

Saving Sam

Lynnette
Beers



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Regal Crest Books

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to a fellow novelist,
Peggy Hesketh (1954-2018), who left us far too soon.
You still had so many more stories to tell.

Part I

“We may sink and settle on the waves.
The sea will drum in my ears.
The white petals will be darkened with sea water.
They will float for a moment and then sink.”

~ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Chapter One

San Diego: Summer 2014

SAM CLEVELAND SPRINTED to the water's edge, not taking her eyes off the swimmer in the rough surf zone. Shards of mussel shells and small rocks cut her ankles and feet as she trudged through the foam. A woman had been swept into the riptide, her body pushed under by the monstrous waves. Sam secured the fins on her feet and swam toward the breakers. With the strap from the red rescue tube slung over her shoulder and across her chest, she dove straight into the tumbler and kicked as each wave grew in magnitude. The phosphorescent surf pounded the shore as Sam sliced her body through the ferocious waves and neared the swimmer.

The heavy surf from Hurricane Marie this week had depleted much of the sand on shore, resulting in exposed rocks along the coast. The powerful waves had magnified in size as they traveled through the Pacific from Mexico to the beaches in Southern California where they'd reached their peak. The coasts hit hardest were the south-facing ones, such as the beach that Sam guarded today. The red flag atop her lifeguard station quivered in the gusty wind. Tower number seven was Sam's usual guard duty on Wednesdays throughout the summer, but today's swell tested her seasoned ability as a San Diego lifeguard.

Closer to the swimmer, Sam scanned the horizon to see the lip of a wave in the distance magnifying in size. Within seconds, it grew to ten feet. Not close enough to the woman to guide her under the monstrous wall of water, Sam dove deep below the surface, emerging on the other side of the wall unscathed. Another one approached as she yelled over the height of the wave, "Dive below as deep as you can! I'm almost there to get you."

This was the first time in her ten years of lifeguarding that the fierce rip currents and huge waves caused her heart to race, but she kicked harder and dove under the next wall of frothing water. As a fit lifeguard, Sam was all muscle and no fat. Her petite frame gave people the

impression that she wasn't buff enough to haul swimmers from the rough surf, yet with her muscular arms and legs she proved that she was one of the strongest guards in the department.

With all her might, she fought against the heavy surf and swam into the riptide to save this woman. On the other side of the ferocious wave, Sam made it to the distressed swimmer. She secured the soft red rescue tube around the woman's waist, holding her close as the onslaught of tumultuous surf approached.

"Deep breath," she yelled and guided her under the water. Sam held the woman's body below the massive wave for a few seconds then lifted her to the surface. They both gasped for air, only to be faced with another tower of water barreling down on them. Sam moved their bodies under the wave and to the other side of the huge surge of whitewater. The rough surf jostled them as Sam braced herself for more.

"I can't...catch my breath," the woman said as her chin dipped under the water. She choked on the saltwater entering her mouth and flailed her arms as she tried to stay afloat.

"I got you. You're gonna be okay," Sam said and clung to the woman, keeping her head above water. The power of the wave built in force as it towered over them. Sam filled her lungs with air and dove under as she held the woman, only to emerge on the other side to see another breaker crashing down on them. Bracing herself for the impact, Sam pulled the woman closer. She didn't let go of her as the wave hurled them to the ocean's floor. After they surfaced, they encountered a third tumbler. The force pummeled them onto a submerged boulder, but Sam kicked with all her might and hauled the woman closer to shore.

"We're almost back to shore. You're okay now." Sam fought against the undertow and pulled the woman closer to safety with each thrust of her fins.

When they reached shallow water, the woman said, "My son...he's somewhere out here. He's only nine. He'll drown out there!"

Sam searched in the distance for any signs of the child. As another set approached, she returned to the raging sea. She pumped her legs through the water and stroked her arms, never taking her eyes off the surface of the ocean. She searched beyond the approaching breaker to see a small head bobbing in the surf. A huge wave towered above the child, the curl of the water about to pull him under.

Sam flipped on her back and kicked even harder to reach the boy. She squinted toward shore to see her two supervisors with their jeep parked in

the sand. Relieved that additional guards were here, Sam swam right into a churning wave as she pumped her legs to reach the child.

All in one motion, she looped the rescue tube around his skinny frame and pulled him close to her body. "I'm gonna get you out of this dangerous area, but I need you to do what I tell you, okay? You're going to be okay, I promise."

"Where's my mom?" the kid said, his voice quivering.

"She's right on shore waiting for you. This tube around your body will keep you afloat as I pull you to shore. We've gotta get out of this rough current in between sets, okay?"

The kid scrambled to try and climb atop Sam, his lanky arms and legs flailing in the water. The boy coughed as he gulped seawater. "They taught me in swim class...how to...tread water, but I keep getting pulled under."

Sam held the boy against her chest. "Relax your body as I get you to shore. When I tell you to kick, you pump your legs like crazy, just like you learned in swim class. For now, I'm gonna hold you as I get us out of this bad area."

Unable to outswim the next approaching set, Sam clung to the boy and dove under the wave. The rough ocean jostled Sam as she held the child under each tumbler. After the set passed, she kicked through the powerful surf. Her muscles burned with each pump of her legs, but she didn't let up as she hauled the child closer to shore. Within a couple minutes, Sam brought the boy into calmer waters.

"Okay, buddy, now kick! Let's see you help us to shore. We're almost there."

About waist-deep now, Sam floated in the calmer water and took a deep breath. She held onto the boy while he continued to kick. Sam never let go of him as she kept her eyes on the sea – watchful for more powerful shore breakers. She escorted the boy to shallow water where his mom stood waiting for him. Although safe, terror continued to wash over the kid's face. On shore, Lieutenant Travis Miller, one of the lifeguard supervisors, retrieved the kid and brought him to dry sand. With her fins dangling from her fingers, Sam searched for anyone else who'd been swept away in the unpredictable surf.

With her legs weak from so many rescues this afternoon, Sam regretted doing that twenty-three-mile ride on the trails yesterday, but the woman she'd started dating last month was as avid a mountain biker as she was. Sam could never say no to a fit, attractive woman – especially

someone as into cycling as she was. But it was the hours following that bike ride which exhausted Sam more. Craving sex, Sam hadn't spent an entire night with a woman since late last year before Annie left her. She had a few one-night stands after the break-up, but nothing more beyond brief sexual encounters and nothing ever leading to a second date. But Kim caught her eye when she'd gone on that ride weeks ago with the Trail Angels. Eight years younger than Sam, Kim had the perfect physique. This young woman aroused Sam in ways she hadn't felt in years.

"Cleveland!" Sam heard Travis from the tower behind her. "Dispatch says you got a call. Says it's urgent."

"Kinda busy here, Miller," Sam said over her shoulder, only to dive below a wave near shore to yank a young girl back to the sand.

"Says it's important, a call from home." Travis, well into his fifties, was more fatherly to Sam than just her supervisor. He was the one who hired her ten years ago, taking her under his wing when she was a young rookie. Without a father since she was twenty, Sam never rejected the kindness from him or his wife.

"Grandma knows I can't take calls at work." Sam continued to scan the surf line, wondering why her grandma would call dispatch on what was their most dangerous beach day in years. Because Sam lived right behind her grandparents' house, she helped care for them, but despite being in their early eighties, her grandparents were active and healthy. Since Grandpa Cleveland had retired at an early age from the police department in Mississippi, he stayed fit once they moved to San Diego. But what sort of urgency could it mean that her grandmother called the main lifeguard station to get in touch with her?

This was a red flag day – the sort of day Sam had hoped for in all her years as a lifeguard. She'd call her grandmother after her shift ended. Up to her thighs now, Sam's body jostled from the churning water. Another swimmer had been pulled into the riptide, so Sam kicked through the surging waves to reach the woman. It only took a few pumps of her legs to get the woman into shallower water. Sam had hardly been on dry sand all day. The waves had increased in velocity as the afternoon progressed. With this being the peak day of the swell, lifeguards had made well over two hundred rescues already. Sam rescued twenty-six swimmers since she started her shift this morning.

After she brought the swimmer to safety, she stood knee-deep in the water, ready to return to the angry sea at any moment. She scanned each approaching wave, ensuring no one was stuck in the ferocious surf. She

noticed three teens tromping through the shallow surf zone and waved her arms in the air. None of them had fins, and they looked like inexperienced ocean swimmers.

“Hey, y’all need to get out of the water. This is a red flag day,” she yelled to the guys. “It’s too dangerous for anyone to be out here. Back to shore!” She ducked under a tumbler then plucked a kid from the churning ocean and carried him to shore. She continued to clear the area until she heard Travis call her once again and approach her in the water.

Travis gripped her shoulder, pulling her to a halt. “Cleveland, you’re done for the day. It was your mom who called. Your brother’s been in an accident, says it’s bad. He’s been rushed to a trauma center, some hospital in Hattiesburg.”

Frozen for a moment, Sam stood in the water as the relief lifeguard dashed past her and into the surf zone. Another huge wave pounded the shore—the impact causing the ground to shake. Robert had been in an accident? Rushed to a trauma center? Taking one more glance behind her at the raging sea, she ran to her lifeguard station to retrieve her things, her thoughts now consumed with what could have happened to her big brother.

Chapter Two

Mississippi: Summer 2014

SAM WIPED THE sweat from her face after her quick jaunt across the parking lot to the hospital entrance and up the stairs to the second floor. A level two trauma center, Forrest General Hospital was the best place for Robert in all of Southern Mississippi. Alone in the hallway, Sam paced down the corridor and waited for the nurse to open the door to the ICU. With the fluorescent lights and white walls too bright at this early hour, Sam shaded her eyes as she waited in the long hall. Although she took a Xanax on the flight, she didn't sleep more than a few minutes shortly before landing. She always kept a fresh prescription on hand, but she rarely needed these pills since she'd moved to San Diego. She was lucky to have made it to the airport in time to catch the redeye, but she now felt the effects of the anti-anxiety meds and lack of sleep.

Once the nurse opened the door, Sam entered the ICU and rounded the corner toward Robert's room. She observed other patients in grave condition, hooked up to monitors displaying their vitals. Her experience as an EMT exposed her to horrific accidents and even, on occasion, patients dying in front of her. But nothing she'd seen could prepare her for this: her unconscious brother hooked up to tubes and leads, the monitors next to him flashing and displaying his vitals. She noticed that the ventilator was doing all the work, that Robert was not breathing on his own. Pale, wounded, and bandaged, Robert no longer looked like her robust brother—the one who'd always protected her when she was a child. A thick plastic tube ran from his mouth to a ventilator next to the bed. Sam stepped closer to the bed, noticing the gentle rise of Robert's chest as the machine breathed for him.

"Hi, Mama," Sam said and approached the chair where her mother sat. Relieved to have her mom here with her, Sam's eyes filled with tears as she once again glanced at Robert.

"Honey, I'm glad you got here so fast." Jane Cleveland pushed herself up from the chair next to the bed. Jane's plump arms pulled her close, the hug causing Sam to get more teary. She hadn't seen her mother for several

months, and so her embrace felt comforting and familiar. A nurse with many years of experience in trauma and emergency, Jane hadn't told Sam anything specific yesterday regarding Robert's medical condition or his prognosis – only that the doctors were still assessing his injuries.

Sam broke away from the hug and stood at the side of the bed and cupped her hand over Robert's. She recognized that he was barely alive, that the medications were keeping him in a heavily sedated state. His face lacked color, except for the bruising under his right eye and the abrasions on his forehead. The breathing machine and monitors reminded Sam of when her dad was in ICU ten years ago after his first heart attack. Overhead, a glaring fluorescent light shone on Robert's motionless body. Through the window, Sam saw the nurse's station and observed medical personnel bustling in and out of the surrounding rooms.

As an EMT, Sam knew Robert might not make it. All her mom told her on the phone yesterday was that Robert was with his friends Greg and Matt when a truck hit them as they were driving across a bridge over the river. Sam assumed Robert was drinking with his buddies from the canoe rental place where he worked part-time, the evenings during summer being when they would have a few beers after work before driving home.

But this week Robert had so much to celebrate after buying the reptile shop from Mr. Rizzo. The highlight of Sam's week was receiving a selfie of Robert as he held the key to the store and a placard that showed his name as the new owner. In his old Rizzo's Reptiles baseball cap, Robert beamed like a little kid.

"They've already done a few x-rays and two CT scans," Jane said and stared at Robert. "There's a small brain bleed but not as bad as I would've expected after an accident like this. They're still assessing the injury to the spine. With these sorts of spinal injuries, a lot can change after the first couple days. The doctors aren't sure about the extent of the paralysis, but right now, Robert is –"

"He's *paralyzed*?" Sam asked. "When will we know if he'll ever walk again?"

"The paralysis could be due to swelling from compressed nerves in the spinal cord. He could regain movement after the swelling goes down. I've seen improvement weeks later in some spinal cord injuries. Right now, we have to pray and wait. Honey, Robert is still alive. That's what matters. This is proof that God was watching over him during the accident. This is a level two trauma center, the best place for Robert in this part of Mississippi."

Sam had seen several neck injuries when swimmers got pulled under the pounding surf or fell head first over the top of the wave—going over the falls, as lifeguards called it. From what Sam witnessed, spinal cord injury victims typically experienced tingling in the hands and feet; others had no sensation at all below the neck. The protocol for lifeguards was to stabilize the body by packing sand around the victim’s neck before the paramedics got there. The people she’d rescued who sustained neck injuries were strapped onto a rigid body board and taken by ambulance to the hospital—some regaining full movement and others not so lucky.

Sam saved these people from drowning, but sometimes they ended up with a life wrought with daily suffering due to paralysis. A day at the beach and playing in the ocean for some beachgoers would sometimes lead to life-altering injuries, which changed the course of their lives forever. But the sort of accident that Robert endured was likely far worse than what a bodysurfer going over the falls experienced.

“Anything could happen at this point,” Jane said, “as far as a shift in his progress. But besides the spinal cord injury, it’s hard to say what the time under the water without air did to him, what sort of neurological damage, if anything.”

“Under *water*?” Sam said, quieting her voice and moving to the foot of the bed next to her mother. “First you’re telling me he may be paralyzed from a spinal injury, and now you’re saying he could have brain damage from being without oxygen? I thought Robert’s truck just hit the guardrail after a truck hit him head-on. Now he’s facing a spinal injury *and* brain hypoxia?”

“Robert’s truck went *through* the guardrail, honey, and then into the river. The impact must’ve been intense, but they’re not sure *where* the truck hit him—if it was in the back, the side, the front. We don’t know yet, but based on his injuries, I’d say it must’ve been a head-on collision. Must’ve been driving mighty fast for that old Chevy to...well, to break through the metal siding on that bridge and end up in the Bouie River.”

“Why didn’t he swim out of the truck? What about the person driving the other vehicle? Was the guy drunk?”

“We don’t know all the details, but I’d imagine Robert was pinned in the truck...or unconscious after the collision and not able to swim to the surface. Since Greg wasn’t as badly hurt, he was able to pull Robert from the truck and get him out of the water before the paramedics got there. Greg said he attempted to do mouth-to-mouth but couldn’t revive him. Kept trying till the paramedics arrived, God bless him.”

Sam knew that any average person could only stay under water for around two minutes, but Robert wasn't an average person. He had the body and lungs of a twenty-year-old. She clung to the hope that Greg pulled him from the water in time before he'd hit the point when lack of oxygen caused his brain to start dying.

"We'll know more in the next few days as to—" Jane raised a hand to her mouth as she began to cry. "Well, we'll know more...as to whether there's been significant brain damage. For now, we need to make sure Robert gets the best care possible."

"How long was he without oxygen?"

"They're not sure. Could've only been a couple minutes...or much longer. The first forty-eight hours are the most crucial when it comes to this sort of brain trauma...or injury to the spine. Lord knows I've seen enough of these sorts of accidents when I worked in trauma. Greg and Matt aren't as badly hurt since they were wearing seatbelts and Robert wasn't, but the police want to talk to them some more and especially to the man driving the other truck, if they can find him. They've tested Robert's blood alcohol level. Still waiting on those results at this point."

Sam leaned over the side of the bed to kiss Robert on the forehead. "I'm here, Robby. It's Sam, I'm right here by your side." She squeezed his hand and felt his fingers grip around her palm. "He squeezed my hand. I felt it."

"He's been doing that since they moved him to ICU." Jane straightened the collar of her shirt and cleared her throat. "It's an involuntary reaction to stimuli. He's in a drug-induced coma. They're keeping him on fentanyl, propofol, and morphine for now. From a medical perspective, we won't know the severity of the brain damage yet...or whether...he'll even gain consciousness. It's best to keep him sedated like this."

"So, he's in a coma, a drug-induced coma." Sam said it not so much for her mom to hear but more so to say it out loud, to try and make sense of what happened to her brother.

"For now, yes. Honey, there's something I haven't told you."

"What is it? Did the CT scan show something worse than you already told me?"

"The man driving the truck, well...he left the scene of the accident. Greg and Matt told the police that the guy drove right into Robert's truck. No telling if the man was drunk or high. No way to know since he still hasn't been found."

“A hit and run? Why haven’t they found him yet? Look what that guy did to Robert!”

“They only have a description of a grey truck, possibly a Ford. They’re looking for him. Robert’s friends gave the police a good description of the man.” Jane held Sam’s hand; the two of them stood over the bed, quiet for a moment as they glanced at the damage this man had done to Robert.

Jane smoothed the sheet over Robert’s body, running her hand through his hair then touching his face before standing closer to Sam. “Honey, have you eaten?”

“Just a muffin and coffee on the plane.”

“I’ll get you something from the cafeteria.” Jane bent down to kiss Robert’s cheek then squeezed Sam’s arm before leaving the sterile room.

Relieved to have time alone with Robert, Sam studied the monitors next to the bed. BP: 100/69. Ox: 97. HR: 71. Temp: 37C. His temple had a gash in it, the skin gauzed and taped. Damp blood seeped through the dressing. A rigid neck brace from his chin down to his sternum made his entire body seem erect and unfamiliar to her. His right eye, swollen shut, seeped with what Sam thought could be tears. His left arm had a splint on it. She hovered over him, examining the tube in his mouth that led to the wide plastic tubing connected to the ventilator.

“Robby, I’m here, and I’m not leaving your side. I’ll make sure you get the best care possible. I’m gonna help you get through this. You were there for me long ago. Now, it’s my turn. She shoved her hands in her pockets, feeling the oval pill she’d left there during the flight. Fingering the tablet, she considered taking it to calm her nerves. But here with Robert right now, she felt surprisingly calm despite what she feared could be a dire prognosis for her brother.

Sam saw a clear plastic bag on the chair of Robert’s belongings. She pulled out his damp and ripped jeans, a gold chain with the cross that Grandma Cleveland gave him for his eighteenth birthday, and his cellphone. Because Robert was always in and out of the water launching and collecting canoes, he’d recently bought the most water-repellant cellphone case out there. The phone itself, some new water-resistant Samsung he bought early this year, appeared brand new. Robert lay here mangled and unconscious, but his phone was completely undamaged.

She pried the waterproof casing off the phone, amazed that the phone battery still had life left and that the phone wasn’t waterlogged. She scrolled through photos he’d taken recently—some shots of kids in the canoes, a few of his coworkers, a bunch of the river and area where he

worked, and a couple of the dirt parking lot where Robert's old Chevy sat next to other dusty vehicles. In one photo, Robert was leaning against the passenger side door of his truck, smirking and flipping off whoever had taken the photo. She then glanced at the last few texts she and her brother wrote yesterday morning.

Robert texted:

Is she hot?

Would I go for a woman who wasn't hot?

No, is she hot in bed, dumbass. I figured you wouldn't date anyone not hot.

Let's just say Kim has got the moves. Never thought I'd date someone that young, but I'm seeing her again tonight. I'd rather just start the evening in bed, but I've arranged a proper date at the zoo. You know, dinner, a walk through the Reptile House, maybe a drink at her place, and then...well, you know.

Good for you. Can't wait to meet her. Maybe you can bring her out to Mississippi one day so I can see for myself if she's good enough for my little sister. Well, and so I can see you, too. I miss having you here during late summer. You'd love the river right now. Lots of class two rapids. Warm water, great for canoeing.

I've got my own fun here. There's a huge swell right now that's supposed to peak today. 15-foot waves, major rip currents, 73-degree water.

Sounds gnarly, but I'll stick with river rafting ;) You won't ever catch me in that rough ocean. No fucking way! If I swam in those huge waves, it'd be just my luck to-

The nurse then breezed into the room, so Sam put the phone back in the bag with the rest of Robert's belongings. She gripped her hand around Robert's. There'd be plenty of time later for her to reread those texts. Hunched over the side of the bed, Sam stroked Robert's head and imagined breathing life back into him as he had done for her over twenty years ago.

Chapter Three

San Diego: Summer 1990

SAM SQUINTED AT the sky ride overhead, the boxes connected to a thick cable and creating rectangular shadows on the pavement below. She leaned against her mama's arm while she waited for her father and brother to come out of the Reptile House. She looked into the dark cave where the snakes and giant lizards were kept and wondered which reptiles Robert was looking at right now. A cool breeze from the exhibit wafted over her bare legs and arms. Nearby, a bright blue peacock squawked, its voice echoing all throughout the zoo.

"They've been in there *forever*," Sam whined and leaned against her mother's hip. "When're they coming out? You promised we could get snow-cones when they're done."

"Samantha, don't be leaning on me," Jane said as she held Sam's sweaty hand. "It's too hot to have you so close to me right now."

"Maybe they're lost. They've been in there for *hours*."

"For Pete's sake, Samantha. We've only been standing here for fifteen minutes. You know this is Robert's favorite part of the zoo. Honey, be patient and keep quiet."

Sam had only wandered into the Reptile House one time, and ever since, she preferred to be way on the other side of the zoo where the zookeepers fed the elephants and giraffes. When she went into the Reptile House that one time, she stood far from the snakes' enclosures, not trusting that the thick glass was enough to protect her from the creatures. Robert assured her that no snake could get to her, that she was safe from a poisonous bite from the snakes. But he stood there—fearless and curious—with his hands and face pressed against the glass to get a close look at the critters.

The Cleveland kids spent a few weeks each summer with their grandparents in the cooler climate of San Diego when the weather in Mississippi was too hot and humid. Sam's parents joined them for only a couple weeks since that was all the time they could take off from work. Mama would return to her long shifts at the hospital, and Daddy would

go back to patrolling the streets of Covington County. Law enforcement was in Harold Cleveland's blood like it was for his father and grandfather – and so it would be for Robert once he graduated high school when he too would continue the long line of police officers in the Cleveland family.

They'd be returning to Mississippi tomorrow to get Robert set up for starting high school next month. For the past few weeks, he'd been bragging to Sam about starting ninth grade, saying he wouldn't have to walk with her to school every morning because his older buddies would be driving him to campus. Their return to Mississippi meant hot, humid weather, but Sam looked forward to being back home where Robert would build a raft out of logs and plywood. He promised to take her down the Okatoma Creek once the raft was finished.

Sam leaned her head on her mama's arm while people nudged in front of them to enter the Reptile House. All were going in there to see the twenty-five-foot python, the sidewinders, the poisonous frogs, and the flying lizards. Sam preferred to see reptiles only on the pages of Robert's picture books. He had two large aquariums back home – one filled with water snakes, the other with lizards he'd found along the Okatoma. But Sam had only seen the reptiles from a distance.

She thought the reptile enclosure at the San Diego Zoo was like an Egyptian labyrinth, filled with free-roaming snakes and lizards. She imagined that for an extra fee, guests could have the giant boa constrictor wrapped around them and get their picture taken. Someone would be picked at random from the crowd, choose a reptile of their choice, and feed it live rodents. Maybe Robert would get picked to do this.

"Robby gets to go in the Reptile House," Sam said and attempted to loosen her hand from her mom's. "Why can't I –"

"You're not to go in there. You know that. You don't like the snakes."

"Now that I'm eight, I think I won't be as scared."

"You're eight by only a couple weeks, little one." Jane kissed the top of Sam's head and pulled her into a tight hug. "Grandma said last Sunday you were just as scared as ever of those snakes."

Since she felt too old for her mama to be holding her hand out in public, Sam attempted to loosen herself from her mother's grip. She thought of freeing herself, running through the dark corridors of the Reptile House, and blindly searching for Robert as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

While she leaned against her mother's hip, Sam glared at the sky ride

overhead. The Skyfari ride wasn't included in their regular zoo membership, so the Clevelands would usually just ride the tour bus or walk the grounds of the park, stopping at each pen to watch the bears or lions, but they always ended their visit standing outside the Reptile House while Robert went inside to study the snakes. Sam stared at the cable holding the boxes until the motion and sway of the ride overhead made her dizzy. Jane finally released Sam's hand, but she remained next to her and leaned her head on her arm.

"Mama?" Sam asked and paused before continuing. "What did Uncle John mean by being saved?" She usually daydreamed during her uncle's boring sermons, but today she didn't understand what he meant by being saved. Saved from what?

"Well," Jane said and looked down at Sam, "it means having a place to go after we die, being assured of an eternal lasting life in Heaven no matter what we've done here on earth."

"Anyone can be saved? Even bad people can be saved?"

"Sure, honey. Remember how Uncle John talked about redemption? About saving people and getting them to reach a point of atonement for a mistake or something bad they've done to others. Uncle John tries to save people."

"You save people who are sick or hurt."

"Well, yes, but redemption is different. Someone like Uncle John tries to get people to realize they need saving and to come to the Lord. Remember how Uncle John talked this morning about the benefits of redemption and how that includes eternal life through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? This involves forgiveness of sins."

Sam thought about what her mother said and about what Uncle John said from the pulpit this morning. She still didn't fully understand what it meant to be saved. She felt safe right here and now next to her mother and with her brother and father nearby in the Reptile House.

It was a big word her uncle had used during the sermon this morning: Redemption. Sam couldn't wait to add this word to her summer vocabulary list once she got back to Grandma and Grandpa's house this evening. She'd put this new word between "redeem" and "reptilian." She'd also add "atonement" at the top of her list and look it up once she got home. She'd learned so many words this summer. Feeling like she'd be the smartest one in her third-grade class in the fall, Sam was excited to share her list with her cousin Rachel once they returned to Mississippi.

Jane took Sam's hand. "Honey, we need to go. We've gotta get back to

Grandma's to pack."

Sam had been standing there, staring at the yellow and red boxes carrying people in the sky, unaware that Robert and her dad had emerged from the Reptile House.

Sam's father set a firm hand on her shoulder and guided the family through the crowd. Swarms of other families headed to the gift shop far ahead of them.

"Daddy, how come we have to leave so early?" Sam asked and stared up at her father. "Can't we go see the monkeys one more time?"

"No, we best get going," Harold said and set his hand on Sam's head then scruffed her hair. "Grandma and Grandpa are expecting us home any minute now. Grandma's making your favorite, chicken and dumplings and ice cream sundaes for dessert."

"But the zoo doesn't close until dark." Sam glared at the bright sun overhead.

"Baby girl, you know we fly out early tomorrow," Harold said and laughed. "No monkeys for you this time. You've been to the zoo every weekend all summer long. It's time we all go back home. How 'bout I give you a piggy back ride to the car?"

Sam stopped walking and pouted her lips. She shook her head and folded her arms and refused to take another step.

"Hey now," Harold said and crouched down next to her. "None of that behavior from you, you understand? Grandma has taken you to the zoo every Sunday since y'all got here last month. You'll be back next summer. It's time for us to get back to Mississippi. The station misses your old dad. Besides, you start school soon. Come along now, Sam." Harold caught up to Jane then reached over to grab her hand.

While Mama and Daddy walked ahead a ways, Sam waited for Robert to catch up to her. She stared at her brother who hadn't stopped grinning since he exited the Reptile House. "Robby, which reptiles did you see?"

"Oh, the usual. You know, huge lizards. Even saw a kimodo dragon. That thing must've been ten feet long."

Amazed that such a large reptile was kept at this zoo, Sam wanted to learn more. "What does a kimono dragon eat? Would it eat a small dog or a cat?"

"*Kimodo*," Robert said. "Yeah, it could kill and eat small dogs and cats. At the zoo, it probably eats rodents and stuff like that. Maybe even whole chickens. In the wild, they eat off large carcasses like deer and even buffalos."

Robert remained quiet and slowed his pace as he studied the reptile brochure. Sam stopped walking then turned to face the Reptile House to try and get a glimpse of the kimodo dragon. Sam shuddered when she imagined a huge, ten-foot long reptile chewing on a buffalo carcass. She trotted to catch up to Robert as he continued to describe which reptiles he saw. Not used to his deeper voice after it'd started to change earlier this summer, Sam sometimes felt like her brother was no longer a kid and therefore was uninterested in hanging out with her. He'd grown a whole five inches this past year, his body now towering over her as he looked more and more like their dad.

"I saw a really cool lizard with an orange head and a blue body," Robert said, his voice tinged with excitement. "It's called a red-headed agama. Wouldn't mind having one of those in my collection. Oh, and I also saw a cool chameleon that changed colors right as I stood there watching it."

Sam would've liked to have seen a two-toned lizard and a chameleon that switched colors right in front of her. If he could convince Mr. Rizzo to sell those sorts of colorful lizards in his shop, Robert could bring one of those home someday. Sam wouldn't mind Robert having one of those in his collection—so long as it wasn't poisonous and she didn't have to feed it. "What about...the snakes? Did you see any copperheads?"

"Didn't see any of those, but I did see a couple huge African snakes. Lots of rare venomous ones. Saw a really cool diamondback, the kind found here in Southern California."

"They have diamondbacks at Grandma and Grandpa's?"

"Naw, they're mostly in the desert or out in the wild." Robert placed a hand on Sam's shoulder and guided her through the crowd.

Curious about what a diamondback looked like, Sam wished she'd been brave enough to get a glimpse of what Robert saw. She stared at her brother again, hoping he would tell her more about the colorful lizards, but she knew it was the snakes he preferred to study, especially the poisonous ones. Each afternoon after school, Robert would scavenge the riverbanks for a glimpse of a water moccasin. Warnings heeded, Sam would follow behind him, her every step guarded as she moved on the boulders and rocks along the river.

Sam looked back toward the Reptile House one more time then caught up to her parents as they followed the crowd toward the exit. She'd return to the zoo next summer and maybe finally be brave enough to go back into the Reptile House—maybe even standing close to the glass while she

observed the snakes and lizards with Robert right by her side.

Chapter Four

Mississippi: Summer 2014

EXHAUSTED FROM BEING at the hospital all day, Sam leaned against the old magnolia tree in her mom's yard and closed her eyes as she tried to will away the tension in her neck and jaw. Even though it was totally dark out, she felt warm on this humid August night near the Okatoma Creek. All she wanted to do was fall into bed, but she remained under the wide, cascading branches. She inhaled the damp air and attempted to relax. Over the years, the leaves and blossoms of this tree always created a shady canopy in the yard. When fierce winter storms hit, the branches sheltered them from the driving pelts of rain. An old swing still dangled from a thick branch, so Sam plopped on the wooden slat and kicked the grass under her feet until she swayed back and forth a few times.

The babbling creek, several paces from the house, used to lull her to sleep when she was a child, but after being gone so many years, Sam found that the churning water grated on her. Ever fearful of water moccasins and copperheads, Sam as a child kept her distance from the river unless Robert was nearby. The snakes would rarely slither across the rocks and grass and into the yard, but Sam always knew they were lurking nearby. Now as an adult, Robert had a vast collection of venomous snakes that he kept in secure glass enclosures out in the barn, which he'd converted into his own separate studio near the house. With Robert in the hospital for what would likely be a long time, Jane would have to take care of the critters, so long as Mr. Rizzo came over and showed her how to feed them. Sam didn't want to have anything to do with them. Since she still held onto that fear she'd felt as a child, she kept her feet above the ground as she swayed back and forth under the magnolia tree.

The nurses had urged Sam and Jane to go home, that they would call if Robert's status changed. Since she'd arrived at the hospital this morning, Sam noticed there'd been no fluctuations in his vitals. She knew if his blood pressure suddenly dropped or if his heart rate plummeted, then his body was not strong enough to fight the damage from the accident. But

confident that Robert was stable tonight, Sam came home to get some sleep.

Sam pulled a pill from her pocket and snapped it in half then tossed it to the back of her throat. The chalky, bitter residue lingered for a couple minutes as she waited for the medicine to calm her body and mind. It wasn't so much the sight of her brother being so infirm as it was being back in Mississippi near this creek that caused her to need this drug. The Okatoma carried so many secrets—memories Sam chose to put as far out of her mind as possible. She was grateful she'd brought the full bottle of Xanax, relieved that she could pop a pill every few hours now that she was back in Mississippi.

In the driveway, bright beams from a vehicle shone onto the house and into the yard. Sam squinted to see who'd pulled up at such a late hour. The lights from the car turned off, and the door creaked open. Sam hopped off the swing and hid behind the tree trunk; she scanned the driveway to see who'd arrived. Her heart sped up as she searched to see who might be on the property. In the dark, she couldn't see if the person had entered the house or gone around the side to the yard. Fortunately, the motion sensor light flashed a bright strobe on this unexpected visitor. Relieved to see that it was Annie, Sam's body relaxed as she strode to the side of the house and greeted her with a long embrace. After the break-up, the two of them chatted or texted a couple times a week, but Sam hadn't told her she was back in Mississippi and that Robert was in the ICU.

"Well, what brings Officer Wright here at such a late hour? This is *way* past your bedtime. How'd you know I was here?" Sam asked and kept her arms around Annie.

"Your mom called me this afternoon," Annie said and stepped back. "Actually, it's Lieutenant Wright." Annie stood there with hands on hips and a wide grin on her face.

"You got a promotion? You didn't tell me that. When did you make lieutenant?"

"A couple weeks ago. Seems like we haven't had much time to catch up lately. But, I had to see you tonight. I wanted to stop by the hospital but figured I should wait till Robert was out of the ICU."

"I was fixin' to call you soon. My mom didn't tell me she called you. She was by my side nearly all day."

"She assured me that Robert was stable, but she had a feeling you hadn't told me what was going on. I've been worried about you all day. You doing okay?" Annie set her hand on Sam's cheek and brushed the

hair from her face.

Sam shrugged and didn't attempt to speak, for she knew she'd start to cry. Instead, she buried her face in Annie's neck and wrapped her arms around her once again. Sam's body against Annie's felt warm and familiar; she leaned in closer to her soft, full breasts.

Their break-up had nothing to do with falling out of love. Several months ago, Annie left San Diego to move back to Mississippi to be nearer to her elderly parents and to return to her previous position with the police department—the same station where Sam's dad worked until he passed away.

But Sam had always been drawn to San Diego County—far different than the slower pace here in Covington County. Years ago, she made San Diego her home when she and Annie moved into the small cottage behind her grandparents' house. Sam took classes at SDSU, hoping eventually to get her bachelor's in biology before going to medical school. But San Diego didn't work for Annie, and eventually she moved back to Covington County.

As much as she missed Annie when they broke up, Sam vowed never to call Mississippi home. Sam was essentially fine with the break-up, reasoning that the age difference would eventually become a problem. Nearly thirteen years older, Annie spoke of things Sam couldn't relate to—aging parents, buying a home, settling down, saving for retirement. In what she felt to be the prime of her life, Sam at thirty-two years old enjoyed training for her next triathlon and dating around. Besides, settling down and maybe having a kid with someone that much older would've led to issues later in life. However, it was pointless to even consider these concerns since Annie ended up returning to her very first girlfriend shortly after moving back to Mississippi. But right now, with Annie in her arms, Sam felt calm and content.

"As always, you look great." Annie pulled away from the embrace and looked her over then cupped a hand on her deltoid. "You've bulked up. Are you doing the intense workouts again?"

"Not any more than usual," Sam said and glanced at Annie's soft midsection. "Just the usual trail rides and beach workouts with the other lifeguards. How about you? You back at the gym yet? Or are you too busy being a lieutenant?"

"Definitely busy. I'm at a desk most days now. Rarely even get out in the field except to assist with investigations now and then. Been mostly recruiting and hiring rookies fresh out of the academy. I get out there

occasionally to train and supervise them, but I'm mostly doing paperwork now. Since my surgery, my knees couldn't take working in the field for too much longer, but I'm finally back at the gym a couple days a week now that I've finished with PT. Anyway, with Marsha gone a lot, a day job seems to work out better for us."

"How's she doing?"

"Oh, the same, busy and gone a lot for work." Annie glanced at the ground and shook her head. "You know Marsha. Can't settle for mediocrity, always looking for ways to be promoted. You'd think she would've been fine as a DA here in Covington County till she retires, but she's taken on yet another position as a consultant for attorneys who need help handling difficult cases. Always looking for a challenge. She really hasn't changed much. She's in Dallas till Monday."

"I'm glad you stopped by. It's hard to settle down after such a rough couple of days." Sam linked her arm around Annie's and led her to the grassy area near the magnolia tree. As the creek churned nearby, they sat on a bench next to the tree. Despite this being August, the Okatoma's water level was high for summertime. The usual trickle of water sounded more like a steady surge of whitewater. Sam wondered how deep the water was where Robert's Chevy went through the guardrail and into the Bouie River, how far down he went until the truck hit the river bottom.

Sam finally felt relaxed, the heaviness of the day's events and lack of sleep causing her muscles to weaken. She leaned her body into Annie's and stared at the starless sky.

Annie was the only person besides Robert who knew why Sam had such an aversion to this creek, why being here sometimes turned her stomach. During all the years they were together, she never revealed all of the details to Annie, but she could tell that to some extent, Annie understood why this place still gave her nightmares. Right now, the other keeper of Sam's secrets lay in a coma, his damaged body fighting to stay alive. Annie next to her right now helped ease her through the uncertainty and fear about what lay ahead for Robert.

"I can stay as long as you'd like," Annie said and nestled her body closer to Sam's. "It's not like anyone's waiting up for me at home."

"If you went to the trouble of coming over here so late, you might as well keep me company all night. I figured I'd sleep in the barn while I'm back home this week. Much more comfortable than my old room upstairs. Robert's got it set up nicely, pretty much a full-on studio out there."

"In the snake house? You kidding me? You, the woman who can't be

ten feet near one of those things?"

"Well, you can protect me. You're a lieutenant now."

"I can protect you from people but not from those critters. Aren't some of them deadly, as in...illegal to own?"

"Now, don't go enforcing the law on us tonight. These are Robert's prized possessions. He's got them all secured, or so he says. Besides, we'll sleep far away from them. But let's stay out here for a while. It's nice being out here. With you, I mean."

"Sam, I should...probably go home later, but I can stay out here as long as you'd like."

Be it the Xanax, the exhaustion of being in the hospital all day with no sleep for so many hours, or the comfort of being next to Annie's warm body, Sam became sleepy. She inhaled deeply then exhaled slowly and rested her head on Annie's shoulder. The murmur of the nearby creek seemed less invasive to Sam once she fully relaxed her body into Annie's. She snuggled her body closer to Annie's then set her hand on Annie's leg. She sat in the same position which years ago always made Sam feel protected. Safe for now, she closed her eyes and felt that nothing would harm her.

Chapter Five

Mississippi: Summer 1990

SAM WANDERED ALONG the banks of the creek, carefully examining the ground with each step. In her brother's thick rubber fishing boots, she crawled atop a huge log and squinted from the sun reflected off the water while she watched Robert swim to the other side of the Okatoma. He quickly reached the other side of the creek, scurried up the slope, and grabbed the rope attached to one of Old Miss Patterson's giant oak trees. Then he soared through the air and jumped into the creek. Robert swam every chance he got when the temperature was warm enough to swim and the water level was at its highest. With this being the end of August, the water was plenty warm for swimming, but Sam preferred to stay on shore. Every afternoon when they were home in Mississippi, if Robert wasn't in the water, he'd search for snakes along the shore. Determined to catch a poisonous water moccasin, he risked getting bitten in order to add to his reptile collection.

His mother, aware of his risky hunts, told him and Sam about victims of the bite—the sudden drop in blood pressure, numbness throughout the entire body, then extreme weakness. Next, without anti-venom, the victim would suffer from hemorrhaging, neurological shutdown, heart failure, and impending death. Based on her medical experience, Mama described victims who were unable to get the anti-venom in time, of large, grown men whose bodies shut down before their brains had. She told them of the look of panic in their eyes—the awareness that death was imminent. Pretty soon a coma-like stupor would happen, then complete paralysis, and within hours, if the victim didn't get anti-venom, there was no chance of survival. Regardless, Robert still hunted water moccasins.

Convinced the area around the log was free of snakes, Sam crouched down, hoisting the rubber boots up past her knees. She watched Robert swim to the other side of the Okatoma. Old Miss Patterson often remained perched on her front porch shaking her fist as they played in the creek. Since she didn't have kids or a husband, Miss Patterson had nothing better to do than to shoo the Cleveland kids off her property. Sam was

grateful that a body of water separated the Cleveland property from Miss Patterson's old house. Sam never so much as swam to the other side of the Okatoma for fear the old woman would holler at them as they played in the water.

"Come on, Sam! Watch how this is done," Robert said then pulled the rope up onto the shore, tromping up the slope as far as the swing would allow him to go. He stepped onto some blackberry thickets then swung high above the water. "Whoo-hoo!" he screamed as he flew in the air. He cannon-balled into the water then sunk below the moving current. Sam sat up, holding her breath as she waited for Robert to surface.

She heard him gasp for air downstream as she balanced on the log. "Quit horsin' around! And get off Miss Patterson's property. Mama and Daddy says to stay off it 'cuz she's a crazy old woman."

"I don't care *what* she says to us. She don't scare me one bit. She's nothing but a miserable old spinster. Come on, Sam, the water's warm today."

Sam sat down and hugged the boots to her chest. She tossed pieces of bark into the Okatoma, imagining them as tiny ships traveling to the end of the river. After she plucked a flower from an azalea shrub behind her, she tossed it into the water and stared at the bright pink blossom until it disappeared far downstream.

With their house so close to the creek, Sam often heard the loud rapids downstream—the part of the creek her father told her to never go near because of the dangerous current. Down the creek a ways, the Okatoma joined with the Bouie River, the area where Robert said he'd one day explore in the raft he was making. But Sam rarely wandered too far from their house. That's because down a ways from the Cleveland property was a sandy area locals called No Man's Landing where lots of rowdy rivergoers would set up camp for the night, only to leave the sandy shore strewn with empty beer cans and trash. Sam's father, when in uniform, would occasionally wander down to No Man's Landing to scare off any trespassers, and he always told Sam and Robert to not wander down to that area.

Sam shaded her eyes to catch a glimpse of Old Miss Patterson stomping across her overgrown lawn toward the creek. Miss Patterson's decrepit house sat tucked back behind dense red buckeye bushes and huge oak trees. Nothing more than a small shack, the house seemed barely large enough for someone to live, but Sam knew to never step foot onto her property. When she saw Miss Patterson approach the creek bank, Sam

cowered behind the azalea shrub and hollered to Robert to get out of the water.

Miss Patterson stood at the creek and waved a fist in the air. "Off my property, you damned kids!"

Certain that Miss Patterson couldn't see her, Sam leaned into the shrub to better hear what she had to say. The leaves of the bush tickled her face and arms as she peered through the thick foliage.

"Been telling you to not eat my blackberries," Miss Patterson said and paced back and forth along the river. "This is private property! You been causing all sorts of racket all summer."

"I wouldn't eat your rotten berries!" Robert yelled from the middle of the creek. "The rats probably ate your nasty fruit. And you know just as well as I do that this creek here doesn't belong to you. It's public area out here in the water."

"You've been vandalizing my property all summer. I've a right mind to call your father and tell him you've been stomping through my blackberry bushes."

"You go ahead and do that. Like that's gonna make my dad stop us from going in the creek. And besides, we haven't done nothing to your property. We've barely been home all summer."

"I've a right mind to give Harold a call tonight and tell him what you've been doing to my trees, but for now, this'll teach you!" Miss Patterson reached for the rope swing Robert tied onto her oak tree last summer then yanked on the thick twine, attempting to loosen it from the branch overhead. Not able to release the rope from the tree, she instead looped the swing far up into the branches. Now, the rope dangled too high for Robert to reach it. "If I see you tie another rope on my tree, I'll call the police and have them arrest you for trespassing. You hear me?"

"You really think my dad's actually gonna have us arrested for being along your side of the creek? We've never stepped beyond the creek bed. I'd never go near your old house. Probably infested with rats." Robert dove below the surface and stayed under for what must've been two full minutes. He came up and gasped for air and swam toward Sam.

When she saw that Robert was in the shallow water, Sam crept away from the azalea shrub and hid partially behind a fallen log. She caught another glimpse of Old Miss Patterson at the water's edge with her fist hoisted in the air as she once again yelled at Robert. But soon the miserable old woman stomped across her lawn toward her house.

Robert exited the water, shaking his wet, shaggy hair on Sam, who

now stood near the creek. "Let's go upstream a ways. Gotta find me a water moccasin." Robert grabbed the metal snake tongs he'd left next to Sam while he swam. Since he'd been an employee at Rizzo's Reptiles for a few months now, Robert would occasionally bring home lizards or nonvenomous snakes. Sam didn't mind so much that he brought home lizards, but the snakes creeped her out, even the nonpoisonous kinds.

Sam trailed close behind Robert, her steps loud and floppy in his rubber boots. She peered across the span of water to the crazy woman's house. Her front door was propped open with a rocking chair that faced the creek. Miss Patterson was likely inside skinning a possum she'd shot and killed in her yard.

As they followed the creek bank, Sam crouched below low brush to get farther up the creek. Brittle twigs scraped against her arms as she stooped under a low-hanging tree. Up ahead, Sam knew there was a perfect swimming hole where Robert liked to swim, but to get there, they had to hug the edge of the water—where water moccasins lurked. Sam followed closely behind Robert, placing her feet exactly where he stepped. At times she had to trot to catch up to him, so she scampered behind, careful to avoid stepping on one of those deadly snakes.

As she plodded forward, Sam felt protected with her brother a couple feet ahead. Relaxed and finally able to take in the scenery, Sam glimpsed across the creek to see lush foliage. A thick wall of shrubbery framed the creek bed—the woods beyond the water so dark and unfamiliar.

Suddenly, Robert halted and waved an arm behind him. He paused then lurched forward, stepping on a slithery creature. Sam noticed it immediately—a greyish-colored snake. She backed away, scurrying up the rocks and twigs to get as far away as possible. As she leaned against a prickly bush, she risked getting scraped to avoid the serpent. While he pressed his foot on it, Robert used the metal tongs and secured the snake by the neck.

"What a beauty," Robert said and held the snake's twisted body up to Sam. It squirmed as Robert leaned in to examine it.

"Is that a water moccasin?" Sam asked, fearful he'd lose his grip.

"Naw, it's just a ratsnake. It's totally harmless."

"A rattlesnake?" She stepped back even farther up the slope, falling back on a prickly shrub.

"No, a ratsnake. It eats rats. They're not poisonous. Wanna touch it?"

She shook her head but took two steps closer to see for herself what a ratsnake looked like. She'd seen pictures of water moccasins, and this

snake from what she could tell seemed an identical match. Dark grey like the moccasin, the ratsnake could very well bite her if she got too close. A bite could be painful, those fangs piercing the skin and causing her to bleed. If a ratsnake could catch and kill rats, then it surely could harm her.

“Not all snakes are bad,” Robert said and released the serpent into the brush far behind them. Sam got closer to Robert and continued to tread upstream. Once at the watering hole, Robert removed his T-shirt then stepped into the creek. After he dove below the surface, he disappeared for a couple minutes. Sam stood atop a huge log then scanned the surface of the water and searched for his body.

Robert finally emerged downstream then did the backstroke to return. “Hey, Sam, come in the water! It’s calm here. No snakes around here.”

Sam studied the vicinity next to the log, seeing no evidence of ratsnakes or moccasins. She shook her head and sat down. One could never be too careful when it came to water snakes.

“It’s like swimming in Grandma and Grandpa’s pool in San Diego. Or in La Jolla like we did last week. You stayed in the ocean for an hour riding the waves with me. The water is the same here, even calmer. Come on, don’t be a baby,” Robert said then swam to where it was shallow. “See? No strong rapids or nothing here. It’s even nicer than La Jolla Shores which you love. It’s no different here in the Okatoma.”

“They don’t have water snakes in La Jolla like they do here.” Sam peered at the rocks and twigs along the river.

“Yeah, but they’ve got stingrays and jellyfish, and that didn’t seem to bother you one bit.”

“Can’t die from stingrays or jellyfish like you can from one of those copperheads or moccasins. You know what Mama told us about those snakes.”

“What if I carry you in so you won’t have to worry about snakes along the side of the creek? You’re safe out here. If any snake slithers across the water, I’ll save you, I promise. You’re being a wimp, Sam. Come in the water.”

Sam considered this. She’d become so hot sitting in the glaring sun. Again, she scanned the edge of the creek, seeing nothing but tadpoles. “Will you save me if the current starts to carry me away?”

“Sam, come on. Don’t be afraid. Of course I’ll save you.”

Without more thought, she kicked off the rubber boots then leaned over so that Robert took her in his strong arms and carried her out into the middle of the creek. Wiry and thin at eight years old, Sam felt like she was

flying over the water as Robert held her. After he released her, Robert swam out to the deeper part and motioned for Sam to swim to him. Both Cleveland kids had taken swimming lessons when they were younger, and Sam did enjoy swimming in Grandma and Grandpa's pool, but this was a different type of swimming altogether.

The frigid water stung her skin, but the more she swam, the more she adjusted to the chilly temperature. She quickly felt free in the creek, the water soothing her body. She splashed Robert and swam closer to him then squealed when he sloshed her with a huge wave of water. She practiced her swim strokes, slicing her arms through the water and kicking her legs. She still couldn't get the breathing down right, but she remembered to kick from her hips and not just her feet. One of the fastest swimmers in her class last summer, Sam was strong in the water. Here in the Okatoma, her body moved through it with ease.

Sam went a couple feet below the surface, opening her eyes to see nothing but blurry, brownish water. She stayed underwater for a minute, her sleek body moving through the gentle current. She returned to the surface and took a deep breath and floated on her back for a moment. After she dunked under the water once more, she emerged to notice that Robert was nowhere in sight—not in the water, not on shore, nowhere near her. Suddenly, that same fear returned to her. Could the snakes swim out this far? Did they only dwell on the edge of the creek? Petrified, she treaded water, her arms and legs flailing but keeping her afloat.

Finally, Sam caught sight of Robert standing on shore far upstream and hollered to him—her voice barely audible above the babbling creek. To get to Robert, she'd have to kick hard, especially against the strong current. Or, she could exit the water here and run along the creek where she might encounter snakes. She recalled Robert saying it was rare for a water moccasin or copperhead to venture into the middle of the creek, so she lay on her tummy and kicked hard until she got closer to Robert. Within minutes, she made it to him.

Immediately, Robert met Sam in the water then scooped her in his arms and carried her far above the shoreline to where the sun beat down on large boulders. They smoothed out their wet T-shirts on shore and waited to dry off before heading home. The bright sun filtered through the scattered clouds. Sam savored the last hours of the afternoon. Finally safe, she leaned back on a rock and let the sun warm her body.

She knew Robert would always be there to save her.

Chapter Six

Mississippi: Summer 2014

SAM SHUT THE door to the barn where she left Annie sound asleep on the couch. Sam traipsed across the damp lawn then tiptoed up the stairs and across the wooden slats of the front porch to remove the tarp from Robert's old ten-speed. She glanced back to make sure Annie wasn't awake and seeing what she was doing. The bright morning sun reflected off the creek. Sam hopped on Robert's old bike and pedaled down the dirt road toward the Bouie River where the accident happened less than forty-eight hours ago. Close to where the Cleavelands lived, the Okatoma joined the Bouie where Robert and Sam would sometimes venture when they tired of the calmer waters of the Okatoma. The bridge was only a few miles from home. Sam needed to see where Robert's truck went into the river. Certain the ride to the bridge would only take thirty minutes on the bike, she hadn't calculated riding on a bicycle with gears that only shifted intermittently.

Atop the old ten-speed, Sam pedaled hard until she made it up the hill, glad to be a few inches above the ground and away from the snakes' reach. Few cars passed her at this early hour. For about ten minutes, she rode on the street, gaining speed with each pump of her legs. When the road narrowed, she cut over to the trail where the terrain was mostly packed dirt. Sam had always been a mountain biker, never a road cyclist. As an EMT, she'd witnessed too many cyclists getting hit by cars, often resulting in severe injuries.

