

This Fallen Prey

Chapter One

The season may have officially started two months ago, but it isn't truly spring in Rockton until we bury our winter dead.

Dalton and Anders are digging the shallow grave. I'm wandering, trying to calm Storm. As a future tracking dog, she needs to know the smell of death. I've read books that say cadaver dogs can't do the job for long because every "success" leads to a dead body. I dismissed that as anthropomorphism until I showed Storm the corpses . . . and she promptly set about trying to wake the dead.

We're walking in ever-growing circles around the grave. Dalton's occasional "Casey?" warns me to stay close, while Storm's insistent tugs beg me to let her explore and forget what she's seen. The tugs of an eight-month-old Newfoundland are not insubstantial.

"Switch?" Anders walks over and holds out a hand.

Storm isn't the only one who needs a break from this task. Every year, Dalton orders his deputy to stay behind. Every year Anders ignores him. As a former soldier, Anders might prefer to stay away, but being a former soldier also means he refuses to grant himself that reprieve.

I give his hand a quick squeeze as I pass over the leash. "Remember, you gotta show her who's boss."

"Oh, she knows who's boss." The dog yanks, nearly toppling Anders. "And it's not me." He plants his feet. "Fortunately, I'm still a whole lot bigger. Go help Eric. We'll be fine."

I walk along a narrow caribou trail bounded by towering spruce. Green shoots have snuck up in patches of sunlight, and the air smells of a light shower, the rain already evaporating. I see

no sign of Dalton. The forest here is too thick. Endless forest, the quiet broken by the scolding of a red squirrel as I pass.

I stay on the trail until I find Dalton standing beside one hole dug down to the permafrost. Three bodies lie beside it. Two are long dead, partly mummified from having been stashed in a cave by their killer. The third looks as if she really could be sleeping. Sharon was the oldest resident in Rockton until we found her dead of a heart attack this morning, prompting Dalton to declare the ground soft enough to bury our winter dead.

A shallow grave. Unmarked. As a homicide detective, I should be finding these, not creating them. But this is Rockton.

These three women came here in secrecy, fleeing threats from elsewhere. They came to the Yukon to be safe. And we failed them. One can argue it wasn't our fault. Yet we accept responsibility. To say "We did our best" is a slippery slope in Rockton.

We lay the corpses in the hole. There's no graveside service. I wasn't brought up in any religion, and our sheriff was raised right here, in this forest. I'm sure, if pressed, we could find a few lines of half-remembered poetry for the dead. But that isn't our way. We stand there, and we remember, and we regret.

Then we fill in the hole.

When we're done, Dalton rubs his face. He looks at his hands, as if remembering what they just handled. I reach into my pocket and pass him a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer. He snorts at that and takes it, and when he's done, I lean against his side for a moment as he puts his arm around my shoulders. Then we both straighten, job done, moment passed, time to get back to work.

"Will?" Dalton calls. There's exactly one heartbeat of silence, and Dalton's face tightens as he shouts, "Will?"

“Over here,” Anders calls back. “Pup found herself a rabbit hole and—” A grunt of exertion. “And she really wants bunny for dinner.”

We walk over to find him only lightly tugging on the leash, big biceps barely twitching. I sigh and yank the lead with a “Hut!” Storm gives me a look, not unlike a sullen teen, and walks over to brush against Dalton.

Anders chuckles. “If Mommy gives you shit, suck up to Dad. Nice try, pup but—”

He stops, as we all hear the whine of a small plane engine.

Dalton shields his gaze to look up.

“Does that sound way too close to Rockton?” Anders says.

“Fuck,” Dalton mutters.

“That’d be yes. Come on, pup. Time for a run.”

We kick it into high gear. Dalton scans the sky as he tracks the sound. It’s not a supply delivery—it’s exceedingly rare for anyone other than Dalton to handle those, and he’s scheduled to head out later today, releasing a few residents. But from the sound, that plane is heading straight to our airstrip.

The pilot shouldn’t be able to see our airstrip. No more than he should be able to see our town. Structural and technological camouflage means that unless the plane skims Rockton, we should remain invisible.

I look up to see a small plane on a perfect trajectory with our landing strip.

Dalton curses again.

“Has anyone ever found the airstrip before?” I ask.

“Ten years ago. Guy was lost. Rookie pilot. I fixed his nav, gave him fuel, and pointed him to Dawson City. He was too shaken up to question. I just told him it was an airstrip for miners.”

