

**GONE FISHING BY EVELYN DAVID  
FIRST 3 CHAPTERS**

**CHAPTER 1**

*Tuesday*

One bar.

Maybe not. I didn't have my glasses on.

I had no idea why Doc Myers and Hank Strothers couldn't fish in a part of the lake where there was cell phone reception.

I stopped to dump a pebble out of my running shoe.

The road had ended about a half mile back. Jack Fulsom, my former boss and the owner of the Eufaula Lake Resort, had warned me that finding my current boss's secret fishing spot wasn't going to be easy. The best he could do was give me a general idea of where rumor had it that Doc and Hank had been seen hooking some prize winning large-mouthed bass. The duo had been gone a week, camped out on some cove accessible only by boat or mountain goat.

I didn't have a boat. Since I'd never driven one before, Jack used that as an excuse not to loan me one of the resort's. Even when I explained the emergency, that Doc was urgently needed back at the funeral home, Jack only tossed me the key to a golf cart and a glossy brochure with a map of the lake on the back fold.

"You can get within shouting distance with the cart. Try not to wreck it, Brianna. I don't have it paid for yet."

I guess I was lucky he trusted me with the golf cart. I was currently without a permanent means of transportation due to some unfortunate incidents that were totally not my fault. As soon as I got over my all-day morning sickness, my husband Cooper promised to take me shopping for a new car. I suspected that might be the first test of our marriage.

I took a detour around a small pool of stagnant water, before veering back onto the worn path. At least there was a path. It was overgrown with blackberry brambles and what I hoped wasn't poison ivy, but it was clearly visible.

I could see the blue of the lake through the trees when I stopped to check for a cell signal again. Three bars!

I punched in Doc's number.

I listened to the ringing, running over in my mind what I was going to say to him.

"Hey Doc! I've got good news and bad news. Good news is that the bodies are piling up at the funeral home and the bad news is that your number one assistant ran off to Vegas with Lottawatah's only manicurist."

Or maybe he'd think the good news was bad and the bad news was good. I don't think he really liked Frank that much. Still, Frank Hutter's absence meant there was no one to embalm bodies. That's pretty much the one thing I didn't do at Myers Funeral home.

It was the flies that caused me to lower the phone from my ear and notice that I was hearing an echo. As I swatted at the bugs, I realized that I wasn't just hearing the ringing through my phone, I was hearing his actual cell phone.

There were a lot of flies. I followed the sound and found a lot more.

The odor of spoiled meat hit me in the face like a hammer. I immediately lost the remains of a strawberry Poptart and the single cup of coffee I was allowed per day.

I didn't have to be a psychic to know something or someone was dead. My name is Brianna Sullivan. Okay, Brianna Sullivan Jackson as of three months ago.

Holding my breath, I forced myself to walk down the bank to the water's edge. Despite the ringing, I attempted to convince myself that the bloated body covered in a swarm of flies wasn't human.

One good look and I knew differently. I disconnected the call and the ringing stopped.

I wondered why Hank Strothers had Doc's phone.

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*Cooper and I had returned from our honeymoon cruise to the extreme heat and sticky humidity of mid-summer Oklahoma. Before we left, the only person, and I mean the only person, to suspect that I might be pregnant was my mother. I didn't have a clue. Well, maybe that's not strictly true. I'd had several clues, I'd just been really good at ignoring them.*

*I waited until we were on the ship to share the news with Cooper. I hoped that waiting until we were a thousand miles from Lottawatah lounging on deck with little drinks with umbrellas in our hands would be a good time to make my announcement.*

*"Cooper, there's something I need to tell you." I took a sip of my drink wishing I had ordered something stronger than cranberry juice. The only time we'd spoken about having*

*children, Cooper talked about a half dozen while I'd mused on whether or not I could manage one. Something else interrupted our discussion and we hadn't gotten back to it. That's not to say, that his mother, Sassy Jackson, hadn't dropped hints about wanting Cooper to give her more grandchildren, although deep down I think she was secretly hoping I wouldn't be their mother.*

*"Pregnant?" Cooper repeated my news slowly. "We're having a baby?"*

*I nodded.*

*He forgot his drink had a little umbrella when he tossed it back. The ship's doctor promised us that the damage to his eye wasn't permanent.*

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Unlike Cooper, Hank Strothers wasn't going to recover.

"This isn't good." I said to nobody or at least I hoped nobody was around to hear me.

Even at that moment I knew that sounded ridiculous, but I couldn't quite wrap my head around the reality. My heart was racing, my breath coming in short pants. I quickly scanned the area, but didn't see any other bodies, alive or dead. Where was Doc?

Finally, it all began to sink in. I sat down on the ground, my legs unable to hold me up. Then in a flash of panic, I scooted backwards up the embankment on my bottom, not stopping until I was hidden in the tree line.

My hands were shaking so hard that I could barely punch number one on my speed dial.

"Cooper?" I whispered.

"Brianna? I can't hear you. You found Hank and Doc? See if you can get a couple of those bass I hear they're catching. Dad will gut them..."

At the word "gut," I began tossing what cookies I had left, but mostly just dry heaving, clutching the phone to my ear as I struggled for control.

Cooper's tone changed. He had a weak stomach and sometimes joined me in my puke fests. "Oh, jeez, Brianna. I thought the book told you that this morning sickness stuff is supposed to be over by three months and certainly by four."

I wiped my sour mouth with my sleeve and was finally able to spit out what Cooper needed to hear. "He's dead."

There was a moment where I wasn't sure if we'd totally lost the connection.

Finally, he asked, "Who's dead?"

"Hank. He's lying at the edge of the water. I think he's been shot, but there are so many damn flies swarming his body—"

The thought set me off again. I could barely hear Cooper yelling, "Get out of there. Now, Brianna. Go to the lodge, I'll meet you there. Get up and get out."

His words finally got through to me. I scrambled to my feet and started running. Branches whipped my face as I tore through the trees, the blackberry brambles scratching my legs. I dashed through the pool of stagnant water. When I reached the golf cart, I jumped in and put the pedal to the metal. I didn't stop until I was outside the main lodge/sales office. I could see my sister-in-law Katie through the window. She was now Mrs. Jack Fulsom, six months pregnant, and the general manager of Lake Eufaula Resort.

She wasn't going to be happy about the news. She liked Hank Strothers okay, but Katie was determined to make the resort a thriving business. This wasn't the kind of publicity she wanted.

Me? I leaned over the steering wheel, trying to catch my breath. I replayed the scene in my mind. Oh, God. Hank Strothers was definitely dead. But where was Doc?

## CHAPTER 2

"What's your best guess? Ballpark it!"

My new husband, the Lottawatah Chief of Police, rarely asked for my opinion where his police work was involved. I'm not saying I didn't volunteer it, just that he usually didn't solicit my help. He was standing in front of me, simultaneously barking orders on his cell phone to Beverly Heyman, the police dispatcher and my best friend, and interrogating me over what I'd seen in the woods.