But Sam only had two choices this morning—Robert's vintage ten-speed or her old Schwinn with the banana seat that she hadn't ridden since she was twelve. She opted for the bike that would get her to her destination faster—Robert's ten-speed Raleigh. Accustomed to her Specialized Camber that had front and back suspension, Robert's road bike felt stiff to her. She felt every little bump in the path, the loose gravel and protruding rocks causing the handlebars to vibrate up through her shoulders and into her back.

Years ago, Robert planned to get into road cycling and went to several garage sales in search of a used bike. He bought this 1970s Raleigh from

some guy in Collins and fixed it up, determined to put in a hundred miles each week with hopes of eventually competing in the Ironman, but he never got past cycling more than ten miles a couple times a week here in Covington County. Sam was aware he'd likely never be able to ride this bike again.

Robert's bike, its frame much too large for Sam's body, creaked as she rode along the trail near the Bouie River. The skinny tires had no traction and slipped on the muddy terrain, but Sam gripped the handlebars and barreled down the trail. As the path veered up and around the next corner, she stood and shifted to a higher gear, her quads and calves burning with each pump of the pedals.

With the bridge in sight, Sam picked up her pace. Stuck in high gear, she rode over loose gravel and rocks, through puddles and sludge, sweating as she headed for an incline at the bend in the Bouie River. Barely out of breath, she pedaled the last several yards without taking her eyes off the bridge. Even from afar, she could see the opening in the guardrail. Once she got closer to the accident site, she caught a glimpse of the yellow caution tape fluttering in the wind above the river. She propped the bike against a rock then stood to the side and peered below to search for any signs of Robert's Chevy.

Sam then noticed a police car approaching the far end of the bridge. After the vehicle stopped, a woman in a uniform got out and walked briskly toward her. Sam tensed when she recognized Annie.

"Well, good morning, early-riser. Thought I might find you here," Annie said and glanced at the river.

"Can't stand to be away from me, huh?" Sam said with a smirk. "Thought you were still sound asleep in the barn. Or maybe on your way to the station."

"Well, I wanted to take a look at the accident site. Based on what Greg told me, I wanted to see for myself where the truck went into the river. The captain ordered a special tow truck to pull the truck from the water. Should be here this afternoon or tomorrow at the latest."

"How'd you guess I'd be here?"

"I had a hunch. Besides, you think I'd sleep with you last night and not get to say good morning?"

"I'd say that sleep is the key word here with you being on the couch all night," Sam said then peered a few feet down to the water coursing under the bridge. "Besides, you're the one who kept saying you had to get home."

“Wasn’t in any condition to drive home at two in the morning. You know how tired I was. Well, it would’ve been nice to get a good morning before you’d left.”

“Didn’t want to wake you. Well, and kissing you goodbye in the morning is a thing of the past, remember?” She laughed then approached the yellow tape, eager to look at the spot where Robert’s truck went into the water.

“I would’ve given you a ride. No sense in you riding on rough terrain to get here.”

“Rough terrain?” Sam stepped closer to the opening in the metal guardrail and studied the river to see if she could see any signs of the truck. “Most of the ride here was along the road. Pretty boring ride, actually.”

“Oh, right, this is barely a warm-up for you. Hey, so listen, Robert’s blood alcohol results came back.”

Sam stood there frozen above the Bouie River, expecting Annie to tell her Robert’s blood alcohol was well above the legal limit. “Yeah, so how drunk was he?”

“Robert had no alcohol in him. No trace at all.”

“Nothing? He was totally sober? Then he...he was alert and not impaired in any way when the accident happened?”

“They’re still waiting on more toxicology results. Could’ve been weed or something else.”

“Not Robert. He never got into weed. He only drank beer. You know that. Then it had to have been the other guy’s fault.” Sam’s body was suddenly filled with rage at what this man did to her brother. She recalled seeing Robert hooked up to the ventilator – all because of this guy hitting Robert’s truck and causing it to careen over the side of this bridge and into the water.

Sam stood at the ledge and tried to see below the surface for any signs of Robert’s Chevy. The morning light reflected on the rippled water, making it difficult for her to see anything under the murky surface. She paced back and forth, squinting to try and view anything submerged. Then she caught a glimpse of a large dark object way below the surface. She glanced to the side of the river, figuring she could scramble down the riverbank, wade in the water, and swim out to the middle where the truck was. But here atop the bridge would be the quickest entry into the river since it’d only be about an eight-foot drop into the water. She fumbled to kick off her sneakers then peeled off her socks and tossed them to the side.

"Sam, what are you doing?" Annie pulled Sam by the arm and guided her away from the ledge.

Sam yanked her arm from Annie's grip then returned to the ledge and glanced down to the water once more. She took off her jacket and tossed it onto the ground as she paced for a moment. "I need to see what this guy did to the truck...I have to know." The water shimmered in the morning light as Sam stared at the dark object below the surface. Then, she stepped off the bridge and leapt into the water.

"Sam, I can't have you doing this!" Annie yelled from atop the bridge. "Let the officials handle this. You know nothing about the currents in this river."

"I've lived near the Okatoma most of my life. Water is water to a lifeguard. I've been in far worse conditions in the ocean. I know what I'm doing."

"You can't just cross police tape to do your own investigation." Annie paced toward where Sam had swum. "I told you, they'll haul the truck from the water soon."

"Annie, it's not like I'm gonna be able to move the truck once I get to it. Besides, technically, I'm essentially part of law enforcement."

"Law enforcement? That's a stretch. It's not like you have the authority to arrest people. You're a lifeguard. You save people from drowning. Besides things are different in Mississippi, especially when it comes to a river. You're a guard at California beaches where they've got waves, rip currents, and stingrays."

"Annie, I got this!" Sam yelled then disappeared under the water and swam below a few feet. The saltwater usually made Sam's body so buoyant when she swam in the ocean, but the fresh water of the Bouie River quickly carried her body to a deeper depth. The farther down she swam, the colder it got.

Sam scanned the water for any signs of Robert's Chevy then swam down a ways until she was near the bottom. Seeing nothing but the blurry river bottom, she swam up to the surface for air. The frigid water caused her skin to sting and her muscles to cramp. But she dove under until she felt the smooth, round rocks at the bottom then kicked until she was several feet away from the bridge. She figured the current had moved Robert's truck farther down river, so she searched until she could make out a large object of some kind. Out of breath, she ascended to the surface to catch a glimpse of Annie standing atop the bridge.

"Sam, this is crazy!" Annie yelled from the bridge. "Get out of the

water now.”

“I got this, Annie. I think I see the truck here.” Sam submerged then swam closer to the large object until she felt a bumper. She ran her hand along the metal then felt the truck bed. She used all that she’d learned in lifeguard training years ago to remain under water for several more seconds as she ran her hand along the side of the truck where she felt a huge indentation in the driver’s side door—at least two feet wide.

Unable to stay under, Sam broke the surface of the water and gasped for fresh air. Trembling from the chilly water, she closed her eyes and concentrated as she took several slow, deep breaths then willed her lungs to carry the oxygen into her blood.

Sam went below the surface again, diving deep until she returned to the truck. She squinted under the water, only able to make out a blurry image. As she swam along the indented driver’s side door, she made her way to the front of the vehicle, running her hand on the hood of the truck. Sam couldn’t feel any signs of impact on the hood or front bumper, so she floated and used both hands to figure out where the other vehicle hit Robert. It must’ve been a head-on collision, she thought as she ran her hands over the hood, the bumper, the front windshield. But the front of the car seemed intact, free of any sign of impact.

Then she swam to the passenger door and ran her hand along the entirety of that side, noticing a huge indentation and another massive dent in the front right fender. The passenger door had withstood some sort of impact, the metal caved in by a foot or so. But without seeing the Chevy out of the water, Sam couldn’t be certain how many separate indentations were in the truck. What she knew for certain was that Robert’s Chevy had been hit more than once.

Sam returned to the surface, filled her lungs with air, then dove back to the bottom of the river. Again, she felt the smashed passenger side door then swam back to the driver’s side. Her hands ran over the large indentations, the metal caved in where Robert had been driving just two days ago. The truck was concave on both sides, folded in like an accordion.

Sam rose to the surface and gasped for air. She looked below the surface and saw the blurry image of Robert’s mangled Chevy. Right now, Robert lay in a coma as his brain and body fought to stay alive—all because of some guy that hit him and ran like a coward.

Sam swam toward the bridge, the chilly water causing her muscles to become even more stiff. Annie sprinted down the bridge and past the

rocks to make it to the river's edge.

"Annie, I don't think Robert was hit head-on!" Sam yelled, out of breath and shivering as she swam to the side of the river where Annie stood waiting for her. She held out one of those silver rescue blankets found in first aid kits. Sam managed to pull her body onto the muddy shore, and Annie wrapped the Mylar blanket around her, holding her in her arms.

"Oh, honey, you're so cold," Annie said and pulled her closer. "Let's get you in the car where I can blast the heat and warm you up."

"Seems like...the guy must've hit Robert more than once," Sam said, her teeth chattering as she buried her face against Annie's warm neck. "There are massive indentations on the right side of the truck...and another huge concave area on the driver side door. I don't think it was a head-on collision. I think the guy rammed Robert's truck off the bridge. They've got to get the truck out of this river soon to examine the damage. Annie, you need to find that man. He needs to pay for what he's done."

Sam left the river's edge then sprinted up the hill. Annie followed behind, huffing as she finally caught up to her. Sam plopped down on the warm pavement, out of breath as she glared at the spot in the water where Robert's Chevy had plummeted to the bottom of the river. For years Robert was her protector as the two of them would play in and around the Okatoma Creek. Now it was Sam's turn to protect him, to help find this man who caused Robert to be on life support as he barely clung to life. Sam returned to where she'd left Robert's bike against the railing and hopped on to head back to the house before going to the hospital.

"Sam, hold on now," Annie said and yanked her by the arm. "Let me take you home, then to the hospital. You need to get into dry clothes. I'll get you to the hospital soon. Your mom's there now. She left me a message. She was worried about you, didn't know where you were."

Sam, overcome with fear, fell into Annie's arms as tears flooded from her eyes. "He can't die, Annie. He can't. He's...he's always been there for me. I can't lose him."

"I know, baby, I know." Annie held Sam and caressed her hair. She rocked her gently as Sam continued to sob. "I'll call the captain later and see if he can get that tow truck here sooner. Sam, I'll make sure we find the guy who left the scene of the accident. I won't stop till we find him."

Sam pulled herself away from Annie then walked back to the ledge of the bridge. As she took one more look into the water, Sam silently promised to her brother that she'd find the man who caused this accident.

The Bouie River, joined nearby by the Okatoma, held too many secrets — of Robert's recent accident and of the awful day years ago that he and Sam vowed to always keep buried.

Chapter Seven

Mississippi: Summer 1990

A STEADY MIST drenched Sam's clothes as she ran along the creek bed and then traipsed across the grass to head home. Robert had already returned to the house an hour ago once the sky clouded over, but Sam lingered behind. She hoped the clouds would give way to sunshine, but within minutes, the skies greyed as an early evening storm approached. Her damp hair whipped in front of her face, blinding her. When she reached the yard, she sprinted to get closer to shelter as a burst of wind shook the branches of the magnolia tree, causing the empty swing to sway back and forth.

Heavy pelts of rain soaked the pathway leading to the house—leaving Sam's boots muddy. The sprinkles turned into a heavy downpour, forcing her to quickly seek refuge under the eaves of the porch. A gust of wind slapped the screen door against the side of the house as Sam tromped up the stairs.

Once on the porch, Sam shook the water from her hair then locked the screen door behind her. She stood in the entryway and kicked off her muddy boots. Even though she secured the flimsy wooden door onto the latch, it continued to rattle from the fierce wind. She then craned her neck to peek in the front room to view her mother perched in the recliner, enthralled by her game shows. A blue light emitted from the TV and flickered on the walls in the dark room. Jane would normally be at work at the hospital right now, but on nights off like this, she sat for hours watching videotapes of her favorite old game shows from the seventies.

Down the hall, Robert practiced his guitar, the words he sang familiar to Sam. She'd learned the lyrics to some of the songs from the fifties and sixties whenever Robert strummed the melodies. He'd been playing this type of music for a few years now, and in that time, he'd gone from squeaking out Beatles songs or the lyrics of Simon and Garfunkel to eventually carrying a tune and sounding just like the original singers. Right now, he crooned out the words to "Turn! Turn! Turn!" with such

precision that Sam thought he was playing a recording of the Byrds.

Sam tilted her head and concentrated on the words Robert sang. He'd been practicing this song for the past few nights in preparation for Sunday's service. Pastor Dan, the new youth minister, would be pleased when he heard Robert sing this with the praise band. Sam recognized the familiar passage from Ecclesiastes that Pastor Dan had her and the other kids memorize at Sunday school a few weeks ago. Rapt by her brother's voice, she tapped her fingers to the beat on the side of the wall, concentrating on the melody Robert played. She took a few steps down the hallway, closer to Robert's room, then slid her back down the wall until she was sitting on the plush carpet. With her clothes still damp from the rain, Sam shivered and pulled her knees up to her chest.

Robert sang softly while he strummed the strings to his guitar but abruptly stopped and tapped his hand on the side of the guitar a couple times.

Sam held her breath as she awaited the return of Robert's soothing voice. She closed her eyes until she heard the soft rhythm of his fingers strumming the strings and the gentle humming of his voice. Since Sam had memorized that passage from Ecclesiastes, she recognized that it was practically identical to the words that Robert sang right now. The wind continued to whip the branches against the windows, the summer storm building in intensity.

"Not a *reason*," Robert mumbled and then started in again with the words. Since his voice changed a few months ago, he now sounded like an entirely different person belting out the words to these old songs.

Sam exhaled a long, full breath then stood and took a few steps down the hall, closer to the front room. Robert's voice and his guitar became fainter the farther she walked. Outside, the wind rattled the windows and doors to the house as tumultuous sheets of rain pelted against the roof.

"Is that my big girl?" Jane called from the living room.

Sam leaned against the wall in the hallway that led into the living room, her clothes still damp and soiled. She'd seen these game shows with her mother numerous times, the celebrity guests looking familiar to her any time she sat long enough to see who the winners were. She took a few steps closer to her mother who sat in the La-Z-Boy with a metal TV tray next to her.

Robert's voice resonated from down the hall.

Jane squinted from the glare of the TV and glanced at Sam, but she quickly returned to her show. "Come in here and give your mama a hug.

Haven't seen you all day since you and Robert been playing down by the creek." She didn't take her eyes off the TV as she watched a *Name That Tune* episode, Mama's favorite show in the lineup. Somewhat of a show tune expert, Jane usually guessed the songs in less than six notes.

"Hah! I knew it! 'Easter Parade.' Got it in just five notes." Jane slammed her drink on the metal TV tray, the ice clinking in the glass. "Come closer, baby girl. Why you hidin' over there by the wall like some scared dog?" Jane pressed pause on the VCR and leaned forward. "Honey, do your mama a favor. Turn the oven on to 425. I'm making your favorite, fish sticks and tater tots. While you're in there, get your mama another drink. Daddy called and said he'll be a bit late, said he's gotta monitor the bridge to make sure it doesn't get washed out in the storm."

Down the hall, Robert strummed the guitar and continued to sing the rest of the song.

The wind picked up again, even though the rain had decreased. Sam felt the gust seep through the screen door—a warm, suffocating draft, like the damp breath of someone behind her. They'd had heavy summer storms all week, the rainwater causing the Bouie River nearby to swell and nearly wash out the bridge.

Robert paused in strumming the guitar. Sam then glanced to the darkened window. The chill entered through the tiny space between the glass and wall. The sudden silence from down the hallway made the wind outside sound so loud and furious. Next to the kitchen window, a tree's branch squeaked against the pane. Sam took a stool from the pantry and scooted it close to the cupboard above the refrigerator. She stood atop the chair and reached to grab a half-empty bottle of what her mama called her drinkey-poo. Sam used both hands to hold the jug as she poured the clear brown liquid into the glass, adding two ice cubes as her mother preferred. Sam walked out of the kitchen, through the entryway, and back into the living room to set the drink on the TV tray.

Jane glanced at Sam then took a long slurp of her beverage. "Samantha, honey, what are you doing in here with those filthy clothes on? You better not be soiling that couch. Daddy oughta be home soon. Hopefully he's not stuck on the other side of the river from the flooding, but once he's home, he better not see you like that. He's liable to be tired and not in the mood to see you covered in dirt. Get out of those clothes and into the bath right now."

Sam tapped her feet against the TV tray, causing the glass of liquor to clank against the metal surface. She hummed along as the closing credits

of *Name That Tune* played.

"Samantha, for God's sake, stop that racket! Between Robert practicing that song over and over and you bothering me while I'm trying to watch my shows, you kids are wearing on my nerves. I swear, sometimes y'all drive me batty." She stared at the TV as the opening of the next game show began. Betty White and Dom DeLoise made up the panel on this episode of *The Liar's Club*. Before they introduced the special guest of the night, Jane glanced at Sam. "Honey, the sooner you get your bath, the sooner you can eat and watch TV or color in the coloring book Daddy got you last week at the zoo. Hurry before he gets home."

Sam wandered down the hall and paused in the doorway to Robert's room. She noticed he'd set the guitar on the bed, but he was fixated on an opened book—the pages revealing slick photos of snakes and lizards. Sam entered his room and sat next to him on the bed then leaned against him and viewed the colorful pictures.

"Robby, you finish practicing your song?" Sam leaned in closer to get a better view of the colorful reptiles.

"What song?" Robert pulled the book away from Sam's face.

"That song you been singing all night, the one about the seasons and all that."

"Sam, why you gotta be listening in all the time?"

"I overheard you singing it is all, the one called 'Turn! Turn! Turn!' that Mama used to sing to us when we were little."

"Well, I've put a spin on it. I've taken a passage from Ecclesiastes and changed it a bit."

"You mean the one from the third chapter?" Sam asked and proceeded to recite the verses she'd recently memorized. "'To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to—'"

"Yeah, that section. But I'm changing it up a bit to better fit the big Sunday service."

"It's not just for the praise band?"

"Naw, this one might speak to the whole congregation. I'm calling it 'To Everything,' kinda like an ode."

"An ode? Sounds pretty boring to me."

"Some of the greatest poems ever written were odes, like the ode by John Keats called 'To Autumn' or 'Ode to the West Wind' by Percy Shelley. We read a bunch of those poems last year in English. An ode is sort of like a dedication, kinda like a way to praise something significant."

For my rendition of this song, I'm gonna call it 'To Everything' because –"
"How can you praise *everything*? Seems like a hard thing to do."

"Sam, haven't you been listening to Pastor Dan?"

Sam thought back at recent bible lessons and how she might've heard the sermons Pastor Dan preached from the pulpit, but she usually opted to doodle in the margins of the Sunday program and not pay attention to what he taught the congregation. "Well, to everything sounds kinda big, like you might as well call it to the world."

"That's the point. There's always something to be grateful for, always a reason to praise everything in the world."

"*Everything*? Even bad things?"

"Well, almost everything, I guess. But, remember how Pastor Dan talked about being grateful for what you have in your life, like being happy even for the small things? I guess that's how I see this song, or at least the version I'm writing. But, I'm done practicing for tonight and want to study these snakes." Robert scooted back against the fluffy pillow and turned the slick page of his book to reveal an odd-looking reptile.

Sam snuggled into the pillow next to Robert and rested her head on his arm. "That one's pretty. We got that kind here?"

"Naw, Sam, see? African reptiles." He closed the cover of the book and showed her, tapping on the title, then flipping back to the page he'd been studying.

"He's kind of funny-looking."

"It's called a strange-nosed chameleon."

Sam thought Robert made up that name, so she pressed her face closer to the photo and glanced at the name, and sure enough, it was called a strange-nosed chameleon. "His tail is curly," she said and giggled. "Kind of like a pig's tail. How come his skin has dots on it? Does Mr. Rizzo sell these kinds of lizards in his shop?"

"It's just the type of scales it has. These types of chameleons are rare to have in captivity. They're actually a threatened species, which is such a shame."

Sam pondered what he could've meant by threatened, figuring it wasn't such a good thing by the way Robert's face got all scrunched up when he said that word. "You gonna work on the raft tomorrow?" Sam asked and peered over the slick pages of the book.

"I gotta work at Mr. Rizzo's in the morning, but maybe later in the afternoon I can work on it some more. Sam, why you gotta be leaning into me like that?" Robert nudged Sam in the shoulder then moved over so she

couldn't even see the book. Robert bought this book at the San Diego Zoo with his allowance money the last time they were there and spent most evenings studying the creatures. He holed himself up in his room late at night probably memorizing every single fact about each reptile.

Sam leaned over so that she could view the colored pages of the book again. "They have African snakes in Mr. Rizzo's shop?"

"No, it's illegal to sell them here. Besides, they're highly venomous and deadly."

"As deadly as water moccasins and cottonmouths?"

"Water moccasins and cottonmouths are the same thing. Told you that before. Moccasins are what we have here along the creek. They're pretty deadly if you get bit and don't get anti-venom. But these," he said and tapped on the giant photo of a grey snake, "these here are probably the deadliest in the entire world."

Sam leaned over to look at the photo and snuggled in closer to him once she saw the slithering creature. "Robby, what's a mamma?"

"*Mamba*, silly, not mamma. They have these in the snake house at the zoo. They're hard to get. People sell them on the black market, though..." He paused and leaned closer to Sam. "But, they're highly poisonous. One bite from a mamba, and the victim dies within minutes. It's a horrible death."

"Samantha, I don't hear that water running!" Jane yelled from down the hall.

"So, the black market sells black mambas." Sam nodded and got a sense of how this reptile business worked.

"No, they sell things illegally. A black market is like an underground group of people who sell things that people aren't allowed to buy. Mambas are hard to get, but...well, not impossible if you know the right people. Someday I could go to Africa – if it meant seeing these snakes out in the wild and not in some glass cage." Robert tapped on the picture of the African mamba then flipped to the next page, exposing a huge bright photo of a green snake. "Oh, this here's probably the most venomous of *all* the mambas – the Eastern green mamba. The venom can kill a person in about thirty minutes if anti-venom isn't given."

Sam cowered back as she gazed at the green serpent and listened while Robert described what would happen if someone were bitten by one of them. The Eastern green mamba seemed too pretty to be that deadly. Its slick body glowed with such a bright green color – the scales on the body perfectly patterned.

"Samantha Grace!" Jane yelled from the far end of the hallway. "I don't hear that tub filling. You better get yourself in the bath *now* before I have to drag you in there myself."

Sam scooted off the edge of the bed then hopped onto the floor. She glanced back at the book. When she caught a glimpse of another brightly colored mamba, she climbed back onto the bed and cuddled closer to Robert who draped his arm around her shoulder. The two of them studied each photo—the Eastern and Western mambas, the black mamba, and one called the Jameson mamba. Robert pored over the words describing these reptiles while Sam examined the colorful images. She hoped this would be the closest she'd ever get to these venomous snakes.

"Anyhow," Robert said and sat upright, "I plan to leave this place one day by way of the river. Then I can go to Africa."

He said it so matter-of-factly that Sam wondered what sort of raft he'd been working on out in the barn. She hadn't studied much geography beyond the fifty states, but she figured Robert would figure out which waterways led to Africa from the Okatoma.

"What about becoming a police officer like Daddy and Grandpa?" Sam asked then leaned against Robert's shoulder while he continued to turn the pages of his book.

"I plan to do that, too," he said and relaxed his head into the pillow. He stared at the ceiling and closed the book on his lap without speaking.

Mama's shows echoed down the hallway, the glow from the TV reflecting on the walls all the way down the hall. Sam reached for the book and peeked at the opening section—the pages filled with glossy photos of what looked to be leopard-patterned skin on a huge snake.

"Is a python dangerous?" Sam asked.

"Not as much as a venomous snake," Robert said and took the book from her. "This one's a ball python. They squeeze their prey to death."

"So, if you do go to Africa someday, you'll see a ball python out in the wild?"

"Depends where in Africa I go. I haven't figured it all out yet as far as where I'll travel. Not sure if I'll go to the southern or eastern part of Africa or...maybe see it all. Maybe I'll retire early and live in Africa. I could be a snake handler. But, I gotta get through high school first and then go to the academy so I can become a police officer. I guess Africa is a ways off still." He leaned back onto the pillow and moved closer to Sam. He opened the book again, turning back to the venomous snake section. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to his side.

The fierce wind no longer shook the windows and doors of the house; the fury of raindrops had turned into soft sprinkles. These summer storms always took Sam by surprise, but she felt secure in Robert's room atop his bed. By morning, the Okatoma would swell by a couple feet and flood the riverbanks, but she'd be safe so long as she remained inside.

As she felt sleepy, Sam rested her head on Robert's shoulder. She took note of the size and color of the African snakes, listening to Robert tell her all about the details of what they ate, how they hunted, how deadly they were, and where to find them. Her lids became heavy, but she strained to stay awake so she could study each page. Sam didn't mind so much looking at photos of deadly snakes—so long as they remained in the pages of Robert's picture books. But aware that deadly water moccasins and copperheads slithered in and along the Okatoma next to their house convinced Sam to never enter that current unless Robert could carry her out into the water like he did today. She'd always be safe with him by her side—be it here looking at photos of snakes or out along the creek.

Chapter Eight

Mississippi: Summer 2014

AFTER TWO WEEKS in the ICU, Robert showed more signs of decline. Morphine, propofol, and fentanyl kept him heavily sedated. The feeding tube, inserted through his nose and down the throat into the stomach, provided sufficient nutrients as he lay in a drug-induced coma, but the formula they gave him caused watery diarrhea. Sores formed on his lips and in his mouth from the breathing tube. Doctors now recommended more permanent ways of sustaining him, suggesting that a GT-tube would be a more comfortable way to give him nutrients, and a tracheostomy would help to stabilize his breathing.

Betty, the nurse, suctioned Robert's breathing tube as Sam gripped his hand during the procedure. Robert's forehead furrowed when Betty moved the tube around his mouth to suction out the excess mucus. Betty talked sweetly to Robert as if he were completely awake. "Robert, I'm almost finished. You're doing great, hon." Betty had become one of Sam's favorite nurses, the only one who sat and talked with her and explained what was going on as far as Robert's status.

"Robby, she's almost done," Sam said and leaned in closer to the gurney. "Squeeze my hand as hard as you want. I know you hate this." Upon that suggestion, she felt a slight twitch in Robert's hand—only a weak fluttering of the fingers. Always strong, Robert would sometimes arm wrestle Sam when they were kids, but being six years younger, she never won and would usually end up with a sore hand. Right now, for once in her life she felt much stronger than Robert.

"Once they put in the trach tube," Betty said to Sam then glanced at Jane sitting nearby, "he'll be much more comfortable. Protocol usually is no more than two weeks with the breathing tube in the mouth and down the throat like this."

"If he ever gets off the trach, he's gonna have a gnarly scar," Sam said and gripped her hand on Robert's shoulder while Betty suctioned more mucus from the bronchial area. She knew Betty was right about the

tracheostomy being more comfortable, but to her it meant less of a chance at complete recovery. She knew the odds: risk of infection, permanent damage to the trachea, pneumothorax, even the possibility of lung collapse.

Jane sat nearby and gazed through the window at the busy nurses' station. In the last week, Sam recognized that Jane had completely relinquished her role as a nurse and instead trusted the doctors and nurses to treat Robert—even when it meant subjecting him to invasive procedures like the surgical insertion of a feeding tube and tracheostomy. The thought of a doctor slicing through Robert's trachea caused Sam to cringe. She'd seen horrific injuries while on duty as a lifeguard and never even flinched when she had to stabilize someone with a possible neck injury or hold pressure on a bloody wound, but to envision her weak brother having to endure two risky procedures made her question if it was right to put him through all of this.

Once Betty finished, Sam sat in the chair next to her mother and breathed out a loud sigh. She rested her head on the wall and closed her eyes. As she started to doze off, she heard several footsteps in the room. She opened her eyes to see a team of doctors and residents—all in white lab coats. The leader of the group, a petite young woman with long dark hair, stood at the foot of the bed and glanced at Robert then turned to face her students—all of them eagerly scribbling notes in tiny notepads.

"I'm Doctor Vaswani," the doctor said and faced Sam and Jane. "I'm one of the gastroenterologists at the hospital. I understand we'll be inserting a G-tube? In his weakened state, there's always a risk with anesthesia, but his vitals look stable."

Doctor Vaswani continued to describe the procedure while her residents stood silently behind her furiously writing in their notebooks. Grateful that Doctor Vaswani didn't dumb anything down as she described Robert's condition, Sam understood the severity of her brother's prognosis. The upcoming procedures would be invasive to someone in such a weakened state. Sam knew this was not what Robert would've wanted. To be hooked up to machines as he lay paralyzed and not able to eat on his own was not Robert's idea of living.

"Mama, why is she putting in a feeding tube?" Sam whispered and leaned closer to her mother while Doctor Vaswani examined Robert. "Shouldn't they wait till he's stronger? This all sounds so invasive. Do you really think Robert would want to be hooked up to a trach and a permanent feeding tube?"

"If God had intended to call Robert home to heaven," Jane said and pursed her lips, "He would've done it the night of the accident. It's not his time. You oughta know that a doctor like this woman here has the skills to fix people in this condition. These procedures are temporary ways to help patients get through this stage of the recovery process. The G-tube can be taken out as soon as Robert is able to eat on his own."

"So, he gets this feeding tube and the trach. Then what?"

"His body will get stronger over time. He'll be transferred to an acute rehab center like the nurses told us yesterday." Jane leaned back in the plastic chair and quietly hummed an old show tune that Sam didn't quite recognize.

Doctor Vaswani studied Robert's chart, taking a pen and scribbling in a thick binder. She folded her arms and began to describe the procedure, telling Sam and Jane that it would require a bit more sedation than what Robert was given now.

"More propofol than he's already on now?" Sam asked and pointed at the locked box controlling the drips of medication entering Robert's body.

"It'll just be a bit more than what he's currently on," Doctor Vaswani said and glanced at the medications hung from the tall pole next to the bed. "Looks like they've lowered the propofol recently. We want to make sure he's free of pain and discomfort during the procedure. Once he's under anesthesia, I'll first do an endoscopy to see where the best place to put the tube will be. Sometimes it's hard to tell where the best placement is, especially when someone is in this sort of condition, but I'll be able to find the best spot to —"

"Doctor, we're both familiar with where a G-tube is placed," Jane said. "I'm a nurse, and my daughter is an EMT."

"He's had a hypoxic-anoxic injury to the brain," Sam said and waved a hand in the air. "Are you sure a G-tube is the right thing to do? There's no evidence suggesting he'll ever speak again...or even be able to communicate with us."

The team of residents stopped scribbling in their notebooks and stared at Sam. Doctor Vaswani palpated Robert's abdomen then listened to his heart.

Sam felt futile in trying to fight for what Robert would've wanted. Putting him through these medical procedures seemed pointless.

Jane clasped her hand on Sam's. "Honey, people recover from these sorts of brain injuries, especially someone healthy like Robert. He doesn't have any underlying medical conditions. His body's strong. Even the neurologist told me he's had patients in comas for weeks that show some signs of recovery."

"Some signs of recovery. Mama, Robert may never speak again. And as for underlying medical conditions, he now has a whole bunch of medical issues. We don't know how much brain damage has occurred from being under the water for so long, but every time the nurse comes in to do a neuro check, she always tells us that his pupils are fixed and dilated. You know that's not a good sign."

"Honey, deep sedation will do that. Robert is stable. You've seen how strong his vitals have been. They're sedating him for a reason—to allow his brain to heal."

"Well, maybe so, but it's obvious he'll never walk again. Why are we even considering—"

"How soon can they schedule the G-tube placement?" Jane asked and stared at the gastroenterologist.

"If we stop the feeding tube at midnight, we can place the G-tube early tomorrow morning." Doctor Vaswani scribbled more notes in the chart then left the room after she muttered a quick goodbye.

The cluster of residents followed closely behind, leaving the room quiet and empty. Sam watched the gentle rise and fall of Robert's chest as the breathing machine pumped nearby. She and Jane sat quietly as they stared at Robert. The IV dripped at a steady rhythm, keeping him deeply sedated. Robert's condition worsened by the day, and no matter how many procedures they put him through, he'd never be the same.

Chapter Nine

Mississippi: Summer 1990

THE CARCASS OF a bird sloshed against the shore, the lifeless body wedged between rocks. The steady Okatoma current washed over the flightless bird as it lay at the river's edge. Last night's stormy skies cleared by morning, the afternoon now giving way to a few lingering clouds and bright sun. After the heavy downpour, today's sunny skies dried the mud along the creek bed, exposing the dead bird.

A grey eyeball, more fish-like than fowl, stared at Sam from the edge of the creek. She prodded it with a stick then crouched down to get a closer look. Since it was so waterlogged, Sam didn't recognize the type of bird. It could've floated down from two counties away or landed somewhere nearby, injured and far from repair. The large body—slick and bloated from hours or days in the river—looked more like a prehistoric sea bird. It'd probably once been large, its wingspan perhaps extending three feet, but it was hard to tell in its condition.

The idea of a dead bird baking on a rock by the Okatoma convinced Sam that she should rid her yard of the odor that would soon emit from the rotting carcass. She found another stick and carefully lifted the dead bird from the water, maneuvering it to the bushes several yards away. The bird, out of the water and possibly more identifiable, could be recognized if it still had use of its wings, but now, so far from any winged activity, it had to be given its final resting place. As she balanced the bird on the sticks, Sam scrutinized each step over the rocks. Always careful where she stepped, she dreaded the day she'd possibly come across a snake.

Sam wandered away from the Cleveland property and decided that the azalea bushes a few paces from No Man's Landing would be the ideal spot for a burial. She generally heeded her father's warnings of drunkards carousing and littering the creek, but today she wandered downstream to where she usually never ventured. Even Robert, despite his bravery at swimming across the creek and down toward the Bouie River, rarely ventured to No Man's Landing, but this clearing was perfect to bury a

bird. She'd need Robert to help dig a hole for the burial, so she left the soggy carcass at the water's edge to go search for him.

Sam skipped along the shore, hopping over rocks and trudging up the dirt path. The bright afternoon sun reflected on the surface of the water, blinding her as she neared the house. In a sundress, Sam felt the cool air from the Okatoma wash over her arms and legs as she traipsed across the lawn. Outside the barn, Robert stacked wide pieces of plywood Daddy brought back from the lumberyard yesterday. Sam hesitated to interrupt Robert when he was involved with anything having to do with the raft, so she stood quietly in the entryway of the barn until he noticed her standing there.

"What is it, Sam?" Robert asked as he heaved a huge board over his head. "You wanna help with the raft or something? I'm just about to build the deck."

"I need you to help me dig a big hole."

Robert lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, exposing a shadow of hair on his chest. "Sam, I've got work to do."

"Just five minutes. That's all, I promise." Sam grimaced and pleaded once more. "Robby, *please*?"

Robert stared at her and shook his head. "What do you need a hole for?"

"Promise not to say? Daddy would have a fit. Promise?"

"Yeah, yeah, what is it? Hurry up, I don't have all day."

"Let's get some stuff to dig a hole, and I'll show you." She tugged on Robert's arm and pulled him into the barn to get the proper tools and then dashed toward the creek.

Robert marched along behind Sam with his fingers gripped around an old rusted shovel. It'd been Grandpa Cleveland's before it belonged to Harold, but Robert used it last summer when he and Sam attempted to construct a dam at the edge of the creek.

Sam carried a small trowel and ran way ahead, glancing back as she made her way toward the burial site. Across the churning Okatoma and up past the rim of water on the other side, a screen door flapped shut. Sam squinted at the familiar but awful sight of Old Miss Patterson, which caused her to halt in her tracks.

"Just keep walking, Sam. You know what Dad told us about her. Don't even look over there," Robert urged as he glared across the creek then nudged Sam so that she picked up her pace once again. "She's gone back inside anyway. Crazy old fool!"

Out of breath, Sam plopped on one of the boulders. She pointed to a heap of twigs and leaves and said, "There...it's...right there." She still hadn't caught her breath but kept pointing at nothing but a pile of twigs. The faint remnants of a talon jutted out from the debris.

Robert nudged the mound of leaves with his foot then stepped back once he caught a glimpse of the carcass. "Ah, jeez, Sam. You took me all the way down here, away from the work I gotta do, to show me *this*? That thing stinks! Leave it be. It's gross." Robert kicked some dirt over the rotting bird then stepped over the mound and trekked along the creek a few paces.

"Robby, *please*, if we bury it here, I'll always know where it's at." Sam's last plea was accented with a break in her voice as she kneeled on the dirt next to the dead bird. "Fine, I'll dig it myself. I don't need your help. Go build your stupid raft."

Sam continued to dig the hole she'd started earlier, but this time she scooped sand with the small trowel. The tiny shovel hardly held any dirt. After a couple minutes of digging, she'd only created a shallow trench. The gritty pebbles beneath her knees left grainy imprints on her skin.

"Okay, I'll help you, but only for five minutes," Robert muttered as he returned to her. Without saying another word, he kicked a couple faded beer cans to the side then thrust the shovel deep into the earth, forcing it farther in with his heel. He drove the rusted tool into the ground a few more times, creating a giant hole big enough for a large animal. When it was deep and plenty enough prepared, Robert used the shovel to scoop the carcass into the grave. He heaped dirt over the dead bird, filling the hole until it was level with the ground.

"You won't say anything to Mama or Daddy, will you?" Sam sprinkled sand and dried leaves over the grave.

"Naw, but you best stay away from here now that this thing is buried. You know what Dad has told us about not wandering this far down the river." Robert continued to pat the ground with the flat side of the shovel then kicked twigs and sand over the site. He headed back toward the house, hoisting the shovel over his shoulder. Within a few seconds he was already yards from the burial site.

The surface of the grave blended with the terrain along the river, making it look part of the natural landscape. But, worried she hadn't adequately marked the spot where the bird lay in its final resting place, Sam decided to erect a gravestone—a monument to show where the carcass would spend its last days mulching with the earth.

“Robby, I’ll catch up with you later!” Sam squatted next to the creek and scanned the surface for flat rocks. “I wanna find a grave marker. I’ll be home soon. Rachel will be over tonight with the new puppy. Don’t tell Mama what I’m doing, okay?”

As she searched for the right gravestone, Sam caught sight of a flat, smooth rock in the creek, but it was at least three steps into the shallow water. She hesitated, for she wasn’t wearing thick rubber boots and therefore wasn’t protected from venomous snakes. She scanned the vicinity and considered where best to place her feet to be able to reach it.

Behind her, she heard the crunch of footsteps on the gravel but kept her eyes locked on that stone under the water. Relieved that Robert had returned to help, she called out, “Robby, can you help me get that rock? It’s perfect for a grave marker.”

She crouched down at the rim of the water to lean as far as her arms could reach, but she was still a good two paces too far. The heavy footsteps on the dirt got closer. “Robby, if I promise to help with the raft, will you please get that stone in the water? It’s that flat one right here, but I can’t...” Sam looked behind her to see a giant shadow towering above her.

A rough hand over her mouth silenced her voice. She suddenly felt dizzy as a tall man gripped her arm. He then yanked her from the riverbank and pulled her to the sandy shore.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing,” the man said with his hand still covering her mouth.

Sam glimpsed at the guy’s scruffy face, wishing she’d heeded Robert’s warnings and headed back to the house. Her face felt hot but cold at the same time, the breeze from the creek chilling her as she remained frozen in front of the tall man.

“Hey, guys, get on over here,” the man said and glanced behind him. “Looks like we got ourselves something special, a little afternoon delight.” He kept his calloused hand over Sam’s mouth and stared at her.

Sam tried to look behind her to see who this guy was speaking to, but her neck was frozen, her legs as well. Her entire body went cold – icy like the river in winter. She squirmed to try and escape from the man’s grip and managed to chomp down hard on his pinkie.

“Goddamned little bitch,” he said through his teeth then yanked her by the hair. “Don’t go biting me, kid. You don’t want to piss me off. We don’t mean no harm. My brothers and I are just taking a stroll along the river.”

Sam squirmed from the man's grip and attempted to step away. "My daddy's nearby," she lied. "Any minute now, he and a bunch of other police officers will come and arrest you."

"Well, how about that?" The man fingered Sam's sundress then ran his thumb underneath the strap, touching the top of her chest. "Fred, Chuck, come on over here. This kid's dad is a cop. What do y'all think of that?"

Sam trembled as the man loomed over her. She tried to escape from his grasp but stiffened when he clenched his hand around her wrist. From the corner of her eye, she saw two more men approach. She couldn't stop her body from shaking.

"Hey, Johnny, you ready to go?" she heard one man say. As the voice neared, Sam caught a glimpse of this other person—a wiry guy wearing a faded blue flannel shirt. "Whoa, what's going on?" There was a sound of surprise in his voice as he stepped closer.

"Now, Fred," Johnny said and stared at him, "don't be interrupting me when I'm about to have a good time with a cop's little girl. I bet Chuck isn't ready to leave either. Right, Chuck?"

Another guy, the largest and what appeared to be the oldest of them all, approached Johnny and glared at Sam. She again squirmed to try and get away from Johnny, but he clenched his hand around her wrist.

"Chuck, how 'bout you help me keep this kid still," Johnny said.

"Don't be moving like that," Chuck said and set his rough hand on her bare shoulder. "You don't wanna be pissing off any of us. Isn't that right, Fred?"

"Guys, we gotta go," Fred said and paced a few feet away. "Leave this one alone."

Sam considered screaming, but her voice remained silent. She stared at Fred for a moment hoping he'd say something else to convince Johnny to let her go.

"Let Johnny have his fun," Chuck said and took a long chug of beer.

"The cops are probably on our trail," Fred said and lit a cigarette. "We shouldn't even be anywhere near Covington right now. They got a good look at our truck last week."

"Yeah, all because of you," Johnny said and shook his head. "Such a fucking loser."

Sam heard the crunch of gravel again and hoped it was Robert this time. She should've stayed with him, should have helped him with the raft as she'd promised. But a dead, bloated bird needed burying.

"You know what, kid?" Johnny leaned down in front of her face—so

close that Sam could smell the sour stench of beer and cigarettes on his breath. "I been watching you. You certainly are a pretty thing. But you know what? I hate cops. They usually run us outta town. Or else they lock us up. I got one up on them, though. Me and my brothers," he said and waved behind him, "we done robbed that gas station just outside Seminary last week. When that clerk went to grab a handgun from under the counter, Chuck here pistol-whipped him till he lay there begging for mercy."

"I beat that guy to a pulp," Chuck said and laughed. "Beat his skull with my pistol. It was a better way to make him suffer than just shooting him in the head. Kicked him a few times in the gut for good measure before we grabbed ourselves a few beers from the cooler then headed out. But then dumbass here blew it when he didn't speed off right away like I told him to do."

Sam wanted to run from these bad men. She wanted to wriggle her way out of Johnny's grip, but her body wouldn't move. When she caught another whiff of beer and cigarettes on Johnny's breath, a sour, hollow sensation traveled to the pit of her stomach.

"Fred's *always* fucking up," Johnny said. "The police got a good look at our truck—all because he fucked up as he drove away." He spat into the river then ran his hand through his greasy hair as he peered into the woods. He returned his hand to Sam's shoulder, pressing hard into her skin.

Chuck stood there and shook his head, looking out over the creek. "Yeah, he's right, Fred always fucks up everything. I say we oughta take a cut out of Fred's earnings from that last robbery for messing up. Not right for him to have an equal share."

"Good plan. Hopefully them cops won't catch up to us." Johnny yanked Sam by the arm then glanced from her face down to her dress and leaned over so that his face was only a couple inches from hers. "Them cops are always causing us trouble. A few years back, a couple of them came and arrested me and my brother for trespassing on private property right around here in this very area. Your daddy have anything to do with that?"

Trembling and short of breath, Sam averted her eyes from Johnny's and stared at the creek. Her daddy once in a while would talk about bad people who'd occasionally come through town, but Sam figured those sorts of people only had an interest in robbing stores and gas stations. She never imagined men like these would be so close to her house.

"Man, you're fuckin crazy," Fred said. "Her dad could be nearby. He could be after us right now. Let her be."

"Fred, shut up, will ya? Why are you such a wuss, huh? Let's see what this pretty girl has on under this little dress of hers." Johnny unclasped his belt and tossed it onto the ground, the clank of the metal buckle hitting the stones. Then he ran his dirty finger under Sam's chin and down her chest again. He reached up her dress until his hand touched the inner part of her thigh.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" Fred asked. "This one's way too young."

"Jesus Christ, Fred," Johnny said. "Quit being so annoying, will ya? You let me enjoy myself right now."

Sam wanted to look into the nearby woods to see if Robert was there. She would never venture out to No Man's Landing ever again. If she'd only thought more about the threat of those snakes, she probably would have never even found that dead bird.

"Come on, guys," Fred said. "Let's get out of here before the kid's father finds us. Just let her go." After he popped open a can of beer, Fred stepped closer to his brothers then towered over Sam. He took a long gulp of beer then stared at Sam who kept trying to wriggle out of Johnny's grip.

"You're getting the little lady's dress all soiled," Chuck said. "Here, how 'bout I help clean her up a bit." He bent over and dusted the dirt from the top of her dress. After he swiped a hand across her bare chest, he brushed the dirt from the front of her, lingering on her belly.

"You know," Johnny said and glared at Fred. "If Fred ain't man enough to flee the scene of a crime right, then I bet he ain't man enough to give us a hand here."

"We don't mean no harm," Chuck said then reached up Sam's dress and touched her knee. "My brother Johnny and me are just nice country folk like you'uns. We got kin around here." He shined out a smile that revealed yellowed teeth, some chipped or missing entirely.

Fred took another long sip of beer then stared first at Chuck and then at Sam. "I bet her dad's the one who arrested me back in eighty-five here in Covington County. Got four years because of that son of a bitch." Fred took a few more gulps of beer then set the can on the dirt, hovering over Sam.

"You got that right," Chuck said then patted the front of her dress, lingering at her crotch. He then pressed his hand hard onto her body. "That ain't right you got so much time for robbing that convenience store.

Lost four years of your life because of them cops."

"You know, Fred, I been questioning how manly you are," Johnny said. "You always did seem a little soft. You'd think four years in jail would've toughened you up."

"I bet he's not man enough to do *this*," Chuck said then lifted Sam's dress and reached far up past her thigh until his hand touched the front of her underwear. He hooked a finger around the elastic and tugged on it a couple times. "Come on, little brother, just this once, huh? Or are you too soft like Johnny says?"

Fred reached for his beer and took another slurp and glared at Sam. "Y'all are fuckin wrong. You know I'm man enough," he said then nudged her with his boot until she fell onto the hard ground. As he stared into her eyes, he inched her dress up a few inches above her knee then reached toward her crotch as he grabbed hold of her underwear, forcing them off her hips.

Sam tried to resist, pulling her legs in as far as she could. Huddled in a ball, she felt the material of her underwear rip.

Fred twirled the ripped panties in the air then pressed his foot on Sam's leg. "Do I fit in now?" he asked and wheezed out a raspy laugh. "Told you I'm just like you two."

"You done good," Chuck said and whacked Fred's back with a hard slap then set a heavy boot on Sam's shoulder. "Now that you've proven yourself, we best get going. I'm plenty satisfied with what we've done. I bet Johnny is about ready to go, too."

"Naw, I don't know," Johnny said. "I'm not so sure I'm ready to leave yet."

"What do you have in mind?" Chuck said and laughed as he towered over Sam. He cupped a hand over the crotch of his jeans. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Sam trembled under Chuck's boot, but then she heard gravelly footsteps nearby. She feared a fourth man. Chuck rubbed his hand over the front of his jeans and glared at Sam lying below him. The crunch of steps on the gravel got closer. She remained paralyzed, her eyes fearing a fourth attacker. But then Sam recognized Robert's shoes and noticed he still held the shovel in his hands. She feared now more for Robert than for herself. Just as she took notice of him, she saw the rusted metal of the shovel swing through the air and whack Chuck in the back of the head. The clunk against his skull echoed across the creek.

"Get off my sister!" Robert yelled and swung it again, hitting him right

in the temple, even before Chuck noticed where it'd come from. Robert stood there gripping the shovel and glared at Chuck. "She's just a kid. Don't you touch her!"

Chuck started to push himself up onto all fours but collapsed and mumbled something that Sam couldn't hear.

"Don't you move!" Robert thrust the shovel forward and barely missed Chuck's head.

Fred stomped closer to Robert and swung a fist his way. As Chuck remained on the ground, Robert jabbed the shovel at Fred, whacking him hard in the ribcage and causing him to fall to the ground. Fred held his side and moaned. Then Johnny lunged, but Robert struck him in the face with the shovel, resulting in him being stunned from the blow. Sam had never witnessed Robert filled with so much anger.

"You fucking make a move," Robert said to the men cowering below him on the ground, "and I'll kill you."

Johnny wiped the blood from his mouth. "Easy there. Just put that thing down. We don't mean no harm. We'll just be on our way now."

Chuck once again started to push himself up from the ground, but Robert struck him again with the shovel—the force hitting him in the neck.

"I said don't move!" Robert whacked Chuck's head again with full force. Another strike on Chuck's head caused him to fall forward, his body going limp onto the ground. As the man lay in the dirt, Robert hit him again—this time a fierce blow to his forehead. The metal hitting the man's skull echoed over the babbling water. Although Chuck's body remained still on the sand, Robert delivered one more wallop to his skull, the blow causing his body to become wedged at the water's edge. While the man lay there unconscious, Robert delivered one more thump to the head, this time hitting him with even more force. Chuck lay motionless next to the creek, face down in the water.

Robert glanced at Sam hiding in the bush, and then he took a step closer to Johnny and jabbed the shovel into his back. "Get out of here or else I'll take care of you, too. Both of you, you best leave, or else you'll be sorry."

"Yeah, right," Johnny said and attempted to stand. "There's no way a kid's gonna take me down. Me and Fred could easily beat the shit out of you."

When Johnny got to his knees, Robert again whacked him in the back with the shovel, which caused him to fall forward onto his face. Then

Robert swung again, this time barely missing his head. With both hands gripped on the handle, Robert glared at Johnny who by now held his hands over his face.

“Okay, you’ve made yourself clear. The three of us’ll be on our way just as soon as I help my brother up.” Johnny crawled over to Chuck then crouched next to him and flipped his body over. From where Sam cowered, she could see, despite Johnny shaking him to try and wake him, that his body remained still. Blood gushed from a giant hole in Chuck’s scalp.

Johnny bent down close to Chuck’s face and jostled his body one more time. “Chuck’s not breathing.”

“What do you mean he’s not breathing?” Fred said and kneeled next to Chuck’s motionless body. He gripped his hands around Chuck’s shoulders and shook him hard, but the movement did nothing to wake him.

Sam scurried back farther into the azalea shrub but peered through the twigs; she saw Johnny again trying to rouse Chuck. Her body shook. Her stomach ached. She fought back the urge to throw up.

Johnny shook Chuck’s body once more, yelling out his name. “He’s not waking up. Fred, I think that kid killed him.”

“No...no, this is crazy. Wake him up! Do something. Give him that mouth-to-mouth thing.”

“You see all this blood? There ain’t no bringing him back now. He’s dead.”

“That fucking kid killed our brother? He’s gotta pay for what he done.” Fred leaned over the lifeless body then pulled a gun from the waist of Chuck’s jeans and reached into the pocket for a handful of bullets.

Before Fred loaded the gun, Robert swung the shovel once more, this time hitting Fred in the shoulder and knocking the gun and bullets to the ground. Johnny then grabbed the wooden handle and yanked hard. Robert, despite only being a teen, retracted the tool from Johnny’s grip. Once again, Robert flailed the shovel at Johnny, missing his body entirely, the force causing him to lose his balance and fall to the ground. Now, both Johnny and Fred hovered over Robert. Fred kicked Robert in the face, causing him to roll over and cover his head with his hands. Robert attempted to crawl away, but Fred kicked him hard in the face. But Robert quickly righted himself and faced his attackers.

Sam crawled toward the direction of the clearing where she’d planned to place a marker for the bird’s remains, found her panties in the dirt, and

put them back on, soiled and ripped as they were. Robert charged forward with the shovel, jabbing Johnny hard in the gut. Sam had never seen Robert this strong before.

Johnny lunged for Robert, hitting him hard in the face. Robert left the shovel in the shallow water then plunged into the Okatoma. With all his might, he swam out to the middle of the creek. He kept treading water as the two men remained knee-deep in the creek, ignoring Chuck who lay motionless on shore.

"You'll pay for this, you goddamned kid." Fred stood in the creek and waved the gun in the air. "You killed my brother, and now I'm gonna kill you."

"Don't shoot my brother!" Sam yelled from her hiding place as she kneeled in the sand. She reached for the trowel and gripped both hands around the handle.

