A DETECTIVE STEELE NOVEL

SNOWFALL



JON SEALY

Snowfall

A Detective Steele Novel

Jon Sealy

Haywire Books

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The Detective Luke Steele Series
About Jon Sealy

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For Brandi and Michelle Sealy,
in memory of Barbara Sealy

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snowfall—as in

grace, fallen from,
as in a great height, released
from its promise.

— Marianne Boruch
“Snowfall in G Minor”

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Chapter One

FATE OPERATES on its own timetable. You might think you have escaped the past, but when there is a gun on the mantel in act one, it is going to go off in act three. Always. The only question is: will the bullet hit the target? As soon as Clifford Deaton went missing, Detective Luke Steele knew the barrel was aiming straight at his heart. The trigger was a call from dispatch one Tuesday in January with news that a body had washed up on the shore of the Keowee River.

Locals had been murmuring about it at Wade's Diner that morning when Luke stopped for an ill-advised breakfast of buttered raisin bread and sausage. The diner was old school, not a television in sight, but there were usually a couple of newspapers at the counter for perusal. Luke had winced on seeing Clifford's smiling face, a formal picture from high school, spanning the front fold of *The Issaqueena Star*, the headline indicating the search continued for the missing college freshman.

His belly was full from breakfast when his cell buzzed with the watch commander on the line.

"Oye Vay, what are you calling me about this early?" he asked the sergeant, Brett Oye, a grumpy old guy from Michigan who had somehow landed in a small town in upstate South Carolina.

"Early? Shift started an hour ago, my friend."

"My body clock gets all jacked up in the dark of winter," Luke said. "It seems to be getting worse every year. Is this middle age?"

"Ha! Only gone get worse. Hey, where are you?"

“Just finishing breakfast at Wade’s. Why?”

“Dispatch put a call through. They might have found the Deaton kid. A farmer named David Shaw, lives off Cemetery Road, called to say he found a body at the edge of his property. He’s still got a pile of ice and snow by the riverbank, so he didn’t get too close, but he said it looks like a young guy caught on some rocks near the shore. Description is close enough to Deaton, the captain wants you to check it out.”

“Roger that,” Luke said.

Around him the diner hummed with the clatter of the morning rush. A group of retirees had shoved two tables together and were currently reminiscing. A pair of power linemen hunched over the counter talking with Truman the cook, while Jackie surveyed the room from the waitress station. Luke was in his usual booth in the back, and the only patrons near him were a young family of four. The mother appeared wrung out, a thousand-yard stare as the father fiddled with the toddler’s drink cup. Big sister howled and hurled a toy to the floor, and when the father reached down to pick it up, he mouthed *sorry* toward Luke, who raised a hand. Until recently, Luke had been there with his ex-girlfriend and her kids. He missed the chaos of it all, if he was honest.

“Still there, Luke?” Oye asked.

“Yeah, sorry. Listen, I’ll be ready in ten. Is Flannel in yet?”

Teddy Burns, a.k.a. Flannel on account of his trademark lumberjack coat, was Luke’s partner. A young guy still eager about a career as a cop.

“Haven’t seen him,” Oye said. “You want, I can give him a call to roust him out of bed, too.”

“I’m right up the street!” Luke said.

“Whatever you say. Detective.”

“Oye Vay,” Luke muttered. “I’ll call him and have him meet me out there. Will you text me the address?”

“Roger dodger,” the sergeant said.

Luke thought about asking if anyone had briefed the patrol officers who would get to the scene first, if they weren’t there already, but he knew Sergeant Oye was on it. The town of Issaqueena had a small police department, but what they lacked in resources they made up for in procedural accuracy and common sense.

When he hung up, he didn’t have to ask Jackie for the bill. In the mysterious ways of long-time waitresses, she somehow materialized with a

coffee to go and a slip of paper with his order on it.

"You read my mind, Jackie," he said.

"I figured you were ready to go on account of your fork being in disarray." The fork was tine-down with the handle in a puddle of grease. He started to apologize, but she said, "I got you, Detective," and swapped the plate for the bill.

He pulled out a ten and a five for her and brushed off the need for change. Breakfast at Wade's remained the best value in town even if his special had gone up fifty percent in the last few years.

When Sergeant Oye texted the address, Luke pulled it up his maps app to get the lay of the land. Wooded country along the river, farmland and dead-end lanes. Brick ranchers with carports. Barns and gardens. For a sense of what he was walking into, he searched for David Shaw and pulled up a LinkedIn profile: no photo and only five connections, a production manager for a rubber processing plant near Anderson.

He put his phone back in his pocket, took a long breath, and ran his tongue over his gums to clear some debris. He thought for a moment about whether it meant anything in particular that he'd been the detective to catch the Deaton case.

If it was a case, he reminded himself. He had a long day in front of him.

The kids at the nearby table were arguing again, over another toy, and something flew into Luke's booth and clattered to his feet. When he reached down to pick it up, he recognized a Skye dog action figure. The mother hissed at the younger child, but Luke said, "It's okay. *Paw Patrol*'s on patrol."

He leaned over with the toy, and the little girl took it carefully.

"Well. Like Chase, I'm on the case," he said to the kids as he slid out of the booth, and the girl grinned at him.

He nodded to the parents and composed himself for the work ahead.

The door jangled on his way out.

Anchored in the South Carolina foothills halfway between Atlanta and Charlotte, the town of Issaqueena started as a stopover for the Southern Railway in 1873 and boomed soon thereafter with the founding of Calhoun College and the rise of the New South textile mills.

Today, the town was thriving thanks to the abundance of lakeshore property, a top-secret research facility and manufacturing plant for

Pulmonis Medical Products, the nearby Cherokee Nuclear Station, and a slew of logistics companies taking advantage of the prime location off I-85. Issaqueena couldn't decide whether it wanted to be a big town or a small city, which suited locals fine. They had a bustling economy of small businesses, they knew their neighbors, and they had a steady pipeline of youthful energy thanks to the college.

It felt like the last small town in America, a throwback to the turn of the millennium. A great place to live, assuming they could keep evil at bay.

Luke called his partner on his way south of town.

When Flannel answered, he said *hello* like he didn't know who was on the line. Luke never understood when people did that. Phones told you who was calling, so he felt you should greet someone like you were opening the door for them.

"Hey, Flannel, we got a call-out. You close?"

"Yeah, I'm in the parking lot."

Luke thought about turning around to pick him up, but he wanted a few minutes on the road to clear his head—and he wanted to get to the scene before too many people swarmed in.

"I'm on the way already, so you mind driving?" he asked. "They might have found the Deaton kid."

"Really, where?"

"It's off Cemetery Road. You know it?"

"Yeah, what's the address?"

Luke gave him the number and said he'd be there in ten.

"What are we looking at?" Flannel asked.

"Not sure yet. Oye Vay said a guy was walking his property and saw a body in the river. Sounds like he stopped just long enough to see it was dead and called us."

Luke didn't need to fill his partner in on the disappearance. Nearly everyone in town knew Clifford Deaton was a freshman at Calhoun College. His photo had been on every newscast and front page for nearly two weeks, and the cops had all gotten the memos about the search parties. Luke and Flannel had each taken a shift the first weekend as the snow plowed in from the mountains. He'd not mentioned to Flannel, or to Oye Vay, his captain, or anyone else, the personal connection he had with the Deaton family. He wanted to mull that over a few minutes before seeing the body.

“See you there, Luke,” Flannel said, and he hung up.

Luke gnawed at a hangnail as he sped down Highway 133, through the rolling hills and oak forests that made up rural South Carolina. Here in the dead of winter the land was barren. Leafless trees, craggy and brown, stood sandwiched between a dark sky and a gray ground checkered with snow.

He knew the days were growing longer in theory, but the darkness always seemed to linger in January. Like something tugging him down.

Clifford Deaton. The college freshman had disappeared nearly two weeks ago, on a Wednesday evening, but no one had thought to call the police until Friday. “He had a tendency to wander off on his own,” the boy’s roommate reported to the state newspaper. “I don’t think any of us had really gotten to know him.”

It was the first week of the spring term at Calhoun College. Cliff and his roommate, Derek Carlson, had attended a party at one of the private houses on University Avenue. A rickety dump: the drywall stank of mold from an old water leak. Dishes overflowed in the sink. Clumps of dog hair gathered by the baseboards.

“I don’t remember him being at the party,” reported one of the guys who lived there.

“We had maybe, like, fifty guests,” said the other.

Derek and a few other boys agreed Cliff definitely attended the party but had left early. No reason given. He’d merely faded into the night. His girlfriend—or a girl he was close with, it was unclear—was named Jessica Boggs, and she’d been at another party Wednesday evening and had not seen Cliff since before the break. She gave the patrol officers her cell phone so they could review her recent text conversations with Cliff: all drivel, nothing to indicate she might be lying.

On Thursday morning people realized he was gone. Not in his bed at the dorm, not returning texts from Jessica, not in his classes. From their statements, Derek and Jessica each assumed Cliff was with the other, and it wasn’t until late in the day, when Jessica stopped by the dorm, that they were able to connect the dots. Cliff was gone.

On Friday the campus police published a memo for the university, alerted the Issaqueena PD and the local media, and organized a search party. Police brought their dogs, residents their flashlights, students their friends. It seemed the entire university—ten thousand students and staffers—came out that weekend.

Friday night, Saturday into the night, Sunday.

They scoured the grounds for the boy, fanned out from the frat houses where he'd last been seen, inspected the dorms, the parking garages, the bushes and cars near campus housing. They upended dumpsters, traversed alleys, and dredged the Keowee River, all while fighting the weather. A cold front was dumping a freak foot of snow up and down the Appalachian Blue Ridge, and it created a storm-of-the-century over the weekend.

Everyone understood but did not say they were trying to find the body before it was buried in snow.

Meanwhile, Cliff had become an internet sensation. Everything was archived online these days: specks of data in a deluge of content, the supernova of digital media and the hunger for advertising eyeballs led to blogs and tweets and clickbait with one article after another about Clifford Deaton, hour-by-hour updates of the search forever recorded in the Google cache. On his Facebook wall, friends posted tributes, while conspiracy theorists spewed venom on Twitter and Reddit. Had Cliff been murdered? What were his politics? What did the university administration know? Who *was* this young man?

People wanted a clean narrative to comfort them. When mysteries lingered, the fabric of our entire world became suspect. The internet was bad enough, but what was left of print media had a field day with salacious headlines and dramatic photos of the boy's school picture from years before.

Luke watched it all from the sidelines. He'd volunteered as part of the search two Saturdays ago, and he'd thought time and again about placing a call to Cliff's mother, but there was nothing he could do except assure her everyone in law enforcement was doing everything they could. Words he'd spoken so many times he was unable to deliver them without wincing at the false notes in his voice.

Andrea deserved better, this he knew. He wondered if Margot had flown in, and what she was doing in life. Margot had been the one who got away.

Instead of placing a call, he followed the reports from law enforcement, and he bookmarked all the news that hit the wire. One search party after another combed the campus for clues, pursuing anything that might shed light on the mystery. Meanwhile, it was one of the harshest winters the region had ever seen. Interstate 85 shut down, stranding motorists for more

than twenty-four hours. The governor declared a state of emergency, but the resources for this kind of weather didn’t exist this far south.

The Issaqueena community was on its own.

Praying for closure.

Closure came ten days later, while everyone shivered beneath a blanket of low clouds. David Shaw was walking his property by the river when he saw a strange sight: the sleeve of a jacket jutting out from the slushy embankment. Assuming this was Cliff’s body, the discovery shut the books on the search, but it marked the beginning of the case for law enforcement. What happened, how, why, and—perhaps—who did it?

As he drove into the country, Detective Luke Steele understood something else. This case was about to open old wounds he believed had scarred over long ago.

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Chapter Two

David Shaw lived in a farmhouse set back from Cemetery Road on Oak Bend Lane. A row of cedars lined his long narrow driveway, one pop of green amid a winter wasteland. Before he reached the house Luke could see the flashing lights of the two squad cars on the scene. Houses were spaced out here, but the closest neighbors would know something was up. He and Flannel would have to get in front of the rumor mill.

The house was two stories, cream siding, with an ostentatious porch no doubt festooned with ferns in the summer. Beside the house was a detached garage, the door closed, and a red Chevy pickup was parked out front. No one had plowed the driveway, so his tires crunched and squeaked in the snow. A drooping tree limb scratched his roof as he pulled up behind one of the squad cars.

An officer got out and adjusted his hat. Young guy, maybe a couple years out of high school. Sometimes it felt to Luke that everyone on the force was either twenty-five or fifty-five, and he was one of the few in the wide middle.

From his glovebox, he grabbed a fresh notebook, a blue rolling ball pen, a pair of latex gloves, and a couple of plastic bags. He put them in his jacket pocket and got out to evaluate the situation.

He nodded his chin at the patrolman. “Morning, Officer, what do we have?”

“They’re all out back, about a hundred yards from the house. You can follow the footprints, but you’ll see them.”

“Is the ME on the way?”

“Yes, sir. The medical examiner, the crime scene techs, everyone but the media.”

“This your first dead body?”

“No, sir. I’ve worked a few suicides, and an OD a few months ago.”

“Given the high profile here, this one might be a little different. Make sure your paperwork is tight. I know you were joking about the media, but there’s a chance someone FOIAs emails and everything else about the case. You know what a FOIA is?”

“Freedom of Information Act.”

“You got it. We might be able to hold them off, but assume the legal team will release everything we write down when we go to court, if not before. Top brass is going to be twisted in knots chasing paperwork, and I’m sure you know how that runs down to all of us.”

“Yes, sir,” the patrol officer said.

Luke sensed the officer had no idea what he was rambling about, so he let it go. The point was clear, to fill out the paperwork properly. He also sensed it was his own nerves pricking him. He would have to watch that in the coming days, he told himself.

As if to reinforce this feeling, his phone buzzed in his pocket and sent his pulse tittering. His younger sister was on the line, and since she almost never called, he knew it was about either their father or grandfather. This was no place to receive bad news, so he hit ignore and put the phone back in his pocket.

Before heading to the crime scene, he studied Shaw’s property, which exhibited signs of pride in the upkeep, though you could tell it had been higher up the socio-economic food chain in the eighties. He imagined a sunken living room with wood paneling, a window over the kitchen sink, the musty smell of old upholstery. In the yard a crooked white oak drooped over the driveway, and there was a figure-eight of flowerbeds now covered in dead leaves and snow. Behind the house was a dilapidated barn with a missing door, ominous shards of equipment in the darkness. A tractor, a rake, saws hanging on a pegboard.

Out back the fescue lawn gave way to fields of broken grass, rows of dirt and the stalks of plants cut down in the harvest. What might have been a peach orchard was off in the distance. Luke envisioned Shaw loading up the bed of his pickup with bushels of corn for a weekly farmers market,

perhaps relishing a little conversation in town more than the proceeds from the farm.

All in all, it was a handsome spread of land in need of a little love.

Among the many tasks at the beginning of an investigation was getting to know the people involved. How did they spend their days? Where did the money come from? Who were they involved with? There were things people revealed in conversation, wittingly or unwittingly, but Luke was equally interested in the shadows that made a person three-dimensional. A person's time and company often told you everything you needed to know about them.

As for David Shaw, Luke would meet him soon enough.

He trudged through a rutted field, where the ground sloped toward the river. A cluster of activity was straight ahead: patrol officers, police tape, and an older man and woman shunted off to the side. When Luke neared he saw the officers had set up crime tape at the top of a hill, and the land dropped another fifty feet steeply toward the river below. He was glad to see a wide perimeter, but judging by the speed of the river, given the recent snowmelt, there was no telling how far upriver the body had gone in.

A clean-cut sergeant named Rhudy waved.

"You the senior officer here?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, my partner and I were second on scene. We came when we heard the call-out."

"What have you done so far?"

Rhudy glanced at the elderly couple standing a ways off. He lowered his voice to say, "Mr. Shaw pulled the body onto the rocks down there before calling us. He said it was to keep the body from washing downriver, and that he didn't touch anything else. Just came up and called us on his cell. When my guys got here, they took a preliminary with Mr. and Mrs. Shaw and set up the perimeter."

"Anyone else touch the body?"

"No. I walked down there to verify he was deceased, but it's obvious if you know what I mean. I scanned up and down the river to see if anyone was nearby or there was anything we should flag for you."

"See anything?"

Rhudy shook his head. "Nothing. My bet is he's been floating since shortly after he disappeared. That water's moving fast, so who knows how far upriver he went in."

“You check an ID or anything to confirm it’s Deaton?”

Luke was really trying to gauge how much the sergeant had mucked around in his crime scene. He understood the officer wanting to check the body and make sure there wasn’t a man with a hatchet running from the scene, but if this was a murder, he wanted the crime scene transferred to his locus of control.

“It looks like him, from the photos, but I didn’t want to trample all over your scene,” Rhudy said, as if he knew what Luke was after.

Luke nodded his thanks. “No problem, Sergeant. You all did a good job in getting the scene set up here. We will need to get your boots over to the crime techs when they arrive. Anything I ought to know about the Shaws?”

“He’s retired. Said he was piddling around the property early this morning. She was on her way to work but took the day off. They both seem pretty blinkered. Waiting for someone to tell them what to do next.”

Luke was already walking toward them. “Mr. and Mrs. Shaw?” he asked, introducing himself as he approached. “I’d like to get a formal statement from you both when my partner arrives, but I wonder if you could tell me what happened here. I understand you found the body?”

“That’s right,” David said. “I was taking a walk, and when I headed down the trail I saw him in the water.”

“That was this morning?”

David nodded.

“Pretty early. Was it before daylight?”

“It was right at dawn.”

It seemed like an odd time to go for a random walk to the river, so Luke waited for him to continue. He’d learned over the years that people disliked silence in a conversation and would tell you all kinds of things if you only waited for them.

“We’ve had some problems with trespassers setting up in the woods to hunt,” David continued, right on cue. “I took down a deer stand around New Year’s and wanted to make sure no one had set anything else up. First time I’ve been able to get out there in a few weeks. I had a winter bug, and then we had the snowstorm. It finally melted enough to get back there.”

“I understand,” Luke said. “You find anything? Other than the body?”

“No. When I saw it was a body, I stumbled a little and slid on the embankment.” He turned and put his hand on his hip, which was streaked with mud. “I splashed into the water and pulled him out. Maybe I should

have left him for you, because he was obviously long dead, but I didn't want to leave him. I guess I thought on the off-chance I was mistaken. Is it the missing college student?"

"Too soon to tell," Luke said. "I don't want to walk you back down there until after our techs do their thing, but if we take some photos, do you think you can show me precisely where the body was?"

"Oh yes, there's a big rock right on the river's edge. He was sort of lying with his head between the rock and the bank. I couldn't say how long he'd been there, but he was wedged pretty good. It took a lot for me to hoist him onto the bank. You can see I'm not a young man anymore, and Cherylene said I was lucky not to end up in the water with him."

"So you got him onto the shore. Did you recognize him?"

David grimaced and caught his wife's eye. "I didn't know him but presume it was the kid in the news? I couldn't say for sure, but he's about the right age."

"He's been all over the news," Cherylene said. "Very sad."

"Do either of you have any connection to him?"

"No," David said, "and I don't know his people either. They from around here?"

"Oconee," Luke said quickly. "What'd you do next?"

"Like I said, it was clear he was dead, so I came back up to call you all. Changed my boots and socks, and here we are."

"Anything else you can tell me? About how he got down there?"

"I assume he floated down. The water was moving fast this morning. Be surprised if he came all the way from town, but maybe Morgan Park? College students like to drink by the river up there, though it's usually in the summer."

Luke made a mental note to check out the park after they finished here.

"I appreciate your time today. Are you both around all day? My sergeant said you might be going to work," he said to Cherylene.

"No, I'm taking the day," she said, and she took her husband's hand.

"And I'm retired," David added. "Three years now, so I've got all the time in the world."

"How long have you lived here?"

"We built the house in ninety-two," David said.

"First house we ever bought," Cherylene added.

More than thirty years. The mortgage would be paid off, but they'd likely had to invest in a new roof among other repairs, which meant they weren't eyeing a move to downsize or join their grown children with grandchildren.

"You have any kids yourself?" he asked.

"They're long gone," David said flatly. Neither offered anything else, so Luke didn't want to pry further.

He thanked them again for their time. "My partner and I will need to talk to you again later to get a formal statement, but right now I'd like to see what we're working with. If you're here later, the techs will need to check your boots and get some fingerprints for exclusion. That means—"

"Sure," David said. "Just let us know."

"I'll make a pot of coffee, so if you need a break to warm up, you're welcome to come in," Cherylene added.

"Thank you, Mrs. Shaw. I think we'll be all right."

Luke turned to Sergeant Rhudy, who was waiting for instructions.

"You mind walking them up to the house? My partner will be here shortly, so will you let him know I'm down here?"

"Yeah, sure," Rhudy said. "I might cut a pair of my officers loose if you don't need them."

"No, that's fine. I told your officer out front, this has the potential to turn into a circus. We don't know if this is the Deaton boy, so make sure your officers understand we haven't made any identification. We don't want the media picking this up before we can even confirm and talk to the family."

Luke smiled at the Shaws and then turned to the hill sloping down the property. There were woods on either side of the river, up and downstream.

"Mr. Shaw!" he called back. "Before you go, how far out on either side does your property go?"

Shaw let out a breath. "Oh, maybe a hundred yards upriver and two hundred down? The river's my property line."

"And what's across there?"

"The county owns a lot of it. We've got twelve acres"—he gestured downriver—"and my neighbor has, I don't know, fifteen or twenty, including some parcels on the other side of the water. Upriver is all part of Morgan Park, but I don't know how far down the county owns. You go up

the bank and it's woods until you hit Pony Pastures and some neighborhoods there."

"Got it. Thanks," he said, and he nodded again to Rhudy.

He pulled the latex gloves out of his pocket and gingerly walked down a rooted rail toward the river. The woods were beech trees, poplars, oaks, all bare for winter and limbs dripping like long-legged spiders. The ground was covered in wet leaves giving off the rank odor of decay. He took it slowly so he wouldn't slide down the embankment, and wondered about David Shaw on this path, in these conditions. The man had at least thirty years on Luke.

From the top of the hill you could see the river, the rocks and the foam of water forming a small rapid. The body, however, was in blue jeans and a gray sweatshirt. If you knew what you were looking at, you could have spotted it, but Luke figured Shaw would have needed to walk halfway down the hill before he noticed the body in the water.

Luke paused here and took out his phone. He fumbled with the passcode through his gloves, and then he snapped several photos of the scene. The rapids around the rock, the body beached by an oak tree, the gray and brown blur of the woods around him. He made a mental note to confirm with Shaw where he'd been when he spied the body, and where the deer stand had been.

After slipping the phone back in his pocket, Luke shuffled the rest of the way down to a flat spot by the water's edge. A narrow trail ran downriver, but there were no footprints in the snow that way. The only obvious disturbances were here by the body, where the ground was all torn up from someone—several someones, including the officers—stomping around.

Rhudy had been right that the Keowee River was flowing fast today from all the snowmelt. The little pool by the rock where the body lodged was calm enough, but Luke wouldn't want to have to wade any farther. They were almost ten miles downriver from Calhoun College, and while it seemed unlikely the body had been carried that far, you couldn't rule it out from the way the water was roiling along.

The body lay on the bank, face-down in a clearing of wet sand. The skin was pale and bloated and covered in grime. Tough to be sure if he was the boy from all those newspaper articles. His hair was dark and cut short, and the back was matted around a bloody wound, or the sticky black remnants of what likely had been a heavy bleed.

Luke tried to visualize what happened, but he couldn't picture a natural blow to the back of the head. Perhaps he'd fallen backward into the water and hit his head on a rock, but how would he have gotten into the current to be carried downstream? He might have wandered into the river, slipped and hit his head, but that too seemed unlikely given the weather. This was not a season to wander into a river.

If it were July rather than January, he would consider the prospect that Deaton had been out on a canoe that capsized. Maybe he'd hit a mini-rapid the wrong way and flipped out of his boat and struck his head. But nothing in the news reports indicated the boy had been the type of avid outdoorsman to be on a river in winter, which brought Luke once again to the idea that the blow to the head was not an accident.

One final possibility was that Deaton had not drifted downstream at all, that he'd been in the water here for the past however long. Luke couldn't see any obvious blood on the rocks, but the crime scene techs would scrape them to be sure. If he'd wandered down here, slipped and hit his head, the next obvious question was: why would he have been here in the first place? And why would Shaw only now have discovered him?

Shaw had said he dragged Deaton onto the shore. It seemed unlikely that he would have flipped the body over first, and there was no torsion in the clothes to suggest the body had been twisted recently. No, from the look of the scene, Shaw had simply grabbed a face-down body and lugged him a few feet onto the bank.

Assuming Shaw was telling the truth about finding him today, the most likely scenario was that someone struck Clifford Deaton and shoved him into the water, and the water carried him however far downstream to the foot of David Shaw's property.

Luke took a breath and then knelt for a closer inspection of the body. Although he'd seen enough of the dead for this to be commonplace, he doubted he would ever be comfortable with death.

Up close to the boy's face, he felt a stone in his chest as he understood yes, this was Clifford Deaton. The boy's face was puffy and disfigured, but Luke could see the resemblance to Andrea. A kind, round face, a feminine jawline, thin bone structure. He did some quick math and calculated the boy must have turned eighteen at the start of the school year. He would be one of the younger members of his class, but nonetheless it seemed impossible. All that time passing.

He carefully reached out and patted the kid's pockets. A cell phone was in one pocket (dead), a set of keys in another (two house keys, a PO box key, and an Ingles grocery card that might help them confirm identity). No wallet, which could mean any number of things. Robbery, maybe, or it fell out in the river.

Beyond the wound on the head, there were no other obvious cuts or abrasions. No broken nails or bruising on his hands to indicate defensive wounds. No blood on his jeans or sweatshirt. Where was his coat? It had been thirty degrees all month. Perhaps the coat had gotten snagged on something in the water, but if he hadn't been wearing one, they might be looking for a campsite with a fire pit, or a car parked somewhere near the river. You wouldn't wander far from the heat, not in January.

Unless: the blow to the head could have happened anywhere. Cliff could have been put in a trunk and driven off to the river for disposal. That would complicate things. For now, all Luke knew was that the boy received a blow to the head, and his body lodged on the rocks sometime in the previous ten days. He needed the medical examiner to pinpoint the time and cause of death, and to examine the body for additional wounds or clues about where the body had been since disappearing that Wednesday night.

His knee popped as he stood. He shook it out and stared upriver. He could only see a couple hundred yards before a bend swallowed the river. Nothing appeared amiss from here. The Keowee was wide and roaring, with a three-foot vertical bank along both sides. Another beachhead was far up to the left, likely part of the county park.

He made another mental note to check that out before heading back to the station. He could get a drone crew out here to film overhead to scope out other beachheads. If need be, they could film the river all the way back to the city. Unfortunately, the snow might hide any disturbances in the brush along the banks, but perhaps they would get lucky.

For now all he knew was he had a crime scene here, a body with a blow to the head, and the mighty river.

Flannel was waiting for him at the Shaws' house. The medical examiner was sipping a cup of coffee in her van while three crime scene techs were suiting up in their jumpsuits. It was cold to be out here without a jacket, and Luke took a moment, not quite a prayer, to feel gratitude for what the techs were doing. Although Issaqueena PD was small by the standards of

Greenville or Spartanburg, everyone did good work, usually without complaint.

Flannel wore a dark gray suit and a black pea coat today. Luke didn't know whether someone had finally told him a lumberjack coat was no way to dress, or if he'd figured it out on his own. Either way, Luke was glad to see his partner had dressed sharp. Once it was confirmed Cliff Deaton was on that riverbank, there was a good chance everyone here would be on the five o'clock news.

"Morning," Luke said.

"How's it looking?"

"It's ugly. We'll see what Kelly can tell us, but I don't think he drowned on accident. He's got a nasty abrasion back here." He did a judo chop to the back of his head. "My bet is he's been in the water a week or more."

"You think the residents had any connection?" Flannel asked, referring to the Shaws.

"My gut says no. We'll want to talk to them again and run background checks, but they say they don't have any connection to the Deatons. If that's true, I'm not sure I see how a strange college student ends up murdered way down there." Luke paused. "Mr. Shaw did say he was walking down there to check for deer stands, so we should check if Cliff was a hunter."

Flannel gave him a blank look.

"Mr. Shaw indicated he'd had some property disputes with hunters. I want to make sure Cliff wasn't involved in that. If he was out hunting Wednesday night, that might be an angle we should dig into."

"I get that," Flannel said. "So it is the Deaton kid?"

"I'm pretty sure, yeah. Everything matches his description. I hate to ask his family to confirm, but he didn't have any identification on him. Which reminds me, have you heard anything on the scanner about this?"

"Just the code about a body. You worried about the news?"

"The PIO's going to need to put something out soon, and the chief may need a press conference. I don't know what there is to say, but I want to talk with the family before word gets online."

Luke dreaded having to deal with the PIO, or public information officer, because management would want to pull a meeting together to get a sense of what Luke knew, what he believed, and where he was going next. They would want to create a strategy for how to manage the press, and he wanted no part of that business. He knew it was all part of the job with a high-

profile case, especially if foul play was involved, but every meeting he took to explain things was time wasted on the case. If he'd wanted to be in the business of spin, he'd be making twice his salary working a corporate sales job.

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

"Let's check with Kelly, and then can you cover the scene this morning? I spoke with the Shaws but didn't take a formal statement. I'd like to see what you get and how it compares to what they told me. After the techs are done, we'll probably need some officers to search up and down the river a ways. I'll break the news to the family and see what Archer recommends about a press conference. What?"

"Nothing."

Flannel's lips were pursed like a kid with a secret. "What?" Luke asked again.

"If you're going to a press conference, um, you might want to clean up a little."

"What do you mean?" Luke gave himself a once-over. The department had loosened up the dress code considerably since the pandemic. Suits now were optional for detectives, but even by the new standards Luke was shabby. After he and Christina had broken up in November, he'd quit ironing his clothes, and he saw that in addition to being badly wrinkled, his white shirt had a splatter of coffee stains on it. He ordinarily would shrug it off as no big deal, everyone was a little worse for wear over the winter, but the job of talking to Andrea and Bill Deaton snapped him out of a fog. He cursed.

"I wouldn't sweat it," Flannel said, grinning at finally being the one to appear more dapper.

"Yeah, yeah." Luke was already calculating the time it would take to get home, shower, and change before driving out to Oconee to see Andrea. He wanted to move fast, and the medical examiner was still in her van, coffee in one hand, phone in the other. "Hey, could you talk to Kelly too when she finally gets rolling? She knows what to do, but my priority is the bump on his head. How'd it get there?"

"You got it."

"Thanks, brother."

He gave the ME a quick wave on his way to the car. She put her phone away and got out, but Luke's mind was already on what he was going to say

to Andrea Deaton.

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Chapter Three

MORGAN PARK WAS four hundred acres of mostly woods and trails bisected by the Keowee River. The road in brought you to a gravel parking lot by a playground, and a short trail walked you down to a beach on the river. As Luke drove in, he straddled tire tracks in the snow, evidence that others had visited the park in the past week. Around him, the deciduous forest was bare brown and dead and dripping with snow and ice. A quilt of limbs blotted out the gray sky, and a steady trickle of ice dripped on his windshield. He kept his eyes peeled for animals or obstructions in the road, but not a soul was here today. Since the snowfall someone had driven in and made a U-turn in the parking lot, but all of the spaces were pristine. A field of uncut snow. A playground coated in ice. A fairy tale forest around him.

When he got out of his Explorer, he heard the sound of ice melting. Water dripping, branches cracking, the low hum of the wind and the river the soundtrack of dread. A gauzy mist hung in the air and moistened his face as he crunched along the snowy trail toward the river. Although he was a grown man with a job to do, he couldn't help but feel like a child again, wandering into the unknown, mystery humming around him. He sensed something lurking beyond his field of vision, as though he'd entered a thin space between the living and the dead. If anything was there, the sound of the river muffled it in white noise.

He walked on, down a rooted slope, eventually reaching a small beach the size of a living room extending into the river.

Beneath the untouched snow he could make out a fire pit of charred logs. He kicked at the snow by the logs and uncovered several crushed beer cans. He studied the beach a few moments. The clearing was big enough to set up a tent, and although the county officially forbade camping, no one would check after hours, especially in winter. It was the kind of thing he and his friends did in high school: Get an older sibling to buy a case of beer, or Mad Dog, or in one unfortunate incident, a bottle of Boone's Farm. Start a fire, get a buzz going, have some fun. Harmless. Usually.

Also, you did that March to November, not January. January was for the hard-core camping dudes, the ones comfortable with icy silences.

Today, there was no silence. The Keowee was narrower here than by the Shaws' property, so you would have to shout to be heard over the roar. A boulder in the water caught his eye. Turbulent water boiled around it in a mini-rapid, and a branch of some sort was caught against the rock. Twigs from the branch reached out of the water like someone buried alive. Because of the pattern of rocks in the water, you could almost hop from one stone to another to reach the rapid. Luke wasn't about to try it today, his shoes wet from the snow and his thirty-something body no longer agile. But he wondered what this setup was like without the snow runoff.

He knelt on the bank to examine the stones in the river. They were worn smooth. Damp. Dark gray, with flecks of brown, but no grit, no dirt, no blood. Any evidence here had been washed away by the river, the skim of ice, the snowfall.

He glanced downriver. A couple hundred yards away, the river elbowed around a birch tree angling over the water. He didn't remember that from Shaw's property, so he couldn't guess how far upstream he was. When the water settled, he might put in with a kayak a little farther up. Rivers appeared different when you were on them, when you became one with the water and moved with the mysterious forces that carried you through a watershed. He could examine the rapids and the patterns of stones, check for logs blocking the river. Anything that might catch a body or offer insight as to where Clifford Deaton had gone in.

And why.

He returned to the fire pit and kicked up a little more snow to examine the beer cans. A regional craft IPA, not something you'd expect from high schoolers. But college students? Maybe. He pulled a plastic evidence bag out of his jacket pocket and put on a glove and picked up a couple of the

beer cans and dropped them in the bag. Then he sealed it shut. He took the Sharpie out of his pocket and pulled off the cap with his teeth and wrote the date and location of the cans. Perhaps the forensics team could pull some saliva off it on the off-chance Cliff had come out here to party. He wondered if they might also be able to tell him how long the cans had been out here. If they weren't clearly left over from the fall, it might be worth getting the techs out here for more analysis.

He knew it was a long shot, but nothing made sense yet. It was like the start of a jigsaw puzzle. He was casting about for edge pieces, trying to find the outlines of the patterns that would lead him to solving whatever there was to solve.

He checked his phone and saw that it was already nine-thirty. He needed to get on to speak with Cliff's parents, but the missed call notification from his sister reminded him he might have a family emergency brewing. He punched the button to call her back and started walking back toward his Explorer.

"Hey, Luke," she said after a couple of rings. Her voice sounded far off and small, and just then the wind picked up and made a crackling in the earpiece.

"Sarah. Hey, hold on a sec."

He hoofed it to his car and shouldered his way in, phone against his ear.

He slammed the door and asked, "You still there?"

"Yeah. Sounds like you're busy."

"I'm out in the field. Found a body this morning."

"Oh."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Well," she started, but he could hear her choking up.

His knee was shaking, and he knew she was trying to find the right words. "Just spit it out," he said. "Is it Dad or Papa?"

"It's Papa. He went to the hospital with chest pains last week, and when he went in they wanted to biopsy a lump. The results came back today that it's prostate cancer. They're waiting on some more tests, but it doesn't sound good."

"Where is he now?"

"He and Granny are back at the house. He's been tired for a week and, I don't know, I think he's finally admitted he's worn out. He's been napping every afternoon. The trip to the doctor took a lot out of him." She paused,

and he braced for the next blow, but all she said was, “I’m out right now, but you can call the house if you want.”

He thought about that for a moment. Sarah and her twelve-year-old daughter had moved in with their grandparents several years ago. She worked occasionally, but lately took care of them and the house full time, for which he was grateful. But he wasn’t sure he liked the way she seemed to be screening things. He didn’t need permission to call the house, if that was what she was implying.

“Why didn’t you call earlier? I could have come up.”

“He didn’t want you to worry about it. You’ve got enough going on.”

“Well. I was just there for Christmas. Was he having issues?”

“He’s been tired a lot lately, but I didn’t know how much. I mean, he’s eighty-four, and it’s been gradual.”

“He seemed fine when I saw him. Thinning out, but like you said, he’s in his eighties.”

The truth was their grandfather was as capable as he’d been for decades. Luke only saw him a few times a year, but with every visit it seemed his Papa had shrunk another notch. The house, too. As children, they would run up and down the halls and all over the house, bouncing on beds, making forts. All that stuff. Now he felt as wide as the hallway and couldn’t believe how low the bathroom sink was, like it was built for a child. It was all a reminder that Luke was entering his prime as the old world was fading away.

Luke’s father was an alcoholic, retired on disability, and lived in a trailer. The wild son of a lawman, he was foggy now that he was entering old age, but Luke’s grandfather was quick and steady and sharp. There was no doubt James Steele could take his old Colt 38 to the range and hit a target center-mass with every bullet in the chamber. The old man still greeted Luke, “Hey, boy,” which made him think it was easier to be the man’s grandson than his son.

What shocked Luke lately, however, was how much he identified with his grandfather as he slid into his thirties. James had spent twenty years in the Navy and another twenty-plus years as a state trooper. He retired before Luke became a cop, but it connected the two men in ways Luke had never paused to examine, and more than once the old man had said he was proud of him.

“It’s been good days and bad days,” Sarah was saying. “I thought Granny was going to be the one to go first, with her hearing and all.”

Sarah was talking like their grandfather was already gone, which made him wonder what she wasn’t telling him. He asked, “Did they say there’s treatment, or what? I thought they could treat prostate cancer.”

“It’s spread to his bones. He’s got a couple options, but it didn’t sound like they would do anything but slow the growth. Maybe a few months? Maybe a year?”

“Well, that’s something. I thought you were telling me he only had, you know, days.”

She was quiet, so he started the car to get the heat going.

“So what’s next? You said they had more tests to do?”

“He’s getting an appointment with an oncologist in Greenville. Schedules are all jacked up, so his doctor is trying to get a rush on it, maybe for next week or the week after.”

“You think that’s fast enough?”

“I don’t know, Luke. We just got all the details today.”

“Look, I’ll drive up. I don’t know if I can get there after work today, but I’ll try. You think he’s up for company for a day?”

“I’m sure he’d love to see you, but we know you’re busy.”

“No, I’ll be there. You talked to Dad about it yet? Or Uncle Mike?”

“I was going to stop by to see Dad on my way home. I’ll call Mike afterward.”

“You want me to call him?”

“I don’t mind. It’ll keep me busy, and you’ve got a crime to solve.”

“There’s always another case,” he said, but he put the car in drive nonetheless and turned on the wipers, which scraped against watery ice already building up on his windshield. “I’ll text you if I can make it up tonight. Give Dad my best.”

“I will.”

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Chapter Four

He'd been waiting on the phone call about one of his grandparents for years, but now that it had arrived he wasn't sure what to do next. He'd assumed there would be something quick, a heart attack maybe, but instead they were facing a hurry-up-and-wait situation. He had a job to do and would need to balance this new and fraught investigation with what his family needed from him: time and energy.

Although he was not a man to believe in coincidences, here he was on his way to Oconee to speak with Andrea Deaton, and that was more than halfway to his grandparents' house off Highway 11. With his grandfather's health on his mind, the drive through the country was a blur, and his thoughts were free of Andrea until the speed limit dropped to thirty-five on what was the main street through Oconee, the town he was raised in. Although it was only half an hour from Issaqueena, his childhood was too far in the rearview. He'd never been a man to dwell on the past, and he organized his life so he always had something to look forward to. A new investigation, another witness to interview, paperwork if nothing else.

Despite looking forward, the past had a way of impinging on him. Last summer, his childhood friend had gotten involved in a gambling scheme and faked a kidnapping, which resulted in Luke chasing after him and a shootout with a grade-A goon on the Chattooga River. Before that, the last time he'd seen his old Oconee friends might have been Nathan's wedding in 2019. He'd have to go back even farther to the last time he'd seen Andrea's younger sister, Margot Love, at some homecoming party in the Obama

years. Even longer since he'd seen Andrea herself, the summer after high school and the Big Breakup with Margot.

He and Margot had been sweethearts for two years, but Andrea had gotten pregnant at nineteen, married Bill in a haste, and lived in a one-bedroom apartment in those years. Luke remembered her bringing what must have been baby Cliff to the Love house, nattering around the kitchen with her mother while the baby toddled around in some kind of bumper car. To seventeen-year-old Luke, Andrea and Bill and baby Cliff might as well have been thirty as twenty, so far removed they were from Luke's life then. He'd often wondered if Andrea's example had been the reason Margot dumped him after high school and lit out for the West Coast. Margot was long-gone, but Andrea and Bill were still in town, and Cliff was dead. Luke was still here, so he was on a mission to procure justice for the boy.

He took a left onto Mount Olive Road toward Baylor's convenience store, and from there Cherokee Branch Road toward Andrea's brick ranch home. He didn't have to put the address in his GPS. When Cliff went missing, he'd googled everyone in the family and taken note of their lives. They had a second son named Eddie, and then somewhere along the line Bill had moved out. Luke had thought about calling her up, but he had nothing to say. He was a cop, a detective, so he needed a body before he could be much use.

Well, he had a body now and bad news to deliver.

He pulled into her driveway, put his car in park, and took a breath.

She made him knock even though he sensed she knew he was here. He'd made these calls before, and knew it must be unbearable to see a cop walking up your sidewalk. Mothers felt it when their children died, so Luke's role was playacting a script.

He checked himself in the mirror before getting out. He brushed his hair to flatten a cowlick and inspected his teeth for flecks of food. He confirmed his badge was on his belt, a notebook was in his jacket pocket, his cell phone was on vibrate.

He trudged up the cracked sidewalk and paused at the foot of the steps to see if anyone would come out before he knocked. Sometimes people did, usually when they didn't know why he was visiting. Curiosity about a police car in the driveway could get the better of you.

When no one came forth, he went up and rang the doorbell and waited.

When she opened the door, it was like no time had passed. He could have been seventeen again, on the couch with Margot while Andrea and their mother chatted at the dining room table. She had crow's feet, thinner cheekbones, hair parted on the side instead of the middle, but otherwise she looked the same as he remembered, the intimidating big sister of the girl he loved. He'd been expecting to find a stranger in middle age, but instead he'd found himself face to face with a past life, his younger self, all that possibility.