Having anyone stumble over Rockton even by land is rare, but we have a pocketful of cover stories. Today, Dalton decides “military training base” will work. We’re all physically fit. Anders keeps his hair stubble-short, and Dalton recently reverted to his summer look—his hair buzzed, his beard down to a few days’ growth. Suitable for a backwoods military camp.

Anders pushes his short sleeves onto his shoulders, US Army tattoo more prominently displayed. Dalton snaps his shades in place. I put on my ball cap, ponytail tugged through. And we have our guns in hand.

We arrive just as the propellers creak to a stop. The pilot’s door opens. A woman gets out. When I see her, I slow, the guys doing the same. We’ve donned our best quickie military costuming; hers looks like the real thing. Beige cargo shorts. Olive tank top. Dark aviator shades. Boots. Dark ponytail. Thigh holster. Arms that make mine look scrawny.

She doesn’t even glance our way, just rolls her shoulders and acts like she has no idea three armed strangers are bearing down on her. She knows, though. She waits until we’re ten feet away. Then she turns and says, “Sheriff Dalton?”

Her gaze crosses all three of us. She rejects the woman. Rejects the black guy. Settles on the white one as she says “Sheriff?” again. I could bristle at that, but she’s right in this case, and the certainty on her face tells me she’s been given a physical description.

Without waiting for confirmation, she steps forward and extends her hand. “I have a delivery for you, sir.”

Dalton takes her hand. While he’s doing a good job of hiding his confusion, I see the tightness in his face. He might rule in Rockton, but he’s only thirty-one, two months younger than me, and new situations throw him off balance.

“We weren’t informed of any deliveries,” I say.

She hands me an envelope from her pocket. “The details are in here, ma’am. I’m just the courier.”

Dalton walks over to the plane. When a hand smacks against the glass, Storm and I both jump. Anders says, “Shit!” Dalton just peers inside. A man’s face appears. A man wearing a gag.

Dalton turns to the pilot. “What the hell is this?”

“Your delivery, sir.”

She opens the cargo door and disappears inside, with Dalton following. Anders and I wait. A moment later, Dalton comes out, pushing the man ahead of him. He’s blond, younger than us, wearing a wrinkled linen shirt, trousers, and expensive loafers. He looks like he’s been pulled off Bay Street midway through his stockbroker shift. He’s gagged with his hands tied in front of him; a cable binds his legs so he can’t do more than shuffle.

“I was told not to remove the cuffs,” the woman says as she follows them out. “I was also told to leave the gag on. I made the mistake of removing it. That lasted about sixty seconds. I have no idea what he’s in for, but he’s a nasty son of a bitch.”

“In for?” I say.

“Yes, ma’am.” She looks around. “There is a detention facility out here, isn’t there? Some kind of ultra-maximum security?”

“Privileged information,” Anders says. “Sorry, ma’am. You know how it is. Same in the air force, I’ll wager.”

The woman smiles. “It was. And it’s no different in private security.” She nods at his tat. “Cross-border job shopping?”

“Something like that. I appreciate you bringing the prisoner. We weren’t expecting anyone new, so we’re a bit surprised.” Anders peeks into the cargo hold. “You wouldn’t happen to have any beer in there, would you?”

She laughs.

“No, sir.” She reaches in and pulls out a duffel. When she opens the zipper, it’s full of coffee bags.

“Just this,” she says.

“Even better,” Anders says. “Thank you.”

I look at the prisoner. He’s just standing there, with Dalton behind him, monitoring his body language as Anders chats with the pilot.

“Thank you for bringing him,” I say. “If you’re flying back to Dawson City, skip the casino and check out the Downtown Hotel bar. Ask for the sour toe cocktail.”

“There’s an actual toe involved, isn’t there?”

“It’s the Yukon.”

She grins. “I’ll have to try that. Thank you, ma’am.” She tips her hat and then motions to ask if she can pat Storm. I nod, and Storm sits as she sees the hand reach for her head.

“Well trained,” she says.

“At her size, she needs to be. She’s still a pup.”

“Nice.” She gives Storm a final pat. “I’ll head on out. You folks have a good day. And remember, keep that gag on for as long as you can.”

Chapter Two

The bush plane has left, and we're standing by the hangar. I've opened the letter, and Dalton is reading it over my shoulder while Anders guards the prisoner. Storm lies at my feet, her wary gaze on the stranger.