I'd already told him everything I knew at least twice over. It was beginning to sink in that Hank was really gone. He'd been a good friend to me and I was going to miss him. Heck, the whole town was going to miss him. Hank had been Lottawatah's part-time crime scene investigator for decades after his multiple terms as the McIntosh County sheriff. Doc would...I was thinking Doc would miss him the most, they'd been friends for more than 40 years. Where was Doc? He wouldn't have left Hank there on the side of the lake, if he'd had a choice.

I wiped the sweat off my face and tried to organize my thoughts. I was regretting that I hadn't taken Katie up on her offer to wait inside the lodge. The wooden bench I was sitting on had splinters and it must have been creeping up on a 100 degrees on the boat dock. There was no breeze. I had on a red, silky t-shirt that I'd sweated through and the only pair of black dress pants that still fit me. Much worse for the wear after my scramble through the woods, the knees were torn and dirty. I silently acknowledged that the pants were probably destined for the trash. I'd left the matching blazer in Sassy's car, the vehicle I'd borrowed to drive to the lake in search of my employer. Sassy's almost new Cadillac had been practically the only vehicle in the parking lot when I'd arrived. Now the car had plenty of company.

There was a flurry of activity and noise as more police cars rolled into the parking lot, sirens blaring. The town's firetruck was here along with three volunteers who were loudly debating the wisdom of putting on their turnout gear. One of them mentioned that an ambulance from Eufaula had been requested, just in case. In front of me a large lake patrol boat was fueling up in preparation to launch. Cooper would be going out along with several of his officers. He'd told me that a State Fish and Wildlife unit was in route. I was planning on going too. Cooper just didn't know it yet.

"Brianna, this is important. What do you think?"

I sucked on the straw, taking a long drink from the giant-sized plastic cup of lemonade that Katie had provided to help settle my stomach and replace some of the fluid I'd lost. Time of death was something I'd seen Doc determine several times a week. He used a thermometer and also checked for the amount of rigor. Science was involved. I wasn't qualified to render that kind of judgment. In fact with Doc missing and Frank Hutter hanging up his rubber gloves, the town of Lottawatah was a medical professional desert. A wasteland! An empty, parched...

"Brianna! Are you listening to me?"

I swallowed the tart liquid. "Cooper, I don't know. I didn't...there are things that you have to consider. The hot weather. The lake water. I think Hank's weight and age factor in. The flies! Cooper, I don't know the lifecycle of flies. Maybe in High School biology I learned about fly eggs but—"

"Stop! I know you can't give me that kind of opinion." He leaned in closer and whispered, "Did you talk to Hank? You know, his ghost or whatever?"

I sucked down a few more ounces of lemonade. "No."

"No, you didn't talk to him or no, he wasn't there?"

"I didn't talk to him. If he was there, he didn't try to make contact." I reached out with my free hand and Cooper helped me to my feet. "I need to use the ladies room in the lodge, then I'll be ready."

He tilted back his hat and frowned. "Forget it. I don't need you to find the body. And you sure don't need—"

"You don't have anyone else who can talk to Hank. Give me five minutes!"

I hurried up the dock towards the lodge, not giving Cooper a chance to argue with me. Just like my bladder was sending me urgent signals, the part of me that communicated with those that had left their mortal bodies was screaming at me that Doc didn't have much time.

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*We had barely unpacked our suitcases and shook the sand out of our clothes before Cooper had invited his whole family to gather at our house for celebratory dinner. He left me a note tacked to the refrigerator advising me of what he'd done and telling me not to worry about dinner, he'd grill some steaks.*

*I ripped the note from the refrigerator door and opened the door just to verify that food had not magically appeared; that food fairies hadn't restocked the refrigerator that we'd completely emptied before leaving town.*

*"Nope. Still empty. Wonder what the hell, Cooper plans to serve with his steaks?" Running late for my first day back at work, I decided to let Cooper worry about it.*

*Doc and Hank had laughed when I'd shown them Cooper's note. Doc told me to take a long lunch and do some grocery shopping; that I should try to make the honeymoon glow last as long as possible. Hank had just grinned and asked what time I wanted him to show up.*

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Hank wasn't showing up now.

Cooper kept looking at me and giving me a little head nod. If he didn't cut it out, people were going to think he had a nervous tic. I knew what he wanted. I just didn't have any answers. The body had been photographed twelve ways to Sunday, but it was obvious that Hank Strothers was going to be sorely missed by the law enforcement community and in particular the police department. I'd seen him work a crime scene and these guys didn't have a clue. Hank would have roped off the whole area, put down markers, and set up the shots he'd need at some point in the investigation. Hopefully, the county investigators would arrive soon and take over, but the scene was probably already contaminated.

Cooper wanted me to talk to Hank's ghost, but, as I've told my beloved countless times, it's not up to me to start the conversation with a spirit. They've got to want to talk to me and for some reason, Hank had no interest in chatting.

I walked over to Cooper who was crouched next to the body. He looked up. "Nothing?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. Maybe Hank didn't hang around, but went straight towards the light?"

Cooper shrugged. He unbuttoned Hank's bloodstained shirt and examined the entry wound. "I can't be sure until the autopsy, but this looks like it was made by a 9-millimeter bullet."

He stood up and started pacing off a distance. He crouched again and examined the grass area near the tree line. "I think the shooter stood here and..." He frowned and looked closer. "I think he was bleeding."

He motioned for one of the deputies to bring the crime scene tape.

I didn't understand. "The killer was bleeding? Who shot him?"

Cooper didn't answer. He started walking carefully through the woods, crouching every few feet. I followed in his footsteps. I saw drops of blood on the ground.

"I'm guessing..." He didn't finish the sentence.

We came to the top of a small ridge and saw the remains of the campsite. The Coleman stove had been kicked over. The cooler had been upended, a pool of water where the ice had melted. One small popup tent had collapsed. Another larger one stood abandoned, the canvas door and rain flaps hanging open. I could see a cot and air mattress inside. Probably Doc's. He had issues with his back. In contrast Hank always claimed he could sleep anywhere. Now he was permanently asleep.

I felt surrounded in darkness. Shivering as a damp chill descended on me, I sensed the wild struggle that had recently taken place. I put my hand over my belly trying to shield the new life inside me from the unseen violence permeating the campsite.

I tried to clear my head, but everything remained fuzzy and distant. I could vaguely hear Cooper calling to his deputies to bring the crime scene kits up to the site. I sat down on the ground before I fell down. I tried to breathe but the darkness was tightening its vise, pushing the air out of my lungs.

And then just as suddenly I felt light and peace fill my body, driving the cold darkness aside. A warm hand was on my back, softly rubbing small circles, murmuring words of love. I opened my eyes and looked into Cooper's worried face.

I gave a shaky smile. "I'm okay."

He didn't believe me. "What happened?"

