

**NOWHERE
GOOD**

PROLOGUE

FAIRVIEW, MISSOURI

TEN YEARS EARLIER

Keep running.

The words tumbled in Claire's head as the field stretched before her, the stars a million pinpricks in the sky above. She'd made it this far—she couldn't look back now. Not when freedom was so close she could taste it like honey on her tongue.

It didn't matter what would happen after. She'd heard horror stories about the way girls like her could go missing when they ran away from home, wind up in the back of the wrong man's car, but nothing could be worse than back there. All she had to do was make it past the green to the cornfield ahead. She'd be safe in the corn. Hidden. Like when she was a kid, during those frenzied games of hide and seek with her sister.

No one would find her there. She was *so* sure of it.

Her burgundy Converse shoes—high tops, flat-footed—weren't fit for running, and the soles of Claire's feet burned as they pounded the earth. Her backpack was just bulky enough to throw off her balance. Every muscle in her damn weak legs screamed at her to collapse. She should've taken the high school beep test seriously. Maybe if she'd kept up with the other girls in class, she'd be strong like them, not cursing every foot forward.

But Claire was alone now, so she had to be her own best friend.

C'mon, keep going. You can do it. Don't give up.

Her lungs heaved, each breath a cloud of glass.

She'd almost reached the half point when a sound—like wheels on asphalt—screeched somewhere behind her.

No.

No, no, no!

Claire kept running, but soon it wasn't just the moon and stars there with her. Two beams of light cut through the field from behind. High beams that stretched so far, they lit up the cornstalks in the distance, created a shadow shaped like her. She refused to look back, even when the sound of tires over mud filled the air. The grumble of an engine roared like a grizzly.

Then: "Claire, get back here!"

Marty's voice. Cold panic.

She dared a glance back. Marty's pick-up truck, that rusted hunk of junk, gained on her. The lights created splotches in her eyes. Claire's feet slipped on the wet grass, but she caught herself and kept running.

The truck sprayed mud beneath its wheels as it flew across the field and cut in front of her. A strangled yelp escaped her throat. She tried to take her chances in the field

behind them, but Marty was on her in an instant. His weight tackled her to the ground. She screamed and writhed as she was crushed between him and the earth.

"Calm down, Claire, Christ!" Marty hauled her to her feet and held her back by her elbows. Claire kicked and yelled with everything she had; all she could see was black. Hopeless, furious black.

"Stop—let me go!" Her throat burned, raw. Marty was too strong. She was a ragdoll in his arms. That didn't stop her from kicking and flailing like her life depended on it. *It did.*

"Let her burn her energy out," another voice said, and Claire's blood turned to ice.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes. And there was the shape of her father, illuminated by the light from the truck behind him: a wide frame, unbearably tall, a cut-off vest that exposed the dark edges of a Celtic cross tattoo wrapped in thorns on his bicep. He stepped toward them till Claire could make out the cool blue of his gaze, the silver stubble that lined his jaw. He had the look of a curious lion—not angry, but amused. And that scared her more than anything.

He was right in front of her now as Marty held her elbows back. Her dad's smell of firewood and beer nauseated her, but his face softened—almost like he cared—as he let out a gruff, "Aw, hell."

Maybe he could be reasoned with.

Maybe, somehow, she could still get out of this.

"Let me go, Daddy. Please, please let me go. I don't wanna live here anymore. You'll never have to see me again, I swear—I won't cause any more trouble."

He smiled down at her. Claire's heart pounded as she tried to read any kind of emotion on him, any sign of love for her. When he ran his thumb over her cheek, it burned, pure acid.

“Oh, sweetie,” he crooned, “I’m gonna teach you a lesson, and it’s gonna be the most important lesson I can ever teach. You never leave family behind. Never. You got that?”

With a nod at Marty, her dad turned away. Cold sweat trickled down her spine.

“Please, don’t—Dad!” She tried to resist, but Marty yanked her toward the back of the truck. “Marty? Please, stop!”