"Luke," she said, and she gripped the doorframe. "I knew it would be you."

"Hey, Andrea. Can we go inside?"

"You found him?"

"We did."

She closed her eyes and inhaled to center herself.

"Was it quick?"

He nodded. "The medical examiner is with him now, but yes, it was quick."

"An accident?"

"It's too soon to tell. I came here as fast as I could because I didn't want you seeing it on the news. We should know a lot more in a few hours, but I wanted to let you and Bill know before the media gets wind of anything. I would expect it to be on the six o'clock news tonight. Can we talk?"

She opened the door and held it for him. After a pause to confirm she meant for him to come in, he followed her.

"I'll need a minute," she said.

"Of course."

"The house is not…"

She gestured toward the living room.

"That's okay," he said. "Take your time. I'll sit down to wait."

"I should get Eddie. He'll want to be here for this. He's home sick, but not sick, if you…" She waved her hands and finished with, "Take a seat anywhere."

She disappeared down a hallway while he stepped down into the living room. While he waited, he heard muffled noises from somewhere in the house, perhaps a whispered conversation, perhaps Andrea crying.

She knew why he was here.

He was glad for a moment to steady himself, and he took an accounting of the room. There was a bookcase against a back wall with some reference books, the collected Harry Potter novels, and a row of cookbooks. A flat screen hung on the opposite wall, and beneath it a jumble of cables and video games and remotes spilled out of a media center. He appreciated that she hadn't hung her TV over the mantel, which had a striking painting of a ship at sea. He was inspecting the painting when Andrea came around from the kitchen.

Behind her was a bony young man, maybe fifteen, in a long-sleeved shirt two sizes too large for him. Face pale and pimpled. The small frame of a child rather than a man. It made Luke wonder how much he resembled Cliff. The body at the river was too waterlogged to get a sense for how he had appeared in life. The photos in the news had been school portraits, staged images unrepresentative of life. It knocked Luke in the chest to see how young the brother seemed, further proof of how much time stood between Luke today and his teenage self.

"This is Eddie," she said.

"Hey, Eddie. I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances. You want to sit down in here?"

They followed him to the dining room table and sat across from him.

"I know this is not easy," he started, "and I'll try to be as quick as I can, but right now we don't know much. This morning a guy named David Shaw found a body in the Keowee River at the edge of his property. The body had a blow to the head, so we don't yet know how he died, or whether it was an accident." He paused to let her catch her breath. "Now, Cliff's father…"

"We split up."

"I have his address and will talk to him next. I don't know if you wanted to call him first?"

She shook her head. "He's probably at work till tonight."

"Where?"

"The nuclear station."

"Do you know what he does there?"

"Maintenance technician, last I knew."

"Okay," he said, wanting to move the interview along. "Do either of you recognize the name David or Cherylene Shaw?"

Andrea and Eddie both shook their heads.

“My best guess right now is that Cliff drifted down the river to their property. There is a county park—Morgan Park—a little ways upriver. A hangout spot has a fire pit and some beer cans by the water. Did Cliff ever mention this park?”

“I thought he was at a party when he disappeared,” Eddie said.

“We can’t verify anything. His roommate and girlfriend each went to parties that night, and each originally said Cliff was with the other, which is how it got reported that he disappeared from one of their parties. But Cliff seems to have drifted away. I’m going to talk with his friends and roommates, but the current case file doesn’t have anyone seeing him since classes got out Wednesday afternoon.”

“He did that sometimes,” Andrea said.

“What?”

“Wandered off. He liked to walk in the evenings, to clear his head. I worried about it when he was a teenager, but I don’t think he ever got into trouble. Just liked having time to himself. It seemed to help him process everything that went on with the social distancing.”

“He would have been, what, sixth grade?”

“First year of middle school. I feel bad for the younger kids—it was harder on Eddie—but Cliff was okay. The kids all got together outside of school anyway, so he logged in and knocked out his work quick each day. Gave him more time for video games.”

“What about college? How’s his year been?”

“He didn’t tell me much,” she said vaguely.

Luke wanted to change the subject. He would check in with the school to see how Cliff’s social life really was, but for now he was happy for Andrea to believe he’d had a normal freshman year. They’d seen enough teen suicides lately that it would be a small mercy for Cliff to have been thriving in the fall.

“Can you tell me a little about him? What was he like?”

“He was a good boy,” she said, and he noticed she was already using the past tense. “Eddie was always the more popular one, though. Sometimes it was like Cliff was the younger son. I worried about him not having enough friends, but he always joined in with Eddie’s crowd. Right?”

Eddie sat as though trying to read the situation, to come forth honestly about his brother or spare his mother’s feelings. Luke knew he would need to talk with Eddie privately, but now might not be the time.

“I think everybody loved him,” he finally said, and Andrea bobbed her head in agreement.

“When they first called to say he was missing, I thought maybe he’d just gone on one of his walks,” she added. “It used to drive us all nuts. We’d have a family dinner or some neighbors over, and he would just leave and go off to his room or out for a walk. He didn’t mean to be rude, but he lived in his own head. He’d been that way since he was little. Kind as could be, but shy and dreamy. You know?”

“We called it the Irish exit,” Eddie said. “A group of us would be hanging out somewhere, and then we’d look up and it’s like, where’s Cliff?”

“And where would he go?” Luke asked.

Eddie shrugged. “Home, usually. Like Mom said, he loved to walk, and he would go out wandering the neighborhood for hours at night. I don’t know what he did. He didn’t have a girlfriend until he got to Calhoun. He didn’t smoke. Just liked walking.”

“Have you spoken with any of his friends at school?”

“No,” Andrea said. “I don’t know most of them. We met Derek—his roommate—when he moved in, in August, and Jessica came to visit for a night over Christmas break.”

“Jessica was his girlfriend?”

“That’s right.”

“What did you make of her?”

“She was polite. Helped with the dishes. She brought out a different side of Cliff, which was interesting to watch. A lighter side. He was clearly smitten, but it worried me a little.”

“How so?”

“A mother worries about her son, and this was the first girl he’d ever brought over. She was his age—I think—but she seemed older, like she knew more about the world. I didn’t want her taking advantage of him. He was like—I don’t know.”

Like his father, Luke thought. In high school, Margot had always described Bill as a puppy for the way he’d doted on Andrea. She’d said it with a contempt Luke had not recognized at the time.

“I’d like to talk with her in the next day or so,” he said. “Have you heard from her?”

“I haven’t, but I don’t think she’d know how to contact us, and I don’t have her number.”

“I’ll get in touch with her through the university in the next day or so, but if she contacts you, will you let me know?”

Andrea thought for a moment but apparently decided not to ask why. “Sure,” she said.

“What about the search parties? Did you see her out there?”

“We didn’t. The school had some kind of liaison, so we mostly stuck with the school staffers when we were in Issaqueena. Searching.”

“It was a lot of people out,” Luke said. “I was out there myself for a few hours. Lot of guys in my office were,” he added quickly. “When was the last time you heard from Cliff?”

“The Sunday before he went missing. He called up to say hi, but he didn’t have much to report. He said he’d gotten settled, and he complained about how it was too dark in the mornings and evenings. The call was mostly me jabbering about work and a new development going in at the end of the block.”

“Any text messages or emails after that?”

“He wasn’t big on communicating that way. He’d answer text messages, but he almost never checked his email. I don’t get it, but kids today just don’t read email.”

Luke had heard that from colleagues complaining about their children. Captain Archer had a son at UGA who missed out on an internship because he didn’t read his emails.

“What about you, Eddie? You talk to Cliff more recently?”

“No, same. I hadn’t really talked to him since he went back to school at the beginning of the month. We messaged each other, but it was mostly sharing memes.” He pulled out his phone. “Last text I got from him was Monday, before he went missing.” Eddie paused. “I sent him a few messages, though. They’re marked *delivered*.”

Luke turned back to Andrea. “When did you first hear he was missing?”

“The school liaison, a woman named Becca, called me up and asked if I knew where my son was. Of course I didn’t, so she thanked me and suggested I try to call him. Which I did, and of course he didn’t answer.”

“Do you know Becca’s last name?”

“Um. Ellison. Becca Ellison.”

“Great, thanks. And when did she first call you?”

“Thursday the sixth, about four o’clock. Becca told me not to panic, but once she explained the situation to me, I knew we wouldn’t find him. Call it

a mother's instincts, but I *knew* my boy. He liked to be alone sometimes, but this felt different. I hadn't slept well Wednesday night, and you explain it away as indigestion or whatever, but I think I knew even then, before anyone called me. It was like a light had gone out. And now here you are."

As she spoke, Luke remembered the search parties, the thinning crowds, the buildings, everything eerie and lonesome on the college campus, the sky melding with the horizon as though God were breaking bad news to the world. Meanwhile a mother, who maybe felt she was supposed to be in the thick of the search for her son, knew in her heart she was searching for a body.

"Is there anything you can tell me?" Luke asked. "About where Cliff might have gone, or who he might have been with, or what he was up to?"

"I can't," she said. "I should have known what was going on with my son. Other mothers seem to be best friends with their college kids. But Cliff was so free-spirited, we thought it was best to give him his space."

"I understand. I'll be back in touch as soon as I know more. You probably will get a call from my office because there's going to be paperwork, and this is my cell." He handed her a business card, and handed another one to Eddie.

Luke was about to make his exit when, out of nowhere, Andrea started up at the ceiling and said, "Maybe I shouldn't have married him."

"Who, Bill?"

She straightened her head and peered into Luke's eyes. "I thought he was the one, and Cliff and Eddie were my miracles, but it didn't work out. Now, I don't know."

"Mom," Eddie said quietly.

"He drank too much, I can tell you that. He was manipulative, and he left me to do so much. I ask myself all the time if I did something wrong. We made mistakes when we were seventeen, got on the wrong train, and there's no going back. After he left I wanted him in the boys' lives, but two weekends a month, they were at his house heating up their own frozen pizzas while he was out God knows where."

"Mom, that's not totally fair," Eddie said.

She squeezed his knee. "I know he's your father, but he wasn't a good influence on you boys. Cliff's wanderings…"

Before she could finish her thought, Eddie rose and went to the kitchen.

Andrea appeared totally lost, perhaps ruminating about what could have been. Luke had once heard that called the ghost ship. You board a ship with one destination in this universe, but in another universe your spirit boards another ship, and it sails in parallel with you for the rest of your life. There's no changing your ship, and no changing course, so all you can do is wonder.

Hence, Luke preferred to move forward, like a shark.

Andrea needed time, and Luke needed to keep moving, so he stood and said, "I should go. My next steps, I'll talk to Bill and then canvass the university to start retracing Cliff's last steps. I may need to talk to you again, but if I learn something, you'll be my first call."

"Thanks, Luke." She reached out and took his hand. "I need you to find out what happened to him," she said.

"I will," he said.

"Margot's coming home," she said. "I don't know when. When I called her, she said she'd get a flight. I don't know if you'd want to see her, but…"

"Give her my best, will you?" he said. "I've got my job to do."

"Find out," she said.

He nodded and took his hand back. "I'll see myself out," he said quietly.

He'd left many families like that, wallowing in their grief. He felt like a hammer whose arrival in these cases fractured the loved ones' lives, a before and after. Most people tried to hold it together through the first interview with him, but he could see the fog as it descended. You might expect screams and sobbing, but likely as not you got repetitive answers, a far-away look, a sort of numbness. Predictable, but never easy to navigate.

Before driving away, he took a few notes to record the time and date of the interview, the family members present, and the detail about Cliff roaming off. It might not mean anything, but it did open the door to a random attack. A drifty boy alone in the evening, he could have been somebody's mark.

Luke tried to keep all possibilities open at the beginning of an investigation, to avoid tunnel vision, but in Cliff Deaton's case he genuinely had little to go on.

When he set his notebook on the seat, he noticed Eddie standing by the carport, watching him.

Luke followed his instincts and got out to see if the boy had anything else to tell him.

Eddie clearly had been hoping to speak with Luke, because he met him halfway and said, “I didn’t want you leaving with the wrong impression of my father.”

“Have I got the wrong impression?”

“He’s not a bad man. He and Cliff didn’t get along, and my mother obviously has no use for him, but Dad does the best he can.”

“You don’t have to defend him to me,” Luke said. “I try to approach everyone with a blank slate. Tell me how they got along.”

Eddie squinted. “Cliff was always closer to our Mom, and I was always closer to Dad. That’s all. When it was the weekend to go spend with Dad, he usually wanted to stay home to play video games. His stuff was here, you know?”

“It happens,” Luke said. “Did Cliff have a lot of friends? In the neighborhood?”

“Not really. He wasn’t the coolest kid, but because he was the big brother, he always tried to act like he had a million things going on. You know what those kids are like. They want you to think they’re more popular than they are. I think Cliff was embarrassed he didn’t have as many friends as I did, he didn’t get invited to all the parties, that kind of thing. Like he was the big brother, so he was supposed to be out late with the big kids.”

“I understand.”

“Everybody liked Cliff. Mom was right about that. He just went a little unnoticed.”

“Did that change at college? Sometimes people come out of their shell.”

“I don’t know. He finally got a girlfriend, so I’d like to think he was doing great.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“I mean, do people really change?”

“It’s possible, I guess. Eddie, what do you think happened to your brother?”

“Aren’t you here because someone murdered him?”

Luke inhaled and held his breath. He glanced toward the house and thought he saw the shadow of Andrea watching them behind the blinds in the front window.

Before Luke could reply, Eddie said, “Nothing else makes sense. You don’t just wander into the river in the middle of winter.”

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Chapter Five

Bill Deaton lived twenty minutes away, on the other side of Oconee, so Luke called his partner on the way to see if the medical examiner had come up with anything.

"Nah, brother," Flannel said. "They just now got him up the hill and loaded into the van. That hill was a little slick. Kelly couldn't tell me anything new. There weren't any lacerations on his stomach, nothing we didn't already see."

"What about the blow to the head?"

"Could be anything blunt. River rock, a bat. Because of the decay she didn't even want to speculate whether it was post-mortem."

"What could she tell you?" Luke said, annoyed that he wasn't there to pester the medical examiner himself.

"She'll have us results by the end of the week."

"She couldn't move us to the front of the line?"

"Ha! She said right now they've got a three-week backlog due to staff shortages. Only reason she's going to get a report to us herself is on account of the media. She knows this is high profile."

Luke cursed. "We need to get this body ID'd. You let her know it's going to hit the six o'clock news?"

"Didn't have to. Everyone knows it. Speaking of, you heard from the captain or anyone in public affairs?"

"All quiet, but I expect they're in a war room right now," Luke said.

"You want to head to the station? Where are you?"

“I’m still in Oconee. I talked to his mother but need to find his father. We may need him to confirm it’s Cliff. Can you pull together a spread of photos and email them to me? Not from the crime scene.”

Unlike the cop shows, real police didn’t bring a relative into an empty morgue and dramatically pull back a sheet to identify the body. In the real world, they sat the person down in a conference room and showed them photographs. Most of the time that was all you needed to confirm an ID, but with Cliff’s deterioration, Luke was worried they would have to wait, which would be hard for everyone.

“What do you want to do about public affairs?”

“I don’t think either of us should get involved with that. I’ll call Archer later to bring him up to speed, and I’ll review their talking points if they can email them over, but we don’t need to get anywhere near their war room.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“If you haven’t already, get the Shaws to sign their statements, then canvass the neighborhood. Check the next door neighbors, and try to find who owns the property across the river—and also if anyone lives near Morgan Park. Looks like a popular party spot by the river, so maybe a resident can fill you in on who uses it.”

“Roger that.”

“If you have time afterward, see if you can connect with someone in the college public affairs office. A liaison named Becca Ellison has been working with the family, so she might be the place to start. We’ll need the names of Cliff’s roommates, his class schedule, his professors. He apparently had a girlfriend, but I don’t know if Ms. Ellison would have that information.”

“How long will you be in Oconee?”

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “I have a family thing to take care of tonight, so I may introduce myself to the local sheriff and see if I can use an office there to start the paperwork for today and map out a timeline for Cliff’s movements.”

“Good way to stay out of the war room.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Luke said. “I’ll catch you later.”

When he hung up he was close to Bill Deaton’s house. No cars were in the driveway, so he suspected Andrea was right that Bill was at work. The driveway was an icy hill with a scar of ice, in part from the house facing north and in part because it didn’t appear like Bill had shoveled the snow.

Luke pulled over on the side of the road and hoofed it up to the house. He almost slipped on the porch steps, but he held the rail tightly as he tried to maintain his footing on the ice. A black chow mix hurtled itself against the window by the door, barking and slobbering against the window like Cujo, eager to tear a drumstick off the detective. Luke waited a moment but, hearing nothing beyond the dog, he rang the bell, which sent Cujo into further paroxysms.

He pulled out his phone and plugged the nuclear plant into his maps app. This would be less than ideal, rushing Bill at his place of work. There would be layers of security to get through, and then when a cop comes in to talk with someone, it stirs up the employee rumor mill.

He left the dog banging its head against the window and thought about how to approach the meeting with Bill.

The Cherokee Nuclear Station was built in the sixties in the corner of the state, and many of Luke's classmates had a parent who worked there. Growing up nearby, he associated the plant with the steam over the cooling towers that livened the sky above the lakes at dawn or dusk, and the test siren that went off monthly as a preparation for meltdown. He'd never known when the tests were scheduled, so if there ever had been an accident, he believed most of the area would ignore the danger until it was too late. But there had never been an accident.

Although the plant had loomed so large in his childhood, he'd not been on the site since a fourth-grade tour. He had a vague memory of men in hard hats, plus a demo room where you could touch an electric ball that would make your hair stand up.

After a quick lunch at a nearby Subway, he turned off the main highway and pulled up to the guard gate at what he thought was the main entrance. The security guard was a heavyset black woman in a tan uniform, and she came out to greet him.

Luke held up his badge and said, "I need to talk with one of the employees here. He might be a maintenance technician, named Bill Deaton."

"I'll need to get clearance," she said. "Can I borrow your driver's license?"

"Is that necessary?"

"Our policy is to make a copy of visitor licenses," she said.

Luke waited.

She finally said, “Tell me your name? Officer?”

“Detective. Luke Steele. That’s Steele with an E on the end.”

“I’ll call my supervisor.”

“Thanks.”

He checked his phone for messages and saw an email from Flannel with several photos of the body attached. Painful to see, but the ME had cleaned him up so you could recognize Cliff. His face was gray, his cheeks were puffy, his hair was thin—but you could see the boy from the photos.

Luke also had an email from Captain Archer. The subject line said, *Status of the Deaton case?* There was nothing in the body of the email.

He replied, *Spoke with his mother, waiting to talk to the father at the nuclear plant. Flannel is doing a canvass.*

About thirty seconds after he sent the email, his phone buzzed with a call from the police station’s main number. The guard was coming back with a clipboard, so he hit *ignore*.

“Mr. Deaton is on the safety and preventative maintenance team. His manager can meet you at the front lobby and get you a conference room if that works.”

“Sounds great, thank you.”

“I don’t need to make a copy of your license, but can I see your ID one more time?”

“Sure.”

Luke pulled out his driver’s license and badge and held them both up to the window. She leaned over and squinted, and then checked her clipboard. “You’re good to go,” she said. “Have you been here before?”

“Not since I was about nine.”

“If you follow this road in, you make a left up there by the bus stop, and that’ll take you to the visitors’ parking. Mr. Deaton’s supervisor will meet you by the front door.”

Luke thanked her again and put his Explorer in drive. He could never work in a place like this. Too much like a military base. Go here, go there, put your hands up. Luke had done his tour of duty and no longer took orders like that. He gave the orders when his case demanded it. That’s what happened.

After getting checked in with a front-desk security guard and explaining to Bill's supervisor that he needed a private place to talk, the supervisor brought him to a dingy, windowless conference room. "It's about his son, isn't it?" the supervisor asked.

"I can't really talk about it," Luke said.

"He's working on some equipment in the D-pilot building. I got him on the radio to come here, but it's going to take him a few minutes. Need anything? Coffee, water?"

"I'm okay, thanks."

The supervisor, a neckless guy in his fifties with a gut like a sandbag, seemed reluctant to leave, but Luke also could see the man felt bad acting like a babysitter.

"If you've got work to do, I'll be fine here. I need to call my captain back."

"I'll wait out here for Bill," the man said.

Whoever had phoned from the station hadn't left a message, but Archer had sent him another email with the subject line, *Call Riley in public affairs.* In the body of the email, the captain had pasted Don Riley's contact details.

Luke scanned the local news sites to see if anyone had picked up the story. So far, nothing was out there. Searching Cliff Deaton on Google, the latest reports online were from the weekend, all regurgitating the same "no news yet" headline.

He called the station and punched in the extension for Captain Archer. The captain's admin, Yvonne Reese, answered.

"Hey, Yvonne, it's Luke. Is Archer in?"

"He just stepped away, but can you hold a minute? I know he really wants to hear from you."

"Sure. Hey, you don't know if they already scheduled a press conference, do you?"

"I don't think so, but Riley has come down at least twice."

"You think I can get away without a news release for a day or two?"

"Mm, the captain just got back, so let me transfer you," Yvonne said.

"I need you to sign off on a news release," Archer said by way of hello. "When are you coming back to the station?"

"I'm at the Cherokee nuclear plant, waiting to talk to Bill Deaton."

"How'd it go with the mother?"

“About like it always does.”

“Any leads?”

“Our best bet is going to be the university.” Luke took a few moments to walk Captain Archer through what he knew, which was not much at this point. Cliff could be secretive and tended to wander. The divorce was hard on him. He had his first girlfriend at the college. No one noticed him disappear.

“Any chance this was purely an accident?”

“Anything’s possible, but even then we don’t know how he got to the river, or what he was doing there. Right now, we don’t even know for certain it was Cliff we pulled out of the water. Can Riley hold the press release?”

“What we have now doesn’t say anything. It’s three paragraphs of *we found a body.* We need to confirm it’s Cliff, but otherwise there’s nothing in here that should worry you. I’m emailing the draft now.”

There was a knock on the door, and the supervisor appeared with Bill Deaton.

“Captain, I got to go.” Luke hung up without waiting for a reply. He stood up and extended his hand. “Hey, Bill. It’s Luke Steele, from Oconee High.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” the supervisor said, and he pulled the door shut behind him.

Although Oconee was little more than thirty minutes from Issaqueena, there may as well have been an entire state between Luke and his hometown for all he came back. His work kept him from doing much on social media, so it was always a surprise to see people from high school. Like Andrea, Bill had been a senior when Luke was a freshman, athletic, with a head of thick dark hair and an impish smile. Now he looked like he carried around a bottle of aspirin in case of a heart attack. He had his hair cropped close, and his face was big and round as an egg. No neck. Weight under his shirt like he was wearing football pads.

“Hey, Luke. What are you doing here?”

“Bill, I’m sorry to see you under these circumstances,” Luke said, extending a hand to suggest they sit. “I’m a detective over in Issaqueena. I don’t know if you got a call from Andrea already, but this morning—”

“You found him.”

Luke nodded.

Bill leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed and was quiet as Luke filled him in on what happened, what they knew, and what would happen next. When he finished Bill pulled out some kind of vape pen. “You mind?”

“Fine with me,” Luke said, glancing at the *No Smoking* sign. “That allowed?”

Bill pushed a button and inhaled. “You talk to Andrea already?”

“I just came from there. I wanted to get to you both before the media picked up the story.”

“How’s she doing?”

“About like you’d expect. Have you spoken with her much this week?”

Bill exhaled another puff from the vape. “Nope.”

Luke let that sit between them for a moment. Then he said, “Bill, I hate to ask, but I have a big favor.”

Bill eyed him warily.

“This isn’t easy, but your son has been in the river for several days. I am confident it’s him, but it’s going to take our lab until the end of the week to get a positive identification from fingerprints. I have some photos on my phone, and if you could confirm it’s Cliff, that will let us close out the search and start working on what happened.”

Luke left out the part about a news release. He hoped Riley and Archer would hold off on publishing the release until Luke confirmed the body’s ID, but you never knew. People in the department had a knack for getting egg on their faces.

Bill closed his eyes and sat for so long Luke prodded him. “Bill?”

“I can do it,” he said, eyes closed. “You need me to drive to Issaqueena?”

“No, we can do it by photos I have in my inbox. I know it’s not ideal here in this conference room, but it’ll help me move on to finding out what happened to your son.”

“Show me the photos.”

Luke pulled out his phone and opened up the best of the pictures Flannel had sent, an upper-body head shot that hid the blood on the back of Cliff’s head. He gingerly pushed the phone across the table. Bill gazed at it for a moment and nodded.

“That’s him.”

Luke put his phone away and waited a beat before saying, “Thanks, Bill. My next stop is the university so I can talk with Cliff’s roommate and some of his friends and professors to see if we can trace his movements the Wednesday he went missing. When was the last time you heard from Cliff?”

“I don’t know. Christmas break some time. I had my boys for a weekend around New Year’s. They were supposed to stay Friday to Monday, but I had to work Monday, so they somehow came up with a plan to go back to Andrea’s for dinner Sunday night. I texted Cliff to wish him luck starting his new semester, but he didn’t write back.”

“Was that common?”

“Yeah. You know how it is. Well, maybe you don’t. You get divorced, and kids don’t mean to pick a side, but…there was always a little awkwardness. I had them two weekends a month, and with Cliff in particular it usually took a day before he seemed comfortable. He’d be glum all Friday night and then cheer up Saturday, and then it’s time to go home Sunday. When he was younger he’d cry on Sunday afternoons, and Eddie was the one to tell him, ‘No, don’t worry, we’ll come back.’ I’m going to carry those moments to the grave.”

Luke hated to probe further, but he needed to know. “Did you keep up with Cliff much once he got to college? Can you tell me anything about his friends or his life down there?”

Bill shook his head. “I saw him on his breaks and gave him some walking-around money, but he kept so much of his life private. Eddie told me he had a girlfriend one night, but Cliff kind of blushed and kicked his brother under the table, and that was that.”

“Anybody have a grudge against him?”

“Everybody liked Cliff,” Bill said. These were the exact words Eddie had used a few hours ago. Luke believed no one was liked universally, so his antenna was up now.

“Is there anything you can tell me about Cliff, or his friends, or anyone that can help me piece together what happened to him?”

Bill took a moment and then shook his head. “I wish I could, I really do.”

“That’s okay,” Luke said. “It’s my job to figure out what happened, and I promise I’ll do that. This afternoon, I’m going to type up what you told me and that you confirmed the photo was Cliff. I’ll need to get you to sign a

statement for my files. Will you give me your email address and phone number? I can send you the statement this evening."

"Yeah." Bill pulled his vape pen back out and puffed a few times before giving Luke his information. When they stood up, Bill extended his hand and said, "You'll let me know how it goes?"

"I will. These things can take some time, but I'll keep you and Andrea in the loop. Here's my card if you think of anything else or need me."

"Thanks, Luke. I, um, it's been a long time, but thank you."

"Of course."

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Chapter Six

RATHER THAN DRIVE back to the Issaqueena PD station, where he undoubtedly would be pulled into a late-afternoon brainstorm about how to play the media, Luke checked in at the county sheriff's department and asked to use a desk with a computer for the afternoon as a professional courtesy. As it turned out, the deputy at the front desk was the kid brother of one of Luke's best friends growing up. Robert Atkins. A nice, soft-hearted boy who always wanted to tag along on the bike rides and tree climbing when Luke and Robert's older brother were in the last throes of pre-teen innocence. Once middle school hit, friends shifted around and Luke lost touch with Robert and his brother.

Until today, he'd been one more ghost out of Luke's past.

"I came up on a case," Luke explained as Robert walked him up to an empty desk on the second floor. "Thought if I could submit my paperwork here, I might have dinner with the family."

"Your folks still out on Jones Mill Road?" Robert—Deputy Atkins, now—asked.

"My dad is. I can't remember if you were around, but my mom…" Luke waved his hand to indicate she was long gone and far away.

"I remember that," Robert said carefully. "Hey, what's the case you're working on?"

"Nothing major," Luke said, not wanting to get into the details, "but I've got all this paperwork to file on it. Seems like that's all we do these days."

“I know it,” Robert said. “Here we are. The passcode to get into the system is on that card taped to the monitor. We’ve got a shared printer downstairs if you need it.”

“I think this’ll work fine. I appreciate it. Where’s everyone else?”

“Short-staffed. The sheriff spends most of his day at the jail or city hall, and we’ve got three other deputies on calls. Judy usually works the desk, but she’s out sick, so.”

Luke thought about asking after Kayla Baker, a deputy he’d had an on-again, off-again something with, but he said, “Yeah, it’s bad with us, too. All right, I appreciate it.”

“Of course. Hey, if you got time and want to grab a beer before you go see your folks…”

“Let me see what time I get through this paperwork,” Luke said.

After Robert left, he fired up the computer and logged in. While he was waiting for the PC to run through its startup garbage, he texted Sarah to ask how their grandfather was doing and if they’d be up for him stopping by.

She texted back right away. *You staying for dinner?*

I need to get back to the case tonight.

Suit yourself. Come on when you can.

He set the phone face-down on the desk and returned to the computer. Although the county was trying to get everyone on the same system, there were still firewalls in place. He wouldn’t be able to file anything with the Issaqueena PD server, but he had Outlook. If he could remember his password, he could shoot everything over to Flannel.

Starting a new investigation was a bit like starting a new class at the beginning of a term. He had a fresh notebook, a new rollerball pen, a blank slate. He hated the paperwork side of the job—almost all cops did—but he’d developed the habit of writing up what he would need to successfully put away a bad guy in court.

For Clifford Deaton, he first needed to write up a short statement for his father to sign acknowledging he had identified the body. Statements from Andrea and Eddie could wait, but they needed to have a record at the start of the investigation showing they were clear to quit searching for Cliff’s body and pursue an inquiry into the death of the body they found in the river. Bill Deaton had checked the box for step one.

His second job was to write up a warrant for searching Cliff’s dorm room and any computers or tablets. He presumed Cliff’s roommate would

allow them in and help them with the search, but Luke didn't want any defense lawyer down the line henpecking him about the nature of anything they might find. Also, he did not trust the university to be forthcoming with any files they had on Cliff, academic or otherwise. He would operate politely and in good faith with the PR contact, Becca Ellison, but he intended to leave the college tomorrow with copies of everything they had about Clifford Deaton.

It took him most of the afternoon to type up these two documents. He sent the warrant application to Yvonne and asked her to see if a judge could sign it before the end of the day so he and Flannel would have it when they went to the college in the morning. Then he sent the statement to Bill with a short note thanking him for his time and asking him to send a signed copy back as soon as he could.

While he was sending those emails, his inbox dinged repeatedly with notes from his captain and Don Riley in public affairs asking for Luke's blessing on the press release. It was four o'clock, and they most likely would have a press conference at five. He opened Riley's file and skimmed the talking points. He replied to say Bill confirmed the ID, but they wouldn't have anything else until after the autopsy.

Don't put it in the talking points, but the ME says the autopsy will be Friday, he added. Then he deleted the line. Let them talk to the medical examiner if they wanted to confirm when the autopsy would be. Maybe if someone up the food chain pestered her, she would get it done faster.

He logged off and stood up to stretch. His last job for the day would be to summarize the timeline in his paperwork, make a list of who they needed to talk to next, and see if he could make sense of the case.

If there was a case.

He walked downstairs and found Robert at the front desk.

"Is there a place to get a cup of coffee around here?" he asked.

"I don't have any made right now, but we've got a Keurig in the break room down the hall," Robert said. "Or if you're feeling fancy, there's a new bakery called Lisa's one block up. Might not look like much, but she's selling cold brew and everything else."

"I may do that." Luke paused.

"You want company? I can put the sign up and come with."

Luke glanced around the empty sheriff's station.

“Fifteen minutes won’t hurt,” Robert pressed. “A call comes through, dispatch will radio me. Aren’t y’all on the common system with the county now?”

“I guess,” Luke said. “Yeah, come on.”

By Luke’s calculation, Robert was thirty or so. He had a wedding ring, and he’d clearly spent his twenties lifting weights. Even so, it was like old times, the little brother hanging around the big kids as they hoofed it down Main Street.

After some chit-chat about the old neighborhood and who had moved where, it was clear Robert still had a keen understanding of their hometown and all the interpersonal dynamics. Luke’s old neighbor, Harry Amidon, was struggling with MS, but recently flew to Atlanta for their granddaughter’s wedding. Lisa of Lisa’s Video and Lisa’s Tanning Salon and Lisa’s Café recently got remarried and was hoping for a buyer so she could retire. Earlier this year the pastor at Luke’s old Presbyterian church was railroaded out after a minor harassment scandal, and they were struggling to raise funds with the new interim guy.

On their way back to the station with coffees, Luke took a chance and asked, “You ever know Bill Deaton and Andrea Love? They were a few years older than me.”

“Not personally, but I heard about their son. Is that the case you’re working on?”

Luke wasn’t sure how much he wanted to talk about Cliff Deaton, especially with a man so well-versed in town gossip. A man, he reminded himself, he didn’t know at all, even if they were schoolyard chums. “We might have found their son,” he said carefully, “but we’re still digging into what happened.”

“I gotcha.”

“I went out to see each of them today. Apparently, it’s a day for meeting up with old friends.”

Robert seemed to want to say more, but they were back at the station. Luke held the door for his friend, thanked him for the coffee, and hurried back to his makeshift office.

There in the privacy of a cubicle, he reread his notes from the day and sketched out a timeline of events:

- Sunday, January 2 – Cliff’s last contact with family

- Tuesday, January 4 – students return to campus
- Wednesday – classes begin; Cliff's last contact with friends; disappears in the evening
- Thursday – college aware and investigates
- Friday – police notified
- Weekend – snowstorm; search parties
- Week – no news
- Tuesday, January 18 – Clifford's body found
- Locations: Calhoun College, house parties, Morgan Park, Keowee River, Shaw house
- People: Cliff, girlfriend Jessica, roommate Derek, the Shaws, the family
- Accident or murder?

He searched his notes for missing data and hidden patterns beyond the facts on the surface. He could find nothing now, but tomorrow's visit to the university would be revealing. That would clue him in about how Cliff lived and with whom he spent his time. Maybe that would help him build a picture of what happened the Wednesday Cliff disappeared. Where did he go? Who was he with? Did he encounter anyone along the way?

He did a quick search for the school liaison, Becca Ellison, and found her LinkedIn page filled with go-getter language about being *purpose-driven* and *passionate about engagement*. He'd seen enough of this language from sparkly corporate people working fake jobs that he felt like he had Becca's number. Her job was to protect the university's reputation and put a positive spin on whatever story emerged. She would be the place to start, but he and Flannel would need to find a way to circumvent her as they searched Cliff's dorm and interviewed his friends.

Searching for Cliff yielded little up front. There were so many news articles about him that digging through to his personal social media accounts would take some time—and someone more skilled at navigating the web. Luke found Andrea's Facebook page. They had dozens of friends in common but were unconnected. Her page stared blankly at him, the most recent public post available being when she updated her profile picture in 2022. He thought they might have been connected at one point, in their teenage years, but he couldn't remember for sure. Had she un-friended him?

He searched through her friends list and found Margot, grayed out because she'd deactivated. He thought about whether he would like to see

her again if she came east, and what they might say. He knew she'd gotten married, but from there her life was a mystery.

He quickly navigated back to search for Jessica Boggs, who had a private Instagram account and a Facebook page with the same limited access as Andrea Deaton. She wore sunglasses and a baseball hat in her profile photo. He clicked to the about page, but there was little information identifying her. Local girl from Issaqueena, no public likes or interests, no relationship information to show. Luke tapped a pen against the desk. He clicked her friends tab and saw they had no connections in common. No surprise given their age difference and his lackluster social media presence, but he made a note to find someone savvier in this area to run the digital background. It was an area the police department came up short. Maybe Don Riley would know something. He put himself out there often enough.

The last person Luke searched for was Derek Carlson, who had no public social accounts. From an internet search, Luke discovered Derek was the son of Howard Carlson, a state senator representing a triangle of the state on the North Carolina line. He tapped his pen again and considered things. A state senator with an only child attending a state school, a decent school but not the top choice for the ambitious. The political job didn't pay all that much, but it provided the most valuable of commodities: access.

Carlson appeared to have made his money in mountain real estate and now owned a one-man consultancy. Luke suspected the consultancy meant nothing more than arranged business lunches among power brokers in Columbia. Recent news articles about Carlson included a solar farm project along the interstate and co-sponsorship of a tax bill, but not much else. He made a note to cross-check a few other state senators to see what kind of media coverage was common and where Carlson fit in the state's pecking order.

The last thing he noticed was a meet-and-greet on the senator's Facebook page. The event was in Greenville tomorrow night in an industrial warehouse converted to a brewery. Luke was tired of those spaces: the high ceilings with exposed ventilation, the faux wood floors, chunky white letters on the windows. All of it screamed private equity. Carlson's constituency covered a large chunk of the upstate, much of it rural or battered small towns, their industry shipped off to China—all so their representatives could host fundraisers in the old factories? Luke had concluded long ago that he would never understand politics.

What he did understand, however, was detective work. His next step was to interview the staff and students at the college. This would give him a picture of Cliff, and this picture would guide him to the next link in the chain.

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Chapter Seven

MID-JANUARY MEANT the days were growing imperceptibly longer. Sunset at the solstice had been around four-thirty, and now the final blush of daylight disappeared around six, so it was cold and dark when Luke arrived at his grandparents' house. On the way he'd heard a news blurb about Clifford Deaton, but switched it over to the country station rather than listen to the disc jockey's dramatic recounting of the day's events.

His grandparents lived in a seventies ranch with dark paneling and a sunken living room. Oil lamps and clocks and religious paraphernalia. He was last here for Christmas Eve after nearly a year away, and the house grew smaller with each visit. What had shocked him a few weeks ago was how much they'd purged. Knickknacks pawned off on relatives, tools and bric-a-brac donated to Goodwill, furniture rotated around.

The porch light was on for him, and he opened the screen and knocked.

The dog barked in the window, and a few moments later Sarah opened the door. Her hair was pinned up messily, and without makeup the crow's feet by her eyes caught the shadows of the night. She gave him a half-hug and stepped back to let him in.

"Doing all right?" he asked her.

"Yeah, we're fine. Papa's in the back. He's resting but looking forward to seeing you."

He followed her to the living room, where their grandmother greeted him with a shaky hug. "Hey, Luke, it's nice to see you. You didn't have to come all the way up here."

“Well, I wanted to check on you.”

“Did you take off work early?”

“No, I was in the area for a case and wanted to check on you all.”

“That’s good,” she said, but her eyes and mind were elsewhere. “I was getting a few things ready for dinner. I’ve got some turkey sandwiches if you want one. Can you stay?”

He caught Sarah’s eye. “Um.”

“He told me earlier he had to get back to his case,” Sarah said.

“I do need to get back to Issaqueena tonight,” he said quickly, “but if you’re already making something.”

His grandmother nodded and bustled off to the kitchen, mumbling something he couldn’t understand.

“You don’t have to stay,” Sarah whispered to him.

“It’s all right. I don’t have anywhere to be tonight.”

“Up to you. You want to see him?”

“How’s he doing?”

“I mean, you wouldn’t know anything was wrong this morning. He was tired but he’s in his eighties. When we got home, I don’t know, it was like he had permission to let out his breath.”

“You sound like he might not want to fight it.”

“You talk to him and let me know. Let me check on him, see if he’s ready for you.”

He followed her into the hallway, again noting how Sarah had taken on the mantle of gatekeeper with their grandfather. You needed that, he knew. Vultures swirl around the dying, yet he wasn’t prepared for how small the world could get in the last chapter. He waited in a dark hallway next to a grandfather clock, listened to his grandmother bustling about the kitchen, heard Sarah knock on the back bedroom door and speak in a low voice to the old man.

While he stood there, unbidden memories flashed into his mind, mostly from his childhood: His grandfather waking him up before dawn to meet some extended family for breakfast. His grandfather walking down the darkened hall with a thermos of coffee and a hunting jacket. His grandmother pulling down the attic steps and the flood of yellow light from above. Luke pacing the hallway as a teenager, in the night, when Sarah had sneaked off with friends. So much of his impressionable life had happened here, in this hallway, and now they were near the end.

Sarah returned to the front of the hall and said, “He’s ready for you.”

“He’s up?”

“More or less.”

She let him go back on his own. The bedroom door was closed, so he knocked and waited.

“Hey, boy,” his grandfather growled from inside. “Come on in.”

“How you doing?” Luke asked. A stupid question, but he had to say something.

“Getting old.”

“So I hear. You look good.”

“I don’t, but thank you.”

The old man was thinner than a month ago, but you would guess he was seventy-five. His silver hair covered his head, and he’d tucked his shirt into his slacks. Maybe it was his slow and deliberate movements, but there was something like iron about his presence. Steel in his bones. Put a state trooper hat on him and he could still intimidate anyone daring to bend the law on the highway.

“Sarah told me about your diagnosis. I wanted to say hey.”

“I’m glad you did. You coming off your shift?”

“Yeah, I had a case that brought me back to Oconee. I just spent a few hours filling out paperwork at the sheriff’s department where no one would bother me. You got everything you need?”

“Yeah, I’m all right.”

“Any prescriptions to fill?”

“Not yet. They gave me some steroids to help my appetite, but I’ve got more tests to do before they know what we’re dealing with.”

Luke paused. He said, “I don’t want to get into your business, but these tests. I mean…”

The old man shook his head. “It’s not good, boy.”

“No?”

“They won’t say it, but I can tell. You talk to McKibben?”

“No, the sheriff wasn’t in, but one of his deputies is Robert Atkins. You remember him and Chris?”

His grandfather smiled and gave a half-chuckle. “I remember those boys. Which one was it who was always in trouble?”

“That was Chris.”

“And Robert became a deputy sheriff. Good for him. What are you working in Oconee?”

Luke paused a moment before telling him.

“Yeah, I read about that in the papers,” his grandfather said. “You looking at the drug angle?”

“What drug angle?” Luke asked, wondering if something had broken on the news this afternoon. He wished he’d listened to the radio report after all.

“If he didn’t drown on accident or in a drunken scuffle, who pushed him in the river and why? Drugs would be my guess. Maybe he was trying to deal at the university and got in over his head.”

“Maybe.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“Just from what I know about him, he didn’t sound the part. From talking to his parents...”

“Take it from me, you never know how people’s kids are going to turn out. You can’t know this, but parenthood can go sideways on you.”

Luke thought about that, and wondered if the old man was making a dig at Luke or himself. Luke felt like a disappointment. His marriage didn’t work out—probably no relationship would have worked back then, rebounding off Margot—and he’d never opened himself up to getting remarried. Ergo, no children. Ergo, he couldn’t know how parenthood could go sideways. But things had gone sideways for the old man as well. Luke’s Uncle Mike was a success in Nashville, but his father had spent his life on and off disability, on and off the wagon. Sideways indeed.