I wasn't sure if he meant to me or in the area. I didn't know in either case. I just knew that evil had recently invaded a pristine, serene spot, but I didn't need to be a psychic or talk to ghosts to know that.

Cooper stood up and held out his hand. "Come on. I'm going to have one of the deputies take you back to the lodge."

I nodded. The fight had gone out of me. Before I left I glanced around once more. This time, I spied Doc's old fishing hat. There was nothing special about the weather-worn khaki hat except some of the fly-fishing lures he had on the brim. He called it his lucky hat which was ironic under the circumstances.

I picked it up and finally felt a connection. It was faint, but clear. Doc was alive.

The campsite was filling up. The county's crime scene techs had arrived. Cooper was talking to them, pointing out dark spots on the ground he wanted tested.

I pulled him aside. "Trust me," I whispered. "Doc is alive."

"You sure."

I nodded. Then something struck me. I looked around again. "Cooper, where's Doc's medical bag. He never goes on these trips without it. Always telling me stories about the damn fools he's had to fix up on these excursions."

Cooper yelled to the group. "Check the surrounding area for a medical kit."

While we were waiting one of the techs came up to us. "I used luminol to test several of the sites you marked. No question it's blood, but I won't know if it's from one person or more than one until we get back to the lab. There's quite a bit in the tent on the cot."

After a few minutes search, it was clear. Doc and his medical bag were both missing. Now I knew why Doc was still alive. The killer needed medical help. Taking Doc guaranteed that he didn't need an insurance card to get it.

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One of the techs drove me back to the lodge. I waved off Katie and Jack's questions and instead got into the car I'd borrowed from Sassy and headed for home. I needed to get cleaned up and try to find something I could still fit into now that I'd ruined the one pair of slacks that still, if barely, zipped up. Then I had to figure out what to do with the bodies that were already piled up in the funeral home, not to mention that soon Hank Strothers would be there too. But first there would have to be an autopsy and the man who did the autopsies in this town was missing and from what I could see, in mortal danger. I was looking forward to a hot shower and long cry before I could figure out what to do.

"Brianna, what in God's name happened to you?"

Like a splash of cold water, reality hit me as soon as I opened my front door. My mother, Julia Sorensen Sullivan, was standing, hands on her hips, in the hallway. My English bulldog Leon was standing next to her. He barked once, before waddling over to sniff my shoes, his own way of figuring out where I'd been and what I'd been up to without him.

"Well?" Unlike Leon, my mother held her position. There was a slight accusatory tone in her voice, which I rightly interpreted to mean two things. I wasn't supposed to be home at that time plus her common complaint about my appearance. I suddenly remembered that I'd asked Mom to wait at my house that morning for the plumber who was coming for the third time to treat a persistent drip in the master bath shower.

My problems were now much more complicated. My mother was, even if not publicly acknowledged, Doc's girlfriend. She'd hung around after my wedding, ostensibly to help me when the baby arrived. I did see her more often now that she was in town, but it was usually on the arms of my boss, Doctor Joseph Myers. For appearances sake, she'd rented an apartment on Main Street, but I couldn't help but notice the persistent grin on Doc's face most mornings.

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*Cooper barely arrived home before our dinner guests.*

*"I didn't have time to stop at the store, but just offer my father a beer and my mother some sweet tea. I'll go get the steaks now."*

*I grabbed his collar. "Not so fast, sweet cheeks."*

*If we followed his plan, I'd be stuck with Sassy, my reluctant mother-in-law, grilling me, and the effect would be the same as if I'd been plopped on the sizzling barbecue. It was definitely the hot seat.*

*"I had a feeling that this little scenario would play out like this. I already stopped at Homeland and picked up steaks, fresh corn, salad, and a watermelon." I didn't mention that I'd also bought a couple gallons of Rocky Road ice cream. I intended to stash that in the freezer for late night cravings.*

*Cooper gave me a quick kiss, stepped back, then leaned in for a second. If we hadn't been about to welcome his mother, I might have had some interest in pursuing that train of thought. But Sassy and Wayne were on their way and I was still trying to keep my never-ending nausea at bay.*

*Instead I held up a box of unopened Thin Mints. "Look what I found in the back of the cupboard." It had been sold to us four months earlier by Madison, our Girl Scout niece.*

*"Since you've got everything under control, I've got time for a shower."*

*He started to move towards the stairs. This time I grabbed his belt loops. "Again, hold your horses, husband of mine. Your folks and Aunt Ida are coming up the walk right now. My mother, Doc, and Hank are pulling into the driveway. This is your party. You play the welcoming host."*

*"The sweaty, smelly host," I heard Cooper mutter as he opened the front door and patted on a smile.*

*His mother embraced him like he'd been in a war zone for the better part of a decade. Wayne, Cooper's father, gave me a big hug and a wink. On most days I thought Wayne deserved the Medal of Honor, if they gave one for keeping silent in the face of a no-nonsense, judgmental, tee-totaling wife. Aunt Ida, Cooper's 90-year-old Great Aunt, who was always full of piss, vinegar, and usually bourbon, gave me a warm hug and a strange look. She lived with Sassy and Wayne but after a brief hug for Cooper, headed directly to our liquor cabinet.*

*Sassy, when she was finally able to let her baby boy out of her clutches, turned her attention to me. She surveyed me from head-to-toe, and I was tempted to open my mouth so she could check my teeth.*

*"I hear those cruises are all you can eat...and drink. Is that true Brianna?"*

*Lord, that woman was as subtle as a pig heading for a trough full of slop. I pulled at my tight shirt and jeans, the product of a growing baby not a buffet binge.*

*"Brianna, you look wonderful." My mother glided into the foyer, perfectly chic in white pants, navy sweater set (despite the sticky 95-degree weather), and sandals which showed off her perfectly-polished, hot red toenails.*

*Since it was my mother who'd packed a pregnancy test in my going-away bag, I welcomed not having to keep up a pretense with at least one of our guests.*

*"Wayne, where's the cooler?" Sassy looked around the entryway.*

*My father-in-law shrugged. "Oh, hell, I left it in the truck."*

*Sassy grinned. "I can barely keep up with my garden this year. I think I over-planted."*

*"You say that every year," Aunt Ida settled herself in the wing chair next to the liquor cabinet.*

*Sassy continued. "I brought you tomatoes, some pole beans, cucumbers, and some early squash. The blackberries are sweet this year, so I brought a pie. Cooper always did like my blackberry pie. I'll be glad to help you plant your garden, Brianna."*

*Frankly, I was considering bricking over our entire backyard. Sassy hoped I would join the Lottawatah Garden club, but I killed plants just by looking at them.*

*My mother handed me a small gift bag. I peeked inside. A box of ginger tea, a baggie of sour hard candies, a roll of mints, and a clear box, labeled Sea Bands, which looked like two small stretchy bracelets I turned the box over and my face undoubtedly showed my confusion.*