She screamed so loud it charred her throat, but they were in the middle of nowhere—no one could hear her, and no one cared. It had all been for nothing.

Claire should’ve known she could never leave Fairview, dead or alive.

ONE

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

TEN YEARS LATER

The homicide department was dead silent, but it wasn't every day they lost one of their own.

Detective Seth Winslow thumbed the pages of a manila folder as he paced the empty office. He'd left the funeral early; out of everyone, he knew Robert Haylock the least, and he'd volunteered to pick up some slack for his colleagues so they could enjoy the celebration of life.

He closed the file. If there was one thing he knew how to do, it was write up a warrant.

From the seventh floor of the police headquarters, the streets of Kansas City spread beyond the windows, blurred by the raindrops. Gauzy street lights shone through the storm, and a blotted-out moon peeked between the clouds. In the reflection of the window, he saw himself—his own

tired blue eyes and short brown hair, a suit and a tie. The fact that he couldn't stand the way facial hair felt on his jaw didn't help him look any older than twenty-eight. Still too young and a long way from his hometown of New York. Maybe it was just the afterglow of Haylock's funeral, but that knowledge felt particularly heavy tonight.

At the end of the day, when all the paperwork was done, his apartment was full of half-empty boxes he didn't feel like dealing with. Six months here and he hadn't hit it off with anyone on the force, not even a group of guys to grab a beer with after a rough shift. Not that he'd put in much of an effort. He had no right to complain; moving had been his choice.

And he was solving murders. That was what mattered.

He dropped the warrant on Sanchez's desk and moved through the dark office, toward the exit. He'd busied himself with as much paperwork as he could—it was time to go.

The conference room door had been left ajar. As he passed, something on the table hooked his eye. A file with crime scene photos spilling out. Lieutenant Delaney must have forgotten to lock up.

Seth glanced over his shoulder—no one was here. He pushed into the room, lit only by the street lights coming through the window. At the table, he inched a picture out of the file.

Night, a young woman's body spread on asphalt. Her head was lulled to the side, tucked into her shoulder, hiding her face. Long, dark blonde hair mingled with the gore—a hack-job of a cut to her throat. She was fully clothed, wearing a tank top and loose-fitting jeans. But there was something written—no, *carved*—on her forearm.

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME

"Jesus," Seth muttered.

The letters were jagged with strips of flesh peeling away. He supposed that would happen if you tried to cleave a sentence into someone's skin. Without seeing the coroner's report, he guessed this was done with a very thin blade. A scalpel, a boxcutter. Surgically thin lines without a surgeon's touch. Curiously, there was an X-ray image from the coroner too. The victim's neck had been fractured.

The light flicked on, at the same time Seth heard a voice. "We're calling it the Fairview murder, pending something catchier."

"Lieutenant, sorry, I just—"

"That's all right." Lieutenant Sheila Delaney held up a hand, setting him at ease. She was still in her dress from the funeral, her pale face lined with exhaustion as she joined him, silver hair pin-straight. "Robert wouldn't want me to drag my heels on finding his replacement. Fairview is a fairly small town and their chief is a personal friend of mine, so they need the backup." She slid some of the papers aside, revealing more photos. "Her name is Eliza Johnson. She was only twenty-six."

"I was just looking at this X-ray here," Seth said. "The killer fractured her neck *and* slit her throat?"

"The fracture was non-fatal. The cut is what killed her."

Huh.

One of the autopsy photos caught his attention. A close-up of a stick and poke tattoo on the victim's ankle, the initials DB with a heart drawn next to them. "Haylock ever figure out who DB is?"

"He did not," Delaney said. "He believed a drifter killed her. Someone from out of town saw a woman passed out behind a dumpster and abducted her. Wrong place, wrong time."

"Seems a bit personal for that."

"Well, she was a known addict, had some solicitation charges under her belt. No DNA was found on the body, though. No signs of sexual assault. Her purse was recovered behind the dumpster. The only solace, if you can call it that, is she had a lot of heroin in her system when she died. She might not have felt much."