"Johnny, keep that kid quiet," Fred said as he quickly loaded the gun.

Johnny found Sam right away and took the trowel from her hands then yanked her arms behind her back. He looped his belt around her wrists and gripped his hand on her shoulder from behind, shaking her as he spoke. He chucked the trowel far into the woods adjacent to the creek. "You think that thing's gonna protect you? Goddamned stupid kid. Don't you move," he whispered in her ear. "You understand? One word out of you, and I'll hurt you."

Johnny ran back to the shore and pelted stones at Robert, missing him each time. Fred pointed his gun at Robert, pulling the trigger with one loud crack. Another loud pop echoed across the creek. Then he pulled the trigger again. Then two more times. Sam couldn't see any signs of Robert in the water. With the handgun aimed at the creek, Fred scanned the surface of the water then tucked the gun into his jeans.

"Well, I done took care of that real fast," Fred muttered then turned his back to the creek and glanced at the azalea bush.

Sam peered through the thick foliage and searched for Robert. When she saw no sign of him in the creek, she glanced over at Miss Patterson's property to see if maybe Robert had made it up the embankment and hid over there. She scanned the water once more then saw what she hoped was Robert way downstream, but she couldn't be certain if it was his head or just a rock jutting through the surface of the water. Shivering, she somehow managed to crawl over to a bush, the tiny pebbles on the sand bloodying her knees.

"Now that I've gotten rid of your brother, I'm gonna take care of you,"

Fred said and pulled the handgun from his waist and waved it in the air. "Don't make me use this. Don't make one move. You hear me?" Fred took off his flannel shirt and tossed it onto the azalea bush, then unfastened his belt buckle. After he unzipped his pants, he pushed Sam onto the ground then kneeled down.

Sam groaned as she tried to escape from Fred's grasp. The glint of the metal from the tip of his handgun caught the late afternoon sun. Fred's sweaty, shirtless torso reeked—a sour, putrid stench that made Sam feel sick.

Johnny stood nearby, arms folded, as he cheered on Fred. After he took another swig of beer, he stepped closer to Sam, creating a dark shadow over her body.

Fred nudged her with his knee. "I'm gonna finish what my brother started. They think I'm not man enough for this, but I'll show them. You move, and I'll kill you. And you tell anyone 'bout this, and I'll kill your daddy. John and I know where he works. You understand?"

Sam's body became paralyzed, but she craned her neck to search for Robert. When she didn't see him in the creek, terror washed over her. Fred jerked her head into the ground. The back of her head ached; her body continued to tremble.

"I told you not to move." Fred gripped both hands on Sam's shoulders and pressed her hard onto the gravel.

Suddenly, the crack of a gunshot rang out nearby. Fred glanced behind him and sat up on his knees. Then another shot pierced the air. And another. After the third shot, Sam felt the body atop her go limp. His gun lay at his side. After she squirmed away from his body, she rolled over to the azalea bush.

"Fuck, man," Johnny said and ducked down low. "They're shooting at us! They done shot me. Probably those fucking cops." He grabbed his shoulder where blood dripped onto the ground as he crouched down to pick up the gun. "Fred, come on, let's get the fuck out of here."

Another shot sounded. Sam glanced at the river and saw Robert treading water. Relieved to see he was fine, she remained quiet. But more gunshots were fired from somewhere nearby. She noticed that Robert dove under the water as those shots continued. After a short pause, another shot rang out. As she huddled in the shrub, her breath became shallow. A few feet away, she noticed Fred moaning and attempting to stand.

One more shot sounded. Johnny wailed out a yelp and grabbed his

elbow. Blood dripped onto the rocks beside the creek. The blood washed downstream into the current, the dark crimson turning to a clear red as the water carried it away.

Nearby, Fred stood and staggered a few paces toward the creek. With a hand clasped to his chest, he righted himself and looked at Sam huddled in the bushes. A fire raged in his eyes as he limped closer to the shrub. Each heavy step thudded on the ground the closer he got to her.

Sam cowered farther into the prickly brush, the sharp twigs cutting her arms and legs. She searched for Robert but couldn't see him. One more shot sounded, this time causing Fred to fall face forward onto the nearby rocks. She was close enough to notice blood pooled around a gaping hole in his back. Suddenly all got quiet. No more shots sounded—just the gentle river churned by.

"Goddamn kids," Johnny muttered, using his shirt to wrap around his elbow. He stood on shore where Robert tread water a couple yards away. "You'll pay for what you done to my brother. I ain't done with you." Johnny stepped toward the creek then lifted the gun in air and pulled the trigger. Only a click could be heard. No pop, nothing but an empty, hollow click.

Sam shivered as she crouched under the scratchy shrub. She tried to get her arms and legs to stop shaking, but the more she tried to keep still, the more her body shook.

"This is your lucky day, you fucker!" Johnny yelled then shoved the gun into the waist of his pants. "But we're coming back for you. For both of you! Come on, Fred." Johnny nudged the still body with his foot then kneeled on the sand. He patted Fred's face and then shook him by the shoulders.

Sam searched the creek again for Robert. The incessant movement of the water filtered past her. Then she caught another horrid glimpse of Johnny shaking Fred's motionless body.

"Come on, man. Get up!" Johnny yelled and peered along the creek bed then stared at Fred. He wasn't moving. He knelt down and shook Fred by the shoulders. "Ah, shit! Those goddamned cops! They fucking killed him. What the fuck, man? We rob a gas station for a couple hundred bucks, and then *this* happens?"

Johnny glanced from the creek to the shrub where Sam hid. After he stomped across the sand, he towered over her, pressing his boot onto her hip and pinning her to the ground. "I'll be back for you and your brother. Trust me, I'll be watching you. Like Fred said, you tell anyone about this,

and I'll kill your daddy. I know where to find him." Then he crouched down close to her. He ran a rough finger across the top of her chest, lingering on the strap of her dress. He scraped his fingernail under the top of it then stood up and spit on the ground next to her.

He paced from Fred's lifeless body and rubbed his hand across the scruff of his face, kicking the dirt and stepping back to the dead body. Then he glanced at Chuck's lifeless body nearby. Johnny muttered something that Sam couldn't hear, and then he pulled Fred by the boots and dragged the body a few feet from the creek. Huffing and sweating, Johnny stopped for a moment and glanced back toward the creek. He gripped Fred by the feet once more and managed to move the body a couple yards.

But then another gunshot echoed into the air, the sound causing Johnny to cower close to the ground. One more shot resonated, resulting in Johnny bolting along the creek and then into the woods. Within seconds, his footsteps became quiet. Sam trembled in the bush. Completely still, she peered through the foliage looking for any signs of Johnny's return. She'd never seen a dead person before, but here before her lay two. She glanced down the creek then heard a thunderous engine start to rumble, and within seconds, she noticed dust rise up from the dirt road. The vehicle sounded a lot like Daddy's, but she knew he wasn't due home for a while.

Since her dress and panties were soiled and ripped, Sam worried about Mama finding out. This wouldn't have happened had she not been foolish enough to venture over to No Man's Landing to bury that dead bird. With the leather belt bound around her wrists, she remained huddled in the azalea bush. Worst of all, she feared Robert had drowned.

Sam heard rustling in the bushes nearby. Too scared to cry, she squinted to try and see if Johnny had returned. Not able to fully catch her breath, her breathing became rapid and shallow. She concentrated as best she could on her breathing like they taught her last summer in swim class. The tips of her fingers started to feel tingly. Wobbly at first, she attempted to stand. She managed to release her wrists from the belt but then lost her balance and swayed into the scratchy foliage.

She glanced to the right in the direction of where Johnny had run, then to the left where Fred's body lay. Maybe the person with the gun had now come for *her*. Now she felt pins and needles in her hands. Unable to move, her feet felt prickly as well. Soon, her lips became tingly. She glanced at the Okatoma, her vision becoming hazy and dark. Sam focused her sight

on the near vicinity – the shimmering surface of the water, the rocks along the edge of the creek, the twigs and gravel under her feet. Then things started to look murkier as her head became even more fuzzy. Soon, her knees gave out as everything then started to go black.

Chapter Ten

Mississippi: Summer 2014

SAM LEANED OVER Robert's bed and examined the tubes and wires that ran from his body to the machines next to him. The breathing tube kept his mouth in a permanent open position, the rigid plastic at the end pressing on his lips and causing sores. A naso-gastric tube, inserted into his nose and down the throat, connected to a plastic bag of liquid nutrients hung from an IV pole. A thin tube ran from the back of his left hand and another one from the crook of his right arm. A Foley catheter inserted into his urethra carried urine from his bladder to a clear plastic sack hung at the side of the bed. A thick, wide hose inserted into his rectum transported runny feces into a fecal bag hung on the other side of the bed.

Sam told her mom to go home to eat dinner and rest, that she'd stay until the shift change at seven o'clock. As she leaned back in the chair, Sam rested her head on the paper towel dispenser and texted Kim.

What are you up to tonight? Besides missing me? ;)

I'm heading to Gossip Grill later tonight for drinks with a friend.

A *friend*? Sam wondered who that might be, but she assumed it was someone from the Trail Angels. Gossip Grill was the kind of place that all types of lesbians visited—butches, femmes, retro girls, and especially young sporty types like Kim. But this lesbian bar was nothing like the Flame where Sam frequented several years ago. Young at the time, she fit right in at the Flame—the women eager to dance with her and buy her drinks, much to Annie's dismay. But Sam assumed the attention boosted Annie's ego. Being there with a much younger woman surely made Annie gloat with pride. But after being together for a few years, they both found they preferred their date nights to be at a quiet restaurant, followed by wine, candlelit massages, and lovemaking at home. Since the Flame had

closed years ago, Sam found other lesbian bars like Gossip Grill to be too trendy. She'd become such a homebody after she settled into her life with Annie, but dating Kim revived that longing for going out dancing and drinking until late at night.

Sounds like a fun night. A drink sounds good right about now.

Probably won't stay out too late. Going for an early ride with the Trail Angels up in OC. Training for that 100-miler in Mammoth in early Oct. Lots of elevation gains and difficult terrain.

I miss my mountain bike. And I miss you, especially your lips on mine.

Yeah, those were some amazing kisses the last time we were together. You've definitely got the moves. So, how's your brother doing today?

He's about the same, I guess. No progress but no extreme setbacks. At least you're doing well to distract me right now from what's going on here. Well, I'd say you've also got some pretty hot moves yourself. Love what you do with your tongue.

Sam felt a warm surge go through her body as she recalled that night with Kim. Her heart sped up as she anticipated Kim's next text. Sam's hands got sweaty as she stared at her phone awaiting a response. Five minutes passed before she got a text back.

Can't wait to see you. I need to get going. Heading to Gossip Grill in a few minutes. Once you're back, we can hit the trails again. And, hit the sheets.

Looking forward to both.

Sam smiled and slipped her phone into her back pocket.

She suddenly felt drowsy, so she shut her eyes. She needed to decide soon whether she'd return to San Diego to finish the lifeguarding season. As one of the few guards who worked May through October, Sam would still occasionally be called during warmer parts of the year like spring break or during unseasonably warm Santa Anas, but with this only being the second week of September, she could still work a few more weeks until the end of beach season. However, for now, she would stay with

Robert until he was moved to an acute rehab hospital—if he even made it through the GI procedure tomorrow and the placement of the tracheostomy.

A firm hand grasped Sam's shoulder, which caused her to jump and bolt forward. She opened her eyes to see a female police officer. Blurry-eyed, Sam saw that it was Annie—in full uniform. She always found her so sexy when she was dressed this way and used to tell her to not change before heading home from work.

"Lieutenant Wright, nice of you to stop by the hospital. You know, that does have a nice ring to it." Sam smiled and looked her over, settling her eyes on her heavy belt with all the gear. "Haven't seen you in this in a while. Is Lieutenant Wright here to guard me?"

"Adorable, as always." Annie pulled a chair closer to Sam and reached over to take her hand. "How's my girl?"

"Your *girl*? Haven't heard you call me that in years. How am I doing? Well, what do you think?" Sam nodded to Robert. "I'm tired, nervous about Robert getting those procedures tomorrow, uncomfortable in these stiff plastic chairs, and hungry. The food in the cafeteria sucks." She leaned back and closed her eyes again. "Why are you in your uniform anyway? Thought you said you had a desk job now."

"I need to speak to Matt about the accident. The uniform tends to make witnesses more honest. Listen, I've got some important news. We found the truck that hit Robert. All we know is that a man was driving it, based on what Greg told us. I'll verify that with Matt when I talk to him."

Sam opened her eyes and leaned forward. "Did they get him? Is the guy in custody?"

"No, not yet. The truck was reported stolen a few days ago. The owner of the vehicle is an elderly woman who no longer drives the truck and hadn't realized it'd been stolen till recently. I guess she's in a care facility but keeps the truck on the property of a house she still owns. A neighbor contacted the police department to let them know the truck was gone. It was abandoned down a remote dirt road, covered up by branches deep in the woods."

"Is there any evidence in the truck, any indication of who was driving it? What are they doing to find the person who—"

"Babe, they're working on it. From what Greg said, the guy driving the truck is in his forties or a bit older. The police will charge the man with hit and run once they find him. At this point, they can get him on attempted murder charges—if they determine that the damage done to Robert's

Chevy was intentional. They won't know till forensics examines the truck."

"Attempted murder? Fuck, that's...they'd better find that guy soon." Sam stood next to Robert and gripped her hand on his shoulder. Only two weeks since the accident, Robert had already shriveled down, his body wasted away into some unfamiliar frame of what used to be her stout brother. Rage filled Sam as she thought of what this man had done to him.

"Sam, they're doing all they can to find this guy. For now, they're looking at the truck for any evidence. Because no one has...actually died, it's not their top priority."

"Are you fucking kidding me? My brother is paralyzed and in a coma because of this guy. Tomorrow they're putting in a tracheostomy and a permanent feeding tube. He's got brain damage due to the guy driving Robert off the side of the bridge and into the river. How is this not a top priority?"

"I'll try to get the investigators to make it a priority. The vehicle was clearly involved in a collision. Pretty extensive front fender damage, along with damage to the driver's side door. It's an old, faded grey truck just like the one Robert's friends described, a 1990 Ford F-150. Once they match the damage on it to Robert's truck, things will change in the investigation."

Anger boiled inside Sam. She paced from the bed to the doorway and then back to the bed. "Just this week Robert signed the final paperwork for the shop, making him the owner of Rizzo's Reptiles. The shop was all his, Annie. This was the first thing Robert actually followed through with. I mean, he'd given up becoming a police officer. Even as a kid, he never finished anything. He never even finished making the log raft he spent that one summer designing. I don't think he'd completed anything significant up until becoming owner of the shop. For years, Mr. Rizzo talked about selling it to him. Finally happened this week. In his seventies, old Rizzo finally made his decision. And now it's been taken away from Robert by some...asshole who rammed his truck into the bridge."

Annie stood quiet for a moment next to Sam, the two of them staring at Robert's unresponsive body. The ventilator made a low whooshing sound as it pushed air into his lungs. "He's gonna make it, babe," Annie finally said and draped her arm around Sam.

"Robert's dream finally came true after all those years working in that shop. First as a teenager sweeping up floors and cleaning cages and

then...managing the place. Now, he's the owner. Or would've been. For now, Mr. Rizzo's running the shop till Robert recovers...if he ever does recover from this." Sam waved an arm over her brother lying unconscious, paralyzed, and barely alive.

Annie set a hand on her cheek then brushed the hair from her face. "This can't be all there is for Robert. He's gonna pull through. He has to. I'll make sure they find the guy who hit him. I'm on my way to Matt's house now to get more information on what he remembers about the accident. Greg's already given us a pretty good run-down of what happened, saying the guy rammed his truck into Robert's right as they got to the bridge. Said the guy didn't stop and rammed him again. Sounds to me like a bad case of road rage."

Robert's right hand suddenly twitched, and his heart rate shot up to 90. Sam glanced out the window toward the nurses' station, motioning for someone to come in. Sam studied the monitor, checking to see if his heart was showing any signs of arrhythmia. His heart rate now bumped up to 94, then 98, and finally, 110. When no one came in, Sam pressed the call button next to the pillow.

Betty rushed in, studying the monitor and tapping the screen. When other numbers appeared on the monitor, Sam glanced over Betty's shoulder to assess what was happening.

When Sam gripped Robert's hand, his heart rate lowered to 95. "Robby, I'm right here. I'm not leaving your side."

"Robert, it's okay," Betty said and leaned in close to his face then held his other hand. "If you can hear me, squeeze my hand."

Sam and Betty stood there, an attentive audience as they waited for Robert to squeeze Betty's hand. Again, Betty asked Robert to squeeze his hand. Nothing. No squeeze, not even a flinch. His heart rate hovered around 95.

"Lemme try," Sam said and cupped her hand around Robert's. "Robby, it's Sam. I'm right here. Give me a squeeze." With that request, his thumb twitched then grasped her hand—not just a fluttering of the fingers but a full clench of her hand. For the first time in two weeks, Sam had a renewed sense of hope that her brother was still there. But, aware that he'd likely never walk again, she set aside all sense of hope that he'd ever be how he'd been before the accident.

As Sam gripped his hand, Robert's heart rate went down to 85, then 82, then back down to 70 as it had been for the past two weeks. Sam stroked his hand and leaned in closer to his face. Robert's eye was no

longer swollen, but it was still a dark purple. The gash on his temple had already faded to a pink line after they'd removed the sutures.

"You two have a strong connection," Betty said. "Your presence here gets some sort of response from him. The spike in heart rate was probably just a fluke, nothing to be concerned about. The EKG shows a steady heart rate. He threw a couple PVCs but nothing to worry about. Blood pressure is stable. I'll ask the doctor to stop in when he's making his rounds tonight. He may want to adjust some of Robert's meds, maybe taper him down a bit more on the fentanyl. I'll be back to check on him before my shift is over. Keep talking to Robert. He can hear you."

Annie put her arm around Sam, pulling her close to her chest. "Babe, we'll find the guy. You have my word on that. Let me drive you home before I go to Matt's. You should be with your mom. Get some supper and relax for a bit. I'll come over later to let you know what I find out from Matt. Marsha's out of town till tomorrow."

Sam relaxed her body and rested her head on Annie's shoulder. "I'm gonna stay for a bit longer. I want to wait till the change in shift. I always like to find out who's caring for Robert through the night. I'll be home soon. Maybe we can enjoy some wine out on the porch later tonight. I could really use a drink...and some company at the house. Mama's been baking lately, only way she knows how to cope. Wine and peach pie later?"

"Sounds good. I should be over by nine or so. I can stay as late as you'd like."

"No sense in wasting time by going home to change out of that uniform." Sam nudged Annie then ran her finger over the badge.

Annie kissed the top of Sam's head then gave her another squeeze. "You know, Marsha and I...well, I'm not sure we should have—"

"Gotten back together? I know. But you know you two have way more in common than you and I ever did. You're the same age, for one thing. Hell, you're both in law enforcement. I mean, *real* law enforcement. And you both live in Mississippi. So, there ya go."

"I don't know what I was thinking to rekindle something from over twenty years ago. We were so young back then, and I guess I thought...well, I guess it felt convenient when I moved back here. I mean, we were both single and not wanting to do the whole dating scene."

"Convenient? *That's* why you got back together with her?" Sam let out a loud huff and then pursed her lips. "Yeah, that whole dating scene can be pretty dismal. Well, at least with Marsha, you've got someone who's

stable. Good ol' Marsha, huh?"

"She's gone so much, you'd think we didn't even live together."

"Nothing wrong with that, I suppose. There's something to be said for time apart. More time to yourself...and more time with me while I'm here, right? It's all good. You love her. That's what counts. But, you should probably know...I met someone recently."

"I figured as much. You got pretty quiet these past few weeks. You'd stopped texting me as much, didn't share as much with me as you used to do."

"She's...a lot of fun. She's eight years younger than I am, but I see potential. Haven't felt this excited about someone new in a long time. Kim is so...well, so into the things I love to do. Plus, she's...really sweet and—"

"It's okay, Sam. It's not like you're not allowed to move on with your life."

"Kinda hard to move on right now," Sam said and stepped closer to the bed then touched Robert's hand. She pulled Annie into a tight hug and leaned her head against her chest. "Not even sure when I can go back to San Diego. Can't leave when he's still in ICU."

Sam closed her eyes and felt safe in Annie's arms once again. She knew she'd always be close to Annie, and for now this embrace meant more to her than some romp in the sack with a young new girlfriend.

After Annie left the ICU, Sam moved to the other side of Robert's bed and lowered the blinds. She leaned down close to his ear. "Robby, we're gonna find that son of a bitch. He's not gonna get away with this. Just like you did years ago for me, I'm going to save you. You'll see. I know you're scared. I know you hate this, but I'm here. I'm gonna help you through this."

Robert's heart rate bumped up to 80, then 82, then 85. It stayed in that range for a few minutes as Sam held Robert's hand and continued to talk to him, telling him more about Kim, about the recent red flag day, and about riding his bike along the river and to the bridge.

Sam was aware that Robert would never swing from the rope attached to the tree along the creek and plunge into the water during hot summer days. He'd never float down the river again, never search the banks of the Okatoma for water moccasins or skip rocks across the surface of the water. He'd never be able to add more snakes to his reptile collection. He'd never feel the touch of a woman's embrace. He'd be lucky if he made it through that procedure tomorrow and even luckier if he made it through another week.

Chapter Eleven

Mississippi: Summer 1990

SAM ROLLED HER head from side to side. She felt warmth on her face and then on her lips. Moist, hot air breathed into her mouth and entered her lungs, causing her to cough. She gasped for a breath then heard her name whispered. A dark shadow hovered over her, someone tall but familiar. Sam flinched but couldn't move her body away.

The person moved away from her and stood to the side, creating a shadow on her face. Not able to view the individual's face, Sam squinted then recognized it was a man. Tall but lean, the guy stepped closer to her. Sam pulled a hand to her face to wipe the dirt from her mouth. The back of her head ached. Sam closed her eyes but felt cool, fresh air on her skin. She heard sloshing water nearby but not like the usual rhythm of the Okatoma heard from her house. Someone walked in the creek a few feet away.

"Sam, I'll be right back," she heard, this time from the river itself. Had her attackers taken note of her name? Had they trapped her on the shore and prevented her from escaping? But the river voice was familiar and safe to her, not like the voice of those mean men.

When Sam recognized Robert's voice, she struggled to sit up as she searched for him. The rough sand scraped her elbow as she rolled onto her side and noticed that Robert had stepped into the creek to retrieve the shovel. Her wrists still ached from the pressure of the leather belt.

Robert picked up the belt next to Sam then flung it far into the woods behind them. Sam craned her neck to the right and saw one man lying motionless on the ground in a pool of blood; the other one's body lay halfway submerged at the river's edge. She crouched low to the ground, her body seeming to move on its own without effort on her part.

"Sam, we need to get out of here. But to get away from here, you're gonna hafta step in the water, at least up to your knees. We need to get away from this area before anyone else gets here. I'm not sure it was the police who shot them. I didn't hear sirens or see any police cars over there."

Sam stepped into the creek, away from the lifeless body that lay at the edge of the water. The fear of snakes left her completely, her feet sloshing in the area where the creatures typically dwelled. Soon, she was up to her knees as she walked upstream against the current a few paces. She glanced into the forest next to her; she feared Johnny was lurking in there watching their every move. When she saw what looked like the shadow of a man near the edge of the woods, Sam stepped closer to Robert, her hand clenching his T-shirt as she plopped one foot in front of the other. She peered over there once again then let out a long exhale when she saw that the shadow was nothing but the thick trunk of a tree. But then she again saw the lifeless bodies a few feet away.

"Sam, don't look at them, okay?" Robert said in a voice that for a moment sounded like her father's. "Sit right here." He pointed to a giant log wedged at the edge of the water then reached up to feel the back of her head, the tender skin on her scalp causing her to flinch.

Sam stared at Robert, noticing his lip was swollen and bleeding. After he swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, Robert spat onto the ground then told her to remain on the log. She rubbed her wrists and cringed from the painful red indentations left from the belt. She clasped her arms around her ribcage and huddled atop the log. As she shivered from the late afternoon breeze on her damp skin, she peered behind her to see Robert at the edge of the water.

Robert went to Fred's body first. He pulled out a wallet from his back pocket and went through it. Sam could see the cash he stuffed into his pocket before tossing the wallet into the water. Robert hooked his arms under Fred's armpits and walked backward as he dragged him to the creek. The man's boot got stuck on a log, but after a strong tug from Robert, the dead body was free, and he was able to put it into the current. The Okatoma took the man, his body hitting the side of the creek and jostling between crooks in the river.

Then Robert approached the other bloodied body that lay partially submerged in the creek, the head bobbing face-up in the water. As he towered over Chuck's lifeless body, Robert nudged it with the shovel.

Sam shivered and turned away from the sight of Chuck's lifeless body. She could hear Robert drag it across the rocks and gravel before the plunk in the water told her he'd now joined Fred on his slow descent downstream. She glanced back over her shoulder to catch a horrific glimpse of Chuck's body floating in the water.

After he returned to Sam, Robert leaned the shovel against the log. He

ran his hand through his hair and shook his head. "I need to get rid of this. I can't just ditch it here," he said and glanced toward the woods on the other side of the Okatoma.

"I thought they killed you," Sam started to say, the words stopping short in her throat. "I thought...I thought you got shot and drowned. I thought for sure you'd—"

"The one guy got me good in the face, that's all. You don't have any scrapes or anything on you from what I can tell. Those red marks on your wrists will go away soon. Your head'll probably hurt for a couple days, but I don't think you hit it too hard when you fell back."

"Daddy can go after that guy. He can find him and arrest him." She rocked back and forth on the log, but then she remembered what Johnny had told her when he pinned her to the ground.

"Sam, Dad can't know about this. They'll arrest *me* if they find out what I did. They find out, and I'll never be able to get into law enforcement like Dad and Grandpa. I only wanted to scare the guy, that's all. I wanted to make sure he couldn't...well, that he couldn't get up and go after you again, but I didn't think—"

"That man who got away saw it all...Johnny, the one who got shot in the shoulder and arm. He saw you hit that man's head over and over and over with the shovel. Robby, even I saw how many times you hit him." The reality of what'd happened caused Sam to tremble once again, her breath shallow and rapid. Her head became light and dizzy. She couldn't get the sight out of her head of Robert hitting that man over and over with that shovel, how he didn't stop even after the man stopped moving. Sam glanced at Robert—stunned that he even had the strength to do what he did to a grown man.

"I didn't think I'd end up doing what I did. I just wanted to stop him from doing what he was doing to you. I wanted to get him away from you. I don't...I don't know what came over me, but no one can know what I did. Sam, you understand, right? No one can know about this."

"Johnny said he'd come after me if I told Daddy about any of this. He said he'd kill him if I said anything. He said he'd kill me, too."

"I won't let that happen. He won't hurt you now. You're okay, and that's what matters."

Sam looked away from Robert for a moment then hugged her legs close to her chest. She rocked back and forth, tuning out the river's currents which carried those bodies far away.

"If Dad asks about this," Robert said and wiped the blood from his

mouth, "we tell him I whacked my face on one of the logs as I was building the raft. He can't know what I did to that guy. He can't know about any of this. You understand, right?"

She stared at her muddy feet. The incessant trickle of water flowed past her, the current by now possibly taking those bodies several yards away. "No...no...no," Sam muttered, low enough so that Robert couldn't hear, especially above the sound of the churning river. "No..." she said again, feeling her chest heave with tears. But she would not cry. As Robert said, no one was to know about this. She took a couple deep breaths, but her tears dried up as fast as they'd come. By tonight, maybe those bodies would reach the Bouie River. Soon, the bodies might make it to another county, and by tomorrow, they might even reach another state. Could the current take them all the way to the Leaf River and then the Gulf of Mexico? Sam hoped those dead men were far away by now and even farther by tomorrow.

"Come on, let's go," Robert said and lifted her off the log. Setting his hand on her shoulder, he guided her into the shallow water. He splashed water onto his face, rinsing his mouth out.

"Hold your hands way down low where it's cold," he said, gently pushing her wrists way below the surface and leading her into the deeper water. He hugged her body close to his.

After her hands and wrists became numb from the cool water, Sam waded in the creek, the water soaking the hem of her sundress. Up to her waist now, the water washed off the dirt from her soiled dress. She shivered then stepped away from No Man's Landing, inching closer to their house.

Mama and Daddy wouldn't know what happened if Sam carried on as if this were any ordinary afternoon. Tonight, her aunt and uncle and cousin Rachel were coming over to give her one of the new puppies. They'd all have dinner, maybe her mama's chicken and dumplings and peach pie. The adults would talk about the kids going back to school next week, and Rachel and Sam would decide upon a name for the puppy. They'd do what they typically did during warm nights—have supper on the porch and listen to the distant trickle of the Okatoma. The grown-ups would talk about how nice it was to sit outside, the air not even cool enough for them to need sweaters.

But right now, Sam wanted a warm jacket, one of her grandmother's afghans, anything to warm her body.

Chapter Twelve

San Diego: Autumn 2014

WITH THE WIND so still, the green flag atop the lifeguard station hung limply from the pole. Gentle waves sloshed onto shore as a lone seagull soared overhead. The ocean's surface was glassy this morning, the air crisp for mid-September. Fall was finally in the air. Sam, donned in her usual long-sleeved white lifeguarding T-shirt, slumped on the seat atop the tower with a beach towel draped over her lap as she sipped a latte that Travis brought her. She stared at the water looking for any signs of swimmers in distress. Travis paced from one railing to the next as he too scanned the shoreline. Since this was his day off, he was in Hawaiian print board shorts instead of his usual red lifeguard shorts.

Sam focused on the coastline, the tranquil water starting to lull her into a sleepy trance. The morning light cast a shimmery glow on the flat ocean, the water starting to swell as high tide approached. A long-distance swimmer far past the surf line stroked her arms as she swam along the coast. Past her, three dolphins sliced through the water, leaping in and out of the ocean. The breeze caused only a slight ripple on the surface, the water remaining glassy all morning. Perched on her tower, Sam peered down the coast, glancing at the vacant beach and the still water. The conditions seemed too calm today. Something was brewing.

After Robert had been moved out of ICU and into the acute medical ward, Sam returned to San Diego to finish the lifeguarding season, but she told her mother she'd hop on a plane immediately if Robert showed any signs of decline. Not yet ready for the traumatic brain injury ward or an acute rehab hospital, Robert would remain in Forrest General for now. He hadn't had any setbacks since he got the tracheostomy and G-tube and was then moved to the medical ward. No spike in heart rate. Stable blood pressure. No signs of infection. But also, no progress. Despite Robert getting some physical therapy to work his extremities, his muscles had atrophied, his legs dwindling down to skin and bone.

With kids back in school, the beaches were no longer packed with

families and paraphernalia. Far from the tower, a few lone beachgoers sat scattered across the sand, the shoreline mostly bare. A few morning walkers meandered in the shallow water. Now that summer hours were over, the lifeguards only guarded the beaches from ten until five o'clock on weekdays. The extra couple hours in the morning gave Sam more time on the trails or at the gym. Three and a half weeks in Mississippi had resulted in her muscles becoming soft and weak—but nothing like what her brother was experiencing from being bedridden and tube-fed for so long.

Sam gulped the last of her latte, licking the foam from the inside of the lid. With her binoculars, she scanned the horizon for any indication that the surf would pick up. A boogie boarder in the surf zone struggled to catch a small wave, the man thrashing his legs to try and drop into the curl. But with only one- to two-foot surf today, the small breaker didn't produce enough momentum for the man to be carried to shore. Travis chewed on sunflower seeds, spitting the shells into a paper cup as he sat back and set his feet on the metal railing.

"Any idea when they'll move Robert to a rehab hospital?" Travis asked.

"They were hoping he'd be moved by now," Sam said. "But the doctors and therapists say he's not ready. So, I don't know. Maybe in another couple weeks? If he continues to be stable, the plan is to transfer him to a skilled nursing facility, hopefully somewhere closer to home so my mom doesn't have to keep making that drive to Hattiesburg each day."

"At least he's stable right now," Travis said and placed his hand on Sam's arm.

"To me, stable just means he's still in pretty bad shape. I don't really see him making any progress. The physical therapists work with him nearly every day, but he just lies there staring up at the ceiling. His eyes look so glassy and distant. He's still pretty unresponsive."

"He still sedated?"

"He's on Keppra and Ativan, but that's about it. They tapered him off the Ativan before they transferred him out of ICU, but they sensed he was agitated and put him back on it after they moved him upstairs."

"Probably best for now. Gotta think positive, Cleveland. Each good day is a step forward, right? It's great having you back, even if it's only for a few more weeks. Just like old times together guarding the beach, huh?" He nudged his shoulder into hers then laughed. "I still remember

when you were a young rookie. All eager and itching to haul swimmers from the water, always volunteering to work the busiest towers. You outshined all the other rookies. Always can tell when we've got a good one. You were one of the best rookies that summer. But we sure did put you through the ringer the first summer you started."

"More like a hazing! You guys gave us all the grunt work. Remember that day you had me and that scrawny high-schooler digging trenches for the new towers? That kid was sweating and huffing the entire time. He up and quit before the day was over. I ended up digging most of those holes myself. Turns out I'd dug those holes for nothing when you told me the city said the towers weren't approved yet."

"Can't believe you fell for that." Travis snickered and slapped his knee. He howled with laughter until his face turned bright red. "Oldest prank in the department. Yeah, I could tell you had it in you when you kept digging and wouldn't stop until you'd finished the job."

"You kidding me? All these years, and you never fessed up? Y'all are jerks," Sam said and rammed her fist into his arm. "You're just like my brother sometimes." She got quiet and searched the horizon for any signs of approaching waves, any indication that the breakers would increase in size.

"Well, prank or not, you more than proved yourself. You ever thought of doing this full time? I mean, not just seasonal. We're losing a couple supervisors at the end of the season. How does the title of lieutenant sound to you?"

"You calling it quits, Miller? You one of the retirees?" Sam laughed then pushed herself up from the bench and leaned against the railing.

"Hey, I'm not even *close* to retiring yet. I've still got another few good years left in me."

"Full time, huh? Guess I never applied because I've always been pretty set on med school. But here I am, thirty-two years old, and I don't even have my bachelors yet. Kind of a long haul to get through med school and training. I should be in my residency by now."

"It's still possible, kiddo. I didn't get my bachelors until I was twenty-nine. But, if you're serious about medical school, you have to start taking more than a couple classes per semester. Maybe your heart's not in it?"

"I always start the semester all enthusiastic and full of high hopes. I sign up for a full load of classes but end up dropping down to only one or two. Seems I'd rather be training for a race or meeting women at the bar. Maybe I'll tire of those sorts of things now that I'm in my thirties."

"Well, only by a couple years now. I changed a lot in my thirties. It's like my perspective changed about having a family, settling down, looking toward the future, and thinking about all the other adult stuff."

"Having a family," Sam huffed. "Seems like such a far-off concept for me now."

"It could happen. You might meet the right woman, fall in love, have a kid together. You never know. You're young, kiddo. Your biological clock has got plenty of time left."

"Yeah, I suppose." Sam pursed her lips then glanced up the shore to the wide, distant span of sand that seemed to stretch on forever. "I doubt I'll ever tire of this, though. I mean, I can't see myself ever *not* being a lifeguard. Maybe I'll be guarding up into my sixties."

"You never know. I'm heading there myself with sixty sorta right around the corner for me. I mostly just ride around in a jeep all day and sit at the towers hanging out with you guys, but I'm still capable of pulling swimmers from rough surf. I was out there on those red flag days recently hauling swimmers from ten-footers just like you young guards. Hell, I'd say I've still got it at fifty-seven. At least for me, this is not just a job but a way of life. Always did have saltwater in my veins. Seems most people look at lifeguarding as only a summer job for teenagers or young adults. Not too many people realize we're marine safety officers, too, and that this is a serious career."

"It's always been more than a summer job for me. When I was in Mississippi these past few weeks, I craved this ocean. It's like I was having withdrawals from not rescuing swimmers or being on the sand. The creek is a few paces from Mama's house, but it's just not the same as this. Also, becoming a doctor isn't all that appealing to me now that I've seen the stuff they encounter in the ICU."

"I hear ya. When I did those ride alongs with the fire department and had a few shifts in the ER, I saw some crazy shit. I soon realized I didn't want to be around all that blood and gore full time. We see our own share of gnarly accidents here at the beach. Neck injuries, dislocated shoulders, even the occasional heatstroke. But the life-threatening injuries aren't a daily thing for us as they are for ER docs. Well, think about the lieutenant position. You say the word, and I'll put in my recommendation that they consider you for the job."

"I guess I was always set on becoming *Doctor* Cleveland, but Lieutenant Cleveland sounds nice, too. Funny, I'd have the same title my father had toward the end of his career and also the same title Annie has

now." Sam chuckled and shook her head as she peeled off her T-shirt and draped it over the railing.

"Haven't heard you mention Annie in a long time."

Sam smiled and glanced at the tranquil ocean. Only a few swimmers were in the water. Right now, the surface was more like a lake than an ocean. Another long-distance swimmer swam parallel to shore, the water perfect for that sort of swim today. The skies were void of clouds, the still water reflecting the blue sky. Sam couldn't shake the feeling that something was brewing—either out there in the ocean or back home with Robert. During her break today, she'd call the nurses' station to get a detailed update on Robert's condition.

"Annie and I saw a lot of each other when I was back in Mississippi," Sam finally said. "She came around quite a bit when I was there."

"Oh, really? You two reigniting any old embers? Have you and Annie gotten hot and heavy since you were back in Mississippi?"

"Can't say we were *ever* hot and heavy. Deeply sensual is more like it. And sweet and tender. Soft and passionate. Well, you get the picture."

"Indeed, I do," Travis laughed and tossed a few more sunflower seeds into his mouth. "Sounds hot and heavy to *this* old married guy. You know, Maria and I have been together for a little over thirty years now. Love her even more than I did the day I married her. Three kids later, things have changed, but she's still my girl. Sure, we've had our ups and downs, but our love is solid. Shit, I still find her sexy as hell."

"Maybe one day I'll have what you and Maria have. Annie's always been so attentive, so loving and consistent, I guess. Well, still is. It's been nice having her nearby. She's always been so...well, so right in some ways but also so wrong in others."

"You two always did have a good thing. Sometimes loving and consistent wins out over hot and heavy. Sad that she up and left to go back to the south. But I'm glad she's there for you. Definitely consider that promotion. The closing date to apply is coming up. You've already got what we're looking for—several years of experience, rough water training, EMT background, and...my recommendation."

"I'll think about it. It depends on...well, how Robert is doing."

"Sure, yeah, I understand. One day at a time, as they say. You know, Cleveland, I need to say something that's been on my mind since your brother was in this accident. I thought of texting you, but I knew it wouldn't come out right through text."

Sam faced him, readying herself for whatever he was going to say.

Always direct with her, Travis never minced his words. She stared at him until he finally continued.

“Family is everything. I learned that the hard way after my dad had his heart attack. I used to put my job first, my family second. I mean, lifeguarding has been my life since I was sixteen. I flew up to be with my dad for the first few days after his heart attack, but I flew back home on a Friday because I felt I had to work on the weekend. Well, it was mid-summer, so you know how that is for lifeguards. Dad was stable when I left. Had no idea he’d have another massive heart attack. He passed two days after I’d flown back home. If I’d stayed through the weekend, I would’ve been with him when he passed. To this day I regret not being there.”

Sam gazed at the tranquil ocean and considered what Travis said. The waves had decreased even more in size. The air started to warm up as the sun moved higher overhead. Sam cleared her throat and took a deep breath, her words carefully chosen as she fought off the tears. “Robert isn’t dying, at least not right now. Mama says if Robert was going to die, it would’ve been the night of the accident. The next milestone, if we want to call it that, was forty-eight hours later. Then we hit the three-day mark. Then a week. Robert is stable. He isn’t exactly thriving...but he’s stable. I can’t put my life on hold as I sit vigil next to his bed.”

“Right, I get it. I guess you gotta figure out if this is as good as it gets for him. I know with my dad, I never imagined he’d pass so fast. I mean, my sisters and I wanted the doctors to do all they could to keep my dad alive, but we also knew how damaged his heart was. Plus, he was way too weak for any kind of heart surgery. My mom knew my dad had a DNR, but she still wanted the doctors to do all they could to revive him. I’m not saying your brother is in the same situation as my dad, but I guess I’m just saying that you have to figure what Robert would want.”

Sam knew what Robert would want. She knew this with certainty. Still unclear whether the brain damage resulted in him being in a complete vegetative state, Sam knew that this wasn’t living to Robert. Even if he did have some awareness of what was going on, he wouldn’t want to be dependent on machines to keep him alive. He couldn’t even feed himself. He’d never be able to take his raft down the river or hunt for snakes along the riverbanks. He’d never even be able to handle the snakes and lizards in his new reptile shop. In an instant, that man took all that away from Robert. There still hadn’t been any significant progress in the investigation, but Annie texted her each day with updates, even if the

update was to say they had no new leads.

“Well, euthanasia isn’t exactly legal in the state of Mississippi,” Sam finally said, her eyes filling with tears. She put on her sunglasses and peered down the coast, ensuring that no beachgoers were hurt or doing anything unlawful. “Plus, Robert doesn’t have an advanced directive. My mom is fighting to get Robert better. He’s in a level two trauma center, the best hospital in the area for his type of injuries. At this point, there’s no way Mama would go for any sort of measures to not sustain his life. She doesn’t seem to realize that he’s never going to be the Robert he was before.”

Travis stood next to Sam, pulling her into a tight sideways hug. “I’m here for you, kiddo. No matter what. Hey, how about you come over for dinner one night this week? You could bring that new girlfriend. We can have a couple beers, grill some steaks, shoot some pool.”

“Not sure if we’re at the stage of me bringing her to barbeques at your house yet.” Sam smiled then thought about how she’d hopefully be able to see Kim soon. They hadn’t seen each other since before Sam went back to Mississippi, and at this point, the craving for Kim’s body had intensified.

“Well, then maybe just you. Maria would love to see you anyway. But, remember, I’m only a text or a phone call away, no matter if it’s here in San Diego or when you’re back in Mississippi.”

Sam took a deep breath and focused on the glassy ocean. Even though this was a slow morning, she still had to be on her toes in case anyone got injured, but her muscles felt sore—partially from the intense workout she did last night and from sitting here for a couple hours not doing anything more than chatting with Travis. Sam tossed her shades onto the bench then stepped down the metal slats of the tower leading to the sand. She hopped off the bottom rung of the ladder and grabbed her fins and rescue tube.

“Gonna go cool off,” Sam said and meandered to the water’s edge.

She stood on shore for a moment then stepped into the water; she shuffled her feet to ward off any stingrays lurking under the surface. She immediately felt the chill in the ocean. No longer hovering around seventy-two degrees as it often was during September, the water had dropped a few degrees. With this being late in the year, there were far fewer south swells to keep the water warm, and as the air became colder at night, the temps dropped by a degree every few days. Since Sam had been a lifeguard for so many years, she could gauge the temperature within a degree or two. Right now, the water felt to be sixty-five or sixty-

six. By the end of her lifeguarding season next month, Sam would be experiencing temperatures hovering around sixty.

A few small waves gently sloshed onto shore as Sam shuffled her feet until she got to deeper water. Once she was thigh-deep, she sliced her body through the water, her skin chilled as she swam under for a few seconds. She resurfaced and assessed her area, searching for anything needing her attention. She flipped over on her back for a moment and stared at the clear blue sky before dunking below the surface once more. As she tread water, her entire body relaxed. She did her best to not worry too much about Robert. He'd eventually be moved to an acute rehab hospital. If there were any negative changes in his status today while Sam was on duty, Mama would text Travis who'd then contact Sam. Since lifeguards weren't allowed to look at their phones even for a few seconds while on duty, Sam kept hers secure in her backpack, but as soon as the rookie lifeguard came to relieve her for lunch, she'd call her mother to check on Robert.

As she swam toward shore, Sam noticed two fit women jogging on the sand a few yards north of her. She squinted into the glaring sun then noticed that one of the women looked familiar. Sam could recognize that muscular body anywhere. It was Kim, running with another fit young woman—the two of them only wearing skimpy bikinis and running shoes. Excited that Kim had chosen this patch of beach to do her morning workout, Sam pumped her fins through the water to get closer to shore. Once in shallower water, she headed back to shore. With her fins dangling from her hand and water dripping from her face, Sam hollered as Kim approached her.

Out of breath and sweaty, Kim smiled when she got close to Sam. "I was hoping you'd be here today," Kim said and leaned her body into Sam's for a quick hug. "We were all set to run in Coronado, but I figured we should come here in the slight chance you'd be guarding this beach."

Sam's cool skin against Kim's felt warm. "I'm glad you chose this beach. So great to see you. Sorry about the wet hug," Sam said and laughed. She gazed into Kim's blue eyes and wished her shift was over now. She'd love to join her for a jog on the beach followed by a dip in the ocean and then a return to Kim's place. Ready and eager to taste her once again, Sam felt a surge of warmth go through her body.

"A wet hug is kinda nice right now after our run," Kim said and smiled, pulling Sam closer but keeping the hug short. "Oh, this is Adrianna. You probably remember her from the Trail Angels."

Sam reached over to shake her hand, apologizing that her hand was wet. Adrianna appeared fit and bosomy, and Sam for the first time in years felt a surge of jealousy. Sam had only been dating Kim for a few weeks now, and for part of that time, their dating only consisted of a few flirtatious texts while Sam was in Mississippi. Still, Sam thought she and Kim had potential. But Kim hadn't mentioned anyone named Adrianna—especially a young, perky girl who looked no more than eighteen.

While Sam and Kim talked some more, Adrianna lunged forward, stretching her calf muscles. All Sam noticed were her breasts heaving out of that skimpy hot pink bathing suit. Fit for thirty-two, Sam worked hard to keep her body in shape, but she felt self-conscious being around such a young, athletic girl like this. Sam folded her arms across her small breasts, her fins dangling from her hand. Adrianna used Kim's shoulder to balance herself as she pulled her foot up behind her, stretching her quads.

"How's your brother doing today?" Kim asked as she gripped Adrianna's arm to help steady her. "Any breakthroughs?"

"No changes. He's stable. Best we can hope for right now." Sam glanced over Adrianna's shoulder to peer at the shoreline and the sandy beach next to her station. She noticed Travis hopping off the tower and plopping onto the sand. Always on alert, Travis craned his neck to do a quick scan of the beach as he walked toward the water. Even though he was off duty today, he was still in lifeguard mode. Leaving an empty tower was never advised unless a guard was in the water assisting swimmers or administering first aid somewhere on the beach.

"Too bad you can't join us for a run," Adrianna said and plopped down in the sand to stretch some more. "Perfect weather for a long run on the beach." Adrianna leaned forward, clasping her hands around her ankles. Her large breasts smooshed against her thighs as she rocked her body forward in slow, gentle bounces.

"Yeah, that'd be...fun," Sam said and stared at Adrianna's breasts. She wondered how this girl jogged being so top-heavy. Sam then imagined what Kim probably saw in her—a fit body, double D breasts, dark skin. Sam had no recollection of meeting Adrianna on any of the rides with the Trail Angels. Sam would've remembered someone like this. "I'm on duty till five. And right now, I need to return to my tower," Sam said, peering at the vacant beach. "Nice to meet you, Adrianna, and...great to see you, Kim." Sam glanced at Kim's lips, longing to kiss her. Instead, she placed her hand on the small of Kim's back then leaned close to her neck to whisper in her ear, "Dinner later? And then...something else?"

"I can't... We're going to REI to get new gear for the Mammoth trip."

"Oh, that's cool. Well, maybe a drink at Gossip Grill later tonight? With both of you, I mean."

"I'm not twenty-one yet," Adrianna said and giggled then stood and dusted the sand off her legs. "I've still got a couple years to go till I can legally drink. Plus, I'm not really into drinking. Doesn't really fit into my training routine. But maybe Kimmie would want to go after we get our stuff for the trip."

Kimmie? Sam thought. She tossed that name around in her head, wondering why Kim had never introduced herself as Kimmie when they first met a couple months ago.

"No, that's okay," Kim said and glanced at Adrianna then at Sam. "I've got...a lot to do tonight. Plus, I need to get to bed early since we're doing a twenty-miler in the morning with a small group from the Trail Angels. Sam, you're off Friday, right? Maybe we can finally go to the zoo like you suggested a few weeks ago. Haven't been there since I was a kid."

Since she was a *kid*? Sam thought. For Kim, that probably meant only a few years ago that she was just a child. Wondering what Kim saw in a slightly older woman like herself, Sam questioned her decision to date someone eight years younger. But, she'd enjoyed the night they were together a few weeks ago—the memories of that hot connection fueling her libido ever since.

"Yeah, sure, that'd be fun. Text me later? Have fun...at REI. And, enjoy your ride tomorrow." Sam considered going on that early morning ride tomorrow with the Trail Angels, but she'd never be able to fit in a twenty-miler before her shift, much less handle so many miles after she hadn't done a long ride in nearly a month.

Sam watched as Kim and Adrianna resumed their jog. As they ran a few paces down the beach, Sam glanced at Kim's tight ass in that skimpy bikini and then caught a glimpse of Adrianna's dark and muscular body. Nineteen years old. Fit, bosomy, and perky. Sam peered down at her abs, which had gotten a bit soft during her time in Mississippi. Nearly a month of no workouts and her mama's Southern cooking had caught up to her. After her shift ended this evening, she'd do a beach run followed by a long swim up and down the coast. Tomorrow morning she'd do another short trail ride before her shift started. Then after work she'd hit the gym for one of her intense weight workouts. She still had four days until her date with Kim. She'd get her toned body back in no time. By Friday, her muscles would surely be tighter. But at least she still had stamina to keep

up with Kim in bed – someone so young and hungry for sex.

The tide was starting to creep farther up onto the dry sand, the gentle surge of water getting Sam's feet wet. With high tide approaching, she hoped it would bring larger surf and more action at the beach. She still had six hours left of her shift, and with such calm conditions, those hours would drag on. Nearby, she noticed Travis trotting toward her in the hot sand waving both arms in the air.

"Hey, your mom just texted me," Travis yelled as he neared Sam. "She said Robert's got a fever, a high white count, and fluid in his lungs."

"Pneumonia," Sam said and shook her head then wedged her fins in the sand. "That's...not moving forward. I knew it was just a matter of time until he got worse." Rage consumed Sam's body once again when she thought of how that man had caused all this damage to her brother's body. Now, Robert's immune system was declining. His body weakened by the day. Incessant diarrhea. Muscle atrophy. High fever. And now, fluid in the lungs. "I've been waiting for something like this to happen. First pneumonia. Next, probably blood clots. And yet they haven't even caught the guy who –"

"Kiddo, you told me they're doing everything they can to find the guy. They've found the truck, they're viewing the security tapes from Robert's work, and they're continuing to search the area, right? It's just a matter of time till they find him."

"I shouldn't have come back to San Diego," Sam said and shook her head, her body tensing as the words exited her mouth. "I should be right by his side, not here guarding this...boring stretch of beach." She glanced at the wide span of empty sand, looking far ahead for any signs of Kim and Adrianna, but by now they'd disappeared far down the shore. "Then I run into Kim, or Kimmie, or Kimberly, or whatever fucking name she goes by. And how would I know *what* name she prefers? We've hardly been out more than a few times! Only slept together once. But here on *my* beach today, my...my supposed girlfriend and some young hottie are jogging past me on the beach as I'm on duty."

"I'm sure she's a great girl. You're just getting to know her. I bet you two can go for a beach run later this week."

"She's probably got her whole weekly fitness regimen all planned out. Probably lots of runs and rides with Adrianna. And here I am guarding a beach that's got hardly any people while *she's* off jogging with some hot young girl. Nobody needs help here today. No rescues, no injuries, nothing!"

"Hey, we need you here. You know that. You know how it is during the off-season. Anything can happen on days like this."

"I shouldn't have left Mississippi. Why am I even here? I shouldn't have left my brother who's just...wasting away in the hospital. Nothing's going on here today. One-foot waves? Who needs to be rescued in these sorts of conditions?" She waved an arm to the calm ocean, her body shaking as the anger continued to surface.

"Hey, hey, kiddo," Travis said and clasped his hand around Sam's arm. "There's not much you can do sitting by his side as they treat him for pneumonia. You yourself said you can't just sit vigil by his side. Your mom said not to worry, that the doctors put him on a strong round of IV antibiotics right when they saw the elevated white count."