As usual, Dalton reads faster than me, and I've barely finished the opening paragraph when he says, "Fuck, no. Fucking hell, no."

Anders leans over to see the letter—and the prisoner lunges.

Anders yanks him back, saying, "Yeah, it's not that easy, asshole," and the guy turns to see both Dalton and me with our weapons trained on him, Storm on her feet, growling.

"If you're waiting for us to get distracted and let you run, you'll be waiting a long time," Anders says.

"It wouldn't help anyway," I say. "You're hundreds of miles from the nearest community. Gagged. Bound. Your legs chained." I turn to the guys. "Can we let him go? Please? Lay bets on how far he gets?"

"Nah," Anders says. "Lay bets on what kills him. I vote grizzly."

"Cougar," I say.

"Exposure," Dalton says.

I look at Dalton. "Boring."

"Fine, rabbits."

"But the rabbits haven't killed anyone."

"Yet."

The prisoner watches us, his eyes narrowing, offended that we find his predicament so entertaining.

“On the ground,” Dalton says.

The guy lifts his bound hands and extends both middle fingers. My foot shoots out and snags his leg. He drops to his knees.

“Boss wants you on the ground, you get on the ground,” I say. “Practice your yoga. Downward dog. All fours. Ass in the air.”

When he doesn’t move fast enough, Dalton says, “Do you really think this is the time to challenge us? I just read that letter.”

The guy assumes an awkward downward-dog pose.

Dalton holds the letter out for me to finish. I don’t need to—my gaze snags of a few key words, and I skim the rest to be sure I’m not misreading. Then I look at Dalton.

“Fuck, no,” I say.

“Uh-huh.”

We’ve left our prisoner with Anders and returned to Rockton. As we enter town, I imagine bringing him back. Imagine how we might explain Rockton, how we’d pass it off. Wild West theme town would be our best bet. Seriously. That’s what it would look like to an outsider—a place where rich people pay serious cash to pretend they live in a rougher, heartier time. Wooden buildings, all in perfect condition, each adorned with very modern, oversize quad-paned windows. Dirt roads swept smooth, not a scrap of litter or whiff of horse dung. People milling about in modern dress, because we wouldn’t want to take the fantasy that far. Living without electricity, cell service, and Wi-Fi is primitive enough, thank you very much.

We drop Storm off at the general store, where Petra will dog-sit. Then we head to Val’s house, which seems like old times, going to her and demanding to speak to the council. For my

first four months in Rockton, I never set foot in Val's house except on business. And I swear she never set foot outside it unless she had to.

Since then, Val has come to realize the council set her up, that they wanted their local representative isolated. She's finally begun changing that, which means that when I say there was an unscheduled plane arrival, she doesn't hesitate to make the call. Phil answers right away, as if he's waiting.

"A serial killer?" Dalton says. "You sent us a goddamn serial killer."

"For six months," Phil says. "Not as a resident, but as your prisoner. You are free to impose any restrictions on him. We will not question your judgment. In fact, under the circumstances, we don't want Mr. Brady to enjoy his stay in Rockton. That is the point."

"The point?" I say.

"Yes, hello, Detective." There's relief in Phil's voice as he realizes I'm there. I am the reasonable one. Classic good cop, bad cop: the hotheaded, profane sheriff and the educated, professional detective. It's a useful fiction.

As Phil continues, his defensive edge fades. "Mr. Brady is in Rockton because he has refused other options."

"Like jail?" Dalton says. "Lethal injection? Because he's sure as hell earned those."

"Possibly, but Mr. Brady's father believes society is better served by saving the expense of a trial while removing him as a danger to the public. He wants to keep Mr. Brady in what we would consider luxurious isolation, on an island, with caretakers and guards. Mr. Brady has refused. Which is why he is temporarily yours."

"So he'll come to see the appeal of a permanent Caribbean vacation," I say.

"Yes, and while we can argue that he deserves worse punishment, that isn't our concern."

“Your concern is how much you make from this arrangement,” Dalton says.

“No, how much you make. For your town, Sheriff.”

Phil proceeds to remind us how expensive it is to run Rockton, how the five-grand fee from residents hardly covers the expenses incurred during their two-to-five-year stays. How even the hundred grand they get from white-collar criminals barely keeps the town running.

Some white-collar criminals pay a lot more than a hundred grand, though, as do worse offenders. Rockton just never sees that money. The council keeps it. But with Oliver Brady . . .