*My mother smiled. "Meant to give you those before you left. I heard that they're good for seasickness. Pressure points on your wrist supposedly relieves nausea."*

*My mother winked and gave my hand a quick squeeze.*

*Doc looked at the box of sea bands and I caught a hint of a smile.*

*Hank handed me a bottle of bourbon, mumbled "Congrats on the wedding and your new house," and joined Aunt Ida who was pouring herself a glass of Jack Daniels, neat.*

*"Why don't we all sit in the living room, while the grill heats up." Cooper walked out of the kitchen with an arm full of cold beer. He handed one to his father, who'd come back in from the truck with Sassy's cooler and one to Doc. Hank had already helped himself to an opened bottle of bourbon.*

*"Mom, what would you like? Mrs. Sullivan, what can I get you?" Cooper was now in his Lord of the Manner mode.*

*"White wine would be nice."*

*I think my mother had forgotten that we were in the middle of Oklahoma where drink choices were hard liquor, beer, and sweet tea.*

*"Um, we don't have any wine, do we Brianna?"*

*Julia Sorensen Sullivan was always polite. "Then, I'll just have ice water."*

*"A glass of sweet tea for me," Sassy called out.*

*I looked around the room. If ever I needed a shot of whiskey this was it. I took a deep breath.*

*"Cooper and I have some news."*

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The news I had to convey today was not the happy news of three months previous. I struggled to find the right words, but I should have known that my mother could always read me like a book, and that was without any psychic ability.

"What happened? Are you and the baby okay? Where's Joseph? Did you tell him about Frank's note? I can't believe he waits until Joseph is on vacation to abandon his job."

I held up a hand to slow her questions, but I was totally unsuccessful in stopping my tears. "I'm fine but I don't know where Doc is, and Hank Strothers is dead."

Leon whined, walking away from me down the hallway, then turning and waiting for me to follow.

My mother was more proactive. She came over and gave me a hug. She led me into the kitchen. I felt like a rag doll, utterly spent and unable to stand another second. I sank down on one of the chairs that surround our oak table. Next thing I knew my mother was cleaning my face with a damp dish towel, piling my hair on top of my head, and placing the cool cloth against the back of my neck. I could have been five-year-old Brianna, fresh from a playground scuffle and finding comfort in my Momma's capable hands.

Leon sat down on my feet and watched me. He probably wanted his head scratched, but sensing my mood decided to be patient.

After a few moments my mother pulled out a chair and sat down, facing me. "Tell me what you saw and what you...what you know."

That was her code for my psychic ability, but of course, that was what was making me so weepy. I didn't actually "know" much of anything. I was pretty sure Doc was alive, but beyond that I didn't have a clue.

I described stumbling onto the murder scene.

My mother cut to the chase. "Did Hank talk to you? Who killed him?"

She might accept that I had some relationship to the spirit world, but my mother still didn't understand that it wasn't like I could order spirits to spit out the truth, like some kind of psychic Perry Mason.

"Hank wasn't there."

"What do you mean he wasn't there. You found his body."

I sighed. "I know, but his spirit, soul, whatever you want to call it wasn't hanging around his body."

My mother sniffed. "Why not? Doesn't seem right that he'd leave when he might have been a help in finding Joseph."

She crinkled her forehead, as if she just figured out something. "Wait, if Hank's spirit wasn't there or wasn't talking..."

Clearly, she still didn't quite believe that it wasn't my fault that the ghost of Hank Strothers hadn't hung around.

"How do you know that Joseph is alive? Do you really believe that?"

I might have been irritated by the questioning, but the desperation in my mother's voice was heartbreaking.

"You'll have to trust me on this one. Hank wasn't there, but I got the definite feeling that Doc was still alive. I'm pretty certain, so is Cooper, that whoever killed Hank was wounded. I'd bet that Hank got off a shot or two before being murdered. My guess is that the killer needs Doc to keep him alive."

My mother sat back in her chair. Relief was evident.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do."

Julia Sorensen Sullivan was nothing if not resourceful.

"Go take a shower. The plumber fixed the leak. I left some new maternity clothes on your bed. You really need to take this pregnancy and your changing body more seriously, Brianna."

This was the mother, ever critical, that I knew.

"I'll fix you a grilled cheese sandwich, and then we're going to the funeral home. Maybe that's where Hank is headed."

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I felt marginally better after my shower, but noticed that the damn shower head continued to drip after I shut it off. Sigh. Another thing on my to-do list.

I'll give my mother credit for good sense. She avoided all those t-shirts that had arrows pointing down to the pregnant woman's expanding middle, with captions like, "Look what Daddy did." Seriously, I saw a woman in church wearing that with her husband grinning like a fool. I also hate the dresses with the Peter Pan collars and bows in the back. Last time I wore a dress like that it was under protest and I was five years old.

Instead on my bed, lying next to a sleeping Leon, were a pair of black slacks with the requisite stretchy panel in the middle. I pulled them on and instantly felt comfortable. Why don't they make these for nonpregnant women? I grabbed a brightly-printed cotton shirt that covered

my middle, slipped on my shoes, ran a brush fruitlessly through my hair, patted Leon, and headed downstairs. Maybe being comfortable and not panicked would make it easier to connect with Hank's ghost.

"I'll drive, you eat." Mom handed me a sandwich and a bottle of water. I reached for the bag of chips on the counter, saw my mother's clear look of disapproval, and uncharacteristically, put back the offending salty, empty calories.

"Thank you for the clothes," I mumbled as I chewed.

"I had to shop online. Nothing in Lottawatah seemed quite..."

She didn't have to finish the sentence. I'm not as sophisticated as my mother who makes everything look like it was designed just for her. Still I wanted to retain what dignity I had left, which is minimal, and I wasn't going to find that kind of maternity wardrobe in Lottawatah.

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*As we drove to the funeral home I remembered how happy my in-laws had been at the news their baby boy was going to be a dad. Lots of backslapping and congratulations were given to Cooper at the impromptu dinner. While Cooper was celebrated for continuing the Jackson line, I gathered a few awkward hugs and some astonished expressions. Great Aunt Ida handed me a shot of Jack Daniels in preparation of a toast to my pregnancy and, as Sassy had mumbled earlier, surprisingly viable 37-year-old eggs. The glass was immediately removed from my fingers by Sassy Jackson and a vocal debate occurred between the two women vying for the title of Jackson family matriarch ensued. I never got the toast or the drink. Hank was telling me just how much bad luck was associated with a broken toast when my best friend Beverly rescued me.*

*She relocated us to the upstairs guest bathroom along with a couple of Diet Pepsis and a large bag of pretzels. "Don't worry, I had six healthy babies and without anyone raising a glass in my honor. How are you feeling about..." She waved her hand in a gesture meant to include multiple topics such as my unexpected pregnancy, my new marriage, my "just off the boat" homecoming, my mother's extended stay, and Sassy's always a little chilly attitude towards me.*