"Yeah, but I should be there. I'm the only one who seems to get any sort of significant reaction out of him. He rarely squeezes my mom's hand, and he only has minimal reaction when the therapists work with him."

"Maybe you can fly out for a few days. I'm sure we can get your shifts covered, just so you can be with him and assure him that he's gonna make it."

Sam could work another couple days and then take the redeye later this week. She could be in Mississippi in less than six hours and to the hospital shortly after landing if she hopped in a rental car and made no stops on the way. But then that'd mean not seeing Kim on Friday. However, at this point, Sam and Kim weren't exactly in a relationship—which was made clear to her just now when Kim was running on the beach with that fit, voluptuous girl.

"Why don't you see how he's doing tomorrow and the next day?" Travis said. "He's already on mega-strong antibiotics. I bet his white count goes down by tomorrow night. Just know that should you need to fly out immediately, we'll get your towers covered."

"Yeah, okay, one day at a time, I suppose. Right now, it feels like he's in limbo, so to speak. He's barely existing, but I guess the reality is that he's still alive, and that's what matters."

"Hold on to that, kiddo. It's still early after his accident. With his type of injuries, great strides can happen weeks later."

"You sound like my mom," Sam said and laughed but realized Travis and her mother were possibly right. Sam had researched brain trauma and spinal injuries on her phone while she sat for hours next to Robert in the ICU. She read about dismal prognoses for victims of cerebral hypoxia and limited recoveries for victims of spinal injuries like Robert's. Not seeing

too many promising stories, Sam did read that in some cases, the patients showed slight improvement over time. She struggled to hold on to those words right now: slight improvement. Sam wondered if that'd be enough to get Robert to a place where he'd more than just exist in a hospital bed hooked up to a ventilator and dependent on a feeding tube.

"Having you there every single day probably won't make much of a difference, and sometimes having a distraction in your life can be healthy." Travis waved an arm out toward the wide span of sand and the ocean in front of the tower. "Be it this beach or that young hottie you're dating right now, I kinda think some distractions are necessary. Right now, Robert is stable. I wouldn't even call this a setback. Remember, pneumonia is treatable," Travis said, gripping his hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Yeah, but brain damage isn't. The thing is, he...he can't even talk. He can't walk, probably never will be able to. He'll be lucky if he's even able to sit up in a wheelchair. I keep wondering," Sam said, her voice breaking, "I wonder if he even knows what's going on. And if he *does*...God help him to not realize the severity of it all."

Sam turned her back to the calm ocean, tromping across the hot sand to return to her tower. With the sun overhead, the sand heated by the minute. Sam tossed her fins on the sand and climbed atop her perch. Shaded under the tower's awning, she scanned the shore, searching for anything out of the ordinary. The ocean remained tranquil and glassy, but as a lifeguard, she knew that a calm day could result in unexpected incidents in or out of the water.

Chapter Thirteen

San Diego: Autumn 2014

A BREEZE BLEW through Sam's hair as she and Kim entered the dark Reptile House. Sam led Kim down the dim corridor toward the giant lizards. No matter how warm it was at the zoo, this dank enclosure always provided a break from the stifling summer heat. But this was autumn—mid-September when warm temperatures still lingered in the air.

Sam savored her time at the zoo with Kim, but she longed for the cool ocean air at the beach. She only had four more weeks left of lifeguarding for the year. If she took the supervisor position, the work would be year-round, which meant only taking one or two classes per semester to edge closer to earning her B.S. in biology. Last week, she'd signed up for a microbiology course at the last minute, relieved that the instructor added her after the class had already started. But maintaining a 3.8 for a few semesters now, she was in good standing with the biology professors. For now, though, Sam needed to decide what she'd do after the 2014 lifeguarding season ended—continue taking this course at SDSU or drop it and take time off to return to Mississippi until Robert was transferred to a rehab hospital.

Late in the afternoon now, the warm autumn air sapped her energy. They'd made the rounds at the zoo—first the primates, then the lions and tigers. Then a quick jaunt up to the elephants and giraffes at the other end of the park. And now, the Reptile House. As she waited for her eyes to adjust inside the dark building, Sam felt Kim's arm wrap around her waist. She leaned into her and relaxed as she started to finally enjoy her day off. With Robert's white count lower now, she had less of a reason to worry about his status. At least the pneumonia was under control. But Sam couldn't get the thought out of her mind that Robert was alive only because of the breathing machine and feeding tube.

She interlaced her fingers through Kim's as they approached the lizards, first stopping in front of the huge iguana with the long, striped tail and the sharp barbs jutting out of its head. Sam peered into the dark enclosure and observed the strange creature as it munched on bits of

apple. Its long tail whipped against the glass, causing Sam to flinch. Then the iguana crept along the perimeter of the pen, rubbing its scaly body against the wall.

Sam and Kim wandered to the next enclosure—the red-headed rock agama with the two-toned body. Sam craned her neck to read the description of the lizard. She studied the placard, chuckling when she remembered what “agama” meant.

“Agama in Latin means unmarried. Robert used to tell me this was his favorite lizard because of that name. When he was in his twenties, he said he’d never be shackled by a wife and kids. Well, I don’t suppose he’ll ever settle down with anyone now that—” Sam stopped herself then eyed the agama resting on the log.

Kim leaned her back against the glass and scrolled through her phone. “Wikipedia says the female agamas initiate courtship by offering their backsides to potential male suitors. Frisky little creatures, huh?”

“The females do that when they feel neglected, or when they feel like they have to get the attention of the male agamas. It’s all about reproduction, not so much about...sexual attraction or...arousal of any kind. The male typically has several females in his territory and breeds with all of them, but he never settles down with just one mate. I guess you could say he gets around.” Sam breathed out a soft, breathy laugh then gazed at the brightly colored lizard. The agama stepped off the log wedged next to the fake pond and crept closer to Sam. She pressed her face against the thick window and studied the colorful lizard.

Kim came up behind her and pressed her body into hers, gripping her hands on her hips. She brushed the hair back from her shoulder and kissed her on the neck. Then she reached an arm around Sam’s lower abdomen and pulled her close, pressing her pelvis into her butt and kissing her on the neck once more.

Sam moaned softly and felt a surge of warmth wash over her body—settling in her crotch. Annie was never this affectionate in public, not even when they walked around Hillcrest or went to San Diego gay pride. Usually the most Annie did was hold her hand when they went to the Flame, but that was only during their first few years together.

Kim faced Sam and placed her hands on her hips, drawing her closer and burying her face in her hair. Kim’s petite but strong body pressed into Sam’s—the firm muscles so angular and hard. Unlike Annie’s body, there was nothing squishy about Kim’s muscular pecs and ripped abs. Sam had never dated someone this fit before. She glimpsed over Kim’s shoulder

and peered down the dark corridor then leaned in to kiss her softly on the lips.

After she released herself from Kim's arms, Sam faced the glass enclosure again. She located the agama huddled on the branch of a fake tree. She studied the bright orange head and thought of her brother's neglected lizards and snakes in the barn back home. Mama dropped a mouse or rat into the mamba's cages every few days and kept a steady supply of bullfrogs on hand to feed the water moccasins, but Robert wasn't there to ensure they got all that they needed. He lay unresponsive in the hospital, his collection of reptiles at home somehow dwelling in the glass enclosures without him.

"My brother has one of these," Sam said and secured her arm around Kim's waist. "When I was a kid, this was the only reptile I'd hold. This place used to scare the hell out of me. I was close to twenty when I finally came in here unafraid."

"I can see why. Reptiles give me the creeps. That lizard is so odd-looking," Kim said and laughed then pulled her phone out of her back pocket. "But I suppose creatures like this are low maintenance as far as care." Kim tapped out a text and then stared at her phone.

"Actually, you'd be surprised at the care these sorts of reptiles need," Sam said and glanced at Kim's phone. "Sure, they can remain in a glass pen like this pretty much indefinitely, but they need more than this. A creature like this wasn't meant to be stuck inside this small box all the time. Makes sense. I mean, this is all this lizard knows. It perches on this fake tree. It's fed a good diet and is given plenty of artificial light with that sunlamp up there." Sam nodded to the amber light in the corner, the beam shining on the agama that had no clue there was much more out there than these four walls.

Right now, Robert lay in a brightly lit hospital room—kept alive by artificial means. Shrouded under fluorescent lighting, he was barely existing. Fed synthetic vitamins and nutrients through his G-tube, his organs continued to function and keep him alive, but that would be all he'd experience from here on out. He'd never again be able to taste a cheeseburger or an ice-cold beer. Not even able to hold a woman's hand, he'd surely never be able to embrace a woman like Sam could. She tried to shake off these images and focus on the red-headed agama inches away from her behind the protective window.

"Sorry," Kim said and focused on her phone again. "Adrianna is bugging me to do another long ride before the Mammoth trip. I'll tell her

I'll call her later tonight."

"You two have been doing a lot of training lately."

"You know how it is with the long endurance rides. A hundred miles is a huge endeavor."

"How many people are going on this trip?"

"As of yesterday, only six of us."

"You driving up with Adrianna?"

"Yeah, she's riding with me and a couple others. We're trying to keep the size of the group small so we don't have to rent any trailers for the gear. With the bikes and packs and all that, things are gonna be tight on the ride up. It'll be cold, so we'll need tents and warm sleeping bags. All that stuff is a bitch to carry while on the bike."

"I suppose you and Adrianna are sharing a tent?"

"Well, yeah, that's the plan."

Sam got quiet and felt a surge of panic wash through her as she stepped away from Kim. She wrung her hands and peered into the next dark pen, searching for the reptile. "A week in Mammoth sharing a tent with Adrianna. Well, that sounds cozy."

"Hey, hold up," Kim said and gripped her arm. "Adrianna and I are just friends. Do you think there's more? We're training partners, friends, that's all."

"Seems like you two spend a lot of time together. You talk about her all the time. You go running or biking with her every day. You shop for gear together. What else do you do together?"

"Adrianna is like a little sister to me. She's only nineteen."

"Nineteen is a whole lot closer to your age than thirty-two."

"Sam, you and I only met a few weeks ago. I've known Adrianna forever. I met her when she was only a sophomore in high school."

"You two seem pretty close."

"We are. She's my best friend. You'll have to get used to that. Besides, she's not actually into women."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Well, she's not into men either. I guess she's still trying to figure things out."

Sam didn't respond. She stared at the chameleon and studied the bright green body, waiting for the reptile's skin to change colors.

"Sam, I like you," Kim said and touched her arm. "A lot. But we've never even talked about whether we're girlfriends yet or whether we're exclusive with one another. We've only gone out a few times. But, I'd like

to keep going out with you, to see where this leads.”

Sam inhaled deeply, her expelled breath fogging the glass in front of her face. “I haven’t felt this way in a long time about someone. I mean, not since Annie and I first started going out. I guess I worry that maybe you’d rather be with someone younger than me.”

“Thirty-two is *not* old. The thing is, Adrianna is way young. She’s just a teenager. She’s like a little buddy to me. She pushes me on the trails. Don’t you have friends like that? Besides, you and your ex talk every day. If I was the jealous type, I’d be a little concerned that you two talk so much.”

“We’re not usually in such close contact since she got back together with her ex, but...yeah, Annie texts me with updates about the investigation. That’s a whole lot different than you and Adrianna—”

“Look, Adrianna is just a friend. Nothing more. I still see her as that high school kid I met years ago. I like *you*. Why do you think I’m here today? And besides, you’re super fit. Plus, you’re way hot. It should be pretty obvious by now that I’m really attracted to you. Haven’t you noticed I can’t keep my hands off you?” Kim took a step closer to Sam then reached for her hand, their fingers interlacing as their bodies moved closer together.

Sam shook her head then nudged Kim. “I’m not usually the jealous type. The thing is, I wish it were *me* you were sharing that tent with in Mammoth, but I can’t risk being far in the mountains for a week and being out of cell service in case Annie or my mom needs to get in touch with me about Robert’s condition.”

“I wish you were going on the trip, too. Maybe next time you can join us.”

Sam relaxed her body into Kim’s and drummed her fingers on the ledge of the chameleon enclosure. “So, you like older women, huh? Well, *that’s* a relief. I hope it’s obvious that I’m attracted to you, too. I can’t stop thinking about you when we’re not together. Jeez, even with my brother in a coma, I kept thinking about you...and about that one night together.”

Kim pulled Sam closer, leading her away from the lizard enclosure. “I don’t know about you, but I’d like there to be a second time. Well, more than a second time.” Kim ran her fingers through Sam’s hair and placed a hand on her face. She kissed her softly on the lips then held her tightly in her arms.

Sam closed her eyes and inhaled Kim’s fresh scent. She liked the way Kim felt in her arms, but she still wasn’t settled on how Adrianna fit into

the picture. Maybe next time you can join *us*? What did that mean? Share the tent with Kim and Adrianna? Dating around was not something Sam enjoyed—the insecurities, uncertainties, jealousies. Then there was the whole age difference. But, at least Sam had something that Adrianna likely didn't have: experience. She knew how to please a woman in bed, and most of them always came back wanting more.

Sam pulled herself away from Kim's embrace and moved toward the adjacent section of the building. With their arms about one another, they meandered to the next couple of exhibits. This row had no reptiles in the cages. The pens weren't even lit; none of them had placards describing the cold-blooded creatures. Sam peered down the dark corridor and then peeked behind her. Then she led Kim to one of the cement columns. She recalled what Travis told her earlier this week—that she needed a distraction. But hopefully Kim would be more than that as they continued to get to know one another. Right now, she couldn't resist kissing her and feeling her body against hers.

Kim's lips welcomed Sam's as the kiss went from soft and sweet to passionate and eager. Wanting more, Sam set her palms on the small of Kim's back and drew her closer. She moved her hand under Kim's shirt, running her fingers along the soft skin of her lower back. Sam kissed her one more time, moving her lips to her neck.

"I'm sure there will be many more nights together," Sam whispered into Kim's ear then kissed her softly on the lips. "Definitely way more than just a second time. I can't seem to get enough of you."

"Well, this is just a taste of what's to come later," Kim said and ran her hand through Sam's hair then stared into her eyes. "There's a lot more where this came from. This might sound weird, but I kind of like that you're jealous. I guess I didn't know that you felt this way about me."

Sam couldn't hold Kim's gaze for more than a few seconds, so she buried her face in her neck. Kim's scent aroused her even more.

"Mmm, let's get out of here," Kim said and grabbed Sam's hand.

"Wait, I want to check out some of the snakes nearby," Sam said and led Kim around the corner to the next enclosure.

Once they approached the next glass pen, Sam read the placard above the king cobra's large enclosure and searched the area for the huge snake. The cobra quivered slightly as its curved body straightened to at least ten feet long. Sam's heart fluttered as she staggered back. Always afraid of the king cobra, when she was a kid, she'd usually hide behind Robert if she even felt brave enough to enter the Reptile House. In the corner, the black snake

creeped forward a few inches then reared its head, its body suddenly growing taller by the second. By now, Sam had stepped a full three paces away from the cobra as that childhood fear returned to her. The erect serpent flattened its head and grew even taller, the yellow scales on the underside magnifying in both hue and size.

Sam turned her back to the cobra and meandered to the next snake as Kim trailed behind. As she studied the sign above the enclosure, Sam took note of the way the green mamba's venom killed its prey. She squinted to read every word. "'After the mamba bites its victim, the potent poison kills within minutes,'" she recited out loud.

Kim pressed her chest against Sam's back and gripped her hands on her hips, but Sam didn't even lean back into Kim's body. Instead, she studied the green serpent coiled around the limb of a tree, its body dormant but still so dangerous. She'd seen this snake many times in Robert's books or in the photos he showed her online, but as she stood in front of it now, she noticed the glowing green hue of the sleek body. The mamba's body was wrapped around the limb in a chaotic and looped mess, with the head tucked beneath the body.

Mesmerized by the snake's bright green color, Sam stared at it for a few seconds and set her palm on the glass. "My brother has one of these, as well as a black mamba."

"Really? It says they're pretty deadly," Kim said as she skimmed Wikipedia once more. "They say a bite from one of these is called the kiss of death. Hey, let's get out of here. Let's drive through Adolpho's then head back to my place and have a couple beers and then continue what we—"

"This is one of the deadliest snakes in the world. One bite can result in death within minutes. Once the venom enters the bloodstream, there's not much that can be done to save the person."

"And your *brother* has one of these?" Kim said and glared at the sign. "How'd he get a mamba?"

Sam kept her eyes fixated on the snake coiled around the branch. "The green mamba is the deadliest of all the mambas. Well, I should say an *Eastern* green mamba. They're also known as tree asps, as you can see here with this one hiding in the branches. There are all sorts of these poisonous snakes—black, Eastern, Western, and another one called Jameson's mamba. Robert was never interested in that one—only the black mamba and this one here."

"If they're only found in Africa, how would your brother have them? I

would assume a dangerous snake like this is only allowed in places like a zoo. It says right here that they're highly venomous and deadly."

Sam stared through the thick glass and thought about how best to answer Kim. She never knew the full details of how Robert got ahold of a mamba or even a boa constrictor, but she knew never to ask. He started collecting the banned snakes after Sam moved to San Diego—where she was far enough away from having to see those creatures slithering about in the glass cages.

"He's got his connections," Sam finally said. "There are ways around those laws, but yeah, they're extremely deadly. The mambas that Robert has are especially dangerous. I never get close to them, of course—not when he first got them, not now, not ever. Consisting of neurotoxins *and* cardiotoxins, a bite from any mamba results in a rapid death, usually caused due to respiratory paralysis and heart failure. It's fast. The victim pretty much has no hope once the neurotoxins start to take effect."

"I think I've had enough zoology lessons for the day," Kim said and tugged on Sam's T-shirt. "Let's get out of here, get some burritos, and then go back to my place. You know, finish what we started a few minutes ago? Do a repeat of that night a few weeks back? What do you think?" Kim waved an arm toward the exit and stepped away from the enclosure; she left Sam in the Reptile House and slumped on the low cement wall right outside the building.

Sam peered into the glass enclosure. The green mamba uncoiled its body from the tree as it reared its head and slithered out a forked tongue. Sam leaned against the wall and tapped on the glass with her fingernail. She stared at the mamba until he slithered off the branch and inched closer to her. Then she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. When she caught a glimpse of her messages, she noticed she had two missed calls from Annie and three texts from her.

We've got a name.

Sam read the first text and stepped away from the deadly serpent that slithered closer to the glass barrier.

We now know who hit your brother.

She paced back and forth in front of the snakes as she made her way through the third text—a long, detailed message that filled the entire screen of her phone.

The prints on the truck have been ID'd to 56-year-old Jonathan Patterson. Since the truck had been stolen, it took them a couple days to ID the fingerprints because the interior had been wiped nearly clean. But once the prints were ID'd to Patterson, his photo was confirmed by Matt and Greg as being the guy who caused the accident. This guy has done time before. Robbery, assault, petty theft. I wanted to tell you this next thing over the phone or in person, but evidently this guy had been stalking Robert at work. Coworkers say he verbally threatened Robert, said he was there to do to him what he'd done to his brother twenty-four years ago. Witnesses say Patterson had told Robert he was there to even the score.

Sam braced herself on the ledge across from the snake enclosures. She reread that one line: "he was there to do to him what he'd done to his brother twenty-four years ago." She calculated what year it was twenty-four years prior: 1990, when she was eight and Robert was fourteen. She skimmed the first part of Annie's long text once more, shaking her head as she focused on that name and recalled that year.

"No, this can't be," Sam said quietly. This couldn't be the same Johnny, or could it? And he'd returned to even the score? That evil man had sworn to Sam and Robert that he'd be back for them one day. And that one day happened last month when he intentionally rammed Robert's truck off that bridge and into the Bouie River.

Despite such a hot autumn day, Sam suddenly felt cold and started to tremble. Jonathan Patterson—Johnny, as his brothers called him—had returned to Covington County. Sam now knew with certainty that he'd come back to hurt Robert for killing Chuck. She constantly tried to block that horrible memory, but it always had a way of creeping back to her. How could this nightmare get any worse? Robert remained unresponsive and grew weaker by the day—all because of this evil man. Annie had no idea that this was the same person who hurt her several years ago. Sam had never told her the man's name, only that three men attacked her when she was eight, telling her that Robert intervened and helped her escape. True to their promise, neither Robert nor Sam told anyone about what else happened that day.

As she stood near a wide window overlooking the zoo, Sam attempted to catch her breath. She closed her eyes and tried to erase the images of that day from her mind, but that afternoon in the summer of 1990 flooded back to her in sick, suffocating waves. Her head became dizzy, but she

willed herself to slow each inhale and exhale. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Deep, controlled breaths into her lungs. Once she finally caught a full breath, she read the rest of Annie's text.

Might be some sort of old teenage feud. I'm not going to stop till that guy is convicted and behind bars. Forensics has determined the person driving the truck is definitely at fault for the accident. The type of impact on the front and side of the truck indicates Robert's Chevy was intentionally hit. We'll make sure the DA tries him for everything they can: car theft, attempted murder, hit and run, reckless driving, even stalking. With his previous record, the guy's going to be put away for a long time. Now we just have to find him. It's only a matter of time till we arrest him. Jonathan Patterson is probably closer than we think. There's more I need to tell you, but I'd rather do that over the phone. Call me as soon as you can, okay?

Sam's breath halted in her chest as she stared at that name: Jonathan Patterson. The significance bore down on her like molten lava. She became lightheaded and set a heavy hand on the wall. Sam should return to her date, but she could hardly wrap her head around this news. Kim paced a few feet away from her in the entryway, laughing and engrossed in a conversation on her phone—probably talking with Adrianna once again.

She pushed her body away from the wall and glanced again at that name. This couldn't be happening. Robert hadn't mentioned anything about Johnny being back, but maybe he hadn't figured out that this was the same Johnny. Sam thought he'd left Mississippi back in the nineties since that was when she and Robert stopped seeing signs of him around the creek. No more hang-up calls. No threatening notes pinned to the barn door. No trucks speeding down the dirt road late at night. As time went on, Sam figured Johnny had been arrested and gone to prison or left the state.

Sam took a couple slow steps away from the snakes and steadied herself on the wall as she neared the exit. She tried to focus on each breath and attempted to fill her lungs with air, but the uneven breathing caused her to hyperventilate. Her hands and lips became tingly, so she sat down on the hard ground and lowered her head between her knees and took a few slow, controlled breaths. After so many years, Johnny was still around and on the loose. He could be anywhere by now—in Tennessee, Louisiana, Alabama, even as far away as California. Or he could still be in Covington County.

Part II

“With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate
Of life at once untie: poor venomous fool
Be angry, and dispatch.”

~ *Antony and Cleopatra*

Chapter Fourteen

Mississippi: Autumn 1990

A CRISP AUTUMN breeze wafted through the leaves of the magnolia tree, causing the empty swing to sway back and forth. Sam hadn't swung under that tree in about three weeks—not since right before school started earlier this month. The tree had matured, resulting in its wide, cascading branches obscuring the view of the Okatoma Creek.

Since returning from church, Sam had changed out of her scratchy Sunday dress and stiff Mary Jane shoes and relaxed on the porch with Robert nearby. Now barefoot and in faded jeans and a tank top, she sat in Mama's wooden rocker and peered across the lawn. Stanley, her chocolate lab puppy, paced from one end of the porch to the other until he settled at Sam's feet. He whined until she picked him up and set him in the rocker, but once on her lap, he slopped wet kisses on her face. In a couple months, Stanley would be too big to sit in this chair. With his huge paws and sharp claws, he scratched Sam's bare arm to get her to pet him some more. She'd soon train Stanley to be the best watchdog, teaching him that barking at any intruders on their property would earn him a treat.

Near the porch, Robert sawed off the ends of a few narrow logs, making each one the same exact length. He gripped a machete in his hand then kneeled down to scrape a groove into the end of one of the logs. Even though he hadn't finished his project in time to use it during summer break, he still cut and varnished each log to prepare it for the raft. The final days of September usually meant time for the Cleveland kids to enjoy the last days of warm weather by frolicking along the Okatoma, but today Sam remained on the porch with Stanley on her lap and Robert nearby. The steady rhythm of the saw slicing through the wood soothed her as she scanned the property for anything out of the ordinary.

For the past few weeks, Sam had no interest in food. Because of the constant knot in her stomach, she barely managed to get more than a couple sips of milk down or a few small bites of bland food. Her pants hung loosely on her body, her hips and ribcage so bony now. Each night,

Jane ordered her to finish her dinner before leaving the table, but Sam just pushed the food around on her plate or snuck pieces of meat to Stanley. She swallowed a few morsels or hid the food in her napkin. During lunchbreak at school, she only ate a couple bites of her sandwich then tossed the rest in the trash.

But right now, for the first time in weeks, Sam felt hungry. While she listened to Robert's rhythmic sawing, she peeled feathery strands of string cheese and nibbled on each salty morsel. Sam placed another thread of cheese in her mouth, but then she heard the faint sound of sirens a couple miles away. Stanley sat upright and growled as his ears perked up. Within a few seconds, the sirens got louder and closer to the house. Sam plugged her ears the nearer the emergency vehicles came.

Jane came barreling out of the house and stood at the end of the porch and peered down the dirt road. "Samantha, don't leave the porch. You stay right there. Robert, get over here! Your dad's on his way home. He told me to make sure you two stay in the house."

"Ah, Mama, I can't stop what I'm doing right now," Robert hollered. "I gotta put varnish on the wood in time to let it dry before supper. That's the most important step. How's a raft supposed to not get waterlogged without the varnish?"

"That can wait. Get over here now! You kids need to get in the house."

Robert threw the saw onto the lawn and stormed over to the house. Sam stood next to her mother and looped her fingers around Stanley's collar. His growl became deeper as the sirens neared. On the road adjacent to the house, clouds of dust billowed in the air as a police car stopped in the driveway. Another car barreled down the road and parked behind the first vehicle. Next, a truck skidded to a stop in the driveway. The door flung open, and Harold Cleveland stepped out of the vehicle. He slammed the door then headed to the house. Two uniformed officers followed him through the yard and to the porch.

"You kids get in the house," Harold said and stomped up the stairs. "You heard me. Get in the house now."

Robert and Sam hurried into the house but hovered in the entryway close to the screen door where they could hear what their parents said. Sam recognized heavy footsteps clomping up the stairs and the deep sounds of men's voices. She peeked through the mesh screen and saw the two officers standing behind her father.

"Sir, any ID on the bodies? You reckon they're locals?" one officer asked.

"Neither of them had any form of ID on them. No wallet, nothing," Harold said.

"They found *two* bodies?" Jane asked. "You didn't tell me there was more than one body. Harold, do you think they were killed for their money?"

"Honey, at this point all we know is that they found two male bodies washed up on the side of the river. I'm going back to the scene after I make sure you and the kids are safe inside."

"Is the coroner there yet?" one officer asked.

"He's on his way now," Harold said. "We've got four officers searching the scene, and more from the state are on their way. So far they only found a man's belt in the woods upstream a ways and a few bullet casings. They'll check for fingerprints on the belt buckle and continue searching for more evidence."

"Sir, they found an empty wallet on shore down a ways," one of the officers said. "No ID, though, nothing with a name on it. No way to connect it to either of the victims."

"Harold, how close did they find the bodies?" Jane asked quietly.

"One was found wedged under a log on the banks of the river about fifty yards downstream from here. A man out walking his dog early this morning found the corpse just past that sandy clearing."

"Oh, Harold! You didn't tell me it was that close to the house."

"Once the officers got there, they searched the area and found the other body a bit farther down, stuck on some low-hanging branches along the river. We don't know yet if the two deaths are related."

Sam huddled next to Robert as a chill washed over her. It was nearly ninety degrees outside, but she shivered and cowered next to Stanley and Robert. The adults spoke quietly on the porch, but Sam could hear almost every word they uttered.

"Do they know who they are? Are they from the area?" Jane's voice quivered.

"Honey, we don't know yet," Harold said.

"Ma'am, the victims' bodies were probably in the river for at least a few weeks," one of the officers said. "The bodies are pretty bloated. Sometimes a corpse is so decomposed that it makes identification nearly impossible. When a body's been in the water for so long, the skin starts sloughing off and sometimes—"

"Anderson, that's enough," Harold said. "Why don't you two go on foot from here to see if you can find any other evidence."

"Sorry, Mrs. Cleveland," the officer said. "We'll take care of matters soon. Don't you worry about a thing."

Sam reached up to cling to Robert's T-shirt. The heavy clomp of the officers' boots as they descended the stairs was loud in her ears. Her parents continued to talk quietly, so Sam concentrated hard to try and hear what they said. Worried they'd somehow figure out that Sam and Robert knew about the bodies, she focused on what the grown-ups said.

"Honey, you stay put in the house. I'll be back as soon as I can. They'll work on identifying the men once the coroner examines the bodies. Don't let those kids out of the house while we're searching the area. You get in the house and lock the door after I leave."

"Harold, who could've done this?"

"Janey, we're working on this. The bodies were only just discovered this morning. My guess is they died a few weeks ago, maybe more. It's hard to tell, but it looks like one guy has pretty extensive trauma to the head."

"What do I tell the kids?"

"I'll talk to them real quick before I go, and then I'll tell them more later, maybe see if they might've seen anybody around the creek recently that they might not have recognized. Honey, I've gotta get back to the scene. I just wanted to make sure you and the kids were all right."

Robert nudged Sam to back away from the door, so the two of them tiptoed down the hallway as the screen door squeaked open. They stood midway down the hall and faced their father when he came inside. Sick to her stomach, Sam tried to stop her body from trembling.

"Not sure what you two might've heard out there, but you need to listen carefully to what I'm about to say. You kids are not to go anywhere near the creek today or tomorrow. You hear me? There will likely be lots of law enforcement around here in the next few days. Once you get home from school tomorrow, you two stay close to home, and by close, I mean you're not to go past the porch. Don't go anywhere near the creek until I tell you it's safe to do so."

"What about my project?" Robert said. "That wood's gotta be varnished before the rainy season."

"For now, that can wait. You stay here with your mom and sister. You keep an eye on Sam." Harold bent over to kiss Sam on the top of her head and then crouched down so that he was eye level with her. "Baby girl, your brother's gonna keep an eye on you while I'm not home. You two can watch all the TV you want while you stay inside. I'll be back just as soon

as I can.”

After Harold left the house, Jane bolted and latched the door then parted the curtains and looked outside. Sam stood by her side. The swing that dangled from the magnolia tree still swayed from the wind. For now, Sam was safe inside the house – with the doors locked and her brother and her watchdog by her side.

Chapter Fifteen

San Diego: Autumn 2014

AFTER SHE ARRIVED in front of the apartment building and parked her Subaru Forester next to the curb, Sam put the car in park, shut off the engine, then leaned over the console and pressed her lips against Kim's. She clasped her hands in Kim's and rocked forward. "I'm really sorry about this. Trust me, this isn't how I wanted tonight to end, but with the latest information about the investigation, I'd probably be totally preoccupied and not very good company." Sam bit her lower lip and released Kim's hand. She leaned back in the seat and fussed with her iPhone to try and get the Bluetooth connected.

By now, Annie was probably back home and possibly going to sleep soon. In all their years together, Annie was in bed by nine, even sometimes by eight, since she typically had to be to work by six in the morning. If Sam called her within the next few minutes, she'd catch her before she was asleep.

Kim fumbled with her house keys and grasped her hand on the door handle. "I get it. I mean, I think I do. It's just that...you seem kinda preoccupied every time we go out. I mean, when you're even *in* town and available to go out. I know it's rough with your brother being in the hospital, but...it just seems like more is going on than you worrying about Robert."

"Annie says they've got some leads on the investigation." Sam drummed her fingers on the gearshift and tapped her foot on the floorboard. The sun had dropped to the horizon, creating a pink glow inside the Forester. Sam glimpsed at her phone. Annie's number was displayed on the screen, ready to be called.

"Since it's still pretty early, I'll probably pop into REI for more gear," Kim said and kissed Sam one more time. She stared into Sam's eyes for a moment then ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm here if you want to talk, or...do something to get your mind off things. I know how hard this must be on you and your mom."

"Robert is stable right now. Vitals are good. Meds have been

decreased. But I know he'll never—" Sam stopped herself and gazed out the side window. A few cars rolled past, the sun at the end of the street dipping closer to the horizon. She set her head back on the headrest and closed her eyes and felt Kim's hand on her knee. She exhaled and turned so that she faced Kim. She glanced at her soft and full lips and thought for a second about putting off the call to Annie until tomorrow morning, but she knew she wouldn't be able to relax if she didn't get updated tonight.

"I'm sure I'll be up late going through my gear for the trip. Call me later? Or, come over, even if it's super late." Kim pressed her lips against Sam's, the kisses sweet and soft. Then she slid her hand onto Sam's inner thigh and gave her another quick peck on the lips.

Sam wanted more than a tender kiss goodbye. She wanted to leave something with Kim that would make her ache with desire until they could be intimate again. Their kisses quickly became more intense. Even though they'd made out many times, these kisses felt new and eager. As Sam's breathing increased in intensity, so did her desire for Kim. She couldn't get enough of her—not this afternoon at the zoo, not here in the car, probably not when they eventually would have sex again. She caressed Kim's hair and pulled her closer. The inside of the car had become dark, reminding Sam of how late it was back in Mississippi.

Kim reached her hand under the waistband of Sam's shorts and moved her fingers down to the soft patch of hair. With one stroke of Kim's finger, Sam felt herself getting increasingly wet. Eager for more, Sam's tongue entered Kim's mouth. A fire coursed through her body as her lips again met Kim's. Then Kim slid a finger over Sam's wetness as they continued to make out. The heat continued to mount. Aware that she preferred a bed on which to make love and mindful that she still needed to call Annie, she gripped her hand on Kim's wrist and guided her away from her crotch and out of her shorts. Sam glanced at the clock on the dashboard. While at the zoo and in the Reptile House, she'd texted Annie to say she'd call her right away. That was well over an hour ago.

"You're so...incredible, but I can't—I mean, just not right now," Sam said then interlaced her fingers with Kim's. It was all she could do to not straddle Kim right here in the car, to thrust her body against hers, but her mind was elsewhere. Sam pulled Kim's hand up to her lips then kissed her knuckles. She stared into Kim's eyes. She felt like a teenager lately whenever she was with Kim—eager, amorous, and aroused.

"God, you've gotten me so wet," Kim said and leaned over to kiss Sam one more time, thrusting her tongue into her mouth.

"You sure know how to get a girl going. It's been a while since I've made out in a car, but...I'd prefer a bed for what I'd like to do. Or even a couch."

"I've got both, ready and waiting for you." Kim giggled and set her hand on the door handle. "You're *sure* you can't come in? Maybe just for a little while? Like, only an hour? I'll make it worth your time. Hell, I'd make out with you anywhere. In a car, out somewhere on the trails, on a secluded beach, well, even in the reptile enclosure at the San Diego Fucking Zoo. You're so hot. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"I vaguely recall some young hottie telling me that just this afternoon." Sam kissed the back of Kim's hand then moved it up to her mouth and slowly began to suck on her middle finger. Then she placed her other hand between Kim's legs.

"I've got a better place for that finger," Kim said and moaned softly.

"That'll have to wait until another time. This is just a little something to keep you thinking of me till we see each other again."

"Such a tease, but...there's always tomorrow night and the next night. We're not leaving for Mammoth for a couple days, but I'll only be gone a week. We've been apart for way longer than that since we started dating. Adrianna can't take off work or school for more than a week. Otherwise, we'd be making this a two-week trip. But, I'm realizing it's probably good that I'll only be away from you for a week. You know, it's been a while since I've said that to a woman. I think high school was the last time I felt that way about someone."

"So, like a couple years ago?" Sam said and smirked.

"Smart ass."

"I'm sure I'll see you soon," Sam said and released her hand from Kim's. She couldn't help but to think of Kim and Adrianna driving up to Mammoth together, riding the trails, cooking under the stars, and sharing a tent all week. Except for the few times she went camping with Annie, she'd never gone on a mountain biking trip with a woman before.

Sam gripped her hands on the steering wheel and glimpsed at the clock one more time. After she turned the key in the ignition, she said goodbye then sped away from the curb even before Kim had reached the stairway to her apartment building. Not even to the end of the block yet, Sam tapped on Annie's number on the screen and waited for her to answer.

"Sorry I couldn't call you right away. I was with Kim at the zoo. But I'm alone now and can talk."

“The zoo? That’s your idea of a hot date with a woman? Well, I’m glad you finally called. I’ve got a lot to tell you about Jonathan Patterson,” Annie said, out of breath and yelling into the phone. “I’m dashing back to my office. Sam, this is going to sound weird to ask, but do you know much about the woman who lived across the creek from you? Did she have kids? Did she have a son? Was she ever—”

“Old Miss Patterson? She was always so crotchety. We called her the old spinster because she’d always—” Once the words exited her mouth, Sam’s face drained of color, and her heart fluttered. It all crashed down on her with such intensity: Jonathan Patterson. Why hadn’t she made this connection when Annie mentioned Johnny’s last name earlier in her texts? “Oh, my God! Please don’t tell me that woman is related to Jonathan Patterson. Did she have anything to do with the accident?”

“Not that we know of. She’s basically bedridden now in a care facility. She’s pretty senile. At this point, we’re trying to figure out if Virginia Patterson is related to Jonathan. I’m going to log into the database now to see if she’s any relation. We’ve attempted to contact her. This is what I didn’t tell you in my text. I wanted to talk to you over the phone about this. Sam, you see, well, Jonathan stole her truck, right from her property.”

“That truck is *hers*? The old grey Ford she kept out front? I didn’t even think that thing still worked. Weeds had grown all around it over the years. Maybe it belonged to Jonathan?”

“No, there’s evidence he broke the lock to get in. Plus it’s clear the truck had been hot-wired. We’re thinking Jonathan is her estranged son.”

“Her *son*? Miss Patterson never had kids, not that I know of. I never saw anyone over there besides her.” Sam reached the 94 Freeway heading east but was at a total stop in early evening traffic. She inched forward as her mind raced at what Annie just told her. She heard typing on the other end of the phone. “You at your desk now?”

“Yeah, I’m in our database right now. Besides finding Jonathan and arresting him, I need to figure out his connection to Virginia Patterson. It can’t be a coincidence that this guy steals a car from someone with the same last name. I can find out right away if she’s Jonathan’s mother. I’m not going home till I figure this out.”

Sam heard more typing. Her breath became shallow as she waited for Annie to say more. Sam’s Forester nudged forward in the bumper-to-bumper traffic. The San Diego skyline glowed behind her through the rearview mirror—the fierce red blaze lighting up the sky after the sun had

disappeared below the horizon.

"Wow, this is interesting," Annie finally said but then got quiet.

"Annie, what did you find?"

"First of all, Virginia is not his mother. But, something I'm seeing here is interesting. I've pulled up other Pattersons in Mississippi besides Virginia and Jonathan. I'm going back a couple decades. Two other Pattersons match one of Jonathan's old addresses in Hattiesburg, a Fred and a Charles Patterson, but nothing matching Virginia's address across from your mom's place. But I still think there's a connection to her. Maybe Jonathan is her nephew or a distant cousin."

"Did you say Fred and Charles?" Sam's heartbeat sped up after those names left her mouth.

"Yes, Fred and Charles Patterson, but they're deceased. Both died in 1990."

Sam listened to Annie tell her about Fred and Chuck's previous addresses, about their extensive list of arrests years ago, but all of this sounded like static in her ears. Sam edged closer to the exit ramp and maneuvered around a slow car to park on the side of a busy street. She clicked on her hazard lights and set the parking brake as she tried to calm her breaths. She didn't want to listen to details about the men who attacked her years ago, yet she clung to each word as she concentrated on everything Annie described.

"They died young," Annie continued. "Fred in his twenties and Charles in his early thirties. With both dying on the same day, my guess is a car accident. Going back even further in the archives here, I see that Jonathan, Fred, and Charles all have the same address as Marilyn and William back in the seventies and mid-eighties. So, it's pretty clear that Jonathan's the brother of these two guys. Well, I'd still like to talk to Virginia to see if I can find out anything else, see how she reacts when we tell her that her truck was stolen by Jonathan Patterson. It's just too weird."

Sam's body trembled as she sat in her car with the heat cranked up. She unfastened her seatbelt then reached behind the seat for her hoodie and pulled it over her head. She hadn't heard these names in over twenty years, but right now, those men's faces appeared to her with such vividness. Johnny's firm grip on her arm had been seared into her skin over twenty years ago. His threats continually rang in her ears...Fred and Chuck's towering presence over her... Right now, Sam envisioned their bodies floating down the creek. She rocked back and forth in the seat,

unable to form words.

"Sam?" Annie asked. "Did I lose you?"

"No, I'm still here. I pulled over. Traffic is awful tonight."

"Virginia Patterson hasn't lived in that house for a couple years now. We stopped by her place the other day. Seems vacant and in bad shape. Virginia lives in a care facility nearby, been there about two years now. I'm planning to speak to her soon, but...well, I don't suppose it'd be possible for you to be on speaker phone when we talk to her."

"Why would you need me on the phone when you talk with her? I never even knew her besides what I saw from our side of the creek. She was always such a recluse. I avoided her whenever possible."

"The manager at the nursing home said she's frail, in her late nineties now, and suffers from dementia. She's a feisty old woman and might not be open to talking to the police."

"Then why would she be open to talking to *me*? Old Miss Patterson was a mean woman when I was a kid. She was a miserable spinster. I thought she passed away years ago."

"Maybe she'll soften up a bit if she knew you were on the phone. A Skype call would be even better so she can see your face."

"Annie, she hated me and Robert when we were kids. She despised everyone. She always threatened to call the police when Robert got anywhere near her property. Besides, she probably won't even recognize me now."

"Sam, if she knows anything about Jonathan and his whereabouts, I'd kind of like you to be on the call, just to see if maybe you can convince her to share as much as possible with us."

"I don't see why she'd soften up if she saw my face. I doubt I'd be much help."

"At this point, what have you got to lose?"

Sam let out a loud exhale. "Okay, I guess I can be on Skype when you talk to her. Maybe before I go to work tomorrow? Early in the morning here, ten your time?"

"That won't work. I'm scheduled to meet with the manager at Robert's work. He's the last one I need to question at the canoe rental place. Maybe the next day we can arrange a conference call at the nursing home. I'll set it up tomorrow."

Sam remained quiet as she gathered up the strength to tell Annie about the Patterson brothers. Cars whooshed past her, this street so close to home but suddenly seeming so unfamiliar. She should be home when

she told Annie about Johnny, but if she didn't say anything now, she'd likely lose her nerve.

"This is interesting," Annie said and breathed loudly into the phone. "Looks like Virginia Patterson is William's sister. Amazing what a quick Google search will show, but this means Jonathan is Virginia's nephew."

"Annie, you need to know something." The words lodged in her throat as she attempted to force out the rest of what she had to say. She turned down the heater and lowered the window a couple inches then stared at the dark night through the windshield. "Jonathan Patterson is the guy who attacked me when I was eight," Sam finally spoke, her words devoid of emotion.

"Oh, my God! Sam, this is the guy? Are you sure? How do you know it's him?"

"In your text you said something about Jonathan evening the score. I'm sure it's him. Years ago, he threatened to come after me and Robert."

"You told me three men were there that day, but you never said they were brothers."

"Yeah, Chuck and Fred."

"Jonathan was trying to kill your brother," Annie said, her words so matter-of-fact. "You said Robert saved you, that he was there to fight off your attackers. Sam, what did he do to those men? They died in 1990. That was...1990 was when you were eight, wasn't it?"

Sam's jaw went rigid. Words formed in her head, but she couldn't get them out of her mouth.

"Sam, honey, *please*. Tell me what they did to you. Why did Robert—"

"He goes by Johnny," Sam said quietly, her voice hoarse. "He's the one who said he'd kill me if I ever said anything."

"That son of a bitch," Annie spat out. "We'll arrest him. We'll charge him with assault."

"Kinda late for that, don't you think? Haven't the statutes of limitation or whatever you call it passed? Besides, the only witness to that day is pretty much in a coma and unresponsive."

"Well, Johnny is still gonna pay. We'll find him. I'll make sure he goes away for a long time. Sam, you need to tell me what Robert did to Fred and Chuck. I could look up cause of death for both of them in our database, but it might be faster for me to ask you how they died." Annie let out a loud sigh into the phone, her heavy breath echoing in Sam's Subaru.

"For Chuck, blunt force trauma to the head. For Fred, gunshot. Robert

didn't kill Fred, just Chuck. Well, he didn't *mean* to kill him. It was all an accident, self-defense. Chuck came at him with full force, so Robert had to fight back. He must've hit him just right in the head to cause him to die. Annie, they could've killed Robert. Or me. Those men were filled with such rage. They almost—" Sam hunched forward in the seat and clasped her arms around her sides. She felt like she was going to throw up, that she would lose the Diet Coke and nachos she and Kim shared at the zoo.

"I'll look at the coroner's reports tonight. Sam, why didn't you ever say anything to me? Your dad must've figured things out. I'm sure he knew about this case since it happened right by your house."

"Robert and I vowed to never tell anyone. He knew he'd never get into the academy if anyone found out about this. Then he gave up becoming a police officer once Dad told us there were unidentified fingerprints on the belt buckle they found near the creek. Robert knew having his fingerprints on file was part of the application process, at least once he applied to the police department. Annie, at this point, it's all in the past."

"But you've carried this with you for so many years, including the years when we were together. I love you, Sam. I always will. I'll always have your back, but...I wish you would've told me more when we were together. I had no idea you and Robert carried this secret."

Sam gazed at the blur of lights from the cars whooshing past her and barely listened to Annie go on about how she wasn't there to protect her years ago, even though they didn't know each other at the time. Annie would have been twenty-one when this all happened. She was probably already in law enforcement by then or at least in the academy and trained on how to protect and to serve.

"I love you, too," Sam finally said then reached up to turn on the dome light in her car. She relaxed her hands in her lap, but then the faces of those men came flooding back to her with such clarity. Her knuckles gripped the steering wheel, and she squeezed her eyes shut, attempting to replace the ugly images with something more pleasant. She imagined the glassy ocean at dawn, the silvery surface of the water reflecting the rising sun. She envisioned the sagebrush along the trails where she biked. She even tried to escape the horrific memories by imagining her finger running along the smooth surface of Kim's taut abs, but as quickly as that sensual image entered her mind, it was replaced by Johnny's rough finger touching her chest and running it under her sundress.

"We'll find him, Sam. You've got my word on that. But why didn't you tell me about all of this? I mean, when we were together."

"I told you about the men attacking me. That seemed like enough to tell you. Annie, the other stuff was all in the past. I never...well, I never thought this would all come back." Sam popped open the console of her car to see the amber vial of pills sitting there.

"Finding Johnny is now our top priority. He'll be arrested for attempted murder, along with other crimes. I doubt they'll bring in any of this old information. It says here that no charges were pressed. The case has been closed for twenty years now. The report back in 1990 says they questioned Johnny and suspected he and his brothers had some sort of scuffle that day along the Okatoma Creek. There wasn't enough evidence to charge Johnny, so they let him go."

"Seems he gets out of a lot of situations. Annie, you have to find him."

"Babe, we're on it. Maybe Virginia Patterson will have some leads where Johnny might be. Listen, I'm going to hop on a different computer. This one's not bringing up the databases I need. You okay?"

Sam stared through the windshield as bright beams from oncoming cars flashed past. "I'm not sure. I mean, it's kinda weird to be telling you about this after all these years. I figured that day would always be behind me. But, now it's here again."

"You have to trust me that I'll find the son of a bitch and make him pay for what he's done. To you and to Robert."

"Thank you," Sam said, her voice so feeble and childlike.

"Can you get home right away then take a Xanax and try to sleep?"

"I'm heading home now. It'll be nice to get in bed and forget about all of this." Sam reached into the console and pulled out the vial of pills. She opened the cap and popped a pill in her mouth, the taste so bitter on her tongue. Sam released the parking brake but sat there a couple minutes before driving away. Her eyes glazed over as she squinted at the oncoming traffic. She could take the back streets and be home in a matter of fifteen minutes, but instead of continuing down this street, she flipped an illegal U-turn and headed back to the freeway onramp. Rather than head east on the 94 in the direction of home, she headed west toward Kim's neighborhood.

"Text me to let me know you got home safely."

"Yeah, okay, I'll be home soon." Sam ended the call and waited at the light. A long line of cars idled in front of her. The traffic light had changed from red to green and then back to red again while she waited to get through the intersection. She hoped she could catch Kim before she left for REI.

Chapter Sixteen

San Diego: Autumn 2014

"I SHOULDN'T HAVE left," Sam said right when Kim opened the door. "I should've come upstairs with you when I dropped you off." Sam fell into Kim's arms and clung to her, not releasing her for a couple minutes.

Kim took Sam by the hand and led her to the couch. "It's still early. We've got the rest of the night. What's going on with the investigation? What did Annie say?" Kim set her feet on the coffee table and pulled Sam into a tight sideways embrace.

"Turns out nothing major's been revealed," Sam said and relaxed her head on Kim's shoulder. "Nothing really worth sharing anyway. They know who caused the accident, some local guy in his fifties. You up for going out for a bit?" Sam bit her lower lip and tapped her foot on the leg of the coffee table. Even though she took another half a Xanax after she parked her car out front, she continued to jiggle her leg, but she felt a welcomed haze in her head—the meds blurring the awful images from years ago.

"I thought you wanted to stay in. You know, finish what we started earlier?" Kim nuzzled her face on Sam's shoulder and kissed her a few times on the neck.

"There will be plenty of that later," Sam said and giggled then moved her neck away from Kim. "It's Friday night. I'm in the mood to go out. You up for getting a drink at Gossip Grill? Maybe dance a bit and then head back here?" For at least tonight, Sam didn't want to talk about the past and preferred to be with someone who knew nothing about Johnny. She took Kim's hand and led her to the door and then down the steps to the street.

The ride through Hillcrest was a blur as Sam gazed out the window while Kim sped down University Avenue and neared Gossip Grill. They found parking right in front of the bar and walked hand-in-hand through the entrance. With the light inside the bar so dim, Sam couldn't quite get her bearings, but she searched the crowd for any familiar faces. Many of

the women who used to go to the Flame flocked to Gossip Grill after they opened, but the lesbians tonight all looked like strangers to her.

Sam went straight to the bar and ordered two Stella Artois on tap. She pulled out a twenty and slapped it on the counter. She eyed the tattooed bartender who bent over to grab two glasses from a ledge below the bar. The young, butch girl bopped her head to the music as she set the glasses under the tap. Sam thrummed her fingers on the bar and glanced at the women around her—all of them young. The thumping music in the dance area next to the bar caused her head to spin. Once she had the cold beer in her hand, Sam chugged several gulps, her glass half empty within a couple minutes. She reached into her pocket for another Xanax and swallowed it with a swig of beer. Kim stood nearby and took tiny sips of the amber liquid and swayed her head to the pulsating music.

After another chug of Stella, Sam took Kim by the hand and led her to the darkened room next door. The music thudded so loudly it made her chest pulsate. Sam finished her beer and set the empty glass on a tall table. Then she and Kim found an unoccupied corner of the dance floor and moved their bodies to the beat. As Sam glanced around at all the strobing lights, her vision became fuzzy—the Xanax numbing every fiber of her body. She placed her hands on Kim’s hips and ground her pelvis into her butt then buried her face in her neck. The drumming beat energized her. She moved her hands to Kim’s quads and pulled her body closer. The music, lights, and bodies dancing nearby became frenzied and more intense, but Sam slid her hands down Kim’s thighs and felt a heat rush through her body.

Sam peered over Kim’s shoulder and saw nothing but blurred lights and shadows swaying to the beat. Her neck and face dripped with sweat. Another cold beer would cool her off. Sam left Kim on the dance floor and approached the bar. She pulled out a ten and some change and tossed it all on the counter, then ordered another Stella Artois. A few coins chinked to the floor, but she didn’t bother to retrieve them.

Kim approached her and leaned against the bar. “You okay?”

“Thirsty,” Sam said and pointed to her mouth then glanced again at the dance floor.

“Can we leave soon? It’s way too crowded tonight. Plus, I’m doing an early ride tomorrow morning and need to get at least a good, solid six hours of sleep tonight.”

Sam grabbed her beer from the bar, leaving the change from the ten on the counter, and interlaced her fingers into Kim’s. She led them both back

to the dance area. For the next several minutes, Sam moved her body to the thumping bass while Kim stood to the side of the dance floor. At one point, Sam lost her girlfriend in the crowd—the women all looking the same with their fit, petite bodies in generic outfits. Sam spun her head around in search of Kim, but any time she scanned the area, she only saw a blur of lights. As she took more sips of beer, she continued to get lost in the pulsing music and swayed her hips and shoulders to the beat.