“One million dollars,” Phil says. “To be used at your discretion, Eric. And twenty percent of that is yours to keep personally as payment for the extra work.”

Dalton glowers at the radio. “Fuck. You.”

“Detective?” Phil says. “I trust you will speak to your . . . boss on this. Explain to him the benefits of a nest egg, should he ever decide to leave Rockton.”

Explain it to my lover—that’s what he means. Convince Dalton he should have money set aside in case he ever wants to leave Rockton with me. This is a threat, too. A reminder that they can kick him out.

I clear my throat. “I believe Sheriff Dalton sees that two hundred thousand as a bribe for endangering his town. While we could use extra money for Rockton, I think I can speak for both of us when I say we don’t want it at the expense of endangering residents.”

“People don’t come here for feather pillows and fancy clothes,” Dalton says. “They come for security. That cash isn’t going to buy us a doctor, is it? Or radios that actually work?”

“We could certainly invest in better radios,” Phil says. “Though I’m not sure that would be a wise use of the money.”

The problem with the radio reception is interference. The same thing that keeps us safe and isolated also keeps us isolated from one another when we're in the forest.

Phil continues, "I'm sure if you asked the residents, there are things they'd like to use the money for."

"Yeah," Dalton says. "Booze. And more booze. Oh, and a hot tub. That was their request last year. A fucking hot tub."

"We could actually do that, Sheriff," Phil says. "It wouldn't be a jacuzzi-style with jets, but a deep communal tub with fire-heated water and—"

Dalton cuts him off with expletives. Many expletives.

"There are always things we could use," I say. "And if we went to the residents and asked, they might take this offer. That's because they trust us to protect them from someone like Oliver Brady. But we are not equipped for this, Phil. We have one jail cell. It's intended as a temporary punishment. It's not even big enough for a bed. We can't confine Brady to it for six days, let alone six months. If you wanted to send him here, you should have warned us and provided supplies to construct a proper containment facility."

"And maybe asked us if we wanted this deal," Dalton says. "But you didn't because you know what we'd say. Which doesn't excuse not giving us any warning. You dropped off a serial killer and a bag of fucking coffee."

"Tell us what you need to construct a proper containment facility, and we will provide it," Phil says. "Until then, your holding cell will be adequate. Remember, the goal here is to convince Mr. Brady to accept his father's offer. Show him the alternative. Let him experience discomfort."

"You want us to waterboard him, too?" Dalton asks.

“If you like. I know you’re being facetious, Sheriff, but the residents of Rockton are not subject to any governmental constraints or human rights obligations. Which you have used to your advantage before.”

“Yeah, by making people sleep in a cell without a bed. By sentencing them to chopping duty without a trial. Not actual torture, and if you think that’s what I’m here for—”

“You’re not,” I say. “The council knows that. What the council may not understand, Phil, is exactly what they’re asking. Even with a proper facility, we won’t be equipped for this. We don’t have prison guards. You saw what happened this winter.”

“But Nicole is fine now. She’s staying by choice. That alone is a tribute to you and Detective Butler and everyone else in Rockton. You can handle this.”

“They shouldn’t have to.”

That isn’t me or Dalton speaking. It’s Val, who has been silently listening.

“Eric and Casey shouldn’t have to deal with this threat,” she continues. “The people of Rockton shouldn’t have to live under it. I don’t know what this man has done . . .”

She looks at me warily, as if not sure she wants me filling in that blank.

“He’s a thrill killer,” I say. “He murders because he enjoys it. Tortures and kills. Five victims in Georgia. Two men. Two women. And one fourteen-year-old boy.”

Val closes her eyes.

“Oliver Brady is a killer motivated by nothing more than sadism,” I continue. “An unrelentingly opportunistic psychopath.”

“We can’t do this, Phil,” Val says. “Please. We cannot subject the residents of Rockton to that.”

“I’m sorry,” Phil says, “but you’re going to have to.”

Chapter Three

For the first three decades of my life, I didn't understand the concept of home. I had one growing up, and outwardly, it was perfect. My parents were very successful physicians, and my sister and I lived a life of privilege. We just weren't a close-knit family. That may be an understatement. Before I left for Rockton, I told my sister that it might be a few years before she heard from me again, she acted as if I'd interrupted an important meeting to say I'd be out shopping for the day.