*I took a long swallow of the fizzy drink before replying. "Okay, I think." Surprisingly I was feeling like perhaps my life had taken a turn for the better. In Lottawatah I'd found the roots that I never knew I wanted when I left Chicago in my motorhome, destination to be determined by interstate highways and gasoline money.*

*I gave Beverly a long look. She'd done something different with her hair while Cooper and I had been on our cruise.*

*Correctly interpreting my unspoken question, Beverly grinned. "Yes, I got a cut and highlight. Mom paid for it for my birthday."*

*I raised my can in a mock toast. "To your great hair and your six wonderful babies."*

*She popped the top on a can and joined me, adding. "Thanks. I should also mention that I've started dating again much to the discomfort of Lottawatah society. So you'll probably hear all about how Mort hasn't been gone a decent amount of time and that I should be focusing on my children."*

*I laughed. "Are those pretzels just for show or are you going to open them?"*

*We didn't have a chance to load up on salt before there was a knock on the bathroom door. We'd been found. In retrospect I wish I'd spent more time that night talking to Doc and Hank.*

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My cell phone rang just as Mom and I pulled into the funeral home parking lot.

"Cooper?"

My husband wasted no time on pleasantries. "Did Hank Strothers keep files at the funeral home?"

"Not exactly. I mean he didn't keep his own file cabinet, but Doc clipped copies of Hank's crime scene statement to his autopsy report of any victims or perpetrators. Why? Don't you have the originals? The Lottawatah PD paid Hank's contract. Or at least that's what I always assumed."

"Yes, but we have some records missing. Remember that tornado that blew in after you arrived in town? Well we discovered a couple of weeks too late that we had some flooding down the south wall in the file room. Between the water damage and the mold, we lost about a decade of files." Cooper sighed. "I've had an intern scanning new records and what's left of the old stuff into a data base, but PJ isn't done. It would be quicker if you can check Doc's records."

"PJ?" I thought I knew everyone who worked for the Lottawatah PD, but I'd never heard that name before. "You found the money to hire someone to help Beverly? That's great."

"No, like I said, PJ, Paula Jean Willard, is an intern. Her uncle, Arlo Willard, a man who hasn't cracked his own wallet open in years much less voted for a city tax increase, set it up the

last time I asked for a larger appropriation for the department. Instead of more money he gave me his niece as an unpaid intern. I wasn't in a position to turn him down. She's a senior at Lottawatah High School. Kind of quiet and jumpy, but really good with computers. She gets credit for community service for her college applications and I get free help."

"Uh, huh." I was trying to unscrew the top of my bottled water. The plastic hadn't been scored completely and I couldn't break the seal. I gave up and stuck the bottle back in my purse. My mother had gone on ahead into the funeral home. "So, you want Doc's files? Which ones?"

"Pull the last five years. Give me copies of any autopsy reports for victims of violent crimes. from the last five years—and I guess files of any of criminals who died while being captured."

I wasn't sure that was exactly the way Doc filed his reports, but Lottawatah wasn't the crime capital of America. How many files could there be?

### CHAPTER 3

In Doc's office I pulled files while my mother sat down the hall, listening to all the voice messages that had piled up while I was at the lake.

The office doors were open, I could hear the voices...the townspeople...the normal business of death and remembrance continuing.

"What will you do if someone else needs a funeral or..." My mother didn't finish her thought.

I stacked the 15 files that met Cooper's criteria on the table by the copy machine in the connecting hallway. I made the first copy before answering her.

Raising my voice, so she could hear me, "We'll just have to refer them to a funeral home in Muskogee. Doc has cooperative agreements set up for when he's on vacation or in case of a major disaster. But since Frank Hutter was supposed to be here, I accepted two new customers this week. They are waiting downstairs and now I'm going to need to get them transferred to another facility. Besides the loss of the funeral contract funds, we'll have to pay for the transfer, so we are actually losing money instead of just failing to make money. Doc is going to kill me when he gets back."

My mother didn't respond.

"He will be back," I whispered, reloading the machine. "He will."

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*"The damn fool broke his arm in a bar fight. I'm gonna need help with old man Jenkins' embalming. His widow just dropped off his Sunday –go-to-Church suit."*

*I looked up from my desk to find my new boss, Doctor Joseph Myers standing in the doorway of my office, holding a worn grey suit with a nightmarish squiggle tie. I'd been on the job 20 minutes.*

*"Mr. Jenkins broke his arm?"*

*Doc rolled his eyes. "Keep up Brianna. Frank Hutter works for me. He handles most of the embalming and funeral prep, but shattered his ulna when he took on the Squirrel in a bar off*

*Route 40. Frank's not much use to me even when he has the use of both arms. Zero help with a cast up his wazoo."*

*"Who... What's a Squirrel?"*

*"Squirrel Anderson, born Eugene but will flatten anyone who calls him that, which I gather is exactly what Frank did. Squirrel is six-foot-four, 300 pounds, and mean as a junkyard dog. Frank got what was coming to him. Of course, he was so drunk he didn't even feel the bone crushing hold that Squirrel had on him. Took four guys to pull Squirrel off Frank. Another couple of hours for him to dry out enough for the Emergency Room up in Muskogee to set the break. Probably gonna need surgery which means he'll be useless even longer."*

*"But...but..."*

*I was talking to Doc's back. He was moving with surprising speed down the hall toward the steps that led to the funeral home prep rooms. I hustled to catch up.*

*I stood outside the cold storage room, where Doc kept the bodies. "I don't think you understand."*

*"Come in Brianna. Old Man Jenkins is dead. It's not like he's gonna pinch your butt, although he was known for doing just that to the ladies in the choir as they walked down the church aisle singing praises to the Lord."*

*I shook my head. "I'm not afraid of dead bodies. I've heard their stories, complaints, excuses, and demands my whole life. I don't mind working in a funeral home, but I'd rather just do the invoices, set up the viewings, maybe sell a coffin or two."*

*Doc stood at the head of the corpse. "Grab his feet, will ya? I want to move Jenkins from this shelf to the gurney. Got arthritis in my right shoulder and it's giving me a fit today."*

*It took me awhile to figure out that sometimes Doc just ignored people's objections and pushed them to do what he wanted, whether they wanted to or not.*

*So I grabbed Old Man Jenkins feet, we swung the body onto the gurney, and pushed it out to the prep room. Then, still pleading an aching shoulder, Doc had me remove all the bodily fluids and replace them with formaldehyde-based chemical solutions. I shaved off the old man's whiskers, then changed his clothes from the gardening jeans and t-shirt he'd been wearing when he'd keeled over into a pile of fresh manure, to his worn, but clean suit. Doc walked me through tying a Windsor knot, which added a slight touch of elegance to the ugly tie. Finally, I combed Mr. Jenkin's hair and stepped back.*