After fifteen minutes on the dance floor, Sam felt a hand clench her shoulder. She spun around to see Kim not looking too happy.

“Let’s get you home,” Kim said and gripped her hand in Sam’s then hauled her off the dance floor. She didn’t say another word. They left the bar and walked a couple paces down the sidewalk in the cool air. Late but busy in Hillcrest, cars whooshed past. Sam tried to get her bearings.

Sam grabbed ahold of a parking meter then staggered toward Kim’s car. The chilly air cleared Sam’s head a bit. She calculated that she’d taken a total of two and a half Xanax tabs—and then chugged two beers. By the time she got in the car, she couldn’t keep her eyes fully open, but she managed to get a few words out. “Kim, this isn’t...it isn’t the way I wanted tonight to end.”

Kim didn’t say a word as she backed out of the parking spot and merged with the traffic. She increased the volume of the music in the car—some frenzied electronic dance music that made the mirrors and console rattle.

Sam rolled her head from side to side—her vision blurring with each slight shift of her eyes. In a stupor, she drooled and stammered then attempted to talk. “Being with you at the...at the zoo...in the reptile enclosure place today was pretty nice...until I got those texts from Annie. Then here I am...fucked up in my girlfriend’s car after being in a...after dancing in a lesbian bar with...probably the cutest girl in there. I shouldn’t have—”

“I’m not letting you drive home like this. You’ll stay the night with me.” Kim stared straight ahead, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed. She inched down University and neared her neighborhood. “*Girlfriend?* What’s that about?”

“Too soon...to call you that?” Sam grimaced.

“Depends on what’s going on with you tonight. You seem pretty wasted. Plus, we’ve only been going out for a few weeks. Well, and not actually going out much at all. Not sure I’m ready for the title of girlfriend.”

Sam set her head on the headrest and stared straight ahead. The bright headlights blinded her, so she shut her eyes but couldn't fully relax due to the EDM mix echoing in the vehicle.

"You seem...preoccupied again. What exactly did Annie tell you earlier?"

While she recalled all that Annie revealed to her, Sam clenched her jaw but only managed to get a few words out. "Just some...basic updates about the investigation, police talk mostly. They've determined it was definitely...a hit and run. Pretty cut and dry, really." The lies continued to pour from her lips. She repositioned her body in the seat and stared through the windshield.

"We'll get you home to my place, get some water in you and maybe some food."

The lights up ahead were less blurry, less frenzied. The Xanax or the beer or the shock of what she'd learned earlier started to wear off slightly. They both remained quiet as Kim coasted down the long, busy street. Cafés and bars along University swarmed with people. Sam didn't feel ready to end the night.

She shut her eyes and tried to tap into the buzz she felt at the bar, but all she could think about was Robert barely clinging to life and about the awful information revealed to her that Johnny was the driver of the other vehicle. Her neck and shoulders tensed as she once again became filled with anger. "It's been hard seeing Robert in such bad shape," she finally said, her eyes fixated on the black road ahead. "He and I were always close, and...I miss him, you know? I guess today things really hit me hard."

At the stoplight, Kim reached a hand over and set it on Sam's cheek. "I can't imagine what you're going through."

"I'm sorry you saw me this way. Years ago, I was prescribed Xanax to...help me cope with...some things. I rarely ever need the meds, but today I think I hit my limit with all the stress about Robert. Pretty stupid to take that medication with a beer."

"Two beers," Kim said and pursed her lips.

"Right, two." Sam shook her head and slouched forward. Her ears buzzed, and her head spun. "I shouldn't have suggested going out tonight. I should've taken you up on that offer of...enjoying some time with you on the couch...or in your bed. I'm surprised you even want me to stay the night."

Kim braked at the next stoplight and turned down the music; she

stared at Sam for a moment then shook her head and breathed out a soft laugh. She reached a hand over and set it on Sam's leg. "We have more in common than you think. I'm on anti-depressants. I don't tell a lot of people. I guess I sometimes feel ashamed to need meds to cope, but...they work to keep me stable. I struggled with an eating disorder when I was a teenager. It's all pretty much under control, but those meds are kind of my safety net, so...I get it. I mean, you needing to take Xanax isn't a bad thing. I see it as helping you cope with your brother's accident, but...alcohol and benzos definitely don't mix."

"Definitely not," Sam said and relaxed in the seat. She felt relieved that Kim seemed to understand, but she was more grateful that the Xanax and beer continued to blot out the awful images in her head.

"I might be crazy for saying this after tonight, but I still want to see you. Whatever's going on, just know I'm here if you want to talk. Or, if you want to be quiet with me, I'm here for that, too. I'm bummed I'm going away soon, but...a little sexting might be fun while I'm gone."

Despite still being buzzed from the beer and high from the Xanax, Sam felt a heat rush through her entire body and settle in her lower abdomen. With her libido piqued, she wondered if she could muster up the energy to have sex with Kim after they got into the bedroom, but at this point, all she wanted to do was fall into bed and sleep off this horrible night. Sam shut her eyes and felt soothed by the gentle rhythm of the car as it edged closer to Kim's apartment.

Once at Kim's building, Sam exited the car and fell to her knees when she tried to walk. Her knees stung with cuts from the sharp gravel lining the walkway. Humiliated, she stayed on all fours, unable to move. Kim knelt next to her and rubbed her back gently. Sam stared at the dark pavement and tried to push herself up into a standing position, but her legs and arms were too weak.

"Next time, we stay in and order take-out and drink iced tea or Diet Coke." Kim pulled the hair back from Sam's face. "I'll help you stand, okay? Sam, you're gonna be fine. Let me help you."

Sam managed to get up with Kim's help and took small, calculated steps closer to the apartment building. The tall lamps along the walkway provided dim lighting as Sam plodded forward. They finally made it to the apartment where Kim led her into the bedroom. Sam's head sunk into the soft pillow. The room continued to spin. When she closed her eyes, the dizziness subsided a bit. She relaxed into the crook of Kim's arm and allowed her to guide a bottle of water to her lips. Not able to lift her head,

Sam relied on Kim to pour tiny bits of water into her mouth.

After Kim set the water on the nightstand, she joined Sam in bed then pulled the comforter over them. Finally, Sam felt safe and set her arm over Kim's midsection. Still buzzed from the Xanax, Sam closed her eyes and felt her body become even more limp. Her breathing softened as a sense of calm washed over her. There'd be no sex tonight—not with the room spinning and her ears buzzing. Sam nuzzled her face into Kim's neck and felt a cloak of sleepiness shroud her.

Chapter Seventeen

San Diego: Autumn 2014

SAM STEPPED DOWN the rungs of the ladder then hopped onto the sand and dashed to the water's edge, focusing on the little girl plopped down in the shallow zone close to shore. She heard the child's sobs from several yards away. Once she was almost in the water, Sam shed her bulky lifeguarding jacket and tossed it onto the damp sand. She didn't bother to remove her long-sleeved T-shirt as she slogged through the surf to get nearer to the child. Sam recognized immediately that the kid had been stung by a stingray; she knew she must administer first aid as soon as possible to neutralize the venom before it did too much damage to the tissue.

The glassy ocean often created seemingly safe conditions to beachgoers. Unsuspecting swimmers like this girl would step on a stingray and end up with a painful sting on the bottom of the foot, the barbs piercing the skin and causing unbearable pain.

Sam trudged through the shallow water and within seconds reached the young victim and scooped her into her arms, then tromped through the water to get back to shore. By now her T-shirt was sopping wet and saturated with the child's blood—the bright red so dark against the white cloth.

It'd been a quiet Saturday up until this moment. Weary from not much sleep, Sam sat atop her lifeguard station all morning wrapped in her thick lifeguarding jacket. She'd been perched on her tower replaying what she learned yesterday about the man who tried to kill Robert. Still stunned that it was Johnny who'd caused the accident, Sam couldn't quite wrap her head around the latest information. She awoke in the wee hours of morning in Kim's bed but drifted back to sleep once she'd taken another Xanax.

Tired and foggy-headed, Sam tried her best to focus on the injured child. She carried the girl onto dry sand and kneeled next to her, gently holding the foot in her hand. She studied the serrated skin and seeping

blood. She glanced at her tower to see if the relief lifeguard was here yet. Almost her lunchbreak, she'd been looking forward to a twenty-minute run on the beach and a dip in the ocean, but with this child sobbing and in intense pain, Sam wouldn't leave her side until she could provide relief.

"Let's have you lie back so I can get a good look at that foot." Sam gently guided the girl's body onto the sand then propped the foot up on her own leg. She'd become adept over the years at not conveying how severe an injury was and typically downplayed any scary situation. She examined the foot to see if the stingray's barb was still in the skin, but the blood kept pouring out from the wound, which prevented her from assessing the damage. She kept the foot elevated above the girl's heart, hoping to slow the bleeding.

"What's your name, sweetie?" Sam asked.

"Olivia," she said, continuing to cry. "I think I got cut by glass. It hurts really bad."

Sam had seen many stingray injuries, but she'd never experienced this sort of injury herself. On a day like this when the surf was calm, those rays lurked under the water along the bottom of the ocean, waiting to sting anyone walking in the shallow area.

"You got stung by a stingray. It's very painful. I'm Sam, one of the lifeguards on duty today. How old are you?"

"Seven."

"Olivia, you're pretty brave for seven. Where's your mom or dad? They around here?"

"I...don't know. My mom...she's up there with my brothers. One of them is a little baby. I'm...big enough that she...let me stand in the shallow area by myself. My big brother went with me, but then...he went to get his boogie board, but that's when I got hurt." Fear washed over Olivia's face, and she started to cry even harder. Her mouth was agape, her jaw began to tremble, and her breathing became more and more erratic. Next, Olivia's lips turned blue. "Stingrays are...poisonous, right? Am I...going to die?"

"No, kiddo, you're not gonna die." Sam helped Olivia sit up then gently rubbed her back and further assessed her overall condition. "How about you take a deep breath, like this." Sam slowly inhaled air into her nose and blew it out through her mouth. "Deep breath, sweetie. Nice slow breaths. The stingray got you with its barb, sort of like the tail. It's gonna hurt pretty bad, but I can help decrease the pain. We need to first find your mom and move you up by the lifeguard tower. What's your mom's

name? Do you know what she's wearing? I'll have the other guard look for her and holler out her name to find her."

"Karen Draper. She's in a Padres T-shirt and shorts. I don't remember what color shorts." Olivia continued to moan softly and rock back and forth. "Sam? Am I gonna lose my foot?"

"No, honey, that's not going to happen. We'll get you all better soon. I know this is scary, but you need to trust me when I say you're not going to be in pain for a whole lot longer." Sam lifted Olivia into her arms and carried her to the lifeguard station, all the while talking to her to get her to not hyperventilate. By the time Sam reached her tower, the young rookie was there to relieve her for lunch.

"Did the stingray inject poison in my foot? Is that why it hurts so much? Is there venom in my body now?" Olivia let out low, guttural moans and winced in pain. Her breathing had become erratic again.

"There's probably a little bit of venom in your foot. If your mom can get your foot in really hot water soon, it'll neutralize the toxins and decrease the pain. Do me a favor, call dispatch," Sam said to the young guy on the tower. "Miller and Hernandez should be close by right now. Tell them we need immediate aid for a kid who's been stung by a stingray. Then after you do that, try and find a woman named Karen Draper. She's probably up by the rocks over there. She's wearing a Padres T-shirt and should be with a baby and another kid."

Sam set Olivia onto the warm sand next to the tower. After she retrieved the first aid kit from the lifeguard station, she pulled out gloves and a clear plastic jug of sterile water then sat next to Olivia.

"I'm gonna pour this on your foot to wash off the blood," Sam said and dribbled water onto Olivia's foot. "This might sting. You're being brave, sweetie. Hang in there."

Sam examined the site where the barb had injected the toxin. Blood continued to ooze from where the stingray's barb had sliced the skin. She pulled out a few nonstick gauze pads from the first aid kit and ripped one open then dabbed the bottom of Olivia's foot where the stingray's barb had pierced the skin. She continued to apply pressure to the wound as she spoke quietly to Olivia and explained what she was doing. Olivia writhed in pain and leaned her head against Sam's arm.

As Sam continued to apply pressure to the wound, a young woman with a baby perched on her hip stormed over to the tower saying she was Olivia's mother and asking what'd happened. A boy trotted behind the mother, racing up to Olivia and crouching at her side. A few seconds later,

Lieutenants Miller and Hernandez arrived in the jeep. The guys jumped out of the vehicle. Travis carried a huge black box and set it near Sam. Then he kneeled in the sand and examined Olivia's foot. Carlos Hernandez crouched down and handed Sam more gauze pads.

"You must be Karen." Sam didn't even look up at the woman and continued to tend to Olivia's foot.

"Wow, that stingray got her good," Travis said then set a hand on Olivia's leg right above the wound. "Kiddo, we're gonna get you some relief. I had this happen to me a long time ago when I was just a young punk surfing up in Cardiff. I was only fifteen at the time. Thought I'd never get relief. You're being way braver than I was. You'll be fine by tomorrow."

"Olivia, I'm here, baby," Karen said and hovered over Sam. "I shouldn't have let her go in the water by herself."

"The rays have been especially bad this season," Carlos said.

"Why is it bleeding so much?" Karen asked. "Is that normal?"

"Feet bleed a lot," Travis said. "This is a lot for a little kid to handle, but I assure you, she'll be fine. Can you get her right home? The sooner you get that foot in really hot water, the better."

"We live in Alpine," Karen said. "That's probably an hour and a half at this hour. Probably take a lot longer if we hit traffic, especially on a Saturday."

"Miller, we need to get her foot in hot water within a few minutes," Sam said and stared at Travis. "You know the protocol. Alpine's way too far. The more we wait, the more that venom is going to do damage to the tissue and cause more pain. We need to get her to headquarters." Sam wasn't going to leave Olivia's side, even if it meant forfeiting her lunchbreak.

"Venom?" Karen asked.

"Sam, is the venom...going to kill me?" Wide eyed, Olivia stared at Sam and started to tremble. "Is the poison all through my body now? Am I gonna die?"

"Olivia, you're going to be okay. The venom has all been centralized in one small area. There's probably only a tiny bit of poison that got into your skin, but it can be pretty darned painful."

Travis stepped closer to Karen. "For a sting from a stingray, the best treatment is to get the foot in really hot water. We can get her to headquarters down the beach a ways a whole lot faster than you could get her to a nearby hospital."

"My foot hurts even more, and now my leg is starting to ache," Olivia said. "Both of my feet feel sort of tingly. Sam, it hurts bad!"

"I know, sweetie," Sam said. "Probably feels like you got stabbed by a sharp knife or got stung by fifty bees, huh?" Sam held Olivia's hand and tried to distract her from the sharp pain. "What grade are you in, Olivia? How old's your baby brother?" While Sam continued to get Olivia's mind off the pain, Carlos packed up the medical kit and secured it in the back of the jeep.

"I just started first grade. My little brother is six months old, and my other brother Tommy is eleven. Why does it hurt so much?"

"There's not much to do when you get stung by a stingray," Travis said and towered above her. "But you won't be in pain for too long. Your mom can give you some Advil or Tylenol later. That oughta help once you're home."

"Wow, that's a lot of blood," Tommy said and bumped into Sam then crouched to get a closer look at Olivia's foot. "It's pretty gross. A stingray did that?"

"The stingray's barb pierced the skin," Sam said and held the gauze firmly against Olivia's wound.

"Sam, it hurts really bad, and now my hands feel all tingly," Olivia said as fear washed over her face once again. Soon, she sobbed so hard she couldn't catch her breath.

"Hey, buddy, move back a bit, okay?" Sam said to Tommy and leaned in closer to Olivia and placed a hand on her face. "Let's give your sister some space as I administer first aid."

Tommy scooted back a bit but continued to ask questions. "They have those big rays at Sea World. Remember, Olivia? Remember how they let us touch the backs of the rays?"

"Those are probably bat rays," Sam said and took another peek at the bloody gauze. "Olivia, sweetie, let's get you to take a couple more deep breaths. Like this." Sam set a hand on Olivia's back and inhaled slowly through her nose and out through her mouth. Within a few seconds, Olivia mimicked Sam's breathing and stopped crying.

"My...my lips are tingly." Olivia started to shiver even more.

"How come her lips are blue?" Tommy asked then stepped back to stand close to his mom.

"What's going on?" Karen asked and put her arm around Tommy. "Can't you give her something for the pain? She's only seven. Why can't you—"

"Ma'am, we aren't allowed to administer meds," Carlos said. "But we're doing all we can for her. Intense pain from a stingray is normal. It'll dissipate in the next three to four hours."

"She's going to be in this much pain for another four *hours*?" Karen asked. "Is the venom affecting her nervous system or something? Why would her lips be tingly?" By now Karen was crying and yelling at the lifeguards. "Why can't you do something? Shouldn't you call 9-1-1?"

"Your little girl is hyperventilating," Travis said and stood close to Karen. "We're getting her to take a few slow breaths. While unusual, hyperventilating can cause someone to pass out."

"Shouldn't we take her to the ER?" Karen flailed her arm in the air and paced closer to Olivia. She continued to hold the baby snug on her hip as Tommy crouched down next to Olivia.

"Olivia, it's gonna be okay," Tommy said and glanced at Sam. "Right? She's going to be okay, right?"

"She'll be fine," Sam said and handed Tommy a package of gauze. "How about you hold on to this in case she bleeds through the dressing? The bleeding is normal. It'll stop pretty soon as long as we keep pressure on it."

"Ma'am, at this point, if we call 9-1-1, they'd transport her to the ER where they'd do exactly what we're going to do once we get her to headquarters," Carlos said and approached Karen. "Let's get you over to the jeep." Carlos waved to the idling vehicle nearby and escorted Karen and Tommy over there.

"Sweetie, we're gonna take you to that tall lifeguard tower where we'll soak your foot in really hot water," Sam said and lifted Olivia into her arms and headed toward the jeep. "You'll need to soak it for a while. The hot water will make the pain go away real fast."

"How we gonna do this, Cleveland?" Travis asked and shrugged his shoulders. "No room for the mom, baby, and brother if you're riding along with me and Hernandez."

"I want Sam to take me there," Olivia said and snuggled her body into Sam's.

"I'm not gonna leave her till she's no longer in pain," Sam said, looking into Olivia's eyes. "Once the venom is neutralized a bit after we soak her foot in hot water, her wound will need to be dressed. I'm not leaving her side."

"I'll stay here at the tower," Carlos said and waved an arm toward the lifeguard station. "Ma'am, I can watch your things here on the beach as

you and your kids ride in the jeep to headquarters. It's not too far, but Miller's gonna get there really fast driving along the shore. Your little girl is in good hands. Cleveland's one of our best."

"Looks like we're all set to take you to headquarters," Sam said and secured Olivia in the back of the jeep. "See, this jeep here isn't quite like an ambulance. It's even better. It can drive over the sand and maneuver over rocks and things like that. You ever ride in an emergency vehicle?"

"No, but my brother did when he got hurt on his bike last summer. A lady not paying attention hit Tommy with her car when she was pulling out of her driveway. Tommy was all bandaged up and got a big blue cast on his leg. He hit his head and got a concussion and wasn't allowed to play baseball for a long time because the doctor said if he got hit in the head again, he would hurt his brain even more."

With the baby on her lap, Karen sat in the back of the jeep, and her son Tommy climbed into the front seat. Travis pulled away from the lifeguard tower and slowly made his way around the beachgoers on the sand.

"Looks like your brother is all healed up now," Sam said and glanced at Tommy. She couldn't help but wonder how Robert was doing. All her mom told her this morning was that his white count had gone down and that he only had a low-grade fever. But the x-ray they did late yesterday still showed some fluid in one of his lungs, and he still wasn't responding to stimuli. "My brother had to ride in an ambulance recently after he was in an accident. He also hurt his brain," Sam said quietly.

"Is he all better?" Olivia asked and looked up at Sam.

"Not quite. He's still in the hospital. His brain got more injured than just a concussion."

"The doctors told Tommy that it takes a long time for a bone to heal after a break and an even longer time for the brain to get better, but I bet your brother will be okay. Maybe he just needs to...to rest...maybe his brain is...Sam, it's hurting even worse now. When is it gonna stop hurting?"

"Honey, I promise it won't hurt for much longer. We're on our way to get you some relief. You know, I bet Lieutenant Miller will put the lights on if you'd like."

"And the siren, too?" Olivia asked.

"Sure, I bet the lieutenant would do that for you."

"What's a lieutenant?" Olivia asked and cocked her head, her face so serious. "Is he a policeman?"

"Not quite. A lieutenant at the beach is someone who's in charge of the

other lifeguards. They get to ride around in a jeep and oversee *all* the other lifeguards. Sometimes they even get to ride the Jet Ski to rescue people. Someday I might be a lieutenant. I actually submitted my application yesterday.”

Olivia’s eyes got big after Sam said this. By now she’d stopped trembling, and her body had relaxed into Sam’s. Certain that Olivia’s pain was still intense, Sam continued to distract her to get her talking about things other than her injury. “Do you and your big brother go to the beach a lot?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, mostly on the weekends in the summer, but we didn’t go much when Tommy was still in his cast. The doctors fixed him up, even his concussion. They said the brain gets bruised just like when you hit your leg or arm, which means it takes a long time to heal. He was bummed that he couldn’t pitch in his games all summer, but he’s back doing that now. I sometimes go to his games to watch. I’m in gymnastics, which Tommy says is just for girls. But I can do somersaults, which he can’t even do.”

“Somersaults? Wow, that’s impressive. I can’t even do that. You’ll be back doing somersaults in no time. You’ll see.”

“When Tommy was taken in the ambulance, they turned on the sirens, and my mom and me followed in our car. My dad got to ride with Tommy in the ambulance. Did you get to ride in the ambulance with your brother?”

“No, he lives far away, in Mississippi. I flew out to be with him the next morning, the day after his accident. I’ll go see him again soon.” Sam glanced at the ocean behind her, noticing the tide had dropped and exposed some rocks along the shore.

Once Travis made it past the flat sand, he rumbled over the uneven terrain as they neared headquarters. Sam held Olivia close to her, bringing her body nearer as they rode over the bumpy sand. She pressed the gauze against the site of the injury and didn’t let up on the pressure. The jeep hit ruts in the sand, so Sam wrapped her arm around Olivia’s shoulders and pulled her close to make sure her injured foot wouldn’t jostle on the bumpy ride. Olivia whimpered in pain, and both Sam and Karen offered words of comfort.

Sam continued to press the dressing against Olivia’s foot to subdue the bleeding. “We’re almost there, sweetie. Only half a mile or so.”

“You lifeguards are saints,” Karen said and shook her head. “I think you don’t get enough credit for what you do.”

“It’s my job. I sometimes can’t see myself doing anything else. I’ve

been doing this for a long time now, but I might be returning to Mississippi soon, where I'm from." Sam caught Travis's eyes in the rearview mirror; she squinted as she caught a flash of his smile in the reflection. She didn't want to be away from this stretch of beach for too long, but she knew she had to return to Mississippi soon.

"Mississippi?" Karen shifted in her seat as the baby in her lap became fussy. "Wow, you've come a long way. Not as many oceans back there, huh?"

"Well, not like this here. I mean, the Gulf of Mexico is way different than Southern California beaches. Hardly ever went there when I was a kid. I spent most of my time in the creek by my house with my brother." Sam envisioned the rambling waters of the Okatoma, the incessant current moving past their property. Those waters were usually so steady—nothing like the varying conditions here along the Pacific. But like the hidden dangers along the Okatoma, this beach sometimes produced unexpected hazards.

"You have any kids?" Karen repositioned the baby on her lap. "Sorry if I'm being too forward."

"No, not too forward. No kids for me...at least not yet. I'm not even settled down as far as a relationship." Sam laughed softly then glanced out the window. "I've always been kind of undecided on whether I'd have a child. Plus I'd want to be with the right partner, someone who'd be loving and nurturing to the kid."

"You'd be a great mother. I can tell. Olivia doesn't just go to anyone, but she obviously feels safe with you. I think it's more than just you being a lifeguard."

"Well, she seems like a cool kid." Sam nudged Olivia who by now had started to relax. "Olivia, you probably never give your mom trouble, huh?"

"I wouldn't say *that*," Karen said and laughed then reached over to run her fingers through Olivia's hair. "But yes, she's my baby girl. Can't stand to see her in so much pain. I'm just grateful she's got the best lifeguard on duty today taking care of her. Right, Olivia? I think Sam here would be a great mom. Don't you think so, baby?"

Olivia shrugged then snuggled closer to Sam. By now she'd stopped whimpering, and the bleeding had subsided.

"Gotta find me a partner first, I suppose." Sam reached forward to slap her hand on Travis's shoulder. "Right, Miller? Can't settle down if I'm just dating around, huh?"

"Cleveland, you know my thoughts about that," Travis said and chuckled. "You had yourself a great one, but then you let her go. Can't let the good ones get away, right? That's what I always say."

Sam averted her eyes when Karen glanced her way. She gazed out the window and fixated her eyes on the sandy beach to the right, eager to finally reach the tower where she could get Olivia some relief. "Miller, just keep driving. Jeez, I'm barely into my thirties," she said quietly without taking her eyes off the beach. "I've got lots of time to settle down and have a family, if that's what I actually want. Besides, it wasn't *my* decision to end things last year."

The five of them sat there quietly for a moment as they neared the lifeguard station. The jeep rumbled over each rut in the sand. Sam pulled Olivia closer. For now, the gauze over the wound had halted the flow of blood. Sam never let up on the pressure and kept a continual eye on Olivia's symptoms.

"I hope you don't mind me saying this." Karen leaned forward and grimaced. "I mean, I don't even know you, but I would say that *she* was the fool to let someone like you go."

Karen's candid comments threw Sam, and she wasn't sure what to say in response. She simply managed a feeble nod and sat back and stared out the front window. The glaring sun pierced through the windshield. Sam squinted at the stark light.

"Your brother, the one who was in that accident?" Olivia asked and turned her head to gaze up at Sam. "Is he a lifeguard, too?"

The question about Robert threw Sam. She thought about how Robert was as strong of a swimmer as she was, maybe even stronger. But no amount of strength or agility in the water could save him in the river after his car careened off the side of that bridge.

"No, but he's always loved the water. He ended up working for a place that rents canoes. He used to take kids like you and your brother on river exploration trips. He's the one who taught me how to swim in the river. I was always afraid of swimming in the creek by our house." Sam laughed and stared out the window before continuing. The tide by now had ebbed, leaving the shore so wide and vast. "Then Robert ended up getting hurt in that river. He got trapped under the water and couldn't save himself."

"How come you didn't save him?"

Sam peered through the side window at the sprawling sand and the rocky barrier above the beach. They were near the tower now, closer to

getting this kid relief from her pain. "Because I was here in San Diego, guarding this beach." Sam's words halted in her throat. Her eyes welled with tears, but she stuffed the emotions and continued. "Robert and I were always...such strong swimmers. He used to save me all the time when we'd get caught in a strong current just down from the Okatoma where the water met with a bigger river. But on the night of his accident, he got trapped and was stuck in his truck under the weight of the water."

Olivia's breaths had finally relaxed completely, and her body stopped trembling. Sam wrapped her arm tighter around Olivia and rested her chin on her head. The five of them road in silence for a couple more minutes until the jeep skidded to a stop close to the main lifeguard station—the tall tower an ominous building on this wide stretch of sand.

"I'm probably gonna return home soon," Sam finally said and carefully lifted Olivia from the backseat. "I mean, to Mississippi, at least to spend more time with my brother." She caught Travis's eye as he got out of the jeep and nodded after she'd held his glance for a few seconds.

"Sam?" Olivia said. "It still hurts bad."

"The pain from a stingray sometimes gets worse before it gets better. It's not going to hurt forever, I promise. Once we get your foot in hot water, it'll take that pain away. It's like magic how that works. Works way better than any medicine."

"Will you stay with me till it doesn't hurt?"

"I'm not leaving your side. You're being brave. I don't think I was this brave when I was your age." Sam carried Olivia's little body up the ramp leading to the main lifeguard station.

The stark afternoon light glimmered on the ocean, blinding Sam as she kicked the door open and approached the basins of hot water. Sam sat on a bench with Olivia on her lap and made sure the water was hot enough. Sam placed Olivia's foot in the scorching water, holding her tighter when she winced from the heat. Within a couple minutes, Olivia stopped trembling—the hot water already neutralizing the venom and easing the pain.

Chapter Eighteen

Mississippi: Autumn, 2014

SAM HALTED HER pace as soon as she heard the piano playing in the hospital lobby. In just seven notes, she recognized the song. She hovered in the entryway and stared at the grey-haired man playing the melody. A small crowd formed around the shiny baby grand as the musician moved his hands over the keys. Every note to this tune had long ago been ingrained into Sam's memory, the words Robert sang stunning the congregation. Pastor Dan asked him to sing that song a few weeks later, but Robert never took out his guitar ever again.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Sam muttered and folded her arms.

"Sam, what's the matter?" Annie said and nudged her. "Why are you blocking the doorway? Can't you see that people are trying to pass?"

"Why do they think it's fine to play music like this in the lobby of a hospital, a place where people are barely clinging to life, a place where people are dying?"

"Sam, come on, just keep walking. The guy's obviously got talent."

"What do they think this is? A piano lounge?" Sam scowled at the older gentleman tinkering away at the baby grand. "I mean, at least play an appropriate song."

"What's not appropriate about this song? What do you think they should play, some Blue Oyster Cult? Are you suggesting something like 'Don't Fear the Reaper' is a more appropriate song in a level two trauma center? This is a nice song, a happy song. Sam, hospitals aren't just a place where people die. It's also a place where people get well, a place where babies are born."

Sam stared at the piano player and shook her head. "Don't you recognize this song?"

"Isn't it that folk song from the sixties by the Byrds? Who *doesn't* know this? Well, probably teenagers or young adults like that girl you're dating who probably doesn't have a clue what good music is." Annie smirked then grabbed Sam by the elbow and led her toward the elevators.

Sam glared at Annie then yanked her arm from her grip and stepped back to the piano. She watched the man's fingers glide over the keys. It

wasn't a song meant to be played on a piano with no vocal accompaniment. The purpose of this tune was the message in the words. Robert taught her that years ago when he practiced this song over and over.

"Annie, don't you remember the words to 'Turn! Turn! Turn!'" Sam asked and shook her head. "This is fucked up. Why would they have some piano player in the lobby of a place where people are sick or injured or dying?"

"Of course I remember the words. They're from Ecclesiastes, chapter three. Sam, music being played in the lobby of a hospital might be comforting for some people."

"Why would that be comforting? Tell that guy to get a job playing the piano at Nordstrom. Did you know Robert was born in this hospital? And now he might die here." She folded her arms and glared at the man while he finished the song then transitioned into another one.

Annie shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She clenched her hand on Sam's shoulder. "Hey, you don't know that. Robert could still make progress. You just have to have faith."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Sam blurted out and flailed her arms in the air. "Seriously?"

"Jeez, Sam, relax, will ya? I'm just trying to think positive thoughts. Robert is getting the best care possible. He could still—"

"No, I meant the next song he's playing. 'Over the Rainbow' hardly seems like the right piece to be played in a hospital. What's he gonna play next? Louis Armstrong's 'What a Wonderful World'?"

The piano player swayed back and forth as he made his way through the melody. He closed his eyes and played the notes, moving his fingers up to the higher keys. More people hovered around the baby grand. Once she walked away from the piano, Sam realized this wasn't the original classic from *The Wizard of Oz*. She recognized this rendition only after a few notes—the tempo much faster than the original version. All those years watching *Name That Tune* resulted in Sam being as good as her mother at identifying a song in only a few plunks on the keyboard.

Sam shook her head and sighed loudly as she headed to the elevators. "Figures he'd play this version. That Hawaiian singer should've left well enough alone and not done his remake of Judy Garland's classic song."

"Hey now, don't go dissing Iz. I happen to like his music, especially this song. But, this does seem like the wrong piece to be played on a piano with no vocals. Iz singing this with his ukulele really is the best. Any time

I hear his version, it reminds me of our trip to Kauai.”

Sam kept walking toward the elevator but didn’t respond to Annie’s last comment. She knew that a few notes plunked on a piano in the lobby of a hospital could hardly do justice to a classic such as this—be it Judy Garland’s original version or Israel Kamakawiwo’ole’s popular remake.

The crowd applauded when the piano player finished the song, and people dispersed toward the corridors of the hospital. Sam paced in the lobby as she waited for the elevator to arrive. She’d only been able to visit Robert for an hour last night after her mom picked her up from the airport, so getting here at eight this morning would give her a full day with him. She wanted to be here when the doctors made their rounds and while the physical therapists worked with him. Since it was Monday, they would likely be here sometime this morning to assess how Robert was doing.

“Before we go to Robert’s room, I need to fill you in on the latest,” Annie said and stepped to the back of the elevator behind an elderly couple.

Sam sighed loudly as she stared at the buttons on the side panel and waited for their floor. She attempted to take a deep breath, but the air in the crowded elevator was stagnant. When they got to the seventh floor, she squeezed her way past the people in front of her and stormed over to the wide expanse of windows to the left. She leaned against the glass pane and said, “So, what’s up? Any news on finding Johnny? Or is he still MIA?”

“You okay? You seem...so edgy.”

“I’m fine, just tired I guess. So what’s up with the investigation?”

“I’m afraid we have no leads as far as where he is, but I did speak with the manager at Robert’s work. He said a man in his early fifties had been harassing Robert for a while now, said the guy came by and would hang out in the parking lot or down by the boat dock. The surveillance tapes confirm it’s Jonathan Patterson.”

“He harassed Robert? For how long?”

“For a few weeks.”

“A few *weeks*? Why didn’t he call the police?”

“He likely had no idea this was the same guy and probably just thought he was a disgruntled customer. For weeks, Patterson kept going to the boat rental place and would give Robert a hard time, asking him all sorts of questions about where he lived and what your dad did for work. The manager says the guy even threatened him.”

"He can't get away with what he did to Robert. You gotta find him."

"Babe, we're working on it. He won't get away with hurting Robert. The surveillance tapes confirm that Patterson came by pretty often, but the harassment didn't start until recently...well, a couple weeks prior to the accident."

Sam paced from the windows all the way over to the elevators. She slapped her hands on the wall then stormed back to the wide expanse of glass. "He should be killed for what he did to Robert."

"In the state of Mississippi, attempted murder will get him several years in prison."

"Several years isn't enough. He'll likely get out in eight to ten."

"Not if I can help it. Early this morning I stopped at the station to read over the autopsy reports. On Friday, I'd only skimmed the basic details, such as cause of death, but this morning I read it more closely. The autopsy reports are pretty interesting."

Sam felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She figured it was her mom asking if she'd arrived at the hospital yet.

"Chuck's autopsy details are quite extensive. The coroner's report says Chuck was bludgeoned to death. The notes submitted from the detective indicate they never found anything that could be used as a weapon besides stones along the river, so they couldn't determine what was used to strike him. From what I can tell in the report, because no one was actually charged with his murder, they stopped searching for a weapon."

Bludgeoned to death made it all sound so brutal. A wave of nausea caused Sam to feel dizzy, so she steadied herself against the window. The coffee she drank on the way here soured in her stomach.

"The skull was cracked wide open in several places. In one area of the skull, there was a concave wound where they say the assailant must've delivered the blows. Sam, how many times did...Robert hit Chuck? And do you know what he hit him with?"

"He hit him a couple times, enough to stun him, I guess. Robert was...just trying to fight him off." Sam's phone vibrated again, so she pulled it out of her pocket and saw a few texts from Kim.

Made it to LA County.

Sam knew that Kim and Adrianna would be at the base of the mountain in a few hours and would spend the night in a hotel where they would get one more full night of sleep before making the ascent up the

trails in the morning.

“Sam, the report shows there were at least seven blows to the head. Sounds to me like it was more than self-defense,” Annie said and furrowed her brow. Over the years, Sam was always attracted to Annie’s crow’s feet and the fine lines which had formed in her forehead, but right now, that concentrated look created deep crevices in her brow.

“I don’t remember much. I was too far away to see clearly. I was...trying as best I could to hide from those men, so I couldn’t see what Robert used when he hit Chuck. I’m guessing it was a rock from the creek.”

“The photos from the autopsy are pretty telling as far as what happened to Chuck. The autopsy shows it was a large, flat object that hit him. A couple of the blows to his face look to be caused by something angular, not round like a stone. As for Fred, it looks like he was shot right in the heart.”

“The person who shot him must’ve been a good aim,” Sam said and peered down at the parking lot where cars filled most of the stalls. A steady stream of people merged toward the hospital entrance as the sun cast glaring strobes of morning light onto the walkway.

“The report shows that Fred had froth in the lungs and airways. They think he wasn’t dead when he fell into or was pushed into the water.”

“You’re saying he was still alive when he was in the creek? But I remember him falling to the ground after getting shot the second time. That gunshot wound to the chest had to have killed him. There was so much blood.”

“The report indicates Fred may have still been alive when he was in the water. The cause of death is clearly homicide, but they’re not entirely sure if it was caused by the gunshot wounds or drowning. But froth in the airways usually indicates drowning.”

“I know what froth in the airways means, Annie. I’ve been a lifeguard for ten years and have seen a few autopsies at the coroner’s office when I did my EMT training. But Fred was shot two times, at least. Maybe even three times. I can’t remember it all, but his body was totally lifeless when Robert—” Sam stopped herself as she envisioned Robert dragging Fred’s motionless body into the creek. Nothing about that man’s body seemed to have any life left in it. Robert couldn’t have contributed to the deaths of *two* men, could he?

“I’ve seen enough photos of gunshot wounds to the chest to know that this is probably what killed Fred Patterson. There’s no doubt that this was

a homicide, but when it comes to the investigation, the coroner's report is inconclusive as far as whether the death was caused by the gunshot wounds or drowning. If he was shot and *then* dragged into the creek still alive, it really doesn't matter because it's clear he was murdered. Any way you look at it, someone obviously wanted him dead."

"And how is this information supposed to help you find Johnny?"

"Right now, we're just trying to piece everything together. It's helping us understand why Johnny did what he did to Robert. What happened twenty-four years ago is helping us get a better sense of who Jonathan Patterson is and what he's capable of. I mean, as far as what motivated him to harm Robert a few weeks ago. Even Johnny himself gave us a clue when he told Robert he was there to do to him what he'd done to Chuck."

"Who's *us*? Who else is investigating the case?" Sam glanced at the medical personnel exiting the elevator and filtering onto the ward; she stepped away from the wide expanse of windows and peeked at her phone one more time to see another text from Kim and a photo of a little kid sent from Travis. In a mere few hours, Sam and Kim would be cut off from all cell contact once the riders reached higher elevation, so she wanted to send a few messages before Kim was out of text range.

"Well, for now it's just me, but I'm getting a better sense of how brutal Chuck's death was as far as what Robert did to him. I can see why Johnny was filled with such rage when he tried to kill Robert by ramming his truck off the bridge."

"We should probably get in there to see Robert before the therapists get here," Sam said and put her phone away. "I'm sure Mama is wondering where I am."

"Hold on," Annie said and clasped her hand on Sam's arm. "There's more I need to tell you. Based on the original reports, they initially thought one of the Patterson brothers had shot and killed Fred. They found bullet casings along the river matching a handgun, the same type of gun a clerk identified after he'd been pistol-whipped by one of them."

Sam's body became more tense. Images from that horrible day flooded back to her, but all she wanted to do right now was go see Robert. "Annie, at this point does it really matter *who* shot Fred? Seems pointless to focus on that right now."

"The autopsy reveals that Fred wasn't shot by a handgun," Annie said and leaned her back against the window. "The entry and exit wounds are consistent with shots from a thirty-aught-six."

"A thirty-out what? What kind of gun is that? Remember, I'm not a

DA like Marsha who knows about specific types of weapons and all that. My crime scene knowledge doesn't go beyond shows like *CSI* or *Dateline*."

"A thirty-aught-six Springfield is a type of bullet, sometimes called a thirty-oh-six, used in hunting rifles. The aught stands for zero. They leave distinct entry and exit wounds. The investigators found one of the bullets right there next to the Okatoma, so they're sure this is what killed Fred."

"He got killed by a *hunting* rifle?" Sam asked and shot a glance up to Annie.

"Yeah, I saw the photos from the autopsy. Clean shots through the chest and massive exit wounds in his back. Definitely consistent with this type of rifle."

"I sort of remember Johnny saying that maybe the police were shooting at them from down the river a ways, but I take it this type of rifle isn't something law enforcement uses?"

"Definitely not anything used by *our* law enforcement officers. Do you remember where the shots came from? Did they come from anywhere near your house?"

"Annie, that was a long time ago. I don't know, it could've been several yards behind me or else somewhere on the other side of the creek. The shots sort of echoed along the water. Why are you asking if the shots came from near our house?"

"I'm just trying to get an idea of what happened the day Fred and Chuck were killed."

"Why would that matter so many years later? Annie, they're dead. They were very bad men. It seems pointless for you to be investigating this now."

"I'm assuming...your dad had a hunting rifle. Didn't he sometimes go deer hunting?"

"Yeah, he had a few rifles. One belonged to my grandfather. Most of them were more for show than anything, but my dad and uncle would always go on their big hunting trip once a year. Robert even went with them a couple times, the first time when he was pretty young."

"Do you know if your mom still has your dad's rifles?"

"We got rid of them after he passed. Why are you asking about this? Are you thinking my dad had something to do with—"

"Sam, I...don't know, but I'm pretty sure your dad would've handled things in a law-abiding way. Besides, there would've been squad cars and officers surrounding the scene. They would have come to rescue you. You would've remembered a team of police officers there."

“Maybe my dad got home early that afternoon and didn’t bother to call in any other officers? He wouldn’t have shot and killed a man and not reported it as a justified shooting, right?”

“I can’t see your dad shooting Fred and then not coming to rescue you right away. Besides, any off-duty officer knows to call for back-up. Your dad was a respected member of the police force for at least twenty years when this incident happened. He was a good man. There’s no record of anyone reporting a shooting that day. The investigation started the day the two bodies were found along the river. That was a couple weeks after the murders, at least based on the autopsies and the approximate time of death for both Patterson brothers. This case was never solved, but nothing has been investigated in about twenty years. Did Robert...ever have access to your dad’s guns?”

“You’re asking if he’s the one who shot and killed Fred? Annie, he was in the creek when the shots were fired. He nearly got shot himself but managed to dive under the water to avoid the bullets flying his way.”

“I’m sorry...I had to ask. The investigation went cold months after the bodies were found. The notes from the detective indicate they suspected Fred and Jonathan as the ones who’d beaten and killed Chuck. The autopsy report indicates Chuck’s death was brutal, so I’m sure they assumed one or both of the other Patterson brothers had savagely beaten their brother. They even found defense wounds on Fred’s knuckles. They likely figured Fred was the one who hit Chuck.”

As Sam listened to Annie, the images from twenty-four years ago flooded back to her. She squinted out the window. A couple of maple trees lined the walkway leading to the hospital entrance. A few billowing clouds eclipsed the sun for a moment. Sam stared at the bright orange and red leaves of the trees. Soon, those branches would be bare as winter approached.

Annie stood closer to the window and continued to describe that September day in 1990, the afternoon Sam had tried as best she could to forget.

“When dealing with investigating the death of someone like Chuck with the sort of arrest record he had, it’s sometimes low priority to figure out who the killer was. They obviously didn’t make this case a top priority back in 1990 and pretty much stopped the investigation about six months later. Well, or at least put it on hold until now.”

“What do you mean until now? Have you reopened the case? Are you sure no one else is investigating this case?”

“As of right now, no one knows I’ve been looking into the deaths of Fred and Chuck. Obviously, no new information is gonna change what happened back then. The world was probably a much better place without those two men in it. They wouldn’t be able to harm anyone else. Besides, each Patterson had a rap sheet a mile long. It would make sense to any detective that one of them would beat up the brother. Chuck had been arrested for rape and a bunch of other violent crimes, but he got released early for some technicality following the conviction for rape.”

“What about Johnny?” Sam asked and held her breath for a few seconds. “What sorts of things did he get arrested for?”

“Everything from drunk in public, to a DUI, to armed robbery and...one conviction for attempted rape in 1988. He too got off on a technicality. It was a teenage girl he assaulted. Sounds like the girl’s parents didn’t want to come forward to provide enough evidence to convict him, didn’t want their daughter to be traumatized any more than she already had been when she fought off her attacker.”

As Sam exhaled, her breath fogged the window. She listened as Annie told her about Johnny’s arrest record but only heard bits of the details. All these years, she’d hoped he’d been put away in some prison far away from Covington County, yet he was back—but as of right now, nowhere to be found.

“Fred seems to be the only Patterson brother with only minor offenses,” Annie continued. “He’d only been imprisoned for a couple years. In time, I’m sure he would’ve done way more time just like his brothers. Chuck seems to have been the leader of the group, the worst of them, I guess you could say. No one would believe a teenage kid could’ve bludgeoned a grown man to death, but...sometimes there really is a time to kill.”

Sam leaned her back against the window and folded her arms. A wave of nausea overwhelmed her as she tried to push aside all that had been revealed to her. She set her head against the glass and looked past Annie at the steady stream of doctors and nurses filtering onto the ward where her brother continued to fight to stay alive. But at this point, maybe he wasn’t doing any of the fighting. The doctors and nurses pumped him with plenty of drugs to keep his vitals stable, and the therapists did the best they could to keep his muscles and joints moving, even though he still didn’t show any signs of being aware of his surroundings.

“You okay?” Annie asked. “I know this all isn’t what you wanted to hear this morning, but I needed to tell you. Frankly, it’s all making sense

to me now as to why Johnny came after Robert.”

Sam bit her lower lip before responding then pushed herself away from the windows and took a couple steps away from Annie. “You mean am I okay with hearing all these details about what happened twenty-four years ago? Do I really have a choice? I mean, Johnny trying to kill Robert has forced everything to come back to me. As the years went by and as I got older, I figured that awful day was long since buried, but obviously it’s not. But I guess hearing it from you makes it less scary. You always were good at figuring things out, always able to read between the lines, so to speak.”

“I only wish I could’ve been involved in arresting Johnny years ago. Better yet, I wish those parents would’ve come forward with details about him assaulting their daughter. Then he wouldn’t have harmed anyone else.”

Sam glimpsed at the clock on the wall and noticed they’d been standing here for nearly an hour. “At least that girl fought him off. She was brave to fight off someone so...evil like Johnny. Hey, so if there’s nothing else you need to tell me, then we should get in to see Robert. I know you need to get back to the station soon.”

Sam stepped closer to Annie and relaxed her body into hers. She felt the warmth envelope her and took a deep sigh then interlaced her fingers into Annie’s—more out of habit than anything else. Sam continued to hold Annie’s hand and thought about all that’d been revealed to her. The haunting images from twenty-four years ago flashed in her mind, but she knew she must put that all aside and go see Robert. The first couple hours of visiting hours had already passed, but at least she could stay until later tonight. She vowed to not leave Robert’s side all day today.

“I’m actually off today,” Annie said and patted Sam’s arm, “but I’ll stop by the station and get updated on the search for Patterson. I’ll contact other jurisdictions to expand our search area. I’ll stop and say a quick hello to your mom and Robert. Haven’t seen him for a few weeks now. You ready to go see him?”

Sam squeezed Annie’s hand hard then raised both their hands in the air as if she were leading her into some sort of sporting event. “As ready as ever. Let’s do this,” she said and released Annie’s hand, sounding like a coach with a fellow trail riding buddy. She clapped her hands together a couple times and marched toward the medical ward.

When she stepped away from the windows, she felt her phone buzz in her pocket a couple times. She looked at the screen to notice another text

from Travis and two more from Kim. She'd sent her a photo this time—a selfie with Adrianna standing cheek-to-cheek next to her as the two of them held heaping servings of frozen yogurt.

Carbo loading! We stopped in West Hollywood to wander around. Wish you were here with us ;) Miss you! <3

Did Kim really just text a heart? Sam furrowed her brow and studied the short text before putting the phone back in her pocket.

“Another text from the young girlfriend?” Annie asked.

“She’s not *that* young. Not as young as I was when we met,” Sam said and smirked. “No, it’s just a text from Travis. Guess he’s bored at the beach today.”

Why provide Annie with all the details of where Kim was right now and with whom? Sam felt her phone vibrate in her pocket one more time but ignored it. She squinted at the bright fluorescent lighting in the hallway as she and Annie passed the nurses’ station. Sam’s legs felt heavy. When she glanced at each bed in the rooms they passed, she noticed that the patients on this floor had obvious neurological deficits. Most of them were elderly—stroke patients, she figured. Some seemed to be carrying on conversations with loved ones; others stared at the television or glanced out the door to the hallway. Robert was likely one of the youngest patients on this ward but probably in the worst condition. As she tried to stop her heart from beating so fast, Sam linked her arm in Annie’s while the two of them rounded the corner to Robert’s room. For a fleeting few seconds, Sam felt like everything would be okay.

Chapter Nineteen

Mississippi: Autumn, 2014

THE VENTILATOR BREATHED life into Robert while the neurologist did his exam. Sam slouched in a rigid plastic chair at the side of the bed and watched the doctor try to get some sort of reaction out of Robert. When the doctor shined a pen light in Robert's eyes, Sam looked past the bed and noticed how different this room looked compared to the ICU. Beyond the empty bed next to Robert's was a stainless steel sink with what looked to be a mirrored medicine cabinet above it. Past that was a small bathroom with a toilet and a shower stall. For patients who were ambulatory and much further along in their recovery, the room would be comfortable. But Robert would never have need of a shower or even a toilet. Still connected to a Foley catheter, he relied on nurses to empty the bag of urine that hung to the side of his bed. Once or twice a day a nurse would wash his body and sometimes comb his hair.

Tired from another night of restless sleep, Sam set her head against the wall and glanced at Robert who lay there unresponsive and unaware of her presence. Her stomach rumbled as she anticipated her mom returning from the cafeteria with a snack for her. Sam had been here for the past four hours while the therapists and nurses attempted to get some sort of response out of Robert. His sternum glowed a deep shade of purple from the numerous times they pressed their knuckles hard onto his bony chest to try and rouse him.

"Squeeze my hand," the neurologist said then set a couple fingers on Robert's opened palm. "It's Doctor Savage, chief resident of neurology here. You've been in hospital for a few weeks now. Your sister Samantha is here." Once again, the doctor shined the penlight into Robert's eyes.

"Actually, he calls me Sam," Sam said quietly and leaned forward, but Doctor Savage didn't respond. She detected a hint of an English or Irish accent – far different than the typical southern drawl here in Mississippi.

After no reaction from Robert, Doctor Savage moved to the foot of the bed and lifted the covers to reveal Robert's thin legs. He set a hand on each bony knee and palpated the muscles in the quads and shins. Then he

peeled off the compression socks and ran his thumbnail on the bottom of Robert's foot. Sam cringed when she imagined the pain she'd feel if a doctor did that on the sole of her foot, but Robert didn't even flinch or wiggle his toes.

"Has he shown any reaction when you hold his hand or talk to him?" Doctor Savage asked without looking at Sam.

"No, nothing lately. Once my mom returns, you can ask her what she's noticed. She claims he squeezes her hand, but I haven't felt him do that for weeks. Is this normal for a brain injury? I mean, to have some response shortly after the injury and then...nothing weeks later?"

"With his sort of injuries, additional neurochemical changes can occur later, such as intracellular calcium overload. If that occurs, it can further damage the axons in the brain. This of course leads to neurodeficits and neurodegeneration. With typical TBI, it can sometimes affect structural neuro-networks in the brain, including delayed axonal disconnection. These sorts of neuro changes can occur progressively, even weeks or months following the brain injury."

Sam stared at Doctor Savage and tried to grasp what he said. All she needed to hear was a yes or no to her question. "What sort of...prognosis do you give for Robert? Do you have any prediction for what's next as far as care?" Sam bit her lower lip and glimpsed over the doctor's shoulder to watch the medical personnel flitting about in the hallway.

"The majority of recovery after traumatic brain injury takes place in the initial two years following the injury, but your brother's case is quite different. Normally, if the patient has no other significant injuries or deficits, they can show improvement up to two years later, but with Robert, we're dealing with brain hypoxia *and* TBI, along with spinal cord injury. His neuro regression could be due to a number of factors, including DAI."

"DAI?" Sam grimaced and awaited Doctor Savage's response.

"Sorry, diffuse axonal injury. It's a feature of TBI. With DAI, axons in the white matter are vulnerable to injury due to the impact that occurs during blunt force trauma. In severe cases of neurological injuries from TBI, patients go from coma to PVS, or persistent vegetative state. You might need to make some decisions soon about long-term care, if that's the route you take," Doctor Savage said then covered Robert's legs with the sheet.