I don't know if my early life would have doomed me to an equally cold and comfortless adult one. Maybe I would have married and had children and formed a family there. But my future didn't proceed in a direction that allowed me to find that out.

When I was nineteen, my boyfriend and I were waylaid in an alley by thugs who took exception to him selling drugs on their turf. I fought back enough to allow Blaine to grab a weapon so we could escape. Instead, he ran. I was beaten and left for dead, and he never even bothered calling 911.

I spent months in the hospital recuperating, post-coma. Then I went to confront Blaine. Shot him. Killed him. I didn't intend to, but if you take a gun to a fight, you need to be prepared for that conclusion, and at nineteen, I was not.

I spent the next twelve years waiting for the knock on the door. The one that would lead me down a path ending in a prison cell. I deserved that cell. I never pretended otherwise. But nor did I turn myself in.

Instead, I punished myself with a lifetime of self-imposed isolation, during which I threw myself into my job as a homicide detective, hoping to make amends that way. Create a home, though? A family? No. I gave up any hope of that life when I pulled the trigger.

Then I came to Rockton. I arrived in a place I did not want to be . . . and I woke up. Snapped awake after twelve years in what had been just another type of coma. I came here, and I found purpose and a home.

Yet my life in Rockton is an illusion. I know that. Our amazing little town exists inside a snow globe, and all the council has to do is give it a shake and that illusion of control shatters.

We do have options. We can refuse to accept Brady. And the council will send someone to escort Dalton to Dawson City. Ship him back “down south”—our term for any place that isn’t here. Any place that Dalton doesn’t belong.

You’re on your own now, Sheriff. It might be hard to go anywhere when you don’t legally exist. Might be hard to get a job when you’ve never spent a day in school. Might be hard to do anything when you don’t have more than the allowance we paid. Oh, and don’t expect to take your girlfriend with you—Detective Butler can’t leave for another year. But go on. Enjoy your new life.

I’m sure Dalton’s adoptive parents would help him. I could give him money—it’s not like I’ve ever touched my seven-figure inheritance. The problem is that Dalton cannot imagine life anywhere else. Rockton is his purpose. His home.

We have a backup plan. If he’s ever exiled, I will leave, too, whether the council allows it or not. So will Anders. Others, too, loyal to Dalton and to what this town represents. We’ll build a new Rockton, a true refuge.

Is that laughable idealism? Maybe, which is why we don’t just go ahead and do it. For now, we work within the system. And under these particular circumstances, walking out is not an option.

These particular circumstances.

Oliver Brady.

Twenty-seven years old. American. Harvard educated. His father runs a huge tech firm. I don't recognize the family name, but I'd presume "Brady" is as fake as "Butler" is for me. Also, his father is actually his stepfather.

What does that stepfather hope to accomplish with this scheme? I don't know. Maybe saving his wife from the pain of an incarcerated son. Or maybe saving his corporation from the scandal of a murderous one.

"Murderous" doesn't begin to describe Oliver Brady. I told Val there were five victims, but in cases like this, five is just how many they've found.

During that interview with Phil, I made him give me details.

The police believe Oliver Brady took his first victim at the age of twenty. I'm sure there were other victims, animals at least. There are patterns for this sort of thing, and Oliver Brady did not burst from a chrysalis at twenty, a fully formed psychopath.

Five victims over seven years. No connection between them or to himself. Just people he could grab and take to his hiding spots, where he spent weeks torturing them.

I'm not sure "torture" is the right word. That implies your tormenter wants something, and the only thing Brady wanted was whatever pleasure he derived from it. The detectives speculated that he never delivered what we might call a killing blow. He simply kept torturing his victims until they died.

This is the man the council wants us to guard for half a year. A man who likes to play games. A man who likes to inflict pain. A man who likes to cause death. A man who will not cool his heels for six months in a secure cabin. The first chance Brady gets, he'll show us how much he doesn't want to be here.

After we leave Val's, Dalton takes off to update Anders. I go in search of another person that needs to be told: the local brothel owner.

Yes, Isabel Radcliffe is more than the local brothel owner. I just like to call her that, a not-so-subtle dig at my least favorite of her positions. She owns the Roc, one of two bars in town. The Roc doubles as a brothel, and she and I are still debating that. I say it sets up dangerous and insulting expectations of the majority of women who don't moonlight in her establishment. She says it allows women to explore and control their sexuality and provides safe access to sex in a town that's three-quarters male. I'd be more inclined to consider her argument if "brothel owner" were a volunteer position. I mentioned that once. She nearly laughed herself into a hernia.