“I’ll look into it,” he said.

“Let me know.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes, and then Luke said he ought to go.

“You staying for dinner? I can’t eat much anymore myself, but your Granny can make something.”

“I’m okay. I ought to get back. We’ve got a long day of interviews tomorrow.”

His grandfather nodded. “Close the door on your way out, if you will.”

He never was one for ceremony.

His grandmother and sister were in the dining room when he got back. “Don’t get up,” he said.

“There’s some turkey in there,” his grandmother said.

“I ought to get back.”

“You shocked?” Sarah asked.
“He seems okay. You’ll let me know what you hear?”
“Yeah, his next appointment is in two weeks.”
“Maybe this case will be over then. He gave me some advice on it.”
“Oh lord, he always has something to say,” Sarah said.
“I’ll see y’all.”

Highway 11 was an open stretch of road running parallel to the mountains. Despite the best efforts from developers, it was still a lonesome way home. The spidery silhouettes of old trees, the spackle of stars, the continual tick-tick-tick of reflectors metering past on the yellow line. Gram Parsons had written “Hickory Wind” about this strip of highway, and that mournful spirit accompanied Luke as he sped along.

In this deep space for deep thinking, Luke kept himself awake by running through the day. He’d felt a number of tugs toward the past: his grandparents’ darkened hallway, Robert and the old neighborhood, Andrea and Margot. His grandfather had been right in one sense. Those ships and his life aboard them had sailed long ago. But today had been a reminder that, in a sense, the ghost ships still existed, perhaps in some parallel universe, the lives that could have been running alongside him all these years.

Tomorrow, he would have to set these thoughts aside. He and Flannel had work to do. Who knew what they would discover at the college, but he suspected his grandfather might be right about the drug angle. If the case led him there, it would take all of his focus to put Andrea and his grandfather aside and get to the bottom of what happened by the Keowee River.

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Chapter Eight

CALHOUN COLLEGE—LIKE much of the town, the state, America—was a gaudy blend of old and new. Originally an agricultural school for families who wanted to eke another generation of crops out of the ruined red clay, some of the old nineteenth-century buildings were still standing, including the library, Randolph Hall, and the clock tower. These buildings felt like what a college should be, an elite institution of learning. Old books, weathered bricks, the somber vibe of something that lasts. Compare that to the new business school, the student union, and the arts building, which all were constructed with the tall windows and black steel of a twenty-first century empire, and which no doubt enhanced the education of future executives.

It was at one such building where Luke and Flannel were to meet Becca Ellison to get oriented. They drove over together from the station and arrived at the university administration building a few minutes before eight.

A perky blonde was already in front of the building, ticking through messages on her phone, and when she saw the officers she slid her phone into her purse, grinned widely for introductions, and quickly navigated them into the building—as if, Luke thought, she was trying to hide the two men in rumpled suits from curious onlookers in the main quad.

She introduced herself as Megan-something and explained she was the college's tour administrator, and that her boss was running a few minutes behind. "Becca's been on point through this unfortunate incident," Megan-something said. "She's ready to help with anything you need."

“I sent a list of what we’d like to check,” Flannel said.

“Of course, and Becca organized it all yesterday afternoon. We’re here to accommodate anything you need,” she repeated, which confirmed for Luke they almost certainly would hide anything they could.

Her heels click-clicked as she guided them through a vaulted entry room, past a coffee bar, and down a gray carpeted hallway with sleek mahogany doors and frosted glass walls that prevented administrators from enjoying a moment of privacy.

“I booked a conference room to get us started,” Megan-something was saying. “Can I get either of you anything? A coffee?”

“We’re fine,” Luke said, assuming the coffee would be from a Keurig somewhere rather than fresh from the coffee bar.

“Great. We’re back here.”

“We’re planning to spend most of the morning in Cliff’s dorm room,” Luke said. “It might be easier to head on over.”

“Detectives!” another voice said from behind them, and Luke wondered if he saw a shadow of relief on Megan-something’s face. Another woman with big curly hair, a strong application of makeup, and a deep void of cleavage breezed over and stuck out her hand. “I’m the VP of student engagement and success.”

“Is that the same thing as public affairs?” Luke asked.

Becca smiled wryly. “Sort of. My actual title is Vice President of Student Outcomes and Public Engagement. I get another line every time they restructure because they add something new but never take anything away.”

“Ah.”

“You want to sit down for a few minutes to get acquainted before we head over to Dodd Hall? I’m sure Megan’s offered you coffee?”

“We’re fine,” Luke said again. He made eye contact with Flannel and then stepped into the conference room.

She whispered something to Megan-something, who scuttled down the hallway. Becca shut the door behind her and offered the detectives a seat. They declined.

“Well. Detective Burns, I got your requests yesterday, and I’m sorry I didn’t get back to you. It’s been crazy here, you understand. Our campus is still so distraught over the tragedy. I’ve pulled Mr. Deaton’s files here—his class schedule, the names of the suitemates in his dorm. I’m afraid I don’t

have his grades from last semester. Those files are confidential, so it'll be up to his estate, presumably his parents, if they choose to release them."

She handed the manila folder to Flannel, who thanked her.

Luke decided to let the grades go, for now. They needed access to Cliff's current professors and friends. He said, "I understand about the grades. Can you tell us, was he in any danger of flunking out, anything like that?"

She shook her head. "Without going into specifics, he was doing fine. There's nothing in his records to suggest he was anything but an average student."

"Thank you for the information here. We'd like to start with his dorm room and his roommate. Before we go, can you tell us anything about his friends? How are the other students coping?"

"That's a good question," she said. "We have an excellent counseling service, which many students make use of regularly. Of course those records are all confidential, but they haven't reported any uptick in visits. I would say, tragedy aside, campus life is business as usual for most students. Everyone has seen the fliers around campus asking for information about Mr. Deaton, but we thousands of students. Very few actually knew him, so I would say it's hit the faculty harder."

"How so?"

"Teachers are up at the front of the classroom, and Mr. Deaton's photo is on the wall next to them. I gather this is a homicide investigation?"

"We're still keeping all options open," Luke said.

"Regardless, whatever happened was a tragedy, and the news is starting to trickle out. The campus newspaper ran a piece this morning, and I'm told they are working on a longer piece about campus security measures."

She kept using the word *tragedy*, a word that sounded compassionate but which had a way of numbing the specifics. He assumed the story about security was going to be of more concern for her in the near future.

"Tell me about your security measures," Luke said.

"To be honest, we're twenty years behind most big organizations. If you go to a Fortune 500 campus, they track you from the moment you pull into the visitor lot. Security runs your license plate and does a quick background scan before they even let you in the door. Everywhere but the restrooms is on video at all times. They know who's in the building and where they are at all times.

“On our campus,” she continued, “we have databases of all our students and staff, and we do have cameras and security guards. Students have to show an ID to enter non-public buildings, which helps alert us if strangers are roaming around campus. But if a student goes missing, or chooses to take a weekend away, we have no idea. They’re free to come and go, hence the less-than-optimal response when Mr. Deaton went missing.

“The good news is that things are changing. This might be of interest to your department. We’re starting our new Student Housing Safety Initiative, which aims to do more to track each student’s whereabouts so that if someone is missing, we can alert security in twenty-four hours.”

“You going to put tracking devices on them?” Luke asked.

“It’s part of our Strategic Plan: Green Light 2030,” she said, missing his sarcasm. She went on to describe the elements of said plan, a seven-step program with clear *deliverables* and *actionable priorities*. As she waxed on, her language said she was excited to pitch the university’s mission, but her clipped sentences and body language told Luke she really wanted them to get their job over with.

Luke held up his hands. “Maybe we can take this on the road to the dorm?”

“Problem with that,” Becca said. “We haven’t been in touch this morning with Mr. Deaton’s roommate, and we need his approval to enter their room.”

“We thought that might be the case,” Flannel said. “Yesterday we got a warrant to give us access to the facility.”

“May I see that?”

“Sure.” Flannel pulled a folded document out of his coat pocket. “We’d obviously rather have Mr. Carlson there and get his cooperation, but time is a priority. Do you know where he is?”

“Megan has a message out with him,” Becca mumbled, skimming the document.

“Shall we?” Luke asked.

She gave a heavy sigh. “Can you gentlemen give me a few minutes to arrange someone from facilities to meet us there? If the door’s locked, I don’t want to have to break the door in or anything.”

“Certainly,” Luke said.

“I can meet you in the lobby, if that works?”

“Dodger Roger,” Flannel said.

While they waited, Luke checked his email on his phone. Kelly the medical examiner had come through for him and said she was scheduling the autopsy for this afternoon. She must have gotten enough media requests that she, too, wanted to get the job over with and let someone else take over.

Luke was fine with that. Taking over where others threw in the towel is what he lived for. His personal life was in a trough, so he was happy to wake up every day to clean out the world's garbage.

Cliff's dorm room was in one of the older buildings on campus, musty and dim. Becca explained without prompting that the building originally was named after former South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond and was still known as "The Strom" even though the college had changed its name during the unrest of 2020.

She led them to the second floor and down a long hall to a room on the end, with a dusty brown tile floor the boys hadn't bothered to cover with a rug. There were two twin beds with iron frames, two desks with scattered papers and pens strewn no top, and an overflowing wastebasket on the floor between them. On the opposite wall, two wardrobes were closed, and beside one, behind the door, was an overflowing laundry hamper with clothes stacked up shoulder-height.

"It's amazing how young men live," Becca said, scrunching her nose.

Luke grunted but suspected she would be equally appalled by the state of his own condo.

After a cursory scan of the room, he determined Cliff's side was by the windows. Flannel began sifting through the wardrobe. There was a second laundry hamper inside Cliff's wardrobe, so Luke assumed the hamper by the door belonged to Derek. He peeked into the other hamper but nothing jumped out at him. A couple of pants on hangers, a pair of flip-flops, a baseball glove, some textbooks piled up.

"Do you know what these guys are majoring in?" Luke asked.

"I don't know about his roommate. Cliff is—was—in the forestry school, but most freshmen take standard classes their first year." She opened her folder and flipped through a few pages. "English, psychology, physics, calculus. Environmental ethics. Hmm."

"You don't have Derek's schedule?"

"Actually, I do. I don't know what he's majoring in, but I pulled his class schedule, as well as the guys on either side of us. I also got Jessica

Boggs, whom you asked for."

"I appreciate it," Luke said.

"Good news, if you wanted to catch both of them, they're in the same chemistry class. It gets out at nine-thirty if you wanted to walk over there."

Luke checked his watch. "Maybe."

He walked over to the desks and pulled out the drawers, checked the papers lying around. Then he emptied the wastebasket on the floor. He put on some nitrile gloves and, kneeling on the hard floor, began sifting things back into the basket. He started with the obvious things—banana peels, emptied bags of Fritos, Kleenex—then shifted to the papers. Most of them were crumpled up printouts of their assignments. There were three copies of a short reflection on James Joyce's "The Dead."

"Is there a janitor who comes through here?"

"Someone should come through once a week to empty the trash and restock the bathrooms. They don't do any cleaning, or laundry, but it's a basic spot check."

"Got it. So all of this should be from Derek rather than Cliff?"

"That would be my guess."

He sighed and put the rest of the papers back into the wastebasket.

The last thing of note by Cliff's side of the room was a Dell laptop closed on the desk. He opened it but the power was off. He pushed the button to turn it on and asked, "Is this school-issued?"

"No, students bring their own PCs."

"We're going to need to bring this with us."

Flannel had finished with the wardrobe and said, "I'll go get some evidence bags."

"Thanks, Flannel. Hey, I'm going to try to catch Derek and Jessica. Can you finish up here with Ms. Ellison? There's nothing obvious, but take some photos and double check there's no, you know, hidden compartments."

"Will do."

Once Flannel skipped out, Luke said to Becca, "I'll write up a receipt for this, if you'll pass it along to whoever will be collecting Cliff's things. It shouldn't take him more than half an hour to finish up."

"Before you walk out with anything, I'd like to double check with Derek to make sure it's Cliff's computer."

"I can talk to him about it in a few minutes."

“We can do it together, if you want to bring him up here,” she said.

“Just let me know where to go meet him and Jessica.”

She seemed unsure what to do. She could try to assert her way into coming with Luke, or she could stay here to supervise his partner. That was the beauty of having a partner. You could separate people to better control the investigation. She reluctantly handed over two pieces of paper with headshots of Jessica and Derek printed on them. She’d helpfully added contact information and a class schedule on each page, and he felt a quick moment of warmth toward her. She might have a goofy job title and interests that ran counter to his investigation, but he could tell she was a thoughtful and hard worker. He respected that.

“Thank you muchly,” he said. “I’ll try to catch back up with you later this morning, but feel free to pass the rest of your files over to my partner.”

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Chapter Nine

LUKE SAT on the rim of a fountain in front of Lafayette Hall to wait for Jessica and Derek's chemistry class to finish. When classes ended, the students streaming out of the building were indistinguishable, the girls in boots and tights and hats, their hair in ponytails, and the boys in ill-fitting pants, too tight or too loose. Smirks on their faces. Mouth breathers. They jostled and laughed and griped about their professors and pulled out phones to text and walk at the same time.

He was about to give up hope when he saw her, the girl from the headshot Becca Ellison had given him. She was striking and lithe, with large, liquid eyes and a sharp jawline. Buxom and maybe not wearing a bra. Two things struck him: First, from the way she carried herself, she was out of Cliff's league, which made him reconsider the boy. Second, Luke never would have recognized her from her obscured Facebook profile, which made him suspicious. If you had nothing to hide, why hide?

Derek was with her, walking close although each of them was lost in their phones. Since the roommate had no social media accounts, the only thing Luke had to go on was Becca's printout, but in person he was the kind of guy you would expect to see with Jessica. Sandy hair, a square jaw, broad shoulders. He looked well-heeled and arrogant, a future captain of industry, though today he was not yet old enough to drink. He smiled and showed her something on his phone, and then he used the opportunity to put his other arm around her lower back, which she seemed fine with.

Luke followed a few paces behind them until the crowd from Lafayette Hall thinned and they were on a quad heading toward the student union. He sped up until he was beside them and asked, “Are you Jessica and Derek?”

They stopped, and Derek dropped his hand from Jessica’s back.

“Yeah,” she said, drawing out the syllable so it inflected upward, an answer that was also a question.

“My name is Luke Steele, and I’m a detective with the Issaqueena Police Department. Could we talk for a moment? Is there a booth at the union where we could sit down?”

“This is about Cliff?” she asked. “A student life person let us know you found him.”

“Well, yes, but we don’t know much about what happened yet. I was hoping you two could walk me through the last couple of weeks so I can get an idea of how Cliff ended up at the river, what he was doing out there, who he might have been with.”

“We both thought he was with the other the night he disappeared,” Derek said. “We already filled out statements with the police.”

“I understand, but now that we found him, my job is to start over from the beginning.”

He opened the glass door to the student union, and they went into a dining area buzzing with groups of students huddling to keep warm from the weather.

They found a relatively secluded booth and sat down.

“I know this might be a tough conversation,” Luke said. “Can I get either of you anything? A coffee or a glass of water?”

The kids shook their heads.

“Well. Before we start walking through the details of his disappearance, do either of you know anyone who might have wanted to hurt Cliff? Any arguments or…”

“Everybody loved Cliff,” Jessica said, and Derek nodded his agreement. “He’s just, he was, the nicest guy.”

“That’s what I keep hearing,” Luke said. “I met with his parents yesterday.”

“How are they?”

“About like you’d expect.”

She grimaced. “His mom was so nice.”

“I understand you visited them over Christmas break. Was that the only time you met his family?”

“Yeah. We hadn’t been dating long. Three or four months, maybe? I had a rough start to college.”

“How so?”

“Nothing specific, you know, just, I didn’t always fit in.”

“Did you and Cliff have that in common?”

“Now that you mention it, maybe. We both had smaller friend groups, but who knows why people click.”

“What was Cliff’s social circle like?”

“He mostly hung out with a few guys in his dorm. And me, I guess. I sort of became an honorary resident in their suite.”

“How many guys are on the hall?”

“It’s arranged in pods,” Derek said. “There’s, um, twelve of us. Eleven now, because Kyle didn’t come back. Well, ten, I guess, now that…”

After an awkward silence, Luke prodded. “What happened to Kyle?”

“I don’t know. He was a few rooms down and apparently told Doug this wasn’t going to work out. College, I mean. Moved home after the fall exams.”

“Were he and Cliff close?”

“Nah, just to say hello to. A group of us would go out to parties a couple nights a week, but otherwise Cliff pretty much kept it close.”

“The two of you then?”

“I guess,” Derek said.

“We can come back to this. Right now, I’m trying to figure out how Cliff ended up in the Keowee River. Have any of y’all ever been to Morgan Park?”

They exchanged glances. “Was that where we all went that one time?” Derek asked.

“Maybe?”

“Cliff drove us to the lake one day back in—November?” Derek said.

“Yeah,” Jessica said. “It had just gotten cold.”

“There’s a park with a fire pit, so we sat out there for a few hours.”

“Were you drinking?” Luke asked.

When Derek paused, Jessica jumped in. “We had some edibles.”

“Ah. Cliff took them, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Was this common?”

“Not really,” Derek said. “Cliff didn’t do well with toxins.”

Luke decided to change directions. He asked Jessica how she and Cliff met.

“We were in a psych class together,” she said. “I switched majors this year and had to catch up on some of my basics.”

“This year?”

“I started last year thinking I was going to do communications but switched over to hospitality.”

“You’re a sophomore now?”

“Sort of.” She seemed embarrassed, as if she only now realized she was the upper-class girl slumming with freshmen boys. She explained her high-school boyfriend had cheated on her, so she’d been a wreck her first year. She hadn’t made any friends, flunked calculus, and went home for a semester to regroup with some night classes at the technical college. When she returned to Calhoun, she met Cliff in the back of Psych 101, where he muttered jokes and made her laugh for the first time in forever. Here was a boy she finally could connect with. He was shy and had the cut of a plain freshman boy: shaggy hair, a few days of uncertain fuzz on his face, a distinctive *squint*. “All the boys have it,” she said, glancing at Derek, who blinked but did not squint. “They furrow their brows and crinkle their eyes. They think it makes them look cool.”

Derek blinked again before adding, “He wasn’t trying to impress anyone. He knew his place, and that elevated him.”

The night Cliff disappeared, Jessica went on, she and Cliff went to separate parties. She went out several nights a week now, as if trying to make up for lost time. She thought Cliff had been with Derek, and the two of them were sending texts back and forth until midnight. Luke had seen a transcript of those messages. They were immaculately punctuated, even until midnight, suggesting Cliff had been sober when he left the campus. He’d had a clear mind and sound fingers for at least half the night.

“His brother told me he would wander off on occasion,” Luke said.

“That’s true,” Derek said. He sat up, energetic now, eyes dilated. “It was actually a little odd. I mean, he was my roommate, man, so I felt like he and I had an agreement—we told each other things, where we were going, who we were hanging out with. He was a great guy, but weird in some ways, and really quiet.”

The boys hadn’t been at Calhoun a month when Cliff wandered off the first time. A group of them had been leaving the cafeteria, trying to plan their evening.

“I don't remember exactly how it went,” Derek continued, “but we were somewhere near the union when somebody asked, ‘Where’s Cliff?’ He’d just slipped off and didn’t come back until after two. I asked him where he’d been, but all he said was that he wanted to explore the town, which was strange because there’s not much here.”

“So he left the campus?” Luke asked, remembering his grandfather’s comment that drugs might be at play. He wondered if Cliff’s late-night outings were about more than clearing his head. A picture of Cliff was emerging—lovable, studious, sober, but with a private side no one seemed to know.

“He went on these walks every few weeks,” Derek said. “Four hours or more in the middle of the night. I don’t think he was meeting anyone. He was just out walking. Like I said, he could be weird. Then he started dating Jessica, and they sometimes spent the night in her room.”

“You thought that was where he was the night he disappeared.”

“You guys hammered me about that when I gave my statement. ‘Why didn’t you call the police earlier? Didn’t you think something was wrong?’ On and on.”

“And?”

“He and Jessica were texting all through the party. You can check his cell history,” Derek assured him. “I assumed they caught up. Anyway, I’d had a few beers myself—don’t write that down in your reports—but no, I didn’t think anything of it when I got back to an empty room. It wasn’t until I saw Jessica the next day that we made the connection he was gone.”

“Did you two spend the night together often?” Luke asked Jessica.

“Don’t put that in your reports either,” she said.

“I’m not here to embarrass anybody,” Luke said.

Her face reddened anyway.

“I never minded that we were always together,” she said. “It made me feel good that he always wanted to be with me, though I did wish we’d spent more time with our friends. It could be a little intense, just me and him.”

“We hung out,” Derek said, a note of mock protest coming into his voice.

“I know that,” she said, “but you were Derek.”

Something about the way he huffed, again as if in jest, caught Luke’s attention. He stared at the two kids a moment.

Before he could press them on anything else, his cell buzzed. When he checked the number, he saw it was Captain Archer on the line and considered declining the call. But he’d gotten what he could for now and wanted to see what Derek and Jessica would do next, when they thought he was distracted.

“Excuse me, but I have to take this. We’ll be in touch.” He got up and pushed the green button to accept the call. “Captain,” he said.

“Luke, where are you now?”

“At the college. Just finished an interview with Cliff’s roommate and girlfriend.”

“Great. Hey, you at a spot where you can take a break? You might want to ride over to Twelve Mile Landing.”

“Yeah, why?”

“There’s been a stabbing. A young woman. Couple kids out of school found her on a trail up the river.”

“We’re up in the rotation again?”

“No, Farbatko’s on it. There’s strong indication that the vic’s boyfriend did it, and he’s been on their list as a possible street dealer for a while.”

Issaqueena didn’t have too many homicides, but if a death was drug-related it usually ended up with Farbatko’s unit. They stayed busy, but it was all churn-and-burn, like drugs themselves.

“So what do you need from me?” Luke asked.

“I’ve got a note here that says she was one of your CIs, from a few years ago. Gabby Cole? Mid-twenties?”

He took a breath and cursed quietly.

“Sorry, Luke. Who was she?”

“She used to work for Scott Bolton’s law firm. She helped me clear that embezzlement case a few years ago.”

“I remember that.”

What Luke didn’t tell his captain was that after Gabby lost her job with the firm, she slid into some bad habits. She’d always been on the edge, and during the trial she’d gotten a roommate who hooked her up with a job bartending at McAleer’s Pub on Sloan Street. Luke ended up paying for three months of rent and signed her up for a semester at the tech college

before losing touch with her. Today he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her. He'd sent her a text last year to see if she was all right, but she'd not replied.

"Thought you might want to check out the scene and touch base with Farbatko. Officers Hazlett and Gould secured the scene if he's not there."

"Thanks, Captain. They picked up the boyfriend yet?"

"They're working it as we speak."

Luke thought about Gabby, a bright town girl who'd lived with her grandmother during high school. He didn't know much else about her family or who might want to know about her passing. He thanked the captain and said he might head over there to see if he could be helpful.

"How are things at the college?" Archer asked.

"Dead ends so far."

"Keep me posted," Archer said, and he hung up.

Before leaving, Luke poked his head back into the union dining area to see if Derek and Jessica were still in the booth. Jessica was gone but Derek was still there, hands folded over the table, and he was peering right at Luke. He held the detective's gaze for a moment and then pulled his phone out of his pocket and got lost in thumbing messages.

Luke scanned the room for Jessica, but she must have left out a back door while Luke was on the call. That bothered him, but he couldn't say whether it was because he'd missed her exit or because her exit felt furtive.

He walked out and surveyed the quad. Students bundled in layers scuttled back and forth, but no Jessica.

Up the hill an old Ford pickup, midnight blue, was parked by the curb, in front of a fire hydrant. Probably a landscaper or maintenance guy double-parked to check on a call-out. It was too far away to see if anyone was in the cab, but as Luke watched, the truck's taillights flashed. The driver gunned the engine and slowly pulled away from the curb.

Luke took a breath and told himself he was losing it. He could use a trip to South Florida right about now. But there was another body to contend with, another ghost from his past.

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Chapter Ten

Luke let Flannel know what he was doing and asked his partner to see if he could interview Cliff's other suitemates, maybe see if there was anyone else at the college who might shed light on who Cliff was, who he hung out with, and what he might have been doing the night he went missing.

Luke paused. "If Derek comes back to the dorm while you're there, see what your read on him is."

"What are you thinking?"

"I don't know yet, but something's not sitting right."

"Got it. I'll set up out front with Ms. Ellison."

Flannel was alerting him that the PR lackey was in earshot, so Luke left it at that. He thanked his partner and hung up.

Twelve Mile Landing was a few miles north of town, where the university had some experimental forests. Because the woods on either side of the river were protected here, it was a popular place to launch a boat. You could sail under the Highway 123 bridge and dock your boat for a drink at a tavern on the other side of town for a post-river drink. The experimental forest also had a trail running several miles up the river from the landing, which in recent years had become popular with junkies and the growing homeless population. This time of year, with the recent snowstorm, the water and the riverbank should be as deserted as Morgan Park.

He saw the lights before turning off the highway. Officers Gould and Hazlett had set up police tape and a command post in the parking lot, amid two police Crown Vics, an Explorer, an ambulance, and a fire truck. The

county fire and EMT were synced to the same system, so both went out on every call. If all they had was a dead victim by the river, the fire and EMS vehicles would clear out soon, but the crews liked to mill about in case they could be helpful.

As he parked, it occurred to him that this was his second dead body by the water in two days. He prayed this would be the last for a while. He parked out of the way and went over to the police tape, where he saw Farbatko sitting in the Explorer and talking in his cell. The lieutenant gave him a nod and pointed toward two officers, presumably Hazlett and Gould, who were coming over. The first was short with red hair, freckled skin, and a soft round face, and the other was tall and dark-haired with sharp cheekbones.

“You the responding officers?” Luke asked.

The first officer, Hazlett, nodded. “We got a call from one of the residents in that apartment block,” she said, pointing up the hill toward a low-rent complex. “Her son’s still out of school with ice up by the state line, so he and a friend were riding their bikes through the park and found our vic lying in a snowbank.”

“We stopped by and had her son verify where she was,” Gould said. “She’s about fifty yards up the river, with a trail of blood coming back to the parking lot here.”

“Forensics hasn’t gotten here yet?”

“Farbatko’s on the phone about that,” Hazlett said. “Sounds like a busy day in the county, and the crew is short-staffed.”

“Hopefully it’s open and shut,” Farbatko said from behind them.

Luke turned and gave his colleague a fist bump. Lieutenant Farbatko had been his first partner, and now they had a friendly undercurrent of competition between their units. Farbatko was in his forties but already had the large paunch and smoker’s rasp of an old man. He also favored bolo ties, which no one ever asked him about.

“I got my guys writing up a warrant to search her house where she lived with her boyfriend. His file is about this thick, including several callouts for abusing her, so my guess is we’re going to find him high or hungover in about an hour. How do you know her?”

Luke gave the short version of his old informant and then asked, “What’s this about these callouts?”

“She’s called us three times in six months. Well, her neighbor has, when she showed up bleeding on her doorstep. The guy’s a junky lowlife, but she never wanted to press charges, and we’ve never been able to pin anything on him. Plenty of reports he’s dealing on the side, but now he’s finally done it.”

Farbatko clapped his hands.

Luke must have looked aghast, because the lieutenant paused. He was a cold man with a shaved head and a drinking problem of his own. He’d been with Issaqueena PD about ten years when Luke started, and while he was an extremely capable human being, there was also a danger in him that Luke guarded against in himself. If it was easy to become a cynic, the threat of becoming a nihilist lurked in the shadows.

“Sorry, Luke.” Farbatko shook out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. Before lighting it, he said, “Hopefully we’ll get him and that’ll be that. You want to see her?”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to check on this warrant, but will you walk him down there?” Farbatko asked Hazlett and Gould. He sparked his lighter and fired up the cigarette before adding, “Carefully.”

“Copy that,” Gould said.

She and Hazlett led him toward the river. Beyond the parking lot, the landing had a concrete ramp going into the water. A few tire tracks in the snow indicated more than one boater had braved the icy waters this week. The elliptical pattern of blood in the snow was unmistakable and sickened him. They gave the main trail a wide berth to avoid disturbing footprints in the snow.

The foliage up the trail, so lush and thick and green in the summer, was stripped bare brown, the trail covered in a scale of ice and snow. No plows came through here, so the snow drifted and froze at will, subject only to the natural order of things, the wind, the thaw and refreeze, animals, lone souls who ventured onto the trail despite its inhospitable conditions. Beyond the first bend they came upon two more officers combing the scrub, waving flashlights through the branches and brambles.

“I take it no murder weapon’s on the scene?” Luke asked.

“Not yet,” Gould said. “If I had to guess, I’d say the drops of blood came from the knife.”

Luke nodded.

Then she was there, in a bank of drifted snow, folded like she was sitting in a chair—or as if someone had carried her like a bride over the threshold and laid her gently on the bedding of powder, bloody sheet beneath her. She was young, thirty at the oldest, but she'd clearly lived a full life. Her mouth was sunken in as though she were missing a few teeth, and although her skin was bleached white, you could see where she had two faded black eyes and a scar along her forehead. She wore a blood-soaked T-shirt, and her arms were scratched and bruised, telling Luke that she'd been indoors and had fought back.

"The blood back there wasn't from a knife," he said. "The killer dumped her here."

The officers paused at that.

They stood off the trail maybe ten feet from the body. He took in the scene and believed Farbatko and his team had it about right. The snow on the trail had melted to a muddy slush, and you could see a few sets of footprints coming in from the landing. A couple of grooves in the mud, likely from where she'd been dragged. Some of that may have been the bike tires. Up the trail, the tracks all stopped, and there was nothing but snow and ice, a stillness eerily similar to what he'd felt in Morgan Park yesterday.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine what happened. She was living with a boyfriend, a low-level drug dealer who got high and abused her every so often, violent enough that she stumbled to a neighbor's house. One bitter pill for women in her position was that domestic violence never ended. Men didn't clean up and reform. The animal was always there, and one day the animal came out and stabbed Gabby. It had been brutal, multiple stab wounds in her chest.

Then what? The man knew what he'd done and had a body in his living room, or bedroom, wherever. He wrapped her in a sheet, hoisted her up, and carried her to the trunk of his car, or the bed of a pickup, or the back of an SUV. She couldn't have been dead long, given all the blood here, so the boyfriend had to live nearby and dropped the body out here. It wouldn't have been easy carting her this far up the trail. Why do that? The blood led you right to her, but maybe he'd not expected that. Once you had a dead body on your hands, things could get unpredictable.

Luke suspected the killer was simply blitzed out of his mind. Criminals were not, as a rule, on the right side of the bell curve, but even the dumbest killers knew about fingerprints and DNA evidence. Even if the man burned

his clothes and drove his car into a lake, his evidence would be all over her body. He would know that, once he sobered up, and then he'd be dangerous.

"Anyone have a guess how long she's been dead?" Luke asked.

"The lieutenant thinks less than two days, but he wanted to wait on forensics before examining the body."

"What a mess." He saw nothing upriver but gray snow and muddy scrub. Brackish water that disappeared into the arms of bare oaks. Downriver, he knew the water wended through town, beneath the Highway 123 bridge and into miles of farmland before it reached Lake Hartwell. Morgan Park was down there, as was the Shaw residence. He believed it was too far for Cliff's body to have traveled, but given this second murder, he wondered. "I think I've seen enough," he said. "I take it you pulled her wallet to ID her?"

"It's in an evidence bag," Gould said.

"You mind if I take a look?"

"Be our guest."

He followed Hazlett and Gould out the way they'd come. The parking lot was a renewed bustle of activity as the medical examiner van had arrived and Farbatko appeared to be packing it in.

"What's next?" Luke asked him.

"Warrant's signed, so I'm going to meet a team at her house. See if we can't catch her boyfriend."

"Where's she living these days?"

"Hunter's Glen apartments," Farbatko said, sending a text to someone. "Behind the Ingles on 93."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"If it's the same apartment, she's been there for a while."

"Well anyway, I got to run, Luke. You want to come?"

"I might meet you out there. Anyone tried to find her family?"

"You volunteering? We haven't found anyone yet. From what we can tell, her mother's deceased and her father's MIA."

"She used to live with her grandmother," Luke said.

"Also deceased."

Luke wondered what became of Gabby's old roommate, if the girl had moved out and the boy had moved in, and what the timing of it all was. He couldn't remember the roommate's name but believed he had it in a

notebook somewhere. He said, “I have a few suspects I’d like to follow up on, but if you’re going to her apartment I’ll head there, too.”

“Suit yourself. You’ll miss the action if you wait too long.”

“Got it.”

Luke said his goodbyes to Hazlett and Gould, and then he started his Explorer and cranked up the heat. He called Flannel to see how his partner was doing—and if he would be all right covering the Cliff Deaton autopsy this afternoon.

True to his word, Farbatko and his team were on the move. When Luke pulled into Hunter’s Glen, a patrol officer waved him into a space. Luke held up his badge and asked where the action was.

“They’re in A105,” the officer said, pointing toward the back of the complex.

“The first floor?”

“Middle unit on the end.”

A squad car was parked in front of the apartment, and a pair of patrolmen were in the front seat inputting data to the dash computer.

A puffy young man was in the back of a squad car. He was about thirty, with an unkempt beard, bloodshot eyes, and wearing a green canvas jacket. He jumped when Luke passed.

The door to the apartment was ajar, and Luke heard voices inside. He gave a short knock and opened it slowly.

“Luke! You made it.”

“Didn’t want to miss the action.”

“Ha! You won’t believe it,” Farbatko said. He pulled out a pack of Big Red gum and offered a stick to Luke, who declined. The lieutenant shrugged and jammed a piece into his mouth before continuing. “We were all set for a chase. We had patrol officers lining the back alley, blocking the exit, the whole nine. We banged on the door and yelled police, and this dude opens it up lazy as you please. You’d think we were in an episode of *Andy Griffith* where the criminals let themselves into jail.”

“You’ll want to piss-test him.”

“Oh, he’s stoned out of his gourd, but whatever it is, it kept him calm.”

“Anything here?”

“You bet. Come in. The bedroom is like the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, with the bloody knife on the floor. Our man was too zonked to offer a

confession, but by the time we get him sobered up, he'll be ready for a grand jury."

As Luke entered the apartment, the first thing he noted was that it did not appear like the house of a crazy man who beat up his girlfriend weekly and finally stabbed her to death. Dude had mismatched Wal-Mart furniture and had spent some money on his TV and Xbox. There were bills on the kitchen counter and garbage arranged neatly in a corner of the kitchen, two bags and a bucket of magazines and beer cans. He *recycled*. The only thing out of place was an underlying stench of mildew, as if a long-ago water leak had not been dealt with properly. Also, the house was hot as Charleston, probably eighty-five degrees with the heat blowing full blast.

"Was Gabby living here with him?"

"Unclear, actually. There's a lot of women's clothing in the closet and feminine items in the bathroom, but there's not a lot of personality anywhere. They've got two bedrooms back here—a master suite and a second room full of unpacked boxes. We'll go through them, but it looks like she moved in without moving in, you know?"

"That sounds like her," Luke said.

"Yeah. Well. This morning I thought we had a domestic abuse situation with a low-level junky drug runner, end of story, but get a load of this."

Farbatko took a box off the kitchen counter and handed it over to Luke. Opening it, he discovered it held about a hundred vials shaped like spark plugs with a clear liquid on one end. Luke recognized these as refills for dab pens—the latest vaping devices young people were using to smoke synthetic THC. Like cigarette vapes, they'd become a problem in schools because they didn't kick out much odor. They were a problem for law enforcement, too, because dealers would put anything into them, including traces of fentanyl. Congress supposedly had passed a law banning synthetic cannabinoids as part of the deal to reopen the government the other year, but nobody at the federal level seemed able to enforce anything.

Luke whistled.

"We haven't searched that junk room back there yet, but this is enough to add intent to distribute to our list of charges for Mr. Bowyer out there."

"Bowyer."

"Robert P. Bowyer. Age twenty-eight, unemployed, busted for all the petty crimes you would expect. Domestic violence, DUI, disturbing the

peace. Plenty of community service but never went down for anything major. Until now.”

“The captain said he was on a list with you guys?”

“The second time she called in a domestic, the responding officer reported suspicious behavior from Bowyer. His arrest record indicates he was connected with some guys in our files, and we suspected he was doing a little distribution himself. If these come back full of cannabis, he might have worked his way up to wholesaling.”

Farbatko was smacking his gum and eyeing the scene. A pair of officers was rummaging around in one of the bedrooms, and Luke understood the lieutenant had a day’s work ahead of him, supervising the crime scene at the river, the forensics investigation here, the interview with the suspect. Luke had his own case to worry about and made to leave, but Farbatko stopped him.

“Luke, you got any idea who we should call about her? Any line on her dad or a sibling?”

“No, but she used to live in another apartment here. I can’t remember the number, but it was an upstairs unit. She had a roommate who might still be around.”

“You mind checking on her? The media’s going to jump on this before I can take a breath, especially since your boy turned up downriver. You and I both are going to feel the heat soon.”

“Sure, I’ve got the address at the station. They’re doing the autopsy on the Deaton kid now, but my partner can handle it. You want company when you talk to Bowyer?”

“Up to you,” Farbatko said, seemingly surprised by Luke’s offer. “It’s going to be dinner time before we get started, and I don’t have any overtime to spread around.”

“That’s okay, I can put in flex time,” Luke said, privately glad to have something to focus on. He’d gone through the holidays newly single again, maybe drinking too much but otherwise okay. The new year had been harder for some reason. Maybe the permanence was settling in, sliding into his mid-thirties without a family and wondering if this was how life would be from now on. He was grateful for something to do in the evening, but he also owed something to Gabby. The case wasn’t his, but since she was his informant, he felt accountable to her somehow. As if he could atone for—

what? Not checking in with her more often? Not writing another check to keep her in school? Not caring enough?

"Send me a message when you're setting up," Luke said. "I need to keep moving."

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Chapter Eleven

He stopped for a king-size Payday candy bar and a Starbucks Double Shot energy drink before going back to the station. He was thinking about joining Flannel for the tail end of the autopsy, but Captain Archer sent him a text asking him to swing by when he had a moment. Luke planned to spend the rest of the day in the field, and maybe tomorrow too, so he went up to see his boss, who promptly asked him to shut the door behind him.

His captain was a short barrel of a man who reminded Luke of a guinea pig putting its front paws on the side of a cage. He had a soft jaw made for administration, but Luke had always found him to be a reasonable man, a straight shooter who gave his detectives a great deal of rope as long as they filled out their paperwork reasonably on time.

"What's up?" Luke asked when they were alone in the captain's office.

"I'm sorry about your CI," Archer said. "Was it bad?"

"Hard to say. She didn't suffer long."

"They get the guy?"

"The boyfriend."

Archer winced. He'd seen enough domestic abuse cases to know the score, but it never got easier. Luke liked that about his supervisor. When you grew numb to the violence, the temptation was to become one with it.

"Well, I'm sorry." He folded his hands in front of him and tapped the table a few times. Then he asked, "How's the Clifford Deaton investigation going?"

“We’re still casting our nets. Flannel’s at the autopsy as we speak, but I doubt that’s going to tell us much.”

Luke filled him in on what they had: the body in the river, the abrasions in the back of his head, no witnesses to anything. Perhaps the medical examiner could tell them whether it was a rock, a bat, or something else that struck Cliff’s head, but the key to solving his death was not in the *how*, but the *why*. Specifically: Why was Cliff out that Wednesday night? What—or who—lured him away from campus?

“And nothing came from the college this morning?”

“Not really. I think the roommate and girlfriend are holding something back, but their stories about Cliff line up with what his family told me. The kid liked to wander by himself.”

“No rhyme or reason to it?”

“No pattern. It started when his parents got divorced.”

“What about his social media? Text messages? Anything there?”

“Nothing yet. Forensics hasn’t sent over what they got from his cell records. Since the phone was dead, we may need to rely on his service provider, which will take a while.”

Archer leaned back. “So what’s your next step?”

“I don’t know yet. Talk to Flannel after the autopsy, maybe try another run at the girlfriend and roommate, see if I can talk to them separately. Maybe bring them here for something more formal.”

Archer nodded. “About that. I presume you’ve run a background and turned up that Derek Carlson’s father is one of our state senators?”

“I saw that, yeah.”

“We’ve already got a call from one of the senator’s staffers.”

“Oh?”

“Young guy. Said he was calling to ‘touch base.’ He’d heard we found Cliff’s body, and said he knew Derek was his roommate. He wanted to ‘open a line of communication’ with us in case they could be helpful.”

“What does that mean?”

“Reading between the lines, they’re trying to figure out the media impact for the senator.”

“Of course.”

“Now, I don’t see any reason why Derek, or his father, would end up in the media related to this case, but I wanted to get your take.”

Luke paused. Archer had never asked him to adjust an investigation because of political blowback, but he knew other administrators who played that game. “Media’s not my area,” Luke said. “That might be a question for Don Riley.”

“Don doesn’t need to be involved in this. I’d like your take.”

“What are you asking me?”

“Is there any reason Derek would show up in the news with this investigation?”

“Right now? No. At least not from our end. You never know with reporters, though, what they come up with.”

“I understand, and I don’t care what happens outside this department. The media, Senator Carlson, they can all pound sand as long as we’re doing our jobs correctly.”

That made Luke feel better to hear.

“But if Derek is somehow involved, or if you’re going to be bringing him in for a formal interview, keep me in the loop. It’s a delicate situation, and I don’t want to be blindsided if something goes down.”

“Of course,” Luke said.

“I hear the senator’s a real dirtbag. Money in all sorts of filthy pockets.”

“You think there’s a connection between that and Cliff’s death?”

Archer held up his hands. “I doubt it. Just tread…consciously.”

At his desk Luke found Gabby’s old address—apartment C215 on the second floor—but had little else about her in his notes. No roommate. No next of kin. It was a gap in his paperwork, one he made a note to capture from his CIs going forward. He reread his notes on the case where she testified against the lawyer she worked for. Luke had been part of a special investigations team focused on “following the money,” the idea being that bringing in street criminals was like cutting off the heads of a hydra. There were always replacements. You needed to go after the money, an idea both obvious and impossible for a small-town police force to implement. The special investigations team was short-lived under a previous chief of police, but they cleared a few high-profile cases of embezzlement and insurance fraud.