*"Thank you, Miss. I appreciate the help getting presentable for my last appearance on this earth. I know it will mean a lot to my Elizabeth."*

*I saw the lights in the prep room dim. Always happens when a spirit decides to chat. Old Man Jenkins, or his ghost, was hovering above the prep table.*

*"I know you think this tie ain't purty, but it was given to me by my daughter, Melinda Mae, when she was 12. Last present she ever gave me. Died of the cancer the next year. My Elizabeth knew I'd want to be wearing it when I met Melinda Mae by those pearly gates."*

*I don't usually cry when talking to spirits, but Old Man Jenkins, with his almost toothless grin, had me at Melinda Mae.*

*Of course, I got myself under control when the spirit added, just before heading towards a bright light in the distance, "You're mighty pretty, although those glasses of yours are downright fugly."*

*Doc seemed to understand what had just happened without hearing the ghost, although I was pretty sure he'd never had a such an encounter before. He just stayed silent while I interacted with the ghost until the lights in the room got brighter.*

*"Let's move the body into the casket and take him upstairs by the freight elevator. Mrs. Jenkins..."*

*"Is that the Elizabeth he was talking about?" I asked, again assuming that he'd know who'd told me that information.*

*Doc nodded. "They were married over 50 years."*

*I noticed that Doc easily moved the body into the coffin and pushed it to the elevator.*

*"What about your arthritis."*

*Doc grinned. "It comes and goes."*

*He turned serious. "Brianna, you're going to be handling the paperwork, insurance claims, funeral arrangements, whatever. But you always have to remember that this is a service we can give to a grieving family. At a time when they may feel lost, we can assure them that their loved ones will be treated with respect. They count on us to do our best."*

*I nodded. I appreciated having a steady job with health insurance, but I was pretty sure that I was going to like even more having Doctor Joseph Myers as my boss.*

*\*\*\**

"Where are you, Doc? Hank, you need to help me out. You need to help Doc."

It was almost seven o'clock before I heard from Cooper again. He was still at the crime scene and would be for another couple of hours. He wanted to know if I'd had any new information to give him from the "other side."

The answer was no, at least nothing from Hank Strothers. Not yet.

Hank was downstairs. At least his body was. Cooper's idea. I'd argued against it. There was no guarantee that Hank's spirit was going to return to his physical body. For all I knew he was with Doc or perhaps visiting a childhood home. Cooper had mumbled something about me burning some feathers or sage; doing something to get Hank's attention. Normally, I would have tried something...not the feather thing...and the sage was for cleansing. Holding something of Hank's might work. I just needed a quiet spot to meditate. That had worked for me before. This time I just had a feeling I should wait until Hank was ready to talk to me. The old man was stubborn. He'd make contact on his own if he thought I could help Doc.

The police should have had his body sent directly to Muskogee. But Cooper had pulled some strings, called in some favors. A coroner from Tulsa County was coming to town the next morning to perform the autopsy.

Cooper was playing the odds, thinking if Hank's body was close, I might get a message.

I hoped for Doc's sake that Cooper had a plan B.

\*\*\*

I was going to head home, but first wanted to check the cold locker that we used to hold the bodies. The repairman, who was fixing my leaky shower head, was also the same guy who was fixing a leak in the locker. I didn't have a lot of confidence left in his talents, even if I had been repeatedly assured that he was a good ole boy from Lottawatah who knew his stuff. The last thing I needed was for water to drip on the contents of the cold storage.

"My word. What is Hank Strothers doing here?"

It was Mrs. Hazel Flores, who had passed on to her great reward two days earlier. She was 92 and been playing bingo when she choked to death on a big wad of chewing gum, which she inadvertently inhaled when her lucky number was called. The other seniors at the center took comfort in knowing that Hazel was first able to call "Bingo" before the unfortunate fatal incident. Mrs. Leona Humphries wanted to continue the game, since the winner had been eliminated and

Mrs. Humphries was just one space away from filling out her card. Mutt Jeffery, who was the voice of Lottawatah on the radio, was calling the game that day and he overruled Mrs. Humphries.

"Show some respect," he'd insisted. "The jackpot of this game will be added to the next."

Didn't do Mrs. Humphries much good. Alice Feller won the round and happily took her double pot of \$10 home.

"He don't talk much, does he?" Mrs. Flores whined. "He's been giving me the cold shoulder since he got here. What'd I ever do to him except maybe vote for Tom Russell when he ran against Hank? Think Hank knew that? I thought it was a secret ballot."

Steven Blackman, who'd also died two days earlier, was 98 when he passed. He'd outlived his wife by ten years, a woman known for her peach pies. She was also, as my grandmother's neighbor Mrs. Goldstein would say, a yenta, an unrelenting gossip. So far, Mr. Blackman, who I suspect had enjoyed the quiet of the previous decade, was also not much of a conversationalist. So Mrs. Flores had pinned her hopes on Hank.

I checked the temperature in the locker. Indeed, Hank did have a cold shoulder, but it didn't account for his lack of conversation. But the damn leak in the corner continued to drip. I ducked out, grabbed a bucket from the work table, and stuck it under the dripping water.

"That's kind of noisy. I thought paradise would be quieter," Mrs. Flores sniffed.

"You haven't gotten to your final destination," I pointed out. "Think of this as a bus stop. I'll bring you some knitting magazines."

"Never mind, I think I'll check in on my daughter-in-law. She probably needs help picking out an outfit for my viewing."

I shook my head. "I'm sure she's already dropped off a suit for you. Rose-colored with a white silk blouse? It's in a closet down the hall."

Hazel nodded. "I know. I've had my clothes picked out for about ten years. They were in a labelled clothes bag in my closet along with a brand-new pair of shoes. Taupe. A higher heel than I've worn in 50 years, but I figured since I didn't have to stand in them, I'd indulge myself."

"Okay." I smiled, making a mental note to make sure Hazel got to wear her stilettos.

Hazel continued, "I was talking about helping Denise choose something decent to wear to my funeral. She probably hasn't given a thought to it. I don't want her showing up in a sweat suit and gardening shoes."

I wished her a good evening and with one last look at Hank's silent form, I closed the locker door.

Even with the coroner from Tulsa coming to do the autopsy on the murder victim, I still had to make arrangements for Mrs. Flores and Mr. Blackman. The families were not going to be happy that we had to ship their loved ones to Muskogee for embalming and then back to Lottawatah for burial. There would be extra expense for that too.

I came up the steps. My mother was waiting for me by the door. She looked tired and Julia Sorensen Sullivan never looked weary. She was normally the energizer bunny on steroids. But worry has a way of wearing you down.

"You can go on. I have to arrange to ship two bodies to funeral homes in Muskogee. Their bodies have to be prepped and..."

My mother was holding up her hand, as if she was stopping traffic.

"I don't care if Frank Hutter has run off with that cheap floozy who's half his age. He's just got to come back and keep things going until Joseph comes home. We're not going to lose clients because some skinny, bald, over-sexed middle-aged man was finally able to score although, ugh, why anyone would hop in the sack with that man..."