"Persistent vegetative state," Sam said, her voice void of emotion. "What did you mean just now when you mentioned whether long-term

care is the route we take with Robert? What are our other options?"

"Well, you must realize that this might be all there is for Robert. A long-term care facility is probably the best scenario."

"You mean until he shows improvement?"

"No, a long-term care facility for the rest of his life. He'll have the best carers looking after him in a place like that." Doctor Savage moved to the small table in the corner of the room to jot a few notes in the thick binder.

"So, he'll basically be living in a vegetative state and be sustained by these contraptions." Sam wrung her hands and glanced from Robert to the machines breathing for him. The ventilator never stopped humming as the tubes pumped air into his lungs.

"I'm not sure if you and your mum have talked about other options."

"I didn't even think we had other options."

"I see that your brother has no advanced directive. If he had that, then we might know what his wishes would have been regarding sustaining his life with these sorts of measures."

"He's only thirty-eight. He doesn't even have a savings account. He never thought much beyond getting a paycheck each week."

"With some patients, palliative care is a clear option, but I'm not so sure we're there yet with Robert."

"What do you mean *yet*?"

"With a patient in his condition, there are all sorts of potential complications. Pneumonia, infection, continual neurodegeneration. There's always a risk of blood clots, and if that —"

"Yeah, I know, pulmonary embolisms. *PE*, as y'all say. He wouldn't survive that. Might be a blessing if he succumbed to a PE, actually. It'd be a quick death. Nothing like this lingering in a state of limbo as he's experienced the past few weeks."

"I recognize your frustration in regards to your brother's situation. This surely can't be easy on your family. Your brother *can* survive this way for a very long time. Years, really. But you need to realize that he'll need twenty-four-hour care. He'll never walk again, and there's a likely possibility that he won't even be able to sit up in a wheelchair."

"He'll be *bedridden* for the rest of his life? What kind of life is that?"

"He'll need a full team of carers. However, you must be aware that, should his condition dramatically decline, then palliative care would be something to consider." Doctor Savage flipped through Robert's chart and rubbed the scruff of his chin as he studied each page.

"My mom would never go for that," Sam said and furrowed her brow.

"She's pretty certain he'll eventually show enough improvement and be able to come home."

"As hard as this is to hear, he'll never be able to go home."

"My mom has this idea that he'll get good care at home. She's a nurse, you know."

"Surely you and your mum realize that Robert needs far more than nursing care. Also, caring for someone in Robert's condition is quite difficult on family members. At this point, Robert continues to be stable. It's quite remarkable, actually, considering his injuries. We'll continue to do all we can to make him as comfortable as possible while he's in hospital here. I foresee he may be able to be transferred to a specialized care facility in the next week or so." Doctor Savage jotted a few notes on a blank sheet of paper and continued to flip through Robert's chart.

As she stared at Robert's unresponsive body, Sam jiggled her leg then occupied herself by rereading the texts Travis sent earlier:

Look who came by to say hi to you this morning—Olivia Draper! The kid is healing pretty well. She even braved the surf on her boogie board.

Above the text was a photo of Olivia sitting next to the lifeguard tower with her foot hoisted in the air. In the picture, she pointed to where the stingray injured her. Sam enlarged the photo to examine Olivia's foot. Only a reddish wound could be seen, the skin already starting to heal. Sam read the last text from Travis:

The mom told me to forward her cell number to you. Probably wants to thank you again for saving her kid.

Doctor Savage finally slapped the binder shut and then bent over to scribble some notes on a small sheet of paper. He furrowed his brow as he filled the entire page with notes.

Not able to see what the doctor wrote, Sam leaned back in the chair and stared at the busy hallway. In the room across the hall, a nurse spoke to a patient's family. Sam had noticed that frail patient this morning—an old woman in grave condition. A grown woman stood at the foot of the bed; she let out a loud sob and steadied herself on the nurse's arm. Sam heard the woman repeat, "Mama...Mama!" several times as she continued to cry. There was something so primal about the woman's sobs, which caused Sam's heart to ache.

Sam studied the way the nurse not only cared for the ailing patient but

also comforted the grown daughter. Next to her was a small boy—probably the patient’s grandson. The kid sat at the foot of the bed sobbing. Sam noticed that the patient was no longer hooked up to any machines. From across the hallway, Sam had a clear view of the old woman who lay motionless in the bed. The nurse approached the grandson and glanced up to see Sam observing the grieving family. The nurse then shut the door, but Sam could still hear the boy’s sobs. She continued to gaze at the empty hallway but tried to tune out the kid’s crying.

Mesmerized by the fluorescent lighting on the stark white tile floors, Sam then noticed someone pacing in the hallway. She caught a glimpse of the man’s face and figured he was waiting to enter the patient’s room across the hall, but the door remained shut. Sam glanced at her phone again and wrote a short text to Travis.

She’s a brave little kid. I’m not sure I’d venture back into the ocean so soon after getting stung by a stingray when I was her age.

Outside the room, the man continued to pace back and forth. Each time he passed the doorway, he peeked into Robert’s room. Sam took another look at his face the next time he passed by. Weathered and grey, the guy appeared to be in his late fifties. Dressed in a blue, faded flannel checkered shirt, he didn’t look like hospital personnel, and he was way too old to be one of Robert’s friends. Maybe it was his boss from the boat rental place? But Sam recalled Robert saying that the manager was only a couple years older than he was. Could it be Mr. Rizzo? No, he was well into his seventies now and totally grey and rotund. The man who paced past the room was thin, almost wiry.

When the man meandered past once more, Sam got a clear look at his face. This time, she noticed the stern look in his eyes—a preoccupied, distant look. There was something frighteningly familiar about that face. He stood a few feet from the doorway and glanced beyond Sam to what she thought was a clear shot of Robert’s bed. Again, that same serious look washed over the man’s face. His eyes seemed hauntingly familiar.

Sam’s heartbeat sped up as she was suddenly filled with fear. She recalled Annie saying that Johnny was now in his fifties. Within seconds, Sam’s fear magnified. Not only had Johnny stalked Robert at his work, but he was now at the hospital?

Sam glanced at the hallway one more time then tapped out a panicked text to Annie:

I think Johnny is at the hospital. The guy keeps walking past the room. Could you come to the hospital? Or send an officer?

Sam followed the text with a call to Annie's cell. The call went right to voicemail. "Annie, I think...I think Johnny is at the hospital. He's found Robert. He's here right now. *Please*, call me back or come directly to the hospital."

She then scrolled through her phone to find the number of the police station. Without hesitation, she tapped on the number and maneuvered her way through pushing a one and then a three to get to Annie's department. A woman answered the phone, and before Sam could say who she was, she blurted out, "I need to speak with Lieutenant Annie Wright immediately."

"She already left the office," the woman said. "She left a couple hours ago. Hon, can I ask who's calling? What is this regarding? Anything one of the officers can help you with?"

Sam's heart beat faster, the blood pulsating in her head as she thought of what to say. "No, I need Annie. I need to speak with her. Please, could you relay a message to her?"

"Sure, hon, I'll be sure and get it to her as soon as possible."

Sam searched for the words to say to the woman and noticed the man in the hallway was now leaning against the wall opposite Robert's room and staring at her with his arms crossed.

"Just tell her Sam Cleveland called," Sam said into the phone. "I've already left her a voicemail and a text, but please, just tell her I need to talk to her immediately."

"Samantha Cleveland? Harold's daughter? I remember when you were heading off to California to go to college. How you doing, hon? Did you move back to Mississippi?"

"No, I still live in San Diego. Could you just relay my message to Lieutenant Wright as soon as possible? It's about...a case she's investigating. I'm sure she'll get the messages on her cell phone sooner than she would a message from the office."

"Sure, hon. You okay?"

Now, in the hallway that man scowled at Sam. She forced herself to look at his face one more time. His eyes looked so dark and familiar to her. Twenty-four years ago, Sam saw nothing but evil in Johnny's face.

"Actually, could you send an officer to Forrest General Hospital?" Sam stammered out the exact details of her location then ended the call and

tapped out another text to Annie:

He's right outside the room. I've asked to have an officer sent to the hospital. I'll also contact the nurse to have her call security. The doctor is here with me now.

Doctor Savage set a hand on Sam's shoulder, causing her to jump. She hit send and then glanced again at the hallway, but Johnny was no longer there.

"Didn't mean to startle you," Doctor Savage said. "I'd like to adjust his meds a wee bit, see if lowering the Keppra might make him more alert, but I'm not going to shelter you from the reality of his situation. I doubt adjusting any of his meds will get him to be more alert."

"Doctor Savage," Sam said quietly and glimpsed at the empty hallway. "I'm not sure if you know about what caused Robert's accident. I mean, about *who* caused the accident. You see, I think that man is—"

"I did read in his chart that there's a criminal investigation going on." Doctor Savage walked toward the door and pumped a squirt of Purell into his palm and vigorously rubbed both hands together.

"Is there any way you can..." Sam said quietly and stood to be by Robert's side. "Well, could you contact security? I think the man who caused the accident is here at the hospital right now."

"He's *here*? You're sure of that? You're certain it's the man they're looking for?"

"I saw him in the hallway a few minutes ago." Sam stared at the empty corridor and listened for any signs of his return.

"I'll ring security straightaway and have them send a guard to the floor."

"Please, they need to find him. His name's Jonathan Patterson. He's in his fifties and is wearing a blue checkered flannel shirt."

Doctor Savage reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He kept his eyes on the doorway. "Hello, this is George Savage, one of the doctors here. We have a possible situation. Send a couple guards up to room—"

Before Doctor Savage finished his call to security, Sam heard a knock on the door. She looked up, and there he was—the man who'd been pacing in the hallway. Sam stepped toward the head of the bed wanting to somehow shroud Robert from any more harm.

"Hi there," the man said. "Didn't want to intrude earlier, but now

seems about the best time for me to pop in seeing that the doctor has finished his examination.”

Sam cowered by the tall machines next to the bed. She reached down to cling to Robert’s hand and got ready to call Annie one more time.

“Sir, it’s best you stay there by the door,” Doctor Savage said.

“Ah, now isn’t a good time for me to visit Robert, I see,” the man said. “Sorry, but I just wanted to say hi to Sam and to Robert and maybe pray with them before I head back home.”

“Pray? You’ve come to pray for my patient? You shouldn’t be here without the family’s consent. Just stay there by the door for now.”

“Sam probably doesn’t recognize me,” the man said and took one more step forward. “Probably been over twenty years since you last caught a glimpse of this ugly mug, but I can tell by your expression that you don’t recognize me.” The man’s serious look softened when he grinned. Warmth washed over his face as he stared at Sam and continued to smile.

Sam again stared at the man’s face and studied his eyes closely. She glanced at his grey hair, the wrinkles on his face. Within seconds, that fear dissolved when she realized that before her stood Pastor Dan—quite aged since she’d last seen him. The fear melted from her body, causing her legs to weaken. She gripped the side of the bed as she recovered from her error.

“Pastor Dan? I thought you were...well, I didn’t recognize you. You look so...different.”

“You can say it,” Pastor Dan said and laughed. “I look old. As I said, it’s been a long time since you’ve seen me. I’ve been through a lot.”

“Everything okay?” Doctor Savage asked. “It’s all right for this man to be here?”

“Yes, he’s one of the ministers from my old church. Sorry to have caused any confusion.”

“I’m not usually this casual, but I drove three hours to come see Robert. I no longer live in Mississippi. I usually wear a shirt and tie when visiting parishioners in the hospital, but this visit is a bit different, seeing it’s you and Robert.”

Doctor Savage left Sam and Pastor Dan alone in the room. Sam’s phone buzzed in her hands. She looked down to see that it was Annie calling. “It’s all okay,” Sam whispered into her phone.

“I’m on my way there now,” Annie yelled into the phone. “I’ve notified the officers nearest the hospital, and they’re nearby. Might take me another thirty minutes, but I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

"Annie, it's all okay. It's not Johnny. It's Pastor Dan."

"Pastor Dan? Who's that? Sam, what the hell is going on? Does this mean I should tell the officers to not go to the hospital?"

"Yes, things are fine here. I made a mistake. It's my old pastor who stopped by to say hi. I'll call you later."

After Sam ended the call, she took another look at Pastor Dan. Up close, he seemed more like an old man.

"How's he doing?" Pastor Dan asked and set his hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Not good." Sam's voice quivered. "I keep hoping he'll come out of this, that he'll open his eyes and look at me. I mean, really look at me and not just stare at the ceiling."

"How are *you* doing, Sam? How you holding up?"

"The best I can. Been a rough couple of months."

"I saw your mom in the cafeteria when I stopped to get a Coke. Ended up talking with her for quite a while and prayed with her before coming up here. She seems to be doing well. Janey's always been such a strong woman."

"I wish I had her strength." Sam stared at Robert and set her palm on his hand. The skin had become so thin. Blotches of dark purple bruises lined his arms. Any time they attempted to insert a needle, his veins rebelled by collapsing.

"What have the doctors told you?" Pastor Dan folded his arms and leaned against the bed.

"The doctor you saw just now is probably the first one who hasn't talked to me like I'm an idiot. Well, I didn't understand half of what he said, but I understood that he was saying Robert's neurological deficits would never improve. I just don't understand why Mama would let Robert continue to live like this."

"Sam, you can't lose faith. It sounds like God was watching over Robert that day. He's alive. That's God's doing, Sam."

"Why would God let *this* happen?" She paced to the foot of the bed and waved an arm over Robert. "What kind of a God lets some evil man try to kill Robert? How was that watching over Robert that day?" Sam was filled with so much anger that her body shook; her hands were balled into tight fists. "An eye for an eye. Isn't that what the bible says? I hope when they find the guy that they inflict as much pain on him as he did to Robert."

"Sam, don't let hate fill your heart."

"That man left Robert maimed and brain damaged. Look at him. Does this look like living to you?"

"You can't keep that hate in your heart. I know how hard this must be for you to see Robert this way, but you can't let anger take over. I know firsthand how hate can start to cause your spirit to die."

Sam felt like she was about to hear some long, drawn-out lecture—the same sort of sermon she used to tune out when she was a kid attending church. She stared at the breathing tube in Robert's neck and watched as the accordion-like hose caused his chest to rise and fall. Robert seemed relaxed, despite the matrix of tubes and leads connected to his body.

"You were probably too young to know why I left the church twenty years ago," Pastor Dan continued. "I'm sure your parents never told you what happened. A couple years after I became the youth minister at the church, I started hanging out with the wrong crowd. I had full intentions of getting those guys to come to the Lord, but in retrospect, I know why I was hanging out at the bars. I used to only go drinking on Friday nights. I told myself that it was perfectly fine to drink a couple beers at the end of the week. Well, Friday nights turned into Saturday nights. It soon became my pattern to drink every day except the Lord's day. Like I said, you were much too young to notice what a hangover looked like."

"I know what it looks like on *me*," Sam said with a laugh then sat in the hard, plastic chair next to the bed.

"I don't know how I managed to counsel you kids back then when I was always so hung over, but being a youth minister was the one thing that had meaning in my life. Still, I continued to drink just about every night, and I'd even drive drunk. But, after about a year and a half of my binges, I got pulled over by your dad one evening."

"My *dad*? When he was on duty?"

"Yeah, the street where he stopped me happened to be on his beat that day. He sat with me for what might've been four hours as I sobered up a bit. Pretty sure his shift had long since ended."

"He didn't take you in? He didn't arrest you?"

"No, but he told me he wouldn't let me drive that night, said I needed to find a way back to get my car the next morning. He took me to a diner and made me eat some food, said some sustenance might offset the alcohol in my system."

"He sure saved your ass," Sam said and pursed her lips. She'd seen a couple DUI accidents when she worked as an EMT, and they always involved the oblivious drunk who had no clue of the injuries caused by

the accident.

"I wish he hadn't saved my ass. For about a month, I made sure to do my drinking at home, but then a few weeks later, I started going to the bars just about every night. One night, I got behind the wheel and drove right into an oncoming car. Killed the woman driving the car and caused the teenager in the passenger seat to become a paraplegic."

Sam sat silently as she waited for Pastor Dan to say more. Nothing but the faint beeps from the machines and the hiss of the ventilator could be heard.

"Once the church board found out, they let me go, said I wasn't fit to be ministering to the youth of the church."

"I guess I did wonder why you left the church. My parents said you'd found a different church out of town. Did you move out of the state right away?"

"No, I stayed in town for about seven months until the trial was over. By the grace of God, I was only charged with vehicular manslaughter. Turns out the woman wasn't wearing a seatbelt, and it was revealed during the trial that the kid had her feet on the dashboard during the accident, said something about how the impact of the crash wouldn't have been as severe had she been seated in a normal position. I was sentenced to five years in prison but got out after three. During that time, I was filled with such hatred, even though I was the one at fault. Sam, I killed a woman and caused a teenage girl to become paralyzed."

"Three years in prison? I can see how something like that would really mess you up. I take it you're sober now?"

"Haven't had a drink for a little over twelve years now. I started drinking again a few months after I got out of prison, but I quickly realized that the alcohol was fueling my hate. I realized I had to get that hate and anger out of my heart."

"How'd you do that?"

"Lots of prayer, several AA meetings, and some awareness that the anger would eventually kill me. I realized I hated myself for what I'd done, but I also hated my dad for how he treated me when I was a kid. I even hated your dad for not arresting me that night. I'm not saying life is easy for me now," Pastor Dan said and took a deep breath. On his exhale he stepped close to Sam and set a hand on her shoulder and also placed his palm over Robert's hand. "It's not easy to let go of that hate. Without anger and hate, what's left is despair. I faced that myself once I let the anger go."

"Pastor Dan, no offense, but I don't have the sort of faith you and Mama have. Right now, the anger is motivating me to make sure Robert gets the best care possible. It's also pushing me to make sure that guy gets put away. He shouldn't ever be let out of prison for what he's done to me or to—" Sam stopped herself and again stared at the trach. The gentle rise and fall of Robert's artificial breathing momentarily calmed her. The steady rhythm of those breaths forced her own breath to slow. "The man who did this to Robert needs to pay for what he's done."

"I'm sure the authorities will do the best they can to prosecute him, and the doctors will continue to care for Robert. As they say in AA, one day at a time. I continue to pray for Robert every day, to ask God for a miracle. I'll also pray for the man who did this to him. I'm sure his heart aches with anger as well. I'll pray that he finds it in his heart to surrender, to not inflict any more pain on anyone else."

"I doubt that man feels any remorse for what he's done."

"It's possible for people to come to a point of regret for even the worst types of evil actions. Sam, you must remember that redemption is a gift of God's grace, attainable only through faith in Jesus."

"I guarantee Johnny Patterson doesn't know the Lord, probably has no intentions of asking for forgiveness for what he did to Robert."

"I'll continue to pray for Johnny that he finds it in his heart to admit he's done wrong to you and your family. You have to have faith, Sam."

"Mama has said those exact words to me many times since Robert was in the accident. She says if Robert is supposed to pass, it'll happen naturally. Well, what's so natural about him being hooked up to a ventilator and being fed by a G-tube? I swear, sometimes Mama's faith in the Lord is in direct conflict with her experience as a nurse."

"Your mother has her faith in the doctors as well."

"The thing about Mama is that she says it's not our job to intervene with God's plan, but how is cutting into Robert's trachea to insert a breathing tube not intervening with God's plan? How is keeping him on so many drugs and feeding him through a tube not playing God? If he wasn't on the meds or the trach or the feeding tube, he'd die."

"God is not the only healer. He gives doctors and nurses the skills needed to figure out how to get people well, even someone like Robert. Sam, would you like me to pray with you before I leave?"

Sam went to the sink near the door. She stared at her reflection and ran the water until it got warm. She splashed water on her face as Pastor Dan approached her. "I don't mind you praying for Robert, but I don't really

need you to pray *with me*," Sam said and dried her face with a paper towel. "I hope you understand. Thanks for coming by and thank you for sharing your story with me."

Pastor Dan wrapped his arms around Sam and patted her back as he held her for a moment. The hug felt hollow, so different from Mama's or Annie's embraces. Sam stood in the doorway and watched Pastor Dan disappear down the corridor.

Across the hallway, the door was now open. The daughter and little boy were no longer there; instead, a young man in a dark suit hovered over a narrow gurney as he fussed with what appeared to be a black tarp. Upon closer examination, Sam noticed it was a body bag. Her breath caught in her chest as she turned away for a moment but glanced back after she heard the muffled sound of a zipper. She watched as the gentleman then wrapped a wide strap around the deceased's body, pulling it snug around the midsection. Sam became intrigued by how the undertaker fastened the straps around the body and how he secured the corpse on the gurney. Aware that she was gawking at such a private procedure, Sam backed away and returned to the sink. But, still intrigued, she opened the mirrored cabinet and angled it so she could view what the man did next.

Ceremonial and professional, the stiff-collared man cinched another belt around the lower legs. With steadied concentration, he rechecked the placement of the corpse on the gurney, tugged on each strap one more time, and released the brake next to the back wheels. He then guided the decedent out the door and into the hallway; he set a gentle hand on the lower extremities as he rounded the corner and disappeared from Sam's view through the mirror. The procedure seemed so intimate—the final steps toward burial performed by this one lone man. Sam was right here when the old woman took her last breath a couple hours ago. She shuddered as she recalled the little boy's wrenching sobs when his grandma passed, the child bereft with inconsolable grief.

Sam returned to Robert's side and watched the gentle rise of his chest as the ventilator pushed oxygen into his lungs—keeping him alive with each thrust of air. For a flash second, Sam's chest heaved as tears brimmed her eyes. But even before a tear cascaded down her face, she composed herself and once again envisioned Robert's Chevy being rammed off the bridge by Patterson. Weeks after state authorities pulled the truck from the Bouie River, they weren't any closer to solving the case today than they were the week it happened. Sam's heart once again filled with anger.

She wasn't ready to let go of hate, wasn't ready to surrender to despair.

Chapter Twenty

Mississippi: Autumn, 2014

THE OLD BUICK rumbled to a stop in the driveway. The beams from the headlights shone on the house, casting bright rays back into the car. Exhausted and hungry, Sam turned off the engine and hunched forward. She endured twelve hours in the hospital today with only a short break to get a rubbery grilled cheese sandwich and a Diet Coke in the cafeteria while the nurses bathed Robert and changed his diapers and bedding. Not quite ready to face her mom, Sam stared through the windshield and thought about all that'd happened today. She didn't think she had it in her to handle another day at the hospital tomorrow seeing Robert unresponsive and making no progress, yet her mother continued to have faith that God would heal Robert, that he'd someday be able to come home. Sam knew that'd never happen and knew he'd never want to be dependent on machines to keep him alive.

Sam gripped her hands around the steering wheel and sat upright. Then she thrummed her fingers on the dashboard as she built up the energy to exit the car, but her body remained frozen. She knew she should go inside to see Mama, to force small talk while they watched one of those inane reality shows, but all Sam wanted to do was lie in bed and text Kim to see if they'd made it to the base of the mountain. She could send a few texts before Kim started her ride. Some suggestive words would surely keep her mind on Sam as she pedaled up the trails. But she remained slumped in the driver's seat and stared at her phone and scrolled through texts she and Robert exchanged days before the accident. Then, as she did almost every night since Robert's accident, she reread his last texts:

You won't ever catch me in that rough ocean. No fucking way! If I swam in those huge waves, it'd be just my luck to end up breaking my neck and become paralyzed. If that happened, you might as well shoot me! Who'd ever think that my little sister would be braver than me out in the water, huh?

Sam stared at Robert's words. Hardly enough to be an advanced

directive, Robert's wishes weren't clear enough to convince her mother or the doctors that he wouldn't want to exist with so many neurological deficits. Defeated, Sam felt it to be a waste of her energy to try and convince her mother that Robert would never want to live this way. She vowed to keep quiet tomorrow at the hospital, to not try to change her mother's view about Robert's prognosis.

After she slipped her phone into her backpack, Sam pried open the heavy Buick door and pushed herself up from the seat and stepped onto the gravel. Every muscle in her body ached—from her neck, to her lower back, all the way down to her calves. With her backpack slung over her shoulder, she trudged up the steps leading to the porch. Immediately, she noticed the bright candles set on the railing. The entire perimeter of the porch glowed. She paused on the stairs and glanced at the white tablecloth covering the dingy wooden table. In the center was a bottle of Chardonnay wedged in a metal bucket of ice. Next to that were two wine glasses and a platter of cheeses and meats. A huge bowl of mixed greens sat at the end of the table; other tureens of food were arrayed on a TV tray.

Sam searched for any signs of guests. Maybe Mama had friends over from church to play cards? Or a date? Perhaps she'd gotten the nerve to ask one of the available deacons over for supper. Sam quickly rejected that idea, for her mother hadn't dated anyone for years—content to watch her shows, bake pies and cakes, and visit Robert as often as possible. Jane had taken a leave of absence once her vacation time ran out, but with Sam home for a couple weeks, she'd be able to pick up a few shifts at the hospital and not lose more income.

Sam clomped up the rest of the steps then set her backpack on a chair. The screen door flapped open—and there stood Annie with a wrapped loaf of French bread wedged under one arm, a bag of tortilla chips in the other, and a platter of stuffed mushrooms in her hand.

Annie grinned and set the food on the table. "Oh, good, you're home. I hope you're hungry."

Home? Sam thought and glanced at all the food on the table. Perplexed as to why Annie would be at her mother's house, much less preparing all this food in her kitchen, Sam wasn't sure what to say.

"I fixed all your favorites. Baked brie, crab-stuffed mushrooms, blue tortilla chips with fire-roasted salsa, sliced prosciutto, and those fun little pork dumplings you like so much."

"The potstickers from Best Wok?" Sam dipped a finger in the sweet

sauce before reaching for a dumpling. "You drove all the way to Collins to get these?"

"Best Wok is only a short jaunt away. I've been working on this for a couple days, ever since you told me you were coming home. Well, your mom helped, too. I called her yesterday and told her about my idea. She fixed the stuffed mushrooms and made the salad. You know how helpless I am in the kitchen. She added some crumbled goat cheese and candied pecans to the salad. But, the wine was my idea." Annie poured a glass of Chardonnay and handed it to Sam.

"You found Rombauer Chardonnay in Mississippi?" Sam took a long slurp of the buttery liquid.

"One of the officers went to Napa with his wife last month, and I asked him to stop at Rombauer Vineyards to bring me back a bottle."

"That's the wine we had for our fifth anniversary...the time we drove up to Napa. I haven't had this in years. Sounds like you've been planning this for more than a couple days." Her eyes narrowed as she stared at Annie and then took another sip of Chardonnay. She surveyed the bounty of her favorite foods and took another slurp of wine, the liquid cooling her body and relaxing her muscles. The steam from the potstickers wafted over her face, drawing her closer as she hovered over the table to get a better view of the spread of delicacies.

Annie waved her hands in the air. "Okay, I admit it. I've been saving the bottle for a special occasion. You think Marsha would appreciate a fine vintage like this? She's content with her scotch and water. I know how much you like Rombauer."

"Me being home so I can give Mama a break while Robert's in the hospital is a special occasion? Seriously, what's going on?" Sam glared at Annie then glimpsed at all the food heaped on platters and in tureens. "After such a long day at the hospital, I expected to come home and have a bowl of cereal while I watched TV with Mama. I was all set on watching *Survivor* or *Dancing with the Stars* and falling asleep on the couch."

"If you'd prefer, I can pour you a bowl of Cheerios. You more in the mood for dinner on a TV tray?" Annie smirked and held the platter of mushrooms in front of Sam. "Or one of these out here on the porch?"

Sam plopped a mushroom in her mouth and closed her eyes as she savored the flavorful blend of crab and seasoned bread crumbs. She took a couple more sips of Rombauer. "I never imagined coming home to a full spread like this. I figured you were home...with Marsha. Or is she away again?"

"No, she's home this week. I figured it's time for *me* to be away on business for a change."

"You're going away? Right now, just after I got back to Mississippi? How long will you be gone?"

Annie clasped her hand on Sam's arm and pulled her closer then looked at her intensely. "Babe, I'm not going *anywhere*. I wouldn't leave you right now. I know how difficult today was for you, so I wanted you to have a nice night, but...I do have another reason as to why I'm here. Just hear me out, okay? Ever since you told me about Johnny Patterson being the man who...did what he did to you years ago, I haven't been able to get it out of my mind that I want that guy behind bars."

Sam shuddered when she heard that name again. In September of 1990, she'd tried as best she could to erase it and his face from her memory. His image used to appear in her nightmares, but over the years that face had faded from her mind – until this week.

"If they haven't found him by now, how are they going to find him?" Sam said, her voice feeble and quiet. She reached for the wine then topped off her glass, the bottle already half empty.

"I've contacted all law enforcement agencies within a hundred-mile radius of Covington County. We'll expand that to two hundred miles if we still can't locate him by tomorrow."

"What about the security tapes from Robert's work? Anything more from those?"

"On the day of the accident, right around five o'clock, he's seen in the stolen Ford right next to Robert's truck."

"Robert has photos in his phone from that last day. He was standing next to his truck in a couple of them. That means...fuck, that means he might've captured a photo of Johnny. Robert had no idea the guy in the truck next to him was about to try and kill him."

"I'll need his phone. We'll search through it and see if we can find any more links." Annie stepped closer to Sam then pulled out a chair from the table. "Babe, sit down. I need you to listen, okay? Until this guy is found, I'm gonna stay here with you."

"You're staying *here*? Why would you do that? You have a home, with Marsha. Why would you stay here?" Sam asked then slumped in the old wooden chair.

"To protect you. Patterson could be anywhere right now. I can't risk having him in Covington with you here alone."

"I'm not alone. Mama's here."

“Sam, it’s best that I be here with you, just until—”

“What if you don’t find him right away? Does that mean you...move in here, that you stay here for weeks on end? What’s Mama gonna say to *that*?”

“Your mom knows I’m staying here, but she doesn’t know the real reason why. I told her my house is being renovated, and I need a place to stay for a couple weeks. Sam, I’m worried Patterson might come after you.”

Sam took another sip of Chardonnay, the taste of it souring in her mouth, but she poured more and drank another gulp. “A couple *weeks*? Annie, you don’t have to do this. Having you here seems kind of extreme. I mean, today at the hospital was just me being paranoid. I didn’t mean to scare you when I left all those messages.”

“Sam, you can’t say no to my plan. I’m here to make sure you’re okay, that you’re safe. With a squad car in the driveway when you’re here, Patterson will be less inclined to come anywhere near the house. Your mom or I will drive you to the hospital each morning, and I’ll pick you up in the evening.”

“Jeez, what am I, twelve? Annie, this is not necessary. I’m perfectly fine driving Mama’s old clunker to and from the hospital. I should be allowed to drive myself anywhere I please.”

“Sam, you’re not to be alone—not here, not on the drive to the hospital, not even if you go to the market.”

Sam knew that once Annie got an idea in her head, there was no talking her out of it. One thing Sam didn’t miss about Annie was her tenaciousness. But Sam knew it was unnecessary and ridiculous to have Annie staying here with her every night until Johnny was found. Leave it to Annie to suggest she guard her here at Mama’s house and have an escort to the hospital. The drives to and from the hospital were the only times she could be alone with her thoughts—to process whatever she saw at the hospital.

“Annie, it’s totally unnecessary for you to be here every single night,” Sam said, her voice tinged with frustration. “What if I want to go for a run or a bike ride?”

“Then I go with you.”

“Yeah, right. You can hardly handle fifteen minutes on the elliptical machine at the gym.”

“You’ll be happy to know I’m up to thirty minutes on the stationary bike. I should be able to pedal on a bike for an hour or so—far behind you,

I'm sure. But the point is, I won't let you out of my sight until Patterson is found and behind bars."

"You make me feel like I'm on restriction or something, like I'm in the witness protection program. Today I just got a little freaked out when I thought Pastor Dan was Johnny. Really, I'm fine. It'd be kind of weird having you stay with me. I mean, you've got a partner, and I've...well, I *think* I've got a girlfriend." Although the lines were now clear since their break-up, Sam knew how inappropriate it'd be to have Annie spending the night here—*every* night, sleeping in the same room and waking up together and sharing a pot of coffee and breakfast like they did years ago. But, even though she was thrilled to experience the newness of her relationship with Kim, she sometimes missed the stability she once had in a long-term relationship.

"Sam, look at it as a law enforcement agent making sure nothing happens to you as we continue to investigate the case."

"You really think he'd come after me? The newspaper articles described how the accident caused irreversible neurological damage to Robert. Isn't that enough payback for Johnny to...even the score, as he said? Why do you think he'd come after me?" Sam shuddered at the thought of Johnny coming after her again. Annie was right; maybe Johnny *would* come after her as well. Though the passion for Annie had mostly diminished since their break-up, Sam knew she'd find some comfort having her nearby.

"We can't be too sure with a guy like Patterson. If he tried to kill your brother, then there's no telling what else he'd do." Annie handed Sam a slice of French bread with a thick hunk of baked brie smeared on top. "Here, eat up. I'm sure you haven't had anything good in the hospital. I got that fig spread you like. It's there next to the other cheeses."

"This is a lot of food," Sam said. After she swallowed the bread and brie, she reached for a potsticker and took a giant bite, the savory juices exploding in her mouth. She dipped the other half in the sweet sauce and plopped it in her mouth.

The screen door creaked open as Sam's mother peeked her head through the opening. "Y'all look like you've got a nice spread of food here. Annie, honey, the pie is out of the oven. I've set it on the rack to cool. Ice cream's in the fridge if y'all want it a la mode."

"There's pie, too?" Sam drummed her hands on the table, which caused the silverware and glasses to rattle. By now the wine had made her more than tipsy, but she continued to take sips in between bites of food.

"I'm home for a couple days, and you two stuff me with food. What's this all about? Why the banquet of my favorite stuff?"

Jane eyed Annie then winked at her. "Samantha, you were at the hospital all day, and I don't doubt you'll do the same tomorrow and the day after. You deserve a nice night with Annie. Heck, even I know when it's time to take a break, especially after the great progress Robert made this past weekend. He's responding to stimuli. You saw how he tracked the therapist's finger with his eyes today."

"Well, yeah, only as she moved his head from side to side as the other therapist put her finger right in front of his face. They're practically doing the work for him."

"Samantha, that's how therapy works. They move his head and arms to do the work, and eventually his brain will catch up. They're retraining the neurons. Eventually things will click. It's still possible for him to grow new neural pathways. You have to trust the Lord as Robert's brain and body heal."

"Mama, there's been no significant change since Robert was moved from ICU. Doctor Savage today told me Robert hasn't made any progress, that he'll never be able to—" Sam stopped talking. It was futile trying to convince her mother of the harsh reality of Robert's prognosis.

"Honey, every little bit of change is progress. I sit there each day witnessing how God is watching over him. The Lord works in mysterious ways. Robert will be home soon."

Sam slumped forward and reached for a crab-stuffed mushroom then laughed. "Y'all are trying to make me fat. Is that the plan? There's enough food here for a huge party. Mama, you made pie? *Really*, what's going on?"

"You can't very well have a feast without your favorite pie."

"You made cherry pie with the crumble topping?"

"Just like you like it. Honey, I'm going in to watch my shows. I still haven't seen the first episode of this season's *Dancing with the Stars*. I Tivo'd that and *The Voice* last week but haven't had a chance to watch it yet. Now that Robert has shown some progress, I can relax and catch up on some television."

"You want some wine before you go inside?" Annie asked.

"Naw, I've got my drink poured inside already. Y'all enjoy yourselves out here. I picked up a shift at the hospital tomorrow, so I'll be on the road by six."

After Jane went back inside, Annie dragged a chair close to Sam and

reached for a hunk of bread. She smeared a layer of fig spread on the bread then set a wedge of baked brie on top. She closed her eyes and took a nibble then followed it with a sip of Chardonnay. "Sodium, carb, and cholesterol overload," Annie said with a mouthful. "Good thing I'm on Lipitor and going to the gym." She leaned forward, taking a thin piece of prosciutto and putting it into her mouth, followed by quiet moans with each chew. She waved a slice of thinly-cut ham in front of Sam's face. "Probably the best prosciutto I've ever had. Here, taste."

Sam took the meat into her mouth, her lips lingering on Annie's fingers. With the salty taste still fresh in her mouth, Sam needed more. She wanted to consume it all—the Gouda cheese, the pork dumplings, the mixed greens and balsamic salad, the crab-stuffed mushrooms. She sucked the blue cheese from an olive; then she savored melted brie and bread. Before she swallowed the cheese, she popped another olive in her mouth, the two flavors together causing her to want more. She stuffed heaps of food into her mouth—salad, stuffed mushrooms, French bread, potstickers. She hadn't eaten this much food in weeks. Be it stale sunflower seeds and Power Bars while guarding the beach or bland hospital food when visiting Robert, Sam hadn't felt full or satisfied in a long time.

Sam popped another mushroom in her mouth and savored the flavor explosion on her tongue. Then she took another sip of Rombauer, the creamy taste melting in her mouth. The wine and the exhaustion of sitting vigil in the hospital for so many hours caused Sam's muscles to weaken even more. "We could eat off this for days. So, if you *do* stay here—"

"Not if," Annie said and scooted closer as her knees brushed against Sam's thigh.

"Okay, well, I was going to say, maybe it's best we stay in the barn. It's more roomy in there...for the two of us. Will you have your gun with you at all times?"

"Yup, got my Glock on me now," she said and patted her right hip where she always kept her weapon when off duty. She topped off Sam's wine and poured herself more as well.

"What about Marsha? Is she in on your little plan to guard me?"

Annie studied the glass in her hand before responding. She cleared her throat and took another sip of Chardonnay. "I haven't told her all the details except to say I'm on assignment, so to speak. She knows I'm protecting you. I can't lie to her about that. She hasn't said much, but really, she has no choice but to let me do this."

After she took another sip of wine, Sam glanced at all the candles, touched that Annie had gone to so much trouble to surprise her with all of this. There must've been at least thirty candles displayed around the perimeter of the porch. "I always liked when I came home to this. You always knew how to make a bad day better. I sometimes...miss this sort of thing." She reached for a mushroom and plopped it in her mouth. She used her tongue to lick the crab from each and every crevice. With the wine in her system, she felt the muscles in her neck and shoulders melt. "But, Mississippi seems to suit you well. Secure job, stable relationship, a growing retirement account. What more could a woman ask for?"

Sam took another long gulp of Chardonnay then staggered over to the banister. She peered into the darkened yard—seeing nothing but the black shadows of trees and shrubs along the creek. She heard the trickle of water as it made its descent downstream.

"I guess Mississippi does suit me well, but...you know San Diego wasn't right for me," Annie said and approached the railing where Sam stood.

"What wasn't right for you? Did the perfect Southern California climate not suit you? Do you prefer the humid summers here in Southern Mississippi?" She waved an arm out toward the dark yard then took another sip of wine.

Annie stepped closer to Sam and gripped a hand on her shoulder. She took the glass from her and set it on the railing a couple feet away. "Sam, let's just enjoy the food, okay? You've had a rough day. I did all this to help you relax for once."

Sam faced Annie then rested her butt on the railing as she folded her arms and stared at the mound of food nearby. Sam felt herself getting more and more agitated. "What do you mean, *for once*? You think I'm tense? You think I don't know how to relax?"

"Babe, please. Let's just enjoy ourselves."

"I've had wine, I'm plenty relaxed. You got our favorite, Rommbauuuer," Sam said, her words slurring as the alcohol hit her even more. "I'm feeling pretty darned relaxed now. How about you? You liquored up enough to feel relaxed?"

"Sam, come on. How about we get some more food in you?"

"What's this all about anyway? You got my favorite foods. You brought over this bottle of Rombauer that you'd saved for weeks. What's going on? And what's with *babe*? I haven't been your babe since last year. You call Marsha babe? Or do you have some other pet name for her?"

Sweetheart? Darling? Or something a bit less tender for someone like Marsha?"

"For God's sake, Sam, what's gotten into you? You know Marsha and I are not...well, she's never been the romantic type. I guess I can't help it when I still call you babe. I never...well, if you really want to know the truth, I never stopped loving you when I left San Diego. But we both knew that breaking up was the right thing for both of us."

"I know, I know. There's no need to dredge up all of *that* again. We've both moved on. You're with Marsha now. You two are the epitome of true love, right? Besides, I'm dating around. Got myself a young hot one now. Anyway, we knew it was more practical for you to be back here. That's my Annie, practical as ever." Sam's head by now was spinning. She'd forgotten how strong Rombauer was. It always gave her a good buzz even before she finished her first serving. But her head was clear enough to take in what Annie had said—that she never stopped loving her. For a flash few seconds, Sam thought about how different her life might've been had Annie never left her, but just as fast as that thought entered her mind, reality set in when she thought about how she had a chance at something new and exciting with Kim.

"I guess if we're talking about all of this, I might as well say—"

"Annie, no need to bring up any of that old shit. We've moved on, right? We should be grateful it was such an amicable break-up. I always thought we were good at being exes."

"Yeah, that we are. Never had such a good ex relationship as this one. But Sam, I need to tell you something. See, when I moved back here, it wasn't just to be closer to my parents or to go back to the police department here. There was another reason I left San Diego. Well, the main reason why I left."

"Then, what? Why'd you leave sunny California? Do tell. Was it because of Marsha? You figured you'd have someone with a stable pension and enough income to make a house payment here instead of in San Diego? Was my lifeguarding income each summer not enough for me to contribute to our partnership?"

"I don't care about how much my partner makes. That never mattered to me. I love that you're a lifeguard. You're so...so passionate about it, and I've always loved that about you."

"Then what are you trying to say? Why'd you leave San Diego?"

"When I left you, I wasn't...fully honest with you, but I didn't exactly lie to you."

“Lieutenant Wright oughta know that not disclosing the full truth is the same as lying.” She gripped the banister, her knuckles whitening the more Annie talked.

“I didn’t want tonight to get like this. I hadn’t even intended to say any of this to you, but now that it’s out in the open, I might as well be honest with you. It’s about time we talked about this. In all the years we were together, it always seemed like...no matter how close we got physically, you always seemed miles away emotionally. Well, and even sometimes you pulled away physically.”

“What are you trying to say? Is Marsha your rock-solid partner? You two having mind-blowing sex every night of the week? Is she your dream woman?”

“No, she’s not. Far from it. But she’s genuine. She never hides what she’s feeling. Shit, at least she *knows* what she’s feeling, but I need to tell you that Marsha and I aren’t exactly –”

“You’re saying I don’t know what I’m feeling? Did I not sob in your arms that morning on the bridge where Robert’s truck went into the river? Do you not recall that you held me as I cried that one night when –”

“Sam, with all that’s happened to Robert, I see that you’re upset, you’re sad, you’re angry. I see that. But, with us, it was an intimacy thing.”

“Seriously? You’re bringing that up *now*? With my brother in the hospital barely alive, you’re gonna bring up our sex life?”

“I don’t just mean sex. I mean, intimacy. Real close, loving intimacy.”

“So, Marsha provides that for you. I get it.”

“Forget I brought any of this up. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Too late to take it back, don’t you think? Go ahead, say what you want to say. Tell me all about my intimacy issues.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it intimacy issues.”

“For God’s sake, Annie. Just now you told me that it was an intimacy thing. How is that not an intimacy issue?” Sam couldn’t believe Annie was bringing all of this up right now – tonight, of all nights.

“This is going to sound wild, but I actually feel closer to you *now* than I ever did when we were a couple. Robert’s accident has...well, it’s opened you up in ways I never saw before. When we were together, it’s like you always kind of kept me at arm’s length. But, I think I get it. Things are making sense now.”

“Well, you always were great at detective work. Lieutenant Wright, doing her job as usual.”

"Just hear me out, okay? I'm starting to comprehend what that eight-year-old Sam experienced back then with those men. It all started to make sense a few days ago when I first started digging around to find out what happened, but what you told me helps me understand you more."

"There you go again, figuring things out as usual. That's my Annie, able to profile me even when off duty. Maybe you'll get promoted to captain soon enough."

"Sam, I just care about you is all. You experienced a traumatic event and haven't ever really dealt with it. Maybe if you –"

"Annie, I get it. What you've told me tonight has been pretty enlightening. You didn't leave San Diego because you hadn't advanced in the police department there or to be here to take care of your parents. You left *me*. You left me because I couldn't –"

"It was wrong of me to not be totally honest with you as to why I left you, but after we broke up, I guess I always sort of hoped you'd become more...well, more intimate on a deeper level. You started to see that psychiatrist, but I think it was only to get your meds filled. Might help for you to talk to someone about all this. Maybe see a therapist? It might be healthy for you to work through some things."

Sam shook her head and glanced over at her glass of wine sitting on the banister. If she hadn't ever told Annie about the details of what the Patterson brothers did to her, why would she tell it to a therapist—some stranger who was getting paid a hundred and fifty bucks an hour to sit there and listen to patients dredge up shit from the past? Sam didn't want to talk about any of this, but she couldn't get around avoiding Annie's interrogating questions. Frustrated and exhausted, Sam closed her eyes for a moment and tried to find the words to appease Annie. "Work through what?" she finally said and waved her arms in the air. "My lack of intimacy with you?"

"I didn't say *lack* of intimacy. I just mean, you only went so far emotionally when we were...together."

Sam recalled the time she was with Kim and how the sex got hot and heavy—way sexier than she'd ever experienced with Annie. She wouldn't necessarily call it making love, but their time together was definitely intimate. Sam couldn't get enough of Kim that night. She wanted to explore every inch of her with her hands and her lips. She wanted to taste her and feel her bare skin against hers. But here she was, miles away in Mississippi with her ex while Kim was preparing to drive up to Mammoth for the hundred miler with Adrianna and a bunch of other fit, young

women.

"Annie, it's kinda weird to bring up all this stuff from the past, don't you think? We're friends now. Good friends. It's interesting to hear you tell me why you left San Diego. I mean, the real reason, but...why bring it up now?"

Annie stepped closer to Sam and clutched her hand around her wrist. "I feel like you need to work through the trauma you experienced when you were a kid. That innocent little girl couldn't...fight back when Fred, Chuck, and Johnny assaulted her."

Sam's body went rigid at the mention of those three names. She felt in her pocket for one of her pills, but she remembered she'd left the bottle in her backpack. By now she was trembling. All she wanted to do right now was finish that wine, go inside, and watch TV with Mama—and not talk about any of this.

Annie stepped closer to Sam. "It's obvious what those men did to you. Sam, honey, I've worked with enough sexual assault victims to recognize—"

"Annie, they didn't...actually assault me. It's not like I was...raped."

"I don't know exactly what happened, but I know you were violated in some way."

"Is it that obvious? Am I damaged goods to you?"

"Sam, you are *not* damaged goods," Annie said and took Sam's hand. "Far from it. You're one of the most special people I know. I knew this right when I met you."

Sam released her hand from Annie's and pressed her palms on the banister as she faced the dark yard. A cool autumn breeze chilled her skin, causing her to shiver. The faces of those three men flashed in her mind—the images she worked hard at erasing all these years now appearing so vividly to her.

"I know if Robert hadn't...well, if he hadn't saved me," Sam said quietly and trembled, "I'm not sure I'd still be here to talk about this with you. Those men were so creepy, especially Fred. He was the one who...pulled off my underwear." She heard Annie gasp quietly when she said this. The words exited Sam's mouth in a monotone voice, as if she were reading a script. "They each touched me but not in any sort of violating way. Johnny ran a finger along my chest, and Chuck put his hand on my leg up by my knee. Chuck at one point touched the front of my dress...down by my crotch. That's all they did. Not all that violating, really."

"Sam, you were only eight. They were grown men, strangers. *Any* touching was inappropriate. I know you don't want to acknowledge that they...violated you, but they did. You were a helpless child."

"Robert protected me from Chuck, that's for sure, but then when Fred was...on top of me—"

"Oh, my God. Those men were monsters. Robert had every right to do what he did. I'm surprised he didn't...kill the others."

"When Fred was on top of me, that's when someone shot and killed him. I'm sure Johnny would have...violated me, but the gunshots were enough to scare him off. Annie, that was a long time ago. In my own way, I've learned to live with the trauma. I'm an adult, not some helpless little kid. You do your work and get that asshole behind bars, and all of this will once and for all be behind me." Sam reached for her wine then stepped toward the table and glanced at the surplus of food.

"I've always felt protective of you," Annie said. "Even when we first met, I had this overwhelming need to protect you. I still feel that way, even now as you're telling me about what they did to you."

"Annie, please, I don't want to talk about this anymore, okay? Just let it go, will ya?"

"Babe, I'm just trying to—"

"I know you mean well, but *please*, just leave it for now. Sometimes you...well, you over-talk things. I get that you care about me, but right now I'd just like to enjoy this food." Sam took a fork and stabbed a piece of prosciutto, the salty taste melting in her mouth. Then she savored a mouthful of brie and followed that with another sip of wine. "You did well tonight...with all this food. I'm glad you're with me right now...and that you'll be staying here for a while. I guess I really don't mind that you're so protective of me. It's something I missed right away after we broke up. After you left San Diego, I learned to move on because I figured it was best for both of us. To get through the break-up, I even reasoned that you being thirteen years older would have never worked out in the long run."

"Hey now, throwing out the age card, are you?" Annie said and laughed as she chewed on an olive. "Well, twelve years and ten months older if you want to get technical."

"Heck, you'll probably be retiring from the police department just as I'm graduating from medical school or...being promoted to top lieutenant for the San Diego Lifeguards."

"Then you *could* have supported me in my retirement years. A doctor's

wife. Now, that would've been nice. Or the wife of the head of the San Diego Lifeguards."

"Wife? That boat sailed a long time ago when you left San Diego." Sam paced to the other end of the porch and listened to the slow trickle of water from the creek. She thrummed her fingers on the railing and took a deep breath and felt her body finally relaxing. "We're fighting like an old married couple."

"Old? Forty-five is hardly old. And married? You said that ship sailed a long time ago. Well, I know we can't kiss and make up like old times, but how about we hug and make up?"

"You sure know how to kill a girl's buzz." Sam pressed her body against Annie's and felt the hard bulge of Annie's pistol against her hip—the weapon a stark reminder of her proposal to protect her until Johnny was found. "You know, I don't mind that you still call me babe. Always did like the sound of that. Just don't ever let Marsha hear you call me that."

"Sam, she and I are not...well, not exactly together," Annie said and pulled away from the hug. "We live together, and I suppose we're not *completely* broken up. But in my heart, it's over. Hell, it was over when we were young. It was ridiculous that we felt we could rekindle any sort of romance twenty years later."

"So, you being here protecting me probably isn't all that upsetting to her?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but like I said, she has no say in this matter."

"You know, if you'd asked me to marry you years ago, I might've said yes." Sam laughed then pushed herself away from the railing and took another sip of Chardonnay.

"What do you mean, you *might* have said yes? I would've proposed in style. Maybe a walk on the beach at sunset, the ring in my pocket, rose petals strewn across the sand, 'I love you, Sam' written in the sand."

"You had me up until the rose petals." Sam laughed and slumped in the old wooden chair. Before saying anything else, she considered what Annie had just said, but she quickly thought about how rational she got after their break-up, how she continually justified that the huge age difference would only become more of a problem had they stayed together. Grateful they'd had such an amicable break-up, Sam realized right now that having Annie here with her overnight might not be such a bad thing. She suddenly felt more relaxed than she had in days. "We're

quite the pair, huh? Sucks that my past has crept back to me. I'm sorry that what happened years ago affected us when we were together. I hate that we're even having to talk about...what happened."

"You are who you are *because* of your past. I was drawn to you right away. I cherish the years we were together." Annie stood behind Sam and wrapped an arm around her chest.

Sam gripped Annie's hand and pulled her other arm around her. They remained silent for a couple moments while Sam sorted out the images in her head—the words remaining lodged in a place she hadn't visited in years. Annie gently rocked Sam and held her tighter. The familiarity of Annie's body soothed Sam, making her feel relaxed and safe.

Sam finally pulled away from Annie's embrace, and said, "At school, they have a counseling center. It's free for students. I might go once I'm back home. With all that's going on with Robert, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to talk about it. The last few weeks have been such a nightmare... Thank you for going to such trouble to put this together. Too bad you didn't get *two* bottles of Rombauer."

"It wasn't that much trouble. Remember, Mama helped. You know me. I make reservations, not dinner. There's actually another bottle of wine in the fridge. Not Rombauer but another decent brand. I figured I'd bring enough wine for a few days." Annie sat in the chair next to Sam and poured more Chardonnay for both of them.