Luke remembered how Gabby had submitted a tip about a possible billing discrepancy in the firm where she worked. At first Luke had assumed she’d been a disgruntled employee hoping to punish her employer,

but after making a few discreet inquiries into the firm, he stumbled on some financial irregularities that suggested Gabby Cole might be onto something. They met for coffee and began a slow courtship of trust that eventually brought down the firm's senior partner. She received a commendation from the chief of police but lost her job in the fallout.

Now she was dead, and it seemed no one was left in her life to care.

Luke put his notes away and returned to the Hunter's Glen apartment complex and rapped on the door of unit C215. He stood in the second-floor breezeway for a few moments, knocked again, and waited.

When no one answered, he leaned over the railing by the stairs to see if he could get a glimpse into the apartment via the balcony, but the shades were drawn tight. He knocked one more time and then headed over to the front office, where he showed his badge to the woman at the desk and asked her for the name of the current tenant.

The manager was young and had flowing hair and tortoise shell glasses. She said, "I don't know if I'm allowed to release that to you. We're not really supposed to give out resident information."

"I get that," he said, "but I'm not asking for you to divulge any private information. I can get the name from the DMV, but just thought this would save me a step."

She scrunched her face.

"It's about the incident in the lower-level apartment earlier. Some of my colleagues are still searching it? Someone connected to that used to live in 215. Gabby Cole. We don't actually know if she let go of the lease or if she moved in with the man in the other apartment."

"Is anyone in danger here?"

"I don't think so, but it would help to know who was leasing the unit now."

She relented and tapped her mouse to unlock her screen. She typed away and then leaned toward the monitor. He could see the reflection of a database file in her glasses. "Danielle Wheeler?" The name meant nothing to Luke, but, unprompted, the office manager added, "She took over the lease from Gabby Cole a little more than a year ago."

"Were they roommates?"

"Doesn't say. We usually like all tenants on the lease, but our files are archived after five years. I'd have to see if I could find the paper lease from when she originally moved in, whenever that was."

“Don’t bother,” Luke said, knowing he’d cosigned the lease as a credit reference. Gabby had found the roommate via an ad with the college after the fact.

He thanked the manager and headed out.

He met up with Flannel at one of the department’s interview rooms. He wanted to hear about the Clifford Deaton autopsy but wanted to steer clear of Captain Archer or any other listening ears.

“You didn’t miss much,” Flannel said. “Kelly grumbled that you weren’t there. Kept saying how this was so urgent but where was the lead detective. I think she was kidding?”

“She was,” Luke assured him, but he didn’t elaborate.

“The kid died by drowning, but she thinks the wound on his head was bad enough, it could have killed him if he didn’t get it treated.”

“So he was struck in the head before he was dumped in the water.”

“Nah, she couldn’t say that. The blow came first, and then he drowned, but the blow could have happened in the water.”

“Accident?”

“Possible but unlikely. He would have had to have fallen backward and sort of landed upside down for the angle to work. She said she’d put money on him being struck by something like a rock or a bat. Something solid.”

“Any other wounds?”

Flannel shook his head. “No defense marks, no abrasions. A surprise hit probably knocked him unconscious, and then he drowned and drifted down the river.”

“For how long?”

Flannel held up his hands. “All she could say was a few days. He went missing on Wednesday and would have been dead by Friday.”

“Before the snowstorm.”

“Yeah. He’d been dead at least ten days, from the de-comp. It’s tricky because the frozen weather would have slowed the process.”

“I presume the tox report is coming later?”

“Yeah, there’s no way to rush those. She’s got a request out to see if he had alcohol or any drugs in his system. You think that would help us?”

“Not right now, unless something unusual was there,” Luke said, thinking of fentanyl in the dab pens. “Our big question is the same as it’s

always been. Where was he Wednesday night? Who was he with? How'd he get to the river?"

Flannel nodded, then continued, "After I left the college this morning I stopped by and got the Shaws to sign their interview statements. They didn't have anything new to add, so I'm thinking they're a dead end for now."

"I think you're right," Luke said.

"You want to get started on statements for the roommate and girlfriend?"

"No, let's hold off on them. The more I think about it, the more I'd like to set them up with us at the station."

"Did the captain give you his spiel about Carlson's father?"

"Yeah, and screw that. We're going to let the chips fall where they may."

"Roger that. Hey, tomorrow I set up a meeting with the campus security to see what they've got on Deaton. Ms. Ellison said she thought they might have some footage from a security camera."

"That's perfect," Luke said. "You think you can handle it? I'm waiting on a message from Farbatko about sitting in on his interview with the Gabby Cole perp. Depending on how that goes, I may take some flex time in the morning."

"No problem. I'll let you know how it goes with campus security."

"Good luck," Luke said, privately glad to skip that meeting. Because Clifford Deaton had disappeared from the college, there might be some territorial circling around this investigation, and he wanted no part of that.

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Chapter Twelve

LIEUTENANT FARBATKO HAD a delicate job in front of him with the interview of Robert P. Bowyer involving the murder of Gabby Cole. Bowyer had been in an opiate fog when Farbatko's team had picked him up, arrested him, read him his rights, and transported him to the station for processing. After fingerprinting and checking in his personal effects and filling out paperwork to the best of everyone's abilities, given the suspect was dimly aware of his surroundings, they transferred him to a holding cell to sober up for a few hours.

At six o'clock, Luke joined Farbatko and his team in conference room Frosty to run through the sequence of events and the evidence gathered, and to plan the best approach for the interview. So far Bowyer had not asked for a lawyer, but a defense attorney might review the case notes and ask for everything to be thrown out, arguing that because Bowyer had been intoxicated during the arrest, he might not fully understand his Miranda rights. Any confession they got tonight, a future attorney might argue, would be fruit of a poisoned tree—the poisoned tree being a suspect who had not been made aware of his rights.

Farbatko's first order of business, then, was to get Bowyer to acknowledge he understood his rights on a recording. "The evidence is there," the lieutenant said, "but our case will be much tighter if we can add a signed confession."

"How you want to play it?" Luke asked.

“I think you and I go in and talk to him. Offer him a Coke, real friendly, and see if we can’t get to the bottom of it with him.”

The department had a wealth of interrogation resources, including a pair of detectives who operated a lie detector, but Luke believed a friendly conversation was the best first approach. People liked to unburden themselves. Farbatko’s instincts were good, and Luke agreed with him. He would play the quiet heavy, let Farbatko take the lead as Mr. Helpful.

They went into the interview room where Bowyer sat in a chair, unhandcuffed, still in his street clothes from when they’d picked him up today. Dirty jeans worn thin in the pockets from carrying keys and a cellphone, a frayed gray pullover that exposed a pinkish strip of fat on his belly. One eye drooped.

Farbatko sat closest to him, at the table, and Luke hung back by the door.

Farbatko said, “Okay. Robert P. Bowyer. Do you go by Robert? Rob? Bobby?”

Again, Bowyer said nothing.

“I suppose Mr. Bowyer might work, for now. Doing all right in here? You were a little zonked when we brought you in.”

Bowyer said nothing.

“Okay. Well. I’m Lieutenant Farbatko, and this is Detective Steele. Do you remember us from earlier? You know, this could be a long night for all of us. We’ve got a few things we need to clear up. Can I get you something? A Coke?”

“Why don’t you get to it?”

Farbatko looked back at Luke. “Well. Get to it, huh. Okay. To start with, I need to read you your rights. We read these earlier when we picked you up. It’s required if we’re going to hold you here at the station, but I need—”

“I know my rights.”

“I understand, but I need to read them to you anyway. Procedure, you understand.”

Farbatko pulled a card out of his wallet and read the Miranda warning, and then he put the card away and folded his hands on the table. “Okay, do you understand what I just read to you?”

Bowyer sighed. “Yes.”

“Okay, now that’s out of the way, we’ve got a few things to cover.”

“I know why I’m here.”

“Gabby Cole,” Farbatko said.

“I’m not talking about Gabby.”

“Well, she’s on our list here. At the top, actually. Do you know what happened to her?”

“I’m not talking about her.”

Farbatko leaned his head back and rubbed the stubble on his chin and cheeks.

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Bowyer?”

“I work in retail.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“I’m an electronics associate at GameStop.”

“Okay. You work shifts? Mornings? Nights?”

“I usually close.”

“Five days a week?”

“About that.”

Farbatko was nodding. “That’s good. Sounds like a fun job. Been doing that long?”

Bowyer shrugged.

“You sure you don’t want a Coke? A cigarette or something?”

“You have any weed?”

“Fresh out. If we were one county up, in North Carolina, I’d volunteer to get you some edibles, but alas and alack. Was today your day off?”

“Supposed to be.”

“Good, so you’re not missing work right now while you talk to us,” Farbatko said, and Bowyer smirked. “What about yesterday? You work yesterday?”

“Nope.”

“What do you do on your days off? Go to the movies, anything like that?”

“Mostly play video games.”

“Yeah, we saw the setup in your living room. Looks sharp.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Well, I’m not a gamer, so I don’t know. Is that what you call it? Gamer? Doesn’t matter. So. You had yesterday and today off. I take it you decided to partake of a little something?” Farbatko held up his hands. “I’m not here to bust you on whatever you were smoking, but I am curious. We

found a couple of boxes of these, uh, I don't know what they are. Vape cartridges? These little tubes—what do you call those?"

Bowyer sniffed and said, "Dab pens."

"Dab pens. What's that?"

"It's just a type of vape."

"So what, the pen heats up your liquid, and you kind of breathe in the steam?"

"Sure."

"I mean, look, we've got scientists, chemists, that work for our department. They're going to examine your devices to see how they work and what's in them, but why don't you tell me. What do you think they'll find? You think it's going to be the same thing I could buy going into my local vape shop? A little nicotine and some fancy flavoring? Or you think there's something else in there?"

"Whatever, man."

"What do you think, Detective?"

"I'd bet a pair of Panthers tickets there's a synthetic cannabinoid in there."

"Detective, I'm in management. You know I don't speak street lingo anymore. What are you talking about?" Farbatko asked, doing a decent job of holding back a smile.

"Cannabinoid, Lieutenant. From the cannabis plant."

"You mean like marijuana? That's what the young people are smoking in their vapes?"

"Problem is," Luke went on, "these things are manufactured in China. Just like anything else you get in China, the quality is shit."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you might find fentanyl or other opioids mixed into the cartridge."

Farbatko turned back to Bowyer. "What do you think? You think we're going to find any Schedule I opioids in your dab pens? That's a lot of cartridges we found. You sure you're paying rent with money from working at GameStop?" When Bowyer offered no reply, Farbatko went on, "What did your girlfriend think of your dab pen hobby? Did she know what's in them?"

"You'd have to ask her."

"What's that mean?"

“Means they belonged to her.”

“The dab pens?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Where’d she get them?”

Bowyer shrugged. “Brought them home from work.”

“Where is that?”

When Bowyer didn’t answer, Luke jumped in, “She still work at McAleer’s?”

“Sometimes.”

“She dealing?” Farbatko asked.

Bowyer shook his head. “She wasn’t part of anything.”

“Ah.” Farbatko tapped the cartridge on the table a few times. “*Wasn’t*, you say.”

“Past tense,” Luke noted.

“Past tense,” Farbatko said. “I know you said you don’t want to talk about her, but we kind of need you to. She your girlfriend? Living with you?”

Bowyer rested his chin in his hands. Luke doubted they were going to get a full confession out of him this evening, but you never knew.

Farbatko jumped into it. “See, whether you want to talk about her or not, the problem we have is she was stabbed and left for dead on the banks of the Keowee River.”

The lieutenant paused to let that hang in the air, to see if the phrase *left for dead* got a rise out of Bowyer. It didn’t.

“We also found a bloody knife at your apartment, in your possession, and what is clearly the scene of a murder in your bedroom. We’ve got a crack forensics team on it, so we’ll get to the truth eventually, but if there’s anything you can tell us to clear this up, now’s the time. It sure looks like you might have been dealing in—what’s the word—*cannabinoid* dab pens, and for whatever reason you got high on your own supply, stabbed Gabby to death, and dumped her body. Is that what happened on your day off from Game Stop?”

Bowyer was staring at a spot on the wall.

“Like I said, we’ve gathered all kinds of evidence—facts—but what we don’t have is a story. You know what I mean? I imagine it’s like a video game. You know all those games are the same, right? You have a hero who goes through one level, and then another, and then another, and then you

beat the final boss. I grew up with Mario Brothers and The Legend of Zelda, and it was such a disappointment to wake up one day and realize they were the same game. Know what I mean? I'm sure you know what makes a game fun is its story, the world it builds. And that's what we're trying to do here. Build a story, because otherwise I assume what we've got is some lonely dirtbag does his lonely dirtbag thing, beats up his girlfriend because he's an animal, and that's what animals do, and then he goes too far one day. Boom!"

Farbatko waited a few moments, but Bowyer, if he was even listening, said nothing.

"Yeah, a story is what we need from you, because if you leave it to us, we'll examine all the evidence we've gathered, all the reports our forensics team is going to give us, and we're going to write our own story. About how maybe you're a weak and insecure man. About how maybe you couldn't get it up in bed with the girl. All those opioids do a number on the body. That's what they didn't tell you in all those D.A.R.E. classes in grade school. They take away your manhood. That's the story we might write, and then maybe we'll start to wonder, what's up with all those boxes in your guest room? Was she leaving you? See you later, alligator?

"If that's the case, it would make sense you'd want to stop her. That's also part of telling a story, isn't it? You need it to make sense. You need motivation, and that's what we'll be looking for if you can't clear everything up for us tonight. We'll need to figure out the motivation ourselves, which might just lead us to think you planned this murder. Maybe you had a fight and she walked out on you, and maybe you lured her back with apologies, wanting to talk. Just talk. Maybe she comes back and walks right into your trap. That story is first-degree homicide, you know what I mean, Mr. Bowyer? That's premeditated, which means some ambitious prosecutor might start thinking about the death penalty. This is still South Carolina, and that's still a feather in some tough-on-crime prosecutor's cap. You want to talk about premeditated murder with us, Mr. Bowyer?"

Farbatko had pushed too many buttons too quickly.

"I'll call my lawyer now," Bowyer said.

"Well, that went well," Luke said sarcastically when they were back in the conference room.

“Eh.” Farbatko waved him off. “We did what we needed to do. Confirmed he was still an item with Ms. Cole. And he didn’t deny anything.”

“He will as soon as he lawyers up.”

“Screw him. We’ll put him away on the evidence alone.”

Luke let it go. There was no need to bust his colleagues’ chops, because the lieutenant was correct. A confession would have helped them all go to bed and rest easy, but both investigators had been in the room with enough bad guys that they knew when someone was guilty. You could smell it on a person, and they’d both gotten the guilty vibe off Bowyer. That was all they needed.

“You calling it a night?” Farbatko asked.

“I have an appointment down the street from McAleer’s, so I might stop by the bar after.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, you want to come?”

“Nah, I’m done today.”

“I don’t mean to cut in on your case, but Gabby’s old roommate used to work there. Maybe I’ll run into her.”

“You do you, brother.”

“What do you think about the dab pens?” Luke asked.

“About her dealing them?”

“About her getting them from work.”

Farbatko shrugged. “Could be. She works at a college bar, that kind of stuff is going to be floating around.”

“Something you want to follow up on?”

“Maybe, but if there’s a fentanyl connection, it might be better to kick it over to vice. What’s up?”

“Nothing yet. Maybe I’m just rattled that we had two dead bodies on the river two days in a row. We don’t have any leads on my other case, though from the autopsy it’s officially suspected homicide.”

“You think there’s a connection between them? I don’t know, Luke. I know my vic was your CI, but we got the guy who did it. He’s a junky, he’s got a history of abuse, he did it a hundred percent. You want to check out the bar and the drug trade, be my guest. But unless you’re thinking this guy Bowyer had something to do with your kid...”

“I wasn’t, but maybe we should have asked him.”

Farbatko laughed. “That would make Archer’s day. Hell, if there’s a connection between your kid and Bowyer, the chief is going to have all of us on a task force.”

“Maybe let’s not spread any ideas around right now.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Farbatko said.

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Chapter Thirteen

LUKE'S APPOINTMENT was a monthly chess game he had with Father Dan at Our Lady of Lourdes. They'd been doing it off and on for more than a year now, not every month but consistently enough that Luke hated to be the one to cancel. Back when he'd been on patrol, he used to pull into the church parking lot, which was down the street from the college bar scene, to fill out his paperwork. You saw enough darkness on patrol, even in a quiet town like Issaqueena, so ending his shift beneath the street lights at the church felt comforting, as if the dome of light was a force field that could protect him from the evils he'd witnessed.

One night he'd spotted the priest out walking his beagle. He'd waved, and the priest had come over to talk to him.

"I hope you don't mind," Luke said when he explained why he was there.

"Please, by all means. You're welcome to come into the sanctuary. We have Friday night adoration, if you ever want to sit with the Lord."

Luke hadn't known what that was, but he'd thanked the priest anyway. They'd exchanged pleasantries for years, and then one day chess had come up, which led to something of a friendship. Luke was not Catholic, but although Father Dan occasionally invited him to church activities, it never came up. Luke wondered if the priest was biding his time to convert him, but if so, it would be a long wait.

Tonight, after leaving Farbatko at the station, Luke picked up a Peruvian chicken with sides of cilantro rice and plantains and brought them to the

rectory. He parked in his usual spot beneath the lights, hot-footed across the parking lot, and knocked on the side door of the church office.

“We didn’t get back in time,” Father Dan said from behind him, dog in tow. The priest was in his fifties, with a rawboned Appalachian build, a scholar’s face, and a wry view of the world. “Melville doesn’t move as fast as he used to,” he said with a drawl, referring to the beagle.

“Did he ever?”

“You’d be surprised.” The priest shook his hand and then opened the unlocked door and held it for Luke. “I’ve got us set up in the office. You’ll have to excuse the mess. Our finance counsel had a busy day of it.”

“Everything going all right?”

“Could be better,” the priest said with an awkward laugh. “We need a new HVAC system and didn’t get the influx of donations we were expecting over Christmas, so now I have to go ask the parish for cash.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Well, that’s part of my job. Here we go.”

Father Dan opened a door to a shabby conference room with a prominent portrait of Mary on one wall and a water cooler on the other. He’d set up the chessboard on one side of the table, and Luke set the bags of food on the other. He bowed his head as the priest blessed it, awkwardly crossed himself, and then they sat down for the meal, game, and conversation.

“What’s new in the world of detecting?” Father Dan asked as he opened with the Italian game.

“Rough week, actually. I’ve had two dead bodies in the last two days.”

The priest winced and studied the board while he waited for Luke to continue.

“Keep this under your hat, but you probably heard about the missing Calhoun student? We found him by the Keowee River last week.”

“I take it you’re investigating it as a murder?”

“Appears so, but we don’t have any direction on it. It could have been anyone or anything, so I’ve got maybe another two days with it.”

“And then what?”

“We keep working it, but at that point the odds of a breakthrough are so low that it would take a miracle to figure it out. That’s your department, I suppose.”

“God’s in all of our lives,” the priest said.

Luke didn’t know what to say to that, so he said, “At least my other case is straightforward enough. It’s drug-related, and we’re pretty sure we’ve got the guy in custody.”

“But?”

“But what?”

“You’re not on your game tonight,” Father Dan said, and he took the queen Luke had left hanging.

“Ouch. We may need a rematch if you’ve got the time.”

“It’s my night off, so unless someone needs me at the hospital, I’m all yours.” After a few minutes, and a few more blunders from Luke, Father Dan asked, “What’s going on?”

“I’m off my game.” Luke thought about his options. Since blundering his queen, Luke had traded off several pieces but was hanging on in the endgame. He guessed he had about three moves before they’d either have to call it for a night or set up for another half hour. The food was gone. Before the checkmate came, he said, “There’s something I’m not seeing here with the college guy. It could be I know his parents, or knew them when I was in high school, so I want to get them justice, you know?”

The priest nodded. “Parishioners sometimes ask me what God wants from them,” he said carefully. “They don’t believe me when I tell them I don’t have any special access. I had a guy from El Salvador a couple years ago, he’d been shot in the back in his home country. The bullet should have gone straight into his heart and killed him instantly, but instead it turned and went out his shoulder. He asked, ‘Padre, what does this mean?’ I couldn’t tell him what God’s up to. My role is encouraging people to listen for our Lord. Where it goes from there, well.”

The priest slid his rook down, leaving Luke nowhere to go.

Checkmate.

“Time for another?” he asked.

Luke checked his phone. “I should get on. I need to make one more stop before I go home tonight.”

Father Dan unfolded himself from the table and thanked Luke for the game. “Good luck with the case, and if I can do anything, for you or the boy’s family, let me know.”

“I appreciate it.”

McAleer’s was an eccentric college bar a few blocks from the church. A greasy spoon during the day, they sold enough regional IPAs that they attracted a profitable combination of hipsters and frat bros. The building was on the corner of a strip and had two big rooms, pool tables on one half and the bar and jukebox on the other. The decor flirted with the college town branding, but it was the one place on what the kids called Dive Bar Row where you might find townies and students alike. Although she didn’t attend the college, Gabby Cole would have fit right in.

Because street parking was tight, most people parked in the Catholic Church lot, which was down a flight of stairs from College Avenue. Tonight there were a few pickups and a souped-up Subaru in the lot. Luke guessed it was early. He backed into a gravel space and locked the door on his way out.

Inside the bar, an ancient woman was on a stool next to a heater, checking IDs at the door. Luke was wearing jeans and a zipped-up fleece, but from the way she eyed him up and down, he suspected she’d made him as a cop. Or maybe she’d seen him drive in.

“Just you, hon?” she asked.

“Just me.” He pulled out his wallet, but she waved him off.

“No cover tonight. Take a seat anywhere. We got a bucket special, five for $10 domestics, or Brant’s at the bar.”

He thanked her and went into a dim corridor and made his way to the bar. There were two tables of young guys. The first looked like they’d just gotten off a shift somewhere: big chests, big biceps, boots. The other guys were skinny and possibly underage. The Subaru drivers. Luke wondered if any of them had known Cliff.

“Steely Dan! What’s up, man?”

He squinted at the bearded bartender. It took a second to recognize his old friend.

“Long time, Brant. I thought you were still at Shorty’s?”

“That closed a year ago,” Brant said, pouring Luke a Guinness without having to ask what he wanted. “The owner died in a plane crash.” He set the pint in front of him, and Luke pulled out his wallet again. His friend hesitated a moment but then took his card. “Leave it open?”

“Better close me out.”

Brant handed the card back. “It’s on me.”

Luke raised the glass and took a sip. “So what’s new?”

“You heard I got remarried? I met this gal in college, and we’d sort of always kept in touch. We both found ourselves divorced and voilà. Right time for both of us.”

“You still playing music?”

“Eh. You know how it goes. We’ve got a kid on the way, so I’m back in school doing HVAC. I’m sort of filling in as a manager here, doing scheduling and working the bar a couple nights a week. Just until the summer, so it’s lucky you came when you did. What about you? Still detecting?”

“Just doing my thing. Chasing down catalytic converter thieves, mostly.”

“That what brings you in tonight?”

Luke took a long sip. “Nah, actually I was wondering if Gabby Cole still worked here. You know her?”

“Sure, I know Gabby, but I haven’t seen her since before Christmas. Maybe even Thanksgiving now that I think about it.” Brant leaned over the bar and stared at the front door for a few moments. “If you’re working something, you want me to find her info?”

Luke shook his head. “Not right now, thanks. Do you happen to know anything about her living arrangements? Where she lived, who she lived with?”

Before Brant could answer, there was a commotion at the table of the college guys. One of them started hollering, and the others were trying to settle him down. A waitress was standing next to them with two pitchers of beer. She was maybe eight months pregnant, but seemed to have the guys under control.

When Luke turned back to the bar, Brant was standing straight, his gaze boring at the boys. He’d put on muscle since Luke had seen him last, and he could tell why Brant would make a good bartender here. He thought about his old friend—really an acquaintance now, a guy he ran with in elementary school—serving beer to underage guys, working in an establishment like this, and he decided not to reveal anything about Gabby’s death.

“What were you asking about?” Brant asked. “Gabby? Who knows? I think she had a boyfriend, but who knows?”

“What about Danielle Wheeler? Ring a bell?”

“Yeah. Come to think of it, she took off about the same time.”

Brand had just revealed that Danielle had also worked at McAleer's. Luke decided not to let on that this was news to him. He asked, "Were she and Gabby close?"

"I guess. They'd both been here forever, but I don't really know who's friends with who outside work, you know?"

"They were roommates, once."

Brant tugged his beard. "They would have drinks together after we close, but I don't know where anyone goes after they leave here."

"Can you see if you still have Danielle's contact info? I've got to run in a few."

"No problem."

Brant tapped the bar and walked off. A few minutes later he returned with a card for the establishment, two names and phone numbers handwritten on the back.

Luke thanked him, drained his beer, and waved his hand when Brant motioned to ask if he wanted another. "I'd have to Uber home, and neither of us would want me to leave my police car in your parking lot overnight."

"Come back sometime, when you're off duty," Brant said. "We can catch up about the ole high school crowd."

Luke gave a quick smile. Between Andrea and Bill Deaton, Deputy Robert Atkins, and now Brant at the bar, he'd seen more folks from school than he'd seen in years. The universe did that on occasion, a little wink to suggest there was some underlying code at work.

Fate maybe.

"One more thing, before I go. You know about dabbing? A vape thing with synthetic THC?"

"I mean, we get people vaping all the time, but I don't know what's in them. Patty's pretty quick to shut it down if you can smell it. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious what you were seeing. Not really my area, but we're always trying to figure out where this stuff is concentrated."

"This is as good a spot as any." Brant pointed at the dining room. "You got guys from the college and guys from Issaqueena. Vaping's big with both groups, though I don't know about your pens. They're not supposed to do any of that in here, but you can't tell when they do."

"You ever say anything?"

"Nah. If it doesn't smell, it's not worth the hassle, you know?"

Luke knocked on the bar and bid his old friend farewell.

The door slammed behind him, and his breath immediately fogged in front of him. He gritted his teeth against the cold and hustled down to the parking lot.

Before he got back to his car, someone came around the bend and started to pull into the church lot. He turned to stare at the bright headlights of a dark Ford F150. He stepped back onto the sidewalk in case the driver was waiting on him, but rather than pull into a space, the driver spun in the gravel and made a U-turn to get out of there.

Out of habit, Luke took note of the license plate—FSA 394—and watched as the truck spit gravel. The driver gunned the engine, and soon the taillights were out of sight.

Luke fingered the card in his pocket that Brant had given him. He jotted down the truck's license plate out of instinct. He thought about Gabby working here, and then going home to an abusive boyfriend dealing marijuana vape cartridges.

Standing in the lights of the church lot, he thought maybe Father Dan was onto something. You listened, and sometimes the universe offered up a message. A student found dead in the river. A bartender found dead on the riverbank. A supply of drugs, a seamy bar, and a truck driving erratically.

Slowly he breathed and watched the clouds of his breath expand and dissipate into nothingness.

Until the next breath.

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Chapter Fourteen

THE NEXT MORNING, Luke called in to say he was using flex time until lunch to make up for last night, but rather than staying home or running errands or whatever, he found himself back at the Hunter's Glen apartments around nine, knocking on Danielle's door. He had her number from Brant but was hoping to catch her face to face. Easier that way.

He was waiting on the veranda when his phone vibrated with a message: *Any news? (This is Andrea)*. He remembered giving her his business card, and he remembered his promise to her two days ago. *I need you to find out what happened to Cliff.* He'd told her he would, but after two days he was no closer than when he'd broken the news to her. No helpful evidence, few leads to follow. Before he could respond, Danielle's door opened.

A woman about thirty stood there in a loose T-shirt, freckled skin, wavy hair, and striking ice-blue eyes. Without makeup she was no magazine model, but there was something immediately alluring about her that put his guard up.

"Ms. Wheeler?" he asked.

"Yes?"

He introduced himself and held up his badge.

"Is this about Gabby?" she asked before he could bring it up. "I saw the police yesterday, and with Bobby's apartment taped up, I figured one of them was dead or in jail. When I didn't hear from her…"

“I’m sorry to say you’re right. We found her by the river yesterday morning, and he’s been placed in custody and charged with her murder.”

She leaned against the door frame and had an inscrutable look.

“May I come in for a few minutes?” he asked. “One of my colleagues may need an official statement from you, but I’m pursuing a few loose ends and think you might be able to help.”

“Yeah, sure. You’re going to have to excuse the mess.”

She led him into a cluttered but clean living room. A blanket was balled up on the couch, an empty coffee mug and plate of crumbs on the coffee table. Beside the plate was a pack of Virginia Slims, a lighter and an ashtray with two cigarettes stubbed out. There was a dog bed in the corner with an assortment of chew toys scattered around. A French bulldog, seeing Luke, jumped up and bark-bark-barked.

“Louie!” she yelled.

He kneeled to scratch the dog, who immediately rolled onto its back for a belly rub.

“Some guard dog,” she said as she lit a scented candle on the kitchen counter. “Take a seat anywhere.”

When she settled on the couch, Luke got up and sat in an easy chair. The dog followed for more attention.

“Did you and Gabby used to be roommates?” Luke asked.

“We did, a long time ago.”

“You moved into this apartment together? Maybe around ’22 or ’23?”

She eyed him a second before nodding.

“I don’t think we ever met,” he explained, “but I met her on a case involving a lawyer embezzling funds.”

“Ah, her policeman friend. I remember her talking about you.”

Luke wondered what the two women had talked about, what Gabby might have said about him, but rather than open that door, he asked, “She moved from here in with Bobby downstairs?”

“That’s right.”

“When was that?”

“Going on two years, I think.”

“How did they meet?”

“At a bar,” she said icily, as though meeting someone in a bar told you everything you needed to know. Perhaps she was in a position to know, having worked at a bar herself. She picked up her smokes and asked, “You

mind?” and she fired up before he could tell her to go ahead. “He was just using her.”

“How so?”

“You know where she worked?”

“I know she used to work at McAleer’s.”

“Yeah, what do you think about that?”

“I wish she’d stayed in school.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I talked to the bartender last night, who said she hadn’t been there for a few months.”

“Management issues,” she said. She smoked her cigarette down and put it out in the ashtray. “The place was a dive, but the pay was always good. You had flexible work hours so you could have another job—or in Gabby’s case, plenty of time for school. During COVID, the pay was great, but last year the money dried up. People started tipping on cards, and management wasn’t sharing all our money with us. Some of the long-time staff moved on.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Catering, mostly.”

“What did you mean when you said Bobby was using her?”

“He was drunk and stoned all the time and needed someone to take care of him. He had this idea he was going to be a crypto millionaire, but that’s not even a thing anymore.”

“One of my colleagues thought he might have been dealing drugs. We found all these things called dab pens in his apartment.”

“Yeah, that was another thing. He and Gabby met some kind of distributor for those things last year. I don’t know. They got wrapped up in a pyramid scheme to sell them.”

“Do you know who their supplier was?”

“No, but you might ask around at McAleer’s. Several of the waitresses were involved too, starting around last summer. We get a lot of college guys coming in, and I guess the idea is we pass them out like cigarette girls, and the college guys bring them into the campus party scene. I don’t know. I was never a part of all that. You know what’s in those pens, right?”

“I do.”

“There you go.”

“You don’t happen to have an old shift schedule, do you? I talked with the bartender last night, but he didn’t seem to know much about his colleagues.”

She gave a wry smile. “Was that Brant? He’s too nice to be working there. Yeah, hang on, I probably have something.”

In one of the kitchen cabinets, she pulled out a stack of papers and old mail and began rifling through it. She pulled out a sheet of paper and studied it a moment.

“They schedule everyone by the week. It gets posted Saturday for the next week. This one is from August.”

He took the paper and skimmed the names. His eyes stopped on Jessica Boggs. He looked up. “Tell me about her,” he said, pointing.

“Who, Jess? She was real part-time, and I think only worked there for the summer.”

“What’s her story?”

Danielle shrugged. “She was there one or two days a week, kept to herself. She was never really organized, so I think Big Ron let her go.”

“Big Ron?”

“The general manager, Ron Ivy.”

Luke filed that away, along with a reminder to see if Flannel had dug up anything on the bar. He said, “Do you know if she and Gabby knew each other?”

“I’m sure they’d met, but I don’t know if they ever hung out, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Sure. Just curious. You mentioned the dab pens started showing up in the summer. I was wondering if there was a connection to this summer employee.”

Danielle raised her eyebrows. “Could be. You might check back with Brant. He started around then too, and since they tended bar together, he might know more.”

“I’ll do that.”

He gave Louie the dog another good scratch and waited to see if Danielle might reveal anything else, but she’d apparently exhausted her gossip about life at the bar. He got up to go, paused at the door, and said, “You don’t happen to have any contact info for Gabby’s family, do you? I had her grandmother’s details, but she’s passed away. Her father is the only other relative I know of, but he’s in the wind.”

“I can check, but I don’t remember her talking about her father much. I got the impression he was, you know, not welcome in her life.”

“That was my understanding, too.”

“Hang on.” She pulled out her phone and began searching through something, shaking her head. “If I had anything, I was thinking he might have been a reference on the lease, but—ha! She put you down as one of her references.”

She had what he assumed to be the lease pulled up on her screen, zoomed in on the signatures page.

“Thanks,” he said. “I thought it might have been a long shot. Anyone else you can think of?”

“Not right now. Can you get into her text messages?”

“We’re working with the phone company for those.”

“Good luck,” she said.

From his car he reread the text from Andrea asking about news on her son. He’d missed another text from her asking if he could meet with her. He was on flex time until lunch, so he texted her back to ask if she felt up for a meal out. Then he started writing a summary of his conversation with Danielle in his notebook, beginning with the date and time and noting that she already knew Gabby had been killed.

He wrote down as many details as he could remember, pausing only when his phone buzzed. Andrea said she would be up for lunch, so they arranged to meet at a place called Habañero’s outside Oconee. Until then, he would pop over to see his grandparents and maybe his father, whom he’d not seen since Thanksgiving. His relationship with his family had been haphazard for more than a decade as the demands of his job and the excuses of life kept him at arm’s length. But he could feel his grandfather’s sickness loosening something inside him, some long-buried sense of filial duty.

When he finished his write-up of what Danielle had told him, he called Flannel.

“Hey, partner, I thought you were on flex time this morning.”

“I am. Sort of.”

“Uh oh, what’d you get into?”

Luke quickly told him about Danielle and the revelation that Clifford’s girlfriend, Jessica, had worked at the same bar as Gabby.

“Well, that’s a coincidence.”

“That’s one word for it.”

“Seems like a stretch to connect these cases,” Flannel said slowly.

“Yeah, I know it. There’s nothing there right now. Issaqueena might be a small town, but Calhoun’s a big school. That connection—I’d like to get a little more on Ms. Boggs. Can you see if you can finesse her records out of the college, do another scan of her social media, maybe see what comes up? Who are her parents, where’s she from, that kind of thing.”

“You got it.”

“Also, see what you can find out about McAleer’s. An old friend of mine is bartending there. See if you can dig up anything on the owner, a guy named Ron Ivy. See if he’s got any kind of a record, what his credit score is, that kind of thing.”

“I’m on it.”

“Thanks, Flannel.”

Luke sat for a few minutes, staring at the brick walls of the apartment complex, the magnolia trees and sugar maples planted as landscaping, while he thought about Gabby and her boyfriend in the dab pen distribution business. Danielle said they’d started up last summer, the same time Jessica Boggs worked at the bar. Could she have been the distribution source? Anything was possible, but Luke never liked coincidences. Two bodies showed up dead in the river, and now the two victims likely had a friend in common. Something was starting to converge.

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Chapter Fifteen

He was surprised to see his grandfather sitting on the porch swing when Luke pulled up. The old man had a cup of coffee at his feet but apparently was just swinging. The sun was out for the first time all week, but it was still in the forties out here. This was no weather for old men.

His grandfather stood and waited for him at the bottom of the porch steps and said, “Hey, boy.”

Luke hugged him and felt big and bulky holding his grandfather’s bony frame. The man who once loomed large seemed to be shrinking by the day.

“I had the morning off and thought I’d stop by and check on you.”

“I’m glad you did. I was just enjoying the sunshine.”

“You’re not even wearing a coat?”

“I haven’t been out here long. You want to join me or come inside?”

“Let’s go in,” Luke said.

The old man chuckled. The screen door screeched as he opened it and held it for Luke. He said, “Can I get you something? You want anything to eat, drink, smoke?”

“I’m okay,” Luke said, wondering what his grandfather might have to smoke. Like virtually everyone in his generation, he smoked back in the sixties but quit somewhere in the seventies, before Luke was born.

“You want me to get your Granny? She’s back in the bedroom. Sarah’s out.”

“That’s okay. I came to see you.”

“Well, all right.”

The two men sat in the living room, and Luke tried to think of what to say. Finally, he asked how his grandfather was doing.

“Same as the last time you saw me. Still sick. Losing weight. I can’t eat much and take naps in the afternoon.”

“How long’s this been going on? I thought you just got diagnosed the other day.”

“I got my biopsy back on Tuesday, but I haven’t been well since Thanksgiving. Didn’t Sarah tell you?”

“Not until she called me the other day.” The trouble with relying on an intermediary was you never got the full story, and never on time, but Luke knew it was his fault for seldom calling his grandparents directly. Although they’d effectively raised him, he’d only been able to call them sporadically in the Army. When he got out, he never picked up the habit of calling every Sunday, and as he got older, more and more time went by between calls. Sarah had been the one to stay home and take care of them.

“Well. How’s work going?”

“It’s going all right. I’m still working that case I told you about the other day.”

“The college student?”

“Yeah. You might have been right about a drug connection. I got another case yesterday, this woman’s boyfriend stabbed her to death. Turns out she might have been dealing something that connects to the college boy.”

His grandfather nodded. “Didn’t use to be like that. We had problems with the hippies smoking marijuana, but it wasn’t until cocaine in the eighties that things started getting out of control.”

“Yeah, the old timers talk about the crack wars. I didn’t think it was all that bad around here.”

“Nah. We had to deal with traffickers on the interstates, but the city cops had to deal with the brunt of the crime. You had neighborhoods in Columbia, and even Greenville, you couldn’t set foot in. Now that the pharma companies got everyone hooked on opioids, it’s all over. The cartels already have a few politicians in their pockets, so it’s only a matter of time before big-city problems are right at your doorstep. Issaqueena, Oconee, we’ve already got junkies breaking in. When they start shutting down businesses because no one will work? It’ll be time to move, if you can afford it. Of course I won’t be here for that.”

“Where would I go?”

“I don’t know, boy.”

They’d had this conversation before. His grandfather was a man of his time, whose view of current events was shaped by eighty years of failed government policies. With solving crimes, he’d been there, done that, got the T-shirt. When Luke had first become a police officer, he’d felt a measure of pride in following his grandfather’s footsteps, but the longer the old man had been retired, the less interested he’d been in the comings and goings of Luke’s work. He used to ask if Luke was seeing anyone and if he ever thought about getting remarried, but those questions quit coming a few years ago, a sign Luke had aged out of the time of *becoming* and into a time of *what-is*.

The two men sat in silence for a time, and then the old man said, “Why don’t I go get your Granny and let her know you’re here?”

He checked his phone while his grandfather was gone but had no messages.

“Hey, Luke,” his grandmother called as she shuffled into the room. He got up to give her a hug, and she asked if he had the day off.

“Just the morning,” he said.

“That’s good. We appreciate you coming by.”

“You want any coffee?” his grandfather called from the kitchen.

“I’m all right.”

“You sure? I’m making a fresh pot.”

“I have to run in a few minutes. I thought I might stop by to see my dad before getting back to work.”

His grandmother nodded as she sat on the couch across from him. Her jaw quivered a bit.

“You want me to ride over there with you?” his grandfather asked, coming into the room with a cup of coffee.

“You can if you want to.”

“I’d just as soon stay here.” The old man sat next to his grandmother, thought for a moment. “Your daddy’s not doing so good. I guess you know this, but don’t be shocked when you see him.”

“Something happen?”

“Nothing that hasn’t been happening for thirty years. It’s all catching up to him.”

“He’s fine,” his grandmother added, always one to downplay the family dramas. Or traumas, depending on your vantage.

“You might want to call, see if he’s awake,” his grandfather said.

Luke put his hands on his knees, then stood up. “I will. You need anything?”

“We’re fine,” his grandmother said. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“You don’t need to get up,” Luke said. “Tell Sarah I stopped by.”

He left the pair of them on the couch, sitting like turtledoves. He put his sunglasses on while he walked to the car and thought about what to do next. He thought about his father, a lifelong alcoholic who might not outlive his grandfather even though his grandfather had terminal cancer. And he thought about what he was doing with his own life, trying to solve one case after another, around the Merry-Go-Round until…when?

He drove out of his grandparents’ neighborhood, down Highway 28 toward their farm property where his father lived in a falling-down house, rent-free in exchange for keeping the grass mown—a job he’d not kept up with for a while now. Luke cruised past the house on Chambers Lane, took in the scraggly lawn, the closed shades, the corroding GMC in the driveway.

At the end of the street he parked and dialed his father, who answered after a few rings.

“Hey, Luke.”

“Hey, Dad. How you doing?”

There was a pause before his father replied, “I’m not feeling so good.”

“I hear you. Hey, I’m in Oconee and thought I might stop by to say hey. You up for company?”

Another pause. “No, I’m not feeling so good.”

“You sure? You need anything? Groceries?”

“No, thanks.”

That was all he was going to get from his father today, so he said, “All right. Maybe next time. Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

They hung up, and Luke sat in his idling Explorer at the end of the road, checking emails and filling out paperwork for nearly an hour, until it was time to meet Andrea for lunch.

Andrea was in a booth in the back when he arrived at Habañero’s. She had her hair in a ponytail and her face was raw, but she looked like she’d at least taken a shower since he’d broken the news to her. She wore blue jeans and

a loose white shirt, and a long tan shawl that called to mind a painting of the Virgin Mary. Another woman who knew something about a dead son.

She gamely smiled when she saw him and stood to give him a hug, offering her cheek for a kiss. “Thanks for coming, Luke.”

“Of course. I wish I had more news for you.” She had a glimmer of disappointment as they sat, so he went on, “We visited the college yesterday and spoke with Derek and Jessica. My partner spent the day getting some other statements from administrators, people who knew him. Unfortunately, they did not have much to tell us.”

“He just wandered off,” she said.

“No one seems to know right now. I’m waiting on some CCTV footage to see if he was with anyone.”

“How are his friends doing?”

“About like you’d expect,” he said, but as he said it he wondered how you might expect a young person to process the trauma of a dead friend. Should they have cried and been more broken up? Was their flat affect a sign of something more sinister? Or was it merely this generation of young people? The only thing he’d learned from all these years as a detective is that people could surprise you.