My mother was definitely losing it.

It was my turn to hold up the discussion of Frank Hutter's sex life. "He's not answering his cell phone and I have no idea where to find him. His note said he'd be back in a month or when he ran out of money. Whichever was sooner."

"That man should have told you directly instead of leaving a note taped to the door. Who does that?" Julia shook her head. "Doesn't he have keys? He could have left the note on your desk if he was too cowardly to phone you."

"I don't know." I was too tired to even try to think about Frank's actions. The man had always been odd.

My mother straightened herself up. Emotion time was over. Back to business. "Okay, you don't know. Then we'll just have to ask somebody who will know."

I didn't have a clue who would know where skinny, bald, apparently over-sexed mortuary assistants run off to.

But my mother was already out the door, snapping her fingers to indicate I needed to get moving. I locked up, tossed her the keys, and got in the car. I was exhausted, hungry, pregnant,

and most of all, worried. But with complete confidence that Julia Sorensen Sullivan had a plan. What the heck, I'd go along for the ride.

\*\*\*

Candy Dalton's salon was open late one night a week and tonight was it. Evening hours for stores weren't that special in larger towns but Lottawatah tended to roll up the sidewalks after six o'clock. Candy had always been a mover and shaker. According to my mother-in-law, about five years ago Candy broke with tradition and decided to keep the Shear Artistry Salon open until midnight on Tuesdays. She compensated by opening at noon on Wednesdays. Candy believed there was a niche to be filled for Lottawatah citizens who couldn't sneak away from work during business hours to get an emergency root touch up, a manicure, or a quick cut and style. But she forgot that the ladies of Lottawatah usually got their Mark Harmon NCIS fix on Tuesday nights. After Candy discovered why her late night was a flop, she purchased a 60-inch flat screen high definition television and tuned it to CBS at the appointed time. Her appointment book filled up.

Our timing was perfect. We pushed open the salon door just as the credits were rolling on the tv show but before any of the chairs emptied out. Candy sanctioned my mother cutting the power to the hair dryers and making the announcement about Frank Hutter being missing. She asked for help in locating him.

Although the ladies in the salon had heard via the grapevine about Hank's death and Doc's disappearance, no one had noticed Frank's absence. As a mortuary attendant, his social life was limited. They had noted that Sun Li (Sunny Lee as the older ladies called her) wasn't around.

"She called her clients and cancelled all her appointments," Candy said, frowning. "Very unprofessional. She acts like she's the only manicurist in town. And maybe she is, but I'm sure I can recruit someone else just as good."

My mother sighed. "You didn't know she was leaving town? She didn't talk to you?"

"No, are you sure Sun Li is with Frank Hutter? I thought she was seeing the game ranger's second cousin...what's his name...Buzz. Yes, that's it. Buzz. Short for Buzzsaw. He got that nickname because of his unfortunate teeth..."

I left my mother and Candy discussing Sun Li's romantic life and Buzz Fairfax's dental issues. I needed to poll the rest of the ladies about Frank before they left for home.

"Why do you think he's in Las Vegas?" Alma Murphy, a loan officer at the bank and organist at the First Baptist Church, asked. "I knew he was a hard drinker, but I didn't know about the gambling. I'll start a prayer circle for him right away. And for Doc of course. Do you think Frank is in danger? You don't think whoever killed Hank, killed Frank too?"

I didn't think Frank was dead, not yet. And the person who was going to kill him...I glanced towards my mother...definitely wasn't the same person who killed Hank."

"Look at that," Ruth Billings shouted, pointing to the television filling one wall. "Someone turn up the sound!"

The warden of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary was talking to a reporter. The scroll at the bottom of the screen repeated a warning about a prisoner escape. Two Oklahoma convicts, who had been serving 20-year sentences for second-degree murder, had gone missing on Saturday. They were being transported to a maximum-security prison in Louisiana to await trial on a separate state of Louisiana murder charge. That charge might get them the death penalty. The Oklahoma Attorney General was in favor of letting the other state assume the expenses for the duo's care and feeding. Of course, that was before the prison van had been found today burning in a pecan orchard about 15 miles north of Lake Eufaula. He said that the state police were organizing a manhunt for the lake area.

\*\*\*

"I've got to stop at police headquarters. Leave these files for Cooper."

My mother was uncharacteristically quiet, focused on her cell phone.

"Do you want me to drop you at your place or Doc's house?"

My mother had rented a small furnished apartment on Main Street from Mrs. Blake. Supposedly she was staying in Lottawatah just until the baby was born.

My mother looked up. "No. I think I'd like to stay with you tonight. You need to get something to eat and some rest. I need to use your computer. Mrs. Blake's wi-fi is spotty at best."

"Maybe some takeout from Tiny's?"

My mother waved to me in acceptance and went back to scrolling through her phone.

Part of me was still trying to puzzle out why my mother was in Lottawatah. She seemed determined to prove we had a normal mother-daughter relationship. I don't think we saw the past in the same way.

\*\*\*

*My mother wasn't around much when I was growing up. We lived with my grandmother in a small apartment in Chicago and my mother travelled for work. Or at least "travelling for work" was the explanation she gave me for disappearing for weeks and then months at a time. I think the real reason was that she was running away...from me and the memory of my father. My grandmother and I did fine on our own. My mother breezed in for holidays and birthdays, but my grandmother was there for the in-between. She got me off to school, ironed my clothes, checked my homework, and took me to the library on Saturday afternoons. Sometimes we went to a matinee instead. My grandmother loved movies, old ones with dancing, and she loved me. She taught me about life, and during her last year she taught me about death. She saw ghosts too.*

*"No use being afraid of spirits, Brianna. They're just people or at least the strongest bits of them, the parts that aren't ready to leave home or their loved ones. Sometimes you can help them along, make their journey easier."*

*I nodded and didn't argue with her. Even with my limited experience, I knew that it was more complicated than that. Sometimes those ghosts stayed because they were fueled by anger and a desire for settling real or imagined slights. I think she thought she'd have more time with me; more time to share her experiences and knowledge of the supernatural world. But of course, we all think we have more time than we actually do.*

\*\*\*

The police station was lit up like a Christmas tree.

"I'll be right back. Maybe Cooper or Beverly wants me to bring them something from Tiny's."

With no word from my mother, I scooped up the files and headed inside.

The deputy at the front desk waved me through. I didn't recognize many of the officers I saw in the hall. Cooper must have called the state police and area departments for reinforcements. The murder of Hank Strothers hit a nerve with every law enforcement agency. With Doc apparently kidnapped, the hunt was going to be widespread. And now with a prison break in the area...

"How you doing girl? Cooper's still out in the field setting up roadblocks where the cons were last seen."