"At the rate we're going, we might go right through that second bottle tonight. This really is all so perfect. The wine, candles, cheese, potstickers, everything. And, you here with me. I guess I do feel safer having a lieutenant in the house again. You brought your uniform, right?"

"It's in the squad car. I can put it on later if you'd like." Annie cocked her head and smirked. "You mean so I can be seen as a deterrent to Patterson, right?"

"Yeah, something like that." Sam took another gulp of wine then tossed one more olive in her mouth—the salty flavor exploding on her tongue. She stared at the golden liquid in her glass and took another sip. As she lifted her body from the table, she felt weak in the knees. She staggered over to the railing and inhaled the damp air. From the porch, she felt the cool air wafting up from the creek.

"I miss Robert," Sam said quietly. Once those words exited her mouth, tears seeped from her eyes. Annie was up and by her side within seconds.

"I know, babe," Annie whispered and held her in her arms. "Robert has always been there for you. He doesn't deserve this. He shouldn't have

to suffer like this.”

Sam buried her face in Annie’s neck and relaxed her body. She felt Annie’s hands drawing her closer. The tears soon turned into deep, wrenching sobs. For the first time since Robert’s accident, Sam didn’t hold back. She allowed herself to acknowledge that her brother would never come out of this.

Annie cupped her hands on Sam’s face and gazed into her eyes. “I promise Johnny will pay for what he did to Robert. Nothing is gonna happen to you with me here. Johnny won’t ever hurt you again.”

Sam closed her eyes and tried to force those awful images of Johnny and his brothers from her mind. Dizzy from the wine, she relaxed her body into Annie’s. She rested her cheek against Annie’s shoulder and felt the tension in her neck melt away. She wouldn’t need Xanax tonight – not with wine, cherry pie, her own private security guard, and Annie’s endless embraces.

Chapter Twenty-one

Mississippi: Autumn, 2014

BRIGHT RAYS OF light filtered onto the bed. Not sure whether this was the first hints of dawn strobing into the room or the glare from a light she might've left on overnight, Sam peeked through sleepy eyes to get a sense of the time. She hadn't slept through the night in weeks. As she lay on her side, she noticed golden streaks of sunlight shining through the windows. She'd somehow slept past seven. On shelves at the other end of the barn, several glass enclosures kept the snakes secure—far enough away for Sam to not have to see them. The air in the room chilled her exposed face, but she was too sleepy to get up to turn on the heater. She pulled the down comforter up to her chin and snuggled close to the warm body behind her.

As sleepiness overcame her again, Sam forced her eyes open and tried to get her bearings. Her head ached, and her vision remained hazy. She scanned the room to notice a police uniform draped over the couch and an empty bottle of wine sitting on its side on the hardwood floor next to the bed. After she caught a glimpse of the bottle, Sam recalled drinking more Chardonnay once she and Annie moved to the barn after finishing most of the food on the porch last night. It'd been so long since she'd shared a couple bottles of wine with a woman and devoured heaps of delicious food. But this was Annie, not the young woman she was dating back in San Diego. It was one thing to have Lieutenant Annie Wright staying with her to protect her until they found Johnny—but this was her ex snuggled closely in bed next to her.

But with the air so cold, Sam made no movements to get out of bed. The warmth from Annie's slumbering body kept her from being too chilled. She nuzzled closer to Annie; she felt her full breasts through the thin T-shirt against her back. A warmth coursed through Sam's body. In all their years together, even after the frequency of sex had diminished, Sam and Annie would always wake up this way. Back then, they slept naked. Each morning, the feel of Annie's breasts against her back in the mornings always soothed her and made her melt with desire.

Right now, that familiar hunger washed over her, surprising her and

scaring her a little. But Sam knew she wouldn't succumb to this passion—for it was just the old memories of how she'd once felt about Annie long ago. She understood the lines were clear: they were exes who'd moved smoothly from partners to close friends. But with the barn so chilly, Sam had no desire to move away from Annie's warm body spooned behind her.

Annie stirred and gripped her hand on Sam's hip bone. "Mmm, it's nice and warm under the covers." Annie's hand slid down Sam's thigh, then along the front of her tight quad. "God, you feel so good. I'd forgotten what it was like to wake up next to such a hot woman. I could stay like this all morning...but, I should probably get out of bed."

"No, stay and keep me warm a little while longer," Sam whispered and relaxed her shoulders against Annie's chest and arms.

Annie snuggled closer—her breath on Sam's neck sending chills down her spine. As she breathed in Annie's familiar scent, a warmth radiated through her body, moving from deep inside her chest and down through her abdomen. This surprised her, for she hadn't felt this way about Annie even during their last couple years together. She nestled her body closer to Annie's chest and felt her hard nipples through the thin T-shirt against her back—the sensation causing her to melt.

Sam closed her eyes and set her hand on the back of Annie's, guiding it to her inner thigh. Annie held Sam tightly, their bodies pressed so close together that their legs and hips moved in unison. Annie's hand traveled to Sam's lower abs, her thumb reaching under the T-shirt and lightly brushing the soft skin above her bellybutton. The tips of Annie's fingertips tickled Sam's lower abs, causing her to shudder. She felt the heat surge through her body and travel down between her legs. She let out a low, quiet moan and relaxed into Annie. Sam felt herself getting more and more wet. The memory of their naked bodies pressed together as in years past caused Sam to ache with an arousal she hadn't felt in a long time.

When Sam scooted back to get closer to Annie, she heard a hard pounding on the door. Sam's eyes flashed open; her body went rigid. Another loud rap jolted her to reality. The knock was followed by the muffled sound of her mother's voice, telling them she'd left the coffee pot on and a plate of blueberry scones out for them.

"Okay, Mama!" Sam yelled from under the covers then moved Annie's hand back to her hip. "Thanks, we'll be sure and get some in a bit."

"I switched shifts at the hospital," Jane said through the door.

Sam waited for her mom to say more. It was so quiet that she could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall and the sloshing creek nearby. By now the room was bright—the morning sunlight blinding her through the windows.

“I’m working graveyard,” Jane finally said. “This way I can see Robert before I go to work. I’m heading over there now. Y’all enjoy some breakfast before you leave for the day.”

“Sure thing, Mama.” Sam listened for the Buick to start and then relaxed once she knew her mother was gone.

Annie moved her hand away from Sam’s hip and stretched out on her back. Likewise, Sam lay back and stared at the ceiling. She thought about what had almost happened then quickly recalled what Annie told her last night—about how she and Marsha weren’t fully broken up. In all the years Sam had been involved with women, not once did she cross any lines. Also, the stark awareness that she pretty much had a girlfriend back in San Diego (or at least the start of something) halted the desire for Annie. She realized their bodies had moved together as they had years ago—the passion due more so to memory than anything else.

Annie scooted to the foot of the bed and patted Sam’s foot through the covers. “We should...probably get up. I need to head over to the nursing home to speak with Virginia Patterson. You up for coming with me? It’d be great if you could be there when I ask her a few questions.” Annie sounded so chipper, eager to start the day.

And just like that, Sam was wide awake and chilled once Annie got out of bed. She pulled the comforter up to her face and watched Annie gather her things and head to the bathroom. After she heard the shower start, Sam lay back and stared at the tall, vaulted ceiling overhead. She couldn’t ignore the heat that continued to travel through her body or the realization that she hadn’t felt such an intensity of passion in a long time—not since the last time she and Annie made love. Even though Annie’s soft touches this morning lasted but a mere few moments, the sensation still caused Sam to long for more. Though it’d been a while since they’d been intimate, Sam often recalled how connected she once felt to Annie when they made love, how their bodies at one time felt as one.

When she heard Annie moving about in the bathroom, Sam pushed back those old memories then sat up and checked her phone—only to see no new messages from Kim. By now, they were probably already on the trail and out of cell service. She scrolled through her inbox. No e-mail, not even a Facebook message from Kim to let her know they’d arrived at the

hotel. They'd be reaching the summit soon.

In case Kim might hit an area where she'd get cell service on the mountain, Sam tapped out a short message and added a winky emoticon and an XOXO at the end of the text. Then she searched her emojis to find the bike and mountain symbols. She also added a few more emojis: a tree, some flowers, a sun, and a yellow heart. That choice of color for a heart surely wouldn't be construed as love or anything overly romantic. She even sometimes sent a yellow heart at the end of her texts to her mom or to Travis. At this point, she was just dating Kim and didn't feel anything more than an intense attraction for her young, fit body. But maybe any colored heart would be too suggestive. Sam stared at the text for a few seconds then heard Annie exiting the bathroom.

About to hit send, Sam backspaced and deleted most of the emojis and simply left it at:

Hope the ride up the mountain goes/went well! Miss you!

But then she changed those last two words to:

Can't wait till I can do a 100-miler one day!

Then she hit send. Even though Kim was so many miles away, Sam realized she didn't miss her. Not one bit. Maybe in time, after she went on a few more dates with her, after she developed more than an intense attraction for her, Sam could maybe love Kim as much as she once loved Annie.

Chapter Twenty-two

Mississippi: Autumn 2014

SAM AND ANNIE pushed through the heavy doors of the nursing home—the lobby brightly lit and stuffy. Faded plastic pink and yellow roses dangled from a gazebo in the entryway; an ornate chandelier hung from the ceiling. Near the front counter, elderly residents sat slumped in their wheelchairs or shuffled down the corridor with their walkers. Many of them stared at Sam as she and Annie meandered down the wide hallway. Despite this being her day off, Annie wore her uniform and carried a thick leather folder with the police department insignia emblazoned on the front. In all the years she and Annie were together, Sam always wanted to somehow help with one of Annie’s investigations. But their purpose in the nursing home this morning was nothing Sam ever imagined happening.

Once they rounded the corner, Sam and Annie located Old Miss Patterson’s room. After she rapped softly on the door, Annie stepped close to the bed. Sam lingered in the doorway and glanced at the old woman she’d always feared when she was a child.

“Virginia Patterson?” Annie said and jiggled her shoulder gently. “I’m Lieutenant Wright from the police department. Can I ask you a few questions?”

Sam approached the window—the curtains partially closed, casting dark shadows into the room. The stench of urine permeated the air. The bed next to Miss Patterson’s was empty, and from the looks of it, no one occupied that side of the room. Sam leaned against the wall, folded her arms, and heard Annie repeat her last question.

“Lieutenant White?” Miss Patterson asked and rolled her head from side to side.

“It’s Wright, but you can call me Annie.” Annie dragged a chair over to sit beside the bed. “I’d like to ask you a few questions about your nephew, Jonathan Patterson. Can you hear me okay, Virginia? Is it okay for me to call you that?”

Miss Patterson opened her eyes and glared at Annie then glimpsed at Sam over by the window. “Haven’t gone by Virginia since I was a child.

Been going by Ginnie ever since I turned thirteen.”

“Okay, then, Ginnie it is. I’ve got someone here you might remember: Sam Cleveland. She lived near you on the other side of the creek.”

“The creek? You mean the Okatoma?” Ginnie asked, her voice hoarse and raspy.

“She might remember me as Samantha,” Sam said, her words curt. She stepped closer to the bed and forced a smile. When she peered down at the old woman lying under a heap of sheets and blankets, she noticed her pale and wrinkled face. Years ago, Sam had only seen Miss Patterson from afar, but up close and bedridden, the old woman seemed completely harmless. Sam relaxed a bit and then said quietly, “I was the skinny kid who lived across from your house. My brother used to swim to your side of the creek.”

“The boy that always tromped through my garden?”

Sam strained to hear Miss Patterson’s hoarse voice, so she stood at the foot of the bed. “Yeah, Robert always did get himself into trouble whenever he’d –”

“Never could keep him from stepping foot on my property. Even when Robert was all grown up, he still stomped through all my plants. Come here, child. Can’t see you so far away.”

Sam stepped to the side of the bed and took the chair that Annie vacated. The room lacked ventilation, causing Sam to feel like she couldn’t catch her breath. Her head throbbed – the pain radiating from the base of her skull all the way to her forehead. Ginnie coughed and stared intently at Sam. Both Annie and Sam remained quiet for a moment. Sam leaned in closer, noticing the pearl-like layer over her eyes. When Stanley was old and in the last years of his life, he had the same sort of cloudy vision – cataracts, which caused the old dog to bump into walls and not recognize anyone unless they spoke before approaching him. Ginnie’s opaque eyes were foggy and unfocused, but she stared in Sam’s direction and smiled.

The smile took Sam by surprise. “Lieutenant Wright has a few questions to ask you about your nephew, Jonathan.” Sam’s body tensed when she said that name.

Ginnie pursed her lips and mumbled a few indecipherable words. Then she stammered something else, her voice so raspy.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t quite understand what you said,” Annie said and stood behind Sam.

“I haven’t seen...that man in years,” Ginnie said. “Told him to stay off of...off my property long ago.” Ginnie’s legs flailed under the covers, her

entire body writhing. She pulled her thin arms from under the cover—her hands and wrists veiny. She clenched both hands and shook her head. “He and his no-good brothers can rot in hell far as I’m concerned.”

Sam studied Ginnie, her frail body nothing but skin and bones. The woman that lived across the creek who she’d abhorred as a child now appeared so childlike and harmless—nothing like the crotchety old woman Sam remembered years ago.

“When was the last time you saw Jonathan?” Annie asked and set her hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Any word from him recently? Any idea where he might be?”

“Summer of 1990 was the last I saw of those three men. They always up to no good. All three of them done time in jail. Would’ve been best if they’d kept those men behind bars. Only one still alive is Johnny, and he’s still up to no good. An officer told me he done stole my truck a few weeks ago. Now, what kind of man steals his aunt’s truck?”

A surge of nausea caused Sam to lean forward and take a breath that caught short in her chest. She felt like she might throw up, but she reminded herself that with Annie right behind her, she’d be okay.

Annie gently rubbed Sam’s back then continued to question Miss Patterson. “Ginnie, has Johnny been here to see you? Has he called? Do you know where he’s—”

“That man knows not to step foot anywhere near me ever again. I done make that clear years ago. He knows what I’m capable of doing. That man is nothing but evil.” Ginnie closed her eyes, her breath labored and her brow furrowed.

“Ginnie, we’ll leave you be for now,” Annie said and glanced at Sam. “How about I come back tomorrow to talk with you some more? Is that okay?”

Sam went to the doorway and peered down the stark hallway. She should have gone straight to the hospital with her mother, should have been by Robert’s side and been there to monitor his care. It didn’t make sense for her to be at the nursing home right now, didn’t help that she was here questioning this old woman.

“Where’s that girl?” Ginnie asked. “Whatever happened to her?”

“What girl?” Annie asked.

“That girl my nephews almost got their hands on.” Ginnie rolled her head from side to side, staring at the ceiling. Her body went rigid and her face contorted. “Nothing but evil in those three men, nothing but the devil in their blood!” The same angry tone Old Miss Patterson used years ago

now tinged her words as her lips pursed and a frown formed.

Sam stepped closer to the bed and studied Ginnie's face, the skin lined with wrinkles. In all the years she'd lived just yards across the creek from her, she'd never actually seen her close enough to notice her oval face or the deep brown eyes. So close to her now, Sam noticed how frail Miss Patterson looked – nothing like the mean woman across the creek that she feared for so many years.

"Do you mean Sam, the girl who lived across the creek?" Annie asked. "She's right here. She's a beautiful grown woman now. She came with me to see you today."

Ginnie squinted at Annie then studied her uniform. "You're a police officer? Why you in my room?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Lieutenant Wright. I came to ask you a few questions about your nephew, Jonathan Patterson. How about I come back another day? We'll let you get some rest."

"I can come back, too," Sam said loudly.

"Come closer," Ginnie said and turned her face upward. "My eyesight's not so good. Come closer so I can see your face."

Sam scooted nearer to Ginnie and moved her face close to Ginnie's. She stood there while Ginnie studied her for a moment. So near to her, Sam grew uncomfortable when she smelled the sour breath coming from her.

Ginnie set a palm on Sam's cheek as tears filled her eyes. "Child, I tried to prevent that evil from ever getting to you. Afraid it was too late. Always made sure you never came near my house since my nephews always stopped by unannounced to ransack my house and drink my beer, but they done got ahold of you anyway. They shoulda never set a hand on you."

"Ginnie, did you see what happened that day?" Annie asked.

"Annie, Miss Patterson isn't in any condition to –"

"No man has a right to set a hand on a small child like that." Ginnie struggled to sit up but slumped back into the pillow and stared at Sam. "I shoulda called the police and not done what I done, but I knew it'd be too late if I waited for the police to get there." When Ginnie's eyes closed, she again started to snore lightly. Her body relaxed, her breaths leveling out as her snoring became steady.

"Ginnie," Annie said and pressed her hand on her shoulder. "Tell us...what you did."

Ginnie's eyes flashed open, and she stared at Annie then said, "I did

what I had to do. I never hesitated to pull the trigger and put a stop to what he was about to do to her. A woman has a gun in the house for a reason."

"A hunting rifle," Sam said under her breath.

Annie huffed out a loud sigh as she moved to the foot of the bed and then stared at Ginnie for a moment. She glanced at Sam who sat there stunned and without words.

Annie said, "Ginnie, we'll leave you alone soon, but how about you tell us more about Jonathan. Anything else you want to tell us? Any idea where he is?"

Ginnie stared at Sam and struggled to grab her hand. "I don't regret what I done, but...I wish I'd killed all three of them that day...but that boy seemed to do just fine with that shovel."

"That boy? You mean Robert?" Annie asked quietly. "What are you trying to tell us? What do you mean by a shovel?"

"Annie, that's enough. Ginnie's had enough of your questioning." Sam's words sputtered out of her mouth; she averted her eyes from Annie and rocked forward. She clenched her hand over Old Miss Patterson's who in turn squeezed hers tighter than she thought an old, frail woman like her could do.

"Robert done got him good," Ginnie said and shifted her head on the pillow. "Didn't think a boy his age had the sort of strength to beat a man to death. I read about it in the paper a few weeks later that Chuck had been bludgeoned to death. Seems a fitting way for him to die. I tell ya, Chuck had it coming. I seen what he was capable of. He had his way with me a few times."

"Oh, my God," Sam said and cupped both hands around Ginnie's.

"No way I could fight him off. A man with that sort of strength can do just about anything he wants with a woman. Or a small girl like you. All three of those men are evil. All of them done took after the oldest one, Chuck."

"Those fucking monsters," Annie said quietly through gritted teeth.

"Nothing I could do but just stay quiet," Ginnie said quietly. "A man sometimes has a way of making a woman afraid to speak up. Chuck threatened me on more than one occasion, said he'd kill me if I ever told anyone. Sometimes you have to take the law into your own hands, is what I always say. I knew Fred would've had his way with you if I hadn't stopped him. Well, and Johnny, too."

A chill went through Sam's body. Annie embraced Sam from behind,

wrapping her arms securely around her. Sam gasped for air. The day she tried hard to erase from her memory came back to her with full force. She vividly recalled the piercing sound of rounds being fired from across the Okatoma – the gunshots that saved her life.

Chapter Twenty-three

Mississippi: Winter 1990

SAM SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the plush carpet in Robert's room and played with his new Lego set. He'd only gotten so far as to take the pieces out of the box but never actually built anything yet. Stanley paced back and forth in the bedroom. He'd grown tall in the past three months since they got him. Oafish for a chocolate lab, Stanley sniffed around Robert's closet, his long tail bopping Sam's arm and causing the Lego piece in her hand to fall inside the castle she was building. Sam had already taught Stanley to fetch and to sit, but he didn't know how to control his tail.

The Cleveland kids still had one more week of winter break before they had to go back to school. Sam and Robert got new bikes for Christmas this year, but they both opted to remain inside on most days. Even though Harold told the kids a few weeks ago that the police had deemed the area along the creek safe, Sam preferred to stay near the house.

After Sam reached inside the castle to retrieve the Lego piece, she snapped it onto the top of the tower. She used up all her own Lego pieces to construct the castle, but the extra pieces that Robert got in his new set for Christmas could be used to build a wall around the tall fortress. Stanley nuzzled his head on Sam's arm as she fit two more pieces together until the castle was tall and sturdy. Next, she lined a few blue pieces all around the perimeter. She continued to do this until a huge circle was formed around the fortress. She snapped a couple more Legos together until she had a low interlocking wall around the entire premises. Later this afternoon she'd find some foliage from the yard to create a forest where she imagined knights in shining armor protecting the castle. She'd make sure Robert came with her so he could help her get the best and most lush branches. She wouldn't have to go far—definitely staying close to the house and not having to go anywhere near the creek.

Nearby, Robert flipped through photos of reptiles he'd taken in Mr. Rizzo's shop. He set the pictures on the floor and created three separate piles. Robert retrieved a big photo album from the shelf behind him and flipped to the back where he slipped the photos under the clear plastic

sheet. He swiped his hand over the page and then admired each photo one more time before setting the album back on the shelf. For the holidays, Rizzo's Reptiles had stocked up on iguanas and chameleons. Robert was constantly studying the varying scale patterns on all of the reptiles. Mama and Daddy had finally agreed that Robert could have an iguana as a pet and arranged to have Mr. Rizzo pick out one he saw most fitting for Robert to have. Because Sam was too creeped out to touch Houdini's crusty skin, Robert always kept a makeshift shelter in his bedroom for the lizard. At night, he kept Houdini locked and secured in a cage, but on days like this he let the creature roam about in his room. However, whenever Sam was in the room, Robert always erected a cardboard barrier between her and Houdini.

Sam scooted back to get a better view of the castle. Stanley sniffed around the perimeter of the cardboard wall, but the closer he got to where Houdini lay under the heat lamp, the more he whined and pawed at the makeshift barrier.

"No-no, Stanley," Sam said and crawled back farther to admire her Lego structure. She scooted back so far that she bumped into Robert's old guitar propped against the wall. A thick coat of dust covered the guitar, which Robert hadn't played in months. The strings were rusted, the instrument having been out of tune for a long time now. Sam hadn't heard Robert's deep baritone voice or the lull of his guitar since right before school started this year.

She sat on her knees and plucked one of the strings, the blip of music sounding hollow in the quiet room. Stanley sat next to her and cocked his head then slobbered his wet tongue on Sam's face. She shoved him away then tugged on another string, the sound of the note echoing in the bedroom. With the tips of her fingers, she strummed all of the strings in one quick thrum. Then she brushed her thumb over each string, plucking out six melodic notes as she tried to remember the words to that one song Robert had rewritten for church, something about the seasons turning or changing. He'd sung it over and over so many times at home and then performed it in front of the whole congregation that one time. Pastor Dan praised him for his clever revisions of Ecclesiastes.

Sam again thrummed the strings and tried as best she could to match the chord she'd created. She sang in her timid voice, the words so faint only she could hear them. "To every —"

"Sam, leave that alone. Don't go touching things that aren't yours."

"You let me play with your Legos." Sam set the guitar against the wall

then crouched down next to the castle and snapped another piece onto the wall. She reached into the box to retrieve more Legos then fit each piece atop one another until the wall had become a few inches tall.

“That’s because I pretty much *gave* you the Lego set. Grandma and Grandpa should’ve known I don’t play with stupid toys like that anymore. Jeez, they treat me like a kid.”

“But you still play with Transformers. Well, if you don’t want your Legos, then does that mean I can have *all* the things you no longer play with? You never play your guitar anymore, so why can’t I—”

“That’s different. You’re likely to go and scratch it or something. Besides, it was Dad’s before he gave it to me.” Robert opened the closet and pulled out the guitar case and then gently set the guitar inside the velvet-lined compartment. He snapped it shut and set the guitar way in the back corner of the closet.

Sam jiggled the box of extra Lego pieces to try and find more red ones for the top rim of the wall. A solid blue wall would be too ordinary and unimpressive. Maybe Robert would let her use his Transformers as guards to protect the fortress. The circumference of the wall surrounding the castle was huge—at least as far as how big a monument like this could be built using a couple giant sets of Legos.

Robert stood up, towering over Sam and her creation, then shook his head. “That castle is taking up too much room.” Robert stepped to the cardboard partition and reached in to retrieve Houdini. With the iguana cradled in his arms, Robert paced back to the castle. “Houdini won’t be able to roam around my room if that huge thing is in here. How’re you gonna move that castle to your room?”

“Why can’t I keep it here?” Sam slumped on the floor next to the castle and continued to add more Lego pieces to the tall tower.

Several weeks ago, Sam had started to sleep in Robert’s bed—so long as Houdini was safely secured in his cage. Frequent nightmares caused her to trot from her bed and down the hall to Robert’s room where he’d scoot over to let her crawl in bed with him and then cover her with an extra afghan Mama always kept at the foot of the bed. Early in the morning Sam would sneak back to her bed before her parents were awake. On mornings when Daddy worked early, Sam would be careful to rise before the sun came up and go back to her room.

Sam didn’t see a need to move the castle and its surrounding wall to her room if she’d end up sneaking into Robert’s bed again tonight. She stared at the fortress, which indeed had taken up a large portion of

Robert's bedroom. Stanley stood next to her and panted, his warm breath blowing right onto Sam's face. She attempted to nudge him away from the castle, but he instead pounced on the blue Lego wall, knocking off a couple pieces from the top rim of the fortress. In addition to not being able to control his tail, Stanley also couldn't control his big, clumsy feet. Sam gripped her fingers around his collar and tugged until he stood still, but his tail swayed back and forth while he whined. Too strong for Sam to control, Stanley broke free from her grip and pranced over to Robert who lifted a knee to prevent him from jumping up and scratching Houdini.

"Maybe your castle needs a dragon, something to guard it from intruders." Robert stepped so close to the castle that he practically knocked it over with his big feet. He bent down and placed Houdini right inside the wall then snorted out a loud laugh.

"Robby, knock it off!" Sam squealed then started to cry. "He'll ruin it. His big stupid tail will knock down the whole wall. Get him out of there. Put him in his cage and then come help me find some branches that I can make into trees for outside the castle."

Robert snickered again then reached in to remove Houdini from the castle. "Sam, he's not gonna bite you. Just touch the soft spot on the side of his neck. It's not as rough as you think. If you touch his skin, I'll go help you trim some branches for your forest."

Sam shook her head and folded her arms. "Looks rough to me. The scales on top of his head are all pokey."

"If you touch Houdini, I'll let you keep your dumb castle in my room."

"It's not a dumb castle. Houdini's green, scaly skin is gross. Nothing soft about it at all from what I can see."

"Well, then take this apart and rebuild it in your room. Houdini needs to wander around in here. You know how he likes to explore and then find a new hiding place."

"I'm not taking it apart. I still need to make a forest. *Please*, just until Christmas break is over?" She crouched down closer to the iguana and tapped a timid finger on his hind leg. She retreated her hand the minute she felt the scaly skin, but she didn't fess up to Robert that the skin wasn't as rough as she'd imagined. It was cool to the touch and kind of soft, sort of like touching Grandpa Cleveland's sun-damaged hand. Then she tapped her finger on Houdini's head, quickly pulling back the minute she felt the sharp protruding horns.

"See? Not bad, huh?" Robert shook his head and stared down at her creation. "Why you gotta be making a forest? Looks to be plenty finished

with this here wall around the castle.”

“No, I want a *real* forest all around the castle walls. With branches and leaves and everything. Can you help me cut down some branches from the trees in the yard?”

“If you’re actually going to go outside, then we might as well take our bikes out for an hour or so. We won’t go far, maybe just up the dirt road a ways.”

Sam slumped on the bed and didn’t respond. She still felt scared to wander far from the house, worried that man could be hiding in the woods nearby. Content to stay right here in Robert’s room, Sam admired the Lego fortress she built. Stanley jumped on the bed next to her and stretched his paws out on her lap. She draped her arms around his neck and then set her cheek on his smooth brown head. “Stanley’s too tired. He wants to stay inside.”

“Mama and Dad got you a nice bike for Christmas. You should try it out again, go farther than the driveway this time. I’ll stay right by your side. I won’t even race you this time. We’ll bring Stanley. He’s gotta get out to run for a bit. Besides, you know how good he is at letting us know if someone’s nearby. We’ll be back before sunset.”

With this last bit of convincing, Sam slid off the bed and took a huge step over the castle to get to the hallway. Before she left the room, she glanced out the window. With plenty of light still left in the sky, they could ride down the dirt road and back again—with enough time to get some foliage for the forest she’d create around the castle. Robert set a hand on her shoulder as the two of them left his room and grabbed their jackets from the entryway.

Robert pulled the zipper all the way up to Sam’s neck and bunched the coat close to her chin just like Mama would do. “You ready? Just down the dirt road and back.”

Sam pulled a knit cap over her head, tucking the long strands of hair under the hat. Sufficiently bundled up, she stepped onto the porch and scanned the yard one more time; then she walked behind Robert while he carried her bike down the steps. Robert placed a navy blue baseball cap on his head—the one Mr. Rizzo made him wear for one of the store’s promotions. With the words Rizzo’s Reptiles and a bright green snake emblem emblazoned just above the cap, the store’s name and insignia glowed in neon green—the snake’s body looping in and out of the letters. Sam glimpsed at the row of thick shrubbery blocking the view of the creek then hurried to catch up to Robert who balanced the bike for her while she

mounted it and hoisted her leg over the frame.

Robert hopped on his bike and pedaled to the perimeter of the yard as Sam followed closely behind. Stanley sprinted to the end of the driveway and glanced back at Sam. He stood there panting and wagging his tail. Once she got nearer to Stanley, he trotted up to her and nudged his wet nose on her hand. At the outskirts of the property, Sam stepped off her bike and stood a few feet from the dirt road. She glanced behind her at the long dirt driveway to see how far she'd rode from the house. Only yards away, the house seemed so far.

"Mama says we shouldn't go far," Sam hollered at Robert who by now had biked down the dirt road several feet. "We might as well stay right here for when she gets home from the store." Instead of going on a bike ride, she and Robert could stay near the house and trim low-lying branches from one of the oak trees and return to Robert's room where she could finish her project. She even didn't mind sharing the space with Houdini so long as he didn't knock over the wall surrounding the castle.

"Mama won't be home for a couple hours," Robert said and stepped off his ten-speed. He wheeled the bike over to Sam and waved an arm behind him to the dirt road. "We'll just go down to the end and back."

Sam gripped the handlebars and stood next to the bike then scuffed Stanley's head, but in one quick instant, he bolted to the middle of the dirt road and glanced back at her. He barked several times until Sam sat on her bike and pedaled up the rest of the driveway.

Robert inched closer to the middle of the dirt road. "Come on, Sam, we won't go far. Ride with me, and then I'll get you the best branches for your forest. Maybe I'll even help you build a moat with real water all around the castle. That's how they kept out the invaders back in medieval times." Robert rode away from Sam and yelled a few more words that Sam couldn't hear. The farther Robert got, the fainter his voice became.

She strained to hear what Robert said and hoped he'd ride back to her. When Stanley trotted to get closer to Robert, Sam had no choice but to catch up to them. The plastic streamers on Sam's bike handles fluttered in the wind the faster she pedaled. She reached a hand up to pull the knit cap tighter on her head so it covered her ears. Once on the dirt road a ways, she coasted down the slight decline until the road leveled out. Barely out of breath, she pumped her legs with all her might while Robert rode his shiny new ten-speed right next to her. The glossy paint of her own new purple Schwinn sparkled in the light. She relaxed in the banana seat and started to race to try and pass Robert.

The faster Sam pedaled, the more the cold air stung her face. But with each pump of her legs, she got hot, so she unzipped her coat. Rays of sunlight filtered through the pine trees along the road. Sam whooshed through the wind with her puppy trotting beside her. The forest here in Covington County near the Okatoma had become lush in the past couple months. For late December, the air wasn't nearly as frigid as it had been lately, and this was one of their first total sunny days in weeks. Stanley paused to sniff the mud at the side of the road, his tail wagging furiously as he burrowed his snout in the neighbor's shrubs. Sam hollered for Stanley to come back, and within seconds he was right by her side.

Although she rarely ever caught a glimpse of the Okatoma anymore, Sam noticed the shimmering light reflected on the surface of the water. Too chilly for swimming and way too cold for snakes to be finished hibernating for the winter, there was nothing Sam and Robert were missing by not scavenging the banks of the creek. Besides, with her new bike, Sam could pedal as fast as she could and be far away from the creek bed. She peered at the long dirt road before her. The bright afternoon sunlight warmed her face. The thick forest to the right became nothing but a blur the faster she pedaled. Soon, she and Robert made it almost to the end of the road.

Robert sped up close to Sam, nearly bumping into her bike. "Wanna ride along the main road? We could get ice cream at the convenience store. You could get one of those drumsticks you like so much. I won't tell Mama. I bet we'll still work up an appetite for dinner." Robert slowed down then pulled a wad of cash from his jeans pocket—some dollar bills, a couple twenties, even a hundred-dollar bill.

Sam slowed her pace when she reached the end of the dusty road. When she realized where that money had come from, she quickly glanced away from the stack of cash in Robert's hand. She peered behind her to see how far they'd gone. She bit her lower lip and scanned the main street. They were close to the busy boulevard. A few vehicles zoomed past—mostly cars but so far no trucks with rumbling engines. As far as she could tell, it seemed safe to continue. For the first time in weeks, she actually wanted to be out in the fresh air and was hungry for some treats.

"Can I get a drumstick *and* a Coke?" Suddenly so hungry, Sam thought about all the candy and Coke she could manage to carry back on her bike. She swung her leg over her shiny purple Schwinn and positioned both feet on the ground right behind the front tire. She steadied her body by balancing her hands on the handlebars.

“You can get anything you want,” Robert said and stuffed the money back into his pocket. “You eat as much as you’d like.”

And just like that, Sam hopped back on the banana seat and pressed her feet down on the pedals. Within a couple minutes, she was cruising along the main road—something she’d never done up until today. The chilly air stung her face the faster she went, but she continued to pick up more momentum as her legs pumped down hard on the pedals. A semi-truck barreled right past her, the powerful wind causing her bike to teeter. She gripped the handlebars harder and squinted at the long road before her. By now, her eyes were watering from the cold wind. She didn’t dare take her eyes off the road, but she could hear Robert huffing and puffing right behind her.

Sam traveled a few hundred yards down the street when she realized that Stanley was no longer next to them. In a panic, she skidded to a stop along the gravelly shoulder.

Robert nearly ran into her with his ten-speed. “Whoa, Sam! You shouldn’t just stop on a busy road like this.”

“Stanley isn’t with us. We forgot to put him back in the house. I thought...I thought he’d come with us past the dirt road.”

“He’s too young to be on the main road. He’s fine. He’s probably on the porch sleeping or chewing on a bone.”

“But he was with us all the way to the end of the dirt road.” Sam peered at the turnout for their road. When she realized she couldn’t even see the roof of their house, she panicked and turned her bike around. “We have to go back. He’s probably wondering where we are.”

“Really? We’re more than halfway to the store. He’s probably back at the house by now.”

“Robby, he’s just a puppy. Let’s put him back in the house, and then we can come back.”

Robert agreed and looped his bike around so that this time he took the lead on their way back. Within five minutes, they were on the dirt road leading to their house and quickly barreled down the incline nearing their front yard. Sam’s legs burned as she pedaled harder the closer they got to their driveway. Once there, Sam pushed down on her brakes and skidded to a stop.

Stanley was nowhere to be found. Not on the dirt road, not in the driveway, not even on the porch where he always greeted her. Out of breath, Sam hopped off her bike and let it fall onto the lawn. She first did a quick search of the driveway and then scanned the front yard. No

Stanley. She bounded up the stairs to the porch and bolted through the front door calling Stanley's name over and over. She stormed down the hallway and then into Robert's room. She searched in Houdini's makeshift cardboard barricade, but even *he* couldn't be found. Houdini was probably buried somewhere under Robert's bed or cowering in a corner.

Sam ran out the front door and again called for her dog. She screamed louder for him, her voice high and panicked. She took a few steps into the yard; she peered at the lush shrubbery. By now Robert was also searching in the yard to find Stanley. Robert followed the side of the barn then lifted the blue tarp covering his unfinished raft.

Still not able to find her dog, Sam squinted into the glaring sunlight and waited to see if Stanley had squeezed next to the stack of wood in search of his ball or a rat. Then up along the creek, Sam noticed a dark brown blur on the other side of an azalea bush. She stepped closer to the magnolia tree but didn't go past the thick trunk; she fixated her eyes on what she hoped was her puppy. That brown blob was completely still. Was he sleeping? Did he get hurt? Maybe it wasn't even Stanley after all.

"Stanley!" Sam hollered as loud as she could. She cowered next to the tree trunk and squinted at the brown mound next to the bush. "Come here, boy. Get over here! Come on, now."

Robert stomped across the lawn and called after their dog. That brown blur by the shrubs remained still. With Robert now at her side, Sam felt a panic wash over her. She was sure that Stanley had been maimed, that he was lying lifeless at the water's edge. She took a couple of timid steps closer to the creek to catch a better look at what was happening.

"Sam, he's probably okay." Robert marched over to the azalea bush and was soon right next to the creek.

"Is that Stanley? Is he okay?" Sam started to run toward what she hoped was her dog, but then she saw what she thought was someone walking along the perimeter of their yard. Sam stopped abruptly. Maybe it was just the shrubs swaying in the wind? Or the late afternoon shadows of the trees reflecting on the house?

As these thoughts went through Sam's head, a chill washed over her body when she realized what she saw—a tall man on their property. The hunger she'd felt moments ago turned into nausea. That man had come after her and Robert, just like he said he would. Sam thought about where she could hide. Too scared to move or to call out for Robert, she listened carefully for footsteps on the gravel along the house. When she didn't hear or see anything out of the ordinary, she took a few timid steps closer

to the creek.

Then she heard the chink of a dog's collar. She looked behind her then hollered for Robert. When he didn't answer, Sam stepped to the perimeter of the lawn but remained a few paces from the creek—close enough to hear Stanley whining but far enough away that she wasn't at the water's edge. Again, she peeked behind her to search for that man. All was still. Maybe it was just the shadows from the trees reflected on the house after all.

Finally, Sam saw Stanley's long tail wagging as he growled at the ground under the shrub. Sam took a few more steps closer to the water's edge, finally getting so close she could smell the damp air and hear the trickle of water over the smooth rocks. Stanley pawed at the dirt next to the creek until he unearthed what looked to be a small tool. In a matter of seconds, Sam knew what he'd found: the old trowel Mama always used in the garden, the one left at No Man's Landing a few months ago. Sam recalled Johnny tossing that trowel into the woods.

At first Sam was confused as to how that tool ended up back here, but she trembled when she started to piece things together. She peered behind her once again, more certain now that Johnny was nearby. "Robby," she said quietly, "I think I saw—"

"Sam, we best get in the house." After he shoved the trowel in his coat pocket, Robert looped his fingers through Stanley's collar and pulled him away from the creek bed.

"Robby, why would Stanley dig that up?"

"He probably smelled some sort of scent, something that didn't seem right to him. Come on, Sam, let's get to the house."

"Good boy," Sam said quietly. When they neared the yard, Stanley let out a low growl, the sound seeming like it came from a full-grown dog instead of a puppy. Trembling, Sam scanned her eyes across the yard and down to the creek bed. Seeing nothing but the tall shadows of trees, she stepped closer to Robert.

Robert took another look around the yard then stood close to Sam and set a firm hand on her shoulder. "You keep Stanley right by your side. He'll let us know if anyone is creeping anywhere near the yard."

Sam gripped her fingers around Stanley's collar, ready to release him should he sense anyone prowling around their property. "Maybe we oughta tell Daddy."

Robert didn't respond but stopped walking for a moment. He glanced behind him and then focused his eyes on the house and the porch. The late

afternoon sun cast dark shadows on the yard. Each wintry gust of wind caused Sam to be even more chilled, so she pulled her coat up close to her chin.

With Stanley at her side, Sam traipsed across the yard, but when she neared the front porch, she heard a loud engine nearby. She stopped in her tracks and glanced at the dusty road and saw a big truck idling close to the neighbor's driveway. The sight of the rumbling vehicle caused her breath to catch in her chest. Robert was by her side within seconds. Sam stood there frozen and focused her eyes on the truck. Whoever was in it revved the engine and then barreled down the road, causing clouds of dust to blind Sam's view. She leaned into Robert who draped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

"Robby, I think we should tell Daddy. Maybe he could –"

"Sam, you know what we agreed on. Besides, that's probably just some guy here to fish in the creek. The Okatoma's been busy with people fishing here lately being that people are still on Christmas break and all." Robert led Sam to the porch and guided her through the doorway where she kicked off her shoes and pulled the knit cap from her head.

Stanley trotted up the steps and nudged his way into the house behind Sam. Now safe in the house, Robert bolted the door behind them. Sam glanced through the window above the couch to see the amber rays of the setting sun wash across the sky. Robert flicked on the porch light, even though there was still another hour before dark.

Sam clicked on the TV, the sound of the evening news filling the living room with adult voices. For the rest of the night, she'd make the wall around the castle higher, using the rest of the Lego pieces to ensure that the fortress remained safe from invaders. Tomorrow she'd have Robert fetch some branches from nearby trees so she could create a lush forest outside the tall wall. For tonight, she'd remain in the house. She'd get Robert to build a moat. No intruders would be able to pass through the woods and cross over the trench to enter the castle.

Chapter Twenty-four

Mississippi: Winter 2014

SAM STOOPED OVER to inspect the wheels on Robert's old ten-speed. Once she pumped some air into the tires, she oiled the chain and spun the pedals around a few times to make sure each link was fully lubed. Then she used a screwdriver to pry the basket from the handlebars of her faded purple Schwinn. After she tossed the basket onto the lawn, she noticed Robert's unfinished raft from years ago. She lifted the blue plastic tarp and examined the project he'd spent so many weeks designing. She studied the nylon rope tightly wound around the pine logs; then she kneeled on the damp grass and set a hand on the rough wood. Each log had a groove carved into the ends, the pieces fitting together like a puzzle. Even though the raft had been protected under this plastic cover for nearly twenty-five years, the logs and plywood had become weathered from the damp air—the wood porous and splintered at the ends. With a few more twists and knots of nylon rope wound around the logs and another coat of varnish, this raft probably would've stayed afloat on the water.

But with no reason to keep the logs intact, Sam would take the raft apart soon. Even though Robert would likely be transferred to an acute care facility within the next week or so, he'd never be able to finish constructing this raft, much less venture down the river on it. Sometime in the next couple weeks, Sam would dismantle the logs and chop up the wood and stack it next to the fireplace. For now, Sam secured the tarp over the raft, tucking the plastic underneath each log. She glanced into the barn to see what was taking Annie so long to get ready then returned to tuning up both bicycles.

Annie had been staying with Sam for about a month. During that time, they fell into a comfortable routine—with Annie snoozing on the couch and Sam sleeping in bed. Annie finally let Sam drive by herself to the hospital, but she still wouldn't let her go for a bike ride alone—be it on the road or along the creek.

Five days ago, the police got a call that Patterson had shown up in

surveillance videos in a convenience store a hundred miles north of Covington County. After investigators searched the area and questioned store clerks, they couldn't locate Patterson, but other witnesses said they saw a guy fitting his description at a post office in Mobile, Alabama. By now, his image was plastered in public buildings and police stations in a 200-mile radius of Covington County. Annie and her officers continued to be on the lookout for Patterson, but Sam didn't see the need for Annie to continue staying with her. Although she enjoyed Annie's company, Sam missed alone time.

Sam lubed the chain on the Schwinn and heard the barn door flap open. She glanced up to see Annie in a bright yellow slicker and grey nylon mountain bike shorts. "Wow, a Gore-Tex jacket? You're really taking this seriously. It's not *that* cold today."

"Well, it was either this old ski jacket I keep in the trunk of my squad car or just a T-shirt."

"At least I'll be able to find you on the trails if we get lost. You sure you're up for a ride? Part of the trail is pretty rough." Thrilled to finally get back on a bike, Sam was in the mood to ride as fast as possible, weaving through the woodsy forest and down the narrow trails.

"If I can handle thirty minutes on the stationary bike, I'll be fine on your old banana seat bicycle. Might feel nice to have something between my legs." She smirked and hoisted her leg over the metal frame—the bike way too small for her body.

Eager to get some exercise, Sam doubted Annie's fitness level. She knew trail riding was way different than being on a stationary bike in the gym and didn't think Annie would be able to keep up with her. They'd be lucky if they made it down the road and back. Sam shook her head and flipped the kickstand up with her foot and steadied the bike. "Want me to leave the streamers on?"

"Sure, might as well make this as fun as possible. You know...ya keep dragging me to the gym, and I'll have my girlish figure back in no time. I've moved down a full belt hole since I've been staying with you." Annie tightened her belt then secured the gun holster on her hip. She zipped up her jacket—the thick, waterproof material bulky. The Schwinn wobbled as she balanced on the small bike while she pedaled up the driveway and to the dirt road.

Sam quickly caught up to Annie and breezed along the road for a couple minutes. Soon, they cruised down the main street for several minutes until Sam waved an arm and motioned for Annie to cut across the

bridge and ride along a dirt path on the other side of the Okatoma.

Sam grinned and hollered to Annie nearby, "Now *this* is mountain biking." With the cool air on her face, she felt invigorated on Robert's old Raleigh ten-speed, thrilled to feel her muscles working again. When she glanced at Annie riding right behind her, she was surprised but relieved to see her keeping up with her. Pleased to see that Annie was barely out of breath, Sam felt happy that the two of them were out biking together.

"Never thought I'd be riding your childhood bike down a dirt road," Annie yelled at Sam who pedaled a couple yards in front of her.

"Well, and I never thought you'd be crashing on my couch for so many nights," Sam said over her shoulder and slowed her pace.

"You know me, here to protect and serve."

"You still think it's necessary to guard me? I mean, I enjoy the company but—"

"What? Am I'm getting on your nerves?"

"Not at all, but...I just don't think it's necessary, you know?" Sam grimaced and waited for Annie's response. Although she did enjoy Annie's company, she didn't necessarily want that to continue for too much longer. She'd barely had a moment to herself in weeks.

Annie didn't answer right away. She rode next to Sam for a couple minutes then finally responded. "I had the same thought last week. Patterson isn't after you. It's clear he was only out to harm Robert for killing Chuck."

Sam thought carefully of what she should say in response, realizing that this would be the perfect time to convince Annie that it was unnecessary to have her staying with her every night. "Then why have you been staying with me for the past month? You still think I need to be protected?"

"From a law enforcement perspective, no, but...from a personal perspective, yes."

Confused at that answer, Sam again felt perturbed that Annie was under foot almost all the time. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Can I help it if I want to make sure you're fine, that you're coping okay? Besides, where else am I gonna get fresh baked pie a few nights a week?"

"Annie, I'm fine. What happened years ago is in the past. Really, I'm okay. I don't need you babysitting me every night of the week." Bugged that Annie was so unrelenting, Sam longed for some time to herself.

"There you go with the age thing again." Annie laughed and sped past

Sam.

When they reached a wider part of the trail, Sam pedaled hard to try and catch up to Annie, but she was surprised she couldn't quite reach her. "Annie, be serious!" Sam yelled and pumped her legs until she was a bit closer. "Hey, hold up. Look, it's been nice having you around, but...I'm not so sure it's right, you know? Shouldn't you sort things out with Marsha? I mean, at home and face things head on."

Annie slowed down so that she was biking right next to Sam. "Sam, she and I are done. It's over."

"Then why are you two still living together? Well, when you actually *do* sleep in your own house. Why not get your own place? Or maybe stay with your parents for now?" When she stared at Annie and waited for a response, Sam noticed that Annie wouldn't look at her. Familiar with that look, Sam knew Annie wasn't being totally honest with her. For a flash second, Sam wondered if maybe Annie was hoping they'd get back together. Although they had such a loving and passionate relationship in the past, Sam knew it was just that—in the past. Plus she knew Annie hadn't fully untangled herself from Marsha.

"It's just a matter of convenience, I guess," Annie said quietly and kept her eyes on the trail.

"Maybe it's time you figured things out once and for all. I don't want to be a factor in your uncertainty about anything." Sam focused her eyes on the rocky path below the front wheel of her bike. She gripped the handlebars as the tires bounced over loose rocks and sludge.

Annie became quiet as she huffed and lingered a few feet behind. The trail became more uneven as Sam rode for a few minutes over rough gravel. She glanced at the river next to her and then stood up to pedal when she reached a slight incline. The sky greyed; a light mist dampened her exposed face. Several feet behind, Annie leaned into the handlebars and rocked her body forward with each pump of the pedals.

Eventually, they biked along an untended path in the woods—the thick canopy of trees providing shelter from the drizzle. The chilly air stung Sam's face as she rode along the dusty track and glanced back at Annie who pedaled far behind. When she approached the end of the woodsy area, Sam braked to allow Annie to catch up. She placed both feet to the sides of her bike and checked her phone to find a couple texts from Kim. Her messages lately seemed more like texts from a trail buddy—the words totally void of suggestive innuendos. But what could Sam expect being so many miles away for so long now? She was the one who

suggested Kim date others and not put her life on hold since Sam had decided to stay in Covington County until Robert was settled in a care facility.

"How'd we end up *here*?" Annie asked, out of breath once she finally caught up to Sam.

"We're not far from home," Sam said and waved her arm toward the water. "See? There's your squad car in the driveway."

"You mean to tell me we rode forty-five minutes to get only a few yards from your mom's house? Can we just wade through the creek to go home the short way?"

"The water's deeper than it looks, especially this time of year. Plus, it's freezing right now. We'll have to ride back the same way we came. Imagine how great you'll sleep tonight after a 90-minute ride."

"Are there any bathrooms on the trail?" Annie asked and glanced around her.

"Yeah, right here," Sam said and waved an arm toward the woodsy area.

"Real funny." Annie paced a few feet beyond their bikes and grimaced then peered across the creek. "Seriously, that coffee's gone right through me."

"Whose idea was it to make lattes this morning right before we hit the trail?"

"My idea of a workout is a bathroom and sauna a few feet from the exercise equipment."

Sam felt herself getting more and more irked at Annie's complaints. "Well, we can either hoof it back to Mama's house, or you go in the woods."

"I'm not about to pee out in nature."

Sam pursed her lips and shook her head. Kim would never whine like this out on a trail ride. "Can't you hold it for forty-five minutes? Thirty if we sprint back home."

Annie glanced back at the woodsy trail then at a dilapidated house nearby. "Maybe I can ask the owner of that house to let me use their toilet."

"You're out of luck. That house is abandoned. That's Miss Patterson's place. You'd have better luck peeing in the woods."

"Oh, right, I stopped here with the officers when we were trying to locate Virginia Patterson. Well, I think I'll knock anyway. There's always a chance she sold it." Annie stomped through the overgrown weeds toward

the shabby dwelling.

Sam shook her head and reread the texts from Kim. She leaned against the handlebars of the ten-speed and viewed nothing but platonic messages. Even though they'd settled into a reasonable friendship, Sam braced herself for any details about whoever Kim was dating.

She paced along the trail while she waited for Annie to come back. She supposed the home was still owned by Miss Patterson, but now that she was frail and senile in a nursing home, she'd never dwell in this house again. Annie was likely out of luck in finding anyone to let her in.

Sam couldn't see the front door from where she stood, and when Annie didn't come back after a few minutes, she grew impatient. She traipsed across the unkempt yard to see why Annie wasn't back yet and froze the moment she could see the front porch.

Two people were locked in a struggle in front of the door. The taller of the two, a man, was grappling with Annie, trying to get hold of her gun. He had one arm wrapped firmly around her throat and the other near the weapon's grip.

Sam froze when the man's gaze turned toward her. She'd recognize those piercing eyes anywhere. Johnny held Annie against his chest, his free hand now holding her gun—the muzzle pressed firmly against her temple. Sam started to take a step forward.

"Babe, don't—" Annie stopped when Johnny shoved the weapon against her head so hard she winced in pain.

"Babe?" Johnny looked at Sam. "Is this someone special to you? What are you gonna do, *babe*?"

Sam trembled and glared at Johnny. A wave of dizziness washed over her as she stared at the man she'd feared all these years. Every muscle in her body remained paralyzed.

"Sam, leave," Annie managed to say. "Get out of here."

"Annie, I'm not leaving you here with him." Sam took a couple steps back, and then she saw it: a rifle lay on the ground near the porch steps. She was only a few feet away from it. Without hesitation, she reached for it and held it in front of her body. Familiar with some of her father's weapons, Sam figured they were the same: point and shoot. She set a finger on the trigger and hoped for at least one bullet. One shot was all she needed to end this man's life. She gripped both hands around the rifle and kept her eyes on her target.

"Let her go!" Sam clenched her fingers over the width of the rifle. As she tried to steady her shaking body, she glimpsed at the barrel of the

firearm and realized it was a hunting rifle—most likely the same weapon Miss Patterson used to kill Fred.