He recounted some of what Derek and Jessica had told him—that Cliff tended to wander, that they’d each thought he’d been with the other, that they couldn’t say where he’d gone.

“That’s what they told the police two weeks ago,” Andrea said.

“Pretty much.”

“Yet what did you do with their statements then?” She glared at him as if he’d somehow missed the clue that led to her son’s death.

“I—”

“They didn’t do anything! What could they do?”

Before she could go down a spiral of grief, a tiny waiter in black came to take their drink orders. “Ready, amigo?” he asked, and if he was fazed by tears welling in Andrea’s eyes, the waiter didn’t show it.

Luke ordered a sweet tea and a plate of tacos al pastor.

When the waiter turned to Andrea, she’d pulled herself together and ordered the same.

“I don’t know why I asked for that. I’m not even hungry,” she said.

“Everyone in your family ate like a bird,” he said, and she laughed.

“You don’t know how lucky you have it, Luke. You’re still slim—have you even gained ten pounds since high school?”

“That’s too kind,” he said, though he knew he’d been lucky so far not to develop a paunch.

He had his hands folded in front of him, and he gnawed on a thumbnail idly while he considered what more he could tell her. They’d cast a wide net in the investigation of Cliff’s death. Based on the autopsy, he assumed it was murder, or at least some type of accidental manslaughter. This information would leak to the press eventually, but for now Luke wanted to see what he might reel in from any camera footage, the toxicology report from Cliff’s blood sample, and maybe the intersection of drugs between Gabby, Jessica, and McAleer’s. He needed to ask Andrea about that—had Cliff ever vaped? Could he have been involved in anything with the dab pens? What did Andrea make of Jessica?

These questions could wait until their food arrived, he decided. Let her relax and maybe get a few bites of her meal before he started worrying her about drug deals and the seedy underbelly of college life. As they waited, he was struck by the sense of being dislocated in time. They could have been having Sunday dinner in the Love household, long afternoons when light bled into night and he was seventeen, a rube from a fractured family who didn’t know how to comport himself, and no clue what the world would soon ask of him.

He asked, “Have you heard from Margot?”

“She called, but she’s busy out on the West Coast,” Andrea said. “I’m not sure it’s really registered with her that her nephew went missing.”

“Have you told her we found him?”

Andrea shook her head, and he regretted bringing it up. You never knew how people would process grief. He thought about saying he could call Margot for her, but just then the waiter brought out tacos, three on each plate, each taco tucked into a metal serving tray.

“Anything else?” the waiter asked.

They each held up their hands, and when the waiter was gone Andrea said, “I shouldn’t have ordered all this. You want a taco?”

“I’m good,” he said, but a few minutes later he’d cleared his plate and found himself staring hungrily at hers.

“Seriously, I’m not going to eat it. Have a taco.”

“Well.” He reached over, and she laughed and turned her head as though someone were sitting next to her to whom she could say, *Can you believe this guy?*

Still a rube, he thought. Still reaching across tables.

When she set down the last bite of her second taco, she took a sip of tea and sat back and stared at the front of the restaurant. He knew Cliff couldn’t be far from her thoughts. He said, “I do have one thing I’d like to ask you about.”

“That sounds ominous.”

He sighed. “I haven’t found anything about Cliff, but his girlfriend, Jessica.”

Andrea shifted her eyes to look at him straight on.

“Did you know she was a year older than Cliff?”

“No,” she said slowly. “I guess I thought she was a freshman like him.”

“She graduated high school two years ago, started at Calhoun but then took a semester off. She was playing a little catch-up, which is how she met him in a freshman class.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Last summer, she had a job at a bar called McAleer’s. She was a waitress, and I don’t know if there’s anything to this yet, but there might have been some illicit drug dealing going on.”

“My son was dating a drug dealer?”

“No, there’s no evidence of that,” he said quickly, “or about Cliff being involved with drugs. But I did wonder if Cliff ever mentioned anything about the drug scene, particularly something called dab pens. Does that ring any bells?”

“Never heard of them.”

He explained the mechanism, a vape product you could load with a cartridge of synthetic THC. It was illegal in South Carolina, but with cannabis occupying a gray space in federal law, it was only a matter of euphemistic marketing and a whisper network to keep teenagers in a ready supply.

“I probably shouldn’t be bringing this up, because I don’t know if there’s anything to it. A few coincidences have gotten under my skin.”

“I’ll ask Eddie if he knows anything about it, but I can’t think of anything,” she said.

“I wouldn’t put much stock into it,” he said. “When I work cases, a lot of these, call them loose ends, come up. We’re following a few threads, so it’s going to be a week or two before I have much more for you.”

Andrea nodded.

The waiter, with an unerring instinct for heightened emotion at the table, came by with the check and began clearing their plates.

Somehow he made it through paying the tab and getting out of the restaurant without edging into more fraught conversation. What could he say? He had his job, and she had her grief.

They were parked on opposite sides of the restaurant, so he walked her to her car, a dented gray Hyundai Santa Fe with a streak down the side like she’d scraped a garage door. The weather was still raw and windy, mitigated by sunshine, so it felt good to be out of the hot restaurant. Melting ice trickled off a gutter somewhere, and water ping-ping-pinged against a downspout.

“I’ll be in touch,” he started to say, but then her arms were around him and she was holding him with urgency. He pulled his hands from his pockets and put his arms around her, and felt an electric need himself as he took in the coconut scent of her hair, the feel of her body in his arms. Then she was crying, moaning, her face in the crook of his neck, clenched his jacket. She wept.

Later, he couldn’t say how long he held her there, in the gravel parking lot off Highway 28, the odd car driving by, Habañero’s patrons watching them through the windows. When she pulled away, she took a breath and closed herself off.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, scurrying toward the driver’s side.

“Hey. Hey, it’s okay,” he said, but she was in the car. She put it in gear without buckling her seat belt, and she might have run over his foot had he not stepped away. He watched her zoom off down the highway, his neck still damp with her tears.

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Chapter Sixteen

As time off is wont to do, Luke's flex time came to a crashing end with a phone message from Captain Archer demanding he get back to the station immediately. "Where are you?" the captain asked on his voicemail. "I need you in Frosty at one. Call Yvonne before you come into the building, and text me if you're going to be late."

Frosty was the detective division's main conference room, so named for the frosted glass windows that suggested a hip open office while providing the privacy everyone but HR consultants understood was necessary for successful operations.

If Luke gunned it he would be thirty minutes late to whatever meeting the captain had called, so he sent a text to Flannel asking if his partner was getting called in—and if he could let whoever know Luke was on his way.

Then he called the captain's administrative assistant, Yvonne, but the call went to voicemail, suggesting she was either out to lunch herself or had been called into the captain's emergency. Not good.

He was out of Oconee and rocketing toward Issaqueena PD when Flannel texted back:

DEA's here.

Watch your six.

Thanks, partner, Luke thought, wondering if Flannel's brevity was on account of being in Frosty right now or if he'd been shut out. If Flannel had been shut out, Luke would have appreciated a phone call. He generally trusted his partner, but department politics could put a wall between them

that would eventually break their working relationship. You needed someone who would help you bury a body without waiting on department approval—and who would call you if a federal agent was in the building. Therefore, Luke assumed for now that Flannel had been blindsided as well and was trapped in Frosty with some aspect of their case unraveling. Feds showed up when you stepped in a booby trap. The question, then, was: What tripwire had they run into?

Crossing the bridge over the Keowee River on Highway 123, he tried Farbatko's cell to see if this might be related to Gabby's boyfriend and the dab pens, but the lieutenant didn't answer.

He did a quick mental inventory of everyone he'd spoken with in the past few days. Related to Cliff's death, he'd started with the Shaws and then talked with Cliff's parents and brother. Next, Luke and Flannel had gone to the college and talked with the PR lady, Derek, and Jessica. He saw nothing there warranting a visit from the DEA.

With Gabby's death, they'd interrogated Bowyer about her murder, and then Luke had spoken with Brant and Danielle about Gabby and McAleer's. It seemed a little quick for him to have hit a tripwire, but maybe the DEA had their eyes on Bowyer. Still, why the urgency? Why did he need to watch his six?

He didn't have to wait long for his answer. Sergeant Oye was the watch commander on duty, and he held up his hands in a *finally!* gesture when Luke came in.

"Oye vay, what's up?"

"I don't know what you stirred up, but they're all in Frosty. The captain's been pacing around with steam coming out of his ears."

"I heard the DEA is here?"

"Yeah, they showed up about eleven."

"How many?"

"Three agents, real Captain Americas."

"Who's in with them?"

"Archer wanted to make sure we outnumbered them, so he's got Yvonne, Flannel, and Farbatko."

Luke exhaled. "Thanks, Brett. Think I have time to use the head?"

"I didn't see you come in."

A few minutes later Luke quietly opened the door to Frosty, and Captain Archer waved him in. “Ah, gentlemen, this is Detective Steele. Luke, these are agents Powell, White, and…Reece?”

“That’s right,” one of the clean-cut suits muttered.

None of them got up or extended a hand to shake.

“They’re from the DEA,” Archer said, “and they wanted to hear about one of your cases.”

“Our case, actually,” Farbatko said. “At least I think it’s our case.”

“This about Bowyer?” Luke asked.

“Why don’t you take a seat,” one of the agents asked.

Luke sat in the middle of the table across from the three suits, flanked by his colleagues.

The agent in the middle—Powell?—took the lead and said, “This morning you asked your partner to run some background on McAleer’s. Why did you do that?”

Luke paused to see if Archer or Flannel would jump in to explain what they might have covered already. When they were silent, he said, “I’m supporting Lieutenant Farbatko on the investigation into the murder of Gabby Cole. We have a suspect in custody already, but I’ve been asking around because she didn’t have a clear next of kin to notify. Until recently she worked at McAleer’s, so I spoke with the bartender there and her old roommate, who also used to work there.”

“The bartender would be Brant Hodges?” Powell asked.

“That’s right, and her roommate was Danielle Wheeler.”

“Go on.”

“Farbatko may have told you, or if you’ve read the reports, but our suspect had several boxes of vape devices that we’re getting tested for marijuana, fentanyl, and anything else that might show up. The quantity in his apartment suggests he might have been distributing them. From talking with Brant—Mr. Hodges—and Ms. Wheeler, it sounds like there might be some connection with McAleer’s. The next distributor up, maybe, or maybe a network of dealers. Ms. Wheeler referred to it as a pyramid scheme.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. You want to tell me what your interest is?”

The second suit—White?—chimed in. “We’re in the Atlanta field office, which is a distribution hub for fentanyl. Eighty-five is the main artery going

to the northeast, so we monitor drug arrests in every county the interstate passes through."

None of this surprised Luke. There wasn't much mystery in the drug game: fentanyl was the new meth was the new crack-cocaine. Now that the deaths had reached the suburbs, the media was covering it, but it was the same old story as meth and coke and marijuana. Mules ran it up and down I-85, dealers laced everything they sold for a little extra jolt, and civilization was falling apart.

"This popped because of Bowyer?" he asked. "I can't believe that."

Powell jumped back in. "How we got here doesn't matter. We're here to see where your investigation into Ms. Cole's murder might be going."

"You mean, are we digging into the vape pen distribution?"

"Precisely."

"I guess that depends. I was on flex time this morning, so I haven't had time to talk with Lieutenant Farbatko about it or brief Captain Archer."

"They led us to believe you have a good homicide case against Bowyer."

"With drug possession thrown in," Farbatko added.

"Of course," said Agent White. "My question is whether there is more for you to look into."

"Captain, can we step out for a minute?" Luke asked.

"Detective, we really need to be open and transparent," White said. "We don't have an agenda here, but some of our own casework may depend on what you do next."

"Captain?" Luke asked.

"It's all right," Archer said, which told Luke something about his supervisor. He could hang like one of the guys, but Luke assumed Archer had forgotten what it was like to be an investigator. You pulled a thread, and it might not go anywhere. Talk about it too soon, and the thread could unravel as management did its thing.

Luke hated to put his cards on the table, but he needed to know why the DEA guys were here. "Okay," he said. "Yeah, Bowyer is put to bed, as far as I'm concerned. It's Lieutenant Farbatko's case, but I don't see anything else I need to do there."

"But your interest in McAleer's isn't over," White said.

"How could you tell? No, I guess something has been nagging at me about finding two dead bodies on the river in the same week. We don't get a

lot of homicides in Issaqueena, and I don't like coincidences."

He could sense Captain Archer sitting up straighter, but it was too late now. The captain had forfeited his chance to hear about this development first.

"Turns out that one of my other victim's acquaintances also used to work at McAleer's. His girlfriend worked there last summer, at the same time as Ms. Cole. I've been wondering if there's any connection there."

"This is the young man found in the river Tuesday?" Powell asked.

"That's correct, Clifford Deaton. He was struck in the head and dumped in the river, and no one knows where he was the night he died."

"You think there's a connection with the fentanyl trade?"

"There's no evidence of that," Luke said. "Yet. But Deaton was a secretive guy. His girlfriend and roommate both said he would disappear on random nights, and they both seem to think he was on one of his lonely outings the night he was killed."

"But do you have any connection between him and the bar?"

"Nope. Right now that's a fishing expedition."

"Great. Would you guys keep us in the loop if anything pops up there? The bar's been on our radar for a while now."

"What for?" the captain cut in.

"Nothing we can share at this juncture."

"If there's some kind of drug trafficking going on in my town, I'd like to know about it."

"We'll let you know if you ever have cause to worry," the agent said.

"Still," the captain said, and Luke was pleased to see this newfound energy in his supervisor.

The third agent—Reece?—jumped in. "Did your background checks turn up the owner of McAleer's?"

Luke looked to Flannel, then said, "I talked to a waitress who mentioned a guy named Big Ron."

"Big Ron Ivy. He was the general manager, and he ran the day-to-day operations until the fall. The business is owned by a real estate trust, a series of properties under control of State Senator Howard Carlson."

Powell paused while the room took in that information.

Luke had his hands on his knees and drummed his fingers against his legs, hoping his colleagues would keep their mouths shut.

When no one else spoke, Powell said, “I presume you all understand the sensitivity here, and the gravity, if it turns out McAleer’s is somehow connected to the regional drug trade. This is a much bigger development than one town’s small-time vape peddler. No offense.”

The captain said, “Are you investigating Carlson?”

The agents sat back, the first time they’d been caught off guard by anything from the Issaqueena cops.

“Let’s say we’re keeping an eye on his financial disclosures and campaign contributions,” Reece said.

“Guys, we don’t want to get in the way of whatever big thing you’re chasing,” Archer said, “but we’ve got a pair of homicides here to deal with. We’re glad to keep an open line of communication, but if the McAleer’s business has anything to do with the boy we pulled out of the river, we’re going to need to kick the hornet’s nest.”

“All we’re asking is you keep us in the loop. If you’re poking into the drug trade and find something that might point toward Carlson, give us a call and let us sit down together to figure out how to proceed.”

“Meaning what?” Luke asked. “You tell us to stand down?”

“It’s a question of prioritization,” Powell said.

“Where’s homicide in your list of priorities?”

“That’s not for us to decide right now. We’re here sharing information in a spirit of transparency.”

“Are we done?”

“You’re free to go, Detective. Captain, could we have a few more minutes?”

Luke, Flannel, and Yvonne got up to go. Luke could sense Agent Reece eyeing him as he walked out.

“Could we huddle in the captain’s office?” Luke asked.

“Of course,” Yvonne said. “You want to wait for Captain Archer?”

“Nah, he’ll show up when he can. When did those guys get here?”

“They called at noon and said they needed an urgent meeting. I don’t think Captain Archer realized what they were here for.”

Luke closed the door to Archer’s office and sat in the captain’s chair.

“Did they ask for any files? Have they read any of our reports on Cliff or Gabby?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Yvonne said. “They went straight to the conference room, so I presume they only know what has showed up in the

public databases."

"Good, so they don't know Howard Carlson's son was Cliff's roommate. We need to keep it that way, for now."

Luke drummed his fingers on the desk, which Archer kept impeccably neat.

"There's all kinds of connections we might make," he said, "but right now we don't know anything. Flannel, did you ever find anything on McAleer's? If Big Ron isn't running it, who is?"

"It's registered to an LLC, but they did a good job of hiding who owns it. I'm not sure how they found the real estate trust."

Flannel seemed wounded that he'd not found the information himself, so Luke said, "The feds have all the time and resources to turn over every rock. I wouldn't worry about it."

"I can tell you they haven't replaced Ron Ivy as the GM. I called them up and asked to speak with the general manager, and the gal who answered said they were trying to fill the position but said one of the bartenders was filling in."

"Okay, I think we need to know more about when Derek and Jessica met," Luke said. "She told me she started at Calhoun last year, took the spring off to regroup, and came back in the fall, where she met Cliff and presumably Derek. Coincidence number one, then, is she had a job at a bar owned by Derek's father. Could they have met earlier? Maybe." Luke clicked his pen a few times. "Something tells me Howard Carlson isn't too involved in the hiring at his bar. He probably could get his son's friend a job, but…"

"Do you think Derek or Jessica ever made that connection?" Flannel asked.

"I don't know if Derek even knows his father owns the bar. If it's part of a real estate portfolio, he might not know what all his father owns. We need to find out. We also need to talk to Jessica again about her job at the bar. It could be a whole lot of nothing."

Luke said this, but he didn't believe it. He couldn't explain it, but sometimes cases came into focus, even if you couldn't explain how you knew who did it or how things connected. You just had to prove it. There was too much here to be sheer coincidence: Derek's father owns the bar, Jessica worked at the bar, Gabby and Danielle worked at the bar, drugs

flowed out of the bar, and Cliff and Gabby ended up dead by the river. With this much smoke, there had to be a fire.

Archer came in and took note of the crew in his office. “That was fun,” he said.

Luke got up, asked, “Did they give you more marching orders?”

“They want us to stay away from Howard Carlson. They wouldn’t tell me why, but they said if anything comes up where we would want to talk to him, they want an inter-agency cross-collaboration session, which is federales-speak for a DOJ lawyer or a judge to tell us why we need to stand down.”

“That has to mean they’re investigating him,” Flannel said.

“That, or he’s a source for something,” Luke said.

“What do we do next?”

“I’m friends with the bartender at McAleer’s. I’d like to talk to him one more time, see if he remembers Jessica working there or has anything on Carlson. Then I think we need to bring the kids back in for formal statements.” He looked at Flannel. “You think you could get back in touch with Derek and Jessica, see if they’ll come down for a statement? Maybe for first thing tomorrow morning?”

“Sure, I’ll do that now.”

“Don’t involve the PR ladies. Last thing we want is for them to send a college lawyer in with the kids.”

“One more thing,” Flannel said. “They, uh, they knew we might be talking to Derek.”

“What! How? I thought we hadn’t shared any files?”

“We haven’t. Maybe they’re keeping tabs on Carlson’s family.”

“They have to know more than they’re telling us,” Luke said, the wheels already turning. If the DEA knew Derek was connected to Cliff, then Cliff’s murder might have some link to Carlson.

“Maybe,” the captain cautioned. “But they were clear. Stay away from Howard Carlson, and that means don’t harass his kid.”

“And we’re just going to roll over?” Luke asked.

“Of course not. They said stay away from *Howard* Carlson. I don’t know how we’re going to play it, so keep me in the loop before you do anything.”

Luke wanted to curse, but he held his tongue and the anger roiling inside him. He knew where he was going next, and no one in this room

could help him.

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Chapter Seventeen

IT TOOK him a little more than an hour to get to Greenville. He raced down Highway 123 through the rural upstate until he got to the town of Easley, an old textile town and retail hub that had been knocked around by globalization. The empty mills and stoplights put Luke in a mood so that by the time he arrived at the Textile Taphouse in Greenville, he almost turned around and went home. The bar was not far from downtown, renovated since Luke's childhood into an upscale grid of shops, restaurants, and a park along the Reedy River.

This was the New-New South, people flooding the Carolinas from the Rust Belt, taking advantage of warm weather and lower taxes. BMW had opened a plant here in the nineties, and that was all it took to transform Greenville from a sleepy Confederate backwater to the regional hub. While South Carolina's "dark corner" of Issaqueena fell behind, developers had swamped Greenville to bulldoze the land, clear ancient forests, and carve up the earth so builders could slap up big mansions with shiplap walls, stylish gray flooring and enough bedrooms that little Grayson and Olivia could get lost. Luke hoped it was good old boy Carolinians getting rich off this construction, but that didn't change the fact that his home state was being conquered and colonized by people he was about to interrupt at State Senator Howard Carlson's fundraising meet-and-greet. This was not campaign season, and Luke didn't understand politics, but he would bet Carlson was getting rich off all these forces of migration and development.

Because it had started as his day off, Luke was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt rather than his usual suit. He tucked in his shirt on his way into the taphouse and clipped his badge to his belt.

Inside, a perky young couple greeted him at a table by the door. “Did you register in advance?” the woman asked him.

“I did not,” Luke said. “I just found the event today and thought I’d stop by. Do I need to register?”

“Not a problem. We’re glad you’re here! If you could do us a favor and sign in.”

She handed a clipboard over to him, and as he was writing his name in an intentionally illegible script, the guy, who must have been named Brad, asked, “What police department are you with?”

“Issaqueena PD,” Luke said, and grinned. “Ever been out that way?”

“That’s where Calhoun College is?”

“You got it.”

“I have some buddies who went there, but I haven’t been there myself.”

“It’s pretty country,” Luke said. “My grandfather always used to call it ‘Beautiful country, God’s country.’”

“I believe it,” the guy said. “The mountains are gorgeous.”

“You have a good evening,” the girl said to him. “Here’s a couple drink tickets for you.”

“Thanks.”

The Textile Taphouse was just how he envisioned it—the high ceilings, the wood finishes—but it was brighter than he would have guessed, spotlights on abstract paintings on the walls, white linens on high-top tables. The catering crew deftly flitted through the room carrying trays of tiny foods. Crab cakes, salmon on crackers, something dark in a pastry shell.

He hadn’t expected to recognize anyone here, but a few feet into the room he caught the eye of Deputy Robert Atkins, his grade school friend in uniform and clearly acting as hired security. He smiled and came over to shake his hand.

“What brings you out?” Robert asked.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing. You moonlighting?”

The kid blushed. “Yeah. I staff one or two of these a month if I’m off duty.”

“Long ways from Issaqueena.”

“He has these fundraisers all over the upstate, and the pay’s great. Two-fifty a night for less than four hours.”

“Not bad. How’d you get connected with this gig?”

“Mr. Carlson spoke at a sheriff’s association fundraiser last year. He joked he was always looking for good security at his events, so when I saw him mingling afterward, I asked if he was hiring.”

“That was bold,” Luke said.

“Maybe? You know what it’s like working for the county on a deputy’s salary. Inflation and all.”

“I get that,” Luke said, not fully convinced he’d heard the whole story.

Robert shifted his weight from foot to foot, asked, “You here as a donor?”

“Me? No. I’m working something that is tangentially related to Mr. Carlson and thought I might catch him for five minutes.”

“I could introduce you.”

“I’m okay, thanks. I’ll grab a drink and get the lay of the land first.”

“Ah. Anything I can help with?”

Luke studied Robert and wondered if he was being worked. It made him uneasy to run into a fellow police officer. “I don’t think so, but thanks again.”

He lifted his chin and headed for the bar. After grabbing a Sprite, he scanned the room. Other than Robert Atkins, he knew no one else. White-haired men in suits, women in bright dresses, younger guys in polo shirts tucked into khakis. Howard Carlson was toward the back, drink in hand, holding forth. Luke approached carefully, like a cat on a hunt.

When Carlson glanced his way, his eyes landed on Luke’s badge, and there was a flash of something on his face. He excused himself from his buddies and met Luke with a grin in the middle of the room. “Evening, Officer.”

“Detective, actually.”

“Excuse me. I’m Howard Carlson.”

Luke shook his hand and introduced himself.

“I’ve got a son at Calhoun now,” Carlson said.

“Actually, I don’t know when the last time you talked with him, but I wanted to ask you about that.”

Carlson stared at him for a moment. Then he said, “Are you investigating the boy who drowned recently?”

“Derek’s roommate, yes, although the jury’s still out on whether he drowned.”

“Terrible thing,” Carlson said. “Yeah, Derek told me about the disappearance and that they found him this week. He hasn’t said anything about a police investigation.”

“It’s a standard protocol.”

“Sure. You’ve spoken with Derek?”

“Just to get a statement. He seemed at a loss.”

“Understandably.”

A catering gal walked over with a tray of food, and when she paused, Luke saw it was Danielle. She started for a moment.

“Hungry?” Carlson asked, taking a crab cake off the tray.

“I’m okay,” Luke said, waiting to see how Danielle would play it. She nodded and moved on.

Carlson watched her go, and then he saw Luke eyeing her and frowned. “I’m happy to help you, but are you sure this is the best place for us? They might have a little storage room where we could talk.” He flagged a passing server. “Hey, is there an office or something we could meet in for a few minutes?”

“Um, catering’s set up in the kitchen, but I don’t know.”

“Let’s try that.” Carlson started walking, and Luke tried to think how he should approach what might be his only candid interview with the senator. “How can I help?” Carlson asked when they reached the kitchen area.

A few of the catering staff were standing around, but they quickly hopped to attention and went back to the event space.

“Could you tell me a little bit about McAleer’s?”

“About what?”

“It’s a college bar in Issaqueena. You’ve got it in your real estate portfolio.”

“I know what it is, but I don’t see what it has to do with anything.”

“Maybe nothing,” Luke said quickly. “How involved are you in the business?”

“I’m not, day to day. Have you talked to Brant? He’s got his finger on what’s going on. To be honest, it’s a line item in my portfolio that I look at every quarter.”

“Brant the bartender?”

“Yeah, I had to fire my GM a few months ago, so Brant has been filling in with scheduling.”

Knowing this level of detail meant McAleer’s was more than a line-item in a portfolio. Luke said, “I thought the GM was Ron Ivy.”

“People come and go in the restaurant business.”

“I understand.” Luke waited a beat to see if Carlson would say more, but he held his tongue. “Is the business at all connected to your political campaigns?”

“There’s a wall, Detective. We have to be scrupulous about who donates and how much. I could self-finance a few commercials, but you need a different level of money to run this kind of operation.”

“You find it easy to keep your business ventures and your politics separate?”

“What are you getting at, Detective?”

For the first time, Carlson seemed ruffled by Luke’s presence. Luke guessed money was a sensitive issue for the senator, both because of how he earned it and what it bought him. Luke said, “I guess I’m wondering how passive the real estate stuff is. You’re not involved in hiring or personnel at McAleer’s?”

“No, other than to approve an increase in wages. Inflation and all.”

“When was the last time you were there?”

“Early January? My wife and I dropped Derek back off at the college, and I met up with Brant to see how things were going.”

“How long were you in Issaqueena?”

“It was a one-day visit. We brought Derek over, took him to lunch and dinner, and in the afternoon I popped over to the bar. Had a quick drink, saw everything was in order, headed out.”

“Do you know Jessica Boggs?”

Carlson kept a poker face. “Who is she?”

“She’s a friend of Derek’s, and the girlfriend of the dead boy.”

“Poor girl.”

“The reason I ask is because she worked at McAleer’s for a few months last summer. I wasn’t sure if you ever ran across her then or when visiting Derek.”

“No, we met his roommate in August, but Derek didn’t talk much about his college pals. When he came home he mostly wanted to reconnect with guys from high school.” Carlson checked his watch. “As far as the bar goes,

employees come and go. Some stay a week, some stay for years. I couldn't possibly keep up with every one of them. As long as they pass a background check and aren't stealing too blatantly, I don't keep tabs on them."

"What about Gabby Cole? Mean anything to you?"

"Again, if she worked at the bar, I don't know her."

Worked. Maybe it was a slip of the tongue, or maybe Luke had misheard him, but he didn't think so.

"Listen, Detective, if you need to talk more, maybe we could set something up at my office. I don't know what else I can tell you, but Trish up front can arrange a follow-up. I should be getting back to it."

"Sure. I appreciate your time."

"Any time. And feel free to grab a drink and some food. I'm always happy to have law enforcement among my supporters."

As if summoned, a staffer materialized in the doorway to the kitchen and asked if he could borrow the senator for a photograph.

"We're finished here," Luke said, and he shook Carlson's extended hand.

On his way out he discreetly scanned the room to see if Danielle was among the caterers, but she was gone. He strode to the door and wished Trish and her colleague a good evening.

"We hope you had fun!" she called after him into the cold night.

He picked up his pace as he hoofed down the street to where he'd parked. Danielle was leaning against his hood, bundled in a long black jacket and smoking a cigarette.

"What are you doing here, Detective?" she asked, stubbing out her cigarette on his hood.

"I was hoping to ask you the same question. Do you often cater the senator's events?"

"We do all of them. He owns the catering company."

"You know he owns McAleer's, too?"

"Yeah, it's how I got this gig."

"You told me they had management issues at the bar."

"Not from Mr. Carlson. The old GM ran it a little too loosely, let guys get away with harassing waitresses and skimming money from our tips. I brought it to the attention of Mr. Carlson, and he fired the manager and offered me a job doing catering. Better pay, better clientele. Only problem is I have to travel all over the upstate."

“He just told me he didn’t get involved in personnel issues at the bar.”

She shrugged. “He might not, for the most part. Like I said, I brought it to his attention.”

Luke thought of Gabby, who had been a whistleblower for her old law firm. What were the odds two women of such similar temperament would find each other as roommates?

“Did Gabby know you were taking the issues up with Carlson?”

“No. By that time, she’d already hooked up with Bobby, and they were starting to make some money selling vape cartridges. Honestly, I think she was using her products to check out so she wasn’t all that focused on what was happening at the bar.”

“Do you know if she ever met Carlson? Did he talk to her about any of the harassment problems?”

“Don’t know. Are you investigating him for something?”

“Right now, it’s pretty clear Bobby Bowyer killed Gabby. I’m just tying up loose ends, and there seems to be a lot going on with McAleer’s, particularly with drug use and distribution.”

Danielle laughed. “Have you ever worked in food service? Everyone’s on drugs.”

“Earlier you called it a pyramid scheme. Selling vape cartridges.”

“That’s what it looked like to me. It was like when everyone got into selling Rodan + Fields. You’re always trying to recruit the next person, even though there’s only so many people in Issaqueena.”

“Did Gabby ever talk about who was at the top of the pyramid?”

“Not to me. She approached me one time about joining her, and then got her feelings hurt when I laughed at her.”

“Would it have been someone at McAleer’s?”

“It’s possible. You think Mr. Carlson has something to do with it?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t see it. He doesn’t do much with the bar, and I think the only reason he’s hanging onto it is because his son is at Calhoun. Besides, he’s got plenty of money. What would he need to sell drugs for?”

“You hire someone like Gabby’s idiot boyfriend to sell drugs. But at the top of the pyramid, you need a bank.”

She sat with that for a moment. “You know, if you’re investigating Mr. Carlson, it might be best that you don’t let him know we’ve talked. He gave

me this job, but he hasn't said more than hello to me since then. He fires people quickly if he thinks he's got a liability on staff."

"Talking to me makes you a liability?"

"Talking to anyone. Press, political people, cops who might have an agenda around his campaign."

"I don't vote," Luke said.

She gave a wry smile. "You should. Democracy's always at stake. Anyway, it doesn't matter what your politics are. If Mr. Carlson thinks someone's being disloyal, giving information about him to anyone…" She slid her thumb across her throat.

"I can't promise I won't need to talk to you again," he said.

"You have my number. If you need me, let's find somewhere to meet in Issaqueena. He doesn't usually stray that far."

Luke wondered if she was hinting at something. Did she want him to investigate Carlson? Was she offering herself as a source on the inside?

He'd come to the fundraising meetup out of spite to the DEA guys. While there might be dirty business going on with Carlson, his campaign funds, his business ventures, and maybe even the drug trade, Luke had nothing to go on and no reason to dig. Dirt was everywhere. His job was to catch murderers. Whatever Carlson was, Luke doubted he was a murderer, which meant this evening had been a pointless sidetrack.

Well, not quite pointless. He wanted to get Brant's take on the McAleer's management fiasco—and who the prior manager had been.

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Chapter Eighteen

DOWNTOWN WAS BUSIER than last night. The church lot was full, so he pulled into the grass on the side of the road and went up the stairs to College Avenue. On his way he scanned the parking lot and saw the F150 parked in the middle. FSA-394. Probably nothing, but he took note anyway.

He passed through a group of loitering smokers on the sidewalk in front of McAleer's. Shaggy college guys. One of them had a vape pen and blew a cloud of smoke into the night. When he saw Luke, he furtively put the device in his coat pocket.

Luke nodded at the guys and took a whiff of the air. He smelled the cigarette smoke but couldn't tell if the vape smoke had any hint of marijuana to it, or if it would cast a smell at all. "Fellas," he mumbled, going into the bar.

He wove through a group of drunk girls who were spitting as they spoke, and he found a stool at the end of the bar.

Brant was there again, hustling up and down the taps. He called something into the kitchen, and he knocked on the bar in front of Luke as he passed.

The tables were filled mostly with college students, but there were some thirty-something hipster types as well, peacoats and thinning hair. Mustaches.

"What brings you back?" Brant asked, and he set down a pint of Guinness for Luke.

"I'm still bird-dogging a couple of cases."

“This has to do with Gabby?”

“Yeah. If you hadn’t heard, she was killed yesterday. We found her body by the river.”

“What happened?”

“Her boyfriend stabbed her and dumped her body.”

Brant cursed.

“Yeah.”

“You’ve picked up the guy? Who was he?”

“Someone she knew from her apartment complex, this out-of-work junkie and petty criminal.”

“I’m glad you got him,” Brant said, apparently not picking up that Luke had more questions.

“Yesterday, I asked you about dab pens. Maybe it’s nothing, but evidence keeps coming back to McAleer’s.”

“How so?”

“Your last manager, Big Ron Ivy? What happened with him?”

Brant raised his hands. “Nobody told me anything. Guy in a suit came in and said Ron no longer worked here, and asked if I could handle the scheduling and bank deposits until they brought in someone else.”

“Would the guy in the suit be Howard Carlson?”

“You know him?”

“We’re acquainted,” Luke said.

Brant thought for a moment. “I don’t know what to tell you, Luke. Big Ron had been here for years, maybe even since I was a student. He hired me and gave me great hours so I could go back to school. I haven’t heard from him since. You don’t have to work here long before you see some shady stuff going down. Big Ron always had a loan out or some guy showing up after hours. It was just how it was. I never saw him hitting on waitresses or anything like that, but there were all kinds of rumors afterward. How he knocked up so and so, or whatever. Until he got fired I thought he owned the place. I’d never seen Howard Carlson before then, and I don’t know what prompted him to change up the management.”

“How is this place running without a manager?”

Brant laughed. “They’ve got a payroll company, so we clock in and clock out. Food’s on a delivery schedule. The wheels will come off the bus soon, but I don’t know. That’s restaurant life. It works until it doesn’t.”

“Have you seen Carlson since?”

“Once or twice. Maybe he was here mid-October? I can’t remember. Anyway, without Big Ron around, you don’t see so many crazy characters around.”

“Out of curiosity, you know anyone who drives a big blue F150?”

Brant laughed. “I probably know a lot of guys who drive one. Why?”

“There’s one parked by the church now, and whoever it is almost hit me when I was leaving last night.”

“Nah, I don’t know who that would be.”

“Hey, last question. Talking to Danielle this morning, she said there was another gal who worked here. Jess Boggs. That name ring a bell? Maybe from last summer?”

Brant looked at him strangely. “You’re bringing up all the old names,” he said. “Do you want to tell me what you’re really digging for?”

“I’ve got a couple of dead bodies on the river, and both of them have a connection to McAleer’s. Maybe it’s something to do with drugs, maybe it’s something to do with Howard Carlson and his political campaigns, maybe it’s nothing.”

“Maybe you should be talking to Big Ron.”

“How do I get in touch with him?”

“I haven’t seen him since he got canned, but I presume he’s still in the area. He was the big fish in our small pond and liked it that way.” Brant ran his tongue inside his upper lip, and then he said, “Sounds like you’re scratching around at something pretty big. You might want to be careful.”

Luke tried to assess whether there was any kind of threat in Brant’s message. Detecting nothing, he said, “I always am.”

He knocked on the bar top, and without touching his beer, he set a ten next to it and headed out. The loitering smokers had moved on outside. Luke stopped to text Flannel to ask if he’d had any luck arranging an interview with Derek and Jessica at the station tomorrow. He added, *Remind me, we need to find Ron Ivy.*

He’d intended to take a closer look at the F150 in the church parking lot, but instead encountered the flashing lights of a sheriff’s cruiser down there. Two deputies were standing beside it, one on her cell and the other one possibly trouble for Luke.

He walked up to her and said, “Deputy Baker, what brings you into downtown?”

She jerked her head, and when she saw who it was, she appraised him. “This guy jumped bail a few days ago, and we got a tip that he was bar-hopping down College Avenue.”

“Any trouble with him?”

“Nothing we can’t handle. What are you doing out here?”

“Stopped at McAleer’s for a pint.”

“Really, Luke? Drinking at a college bar?”

“The bartender and I are old friends. Plus, I’m working a case.”

“Always with the cases.”

“Yeah. It’s good to see you, Kayla.”

“Is it?”

“I looked for you when I was at the sheriff’s station the other day, but you must have been out.”

“Must have.”

“I would have called,” he started, but had no excuse to offer.

Kayla’s magnetic blue eyes still gave him a catch in his throat, and the air between them seemed to radiate. The two of them had met on a case last spring, which had culminated in a harrowing chase down the Chattooga River. They’d had a spark, but his dating life had been complicated, and for a few months there he’d gotten serious about a real estate agent. That relationship came to an end when a roofing contractor was murdered a few doors up from her fancy new house. Kayla helped him solve that case, too. He knew that if he were smart, he would listen to what the universe was trying to tell him, but he was as inept in his home life as he was capable in an investigation.

He wanted to say something more, maybe open a door for the two of them, but she was having none of it tonight. “I should get to the paperwork so we can get this guy processed before lunch,” she said.

“You’re still on the C shift?”

“By choice,” she said. “I don’t have to deal with department bureaucracy, plus there’s a lot more action at night.”

She held his gaze and left him speechless.

Her partner got off the phone and said, “Ready?”

“Yeah, let’s bounce,” Kayla said.

Luke cleared his throat. “Deputy Baker, one thing. You got a flashlight I can borrow?”

Kayla rolled her eyes at her partner. “What do you need it for, Detective?”

“That F150 over there. It keeps showing up, so I wanted to take a quick peek in the windows.”

“I’ll be right back,” she told her partner.

At the truck, she pulled the flashlight off her belt and shined it into the front cab. Everything was clean and neat. The only thing in the cab was a Starbucks grande something in the cupholder. No hang tag, no stickers in the window. The extended cab had a bag of Iams dog food, a zipped-up backpack, and a folded-up towel.

“Student?” Kayla asked.

“Could be. I might have seen it on campus a few days ago, and then the driver pulled into this lot last night, saw me, and took off like Dale Earnhardt.”

“He peg you as a cop? Maybe he was inebriated.”

“That’s probably it.”

He walked her back to her sheriff’s cruiser. Her partner was sitting in the driver’s seat with one leg on the pavement. “Anything?” she asked.

“No,” Kayla told her. “The detective is chasing down student DUIs.”

The partner squinted at Luke. “I ran the plate if you need it.”

“Who is it?” Luke asked.

“Ronald Ivy. He lives in Bounty Land. No warrants, no tickets, nothing on him.”

“I appreciate it,” he said vaguely.

“Any time, Detective.”

After the partner closed her door, Luke tried to think of something to say to Kayla, but she beat him to it. “I know that look,” she said.

“That obvious?”

“Good luck with your case, Luke. I’ll see you.”

He watched the deputies drive off. He considered heading back into McAleer’s to see if Brant could spy Big Ron Ivy, but instead he returned to the station to see what he could find in the federal registries. He would bet a steak dinner, inflation and all, the DEA had a thick file on Big Ron and Howard Carlson.

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Chapter Nineteen

THE STATION HAD a different vibe at night, same as every business. Slimmer staff, little management, less courtesy. Human resources made work less fun—maybe for good reasons, but Luke wondered what it would have been like to focus on the work rather than the niceties. Example: on the day shift, management liked you to answer the phone with your name and department. “Investigations division, Detective Steele speaking.” Without top brass around, you might hear a phone ring in the squad room and someone pick it up with a gruff, “What!” Callers got to the point and let you get on with your night.

It was after ten when he badged in, so the investigations division was empty. Captain Archer’s office was dark, the door closed, and the hall was on emergency lighting only. Fluorescent lights clicked on when they registered the motion of Luke coming in, which he disliked because he would just as soon have no one know he was here.

When he sat down and shook the mouse to light up the screen on one of the investigation division computers, the blue light hit him hard and he felt a headache coming on. After a couple of late nights, he was feeling his age.

He had access to a handful of federal directories for background, but when he keyed in *Ron Ivy* and *Ronald Ivy* and *R. Ivy*, nothing came up. The man had no record, which was not unusual, but he also had no social media accounts, phone numbers, or email addresses on file, which was odd indeed.

The system Luke used was called FASID—the Federal Accountability and Security Information Database—and it was one of a handful of systems

created by Homeland Security to aggregate databases from the FBI, the DOJ, participating local and regional law enforcement, as well as state DMV records. Additionally, because the software was developed by a firm with market research ties, FASID also trawled the web for publicly available information from social media accounts, business web pages, blogs, or any other personally identifiable information on the worldwide web.

The theory was that extremists might not have a law enforcement record, but algorithmic intelligence could identify patterns of online behavior to flag notable characteristics about a person for investigation. Homeland Security—or its market research firm—branded FASID as “deep background.” AI was the latest integration. The program searched the databases and offered interpretive analysis via an LLM. No one had yet tried to bring a case based on information gained through such a search, the assumption being that the system flirted with violating the Fourth Amendment. Was it an illegal “search and seizure” to compile threatening social posts? Who would be responsible if the AI hallucinated something about an innocent person—the cops, the courts, the tech company? Courts hadn’t answered that yet, but FASID nonetheless was extremely useful in getting to know a person you might want to surveil.

Even when a person had a carefully locked down online profile—no public social media posts, no business details on LinkedIn—FASID usually turned up an address and phone number from DMV records. For Big Ron Ivy, nothing. Perhaps Luke had misspelled his name, or misheard it. He tried variations of Ivey, Ivee, even Iverson. Finding nothing, he made a note in the Clifford Deaton case file and grabbed his jacket.