The speaker was Beverly Heyman. She was technically in charge of the switchboard. When I spotted her, she was heading back to her desk, with a pile of folders in one hand, a box of donuts in the other. Cooper tried to make sure that Beverly worked a fairly regular schedule, but under the circumstances, it was all hands-on deck.

\*\*\*

Crazy, I'm crazy for feeling so lonely...

I'm crazy, crazy for feeling so blue...

*She had been the star of the Lottawatah High School chorus; the soloist in the Lottawatah Methodist Church choir; and she'd never had a voice lesson in her life. But Beverly Heyman would have made Patsy Cline jealous listening to her sing her signature song. Me? I do the world a favor by limiting my singing to the shower, if no one else is in the house.*

*We were the Mutt and Jeff of Lottawatah. She barely five feet tall and even nine months pregnant, probably still under 100 pounds. Me? I hit 100 in fifth grade, and was five-foot-seven by seventh grade.*

*"Do you have kids?" I asked her the first time we met.*

*"A few. Once they started coming in two's, it's been hard to keep count."*

*I pride myself on being un-shockable, but the look on my face was transparent.*

*She laughed, long and loud.*

*"Mort and I got hitched two weeks after I graduated high school. Had our first baby one year later."*

*Me? I was still trying to figure out what the hell I was doing hanging around Lottawatah with Cooper as a maybe boyfriend.*

*She loved horror movies. Talking to ghosts sometimes felt like I lived one.*

*She was the dispatcher for the Lottawatah Police Department, taking off four weeks each time she delivered, including that set of twins. She adored her husband Mort, who always seemed to me to be more than a few fries short of a Happy Meal. But the guy was absolutely devoted to her and the kids, which by the way numbered six.*

*"You went to California? See any movie stars?" She listened to my tales of being on the road in Matilda, my motor home, but had no dreams of adventure except maybe a trip to Dollywood, with hopes of meeting her idol, Dolly Parton.*

*No fantasies of being inducted in the Country Music Hall of Fame. Beverly picked up extra money singing at weddings and funerals. Her Amazing Grace was enough to create an entire congregation of weepers, even those who were barely mourning the deceased.*

*She had a clear set of rules to live by, number one was: "Life's too short to worry about calories or frizzy hair." Of course, she didn't have to worry about either, she a size zero and with the perfect bouncy, naturally blond ponytail. Me on the other hand, worried way too much about desserts and hair that had its own zip code.*

*The truth was I had no clue why Beverly Heyman was my best friend. It wasn't just because the girlfriend pickings were slim in Lottawatah. Nope she would have been my BFF anywhere because she never doubted me for a second when I told her ghosts talked to me.*

\*\*\*

I snatched a donut from the box. "Your momma watching the kids?"

Beverly heaved the folders on her desk, grabbed two donuts, and put the rest of the box on the corner table that held the big coffee urn. "Yes, luckily she'd already planned to keep them. You know tonight was the night."

"Your first date?" Beverly had signed up with an on-line dating website while Cooper and I were away on our honeymoon. If I'd been around, I might have been able to talk her out of it. Seemed a risky venture to me.

Beverly nodded. "Just as well. I wasn't sure about this guy. We seemed to have some interests in common, but it's hard to tell just chatting back and forth on the computer. Probably wouldn't have worked out anyway."

I swallowed the bite of stale donut. "You don't want to reschedule?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. Meanwhile, circumstances being what they are, it's good that my mother has the kids at her house. I don't know how late I'll be staying. Anyone who could relieve me has been stationed at one of the roadblocks or is part of the manhunt. Momma's very upset, but the kids are a distraction. She's known Hank since they were teenagers and of course, everyone's worried sick about Doc."

Beverly looked at me, then whispered, "You heard anything?"

She wasn't asking if I'd had any phone calls, unless it was a direct line to the hereafter. I felt like I was letting everyone down that I wasn't in contact with Hank's ghost or with Doc.

I shook my head. "Cooper asked me to drop off these crime scene and autopsy reports. Don't know that they will be much help."

Just then Beverly's cell phone pinged. She glanced down at the screen and giggled. In all the time I'd known her, I didn't think I'd ever heard her sound like...like a teenaged girl.

"What?" I asked.

Beverly was furiously typing a response. She hit send before looking up with a self-satisfied grin.

"Spill it," I insisted.

Beverly leaned in and whispered, "It's Pistol Pete from AloneNoMore.com."

"Was that who you were going to meet tonight? I thought his name was Joel?"

Beverly lowered her voice even more. "I didn't want to limit my choices right off the bat. Ken Doll and I've been talking too. I was going to set something up with him next week if Joel was a bust."

"Wait...didn't you say your text was from Pistol Pete?"

The grin reappeared. "Yep. He was my backup, backup."

"You're dating three guys?" I had to smile. "Okay, what's your profile name?"

"Nope, not telling anyone. My Momma would kill me if she knew what was going on. She thinks I met Joel at a church retreat."

Beverly, despite having six kids, was still in her early thirties. She was gorgeous, smart, and could sing like an angel. I was sure she'd be popular, although having that many kids might be a turnoff for the faint of heart.

I was happy for her. She deserved some fun in her life. It had been a rough patch since her husband Mort was killed. I squeezed her hand. "You go girl. But be careful."

I looked down at the pile of reports and thought a moment. "Do you think there's a connection between the prison break and Hank's murder?"

"Maybe."

"I didn't hear the names of the convicts. Do you have them."

Beverly grabbed a piece of paper. "Here's a photo of the two of them, Jeb Bingham and Clarence Johnson."

I shivered when I looked at the two mug shots. I didn't need to be a psychic to know that these were two bad, bad guys. I recognized the name of Clarence Johnson. He was mentioned in one of Hank's early crime reports. Doc had done the autopsy on the 7-11 clerk who'd been killed during the robbery. Dead at 17 for \$36. Hank had found a sales receipt at the crime scene for a local carwash. Cops traced the car to Johnson, who still had the handgun used in the murder in his backpack. Arrest and conviction had followed fairly quickly.

I hit speed dial one on my cell phone.

My husband answered immediately. "What'd you find?"

I didn't waste any time on pleasantries. "Hank worked on the case that sent Clarence Johnson to prison. Did he break out of prison before Hank was killed?"

Cooper sighed. "We'll have to wait for the autopsy report to fix the time of death, but it's certainly possible. There's an APB out for both convicts, but they were last spotted in heavily forested terrain. We probably have to wait for first light of morning and the tracking dogs to start the hunt. In the meantime, we've got roadblocks everywhere. You should head home. Lock the doors and put on the alarm system. I'm not kidding, Brianna."

I smiled at the husbandly concern. "My mother's planning to spend the night. We'll be fine."

"Be sure and eat something that's good for you. And drink some milk."

I could hear someone talking to Cooper in the background.

"I've got to run. All of you take care."

I knew he was talking about more than my mother and me. Cooper was talking about his baby too.

This tough Police Chief was going to be putty in some little kid's hands.

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