I find Isabel upstairs at the Roc, walking out of one of the three bedrooms that serve as the brothel—for safety, paid sex must take place on the premises. She's wearing a kerchief over her silver-streaked dark hair, and it may be the first time I've seen her in jeans. Her only "makeup" is a smudge of dirt on one cheek. We can't find room for makeup and hair dye on supply runs, which is a relief, actually, when that becomes the standard. With Isabel, it doesn't matter. She still looks like she should be lounging in a cocktail dress, smoking a cigarette in a holder, with hot young guys fetching her drinks.

She's carrying an armload of wood, and I look into the room she's exiting and see a bed in pieces.

"Whoa," I say. "I hope you charged extra for that."

"I would skin a client alive if he did that." She hefts the wood. "Well, no, if he could do that, I'd want a demonstration. I'm repurposing the room, so I deconstructed the bed."

"By yourself?"

“Yes, Casey. By myself. With that thing . . . what do you call it? Knocks in nails and pulls them out again? Ah, yes, a hammer. Kenny was busy, and I didn’t want to disturb him when he was getting ready to leave.”

“You mean he was going to charge you double for a last-minute job, and you decided to do it yourself.”

“Same thing. Make yourself useful and grab some wood.”

I do, and as I follow her down the stairs, I say, “You said you’re repurposing the room?”

“It will now be for private parties.”

“Kinky.”

She glances over her shoulder. “Not that kind. However, if you’re interested in that kind, I can certainly arrange them. I’m sure we’d find no shortage of buyers. Though I also suspect our good sheriff would snatch all the invitations up.”

“Nah, he’d just glower at anyone who tried to buy one. That’d make them change their minds. Fast.”

“True.”

“And, just for the record, I’m not interested in private sex parties.”

She stacks the wood onto a pile. “As I said, it’s not that kind of room. We very rarely have three clients requiring rooms simultaneously, which makes it an inefficient use of space. Instead, it will host private parties. Drink and food provided, along with a dedicated server . . . who will offer nothing more than drink and food. You may feel perfectly comfortable holding your poker games up here.”

“With people banging in the next room for ambience?”

“I’m installing soundproofing. Now, what was a plane doing landing on our strip?”

“You saw it?”

“I see everything.”

Her network of paid informants makes sure of that. Isabel not only runs the Roc, but controls the town’s alcohol, which makes her—after Dalton—the most powerful person in Rockton. She’s also the longest resident after him. She’s passed her five years but has made an arrangement with the council to stay on. I suspect that “arrangement” involves blackmailing them with information gathered by her network.

In a small northern town, I’m not sure which is more valuable: booze or secrets. Sex comes next. Isabel owns all three, while holding no official position in local government. Kind of like the Monopoly player who buys only Park Place and Broadway and then sits back to enjoy the profits while others scrabble to control the remainder of the board.

I hand Isabel the letter that came with Brady. As she reads it, her lips tighten almost imperceptibly. Then she folds it and runs a perfect fingernail along the crease.

“This is one time when I really wish you were given to practical jokes,” she says.

“Sorry.”

She shakes the letter. “This is inappropriate.”

I choke on a laugh. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“No, it is the best way of putting it. Springing this on Eric is inappropriate. It is also inappropriate to ask the town to accept it.”

“They’re paying us. A million dollars for Rockton.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Did you actually say money doesn’t matter?”

She fixes me with a look and heads back upstairs for more wood.

“We don’t need a million dollars,” she says as I follow. “People didn’t come here for luxury accommodations. They came for safety. This trades one for the other. Unacceptable.”

“That’s what Eric said. So they promised him twenty percent.”

“Imbeciles. Did he tell them where to stick it?”

“Of course. Doesn’t change anything, though. We are stuck with Mr. Brady for six months.”

“And you want my advice on how to deal with it?”

“If you have advice, I’ll listen, but I’m here for your expertise on Brady himself. Use your shrink skills and tell me what we’re dealing with.”

She picks up the headboard and motions for me to grab the other end. “I was a counseling psychologist. I had zero experience with homicidal maniacs. Fortunately, you have someone in town who is an expert.”

“I know. But he’s going to be a pain in the ass about it.”

“And I’m not?”