Issaqueena at night was a reminder of the community’s small-town roots as a railroad stop between Atlanta and Charlotte. Stores and cafes and even the Starbucks closed by eight, so the only things open as he drove home were the Ingles grocery store on Highway 93 and the Los Hermanos Mexican restaurant. He passed them by and turned onto Cherokee Trail where he lived in a complex of seventy townhouses. His was an end unit, with an overgrown crepe myrtle shading the front yard from the sodium lights of the parking lot. Like the rest of the town, his neighborhood was quiet, his neighbors all tucked in for the night, so he winced when his storm door creaked as he opened it and then let it slam shut behind him as he entered the darkened townhouse.

He’d owned it for nearly ten years, bought for a song before COVID wrecked everything. It had been a good little house for him over the years, but last year he’d all but moved in with a girlfriend and her children. She was a real estate agent and lived in a fancy new development outside of town, and although her house had been chaotic with the noise of family, it felt good to be there. He always had elbow room, and the wood floors and plush carpets made him feel like he was somebody. He’d never experienced that before, the way a home could shape your outlook. Or maybe it was the girlfriend. Or the children.

Regardless, he’d been back in this cramped prefab, and there was never dinner on the stove when he got home or someone to tug at his arm and say, “Guess what!” Instead, he ate dry biscuits or made plates of peanut butter and saltines. Tonight he turned on a basketball game for the noise but quickly decided he was done for the day, so he shut the TV off and went upstairs to take a shower.

Cocooned in his end-unit townhome, second floor, the northwest bathroom lit by what might be the last incandescent light bulbs in America, Luke sat down with his head in his hands and let the water steam up the room around him. Although he was a grown man and had lived alone most of his adult life, he felt a chill at how easy it would be for someone to creep into his home unnoticed at night.

He turned the shower off and waited for the water to go down the drain. He listened but heard nothing in the house. He knew no one would break in, not with his police Explorer parked out front. The only one who might sneak in late at night would be coming for him specifically. In that case, Luke would never hear it coming. He understood this, so he shut his antenna down and toweled off.

Once the lights were off and he was in bed, he tried to imagine the story of Clifford Deaton’s death, which was still a mystery. He turned over the possibility that the boy could have been involved in the drug trade, maybe connected to it through Jessica and McAleer’s.

In Luke’s mind Cliff got out of his last class and saw a message on his phone. Perhaps something encrypted. Telegram, or a Snap that disappeared like a spy’s self-destructing note:

Meet me at Morgan Park.

I have your next shipment.

We need to talk.

He didn’t have a car, so it wouldn’t work to meet someone at the park. Maybe McAleer’s. Maybe another bar. The church parking lot.

Luke visualized him leaving the dorm on one of his usual late-night walks, walking with his hands in his pockets, glancing furtively about him. Across the quad, across Clemson Field, across Highway 93 to College Avenue. Would he run into anyone he knew? What time was it? Eight o’clock? Nine? He might have passed a group of freshmen guys in khakis and polo shirts, walking with unearned swagger. Maybe someone waved, maybe a customer for the vape pens. Luke could see Cliff grinning and waving back, maybe asking where the guys were going later.

House party at the Downs!

Come with us!

Maybe later!

Maybe.

He turned onto Sloan Street and passed McAleer’s, heard the music streaming from the bar when a drunk stumbled out, Old Crow Medicine Show or some other hipster tune blasting from inside. He snapped his jacket lapels and picked up the pace, down the steps to the church parking lot where Big Ron Ivy sat in a rumbling F150.

Perhaps they met there on occasion. No big deal. Usually.

Cliff got in the passenger seat, expecting a quick transaction. *Here’s some cash, here’s the next package of vape cartridges. It’s something different this time.*

Big Ron was a shadow in Luke’s mind: a man in his thirties, maybe potbellied, maybe a round face with a mop of curly hair, or maybe blonde hair in a ponytail and a weathered tan.

Let’s take a ride.

Where to?

We need to get out of sight.

The transmission clicked as Big Ron put it in gear, and the tires crunched on the gravel as he rolled out of the space. He turned onto College Avenue away from the university, toward the river.

After a few minutes, tired of playing it cool, Cliff asked, *What are we doing?*

I have something to show you, but I can’t do it here. Ever been to Morgan Park?

I went drinking there around Thanksgiving.

It’s a good spot for that. This time of year, no one’s ever there. It’ll give us a chance to talk. I think you’ll like what I’m going to propose.

Cliff watched the storefronts sweep by, and then they turned onto Highway 123 toward the river. Over the big bridge, down Cemetery Road into the countryside. It was pitch black, no lights in the farmhouses, ominous woods.

For the first time since getting in the truck, Cliff gave in to a voice buried deep and wondered if he would make it out of here. When he’d first learned of his parents’ divorce, he’d taken off into the woods behind his house and stayed there after dark. No one had come after him, and when he’d come home, no one asked where he’d been. Something had shifted in Cliff’s life then, and that shift put him on the timeline that led to now, riding into the deep dark woods once again, and once again no one would come for him.

When they reached Morgan Park, they rolled down a dark road that would soon be covered in snow and parked in a small lot at the dead end. Big Ron put the truck in park and shut off the engine. Without a word, he got out and shut the door.

Cliff hesitated, then followed. He couldn’t see much. A starlit sky hidden by clawing branches of old-growth forest. The temperature had dropped so he could see faint puffs of breath in front of him, minor disturbances in the air.

The rest was silence.

Who said what and why mattered little, because if the story in Luke’s mind was correct, murder was already in the cards.

A rock, a bat, a blow to the head.

Cliff was not a large man—still a boy, really—so if Big Ron lived up to his name, he could carry him like a bride to the water’s edge and heave him into the Keowee River. If he wanted to make sure, he might have waded out with the body to get him into running water, submerged him in a rapid. The water would wash away much of the evidence: fingerprints, fibers from Big Ron’s truck, blood.

Big Ron would be cold when he got back to his truck. He would have cranked the heat up, and the air would have blown through the vents. Hot air like a breath from Hell.

Before Luke fell asleep, his mind continued to turn the story over. There wasn’t a great deal of mystery to a drug deal gone bad, but Big Ron’s

moves after the fact were curious. Why follow the lead detective around in his old blue pickup?

If there was a loose end in the drug trade for Big Ron to tie up, the connection was either Gabby Cole's murder or the investigation into Clifford Deaton. Luke was at the nexus of these two cases, which meant it was possible he was the loose end. He thought again of how vulnerable he was in his end-unit townhome, alone in the dark in the anonymous suburbs. He flinched at the creaks of the settling house and the clicks of the ice maker.

He needed a map of whatever was going on with McAleer's, and he needed to know whether Cliff was involved. That answer lay with Jessica, whom he would interview in the morning. Rather than plot out what he would ask her, sleep was coming quickly, and his mind slid back to the church parking lot, to Kayla.

Margot had been his first love in high school.

His ex-wife had been a rebound and a (brief, consequential) mistake.

With Christina, the real estate agent, he'd been playing Mister Family Man. Mister Suburbia.

Sheriff's Deputy Kayla Baker was the one his mind turned to in the dark and in his dreams.

He went to sleep with an overwhelming sense of his life in suspension.

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Chapter Twenty

JESSICA WAS COMING to the station at eleven. Flannel had left messages with Derek, but the roommate was MIA. “That’s fine,” Luke said. “I’m more interested in talking to the girlfriend today.” He thought he would have the morning to do some more digging into McAleer’s, and maybe search for any connection with Howard Carlson and his political campaigns, but Archer stormed into the investigation division and yelled, “Steele! We need to talk.”

Luke and his partner made eye contact. He knew it could only be one thing but asked, “Any guesses?”

Flannel held up his hands.

“Wish me luck.” Luke followed Archer into his office and, without needing to be asked, shut the door. The captain clasped his hands as if in prayer and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He stared out the window and sighed. Luke thought he could see the beat of the captain’s pulse in his carotid artery and hoped Archer wasn’t about to stroke out in front of him.

“Remind me, the last time I saw you?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“Right. What had we just done?”

“Met with the DEA.”

“And what did they want us to do?”

“Keep them in the loop?”

“Try again. What else?”

“Look,” Luke said, “if they complained about me going to see Carlson last night, how’d they know I was there? No one was following me, so they must have him under surveillance. Or he’s an informant and reported in after the party. Either way, they weren’t being straight with us.”

“Of course they weren’t being straight with us,” Archer said, “but what did they ask us to do?”

“Stay away.”

“Stay away from Howard Carlson. And what did we talk about in my office afterward? Right here?”

Luke thought for a moment. Archer had repeated the direction from the DEA, but he hadn’t meant it. If anything, Luke might argue, when the captain had said yesterday *they want us to stay away from Howard Carlson*, what he’d actually been telling Luke was to go check him out.

“I guess I missed what you said.”

“I said keep me in the loop before you do anything.”

“Sorry, Captain, the, uh, the situation was fluid. Carlson had an after-hours campaign event, and I didn’t want to miss the chance.”

“I know he had an after-hours campaign event. I heard all about it.”

“What did the feds say?”

“It wasn’t the feds. Carlson’s lawyer called the chief this morning and gave him an earful about one of our officers off the reservation. You know I don’t care about what the DEA told us, and I don’t even care if you bend a few rules after hours to check him out. But I do care about him calling the chief! I—”

Archer paused and stared out the window again.

“I have to pull you off the Deaton case.”

“Captain—”

“And you need to stand down on Gabby Cole. Farbatko’s got that one nearly wrapped up anyway.”

“Captain, hold on. We’re at a critical juncture with the Deaton case.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“We’ve got the girlfriend coming in a couple hours. She could give us our first real lead.”

“Let Flannel take it.”

“That won’t work.”

“He’s been your partner, hasn’t he?”

“I interviewed her and the roommate myself while he was searching the dorm. She’s expecting to make a formal statement for me today, and if we throw someone else at her, who knows how she’ll react. Let me stick with it to get through this interview.”

“What do you need out of her?”

Luke took a breath. If he could buy himself a few hours to interview Jessica, he thought he could buy himself another day or two on the case. If there was anything to the drug angle, Jessica was the key, and this morning would determine whether they pursued drugs and the bar angle—or had to start back over from scratch. If the drug angle didn’t pan out, Luke would be glad to hand the case to someone else. Let Farbatko take it over. He didn’t have any connection to the boy and might see something Luke missed. This is what he told himself, but he also knew the drug angle was it. He wasn’t wrong about all these coincidences adding up to something more.

“Do you want the short version or the long version?” he asked.

“You better give me the long version,” Archer said, and Luke knew his captain was going to let him stay on the case.

Slowly, Luke walked him through what he knew: There was some kind of drug-dealing operation going on at McAleer’s, all the players had converged there last summer when Big Ron Ivy had been the general manager, and there was a fair chance Cliff either was dealing illicit vape cartridges or had gotten caught up in someone else’s deal gone wrong.

“You’re thinking Derek or Jessica?”

“I’m thinking it’s a mighty big coincidence that the bar owner wants me off this case, and his son is plugged into everyone we’re talking about.”

“You know you don’t have anything, don’t you? This isn’t even a fishing expedition. I don’t know what to call it, but you’ve got nothing.”

“You know I’m onto something,” Luke said. “You can feel it too, pulsing right below the surface. Let me talk to Jessica. She knows me now, and I think she’ll talk since she’s going to be here and won’t have Derek to cover for. Flannel can be there, and you can watch through the window. If you’re not convinced afterward, fine, put me on desk duty.”

“I don’t know how I can sell this to the chief,” Archer said.

“If we move fast enough, you won’t have to.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

THE TEAM AGREED Luke and Flannel would sit in to interview Jessica. Archer would watch through the glass, and they would meet afterward to determine how to proceed with Clifford Deaton. Having his captain there sent a clear message. Make magic happen with the Jessica interview, or Luke would be riding the desk until Easter.

A few minutes past eleven, the officer at the front desk called up to say Jessica was here, and Luke went down to retrieve her.

"Thanks for coming in," he said in the lobby. "Right this way."

He held the stairwell door for her. She was wearing an oversized white sweater over black leggings. The sweater had a thick collar that covered her neck like a brace. Away from the college campus, she seemed younger, more vulnerable. She appeared to be quietly taking things in as they went up the stairs and onto the main hall toward the interview rooms.

"Doing all right this week?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yeah."

"I know it's been a shock. I'm sure your professors will understand if you need to take any time."

"No, they've been great. It's only bad when people know who I am, you know?"

"Like in your, was it psychology, class?"

"That was in the fall."

"Ah. Here we go."

He led her into a small interview room. Unlike cop shows, the room was warm and comfortable, with a brown table and padded chairs and a plant in the corner. They had rooms where they could break hardened criminals, but their main interview room was the kind of place a doctor might sit you down to deliver some bad news.

“This is my partner, Detective Burns, who spoke with you on the phone. He’ll be joining us for your statement. Detective, Jessica Boggs.”

“How are you?” Flannel said, and he extended his hand.

The two detectives sat across from her, and Luke pulled out his notebook and pen as well as a tape recorder. For legal purposes, they needed the interview on tape plus her permission to record. He liked to have a small audio recorder on the table to distract from the high-resolution video camera. He said, “Since this is a formal interview, we’d like to record it to make sure we take down everything accurately.”

“Sure,” she said. Her eyes were on the table, but it was unclear whether from grief or intimidation or looming dishonesty.

He turned the audio recorder on and said, “This is Detective Luke Steele. I’m with Detective Theodore Burns interviewing Jessica Boggs on Friday”—he checked his phone—“January 21st at 11:05 a.m. Will you two introduce yourselves?”

He nodded to Flannel, who said, “Detective Teddy Burns.”

Then Jessica, who leaned in awkwardly. “Jessica Boggs.”

“Thanks. Now, like I’m sure Detective Burns mentioned on the phone, we call this a formal statement, but it’s really meant to be an informal conversation. You and I spoke the other day, so we need to have an official statement from you in case something ever goes to trial. It’s standard procedure with suspicious deaths, so it’s nothing to worry about. Are you with me so far?”

She nodded.

“I’ll need you to say yes or no so the mic picks it up.”

“Sorry. Yes.”

“Great. Well, first of all, I’m sorry again we have to do this under these circumstances. I know you’re grieving, so I’ll try to be quick. To go over some of the basics, you were Clifford Deaton’s girlfriend?”

“That’s right.”

He led her through a series of questions recapping most of what she’d disclosed on Wednesday—they’d met in the fall, they weren’t in love but

were dating, she didn't know where he was the night of his disappearance, she had no clue how he could have ended up in the river.

"Now," he said, turning the page in his notebook, "we're really trying to find out where Cliff was the night he disappeared, because where he went will point us to what might have happened to him. What can you tell me about McAleer's?"

She cut her eyes toward the detectives. "What do you want to know?"

"For starters, was that a hangout spot for your friend circle?"

"It's a popular bar."

"I understand, and I'm wondering if you, Cliff, or Derek ever hung out there?"

"No." She hesitated. "Not that I remember. We might have had lunch there. I've been there before, of course."

"You used to work there, if I understand correctly."

"How did you know that?"

Luke leaned back. "Actually, it came up in another case I've been working. I was reviewing who worked there last year, and I saw your name on a weekly schedule."

"That's random."

"I thought so, too."

"I mean, I was a server for like a month. I sucked at it and put in my notice so Ron wouldn't have to fire me."

"This is Ron Ivy? Big Ron?"

"That's right."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Ron? What about him? He's a good old boy from Seneca."

"How'd he wind up at McAleer's?"

"I don't know. He'd been there a while when he hired me."

"Was he a good boss?"

Jessica fidgeted in her chair. "Yeah, I mean, he was pretty relaxed about scheduling. He didn't jump in to clean or whatever when we were short-staffed, but people came to the bar because of him."

"What do you mean?"

"He seemed to know everyone. College students came in to hang out with each other, but there were always people stopping by to have a drink and catch up with him. He'd sit at the bar and tell stories all night."

Luke flipped through a few pages of his notebook and chewed on his upper lip. “If my timeline is right, you worked there before you and Cliff started dating?”

“Before I even knew him. Like I said, I worked there in June, maybe July last summer? Waitressing isn’t my thing. I would forget to write down special orders, I wasn’t loud enough to check with the kitchen guys on an order, I’d drop food. I was a mess, so I quit.”

“What did you do for money?”

“I had a little saved up, plus, you know, my parents were paying for housing. I didn’t need all that much.”

“Did you ever go back to McAleer’s? I’m wondering if Cliff ever hung out there, even if it wasn’t with you?”

“Not that I know of. Why?”

“You ever heard of a dab pen?”

“Sure.”

“Used one?”

“I’ve tried it. Not really my thing.”

“What about Cliff? Or Derek? Did those guys ever vape or try marijuana? Anything like that?”

She pursed her lips and slowly shook her head. “Nope.”

“To level with you, this other case I’m working, we’ve got someone dealing drugs. They take these dab pens and fill them with cannabinoids. Synthetic marijuana. They often lace it with fentanyl. You know about that?”

“Yes, I’ve heard of fentanyl,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Fine, well, I keep getting reports about the bar being a distribution hub for these things.”

“It’s a restaurant. People do all kinds of things there. Cooks especially.”

“You know anyone dealing this stuff?”

She shook her head again.

“What about Ron Ivy?”

“He mostly just drank,” she said. “He could go through a handle of Captain Morgan’s in a night, but that’s it.”

“Do the names Gabby Cole or Danielle Wheeler ring a bell?”

She glanced away. “I don’t think so.”

“They worked at your bar last summer.”

“I might have met them, but I’m sorry, I don’t remember.”

“That’s fine. Did you know Big Ron quit?”

“Again, sorry.”

“Last question, and this is a delicate one. Did you know Derek’s father’s real estate company owns the bar?”

She frowned. “I did not.”

“You ever met his father?”

“No, Derek hasn’t talked much about his family. I know he’s from Greenville.”

“You didn’t know he’s a state senator?”

She was clearly taken aback, which made Luke wonder if he was barking up the wrong tree after all. He was sure Jessica had been lying about the trio’s drug use a moment ago, but maybe it had been garden-variety college experimentation rather than a drug ring. Perhaps he was dealing with a sequence of coincidences after all.

He said, “Derek’s father is Howard Carlson, a representative for a chunk of the upstate. Outside politics, he has a real estate investment business, and they own McAleer’s. Apparently, it’s pretty hands-off, but I wondered if that had ever come up among you all—Derek’s father owning the bar where you used to work.”

“That’s weird,” she said. “But no, I didn’t know that.”

“Sometimes these coincidences happen. You find it happens more as you get older. I want to go back for a minute to Big Ron and the dab pens. I’ve talked to two servers who were involved in what they called a pyramid scheme. You know what that is? Multi-level marketing? It’s where you have a main dealer who then recruits people to be his sub-dealers. He gets a kickback from all their sales, and they have the chance to recruit even more dealers. Like if your mother ever went to a Tupperware party.”

“Okay…”

“Drug dealing is a bit like that. Cartels want to get their product on the street, so they build up a people person with lots of neighborhood contacts to be the hub, and then that person recruits foot soldiers to go out and do the work of sales. I’m wondering if Big Ron might have been that neighborhood hub. Lot of people who worked for him seem mixed up in filtering drugs out through the college network. Think back. Did you ever see anything that might fit the bill for what I’m describing? After-work meetings, or people coming and going out the back of the bar? Maybe someone Ron paid in cash?”

“He always cashed out our tips,” she offered.

“Yeah, that kind of thing. You ever have another server pull you aside and ask if you wanted to make a little extra money?” When she didn’t reply, he sensed a crack in the door and decided to jam a crowbar in. “Did you know Ron drives an old blue F150? It’s pretty unmistakable. We’ve seen it riding around town this week. At the bar, at the college campus. I guess I see all these coincidences and wonder if maybe he’s still in the drug business even if he’s not managing the bar, and I wonder who all he’s been in contact with. When was the last time you saw him?”

“What’s this have to do with Cliff?” she asked.

“Maybe nothing. But if we’re correct about Ron, Cliff might have been one of his dealers. That might give us some answers about what he was doing the night he disappeared. You said he would disappear on these long walks. What do you think he might have been doing?”

“I don’t think Cliff was dealing drugs,” she said with a laugh.

“Everyone keeps telling us he was this great guy, everybody loved him. Maybe that’s just the personality you need to earn a little walking around money in college. I’m sure it seemed harmless enough. Marijuana’s legal in a lot of states now, we’re sixty years past all the flower power good times, so what’s the big deal? You think he could have met Ron? Maybe through you or Derek?”

“Cliff wasn’t about that,” she said finally.

“About what?”

“He wasn’t interested in doing any of that. Everybody loved him, but he didn’t have a lot of friends. He would have been terrible at sales.”

“But you knew about the distribution scheme, right? Were you one of Ron’s dealers?”

“No!”

“How do you know Cliff wasn’t involved?”

“He just wasn’t.”

“Miss Boggs, I’m not here about dab pens, and I’m not trying to arrest a bunch of waitresses selling marijuana vape cartridges. There’s a good chance Cliff was murdered, so my partner and I are here as part of a homicide investigation. We need to know what Cliff was into, because whoever threw him into the river was brutally efficient. They didn’t leave evidence, they didn’t leave a trail for us. If it’s related to Big Ron, we need to know.”

“I know Cliff wasn’t involved, because he told me he wasn’t interested.”

“Go on.”

“You’re right, Ron was running what you described.”

“A pyramid scheme.”

“Yeah. He paid his staff to use those dab pens when the bar got busy. That was just nicotine vaping, like smoking a cigarette. ‘Make it look cool,’ is all he asked. He gave us the pens to give away and told us we could either be a supplier or hook students up with someone.”

“Does that have anything to do with why you quit?”

She nodded. “I’m really not a good waitress, but I am good at making introductions. He’d pay me to go to parties, hand out the pens, and talk to people about what you could use them for.”

“And if someone wants to buy cannabinoids?”

“I never sold drugs. I just made introductions and gave them a phone number to text.”

“Ron’s?”

“It’s a Google number, but yeah, that’s my guess.”

“So what he’s done is he’s separated his sales and distribution. It’s smart because if anyone ever picked you up at a party passing these things out, what do we have? Just a young woman giving away nicotine vapes. Seems like no big deal, but it’s a way to get customers in the door.”

“I don’t know anything about the other side.”

“I know you don’t. He set it up that way on purpose. The right hand and the left hand aren’t talking to each other. What I do want to know is who else was involved. You say Cliff wasn’t interested. What did he know?”

“He knew I had a connection.”

“Did he know the extent of your…involvement?”

She considered that for a moment. “He thought I just liked to vape at parties and knew a guy who would sell them to me.”

“What about Derek? Did he know?”

She fixed her eyes on the table. “He knew I was doing more than vaping, but he didn’t know anything else.”

“Nothing about Big Ron?”

“No.”

“Do you think Derek might have taken you up if you’d ever offered to hook him up with a distributor?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“But you never set him up with Ron or passed on that Google number?”

She hesitated a little too long.

“Miss Boggs?”

“Yeah, I gave him the number, but I don’t think he ever called it. I think he just wanted to know what was going on with Cliff’s girlfriend, you know? Like he was watching out for his friend.”

“When was the last time you saw Big Ron?” Luke asked again.

“I haven’t talked to him in months.”

“But you’ve seen him? Driving around?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have the Google number in your phone?”

She stared at the table.

“Probably best that you give it to us.”

She pulled out her phone and unlocked it. “Eight, six, four,” she started.

Luke wrote down the number and thought for a moment. It felt good to have all his suspicions confirmed, to see the connections between McAleer’s and the drug trade. He wanted more on Cliff, but this investigation was widening to include Big Ron Ivy.

“To step back,” he said, “can you walk me through last summer? How did you get your job at the bar?”

“I filled out an application. They had a ‘now hiring’ sign in the window advertising fifteen an hour, so I walked in and asked the bartender how I could apply.”

“Any chance the bartender was Brant Hodges?”

“That’s right,” she said, surprised. “He gave me a paper application to fill out at the bar.”

“Then what?”

“Ron called that afternoon and asked if I could come by in the morning. I met him there the next day, he bought me a Coke, and talked to me about the job. I didn’t have any experience, but he said that was okay, I could learn on the job.”

“How soon did you start?”

“That Friday afternoon. I guess he figured I’d have a few hours to get the hang of it, and if I could make it through the Friday dinner rush, I’d be fine.”

“When did the vape pens business start? Did he approach you about that?”

She shook her head. “I took a smoke break with one of the other servers, and she gave me a sample. I don’t really remember the order of everything, but I think I saw her passing out pens to a table of guys, and when I asked her about it, she said there was a little commission. She called it affiliate marketing.”

“Did you understand the pens could be loaded with cannabinoids?”

“I knew people smoked all kinds of things in them, but I always thought I was selling nicotine products, like a cigarette girl. I thought it was a program from the company that made them.”

“You had to know this wasn’t a normal business deal. You don’t have secret Google numbers selling Tupperware or vitamin water. It never occurred to you that you were part of a drug ring?”

She put her hand over her mouth, and he could tell she was starting to understand the severity of what she’d been a part of. He had nothing to charge her with, but he didn’t want her so wound up that she started thinking she might be heading from the interview room to jail.

“Let’s assume it was all nicotine vape pens,” he said gently. “How did the process work? You handed out free samples and a phone number, and that was it?”

“That was it,” she said. “Half my customers are already into Zyn, so I just had to show them the advantages of a vape.”

“Then what?”

She explained how she had set up her own voice-over-IP number. When she approached people, mostly guys, to talk about the dab pens and refill cartridges, she would text Ron’s number to them. She got a better response if the guys thought she was giving them her own digits. She would send a screenshot of the texts to Ron, who paid her twenty per contact, plus twenty for anyone who reached out to him, plus commissions on the sales. It was a classic pyramid scheme, because she got a kickback from anyone else she referred to be a cigarette girl.

“So you got set up with all of this at McAleer’s. You weren’t a great waitress, but you were good at passing out vape pens. Is that why you quit? To go freelance?”

“I told you, I quit before Ron fired me. I was messing up orders left and right. But yeah, I could make more money going to a party and sending out

texts than I could working as a waitress. Even with tips, the money doesn't compare."

"And you kept it up all through the fall semester?"

When she nodded, he thought about Andrea saying she never quite trusted Cliff's girlfriend. Listening to Jessica's tale, two things occurred to him. First, Andrea had good instincts. Second, the thought flickered up, for perhaps the first time, that she might have said something to Margot about him all those years ago. *Hey, little sister, you don't want to end up like me, married with children right out of high school. Luke might be a good high-school boyfriend, but he's not the one for you.* He buried that thought as fast as it came. Maybe when all of this was over, he could sit with it and reckon with his past. He asked, "You quit the bar but you kept up with the vape promotions. How did that end?"

"Ron was getting hard to get in touch with. He owed me for a few weeks, and I heard from a couple of contacts that they needed refills."

"Had you officially broken it off or anything?"

"Not yet, but I haven't sent him a referral since before Christmas, and he still owes me for people before Thanksgiving."

Luke sat back and crossed his arms.

"Do you have a direct line to Ron?"

"Just the Google number."

"How did he pay you?"

"Venmo. He was talking about switching to Zelle because the government was going to start tracking him for taxes. I told him I'd take cash, but he never liked to meet up."

"You think he was paranoid?"

"I think he was trying to wind it down himself. He got canned from the bar, and I guess this was his full-time thing, but he was running people all over the upstate and never had time to relax."

"Is there anything else you want to tell me about this operation? Anything you've left out?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What about his supplier?" Flannel asked. "Where'd he get the stuff?"

Jessica shrugged. "Where does anything come from?"

Luke paused. On the scale of life, he wasn't all that much older than she was, but he found it startling how someone could be so incurious about the world, as if mysterious elves manufactured things for consumption.

In this case, the elves started in a lab in China, where they produced fentanyl for the U.S. pharma companies and sent production overflow on pallets to Central America, where an underground economy of chemists mixed a concoction of propylene glycol, synthetic THC, fentanyl, and flavor compounds to fill Chinese-manufactured vape pen cartridges. Slap a label like Sunshine Blast or Berry Buzz on it, and they were ready for prime time in the United States college market. Put a counterfeit customs label on the box, *Hecho en Mexico*, load it into a GPS-equipped truck, and boom, you have a successful import operation. So many goods coming across the border, and so much money sloshing around the drug trade, there was no way to stop it, certainly not from Issaqueena, South Carolina.

You would, however, need a local network for sales and distribution. Maybe Ron Ivey was it around here, a good old boy bar owner with flexible morals and a money-making mindset. Or maybe you needed someone with political clout. Perhaps a real estate mogul-turned-state senator. He considered his options for a few moments before deciding what to do with Jessica.

He said, “At this point, you have to know you were part of something illegal. I don’t have anything I can charge you with—yet—but I will caution you that you’re involved with a dangerous game. I’d advise you to cut ties to anyone else involved in this business. Do you understand?”

Her voice cracked. “Yes, yes, I understand.”

“We’re going to be monitoring the Google numbers,” he added. This was not strictly true, because they would need a court order, but she didn’t need to know the details. “Do you have any other way of contacting Ron?”

She shook her head.

“May I see your phone?”

She pulled it out and handed it over. He passed it to Flannel to skim through her contacts to make sure she was telling the truth. Then he stared at her while chewing his upper lip in thought.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

"If she's telling us the truth, we're going to need to bring those DEA guys back in," Luke said. "I hate to admit it, but there's a good chance Howard Carlson is at the top of this pyramid, and I bet they're several steps ahead of us."

He and Flannel were at a Japanese quick-serve place called Atami's for a late lunch away from the listening ears at the station. He was munching on a teriyaki bowl and had a Styrofoam cup of sweet tea in front of him.

"You ever dig up an address on Big Ron?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, he lives down on Cemetery Road."

That set off alarm bells. "How far?"

"It's way out in the country. I don't know exactly."

"Near where we found Cliff's body?"

"It's a few miles farther out. Downriver," Flannel added. "I sent patrol down to check it out under the guise of an area canvass, but he wasn't home when they stopped by."

"That was smart," Luke said.

"You want to check it out after lunch?"

"Let's see if we can get the scoop on Derek first, to make sure his story matches Jessica's. I might also check with the bartender at McAleer's. He's an old friend and may have a few things to add."

"Archer going to give you any leeway to stay on the case?"

"TBD," Luke said. "He's probably put word up the chain of command that I'm out of it, but if we can get a little momentum, I don't see him

squawking if I’m still nosing around.”

“That’s what I like about you, Luke. You just keep moving forward.”

“All you can do, brother.”

They ate in silence for a few moments as Luke considered his partner. They’d been working together more than a year now, and they worked well as a pair. For a younger guy, Flannel was sharp and hardworking, but he definitely was in a different spot from Luke. He’d never been married, for one thing, and he had a steady girlfriend he seldom talked about.

“How’s Emily?” Luke asked.

“She’s good. She got promoted from specialist to associate at her job.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Three percent pay bump and a new business card.”

“How long have y’all been together now?”

“We met in college but didn’t start dating until a few years after.”

“Help me with the math.”

“Going on three years in May.”

“Pretty serious.”

Flannel blushed.

“Is it getting more serious soon?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s a good thing,” Luke said. “I was an idiot for getting married at twenty, but you don’t realize how easy it is to lose a decade.”

“For sure,” Flannel said, but Luke knew his partner didn’t know what he was agreeing about. Some things you could only learn by experiencing them, and getting older was one of them.

Luke himself still felt young and spry, but he also sensed he was on the edge of something. Doors were starting to creak shut. He studied his partner, who had come a long way in the two years with the investigations unit. He’d come into the division from property crimes, and before that patrol, but Luke was embarrassed he didn’t even know until today that Flannel had gone to college. He asked, “Where did you go to school?”

“Well, I started at USC, but I didn’t finish. I was in a band and dropped out to go on tour.”

“No kidding. What did you play?”

“The stand-up bass. I called it postmodern folk. Mumford and Sons was getting popular, so we were trying to catch that wave of Americana or whatever, but we never caught on.”

“I like that stuff. How come you never told me about this?”

Flannel shrugged. “We made a demo and spent a year on the road, and I got tired of that life. Came home, applied to be a cop, and here I am.”

Luke scraped the last of his chicken and rice onto his fork and washed it down with a gulp of tea. He chomped on a few pieces of ice, then said, “We ought to get back to it. You done?”

Flannel pulled out his wallet, but Luke waved him away.

“On me today. But I want to listen to your demo. How do I find it?”

Flannel groaned. “I can email you a link.”

“Please do.”

After lunch Luke took them through the Starbucks drive-thru for an espresso. The caffeine would give him a headache tonight, but he needed something to get through the last few hours of the week. He drank the espresso on the way back to the station and then suggested they swing by Farbatko’s cubicle in case the lieutenant had anything more on Gabby Cole.

The special investigations division was empty, everyone either out to lunch or knocking on doors. Luke had expected this, but he thought there might be a case file on Farbatko’s desk. He wanted to know if there were any forensics reports or other updates that might upset their understanding of the crime. He found the case file, but it appeared nothing had been updated in the past two days. The last entry was a printed transcription of their interview with Bowyer. A post-it was on the inside back cover with a few scribbled dates. The first was the end of the month, which Luke assumed was a trial date. They must have had the bail hearing and set the schedule. Luke wondered if Bowyer possibly could have made bail. Surely Farbatko would have called him if it was the case.

“Fellas,” Farbatko said, breezing into the office.

Luke shut the case file and made eye contact with Flannel.

“I hear you’ve had quite a day,” Farbatko said.

“Yeah. We were just…”

Luke didn’t finish. He cocked his head toward the door.

“Don’t worry about it.” Farbatko came over and picked up the case file, examined it, and set it back on the desk. He said, “Archer mentioned you were going to be riding a desk for a few weeks on account of harassing Howard Carlson, so I shouldn’t bother looping you in. I take it you’re not interested in sitting back with your feet up?”

“He’s giving me a day to close out a few things.”

“And? You get anything out of the good senator?”

“An earful about interrupting his campaign event. He didn’t even ask for my vote.”

Farbatko smirked. “DEA guys put in a call to Archer? That why you’re off the case?”

“Nah, it was Carlson himself. Complained about being harassed.”

“You got to him, huh. Now I really do think he’s into something.”

“McAleer’s is ground zero, that’s for sure. We don’t know who’s running things at the top, but it’s either Carlson or the guy he hired to run the joint.”

Luke quickly summarized what had gone down since he and Farbatko had been in the conference room with the DEA suits. When he finished, Farbatko said, “So you know there’s a drug operation going, but you don’t know if it’s got anything to do with your dead student.”

“Nope. There’s something there. His girlfriend was dealing, sort of, but she says Cliff wasn’t a part of it.”

“You believe her?”

“Flannel, what do you think?”

“I do,” his partner said. “I think she was doing more than she said, but my money’s on the roommate being involved.”

“She did get cagey when we were talking about him, didn’t she?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Anyway,” Luke said to Farbatko, “I was hoping you might have something more on Gabby Cole.”

“They arraigned Bowyer yesterday, but the trial won’t be until March. I don’t have the forensics reports yet, but I talked with the ME’s office, and she said it’s pretty straightforward. The knife we found with Bowyer was the knife that killed Gabby. Nothing about it is raising any concerns for her. It’s a clean-cut case of a drugged-up loser killing his girlfriend. It might have something to do with your bar. Drugs might have come from there, and she might have been dealing, but that’s all outside my purview.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“I wish there was more here, but unless you’ve got evidence that Bowyer was dealing, to give me something else to charge him with, there’s not much else for me to do. For what it’s worth, I think you’re onto

something with this McAleer's business. I'd keep scratching at that. You going to reach back out to the DEA guys?"

"I want to see what we can dig up on Big Ron first. Maybe see if we can't get a statement from Derek."

"You think the girl's going to give him a heads up?" Farbatko asked.

"We probably should find him now. I'll call him."

Farbatko wished him good luck.

The first thing Luke did when they were back to their unit was flip through his notes to find a business card from one of the DEA agents. He fingered the business card for a moment and thought about his options. He knew the DEA would tell him to stand down. He had nothing concrete on Big Ron or Jessica or anyone else. They might have something on Howard Carlson, but that might be on the level of interstate trafficking. Not Luke's domain.

"Flannel, you ever hear back from Derek Carlson?"

"I left him a voicemail, but nothing yet. You know kids today don't answer their phones."

"You got the number handy?"

Flannel set down a file, flipped through a notebook, and passed it over with a page open in the middle.

Luke put the agent's business card in his pocket. Then he dialed the number and waited through several rings. Then a voice answered, breathing heavily. "Hello?"

"Is this Derek?"

"Yeah."

"This is Detective Steele with the Issaqueena PD. We spoke on Wednesday?"

"Yeah, sorry I didn't call you back last night."

"That was my partner. Detective Burns."

Derek coughed.

"You all right? I was hoping you might be free to come in for a statement today."

"I'm a little busy."

"It's important. Do you have a class?"

"It's not that. It's…"

"Yes?"

"Did you talk to Jessica already?"

“Yeah, she came in this morning. Quick and painless.”

“I saw her when she got back. She got in a car with some guy.”

Luke had been clicking his pen, and paused. “Something wrong?”

“Um.”

Luke waved Flannel back over. “Do you know where she went?” he asked. “Or who she got in the car with?”

“I don’t. It was some dude in a pickup.”

“A blue F150 by chance?”

“Yeah, maybe. It was a big dark truck.”

“What’s bothering you about this? Is she in danger?”

“I don’t know,” Derek said. “She didn’t look like she wanted to get in, and he kind of sped off with her.”

“Where was this?”

“At the student union. She texted when she left you all and asked to meet for coffee.”

“Did she say why?”

“No.”

“Okay, Derek, listen closely. We need to find her, and I think we might know where to start. Do you know anything about her distributing vape pens, dab pens, anything like that?”

The boy was quiet a moment.

“Derek?”

“She told me it was a sales job. Like being a cigarette girl. To help the company market its products.”

“Did she ever say what company it was?”

“No.”

“What about who she was working for?”

“No, she didn’t tell me any of it.”

Luke could hear the tension in Derek’s voice, and he knew they needed to move quickly to find Big Ron.

“You need to come into the station, son,” he said. “You might be in danger yourself, so come here and ask for Yvonne Reese. She’ll get you set up in a break room until we can figure out what’s going on.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

When he got off the line, Luke logged into the DMV database and pulled up the information for the F150's plates—FSA 394. Sure enough, they were registered to Ronald Ivy, with an address in a rural area called Bounty Land a few miles south of the Shaws, where the whole thing began.

"Let's go," Luke said to Flannel, grabbing his coat off the hook. "Yvonne, we've got a young man coming in, and we're going to need to get a statement from him. "Will you get him set up in Frosty? Maybe get him a Coke?"

"Sure."

"We don't want him to leave, so ask him to be patient. If he gets restless, call us."

"Roger that," she said.

On the way down the stairs he texted Farbatko that they had a situation and gave him the address in case he wanted to meet them there.

"You think we need a black and white?" Flannel asked.

"Let's get the lay of the land. If she got in the truck voluntarily, I don't know what they're doing. We don't want to spook him with cops swarming all over."

"Seems risky for her to go to him right after telling us about his operation."

"Maybe she didn't. He might have been following her, watched her come into the police station, and decided he'd had enough waiting."

When they were buckled in and on the highway, Luke pulled out his cell and dialed the main non-emergency line. He asked the operator to patch him through to Sergeant Oye.

“Oye Vay, it’s Luke Steele,” he said.

“The man of Steele! What’s happening?” the sergeant said with a laugh.

“Flannel and I are heading out to a situation in Bounty Land, and we could use some patrol backup in the vicinity. We don’t want anyone riding by this guy’s house and drawing attention, but is there someone who could ride down Cemetery Road and be on point in case we call back?”

“Yes, sir, what’s the address?”

Luke told him.

When he hung up, he turned on the radio. They listened to the tail end of Cody Johnson’s “Til You Can’t,” and then Walker Hayes came in singing about the Bourbon Street steak at Applebee’s, which Luke remembered from Friday nights out with his grandparents. It was a big deal to drive into Seneca for dinner. Sometimes they’d drop him and Sarah at the movies while they did their weekly shopping at Walmart. Teenage life before social media: trying to appear cool in skinny jeans, shaggy hair, the awkwardness of being at the movies with your sister and wondering which one of you would start dating first and leave the other one behind. He was older, but she was precocious. They’d never talked about it, what ages thirteen and fourteen did to siblings, but he believed it had something to do with why they weren’t close as adults. He’d found his friends in high school, dated Andrea, gone off to the Army, and never really reconnected with anyone in Oconee. Nearing middle age, it made him sad to think about, so he shook his head and tried to focus on the job at hand.

He sped down Cemetery Road, under the power lines where a pair of shoes hung, tied together by their laces. When he reached Morgan Park, he slowed and then did a wide U-turn in the road.

Flannel grabbed the hook above the car door and tensed in the passenger seat.

“I want to check something real quick,” Luke said, and he turned into the park.

Since Tuesday, the snow had melted and refrozen and was melting again. Instead of a quiet fairy tale vibe, the park now held the feel of decay. Muddy tracks, broken branches, dripping water. His tires crunched along the rocky road to the deserted parking lot.

He parked anyway and left the engine idling.

“Hang tight,” he said, and he got out and jogged down the trail to the clearing by the river.

Nothing appeared to have been disturbed. The snow was a thin sheen of ice over the muddy beach. The river roared past, the water still high from the ice melt. Seeing nothing here or downriver, he jogged back to his Explorer.

“You expecting to find another body?” Flannel asked.

“You never know. Let’s roll.”

Back on Cemetery Road, he slowed again as they drove by the Shaws’ farmhouse. No F150 was in the driveway. In fact, no one appeared to be here at all, so they rode on.

Big Ron Ivy’s address was another three miles along, past open fields with shivering cattle and power lines, around a hairpin turn, in a white house on acreage. The F150 was parked in the driveway beside a faded basketball goal missing a net. Luke pulled in behind it and got on the radio to check on backup.

“This is Detective Luke Steele, checking on patrol backup for the 3200 block of Cemetery Road. Over.”

“This is Unit 708,” said a woman. “Officers Hazlett and Gould. We were told to hang back, so we are en route. ETA six minutes. Over.”

“Roger that. Detectives Steele and Burns are approaching the suspect’s house for questioning on suspicion of kidnapping. No further information at this time. Over and out.”

When they got out of the car, they heard the sound of a saw coming from the basement on the left side of the house. Luke motioned with his hands for Flannel to come with him down the embankment to check it out. Then he unzipped his peacoat, made sure his badge was visible on his belt, and put a hand on his holster.

After a high-pitched whine from the saw, a board clattered to the ground. The saw shut off.

“Hello?” Luke called. “Mr. Ivy?”