“You think that thing’s loaded?” Johnny asked, his voice tinged with anger. “My aunt never kept bullets in that thing. Must be my lucky day, huh?”

“Sam, get out of here,” Annie said and gritted her teeth.

“No, I’m not leaving,” Sam said quietly and shook as she saw the woman she’d once loved so deeply surrender to this evil man.

“How’s your brother doing?” Johnny said and chuckled. “I stopped by to see him weeks ago. Got in the ICU late one night by telling them I was his cousin. Them nurses are so gullible. They’ll let anyone into that hospital, anyone who seems to give a flying fuck about the condition of their cousin on life support. Looks like I did a pretty good job making him nothing but a vegetable. Serves him right for what he did to my brother.” Johnny laughed, and his arm loosened a little from around Annie’s neck.

Annie took advantage of the move and rammed her left elbow into his gut. He stumbled back, gasping for breath, at the same time releasing his hold on her. Annie cold-cocked him with a right hook. Johnny fell to the floor, dropping the gun. Annie flipped him onto his stomach and kept her knee on the small of his back, pinning him to the ground.

It all happened so fast that Sam simply stood there gripping the bullet-less rifle. Then she rushed toward Annie.

“Sam, don’t come any closer. Call 9-1-1,” Annie said.

Sam reached into her pocket for her phone and called 9-1-1, stammering out a few panicked words. But then she watched in horror as Johnny shoved his body upward, dislodging Annie. He reversed their positions and used his weight to hold her down while he pounded his fist into her face. With Annie down, he got to his feet and fumbled for the gun.

A surge of nausea traveled into the pit of Sam’s stomach, and her knees gave way. Annie remained supine on the porch—bloodied. Sam cowered as Johnny towered over Annie with the handgun pressed against her head.

Johnny grabbed Annie by her hair and forced her to stand. He pulled her off the porch and stepped close enough to Sam that she could smell his unwashed body. Annie’s face was bloody, but her eyes shone with anger and fear. He shoved Annie to her knees and backed up a step, far enough that Annie couldn’t reach for him. He leveled the pistol at her head.

Sam still had the rifle aimed at him, but Johnny laughed. "Weapon ain't no good without bullets. Good thing I've got them." He tapped the pocket of his shirt. "So pointing that thing ain't gonna save her. Say goodbye to babe."

Sam had no time to think. She grabbed the long barrel of the rifle and with a strength she didn't know she had, used it like a baseball bat and slammed the butt into Johnny's face.

"You took my brother away from me, but you're not about to take her away, too!" Sam screamed and hit him again, hearing the wood of the rifle butt crack with the blow. She hovered over Johnny's shaking form, barely registering that he no longer held the pistol in his hand. "Maybe it's about time you joined your brothers," Sam said and swung the rifle back for another blow.

But it never hit her intended target. Instead, Sam turned to find Annie's gentle gaze on her, her hand holding the rifle back. "Sam, stop. I'll take care of this."

Annie was now in possession of her service weapon again. It was aimed at Johnny, who wasn't making any attempts to get back up.

"Shoot him!" Sam said. "End his life right now. If you don't, I will." Her body shook with rage and fear.

"Sam, step away from him," Annie said quietly as she tried to pull the rifle from Sam's strong grip. "Trust me, he'll pay for what he's done. I won't let you murder him."

Johnny closed his eyes and slumped forward. "You fucking cunt. I should've taken care of you years ago. Never should've left the scene without having my way with—"

Annie shoved him onto his stomach again, her knee in his back and the gun pressed against his head. "Patterson, you're done! You're lucky your aunt didn't shoot you years ago, lucky she didn't end your life once and for all like she did to Fred. She would've done the same to Chuck had Robert not taken care of him. Y'all are nothing but scum."

"My *aunt*? Never thought she had it in her to shoot anyone, much less my little brother." Johnny's eyes widened as he tried to look up at Annie. "Got nothing to be afraid of at this point. Been waiting for y'all to find me. I've been watching you two across the river for a couple days now."

"It'd be so easy to end this right now, but I'm not gonna make this easy on you. You've gotta face the consequences in front of a judge. By the time you're behind bars, you'll wish I had killed you," Annie said. "Ginnie shot Fred right through the heart. You ever wonder what he felt

when that bullet hit him?"

"When I was a kid," Johnny said, his voice raspy, "I always looked up to my older brother. Always wanted to end up like Chuck...till he done what he did to Aunt Ginnie. The first time he hurt a girl, I was only thirteen. Saw him tie the girl up and have his way with her. He told me if I ever told anyone, he'd say I was the one who participated in beating the girl nearly to death. Once I got older, I learned the way you got a woman was to use force. But Fred...he always was a little soft around the edges. Never did lay a hand on Aunt Ginnie, never actually touched a woman in that way."

"But he thought it was okay to go after a little girl," Annie said, her jaw rigid as she glanced at Sam. "He had no right to do what he did."

"Fred wouldn't have done what he did had we not urged him on," Johnny said quietly. "To this day I regret what me and Chuck said to Fred to get him to...do what he did. Didn't think he had it in him to even know how to remove the panties from a girl."

"He ripped my underwear off!" Sam said, her body shaking.

"She was eight," Annie said.

"And you stood there cheering him on," Sam said.

"Wasn't right what I done to you, but your brother killed Chuck. Not right that he did what he did to my brother. Had to finally come after Robert after all these years. An eye for an eye. Isn't that what the bible says?"

"Don't go quoting the bible," Annie said. "You had no right to go after Robert. He was only protecting his sister."

"I never once set a hand on a child before that day. Might've done some bad things to women, but...never to a little girl like I done to you." By now, Johnny's eyes were filled with tears as his body shook.

Sam relaxed her grip around the barrel of the rifle. She stared into Johnny's eyes—the same eyes that peered down at her twenty-four years ago as she lay helpless on the ground.

"Probably would've been best if all three of us had been killed that day. Would've stopped me once and for all. The drinking, the robberies, the assaults...what I almost did to a girl like you. Go ahead, shoot me. As God is my witness, I face my punishment."

Sam saw Annie's finger quivering near the trigger. In a matter of seconds, this could all be behind them. Johnny could be obliterated with just one shot. But Sam knew that one bullet wouldn't erase what happened. She threw the rifle a few yards away from where they stood

and said, "Trust me, God knows what you've done. At this point, a bullet's not gonna save you. You've gotta face the consequences."

"Jonathan Patterson, you're under arrest," Sam heard faintly.

While Annie read Johnny his rights, Sam felt her body finally relaxing. The rage she felt earlier melted into a measured confidence. Here before her sat a coward—someone lacking power over her.

"Yes, that's what I said," Sam heard Annie speaking. "It's Lieutenant Wright. I've arrested a suspect. His name is Jonathan Patterson. He's accused of attempted murder. Send backup immediately." Annie ended the call then glanced at Sam for a flash few seconds, her face relaxing into a smile.

Sam locked her eyes with Annie's and took a couple steps back. She slumped onto the porch steps, her body still trembling. It was hard to know how long she sat there before she heard sirens in the distance. Soon, flashing lights strobed the entire property, and officers flooded into the yard. Annie directed an officer to Johnny, and he was immediately cuffed and removed.

Once Johnny was out of sight, Sam fell into Annie's arms. Tears flooded her eyes as her body relaxed into Annie's. They didn't release their embrace until Johnny was safely placed into a police car.

"You're okay now," Annie whispered.

"This has all been such a nightmare...a long, twenty-four-year nightmare."

"No one's gonna hurt you ever again."

"Maybe you could stay one more night?" Sam said and buried her face in Annie's neck. "Might be nice to...have you near me a little bit longer."

"You got it. I'll stay as long as you want."

Sam pulled away from Annie then looped her arm in Annie's as they left the yard. Sam peered across the water where she could see the wide barren shore of No Man's Landing. Over the years, the terrain had changed—the sandy beach now barely recognizable. Twenty-four years of storms and tumultuous currents by now had likely taken the skeletal remains of that dead bird far away.

Part III

“For this moment, this one moment, we are together...
Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh.
Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob.”

~ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Chapter Twenty-five

Mississippi: Spring 2015

THE ENDLESS TORRENT of the Okatoma churned in the distance. Sam stood in the opened doorway to the barn and thought of going over to the house to see Robert but hesitated since she knew Mama was probably with him right now. Ever since he came home, Sam preferred to see Robert by herself—the time when she could talk to him without anyone else hearing what she said.

With this being spring, the water level was at its highest, the flow louder and more powerful than usual this year. Since the accident, the creek had taken on a different sound all together—the rumbling current an incessant reminder that these waters took Robert away several months ago. Here but not here—this was the continual thought that ran through Sam’s head once he came home.

Sam tossed her backpack and books onto the bed then settled down to study for her bio exam. She took out a set of colored pencils and began to copy pictures of cells from the textbook. A few weeks ago, she signed up for a microbiology class at the local community college. Although she decided against medical school, she still wanted to get her B.S. in biology since she only had a few more units left. For the time being, she turned down the lieutenant position but still considered it should she be able to return to San Diego. But for now, Mama needed help caring for Robert.

The only way the rehab hospital discharged Robert was because Jane assured them he’d have twenty-four-hour care at home with her being a nurse and having experience in monitoring ventilators and feeding tubes. Mavis came Monday through Thursday, and Ellen came during the daytime on the other days. Sam managed well with her experience as an EMT. It wasn’t until two weeks after Robert came home that she came up with her plan.

With a tower of books entombed around her, Sam pored over pages of notes and class handouts. The drone of the creek grated on her, but she did her best to concentrate on her studies. She flipped through a stack of flashcards, hoping some of this material would be lodged somewhere in her brain for tomorrow’s exam. She peeked at the other side of a flashcard

that had a sketch of what looked like a Rorschach drawing. Over the past couple weeks, Sam spent more time replicating the images than she did studying what the actual pictures meant. She could no more describe the difference between cell symbiosis and cell replication than she could anything she'd learned so far this semester. She set the card with the others then flipped to the section in the textbook on cell symbiosis. She was startled to notice her mother in the doorway.

"Why don't you study in the kitchen where the light's better?" Jane stepped closer to the bed and stood there for a moment without saying a word. Outside, the wind rustled through the trees, momentarily drowning out the sound of the creek.

Sam thumbed through her flashcards and didn't look up when she answered her mother. "I've got all my books and notes set up here. Might as well just stay put."

Jane stepped to the foot of the bed then paced back to the doorway. "So, you probably heard about the charges. He goes on trial the first of April."

"Annie told me yesterday," Sam said without looking up as she rummaged through the tin of pencils.

"Not sure I can face that man after what he's done to my boy."

"Mama, I'll be there with Annie. She made sure he's been charged with everything possible, the worst of which is attempted murder." She heard Jane gasp when she said those two words.

"I know how those trials work. I've seen enough true crime shows to know what'll happen to him. He'll likely only get charged with reckless driving and be out in six months. How do we know his lawyer won't convince a jury it was just a random accident?"

"There's no way they'll lessen the charges. We both see what that man did to Robert. He can't even sit up or...feed himself." A measured rage tinged her words, but she quieted her tone once she noticed Jane wringing her hands and pacing along the side of the bed. Sam set the flashcards aside and looked at her mother. "Mama, it's all gonna work out. You'll see. That man tried to kill Robert. That sure as hell isn't reckless driving."

"At least Robert is home where he belongs. Will you check on him soon? I got called into work for a few hours."

"You working till morning?" Sam asked, eager to know if she could be alone with Robert for an extended period of time.

"Just till midnight. Census is high right now, so they need coverage in the ICU." Jane paused in the opened doorway. "There's leftover stew in

the fridge and oatmeal cookies on the counter.”

“I’ll heat up some dinner in a while. I’ll be sure to check on Robert when I’m over there.” Sam closed her textbook and set the tin of colored pencils on the nightstand. A cool gust of wind rustled the notes and flashcards on the bed. “Mama, everything will work out. Like you said, at least he’s home now.”

After she stood there quiet for another moment, Jane shut the door without saying goodbye and left Sam to her studies. Sam peered out the window and watched her mother traipse across the lawn and then get in the Buick. Once she saw that the car was down the road, Sam left the barn and followed the worn path to the house then trudged up the steps. She paused in the entryway for a moment and wondered if today really was the right day to follow through with her plan. With her mother gone until midnight and with both nurses off today, this was probably the most opportune time.

Sam followed the long hallway down to Robert’s room and paused in the doorway. Once she approached the foot of the bed, she noticed his eyes were partially open.

When Robert came home, he was a shell of what he once was. Canoeing, swimming, and collecting snakes one day—the next, brain damaged and paralyzed with a catheter and hooked up to a G-tube and ventilator. He was here but not here.

Despite Robert being in a persistent vegetative state, Sam made sure he was around all that he loved—the copperheads, water moccasins, and mambas. Even if Robert had no recognition of these creatures, at least they were nearby.

On the shelf, the snakes pecked at the tops of their aquariums, eager to escape from the sealed glass cages. In the largest tank, a moccasin hovered over a bowl of water then disappeared in the branches and leaves. Against the wall, in a secure glass cage was the Eastern green mamba. In the past few weeks, Sam became comfortable near the snakes once she realized they wouldn’t harm her if she didn’t get too close or provoke them.

But she knew that today she’d need to provoke them. She stood a few inches from the poisonous snakes and peered into the cages. Then she approached Robert and stared at him for a few moments. She returned to the green mamba’s glass pen then lifted it and placed it onto the nightstand.

The mamba uncoiled its body and slithered closer to the top of the cage. Sam once again read the texts she and Robert exchanged the day

before his accident. Then she skimmed the message she'd read so many times: "If I swam in those huge waves, it'd be just my luck to end up breaking my neck and become paralyzed. If that happened, you might as well shoot me!"

Sam glanced at Robert—his glassy eyes fixated on nothing at all. Certain he couldn't recognize that in these cages were his snakes, she hoped he at least noticed the difference between light and dark. Doctor Savage said Robert might react to light and dark by fluttering his eyelids but that he'd never respond to stimuli like touch or sound. Any time Sam touched him, he had no reaction at all.

His breathing became erratic. Sam glanced at the ventilator. She'd become accustomed to the occasional sputterings of breath. At first, right after they brought him home, she'd call in the nurse or her mother to see if his trach needed adjusting, but now she was used to this. She stared at him until his breathing leveled out. Then she again glanced at the texts Robert had sent months ago.

"It won't be long, Robby. I promise," she whispered then went to the mamba's cage and tapped on the glass until it reared its head and slithered out a tongue.

Sam shook two tablets of Ativan out of the bottle and set them in a small bowl; then she used a spoon to turn the pills into a fine powder. She mixed the medication with a bit of water, forming a soupy liquid. She used a syringe to collect it and connected it to Robert's G-tube. She slowly released the medication into the tube. Two hours before his next scheduled dose of Ativan, the double dose would keep Robert in a much more relaxed state. Within fifteen minutes, his eyes were completely shut.

"It'll be fast, just like you told me years ago," Sam whispered in his ear and pulled the covers off his body to reveal his bony legs.

Sam tapped on the mamba's cage, angering the green serpent. She rapped on the glass one more time. The snake slithered closer to the top of the enclosure. She unclashed one side of the cage, pausing to peek through the window for any signs of her mother's return. As her hands trembled, she gripped the snake tongs and unclashed the side of the cage. With the metal tongs, she captured the mamba around the neck. The serpent writhed as Sam held it over Robert's torso, and then she released the deadly creature onto the bed. She prodded it with the end of the tongs—angering the mamba even more.

Her heart thudded faster while she witnessed the snake slithering down Robert's legs and then coiling around his foot. Again, she prodded

the creature until it pierced Robert's skin with its sharp teeth. Robert lay there without any reaction to the bite. Sam remained a few feet away and stared at the green mamba, which had partially retreated under the sheets at the foot of the bed. She observed Robert for any signs of neural shut-down – anything more than his usual deteriorated neurological state.

After five minutes, Sam returned the mamba to its cage. She stared at Robert for a few minutes and studied his face. By now the neurotoxins had circulated into his heart and throughout his body. From what she'd read, Sam knew that the cardiotoxins would cause his heart to stop within thirty minutes, but she also recognized that the breathing machine would continue to pump air into his lungs – making him appear alive. Sam broke out in a cold sweat and pressed her back against the closed door and waited.

Once twenty minutes passed, Sam paced to the foot of the bed and then to the ventilator, which continued to pump air into Robert's lungs. She stared at his face. His eyes were shut. He looked relaxed, his jaw slack. Sam set a finger against his neck to feel for a pulse. Lifeless, Robert looked calmer than he had in months. He was finally free.

Now that the venom had stopped Robert's heart, Sam flipped the switch on the ventilator. There was no need to have artificial air pumping into his lungs if his heart had stopped beating. Sam set her hand on his bony chest. She sat next to him, his body remaining warm for several minutes. With the room so silent, all she heard was the churning of the Okatoma nearby. While she stared at Robert's lifeless body, her tears flowed freely. An hour passed, and his skin became cool. Sam let out a long sigh – her breath the only sound heard above the creek.

Chapter Twenty-six

Mississippi: Spring 2015

THE LATE AFTERNOON sun cast silvery flecks over the surface of the Okatoma. Still in her black dress and heels from the funeral, Sam wandered next to the creek. She noticed the lush foliage along the shore. Bright pink blooms burst through the azalea shrubs. High atop the oak trees, a few chirping birds settled on the branches. Sam shaded her eyes and glanced up to see two greyish-blue robins perched on the limb nearest her. They continued to warble, each bird trying to outdo the other with their singing.

As she strolled along the creek, Sam noticed a pool of water sheltered between a half-circle of rocks. Years ago, she and Robert attempted to build a dam—the remains of it this small pool of still water near the shore where tiny tadpoles flitted in between the rocks. Sam crouched down with a stick and gently stirred the calm water. A swirl of dirt clouded it as the tadpoles disappeared along the rim of the creek.

Behind her, Sam heard muffled voices and laughter from friends, loved ones, and neighbors who came to pay their respects. The service this morning was standing room only as people swarmed in the back of the church. Mama's house was not big enough to hold all the guests following the service, so many sat on the porch or in the yard while Pastor Dan grilled hamburgers and hotdogs. Mama baked a dozen pies, but the ladies at church tripled that amount once they heard there would be a reception following the funeral.

Sam settled her eyes on the creek once again. The sunlight reflected on the ripples and cast blinding light into her eyes. From behind her, Sam heard voices approaching. When she turned around, she noticed Travis and Annie tromping down the path. Both had heaps of food piled on plates and bottles of beer wedged under their arms.

Travis held out an amber bottle. "A Sam Adams for Sam?"

"You had anything to eat yet?" Annie asked and swallowed a forkful of potato salad then washed it down with a swig of beer.

"I'm not hungry," Sam said and took a sip of Sam Adams. "But this'll

probably go down just fine." She kicked off her heels then sat on a fallen log at the edge of the creek and peered across the shimmering water.

Travis stood behind her and clasped a hand on her shoulder. "How you holdin up, kiddo?"

Sam shrugged and took a long gulp of beer then wedged the bottle in the dirt. "Maybe after a couple of these, I'll feel better."

Annie sat to the left of Sam on the log; Travis opened another beer then sat to the right of her and finished the last of his hotdog. Overhead, the birds continued to warble in the trees. The guests nearby laughed and talked – their voices blending into a comforting murmur. Sam closed her eyes and relaxed her body into Annie's.

"Sam, I know this might not be the best time to tell you this," Annie said and set a hand on Sam's arm, "but I got a call from Marsha right before the service. She told me Patterson has admitted to intentionally driving Robert's truck off the bridge."

"Crazy fucking bastard," Travis murmured.

"Did he actually plead guilty?" Sam asked and stared straight ahead.

"No, they haven't gotten that far yet." Annie took another swig of beer then cleared her throat and continued. "The laws are pretty clear that a death caused by an accident that happened months prior can still be classified as murder, but since he confessed, I'd imagine it'll be a pretty straightforward trial. Of course, it'd be easier if he ends up pleading guilty. Save us all time from having to go to trial, but Marsha says he'll probably get life."

"Life in prison?" Sam said, her voice shrill. "What does that even mean these days? Twenty-five years with early release for good behavior?"

"The guy should be put to death," Travis said, his words loud and angry.

"He'll likely get life without parole," Annie said quietly.

Travis chugged more beer. "Don't they have the electric chair in the South? They oughta fry that son of a bitch."

"They haven't had the electric chair in Mississippi for a long time now," Annie said and leaned in closer to Sam. "But I'm sure justice will be served. He's never gonna get out of prison. He'll never hurt anyone ever again."

"Since he was solely responsible for Robert's death, he needs to pay for what he's done." Travis took another swig of beer and shook his head then stared straight ahead.

Sam's body tensed when she heard those words: solely responsible.

Although it was true that she wouldn't have done what she did two weeks ago if it hadn't been for what Johnny did in the first place, she knew he was not solely responsible for Robert's death. Sam stared at the steady current filtering by, acutely aware that there would always be secrets in Covington County that only she knew about. But Jane would go on feeling comforted that Robert passed peacefully that one afternoon. As a nurse, she probably assumed his heart simply stopped that day, a likely complication of the extensive neurological damage caused by the accident. Sam recalled how a sense of calm washed over her when she felt Robert's body go cold, how she knew he was finally free.

The three of them sat quietly and sipped their beer. Sam was aware that by this time of the year, the water moccasins and copperheads were no longer hibernating and could be found slithering around this area. Usually so watchful for the venomous serpents, she didn't feel as terrified of encountering them. No longer a frightened kid, she now realized they were probably as scared of her as she was of them.

"Travis, did you know this is where I got over my fear of water?" Sam waved both arms out toward the glistening creek. "Robert taught me to not be afraid of the rough current or anything that might be lurking under the surface."

Travis crouched at the creek and dipped his fingers in the water. "Pretty awesome to have a swimming hole right in your backyard. Mighty cold temps, though. Probably not even above sixty."

"Since when has the water temp been a deterrent for you?" Sam laughed and stooped down next to Travis. She finished the last of her Sam Adams and tossed it over by the other empty bottles.

"Well, when the surf's up, I'll brave water in the mid fifty-degree range—so long as I'm wearing a full wetsuit and hood."

"Y'all are braver than I am," Annie said. "I won't get in the water unless it's above seventy."

Sam and Travis rolled their eyes and laughed. Sam peered down toward No Man's Landing where a couple of kayaks were wedged in the sand as two guys stood on shore with fishing poles. On the other side of the Okatoma four people strolled along the water's edge.

"Thanks for being here today," Sam said and nudged her elbow into Travis's ribcage. "You look handsome in that suit. Way different than your usual attire."

"You both look nice," Annie said and gazed at Sam. Her eyes drifted from her face, to her breasts, and farther down her body. "Haven't seen

you in a dress in years. You look...stunning."

"I clean up well, huh? Pretty different than board shorts and T-shirts. Right, Miller?"

"I'm about ready to ditch the tie and dress shoes."

"It felt right having you at the service. Mama was touched you flew all this way to be here."

"You know I'd do anything for you, kiddo. You're like a kid sister to me." Travis draped his arm around Sam's shoulders and pulled her into a sideways hug.

"Your *sister*? You're old enough to be my dad." Sam chuckled and shook her head.

"There she goes with the age thing again." Annie laughed then handed her another beer.

"Seriously, if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. I'm just a text or a phone call away."

For a moment, Sam thought about what Travis said, her mind focused on a possible way to honor Robert. She wasn't entirely sure it would work, but she knew it was worth a try. "You know, there's one thing I do need your help with. Well, and you, too, Annie."

"Sure, anything," Travis said and finished the last of his beer. By now, there was a collection of empty bottles near the creek.

Sam noticed the branches above her swaying slightly and then studied the river to assess the flow of water. She bent over to peel a piece of bark from the log then tossed it into the creek. For a few seconds, she watched the tiny piece of wood float downstream.

"Sam, what's going on?" Annie asked and stepped closer to Sam.

Sam kept her eyes on the bark, which by now had floated downstream a few yards. Again, she tore off another piece, this one a much larger hunk. While she gazed at the bark, she waited until it reached No Man's Landing.

Sam finally said, "Miller, we gotta get you out of that suit. Did you bring a change of clothes?"

"Not with me here. My stuff's all at the hotel."

"Robert's probably got clothes you can fit into," Sam said and glanced at his midsection. "Annie, you've still got some clothes in the barn. Anything'll do, just something comfortable that you don't mind getting dirty or wet."

"What exactly are you gonna have us do?" Annie asked.

Sam gathered all the empty beer bottles and stepped into her heels

then started up the path toward the lawn. "I'll explain after you two get out of your church clothes. I gotta get out of this dress and these heels."

Once the three of them changed into shorts and T-shirts, Sam led them to the side of the barn. In Robert's old cargo shorts and a faded Padres T-shirt, Travis looked like a plump version of her brother.

Sam placed both hands on her hips and stared at the blue tarp. Then she peeled back the plastic covering and kneeled down to examine the raft. She surveyed the logs that were loosely connected with nylon rope and said, "Robert never had a chance to test out his raft. He always promised he'd take me down the creek sometime, even told me he'd leave this place by way of the river one day."

"You think this thing'll float?" Travis crouched down to examine the logs and loose twine.

"Looks pretty sturdy to me," Annie said and bent down closer. "Maybe just tighten the logs a bit at the end? I've got nylon twine in the trunk."

"Worth a try, don't ya think?" Sam gripped her hands on one end of the raft. Likewise, Travis and Annie each took a side as the three of them lugged it to the middle of the lawn.

Annie jogged over to her car while Sam and Travis assessed the quality of the logs. Sam ran her hand along each one, looking for places that might need to be tightened. Once Annie returned with a spool of nylon twine, the three of them worked together until every log was flush with the others.

"Hang on," Sam said and sprinted back to the barn. She returned with an oar and a blue baseball cap—the one Robert wore in the photo he'd sent her right before the accident. The neon green snake insignia above the bill hadn't faded a bit. Sam placed the cap on her head then tucked the long strands of hair behind her ears.

The three of them hauled the raft across the lawn, past the magnolia tree, then down the dirt path. Once at the water's edge, they dragged the raft along the sand a few feet until they reached an open entryway into the creek.

"This is where Robert would've wanted the raft to be launched." Sam pointed to the creek then patted her front pocket to make sure the tiny keepsake urn wouldn't fall out as she made her way down the river. Jane made the decision to have Robert cremated, his ashes divided up into three small urns—one for each of them to keep and one to be spread somewhere here along the Okatoma. But rather than spread the cremains

along the creek, Sam had a better plan.

With help from Travis, Sam situated the vessel at the edge of the creek. Then she used her foot to nudge it away from shore. "Once I reach a stronger current, I bet this thing'll go pretty far."

"Wait, you're actually going to ride this thing down the river?" Annie asked.

"What did you think I was gonna do with it? Just set it adrift with no one to steer it?"

"Doesn't the river get pretty treacherous up ahead? What if the raft gets stuck on submerged logs or rocks in a remote area with no one around to help you?"

"Annie, relax, will ya? I'll steer it so that I don't get trapped in any low-lying branches, but if this raft does end up getting wedged somewhere, then I swim or walk to shore." Sam kicked off her flip-flops and tossed them far from the water's edge. She stood up to her ankles in the frigid water and again studied the current.

"What if the raft capsizes in a rough area?" Annie asked and flailed her arms in the air.

"Sam's a strong swimmer," Travis said, his voice calm. "There's really nothing she can't handle when it comes to dangerous conditions. River rapids probably won't be much of a challenge for her."

"What's the worst that could happen? I might hit some class four or five rapids, and the raft might jostle if the whitewater gets real treacherous, but I can handle it."

"Babe, this is a crazy idea. I can't have you do this. This makeshift raft doesn't seem sturdy enough to withstand any rapids. You could drown."

Sam understood Annie's concerns, but it was true that she could handle some of the most treacherous conditions in the water. "Annie, as a lifeguard, I've experienced far more dangerous ocean conditions than anything I could possibly encounter in this river. Besides, Robert knew what he was doing when he built this thing." Sam stepped into the water up to her knees then set her hand on the deck of the raft and studied the waterway once more.

"I'm going with you," Annie said and stepped out of her sneakers. "You can't do this alone. I won't let you." Annie tromped through the water to get closer to Sam.

"You won't *let* me? Annie, I'll be okay." By now Sam was up to her waist, her shorts and the end of her T-shirt totally saturated. A breeze chilled her damp skin, causing her to shiver.

“Frigid temps or not,” Annie said, “I’m coming along. You shouldn’t do this alone.”

Sam glimpsed at Travis and shrugged. “Guess I’ll have company on my journey down the river.”

“Travis, there’s a bridge a few miles downriver,” Annie said. “Meet us there. Ask Jane to tell you how to get there.” Annie hoisted her body up on the raft.

Sam sat at the front and used the oar to slice through the water to propel the raft forward. The gentle lap of the oar slicing through the water soothed her as she inhaled the crisp spring air. She barely needed to paddle, for the current gently carried them downstream. The vessel that Robert made years ago proved to handle the river well so far.

Focusing on the waterway ahead, Sam noticed whitewater but knew she could handle the stronger currents. “It’s nice to get away from everyone. I can’t really take putting up a front right now. You’ve always been okay with me being quiet and not prodding to ask me what I’m thinking. You’re the only person I feel real with.”

“I can relate. Can’t exactly let my guard down with just anyone like I can with you. It’s weird but with Marsha, I don’t think I ever fully let my guard down. It’s like I always felt I had to appear strong and seem on top of things when I was around her. Now that she and I are totally done, I can see this so much more clearly now.”

Sam scooted to the middle of the raft and sat on her knees. Then she used the oar to guide them away from the boulders on the left. The raft jostled when the water became bumpy and violent. She steered the raft closer to the middle of the river, and a huge wall of water saturated them. Sam felt invigorated being in the water again—reminding her of summers guarding the beach in San Diego. But within seconds, the raft rumbled over rougher currents. They were catapulted into the air a couple feet and sailed over the rushing river.

“Maybe we should get to shore and get out of the water!” Annie yelled over the surging waves.

“This is nothing, only a class two rapid. I got this.” Sam concentrated on each stroke of the oar while she guided the raft through the sloshing current.

“Only a class two rapid? Feels pretty dangerous to me.”

“It’s gonna be okay. Once we get past that bend up ahead, the river is like a lake.” The raft surged over the whitewater, but Sam steered them through the fierce waves and kept them safe.

The raft soared across the ferocious current with ease, the logs keeping them afloat as they entered the class four rapids. Sam heard Annie holler out something behind her, but the roar of the rumbling river drowned out her words. By now, the river was completely white—the frothy surge pulling the vessel through the water’s path.

“Don’t let go of the rope!” Sam yelled. “Hold tight no matter what, even if the raft flips over.”

Soon, the river narrowed, and the current became more treacherous. Not sure if the rocks up ahead indicated a surging waterfall or class five rapids, Sam guided the vessel through as it barreled over the falls. They bobbed up and down in a swirling pool of water in the middle of the surge.

The water then suddenly leveled out to what Sam would call only a class two rapid, and within a couple minutes, the water became glassy. Robert used to tell her about how the Okatoma was so unpredictable—calm in some areas and ferocious in others. Finally experiencing it for herself, Sam now understood what he meant. She knew he would’ve been proud of how well she managed the raft in the rough rapids, but she also knew that he’d constructed a sturdy vessel able to withstand dangerous conditions.

Right now, the raft barely moved in the current, so Sam used the oar to propel them along. After she set the oar next to her, Sam dangled her legs in the water then took off Robert’s baseball cap and wedged it between the logs. Once she determined that the current was safe up ahead, she lay back and gazed at the sky. Her arms felt weak from working through those rapids, but the sun on her skin soothed her.

“Holy shit!” Annie said. “That was intense. You were amazing back there.”

“Told you I’d keep us safe,” Sam said and closed her eyes then felt in her pocket to make sure the tiny urn was still there.

Annie slapped her hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Damn, girl, I’ve seen you guard the beach on a mellow day, but I’d never actually seen you handle rough conditions like this. I never thought I’d enjoy riding the rapids, but that was awesome. Maybe we could take up river rafting. One of the officers has been telling me I could borrow his kayak. How different is a kayak in the rapids than this raft? As long as I’ve got you to rescue me in case we capsize, I’m good to go.”

Sam didn’t respond right away but sat upright and moved to the front of the raft. She dipped the oar in the calm river and moved the raft

forward. A cool breeze chilled her damp skin. She gazed at the trees along the river, the terrain looking familiar to her as they neared the bend where the Okatoma joined the Bouie.

"Annie," Sam finally said and looked back at Annie for a moment. "I'm not gonna be in Mississippi much longer. I've decided to take the lieutenant position. I'll be returning to San Diego in a couple days."

"Wow, that soon?" Annie furrowed her brow, looking more angry than surprised at Sam's news.

"Earlier today Travis told me they still want me as lieutenant. I need to jump on this now or else they'll choose someone else for the position. Not sure how I feel about supervising lifeguards and not doing so many rescues, but I think it's a good move forward."

"You think your mom'll be okay by herself?"

"We Cleveland women are strong. Mama's ready to go back to work full-time and might even apply for a supervisor position at the hospital. I'll be back periodically, at least over the holidays."

Annie expelled a long breath and slumped forward. "Well, I enjoyed having you back in town these last few weeks, but...I know this really isn't your home anymore."

Sam once again focused on the surface of the water, ever watchful for a change in the current. "I'll always have a home here with Mama, but...San Diego is where I need to be right now."

"I understand. It's time for you to leave Covington County."

"I've enjoyed having you nearby. Even staying together in the cramped quarters of the barn for a few weeks was...uh, nice."

"Even with my snoring?" Annie laughed and kicked the water with her foot.

Sam gazed at the path of water in front of them. She couldn't even look at Annie to say what'd been on her mind for weeks now, but she knew it was time to finally say something. "Annie, I need to say something. I should've said something about this weeks ago, but with Robert going into the rehab hospital and then coming home and...well, then with his passing, I figured I'd just let it go. But I feel like I need to talk about it, or apologize, I guess. See, when you and I woke up that one morning and—"

"Sam, I know what you're going to say. I've felt bad about this for weeks now."

Surprised that Annie also felt bad about what almost happened a few weeks ago, Sam proceeded to finally get all of this off her chest. "I think

it's probably best we were interrupted."

"I had the same thought right after your mom knocked on the door. I shouldn't have...let it go as far as it did."

Relieved that Annie felt the same way, Sam relaxed and felt the words flowing more easily than she anticipated. "I'm sorry if I led you on or gave you the wrong message."

The raft surged forward in the gentle current, the water forming ripples with each stroke of the oar. Sam glanced at Annie behind her, wondering what was going through her mind.

Annie didn't respond right away but then laughed quietly and said, "I know if your mom hadn't interrupted us, I wouldn't have stopped, but I think that probably wouldn't have been such a good idea."

"As I think back on that morning, I realize I was probably overcome with the memory of how drawn to you I was at one time. I mean, we had something incredible."

"We did have something amazing, but for me, it felt like more than igniting a desire from the past."

Sam didn't respond but sat up and put the oar back in the water. The current remained calm while she maneuvered her way down the Bouie River. She glanced into the water to see the rocks along the bottom. Crisp, clear, and calm, the river soothed her, but she kept her guard up should they encounter more rapids ahead.

"Annie, what I'm about to say is pretty hard." Sam paused and stared at the rocks at the bottom of the river, but she got up the nerve to look Annie directly in the eyes. "What we had years ago was incredible, but I think part of me moving forward includes us remaining good friends and keeping those lines clear. I can't deny that the feelings are still there...but it's time for me to leave the past behind. Going back to San Diego and taking this new position provides me with the sort of new start I need right now."

Annie sighed loudly and didn't say a word for a couple minutes. She dangled her feet in the water and used her hand to help paddle the raft through the slow current. "Sam, I understand. If there's one thing I learned about getting back together with Marsha, it's that you can't rekindle the passion from long ago. You and I really do make good friends, and I'm grateful for that."

"Sometimes it seems easier to remain single," Sam said and shook her head. The raft jostled as the current once again became stronger.

"Yeah, less complicated, huh? But, you're young. You could find

someone right for you. Now that you'll be returning to San Diego, maybe you should pursue things with Kim. I know I've said some stupid things about how young she is, but hell, you and I had something amazing, and you and I had a *much* bigger age difference than you and Kim do. I think you should go for it."

"I don't know. I mean, I get the sense there's a reason why she and I have only been...together once. It always seems like there's some sort of obstruction in our way."

"I think that obstruction has been removed, don't you think?"

"Yeah, maybe so. I guess I'll see what happens once I get back. She's sent me some...fun texts lately, so maybe there's still something there."

"Ah, so a little fun sexting going on?"

"Something like that. I'm just not sure I can keep up with her. Was I ever...that energetic? Seems she's got a one-track mind."

"Oh? On what, Sam?"

"Not what you think. She's obviously hot and eager as far as *that* goes, but...she's so into training for her races. I don't recall being so...hyperfocused or shallow at her age."

"You weren't. I wouldn't have asked you out if I thought you were shallow."

The two of them became quiet. The raft sloshed forward. Sam fought against the current and veered to the left. They soon neared the bridge where Robert's truck had careened into the water. Sam recognized Jane's old Buick and Travis's rental car parked at the end of the bridge. He and Jane stood there as Sam used all her strength to fight against the current and guide the raft to shore. She stepped onto the muddy bank and helped Annie do the same. After she wedged the raft far up on the riverbank, Sam took Robert's hat and stepped back into the water.

"I'll meet you up on the bridge," Sam said and took another step into the frigid water.

"Sam, what are you doing?" Annie leaned forward and tugged on Sam's T-shirt.

"Annie, go to the bridge. I'll be right there." Sam by now was up to her knees in the river.

"The water is rough here. You can't go in there."

"Please, just go. I'll be fine." The water slapped against Sam's thighs, but she continued to hold onto Robert's hat. With both hands gripped on the bill of the cap, she stared at the insignia. Robert wore this hat so many times that the bill had worn down so that it fit perfectly around the

contours of his head. Sam ran her finger along the words on the cap. It was uncertain what they'd do with Rizzo's Reptiles since Robert had no will and hadn't made any sort of arrangements as to what would happen to the shop. For now, Mr. Rizzo went back to running the store but promised Jane and Sam he'd share the profits with them until legal arrangements were made.

Sam took another step into the river. She shivered now that the water was up to her waist. She set the baseball cap on the surface and let it go. Slow at first, the cap barely moved until the river caught hold of it. As her eyes filled with tears, she guided the cap to the stronger current. Up to her chest in the icy water, her body became numb, but she knew she needed to make sure the cap floated in the stronger current. She felt a strong surge pull her forward, but she kept her feet firmly secured. She stared at the cap as it cruised down the river a few feet. Then she took a couple steps backward and returned to the shore.

After she exited the water, she strode along the riverbank and made her way to the bridge. She never took her eyes off the cap while it bobbed on the surface and floated away. Surprised that it hadn't sunk, Sam watched it move steadily along the river. She kept her eyes on the bright green snake emblem as the hat traveled downriver. Within a couple minutes, she joined Jane, Annie, and Travis on the bridge.

The cap floated beneath them, momentarily disappearing as it made its way to the other side where it drifted for a few more yards. Sam kept her eyes on the hat until it disappeared entirely from her view. Then she removed the small urn from her pocket and pried off the lid and handed it to her mother.

"Honey, you should be the one to do this." Jane set the urn in Sam's hand then wrapped her arm around her waist and held her tight.

Sam glanced behind her to see the shiny new guardrail where Robert's truck had descended into the river. With her hand gripped around the tiny urn, Sam crossed over to the other side. She stood on the ledge and peered down into the water. Jane, Annie, and Travis stood nearby and remained quiet.

"Seems fitting that he'll always be part of this river," Sam said and shook the urn until the fine powdery cremains scattered in the wind. The ashes fell like snow into the water.

Sam squinted at the ripples—Robert's cremains already blended in with the water. The current never ceased. The sun soon dipped down to the horizon and cast golden strobes across the river, creating shimmering

flecks of light on the surface.

Epilogue

San Diego: Summer 2015

THE JEEP ROLLED across the sand and hit ruts and small rocks along the way. Sam gripped the door handle and glanced out the window. Even though it was about an hour until sunset, beachgoers still covered the beach with their chairs and towels. This was one of the hottest days all season. Mid-August heatwaves always packed the beaches. With only one- to two-foot waves today, there hadn't been any exciting rescues or dangerous situations until Sam and Travis got the call from dispatch just now.

"How far up did they say it was?" Sam asked, excited to finally have an emergency that required her assistance.

"Way up by headquarters." Travis slowed down and maneuvered around dips in the sand. "By the way, you still need to make next month's schedule."

"I'll do that tomorrow. Never thought my position as lieutenant would be so sedentary. I'm in the office more than I am on the sand. So, someone got hurt, you said?"

"All they said was that a woman is in distress." Travis shrugged and stared straight ahead, slowing down as a couple kids darted across the sand toward the water.

"They didn't tell you anything else? Is it heatstroke? A jellyfish sting? Heart attack?" Sam asked, her voice escalating with each question. "Maybe it's a dislocated shoulder or some kind of laceration. Did they call the paramedics?" Sam hoped it was something serious, some sort of action that would get her adrenalin pumping. Bored and antsy from being at a desk so much at the main lifeguard station this week, Sam felt pumped and eager to put her lifeguarding skills to work.

"They said it'd be enough with just us there. I guess we'll know more when we get there." Travis thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel and whistled an unfamiliar tune.

Sam glared at Travis and wondered what got him so giddy. "You're pretty chipper today. You got big Friday night plans with the wife?"

"Yup, celebrating our anniversary. I've got reservations at the Marine

Room.”

Sam admired Travis and Maria for the type of love and commitment they shared, but she thought about how unlikely it'd be for her to ever find someone again who totally got her, someone who would love her no matter what. “How many years have you been married now? Thirty-one?”

“Thirty-two.” Travis beamed and glanced at Sam for a moment. “She’s still the love of my life.”

“You two give me hope, but with my track record, I’m not so sure I’ll ever reach thirty-some years with anyone.”

“Never say never. I take it things with Kim are over?”

“It’s been over for weeks now. Just haven’t had a chance to fill you in on my dating life. Didn’t think you’d be interested in hearing that I got bored with her.” Sam pursed her lips and stared out the window and thought about how free she felt since she stopped dating Kim, relieved that she no longer had to deal with the drama of dating someone so young and busy.

“I kinda figured things had fizzled out with you two.”

“Turned out the only thing we had in common was mountain biking. Can’t exactly connect on a deep level when it comes to just one interest. Things in the bedroom even started to get...pretty boring and predictable. Call me old fashioned, but I need to be in love to—”

“That’s not old fashioned, kiddo. It’s how it should be when you settle down with someone.” Travis smiled and focused on the bumpy terrain. Once he maneuvered around a couple of deep ruts, he returned to whistling some random tune.

Sam stared at Travis, studying his face for a moment. She hadn’t seen him this chipper in a long time. “Maybe if I’m lucky I’ll have what you and Maria have.”

“I thought you *did* have that at one time.”

“I thought so, too. I think if I could have half of what Annie and I had years ago, I’d be happy.”

“Why settle for only half of what you had with Annie? Why not the whole thing?”

“I figure at this point I shouldn’t set such high standards. Maybe that’s why things didn’t work out with me and Kim. I realized I was always comparing her to Annie.”

“That kind of love only comes around once in a lifetime.”

Sam became quiet and peered through the window to catch a glimpse of the main lifeguard station up ahead. She knew what Travis was trying

to say, and maybe if she was lucky, she'd find love again someday. But for now, she had no interest in meeting anyone new. No sense in dating a woman to only lose interest after a couple dates.

Once they neared headquarters, Sam noticed something displayed in the sand—hundreds of red and white rose petals strewn above the tideline in the shape of a heart. Sam huffed then said, “Look at that. Some hopeless romantic has littered the beach with rose petals. Looks like something’s been written in the sand above the heart.”

“What do you mean hopeless romantic?” Travis asked and glared at Sam. “What’s so hopeless about someone professing their love for someone like this?”

Sam sighed and shook her head, bugged by Travis’s overly optimistic mood. The jeep continued to rumble over the bumpy terrain while she kept her gaze on the ocean and adjacent sandy area. Ever watchful for injuries or illegal activities, she couldn’t help hoping to be asked to assist with pulling swimmers from the surf. She’d only had five rescues since her return to the department in the spring.

As they got closer to headquarters, Sam saw that the rose petals spelled out a few words. With the glare of the early evening sun piercing through the windshield, all she could see was an M and an E.

Once the jeep rumbled to a stop, Travis grabbed the walkie-talkie from the middle console. Sam exited the vehicle, ready to shoo away any onlookers as she provided medical assistance to the woman in distress. She grabbed the clunky first aid kit and lugged it across the sand. When she neared the main lifeguard station, she saw more clearly what was written in the sand: “Marry me.” She scoffed at this overly romantic and clichéd gesture then searched for their patient.

“You sure this is the right location?” Sam hollered at Travis who lingered behind a few feet. “I don’t see any signs of anyone hurt or in distress. Maybe the other supervisors took care of it?” She placed the first aid kit in the sand.

“Nope, we’re the first responders on this call.”

“You see what some sap wrote in the sand? In a few minutes, high tide’s gonna wash over this and make the words disappear. Seems pretty fitting since love is fleeting and doesn’t last.”

“Well, as I said, never say never. Love is probably closer than you think. Maybe you just need to look right in front of you for a change.” Travis waved an arm behind them then picked up the first aid kit and returned to the jeep.

"Where are you going?" Sam started to say but then noticed a familiar face in front of her. "Annie? What are you doing here?" Surprised but excited to see her, Sam had more questions in her head but got quiet when she noticed how nervous Annie looked.

"Travis is right. Maybe you need to finally see what's in front of you," Annie said and moved aside so that the rose petals were clearly visible.

Sam approached the giant heart to read the words "Marry me." She stared at her name in white rose petals. She was stunned, nearly speechless. "How did you...find so many roses? Are you...the woman in distress?" Sam cocked her head and stared at Annie.

"Is that what Travis said to get you here?" Annie laughed but quickly composed herself. Dressed in cargo shorts and a T-shirt, she looked like she'd been here at the beach all day planning this. "I guess you could say I'm a woman in distress. Been in distress for months ever since you left Mississippi."

"You came here to ask me to marry you? I thought I made it clear that—"

"Sam, I know you told me you want to move forward. I know you said that being with me again wouldn't really be moving forward, but...maybe we can leave only the bad things behind and hold on to the good."

"Well, yeah, that's what I'm doing in San Diego. I'm moving forward."

"You've always had a hard time seeing the good in front of you. What if our future looks totally different than how it was before? What if you move forward with *me*...as my wife?" Annie looked so earnest, but also so nervous. For a moment, she averted her eyes from Sam's and shuffled her bare feet in the sand. Then Annie looked deep into Sam's eyes and smiled, her whole face lighting up.

Sam wasn't sure she'd heard Annie clearly, but the look in her eyes said it all. As her *wife*? Sam thought as questions flooded her brain. "What about your job back home? What about your parents?"

"I haven't figured out the details yet, but I'll be retiring soon."

"Retiring? You're only in your forties."

"I've got enough in my pension to retire early. Maybe I could...I don't know, run some sort of self-defense class at one of the colleges here. As for my parents, they'll be fine. The thing is, I know I've never loved anyone as deeply as I love you. I know love like this only comes around once in a lifetime."

"Yeah, I'm finally realizing that. You'd really move back here? You'd do that for me?" Sam's heartbeat sped up as she took in all that Annie had

said. Sam couldn't believe what was happening. Sure that she'd lost a second chance with the love of her life, Sam suddenly felt weak-kneed when she realized what Annie was suggesting.

"I was a fool to leave you in the first place. I know what we had...*have* is pretty amazing. I'm going to propose a radical idea. I know this'll sound crazy, but what if we...well, what if we didn't live together all the time?"

"Are you suggesting an open relationship? That's not something I'd ever—"

"Babe, no, never. You're the only person I want to be with. I've never loved someone as deeply as you. It's a crazy thought, but what if we...have a home here in San Diego and one back in Mississippi?"

"Annie, my job is year-round now. I can't just leave whenever—"

"Sam, I know that. After I retire, I can be here most of the year, so long as I can go back to Mississippi to be with my parents a few weeks at a time. My heart is yours. I've longed for you ever since you left. Right now, I get five weeks of vacation a year. We'd probably only be apart a few weeks at a time before I retire."

Sam glanced at the rose petals on the sand, stunned that Annie went to this much trouble to profess her love. Sam recalled what she reluctantly told Annie that afternoon on the river. Still numb from Robert's passing, Sam wanted to leave the awfulness of the past behind—Robert's accident, Johnny's reappearance in her life, the horrible encounter with the Patterson brothers when she was a child. Months ago, once and for all, she left Covington County and all the horrid memories of that place. But she realized that there were good things she'd left behind, too.

The past year was a blur to her, but Sam hadn't felt this clear in months. "When we broke up," she said quietly and took a step closer to Annie, "I reasoned that I should just be grateful for what we had. I figured it was best to move forward and not look back." Sam's hand brushed against Annie's, the touch sending shivers through her body. Here before Sam stood the woman who never stopped loving her through the worst times of her life. She again took in all that Annie had said and thought carefully about what she'd say next. Sam's heart thudded in her chest. "My heart has belonged to you all this time. Even apart, I never stopped loving you."

"Nor have I."

"You know," Sam said and glanced at Travis over by the jeep, "this new position with the lifeguards isn't what I expected. I miss guarding the

beaches. I ride around all day in the jeep and supervise the other guards. I make schedules and write evaluations and reports. Five days a week, I make sure the guards are following protocol, but I miss the rescues. I miss the rush and the satisfaction of pulling swimmers to safety."

"Can you go back to guarding the beaches like before?"

"Seasonal lifeguards are only hired during summer. The best ones are kept through autumn."

"What if you went back to guarding the beaches during the summer and fall months, then returned to Mississippi once beach season ended?" Always a problem-solver, Annie furrowed her brow and glanced at the sand for a moment then added, "Maybe the department has some sort of seasonal position for supervisors, something other than a summer lifeguard."

Sam paused and glanced at the sunset over the ocean. "There's nothing more I ever want to do than lifeguarding. I'm sure Mama would like having me home in between lifeguarding seasons, but...I wouldn't be making much money."

"Sam, my pension from the police department will keep us comfortable. I never want to take your passion away from you, but I want you to know I'll always take care of you."

"Annie, I want a partner, someone to love me on an equal level. I don't need someone to take care of me anymore."

Annie reached for Sam's hand. "That's what I want, too. Something shifted in me when you were back in Mississippi. It's like my love for you reached a different level. I couldn't ignore it, but I also wanted to respect your need to...move forward as you put it."

"I felt the same way...about something shifting. It kind of scared me, I guess. Probably why I told you I needed to move forward without you. I'd never felt such a depth of love for someone as I did when I was back home. Well, as I still feel now. Annie, I love you and...want you by my side, no matter what the future holds." Sam realized she'd never stopped loving Annie, never fully let her go.

"Maybe we oughta stop being so practical and follow our hearts for a change." Annie looked deep into Sam's eyes. The setting sun cast amber rays of light onto her face, her eyes conveying her deep love for Sam.

In this moment, Sam knew for sure that Annie meant all that she said. At this point, she knew she'd be a fool to ever let her go. "This all feels like some sort of business transaction when all you'd probably intended was to profess your love for me. I always did love your grand gestures."

“So, is that...a yes?” Annie smiled and stepped closer to Sam, their bodies finally touching.

Sam nodded as her eyes filled with tears. “Can’t believe I’m crying after being proposed to. Now look at who the sap is.”

Annie gently wiped the tears from Sam’s cheek with her thumb and pulled her body closer. “My heart has never been so full of love for you as it is right now.”

Sam looked deep into Annie’s eyes. She never felt happier than she did right now, never more sure than how she felt in this moment. She loved Annie and didn’t ever want to lose her again. “I’d say it’s time you kissed me.”

Annie cupped Sam’s face in her hands and pressed her lips against hers. Annie’s lips felt so soft and familiar, causing Sam to want her even more. As they continued to kiss, cheers erupted behind them as fellow lifeguards applauded and hollered out congratulations. When Sam wrapped her arms around Annie and buried her face in her neck, a warmth flooded her body. But in an instant, a chill washed over her when they were hit by a wave. Sam glanced down to see rose petals scattered along the sand.

The rose heart was gone, the petals washed away in the surf, but Sam now knew that her heart belonged to Annie, the woman who would keep her safe and loved. With Annie once again by her side, Sam realized that while she spent her life saving others, Annie had spent hers saving Sam.

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