“You’re a whole different kind of pain in the ass.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. He is your expert with Oliver Brady. You need me for an entirely different sort of advice: how and what to tell the general population. That is going to be the truly tricky part.”

Chapter Four

I pace behind the butcher shop.

“The answer is no.” Mathias’s voice floats out the back door. “Whatever it is you’re considering asking, the answer is no.”

“Good. Thank you,” I say. Or Bien. Merci. Mathias’s English is perfect, but he prefers French, and I use it to humor him. Or placate him. Or charm him. Depends on the day, really.

“Wait,” he calls after me. “That was too easy.”

“You’re imagining things,” I call back as I keep walking.

A moment later, he’s shed his butcher’s apron and caught up. “This is a trick, isn’t it? You wish my help. You know I will grumble. So you pace about, pretending you have not yet decided to ask me, and then you leave quickly when I refuse. My interest piqued, I will follow you of my own accord.”

“You got me. So, now, knowing you’ve been tricked, you should go back to your shop and not give me the satisfaction of victory.”

“I could learn to hate you, Casey.”

“Sure, you could. You could even find someone else to speak French to you. We’re mostly Canadians here, so almost everyone knows rudimentary French. It’s a little rusty, but I’m sure they—”

“Death by a thousand cuts would be less painful. As will whatever fresh torture you’ve dreamed up for me. I presume we have a rash of phantom chest pains in the wake of Sharon’s demise, and you want me to assure them they are not about to die. William would be better suited to the task. He will tell the truth.”

Mathias may be the town butcher, but he was a psychiatrist, which means he has a medical degree. He's just never practiced—the medical part, at least.

“No phantom chest pains.” I glance around. Even if we are speaking rapid-fire French, I want to be sure no one is nearby. “We had a delivery today.”

“I heard the plane.”

“They dropped off a new resident.”

“And he is ill?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

I pass over the letter that accompanied Brady. As Mathias skims it, his eyes begin to glitter. By the time he finishes, he's practically beaming.

“I think I love you,” he says.

“Fickle man.”

“We all are. So, what does Casey Butler wish me to do? Assessment? Or assassination?”

“I haven't decided yet.”

After talking to Mathias, I walk to the hangar. Inside, Kenny and Paul stand on either side of Brady, watching him so intensely I suspect they literally haven't taken their eyes off him.

“Hey,” I say to Kenny. “You didn't need to be here. Your ride out of Rockton might be delayed, but you are officially retired from duty.”

“Hell, no,” he says. “As long as I'm here, I'm working. Especially something like this.”

“We appreciate that, but for now, you can both head back to town. I've got this.”

Paul looks over my shoulder. “Where's the boss?”

“Busy.”

Paul opens his mouth to question, but Kenny shoulders him out, saying, “See you back in town.”

They leave, with Paul casting regular glances my way. I wait until their boots tromp down the well-used path. Then I walk to Brady. His hands are still bound, feet chained.

I lower myself in front of him. He’s watching me carefully. Analyzing the situation and struggling to hide his confusion.

I don’t cut the most intimidating figure. I’m barely five foot two. A hundred and ten pounds. I just turned thirty-two, but the last time I was in the US, I got carded in a bar. My mother was Filipino and Chinese, and physically I take after her more than my Scottish father. In other words, absolutely nothing about me screams threat.

When I reach out, Brady draws back. Then he steels himself, shame flooding his eyes, as if he’s been caught flinching from a Pomeranian.

I tug down his gag.

“I didn’t do it,” he says.

I shove the gag back up, and his shame turns to outrage. He doesn’t move, though. Not one muscle. Still considering. Still analyzing. Still confused.

“Never been in prison, have you, Oliver?” I say.

He doesn’t respond.

“If you’d like, you can blink once for yes, twice for no, but nodding and shaking will be easier. In this case, it’s a rhetorical question. Guys like you don’t go to jail. That’s why you’re here instead. But having probably never even spent the night in a drunk tank, you need some advice. Telling the guard you didn’t do it is pointless. He doesn’t care, and even if he did, he

can't help you. No one here is your judge or jury. We're all just guards. Now, let's try this again."

Gag down.

"My goddamn stepfather—"

Gag up.

"Your escort was right," I say. "Best to leave that on."

His eyes blaze hate. Hate and powerlessness from a guy who has never known a moment of either in his life.

"Do you have any idea where you are?" I ask.

He doesn't respond.