There was another clatter in the basement. Luke continued moving forward.

“Mr. Ivy? Issaqueena Police. You down here?”

“Yeah,” a man called. More clattering.

“Can you step out for a moment?”

A gravel driveway led from a second entrance down to the basement, where a one-car garage bay door was open. A man came out with a perplexed look on his face. He was a big guy, true to his nickname, with broad shoulders, thick greasy brown hair, a back brace around his stomach, and a cane in his hand.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Luke relaxed, took his hand off his sidearm. He unclipped his badge from his belt and held it up. “Detective Steele. This is Detective Burns. We’re looking for Jessica Boggs. Is she here?”

“Who?”

“Jessica Boggs. She used to work for you at McAleer’s?”

“Oh. Yeah, Jess. She’s not here. What is this?”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

Ivy’s face shifted from confusion to anger as he sized up the situation, two detectives asking about a girl he used to know. “It’s been months, man, I don’t know. Sometime over the summer, she quit and I haven’t seen her since.”

“You didn’t pick her up at the college today?”

“What? No. I’ve been here all day.”

“But you’ve been there recently, to McAleer’s. I saw your truck in the parking lot last night.”

“What’s your point?”

“Why were you at the bar you got fired from?”

“It’s a free country, man.” Ivy shifted from one leg to the other. When he saw Luke wasn’t mollified, he added, “I’m dating one of the waitresses. I was picking her up. What is this, anyway? Why are you following me?”

“We got reports that Jessica got in an F150 at the college campus today. We think she might be in some danger.”

“Wasn’t me.”

Ivy glanced over Luke’s shoulder. The slam of a car door meant Hazlett and Gould had arrived.

“You mind if my colleagues have a quick look around?”

“Whatever, man. Don’t break anything.”

Ivy turned and walked into the basement. He had a board clamped to a pair of sawhorses, and a circular saw was resting on the board. Several more boards were stacked against a wall.

“What are you making?” Luke asked as the cops followed him in.

“I’m installing some more shelves in the garage. I wrenched my back a few months ago, tripping on some stuff I had lying around. Orthopedist is giving me steroid shots, but he thinks I might need a surgery. Which I can’t afford.”

He clomped up the stairs with the cane tapping each step.

“I’m not going to be able to hang everything like I want it until something loosens up, but I needed something to do until I go back to work.”

“Where are you working?”

“Ryobi plant down in Anderson. Just finished their MT1 training rotation and had to go out on short-term leave.”

“MT1?”

“Manufacturing technician. I was searching for something different. Getting too old to run a bar.”

The basement steps led to the kitchen, and Ivy nodded. “Have at it.”

Luke motioned for Hazlett and Gould to do a quick search while he and Flannel waited in the kitchen with Ivy, but he knew they wouldn’t find Jessica here. None of this was adding up. He decided on a direct approach. “Mr. Ivy, do you know anything about dab pens?”

“Ha! Those things are the devil.”

“You do then.”

“Sure. They’re all over the Calhoun campus, and I imagine most of the high schools around here, too. You finally going to do something about the drug market?”

“What do you know about it?”

Ivy shrugged. “Not much. I can see why you’re investigating McAleer’s. Half the staff is high every shift.”

“You know anyone there who is dealing or distributing these things?”

“I don’t like to speak out of turn about this stuff. Everybody’s using them, but I’d check with the bartender.”

“Brant Hodges?”

“He’s the one.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I guess you don’t do many drugs in your line of work, Detective. When you’re looking for drugs, you get an instinct about who might have them. He’s the guy I’d start with.”

“You don’t happen to know what he drives, do you?”

Ivy scoffed. “I couldn’t even remember his last name until you told me. People come and go so much in that business, I couldn’t keep up even if I wanted to.”

The patrol officers returned to the kitchen, and Gould said, “Place is clean.”

“Told you,” Ivy said. “You got any other questions, or you mind getting out of my hair?”

“We might need to talk to you some more,” Luke said.

“Whatever, man.”

They huddled in Ivy’s driveway a moment. Ivy had followed them out to the basement and turned on his saw again. He was buzzing through boards before the officers reached their vehicles.

Luke asked the patrol officers if they could stick with the detectives for the afternoon.

“I don’t think that’s a problem,” Gould said. “I can radio Oye Vay to check, but there’s usually not much action happening on Five Beat.”

The department had divided their area into ten beats, which a pair of patrol officers could manage in a day. Five Beat covered from the Highway 123 bridge south along Cemetery Road to the Liberty Highway, and then east to the Anderson County line. It was a wide beat, but unless they got a call-out, patrol officers here mostly spent their day stopping for motorists with flat tires, pulling over country kids rolling through stop signs, and the occasional domestic violence callout. Being on Five Beat meant you could get pulled off patrol if a detective needed you, and Luke wanted backup for where they were going next.

“Yeah, call him up, and then follow us.”

“Where to?”

“Not sure yet.”

Luke pulled out his phone and called Yvonne to pull a DMV address on Brant Hodges. He got in the car and cranked up the heat while he waited for her to search through the state database.

“He’s registered at Hunter’s Glen, apartment B170,” she said after a moment.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Says it right here, Detective.”

“How long’s he been there?”

“At least a year. Doesn’t say when he moved, but he renewed his license last March and was living there. Four years earlier, he was at Blackburn Court.”

“Thanks, Yvonne.” He hung up and gaped at Flannel. “Take a wild guess where we’re going.”

“I heard.”

“You better call Oye Vay and ask him to send a second patrol car to meet us there.”

He did a U-turn and drove across part of Ivy’s front lawn to get around Hazlett and Gould’s squad car. He checked his rearview to make sure they were with him as he sped up Cemetery Road. It would take them about fifteen minutes to get back across town to the Hunter’s Glen apartments, the same complex where Gabby and Bowyer lived with all their boxes of dab pens. The same complex where Danielle Wheeler lived. One more coincidence that couldn’t be a coincidence.

The other night at the bar, Brant had told him he was only bartending a few nights a week. He’d reconnected with a girl after his divorce. They had a kid on the way. He was in HVAC school. None of that lined up with a man running a drug operation, but none of that had to be true, either. People lied constantly, especially to the police, and Luke realized he’d taken too much of his friend’s word at face value.

Well. Now wasn’t the time to run through the past few days of his investigation and reconsider them with Brant at the center of the crime. He needed to find Jessica first, and then he could sit down with his old friend for a talk.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

In front of apartment B170 at Hunter's Glen, a forest green Ford F150 was parked beneath a water oak. It was one of the old boxy models from the nineties, a popular car when Luke was growing up. He wondered what made someone seek out a vehicle from their childhood. Maybe an inheritance, maybe a good deal, or maybe it had something to do with nostalgia, a powerful emotion that could hold sway over a person's life.

"You got that license plate?" Luke asked as he drove past the truck and curved toward the back of the complex. He wished he'd thought to radio Hazlett and Gould so they wouldn't have followed him into the complex, but there was nothing they could do about it now except park out of sight and hope no one had been peering out the windows.

They pulled into a pair of spaces behind the next building and cut their engines.

Flannel was scrolling through something on the car's police link computer. "Does that plate belong to Brant Hodges?" Luke asked.

"It does. I was just checking to see if there was anything on him, but he's clean as far as our system goes."

"It would be too convenient if he had a criminal record or a warrant out on him."

They got out and huddled with the two patrol officers.

"What do you think, Luke?"

"I guess we go knock on the door." He turned to Hazlett and Gould and thought for a moment. Then he explained, "What we're looking for is a

suspect who may or may not have coerced a young woman named Jessica Boggs into his truck. It's possible they both are involved in the drug trade, but it's also possible he might be threatening her over talking with us. The suspect here is Brant Hodges. A white male, mid-thirties, with thick dark hair and a beard.

He added, "He might be connected to the murder of Gabby Cole the other day. We've got at least two people with the same employer, living in the same apartment complex, and possibly connected to the same drug hustle, so it's a good bet there's a connection."

"I thought the boyfriend did Cole," Gould said.

"He did. But she, or maybe both of them, were dealing in something called dab pens, and there's a pyramid scheme of distributing them at their bar. Hodges may be at the top of the pyramid, or at least a high-up lieutenant."

Luke ground his teeth. It unnerved him how easily he'd switched from thinking of Brant as his old high school pal to Hodges the suspect.

"Now, Hazlett, Gould, what I want you to do is hang back at the end of the row to see what happens and cover the balcony in case he tries to make a run for it. I'm hoping he'll answer the door and let us in, in which case you don't come in unless it's clearly urgent. I don't want to spook him with a roomful of cops.

"If we have to go in, my guess is this apartment has the same layout as the others. Kitchen on the left, living room and balcony, bedrooms in the back. If we have to go in, both of you move to the balcony. Assume if he comes out, he'll be armed and desperate. Get him down fast.

"We have two objectives here," he went on. "First, determine if Jessica is there and in danger. If so, get her out and secure the scene. Second, find out whether Hodges has any connection to drugs, Gabby Cole, Cliff Deaton, any of it. If he does, we need to search his premises and get him to the station for questioning."

The four of them walked to the B-complex, and Hazlett and Gould stationed themselves on the sidewalk up against the corner of the building, where they could see the breezeway and the balcony. The blinds in the front window were closed. Always the case.

Flannel and Luke went into the breezeway and paused in front of unit 170.

"Ready?" Luke asked.

Flannel stepped to the side, out of sight of the peephole, and put his hand on his gun. “Let’s do it.”

Luke raised his fist and banged on the door.

When no one answered, he called, “Hey, Brant, it’s Luke.”

He rapped again on the door.

He heard Hodges undoing the chain, and then he opened the door. He grinned for a moment and said, “Hey, Luke.”

Then he saw Flannel, and his eyes widened.

Before Luke could ask about coming in, Hodges jerked away. He slammed the door before Luke could wedge his foot in to hold it, and bolted it shut.

Luke yelled to the patrol officers, “Cover the balcony!”

He stepped back, raised his foot, and kicked at the door. The wood cracked, but the structure held. He kicked again, and then again, and the cheap wooden door frame burst and the door flew open.

The detectives had their guns drawn and entered the room in time to see Hodges on the patio, climbing over the railing.

Luke scanned the room, spotted Jessica on a chair in the corner, knees to her chin.

“Check her,” Luke said, and he ran back to the breezeway.

He ran toward the sidewalk, but the report of gunfire stopped him short.

Two shots, followed by one of the patrol officers yelling, “On your knees! On your knees!”

Luke edged around the corner and saw Gould with her gun drawn, Hodges on his knees, hands up, Hazlett approaching from behind.

“Get down on the ground! Face down!” Gould yelled.

“Okay, okay,” Hodges said, and he slowly lowered himself to the pavement.

Hazlett pounded on his back and cuffed him quick as a rodeo stud.

“What happened? Who fired?” Luke asked.

“It looked like he had a weapon,” Gould said, still aiming her gun at Hodges.

Luke touched her forearm, and she lowered it.

“Was he hit?”

“No, I missed.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

IT TOOK several hours to clear up the crime scene. When Hodges leaped over the patio railing, he was still holding a bottle of water that he'd been drinking in the apartment. Adrenaline apparently had kicked in, and he ran without loosening his grip. Officer Gould had seen the bottle, registered it as a weapon, and fired on instinct. She'd hit the wood post at the corner of the railing.

Hodges, in some combination of dumb luck and quick thinking, had fallen off the railing and landed on all fours. When the shots were fired, he curled into a ball and yelled out, "I give up!"

The department would review the body cam footage. Gould might get a reprimand, but since no one was injured, it was unlikely anyone would even report that an officer had discharged her weapon. Certainly not to the press.

Inside the apartment, it took several minutes to calm Jessica enough where she could speak. It turned out Hodges had been her cell contact all along. She'd thought it was Ivy at the top of the pyramid, but Hodges had the connection with whoever was supplying the operation from out of state.

He'd been following her for days, she said, but it wasn't until she went in to make her formal statement that he'd approached her and told her they needed to talk about what she was saying. In front of the dorms, he'd leaned over from the driver's seat of his truck and told her there was more than enough evidence for her to go to jail on a felony drug charge, and even if the cops would turn a blind eye to her as an informant, she would be kicked out of school.

“You believed him? About the felony charges?” Luke asked while they sat in Hodges’s living room.

“I guess. I know what I’d told you, and by the time I got back to campus, I was starting to worry. When he pulled up and told me I was in deep trouble, I panicked. I got in the truck with him, which was stupid, I know, and he brought me here. When we got here, he told me to relax, we could work something out, but he needed to get the whole picture of what you knew. I thought about running, but where would I go? Besides, I never really had a chance. He had me by the elbow and brought me in here.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“No. He asked if I wanted anything to drink. Then he paced back and forth. He kept saying he needed to think. *I need to think. I need to think.*”

“That’s all he said?”

“Until you knocked on the door. Then he cursed and flew out to the patio.”

“Jessica, it’s pretty important we understand what’s going on. Is there anything else you can tell us? Anything he said in passing on the drive over here?”

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “No. He said it’ll be all right. He also asked if I thought it had run its course.”

“The vape distribution?”

She nodded.

Flannel was leading a team of officers searching the apartment. He came in and shook his head. “Place is clean. We’ll get a forensics crew in here to check for trace materials, but…”

“Thanks, Flannel. Maybe do a little digging to see if he’s got any other addresses on file. Get a proper background check on him.”

“Will do.”

“They already take him to the station for processing?”

“Farbatko took over and sent Gould and Hazlett in to make formal statements. Another patrol officer took Hodges in.”

“Got it.” To Jessica, he asked, “You ever been here before?”

She shook her head.

“Or any other place where Hodges may have lived?”

“No. We weren’t close. Once I left McAleer’s, it was all text messaging.”

“We’re going to need to get a copy of those records. We’re going to have to take your phone, get a warrant, and do an extensive search, but this afternoon it would be helpful if you could give us permission to review those conversations so we know where to start with Hodges.”

She nodded.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I am. Just shaken up.”

“I understand.”

He wondered if she suspected Hodges had been involved with Cliff’s death. If so, did she understand she might also have been moving toward that same fate? *I need to think,* he’d said. Maybe Hodges had been trying to figure out what to do next, but it was also possible he was attempting to psych himself up for another violent incident.

Two hours later Conference Room Frosty was crowded with cops. Captain Archer was at the head of the table, and Yvonne Reese was beside him to take notes. Lieutenant Farbatko and officers Hazlett and Gould sat on one side of the table, Flannel and Luke on the other. The public information officer, Don Riley, was there to discuss the media strategy. No one loved hanging around Friday afternoon, especially not for a staff meeting, but there was a buzz in the air today.

“To start at the top,” Archer began, “what’s the status on the apartment complex?”

Farbatko jumped in. “We did a preliminary search, but didn’t find much. We recovered a tablet and Hodges’s cellphone, and we’ve got a request in to see if we can access any possible Google Voice number. Thanks to Detective Steele, we believe that’s how Hodges was coordinating his operations.”

“For Riley’s benefit, what’s the overview?”

“Okay, sure. Brant Hodges is a bartender at McAleer’s, and he’s been running a drug distribution game. We don’t know the details yet, but he’s got a supplier of vape pen cartridges filled with synthetic marijuana. We’re still doing lab tests, but we suspect an opioid is mixed in.”

“Meaning fentanyl?” Riley asked.

“Most likely. It’s popular in other states.”

“Do you know anything about the supply network?”

“Not at this time,” Farbatko said.

“And we don’t want to speculate in any press releases,” Archer added.

“Right,” Farbatko agreed. “We have a few possible leads on the network above him, but all the details we have right now are downstream. He uses Google Voice or some other VOIP telephone number to communicate two sides of an operation: sales and distribution. On the sales side, he recruits waitresses to act like old cigarette girls and introduce guys to the product. She gives them a number and gets a commission if anyone places an order. We don’t know much about the distribution side, whether Hodges does the deliveries or if he has another network of dealers.”

Riley was taking notes on a laptop, which made Luke nervous. The PIO was young, preppy, and taking business classes at night. In a few years he would take his media training and his business degree and get a job in market research, but for now they were stuck with him type-typing away. Before the meeting, Luke had suggested it was too early to bring in the PIO, since they hadn’t yet conducted a formal interview with Hodges, but he’d been overruled. In fact, Archer hinted Luke was lucky to be in the meeting at all given the shenanigans with Howard Carlson.

Farbatko continued, “We think it’s a combination of both. One of the sales girls, Gabby Cole, was recently murdered by her boyfriend, and they had a pile of the product in their apartment. The boyfriend was a heavy user, but we suspect he was also in the distribution game. We’ve charged him with homicide, but given today’s events, we’re going to be talking with him again.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant,” Archer said. “Detective, you want to recap the connection to your case?”

“We really need to talk with Hodges before speculating too much with the media,” Luke said.

“I understand,” his captain said. “Humor us.”

Luke sighed. “We’re investigating a possible drug connection to Clifford Deaton’s murder. Right now, the evidence is all circumstantial, but his girlfriend, Jessica Boggs, was one of Hodges’s sales girls. She worked at McAleer’s last summer and then realized she could make more money selling vape cartridges without having to wait tables. She says Cliff didn’t know what she was doing and had nothing to do with it, but the

coincidences around his death suggest otherwise. We really need to talk to Hodges."

"Unfortunately, he's lawyered up already," Farbatko said. "He was ready for this day and gave us the number of his attorney. She's meeting with him tonight, and then we're all talking tomorrow morning at nine."

"That was fast," Luke said.

"It gets worse. One of them, Hodges or the lawyer, made the connection between Jessica and Clifford Deaton. She's aware we might be charging him with homicide, so they're going to be ready for us tomorrow morning."

"Can we get a warrant for the forensics team to search his vehicle?"

"I don't see why not. What are you thinking?"

"There's a chance he drove Cliff from wherever they met to the river. We need something linking them if we're going to go down the murder route."

"You know we won't have that before tomorrow morning."

"It can't hurt to check," Luke said, knowing Farbatko was right. "Maybe he did us a favor and left a blood stain in the bed of his pickup."

"I've seen dumber things."

Riley cleared his throat. "We should get a press release out tonight if we can. Since shots were fired, the local reporters are already calling. I put them off for the six o'clock broadcasts, but they're going to have people out there at ten."

"Can you keep it vague? Say we were speaking with a person of interest, shots were fired, the suspect is in custody."

"You know the political environment," Riley said. "They're going to be asking who fired the shots, who fired first, the race of the man, the race of the officers, all of it."

"I just need you to buy us a day until we can see what we get out of him."

Riley looked to Archer. "Captain?"

"Yeah, keep it short. Going into a weekend, how many people are going to be paying attention? But," Archer glared at the detectives, "we need something Monday morning. If any of these reporters go to the chief, he's going to have all of us in the hot seat across from him."

"Yes sir," Luke said. When the captain nodded, he understood he had tacit agreement for him to stay on the case through the weekend. He also

knew that if nothing came of the Hodges interview in the morning, he would be facing a long stretch of paperwork penance.

“One other thing.” Archer bore his gaze into Luke and narrowed his eyes. “You need to call Reece at the DEA.”

“Captain.”

“Let him know we’ve made an arrest, and if he knows anything about Brant Hodges, we need to know it. Tonight.”

“And if they try to swoop in to stop us from mucking up whatever they’re running with Howard Carlson?”

“We’re holding Hodges on suspicion of homicide. Their jurisdiction can’t protect him from a murder charge, and we need to know what they know.”

The captain had a point. Luke disliked the idea, but he was getting tired of groping around in the dark. Maybe someone with resources could help. For once. He nodded and said he would make the call.

Riley cleared his throat again. “There’s, uh, one other thing. This is delicate, but you knew the suspect, correct?”

“Yeah,” Luke said, “he and I went to high school together.”

“Anything a reporter might pick up on?”

“You mean like a Facebook photo of us drinking together down on Sloan Street? Nah, we weren’t close, and we hadn’t kept up after high school.”

Riley nodded and said something else, but Luke was no longer listening. He was thinking about how many high school friends had re-emerged in his life. Andrea and Bill Deaton, Brant Hodges, even Deputy Robert Atkins.

He often ran into someone he’d wave hello to, but it was beginning to feel like a reunion. These happenstance encounters were beginning to feel like the hand of fate operating in his life. It made him uncomfortable to consider, but it also gave him an idea.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

LEAVING THE STATION, it was four-thirty. He had time but needed to get out to the sheriff's station in Oconee before five and everyone went home. He made two phone calls on his way, and both went to voicemail.

The first call was to Andrea, to see if she wanted to meet for a drink this evening. "We're working a few leads, and while I don't have anything new I can share, I did want to ask you a few more questions. I know it's not easy, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it, Andrea. I promise."

He hung up and took a few breaths. Then he called Bill Deaton to see if Cliff's father might be available to meet up. That call too went to voicemail, so Luke left a message. "Hey, Bill, this is Luke Steele. I'm, uh, still working this case, and I had a few more follow-ups and was hoping you might be free to meet with me tonight. I know it's late notice, but give me a call."

He tried to work out what he was about to do. He had a half-baked plan but would be taking a ready-fire-aim approach. Most of the time that worked out for him, but everything about this case defied the usual patterns.

On Main Street, he drove past the sheriff's station but didn't see anyone milling around the parking lot. That was a good sign that the day shift was still there wrapping up. He made a U-turn and pulled into a space a few blocks up from the station, where he could see the coming and going, but no one coming out could recognize him.

Then he opened the Google Voice app on his phone. He'd downloaded the app and created a number for himself before the team meeting this

afternoon so he could understand the mechanism for what Jessica had been describing. He'd been surprised by how easy it was. Using an email address, he was able to create a number for himself, which he could use to make calls or send texts through the app. Pair it with a cybersecurity device called a VPN—virtual private network—and he could make calls from an untraceable number on his cell phone. He believed a court could make the tech giant give up information about who downloaded the app, what email address it was registered on, or other personal information, but it was an effective layer between you and the world.

He used the app to dial the non-emergency line so that the call would come in as an untraceable number.

"Sheriff's Department, how may I help you?" a woman asked.

"Yes, I was trying to reach Deputy Robert Atkins. Is he in today?"

"Who is calling?"

"This is Brant Hodges."

"And what is this regarding?"

Luke chuckled. "We were supposed to meet up today, but I got stuck at work. I was calling to see if he could meet me at McAleer's, over by Calhoun College."

"Hang on."

She put him on hold, and he picked up a pen from his cupholder and clicked it idly.

A minute later she returned. "He didn't answer at his desk. I can leave him a message if you want."

"Yeah, if you would, just tell him I called and let him know I'm stuck at work."

"Will do."

"Thank you, ma'am. Have a great day."

When he disconnected, he waited and watched the station. Ten minutes went by, and just when he was about to call it a night, Atkins came out a side door and got in a sheriff's Camaro. Although it was hard to see, Luke thought he saw him holding a cellphone to his ear, and he pictured Atkins trying to call Hodges back. He made a mental note to check with property back at Issaqueena PD to see if any calls had come through on Hodges's cell.

Then Atkins started the car and slowly pulled onto Main.

Luke started his Explorer and followed at a distance. He wished he could drive incognito, but no dice. The chief wanted all officers in marked cars for friendly public relations. If you preferred to drive something without lights and a logo, you had to pay your own gas.

It didn't matter tonight because Luke knew where Atkins was going. He could have taken a different highway to get to McAleer's, but a just-in-case voice told him to stay with Atkins. He was playing a dangerous game, so he needed to check every procedure, step by step.

On the way down Highway 123 toward the Calhoun College campus, he pulled the DEA agent's business card out of his pocket and called him up.

"Reece," the man said.

"Reece, this is Detective Steele, Issaqueena PD."

"Detective. You calling to apologize?"

"Actually, I was hoping you might fill me in a little on your Howard Carlson operation."

"I was told you had been taken off any investigation involving Carlson."

"There's been a few developments. Listen, I'm currently following a guy who might be a crooked cop on Carlson's payroll. We've arrested Brant Hodges on suspicion of homicide, so I need to know where all this goes."

Reece cursed. "Back up, Steele. What are you talking about?"

"I've got two cases that might be connected. The dead college student we pulled out of the Keowee, and my murdered CI who was wrapped up in whatever is happening at McAleer's. Hodges kidnapped a person of interest in my college kid case, so we've pulled him in. Now I'm trying to figure out if he's at the top of the pyramid—or if, more likely, Carlson's at the top. I need to know what you know."

Reece was silent for a few moments. "Where are you now, Detective? You sound like you're driving."

"I'm on my way back to McAleer's. I think I've stumbled on one of Hodges's partners, and I want to see what happens when he figures out Hodges has been arrested."

"Slow down, Detective. We need to huddle on this."

"I'm tailing a guy now," Luke said. "I've got about half an hour before he starts connecting dots, so what can you tell me?"

"Who are you following?"

"A sheriff's deputy who went to high school with Hodges. He moonlights for Carlson, and I think he might be on the payroll for whatever

else they're running."

"And what do you plan to do next? Confront him at the bar?"

"Maybe." Luke was still moving on instinct and could only see two moves ahead.

"Do me a favor. If you talk to this guy, don't bring up Carlson."

"I can't promise that."

"Steele. Listen. We have a whole case around Carlson, how he's been using his campaign to launder money from the cartels to facilitate the drug market on I-85 across the whole upstate. I've got a whole team pouring through his financial records and surveilling his activities, but we don't know if he's acting alone or if there's anyone else in government involved. We don't know how far this goes or who he's got on his payroll, but it's bigger than either case you're working."

"I've got a grieving mother and father who want justice," Luke said. "That's my job."

"We'll get you your killer. Whoever pulled the trigger on your college student, we'll nail them. I'm just asking you to do that in a way that lets us also bring down Carlson's operation."

"Clifford Deaton wasn't shot. Someone bashed his head in and dropped him in the Keowee River."

"I'm sorry," Reece said. "We can work together. Just tread carefully until we can regroup."

"We're interviewing Hodges tomorrow morning. You want in, come to the station early. He's lawyered up, so we're only going to get one shot at him."

"And tonight?"

Luke hung up. He knew there was a chance someone from the DEA would show up shortly to try to intercept him. If they knew what they were doing, they would hang back rather than risk spooking Deputy Atkins. Even if they busted in and pulled Luke away, it was worth the coin for learning he was right about Carlson. That would give him leverage tomorrow with Hodges. Now he wanted to know how Atkins was involved—and who else from high school had fallen into Carlson's orbit.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE WEEKEND CROWD was already out at McAleer's when Luke arrived, so he had to maneuver through several crowds of young people milling around to get a seat at the bar. He didn't look around in case Atkins was already there, eyeing him and wondering where Brant Hodges might be.

A young woman was behind the bar, and when she had a moment, she came over to Luke and asked what she could get him.

Luke ordered a pint of lager from a local brewery and then shouted, "Is Brant working tonight?"

She squinted. "Nah, he didn't come in."

"Was he on schedule?"

"He was." She shrugged.

She hurried over to the taps and then returned to set a coaster and his pint on the bar. He gave her his credit card and asked her to close him out.

Then he took a sip of beer and scanned the room. Atkins was already there, at the end of the bar, a pint of beer already in front of him. Luke smiled, raised his glass, and got up to amble over. "Hey, Robert, fancy seeing you again. What you up to?"

"Nothing much. Thought I'd grab a drink after work."

Atkins had removed his badge and gun and zipped a fleece over his deputy's uniform, so you wouldn't peg him as a cop right away, until you looked at his shoes and saw his gait. Some things were giveaways.

"I hear that," Luke said. "I'm technically still working. Same case I was filling out paperwork on at the station the other day. One of those cases that

we’re not going to clear but it won’t go away. You know?”

He drank a third of the beer in a couple of swallows. He didn’t recognize anyone in the crowded bar, but he wondered if the bartender or anyone else here was picking up the baton for the vape distribution.

He went on, “I was supposed to meet a source here tonight, but he didn’t show, so I think that means I’m going into the weekend with bupkis.”

“Who was your source?”

“Just some guy who tends bar,” Luke said casually. “I can’t say too much, but you might have read about the college kid we fished out of the Keowee the other day? We still don’t know if it was drowning or what, but we think he might have been wrapped up in something around here. I thought my guy might be able to point me in the right direction.”

“You weren’t trying to meet Brant Hodges, were you? From high school?”

Luke eyed him. “How’d you know?”

“I occasionally stop by here, and I ran into him one day. He didn’t remember me, but he knew my brother. I always like to catch up with the old gang, keep up with people.”

They sipped their beers and studied the crowd, Luke waiting to see what Atkins might say and Atkins, perhaps, keeping an eye out for Hodges.

“What makes you think your dead kid was wrapped up in something here?” Atkins asked. “What was he up to?”

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “He was a little strange, and a few things his friends said made it sound like he was involved in some kind of scheme. A little bit of evidence pointed me this way.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing specific. You know how it is, you get a hunch.”

“The true detective,” Atkins said, referencing the HBO series.

“I never saw that show.”

Atkins grinned and took a long drink. “I like you, Luke. You’re kind of old school. Hey, well, what’s the connection to Brant?”

“I figured since he was a bartender, he would know most of what’s going on.” Luke studied his old friend. “Kind of like you. You’ve got a way with people, keeping up with them and asking how they are. I’ve let a lot of old friends go over the years.”

“That’s what I love about law enforcement,” Atkins said. “In a big city, you might be looked down on with all the culture war stuff, but our county

is still old-fashioned. It doesn’t take much to know everybody, and everybody’s business.”

Atkins was hard to read. Luke thought the deputy might have been trying to send him a message, but what? Did he know what Luke was up to?

Luke drank the rest of his beer and set the glass on the bar like he was going to go, but Atkins stopped him. “Let me get you another.”

He checked his phone and saw a missed call from Agent Reece. He said, “I got to go. I’m working in the morning.”

“On the weekend?”

“My captain’s riding my case about paperwork. I never seem to get ahead of it.”

“Sounds like it. Anyway, one more won’t hurt you.” Atkins was already waving two fingers to the bartender. “Do you know Hannah? She’s a student at Calhoun. She hasn’t been here as long as Brant, but she might know something about your guy.”

Hannah brought the two beers over and set them down. Atkins said, “This is my buddy, Luke. He’s a detective.”

“That so?”

“I’m off duty,” Luke said, and he waved the bartender away.

“She might know something.”

“We’re all right.”

He gazed into the beer in front of him and wondered if Atkins was onto the ruse. If he was plugged into the crime network with Howard Carlson, Atkins would hear about Brant’s arrest soon enough, and it was plausible someone had already tipped him off—meaning he would know Luke wasn’t here to find Brant. The next time the two men saw each other, Atkins would know Luke knew about him, and he would know that Luke knew, and so on, yet neither of them would say anything. They would grin and shake hands like old friends until Luke made a play. Luke wouldn’t do anything until he figured out whether Atkins was a one-off on Carlson’s payroll, or if the rot went deeper into the system. Until then, Luke would not file paperwork on this conversation.

As he guzzled the second beer, he regretted calling Agent Reece because the DEA would ask him about this evening. Luke would say his lead hadn’t panned out. The agent, if he was worth anything, wouldn’t believe him, but that was the problem for another day.

He drank the last of his beer, too quickly, and said, “Now I really need to scoot.”

“Great to see you,” Atkins said. “Twice in one week!”

“Yeah, let’s not go another ten years until the next one.”

“I can’t imagine it will be that long,” Atkins said.

The night had grown bitter, and the beer had gone to his head. Two pints gulped like a much younger man might do, and Luke was fuzzy upstairs. He saw he had returned calls from Andrea, who hadn’t left a message, and Bill, who said, “Yeah, Luke, I just got off my shift. I’ll be up for a while so call me back when you can.”

There was a note of urgency in Bill’s voice, the father of a murdered son hoping for information. Perhaps feeling lost or angry still at what happened. Perhaps wondering if he was responsible. Luke had thought about Andrea all week, but he felt embarrassed now at how little he’d considered Bill, the father out of the equation. Which had been crueler: leaving Bill in the dark all week, or calling him tonight with no update, no line of questioning, and no plan to call him back?

On the empty drive home to his lonesome townhouse, Luke cast his mind back to high school, those years of confusion. They’d all known each other since elementary school: Bill and Andrea several years older, Robert several years younger. Luke and Brant had been elementary school friends who’d bonded over football at recess, laughing at the back of the school bus, competitions over who could drink a carton of milk the fastest.

Middle school had shuffled the deck chairs in ways that Luke could not understand today. Boys he’d been friends with for years grew sullen and passed him in the hallways without making eye contact, and the girls radiated hormones so thickly it made it hard to breathe. Teenage Luke came out of that period on Margot Love’s arm. As soon as he could drive, the two of them were at the movies every Friday night.

Graduation loomed, then passed, and then Margot gave him the *Dear John* talk in a car eating soggy French fries. “What do you think is going to happen to us when I’m away?” she’d asked, referring to college a plane ride away. “I don’t want to live like Bill and Andrea.”

“What’s wrong with their lives?”

“Nothing. It’s just.”

“Just what?”

“It’s been fun, but nothing lasts forever. Let’s not let the end ruin what we had.”

It’s been fun.

Maybe Margot had been right. Andrea and Bill had split up. Luke’s first marriage had been a bust. Maybe there was wisdom in seeing the world for what it was, a temporary playground for having fun.

At the time Luke had followed in his alcoholic father’s footsteps, sneaking liquor out of his grandparents’ open bottles, at first just enough to take the edge off and help him sleep. Pretty soon that turned into driving around feeling sorry for himself, smoking stolen cigarettes and nursing eight ounces of Wild Turkey in a Coke bottle, then throwing up in the bushes out back.

One hungover Saturday morning, Sarah met him on the back steps and told him he needed to stop. “Papa knows what you’re doing. I saw him watching you when you snuck out the back door a few minutes ago.”

“He hasn’t said anything.”

“He will, though. You know how it’ll go. He’s got a switch instead of a dial, so when he’s had enough he’ll send you over to live with Dad.”

“Good. Maybe that’s what I should do.”

“Why?” Sarah asked. “What happened?”

She was in the tenth grade but already somehow wiser than he was—about the world, about sex, about their family, about how to make it through each day. How could he tell her? Something inside him had come loose. He couldn’t control it.

His solution had been to push forward. If he stayed busy, if he had a project to work at all hours until it exhausted him, he could forget about the past and control whatever was inside him. But even now, he worried about what might happen if he slowed down. If he could no longer outrun a reckoning with himself.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE INTERVIEW with Brant Hodges was scheduled with his attorney for nine o'clock Saturday morning, but when Luke arrived at a quarter to eight, the station was already crowded. Captain Archer was meeting with Agent Reece and the county prosecutor in his office. Archer had left a post-it on Luke's desk instructing him to join them.

When Luke knocked, Archer told him to come in and shut the door behind him. Archer was behind his desk, and in the two chairs across from him were Agent Reece and the prosecutor, a fast-talking young Republican type about Luke's age named Gregory Whiteside. He went by Gregory, which was all Luke needed to know about him.

"Hodges's attorney is already here," Archer said while Luke went back to the hall and wheeled in Yvonne's chair. "We put her in Frosty, and when Hodges gets here, she's going to push hard to cut a deal."

"What kind of deal?" Luke asked.

"She hasn't offered specifics, but, Reece, you want to weigh in here?"

"Sure." Reece's eyes bore into Luke as he spoke. "When we met earlier this week, I thought we all agreed you were pursuing the murderer of Clifford Deaton and would keep us informed of any developments."

"I called you last night," Luke said.

"Yeah, after you bum-rushed Carlson two nights ago, and after you poked a bear at the sheriff's department."

"What's this?" Archer asked.

“Nothing,” Luke said, unwilling to reveal Atkins’s role in the mess, whatever it may be. “I made a mistake and thought a guy I went to school with might have been working with Hodges, but it didn’t pan out.”

Reece gave him a look that suggested he knew Luke was spinning a tale but would give him the rope to make his play.

“You sure there’s nothing you need to tell me?” Archer asked.

“The only thing we need to worry about is Brant Hodges.”

Reece cleared his throat. “Anyway, like I told you last night, Detective, we’ve been building a case around Howard Carlson. Hodges may be the distributor, but Carlson is the one managing the money. We don’t have all the connections to make an arrest, but he’s using a string of LLCs and real estate partnerships to launder money from the cartels, and using it to fund his political ambitions. Or the cartels are funding his politics to protect their business interests.”

He let that sit for a moment, and everyone took a breath.

“Is there a local aspect to this case?” Whiteside asked.

“Unfortunately not,” Reece said. “With the campaign finance connection, the DOJ is keen to prosecute. Especially in this political climate, the administration wants a national news cycle out of it, if and when we get enough to make the case.”

Whiteside turned to Luke. “What evidence do we actually have on him? For Deaton’s murder or anything else?”

“With Jessica’s testimony, we have him on some conspiracy charges with intent to distribute,” Luke said. “We’re still waiting on the lab to come back with a report on the dab pens we found in Gabby’s apartment. We *think* they’re going to contain synthetic cannabinoids and other chemicals, but we won’t know for a few more weeks.”

“So, witness testimony right now?”

Luke nodded. “We should be able to get his cell records. He allegedly uses a voice-over-IP number to connect with buyers. If we can get a statement out of Gabby’s killer acknowledging where they got the drugs, there’s your case.”

“Anything connecting him to Deaton?”

“Speculation,” Luke admitted. He had a few things he could bluff with, but without a confession, he was no closer to finding Cliff’s murderer than he’d been on Tuesday when they found the body.

Whiteside said to Reece, “So, you want us to trade these distribution charges—for what? Informing on Carlson?”

“That’s the goal.”

“And you can’t tell us specifics about where you are on that case?”

Reece shook his head. “We’re close. We probably could get a minor conviction with what we have, but my agents agree there are more tentacles out there. We want to see how far Carlson’s operation extends.”

“You think Hodges will help with that?”

“He will if he wants to avoid the drug charges.”

“And if Detective Steele gets a confession for murder out of him?”

“He’s all yours,” Reece said, “though I’d love to tease a reduced sentence for information on Carlson.”

“Which you know we can’t offer.”

“He doesn’t need to know that.”

“His attorney will know what game you’re trying to play,” Luke said.

“She might be thinking ahead about the sentencing,” Reece said. “Yeah, your boy here might throw everything at him, but cooperation with a federal investigation might sway a judge to give him a more lenient sentence. Relax. If he’s your murderer, I don’t care how long he goes away for. All I want is to extract some cooperation out of him.”

Archer jumped in. “You’re taking the lead on the interview, Luke?”

“That’s the plan, unless…”

Whiteside thought for a moment. Then he said, “That works for me. Let’s go see what we can do.”

Since Luke’s arrival, an officer had escorted Hodges into the conference room. He sat glumly next to his attorney, Shannon Snow.

Reece and Archer went into the observation room to watch the interview on the AV system, while Luke and Whiteside went in and sat across from Hodges.

After a round of introductions, Whiteside said, “Ms. Snow, as you know, Detective Steele has a few lines of inquiry for Mr. Hodges. I understand that at his arrest, he was briefed on his rights to an attorney and to remain silent, but I want to make sure you’ve counseled him as well on his rights.”

“We’re all set,” she said. “Before we get started, I also thought we might discuss any possible damages the county may pay my client for false arrest, lost wages, and character defamation.”

Luke grinned. Although she was his opponent in the room, he liked this woman. He recognized her as a former prosecutor. She was maybe fifty years old, thin, brunette, and comported herself like a real estate agent. Big jewelry. Hoop earrings. A shark behind the glamour.

Luke knew wrangling a confession out of Brant would be a challenge with or without a defense attorney. He'd debated whether to play the sympathetic old chum keeping an eye out for his pal versus the betrayed friend seeking an explanation. Since people like to tell their own story to justify themselves, Luke was leaning toward the role of betrayed friend, but he decided to start with the safest play.

"Before we get into all that about damages, let's begin with what we know." Luke paused. "This is obviously a little awkward since we go back to high school…and were friends. That's—I don't know what to say, but want to put it out there that this interview is hard for me, too."

"Should you be here, Detective?" Shannon Snow asked.

"Well, we talked about that, and since I made the arrest and it is my investigation, I know the story and what evidence we have, and everyone agreed it would be for the best if I led this morning. Though, as you know, Mr. Whiteside will be taking over with the charges."

Luke let that hang in the air so Brant could think about what charges might be forthcoming.

"So, Brant, we know you're a bartender, and we also know you are at the head of a scheme for distributing illicit drugs, specifically a device called a dab pen. We've got evidence for how you recruit waitresses to introduce guys to these devices and connect them with you via a Google Voice number for making the sale. You then give these girls a commission and an incentive to recruit more girls. It's a pretty standard pyramid scheme, and pretty smart compared to most drug dealers that sit across from me."

"Alleged," Shannon Snow cut in.

"Alleged. Correct. All of this is alleged, but we do have enough evidence to proceed with a case around distribution of illicit vape pens. However, I presume you know what we are really here to talk about is Clifford Deaton."

"My client—"

Luke held up his hand. "Let me run through where we are, and then you can decide what you'd like to tell us. We know Cliff had a connection to

what was going on at McAleer's via his girlfriend, Jessica Boggs, a former waitress there. We know she was making contacts and earning commissions on sales. Beyond the natural communication you would expect from a boyfriend and girlfriend, we have evidence that Cliff had a couple of connections to the bar crowd. Whether he was a user or distributor, we're still looking into that.

"What's relevant for today," Luke went on, sensing the attorney was about to leap in and force him to put his cards on the table, "is that Brant's —Mr. Hodges's—truck has been seen around the Calhoun campus, notably near Cliff's dorm room. We're still digging into the CCTV footage, but I suspect we will see Mr. Hodges on campus the day Cliff disappeared, possibly meeting with the boy. We know you had the night off work, which is your means and opportunity, and our interview with Jessica has supplied us with plenty of reasons for motive."

He turned to the defense attorney. "You know we have a forensics team lined up and a warrant to swab his truck, so what are we going to find? It won't take much, a hair or a few skin cells that match Cliff's DNA, and then your case is about a plea deal, which is why Mr. Whiteside is here today."

Luke could tell by the way Brant was slumped in his seat that he'd hit on something, possibly the CCTV footage.

Shannon Snow spoke. "My client understands the charges brought against him, and he understands the gravity of the charges around the drug distribution. He categorically denies having anything to do with Mr. Deaton's disappearance and death, and any evidence you may have is a misinterpretation on your part. He was working every night the week Mr. Deaton went missing, behind the bar every night until after two a.m., with more than enough witnesses to throw a wrench in that line of your investigation. However, he also has some information that might be useful in helping you with both your investigation into the drug trafficking in Issaqueena *and* the Clifford Deaton murder."

Luke kept his eyes on Brant when he said, "Let's hear it."