"Nowhere," I say. "No place that exists. No place that falls under any law or jurisdiction. If I shoot you, the sheriff's just going to say, Oh hell, another body to bury. We buried three this morning. Our winter dead. And sure, it's easy enough to reopen the mass grave and toss your ass in, but I wouldn't do that. None of those people deserves to share their final resting spot with thrill-killing trash."

His mouth works behind the gag. He so desperately wants to tell me he didn't do it. I don't look forward to six months of hearing how this is all a big mistake. Could be worse, I suppose. Could be six months of him regaling us with the details of his crimes.

"My job here is to protect people," I say. "And you threaten my ability to do that. Yet killing you seems problematic. I'll have to give it more thought. I haven't worked out all the factors."

"In other words, don't give us an excuse," Dalton says as he strolls in.

"I wasn't going to say that."

"It's the truth."

“Far too Clint Eastwood for me.”

“Which is why I’m the one who said it.” He stops in front of Brady. “Did you take off the gag?”

“Twice. I got ‘I didn’t do it’ and cursing about his stepfather.” I turn to Brady. “Get up. We’re taking you to town.”

A press conference in Rockton is a strange thing. First, we don’t have a press, which may make the entire endeavor seem rather pointless. Instead, it only makes it all the more critical. Without official media, the only way to disseminate information is word of mouth, and as anyone who’s ever played telephone can imagine, that’s a dangerous game when you’re dealing with a matter of public safety.

In a Rockton press conference, I am the physical manifestation of the printed page. I climb onto the front porch of the police station, give the news, and take questions. Dalton stands off to the side, arms crossed, his expression warning that those questions better not be stupid.

Brady is safely ensconced in the station cell. We brought him in through the back door. So no one has seen him yet as I stand on that porch and tell them that the council has asked us to take custody of a dangerous criminal. I get that much out, and then I wait, knowing exactly what will come.

“How dangerous?” someone asks.

The first time I spoke to a community group, my sergeant told me not to give details. They don’t need to know, he said brusquely, and I bristled at the implication that a frightened community didn’t deserve to know the exact nature of the predator in their midst. Which wasn’t what he meant at all. It wasn’t patronizing; it was protective.

I must know what Brady has done to fully understand what I am dealing with. That's the nightmare I must welcome into my head so that I can do my job. No one else needs that.

Even Dalton, who'd insisted on listening earlier, now shifts behind me, porch boards creaking, that subtle movement screaming his discomfort at the memory. Whatever Dalton has seen, whatever tough-guy face he puts on, I know his overwhelming thought on Brady's crimes.

I don't understand.

I cannot fathom how one person could do that to another.

I don't either, but I must stretch my imagination there as much as possible.

For the town, I provide the roundabout blather of the bureaucrat, words that seem like an on-point answer.

He's dangerous.

Murderously dangerous.

While I understand that you may wish more, you must also understand that he comes to Rockton as a prisoner, to await a decision on his fate, which means we are not at liberty to discuss his exact crimes, for reasons of security.

Words, words, more words, spun out until I see nods of understanding. Or, at least, of acceptance.

I continue talking, imparting data now. He will be here six months. He will be confined for the duration. He is being held in the station until we can construct a special building to house him.

"How long will that take?" someone asks.

“We’re assessing the feasibility of constructing a new versus retrofitting an existing one,” I say. “We’re aware that the holding cell is far from ideal. That’s why we want to move quickly on an alternative.”

“Can’t we just free up a house? Guard the exits?”

“No,” says a voice from the crowd. Everyone follows it to Nicole. When they see who has spoken, a murmur runs through the assembled. They remember what happened to her.

“We understand that whatever this man has done, he is due his basic human rights,” I say.

I feel that creak of the boards, Dalton recalling what Brady did and not convinced he concurs. I would agree. As far as I’m concerned, Brady can get comfortable in that cell. But that isn’t an option, because the people of Rockton would not allow it without hearing the extent of his crimes.

I already see the crowd pulse in discomfort. I could tell them what he has done. Do not let yourselves be concerned on his behalf.

Just tell them.

Take the outrage and the anger and the impotence that Dalton feels. Multiply it by two hundred. An entire town, furious that the council has done this, furious that we have “allowed” it.

If we tell them his crimes, any civil rights we’ve accorded Oliver Brady will be held against us. Mob mentality will rise. Against him. Against us.

I love my town, but I do not trust them in this. So I remain silent.