Snow nodded to her client, and then she said, "Assuming he was involved in drug trafficking, he's not the one you want. He would be higher up the food chain than any waitresses offering samples, but he wouldn't be the one importing drugs or financing a sustainable business out of it. He's a

bartender. In school, I might add, to learn the HVAC trade so he can build a business for himself very much in demand."

"What can he give us?"

"He can give you the top of the food chain, at least locally, and he might also be able to give you a lead for the murder."

"In exchange for? We're not dropping distribution charges."

"Misdemeanor participation in a conspiracy. No jail time."

Luke scoffed.

"It's a good deal, Detective. You're going to want to know who's behind the curtain."

"Howard Carlson," Luke said, and Snow blinked. "Yeah, we have a rough idea of what the operation looks like, and it's bigger than anyone sitting in this room. I've heard that multiple times this week, but with due respect to everyone involved, I don't care about Carlson. That's not my case."

"Do you feel the same?" Snow asked Whiteside.

"You mentioned a lead on the murder," Whiteside said. "What do you have?"

"I need to know the misdemeanor option is on the table."

"I can't promise anything until I know what you have."

"And we can't offer what we have until we know what's in it for my client."

She pulled out a document outlining terms of a plea agreement, clearly prepared for this moment. She may have been surprised that the cops already knew about Carlson, but she also knew how little evidence they actually had to try him for anything.

"Can you give us a few minutes?" Whiteside asked, and he elbowed Luke.

"Sure."

Luke and Whiteside went to the observation room to confer with Archer and Reece. On the camera, Snow was telling Brant, "It may take a few hours, but we'll get it squared away." She glanced up at the camera and smirked.

"Luke, I take it you're not happy about a misdemeanor plea?" Whiteside asked.

He thought about Gabby dead with Bowyer in custody, and the thought about Cliff dead and no leads other than Brant. If the bartender didn't

murder him, but could point to someone who did, Luke would take that deal.

“I can’t make a deal contingent on him delivering evidence for who killed Cliff. If he had anything real, his attorney would have led with it.”

“What do you think? Would you charge him with anything based on what we have?” Luke asked.

“It’s not enough. If we get a confession about conspiring to distribute, and Agent Reece gets a cooperative witness for whatever you’re putting together on Carlson, I’d call that a win,” Whiteside said.

“I’m good with that,” Reece said.

“If he didn’t kill Cliff, I need a good lead.”

“My bet is he doesn’t know anything. It’s a bluff to get a plea.”

“Where’s your line, Luke?” Archer asked.

Luke slumped. “I don’t have anything, and if I can’t get Hodges in a room without his lawyer, let’s see what she’ll give up.”

Everyone exhaled, knowing their best chance at a big win today was slipping away.

Whiteside signed the memorandum of understanding, and they returned to the interview room. Brant appeared lighter, almost smiling. His attorney must have told him they were about to win big, going from drug dealer and homicide suspect to walking out the front door of the police station.

Luke didn’t wait for Whiteside to hand over the paper. He sat hard and leaned over the table. “Before you leave this room, I need to know what you know about Clifford Deaton.”

“First things first,” Shannon Snow started, but Luke held up his hand.

She took the paper from Whiteside and scanned it.

“I want to hear it from him,” Luke said, not taking his eyes off his old friend.

The defense attorney nodded to her client.

“You’ve got a lot of the story right,” Brant started. “I’m not proud of any of it, but you cross one line, and then another, and then…”

“Just stop. Do you know how many times I’ve heard that story?”

“Maybe because it’s true. Nobody intends to find themselves where I am.”

“Yet here you are.” Luke couldn’t say when he’d lost whatever switch was inside him that allowed him to sympathize with people’s stories. He’d heard too many tall tales, from the slickest criminals in the business, but it

all came down to will. Or fate. Everyone had tough times when they were young. Most people willed their way through, and he believed it was a waste of time to dig for any deeper meaning in human behavior. Fate operated on its own accord.

“Here I am,” agreed Brant.

“I’ll level with you, Brant. I’ve got colleagues who are more interested in the drug trade than anything else—whether you’re running the show or reporting to someone higher up the food chain. That matters to me as a law enforcement officer, but that’s beyond my case. My case is Clifford Deaton, and I’ve been having a hard time squaring the brutal murder of a kid with the guy I used to know in grade school. Can you help me out with that?”

Brant was shaking his head. “No, you know I didn’t kill anyone. I couldn’t do that.”

“You flinched a minute ago when I mentioned security footage at Calhoun. You might have been working when Cliff was taken out to the river, but you know something. You met him, didn’t you? What do you know?”

Brant sighed. “You know the two things that make me a good bartender?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“I listen to people, and I can handle a situation. You remember the drunk college bros the other night?”

Luke remembered the frat bros at the table getting rowdy, and how Brant had snapped to attention, no longer the lazy and amiable bartender, but the guy ready to knock heads together.

“When you’re dealing with drunks, you sometimes have to get physical.”

“The same goes with collecting money, I imagine.”

“Yeah.” Brant eyed his attorney. Shannon Snow was watching him carefully, but she let him go on. “You’ve got the general operation right. Jessica and other girls at the bar approach young guys—or girls—and slip them a dab pen. It’s a great device, better than JUUL ever was, and a faster buzz than you get with a Zyn. It won’t smell. It tastes good. And whatever you’re smoking goes straight to your bloodstream.”

“I get it.”

“Okay, you text a number and you order whatever. Nicotine. Weed. Speed. There’s something for everybody. When we were in high school,

you'd have the skateboard potheads or the guys using Adderall to study, or the rednecks smoking Winstons. Now they all want this fancy device."

"I get it," Luke said again. "Jessica sells, and you—what? Fulfill the orders?"

"Yeah, but what you might not be thinking about is how people buy on credit. They want a refill after they've had a few drinks, and they put it on their tab at the bar. Usually that's no problem, but if the card bounces, then we've got an issue. Bars have to deal with that all the time, especially if you're a college bar.

"The problem is, vape cartridges can add up. It's not like you can just get some fool to wash dishes a few nights to cover their drinks. They can rack up a few thousand dollars in a semester, and then what do you do? You wait until they get their student loan deposits at the beginning of the semester, and then you hit them up to make sure you get your cut."

"And that's where Cliff came in? He owed you money?"

Brant smiled sadly. "That I think is where our mix-up happened. I had a handful of guys who owed me, but I knew who they were and how to get in touch with them. They didn't want me showing up at their dorms or wherever, so all it took was a few reminder text messages and they showed up with a check. No problem.

"We had one guy, however, who always paid cash, but who started racking up credit in the fall. I thought he was Jessica's boyfriend. She knew him, anyway, so I didn't worry too much about it. I never met him. She would pick up the boxes for him. In December, I sent her a few messages and said, hey, your boyfriend needs to pay his tab. She said, yeah, yeah, she'll send him in. Only he never paid up."

"Wait," Luke said. "She said Cliff never messed with this stuff."

"Right. That's the confusion. One day in January, after the student loan money came through and the other guys who owed me paid up, I went to the campus to see if I could meet up with her boyfriend. I saw her walking arm in arm with this guy and assumed he was the one who owed me. When she went into a class, I caught up with him and walked him around to a little quiet area and said, 'Hey, brother, you really need to pay up your tab.'

"Only he tells me he doesn't know what I'm talking about. I tell him,'It's not a big deal, but we need to square up.'

"Again, he said, 'What are you talking about? Who are you?'

"'You're Jessica Boggs's boyfriend?'

“‘He said, ‘Yeah, what is this?’

“I could tell he really didn’t know what I was talking about, so I said, ‘Are you the guy she’s been getting product for?’

“‘What product?’

“I did a little puffing motion and said, ‘You know.’

“‘I don’t know,’ he said.

“I knew something was off, but I was having a bad day, getting tired of college assholes, so I grabbed him and shoved him against the wall and got in his face, and he started yelling, and I was about to get really physical, but I just pushed him against the wall a few times and said, ‘You need to pay up!’ Then I walked away.”

Brant held up his hands as if to say there was nothing more to it, just a shake-down from drug-runner to a deadbeat user.

“You’re sure that was Cliff?” Luke asked.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but yeah, when I saw his face in the news a few days later, I recognized him.”

“What did Jessica have to say about it?”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to her. When I saw he went missing, I sent her a message to say we need to pause the business. She didn’t reply, so I didn’t know what was going on.”

“What did you think was happening?”

“I just put it down as an unpaid debt. We don’t write down customer information or details about inventory, so no one else should have known about Cliff, or whoever owed us money. I’ve never had to escalate bad debts, so I didn’t know what to make of it. Then I saw you digging around at McAleer’s, and then Bowyer killed his girlfriend, and I started thinking it was time to get out of the business altogether.”

“At that point you couldn’t just walk away.”

“Not until I knew what all was going on. I thought Jessica might have been freelancing, and maybe someone else had jumped in to deal with the debt. I thought maybe Cliff, or whoever, owed someone else money, too.”

“That’s why you picked her up yesterday.”

Brant nodded. “You got it.”

“She say anything before we got there?”

“Just that Cliff was the wrong guy. She was really mad about that.”

“That you confronted Cliff?”

“Yeah. She called me an idiot and said the money was coming. I get the impression I wrecked her relationship.”

“If Cliff really wasn’t the guy who owed you…”

Luke already knew the answer before Brant said, “Derek Carlson. Of course, if I’d known it was him, I would have found a way to write off the debt.”

“You can’t shake down the boss’s son.”

“I shouldn’t even have sold him anything,” Brant said. “That was why he was using her. I don’t know how much he knew about his father’s business, but he knew enough to keep his name out of it.”

Luke sat back and thought for a moment.

Whiteside jumped in. “If Cliff wasn’t involved, what did she think happened to him?”

Brant shrugged. “She didn’t. She thought I might have killed him, or maybe someone I work with did it, but after I assured her that no, I hadn’t given him a second thought after talking to him, she settled down. About the time you showed up at my apartment, she’d come around to Cliff’s death as just a coincidence.”

“What about you? What do you think?”

“I don’t know, man. It doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

Whiteside said, “We need to talk more about who you work with. That’s going to need to be a lengthy conversation.”

“Yeah.”

“In your view, do we have the basic facts right? That Howard Carlson was running the money?”

“Yeah, he’s the money, but the products are coming in from some cartel dudes.”

“Can you help us identify them?”

“I can, but I see a different guy every time I re-up. I don’t know what that organization looks like, but I can tell you it’s bigger than Howard Carlson.”

“Why do you say that?” Luke asked.

“The logistics of it alone. This is a multi-state operation. They’ve bought off guys like Carlson all the way to Mexico, plus cops and trucking companies and I don’t know who else.”

Shannon Snow put a hand on his arm. “Gentlemen, before we have this longer conversation, I’m going to need to talk to my client some more and

then get a formal statement from your office about what he'll be charged with. Then we can talk more about how best Mr. Hodges can support your investigation."

Whiteside, who was smiling. This morning, the Issaqueena Police Department had no case about drug running in the county. All they had was speculation about a possible murder and low-level distribution. Now they had a case about conspiracy, racketeering, and other sordid charges. Also, what neither Brant nor his attorney knew was that the DEA had a separate federal case in the works—and Reece's case would be outside any agreement with Whiteside. Brant was going to make a case for Whiteside and then spend years in a federal penitentiary.

Luke felt nothing toward his old friend. You play stupid games, you win stupid prizes. But he was despondent to learn he was no closer to solving Cliff's murder than he'd been on Tuesday morning. Whiteside might be feeling good, but Luke was having a crummy day. He needed to get out of here. Let Farbatko or someone else manage the drug case. He wanted to pin down someone for homicide.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

In a quick debrief, the team agreed to send patrol officers to the campus to pick up Jessica and Derek for additional questioning. Luke ordinarily would pick up a witness himself, but he needed some time to regroup. He also thought it might help to rattle Derek and Jessica by having patrol officers pick them up and drive them down in the back of a squad car. As with any act of leverage, putting people off-balance made it easy to knock them over in the interview room.

"You good to come back for the interview?" Archer asked Luke privately in his office.

"Am I still on the case?"

"I don't love it, but they're your witnesses. You and Farbatko should huddle to see who will take the lead after today, but I want you to stay on it for now. Plus, I think there's something you haven't told me."

"What's that?"

"Reece and Whiteside may have overlooked it when you said your lead last night didn't pan out, but I've known you long enough to know there's more to it. Who was your lead?"

"No one. I mean it, it didn't pan out."

"What were you doing? Where'd you go?"

"I went to McAleer's. I thought maybe revisiting the source would kick something up. I don't know, maybe I thought I could talk to the bartender or one of the waitresses and…"

"What, find someone to offer you drugs?"

Luke shrugged. “I told you it didn’t pan out.”

Archer waited a moment, but when Luke had nothing to add, he shook his head. “You got anything else you can work on while we’re waiting on patrol?”

“No, but I’d like to go back through my notes on Deaton. Start at the beginning of the book and see what I missed.”

“Don’t take it too personally, Luke. We can’t win them all.”

Luke was suddenly anxious to get out of here. Lying about what he’d been up to in following Atkins, it occurred to him that returning to the source of the crime might not be a bad strategy for the Deaton case. He felt in his bones he’d missed a clue Tuesday morning, and his last Hail Mary was that re-walking the crime scene would shake something loose.

When he walked out of the station, he saw a missed call from Andrea. She’d not called him back last night, and now he felt sick because he only had bad news to share. He would have to visit her and Bill again to fess up and admit he’d bungled their son’s investigation. He wouldn’t add that on Monday the chances were good he would be assigned to a new case, and then a new case, and then a new case. Unless something popped with the DNA or other forensics tests, their son essentially would be a cold case. The local news had already moved on, and the investigation unit would soon follow.

He got in his car, turned the heat on, and stared at the dirty windshield covered in dirt and road salt. Despite the cold air he was sweating in his suit and felt clammy, a sickness coming on. He’d not had clear lungs since getting COVID a few years ago, and he felt dread at the slightest hint of ill health. He stared at Andrea’s name on his list of voicemails, imagined her voice riddled with grief and hope, and he hit delete without listening to her message. What could she tell him? What could he tell her? The week had been a failure, and the mystery would haunt them all the rest of their lives.

Winters in the upstate never lingered. South Carolina was a semi-tropical environment ideal for growing cotton. You saw the scars of the textile industry in the hills of red clay. The occasional snowfall only covered this legacy for so long. This morning the temperature was in the mid-forties, so the only snow still on the ground was where it had drifted into banks now gray with grime. Clouds were low like a blanket, but suggested rain was imminent.

The melting snow had run into the river all the way up to the mountains, so the Keowee, ordinarily lazy and brown, still roared through Issaqueena County. He crossed the river by the Highway 123 bridge and continued down Cemetery Road into the quiet woodlands south of town.

David Shaw was in the carport when Luke pulled into the drive. Shaw was wearing a camouflage jumper and appeared to be unloading gear from a morning hunt. A rifle leaned against the wall by the back door.

“You going out or coming in?” Luke asked, waving.

Shaw laughed. “I went out about four, so just wrapping up.”

“Get anything?”

“Nah. My nephew and I got a few shots off, but no hits.”

“That’s a shame.”

Shaw brushed his hands on his pants and walked over. “What can I do for you? You solve the case?”

“I wish I had, but it’s a waiting game with forensics. Case like this, if there’s not an obvious suspect, it comes down to technology, but that takes a while. We spent the week getting to know the boy and his friends at the college, so I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I walked back down to the river, to see if anything jumps out at me that I might have missed.”

“Help yourself,” Shaw said. “You want a cup of coffee or something first?”

“No, I’m all right.”

“Well. You’re welcome to walk right on down, or I can join you if you give me a minute to run to the bathroom. Old man issues.”

Luke smiled sympathetically and said, “I appreciate it. I’ll be all right.”

He evaluated Shaw for a few moments, turning the old man around in his mind. The background on him had come back clean, no connections to Cliff or the college. He was retired and thin and harmless, with possibly an enlarged prostate. He wasn’t a killer, but Luke nonetheless felt the key to Cliff’s death was by the water, either here or over in Morgan Park.

A few days of snowmelt had changed the appearance of Shaw’s land. Yellowed and decaying plant matter was the color of coleslaw. The land appeared unkempt, as if it had been years since anyone had planted crops, and in a few more years the forest might return, assuming developers didn’t come nosing around making offers on riverfront property.

Luke trudged the same route he’d walked Tuesday morning, through the field and down the hill into the woods. The ground was slick with mud, and

he stepped gingerly, wishing he'd worn tennis shoes.

At the bottom of the hill, police tape still blocked off the area where they'd found Cliff's body. Luke believed the forensics crew had done everything they would do here, so the caution tape could come down.

He surveyed the scarred riverbank, and then the hill toward Shaw's farm. There was no reasonable story for how Cliff arrived here except by drifting downriver. He knelt by the water's edge and gazed at the rock where the body had lodged. The rock was in the middle of fast-moving water and could easily stop a body floating along. He dropped his hand to the icy water, let the river massage his skin, felt the chill in his bones. There was no sound but the water rushing by and his own heavy breathing.

He got up and dried his hand on his coat and took one last look around. The forensics team and the patrol cops had trampled all the land nearby, digging up anything to be found. Luke knew it might seem pointless to be out here, but although he couldn't explain it, he sometimes felt a psychic connection stirring at crime scenes. He was not particularly religious but believed the spirits of the dead occasionally left a few breadcrumbs for the living in the air around the scene.

If Cliff's spirit had left any residue, he wasn't picking it up. The only thing he felt was a tightness in his chest and an urge to get back up the hill. Perhaps other, darker spirits were here, and Luke wanted no part of them. He shoved his hands in his pockets and hoofed it back toward Shaw's farmhouse.

The old man was nowhere to be found. He'd cleaned the last of his supplies out of the bed of the truck. No lights were on in the house, a gloomier interior with darkening skies and mist in the air that signaled a cold rain coming.

Maybe it was a week of defeat, but exhaustion was settling in. The car warmed quickly, and hot air blowing out of the vents made his eyes heavy as he coasted down the Shaws' driveway and back onto cemetery road. He'd considered Morgan Park as his next stop to see if he could shake anything loose, but now he wanted to pull over to take a nap. Was rapid-onset exhaustion a thing? Was he getting old?

He steered his Explorer into the park, and he remembered his dream from a few days ago, how he'd blithely imagined Big Ron Ivy picking Cliff up and carting him out here to kill him. The last of the snow had melted

since then so the park no longer gave off fairy tale vibes. Instead, it was a bleak wooded landscape in the dead of winter.

There were, however, two cars in the parking area. A green Subaru Forester and an indigo Ford Ranger.

Luke pulled in beside them and checked that he had his badge on his belt, his gun was secure, and his fly was zipped up. When he got out, he heard the kids before he saw them, a trio of college-aged guys with pup tents and a tarp set up in the clearing by the river. There was no caution tape here, so he hoped forensics had come in and gathered the beer cans and other paraphernalia on the beach. Anything now would be contaminated.

One of the guys was kneeling over a fire boiling coffee. The other two were fishing by the water's edge. Before they saw Luke, he watched them laughing and joshing each other, and then one of the fishermen slugged the other in the arm. The first grabbed his friend by the lapels and pretended to heave him toward the river. His friend held up his hands, and they both laughed.

Luke was struck with a realization.

Then one of the boys spotted Luke.

"Hey, fellas," he said, walking over, and they all stood at attention. "Relax. You're not in any trouble. I'm working a case here. You might have heard about it—a college guy who went missing and was found this week by the river?"

"Yeah, I heard about him," the guy at the fire said.

"You all Calhoun students?"

They nodded.

"Any of you know him by chance? Clifford Deaton?"

They shook their heads, and the one by the fire said, "I saw the fliers about him. They put them all over campus."

"Any rumors about what happened to him?"

"Just what you'd expect. Either an ax murderer carted him off or drug dealers shot him and dumped him in the woods."

"Well, neither of those things happened," Luke said.

"So what was it?"

"We don't know yet. We're waiting on a lot of tests to come back. DNA, fingerprints. Things work slower than they do in the movies. Y'all camp here often?"

Fire Guy shrugged. “We camp every few weeks, but usually we head out somewhere, Table Rock or the AT. Last night we thought it would be fun to do a winter overnight. We were supposed to have some more friends join us, but they peaced out when they saw it was still freezing overnight.”

“That is cold,” Luke agreed. “You ever see anyone else out here? Other Calhoun kids?”

“No, but it’s a popular spot. People usually leave beer cans and whatever. They can’t be bothered to clean up after themselves.”

“Anything last night?”

“Actually, it was pretty clean. There was a charred log in this firepit, but who knows how long that’s been there. Otherwise…”

Luke was glad to hear the forensics team had cleared the beer cans. Maybe something would come from them. He scanned the river, but his mind was already thinking about his interview with Brant this morning. He’d said Jessica’s boyfriend owed him money, but when he’d confronted Cliff, Cliff knew nothing about the drug operation. That lined up with what Jessica had reported. But who owed him the money, and who gave Brant the idea it was Jessica’s boyfriend? Something about the way the two fishermen were joking around gave him another vision about what had happened here two weeks ago, and he needed to get Jessica back in the interview room.

He wished the campers well and got on the phone with Captain Archer while he was still hiking back to his car. Archer didn’t answer, so Luke left him a message.

“Captain, when you pick up Jessica and Derek, get them in separate interview rooms. We need to talk to them again about Deaton.”

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Chapter Thirty

IT WAS after lunch before the patrol officers picked up Derek and Jessica and got them to the station for their interviews. They put them in separate interview rooms, and when Luke arrived Captain Archer was pacing like a caged dog. He'd called in Flannel, Farbatko, and Agent Reece, who had brought his two other DEA guys. Gregory Whiteside had taken over the conference room and was planning a media strategy with Don Riley, so the detectives and the DEA guys all had to squeeze into Archer's office.

"Howard Carlson's already called in a team of lawyers," Archer said. "I don't know how he knows we picked up his son for questioning, or how he knows his son might be on the hook for something. Maybe the kid sent a text when the patrol officers checked in at the dorm. They had to call up to ask him to come down. It was supposed to be for a formal statement, but if he's involved in any of this, he was smart enough to shut up."

"I think he's more than involved," Luke said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know how Hodges told us he shook down Cliff, thinking Jessica's boyfriend owed him money?"

"You think that's Derek?"

"I do, and I'd push it one step further."

He let that register for a moment. When he explained what he had in mind, they agreed he needed to get a statement from Jessica. They would tell Derek an attorney was on the way so they wanted him to hang tight. Meanwhile, Jessica had to talk. Now.

Luke and Flannel took the interview, and when they went into the room where patrol had stashed her, Luke considered her slumped in the chair. Her hair was down, and she was ticking through her phone like any other American college student. If she had any sense of what was coming, she hid it well.

“How are you?” Luke asked, sitting in front of her. He set a pen, a yellow legal pad, and an assortment of Xeroxed forensic lab reports he’d pulled from a recycling bin on the table between them. “You recovered from yesterday?”

“I am, thanks.”

“I know that was pretty scary. I know you gave a statement to the officers yesterday after we arrested Brant, but we appreciate you coming back today.”

“What’s one more statement?” she asked.

“Indeed. I’m glad you can have a sense of humor about it. Now, a quick update, we’re holding Brant and have conducted our preliminary interviews with him. With your help, I think we’ve got a good case to put him away for the drug operation. You should know, your role in all of that was toeing a line. I’ve met with the prosecutor, and they agree it’s a gray area. You were making introductions and selling vape cartridges, but you didn’t necessarily know what was in them or anything about some of Brant’s connections to the cartels.”

She widened her eyes and sat back.

“I know, it sounds scary. You were actually pretty lucky we showed up at Brant’s apartment yesterday. He’s connected to some bad dudes, and his business is falling apart on some fronts. We don’t know what he had planned, but it’s good we got him off the streets.”

“Sounds like it. What do you need from me?”

“We’ve got our county prosecutor in the office preparing some statements about the charges he’s going to file. He’ll want to meet with you shortly to double-check our work and make sure we didn’t put you up to anything, and then he can get your statement. Any questions?”

“No, that’s all pretty clear.”

He picked up the papers and flipped through them. Then he stacked them against the paper and clipped them together and stared for a moment. He set the papers under the legal pad, picked up the pen, and clicked it a few times.

Her eyes darted back and forth between him and Flannel, and she said, “So…what’s next?”

“While you’re here,” Luke said. He gazed at the door as though trying to remember what he wanted to say. “I do have a few loose ends to clear up about Cliff.”

“Okay.”

“I have in your statement that y’all had been dating a few months, since the fall?”

“Yep.”

“And he was definitely your boyfriend? No ambiguity? No, what do they call it, friends with benefits?”

She blushed. “No, he was my boyfriend.”

“Got it. Only reason I ask is because we’ve got a few stories that don’t line up. I’m waiting on the toxicology reports, but I presume I’m not going to find anything in Cliff’s system except maybe some alcohol. He wasn’t a drug user, he didn’t have anything to do with the vape business.”

“That’s right.”

“Only Brant tells us your boyfriend was in debt to him. That he actually met with Cliff once to try to shake him down. Did you know that?”

A look of alarm crossed her face. “No, he never told me.”

“Yeah. We need to verify the security footage, but I’m a pretty good judge of character. I can tell when someone is lying to me. Usually. Brant told us a few lies this morning, but that felt true to me. How about you, Detective?”

“Me too,” Flannel said.

“Right. So how do we square that? Cliff was clean, but your boyfriend was in hock.”

She slumped in her chair but said nothing.

“I hate to do this, but before I give you my hypothesis of what’s going on, we need to pause and talk about your rights before we proceed. You probably realize this, but since this is a formal interview here, I need to remind you about your right to remain silent.” He spelled out a Miranda warning for her, and she slumped lower in her chair. “Do you understand what I’ve just told you?”

“Are you arresting me?”

“What would we arrest you for?” Luke asked. When she made no reply, he asked again if she’d understood him. She nodded. “Okay,” he went on.

“A few things we need to go over about what we know. We know Derek Carlson’s father is the money man behind your little vape operation. I don’t know if you knew that, but he owns McAleer’s and recruited Brant to be his operations guy. Presumably, he’s got a few of these operations around the upstate, and the DEA is going to take care of that investigation going forward. It involves crossing state lines and the drug cartels, so that’s federal. Too big for my paycheck.

“But what I’m concerned about, what I’ve been concerned about all week, is what happened to your boyfriend. I think you and Derek know more than you’ve told us, which means you’ve already committed a crime of withholding evidence, obstructing a police investigation, wasting police time. When you didn’t tell me about the vape operation, that was a crime. It doesn’t matter if you knew the extent of what Brant was dealing, the cannabinoids and the fentanyl in the vape cartridges. That’s all ancillary. You should have told us about the operation from the get-go.

“Until this afternoon, I didn’t know what Derek might have known about his father’s operation, but remember how I said a moment ago that I can spot a liar? Derek told on himself when our patrol officers picked him up. He told on himself two ways. First, he sent a message to his father, and second, he shut his mouth. He’d been coached in what to do if the police come knocking, and right now he’s in the other room waiting on an attorney. His father is sending an army of some of the best lawyers in South Carolina to make sure his son stays out of jail. Can you guess how he’s going to do that? What do you think the lawyers are going to say? They’re going to find a way to pin everything on you. What you did, how Cliff died, it’s going to land squarely on your shoulders.”

“No, wait,” she started, but he held up a hand. He liked to hold forth at the beginning of an interview because it made suspects uncomfortable. People wanted to tell their stories, and they wanted to tell them their way. Sometimes slipping in a false detail pricked a sense of indignation. They always wanted to have their say, Miranda or no Miranda.

“Where we are now,” he went on, “what you say or don’t say in the next few minutes is going to determine your future, and whether you leave the station today. Did you know you might not be going home this afternoon? Shut off your computer, turn out the lights, burn your diary? Because Howard Carlson’s lawyers are going to make sure you stay behind bars. The college will box up your belongings at the end of the term. Will someone

pick them up for you? They're not going to store anything. Maybe your parents can pick it up for you and hold it in their attic? How are your parents? What do you think they're going to say if you call them up in a couple hours?

"So that's your situation. Now let's talk about Cliff. I'm working on the assumption that Derek was the other man in the story, that he was your 'boyfriend' who owed Brant money. Is that correct?"

She'd said nothing during his monologue, and now she was staring at the table, shoulders dropped, lips quivering. She gave a faint nod.

"I need you to verbalize your answers for the recording," Luke said. "Was Derek the boyfriend Hodges referenced?"

Her voice cracked. "Yes."

"Was that just something you said, or were you seeing him?"

"We dated a little, last summer."

"About the time you were working at McAleer's?"

"That's how we met. His father was doing a campaign event, and Brant sent me there to help with catering. Derek was there and asked me to stay for an after-party. We split a leftover bottle of wine on a loading dock."

"He was living at home? Just out of high school?"

"That in-between space."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, really. We kissed that night, and he took me out a few times. We didn't click. It was a little weird, dating someone who had just graduated from high school. It was different in the fall, when he and Cliff were living in the dorm. You're free in a way you can't be living at home."

"Okay, you and Derek dated, but not too seriously. What was it, three or four dates?"

"About that."

"Dinner. Movie. That kind of thing?"

"Dinners. Ice cream. Driving around."

"Did you know he was going to Calhoun in the fall?"

"We talked about it."

"You had his number, I presume? Did he call you when he got on campus?"

She shook her head. "We both knew we weren't going to work out."

"Why is that? You weren't attracted to him?"

She reddened.

“Or maybe you were? It must have been a surprise, then, hooking up with Cliff and discovering he was Derek’s roommate.”

“A little.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t let Cliff know.”

“No.”

“Did you and Derek still have a, you know, spark?”

“We were friends.”

“Friends can have a spark. It sounds like you all hung out together as a trio. Was Derek dating anyone?”

“No.”

“So he was the third wheel, or maybe Cliff was the third wheel, by the end. One of you told me you’d gone to Morgan Park—in November? That you all sat around a fire pit and had a few drinks? No, it was edibles. I’m not as young as I used to be. These little details take a few minutes to lodge. So it was just the three of you at Morgan Park?”

“Yes.”

“Just the one night? You ever go back?”

She shifted in her chair.

“Maybe you and Derek went back without Cliff?”

“Cliff was studying for finals. We were supposed to hang out, but he bailed on us.”

“Us being you and Derek? And I’m guessing you and Derek wondered what you should do, and one of you suggested heading back to the park? Whose idea was it?”

“Both of ours, I guess. He asked if I had any edibles left, and I said yeah, but I didn’t want to sit around the dorm with them.”

“I see.” Luke noted that Jessica was the one with the edibles, in keeping with her other activities. They weren’t legal in South Carolina, but she could have gotten them by mail or driven up to Brevard. For now it was one more seedy question mark around her private life.

“We went out to the park,” she continued, on a roll now with her story, which Luke wanted. “It wasn’t that big of a deal, or it shouldn’t have been. We set up a couple of camp chairs and lit a fire log. It was too cold to enjoy ourselves, so we packed it in after an hour, and I don’t even know what happened. We were in Derek’s car, a little high, and when he dropped me at the parking lot by my dorm, we made out for a few minutes. It was dumb, and pointless, but it happened, and that made things awkward.”

“With you and Derek?”

“With everyone. Around Derek, around Cliff, around them both. Cliff was so busy with finals, I don’t think he suspected anything. Then I went to visit him over Christmas break, and I almost told him. I should have come out with it, but I was too chicken. It wasn’t until we were all back that he started asking questions. I slipped up and said something about going to the river while he was studying for finals. He let it go but brought it up a few times and made a joke about me and Derek having all the fun while he was busy studying.”

She stared at the table, flexing her jaw. He knew she was feeling guilty for her indiscretion, guilty for lying to Cliff, and guilty for whatever came next. He prompted her to keep going. “How did you end up back at the park?”

“It was my idea. Cliff said something about ‘when y’all were out at the park,’ so I said, ‘Let’s go back.’

“‘What, now?’ he asked.

“‘Why not,’ I said. ‘It’s the first week of school.’

“‘It’s freezing out there.’

“‘That’s what’ll make it fun,’ I said. ‘We can build a big fire and pre-game for some parties tonight.’ I don’t know what I thought would happen. I guess I thought if we could have another night at the park, all three of us, then Derek and I could put our night behind us.”

“But it didn’t work out that way,” Luke said.

“No. It started out fine. We went out there right after my last class, around four, and we had a fire going by dusk. It was still getting dark around five-thirty. We had our edibles and a bottle of wine and our Solo cups. We were just relaxed, but Cliff. I don’t know. I guess he wasn’t feeling the vibe, and he started asking about me and Derek.

“‘When did y’all first meet?’ he asked. ‘It wasn’t when we started dating.’

“‘What do you mean?’ I asked him.

“He told me, ‘It wasn’t when we started dating. I brought you to the dorm around Halloween, and you shook hands like you were just meeting, but that wasn’t it.’ Then he said to Derek, ‘You told me she was cute. You told me I’d done well.’

“Derek told him he had, and then Cliff reminded him he’d said something about my job at McAleer’s. ‘Remember that?’ he asked.

“I don’t think Derek remembered it, but Cliff pressed him. ‘How’d you know she used to work there?’ He said he couldn’t let it go, and he finally decided Derek and I had been dating all along behind his back. He kind of went crazy. We kept telling him, ‘Cliff, chill out,’ but he wouldn’t listen. He crossed his arms and started sulking.

“Finally, Derek said he’d had enough and was going home. ‘You coming?’ he asked me.

“Of course he’d driven us all, so of course we both had to go with him. By that point I was sulking too, because it was clear the friendship was over for all of us. We’d argued and said things we didn’t mean, but there was no coming back. You know? I thought we were going to pack up and go back to campus and that would be that, but the boys started fighting. I don’t know how it started. Cliff was drunk and yelling and I think he pushed Derek, and Derek pushed him back, and then they were going back and forth and, I don’t know, Derek pushed him or Cliff slipped, but he fell over and slammed his head on a rock by the fire pit. Derek was breathing heavy, and he sort of leaned over and rested with his hands on his knees. I called them idiots and said, ‘Let’s go!’ but then Derek said, ‘Wait a minute.’ He started shouting Cliff’s name, and I ran over.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s all a little foggy, but we figured out pretty quick that Cliff was in bad shape. He was bleeding all over and we didn’t know what to do.”

She stopped, and the interview room was eerily silent. Luke and Flannel were holding their breath, and he imagined the guys watching the CCTV screen in the other room, everybody bugging out over what she was telling them. They would have to be careful, to make sure the Miranda warning was documented, and to sign their statements attesting to what they’d heard from Jessica. Carlson’s lawyers would descend on the county soon to marshal a million-dollar defense of Derek, which would mean negating this confession. Luke waited for her to continue rather than prompt her with something a defense attorney could twist.

Finally, she resumed her story. “I wanted to call the police, but Derek said he was already dead. Cliff was bleeding, and his eyes were glassy, and he wasn’t breathing, and Derek started telling me what would happen next. How we would both be charged, what the cops would think about the vape sales, how our lives were over. ‘There’s nothing we can do about what’s done,’ he said. He said it was an accident, but no one would believe it

unless we made it look more like an accident. We pulled Cliff into the water, and then he dug out the rock and dropped it in the water next to Cliff. We swept the bloody dirt and leaves into the river and left him there, in shallow water. I had no idea he would drift downriver and wouldn't be found for so long. I never wanted to put his family through that."

"What did you think would happen?" Flannel asked.

"I thought they'd find him before the snowstorm and figure he got drunk and fell in the water. He used to wander off—that was true. I don't know where he went, but there's no reason he couldn't have gone to the river to drink by himself."

"It's almost five miles from his dorm," Flannel said.

"I wasn't thinking," she said.

"Keep going with your story," Luke said quietly. "You carted him into the water and cleaned up the campsite. Then what?"

"Then we got in Derek's car, and he drove me back to my dorm. We agreed we'd clean up, make ourselves seen at separate parties, and report Cliff missing the next day."

"And lie to the police about what you'd done."

"What were we supposed to do? He went crazy, and Derek defended himself."

"Did he defend himself, or were they pushing back and forth?"

"What?"

"A moment ago you said it was all foggy, but they were pushing each other back and forth," Luke said. "I want to make sure I have the story straight."

"What were we supposed to do?" she said again.

"Anything but what you did? Call an ambulance?"

"We couldn't do anything for him," she whispered.

Luke wondered what was going on inside her head. All week, what he'd taken for the glassiness of grief and youth had masked something more sinister. A callous self-interest, ancient and primitive in the human race. Society had masked that part of our nature, but as a gal in the Army had once joked to him: You can take the boy out of South Carolina, but you can't take the South Carolina out of the boy. Likewise, society could impose all its rules of civility, but human nature was broken. It seemed like we were moving back toward a more primal state.

He looked to Flannel, who held up a hand to say he had nothing more to add.

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Chapter Thirty-One

THERE'S nothing we can do about what's done. That line from Jessica's interview would haunt Luke for a long time. Most of the time, he saw a wall between himself and the criminal mind. Different circumstances, different motivations, a different understanding about how life worked, but he understood Jessica's comment all too well. A circumstance that would haunt him through the remainder of the weekend.

As he left the station, he saw he'd missed several calls this morning from a local number. He thought it might have been Andrea's home number calling him back from last night, but when he returned the call he discovered it actually was Bill who had been pestering him.

"Bill, hey, it's Luke," he said.

"What's up, buddy?" There was a humming in the background, wherever Bill had been calling from. The noisy ambience didn't stop a note of frustration in Bill's voice. "Thought you might have called me back last night," he said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," Luke said. "I had a lead I wanted to get your take on, but it actually turned into something before we caught up."

"I was up late waiting."

"Sorry. Listen, I've got an update for you."

Luke gave him the short version, leaving out names and the information about Carlson's drug operation. Bill listened quietly, and then he said, "So you're telling me, at the end of the day his girlfriend was cheating on him, and the other guy bashed my son's brains in."

“Well, there’s going to be a long process of discovery, once he’s charged, with a bunch of lawyers chiming in to add a little nuance here and there…”

“Again,” Bill said. “The other boyfriend did it?”

“Looks that way,” Luke said.

“What happens next?”

“The state’s attorney is with my supervisor now, and they’ll file charges on Monday. From there, I would expect a long wait while the lawyers try to work everything out.”

Bill was silent for a few moments. Luke was conscious of every second that ticked by but knew he could say nothing to fill the space between them. A decade of police work had made him numb to the trappings of the heart.

Finally, Bill asked, “What was your lead last night that broke the case open? You said you wanted to ask me about something.”

“Actually, it doesn’t really matter. I was following up on a loose end, but the girlfriend ended up confessing.”

There would be time, after charges were filed, to let Bill and Andrea know about Brant and the drug operation, to reminisce about old times and express collective bafflement over the roads they all took and what time had done to them. In most cases, Luke’s role with a victim’s family ended with the arrest. He occasionally testified or offered depositions, but he delivered as much closure as he could with a solid arrest. With the case of Clifford Deaton, he would be connected to Bill and Andrea for months, through the trial and sentencing. Possibly longer. He couldn’t say why but felt he owed it to them.

As if reading his mind, Bill asked, “What happens next?”

“It’s going to be slow for a while. The prosecutor will run through everything from as many angles as they can think about, and they’ll be in touch if they’d like you to testify, which I presume they will. There are going to be some high-profile lawyers involved on the defense, so that could delay things. In the meantime, would you let Andrea know?”

“You haven’t talked to her yet?”

“I called her last night, same as you, but she didn’t answer. You were both on my list for today.”

“She might like to hear directly from you.”

Luke waited.

“I haven’t talked to her much, during all this,” Bill went on. “Not since you found him. I don’t know where things went wrong. Maybe they were wrong from the beginning.”

“You can’t do that to yourself, Bill. Call her up. She doesn’t know me from Adam. I’m just a guy her baby sister used to date. You’re the only one who knows what she’s going through.”

“What am I going to tell her?”

“Tell her we got them, and go from there,” Luke said. He knew he was abdicating, but what did he know? He knew the law, but he didn’t know parenthood—and he certainly didn’t know the grief of a lost child. He’d seen that before, but it was the darkest mystery. “Bill? You going to make it?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Luke.”

After hanging up, he started his car and thought about where he should go. He was too young to eat dinner this early, but too old to go find a bar. He texted Sarah to see if she was around and if their grandfather was feeling well enough for company. He could head over there and grill steaks for everyone. He couldn’t understand the private grief of Bill and Andrea, any more than he could understand a lifetime of building a family, but he could try to reconnect with his own family, while he still had the time.

On the way out of town, he scanned the radio stations, but there was nothing but commercials on his presets. Rather than drive in silence, which made him antsy, he ticked through his favorite contacts and paused over Kayla. He still owed her a call—had owed her a call since they’d solved the case of the dead roofer three months ago. Why hadn’t he? Sometimes even his own actions were a mystery. He meant to set his phone down, but instead he hit her name to place the call.

He felt like a teenager calling up a girl for the first time. His chest tightened, and he winced with each ring, waiting to see if she would take his call. Then, instead of a ring: a crackle, followed by her voice.

“Luke. I was just thinking of you.”

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What Next?

Thank you for reading *Snowfall*, the third installment in the Detective Luke Steele mysteries! To keep up with the latest, join my newsletter and receive a free ebook of *Chasing Keys*, the prequel novella.
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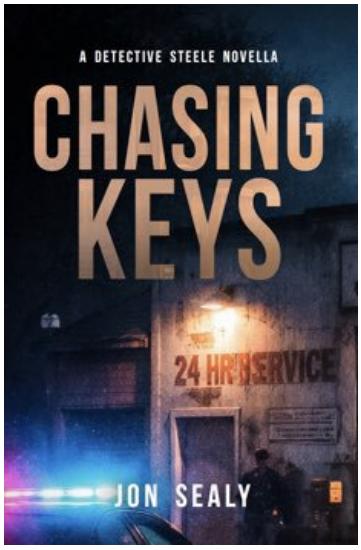
The Detective Luke Steele Series



A ransacked auto shop on the outskirts of town. A mysterious bloodstain. And a missing troublemaker who might not want to be found. *Chasing Keys* (a novella) introduces Detective Luke Steele — a man most at home on the other side of the caution tape.



Detective Luke Steele thought he could play house. He's settled into a new rhythm: nights in an upscale subdivision with his real estate agent girlfriend and her two kids. Mr. Suburbia. Mr. Stepdad. It almost feels real. Then flashing blue lights shatter the calm…

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About Jon Sealy



Jon Sealy is the author of the Detective Luke Steele novels, set in the small-town South. His debut crime novel, *The Whiskey Baron*, was published by Hub City Press in 2014 to critical acclaim. Originally from South Carolina's Blue Ridge foothills, he now lives with his family near Richmond, Virginia.

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