Heroin. It was like hearing the name of a toxic old friend, someone he'd rather not run into and be tempted to shake hands with.

"So she was killed somewhere else and left here, in public, with the writing on display," Seth said. "Why would a drifter do that? Why would he write something this possessive if he didn't know her?"

Lieutenant Delaney's eyes scrutinized him, made him hesitate. The space between them filled with the splatter of rain on the windows.

"I could find out," Seth said. "I know I'm new here, but I'd be good for this case."

She let out a light laugh and began gathering the photos into a pile. "Haylock had worked a handful of cases in Fairview over the years. He had good rapport with the locals. Sending my newest and youngest detective to replace him would not seem very responsible."

All right, that one stung, but he didn't let it show.

Delaney breezed past him toward the board and pinned some photos up.

Don't push your luck. But Seth had never been afraid to go after what he wanted in his career; there was a reason he'd been the youngest person in his precinct to make detective. He'd done well for himself in the two years since. But this wasn't New York, and Lieutenant Delaney didn't have any extra patience for him.

Still, he wasn't about to give up that easily. "I understand your point, ma'am, but I've worked cases like this before. I'm good for more than just street shootings."

She lifted a brow, as if to call out his audacity. "You know, I've never understood why the detective who caught the 'Brooklyn Butcher' would take a position all the way down here. If Kansas City's homicides are boring to you, Winslow, then NYPD would love to have their rising star back."

He sighed in exasperation. He hated being misunderstood. "That's not what I meant, Lieutenant. I like working here."

"Good. I like having you here." She offered a quick, but cutting smile and went back to the pile, deciding which one to pick next. With the crime scene photos gone, another was left behind—Eliza Johnson when she was younger, alive, smiling at the camera for a school photo with a blue background. Green eyes and shiny hair, a healthy flush to her cheeks. A snapshot of her life before it all went downhill.

"Can I at least state my case?" he asked.

Delaney pressed her palms on the table. "Look, I already know you're good, Winslow, but you're a city cop. Fairview is deep in the countryside. You could say goodbye to the camera angles and the potential witnesses and the *backup*. Not to mention the townsfolk see and hear things they'd never tell an outsider. These folks protect their own. I'd know, I grew up in a place like that."

"True, but I did a lot of solo work in New York. Undercover, especially when I was in narcotics. I always made it out and got my job done."

Delaney studied him for a moment too long. "Why do you want it so badly? What's so personal about this one?"

Seth hesitated. He didn't want to make it personal, but part of it always was, at least for him. "I've closed every case

you've given me. The stabbings, shootings, break-ins, accidents. But cases like this"—he pointed at the photo of Eliza's body—"are exactly why I do what I do. It's more than a homicide—it's a statement. And he could do it again."

"Hm. I know your file."

"Then you know I've dealt with killers like this before. Maybe someone unexpected is exactly what we need here."

"You'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"Good. Let's make him nervous."

She perched on the edge of the table, considering it. Despite his attempts to maintain confidence, Seth's heart pounded.

Delaney sighed as she hopped to her feet. "You're lucky—I happen to agree with you. A drifter likely didn't do this." She shot him one last wolfish, all-knowing smile. He couldn't help but feel like this was a test, and somehow, he'd passed. "I'll let them know you're coming."

FAIRVIEW, MISSOURI

Seth knocked on the door of a bungalow with sun-bleached paneling. A pick-up truck was parked in the driveway, its bed covered by a tarp, and the Missouri sun had sucked the life out of the lawn. Other houses were lush green with sprinklers on, but this one stood out. The bad seed on the street.

Beside him, Officer Amy Pereira shifted from heel-to-heel, stealing a glance his way. He understood why she'd be wary of him. He'd only arrived in Fairview a couple of hours ago, and he was a good thirty years younger than Haylock. After a restless night of reviewing case files, a four-hour drive down the backroads had brought him here, past a corncob-shaped

population sign that read: *Welcome to Fairview, Missouri's Corn Capital!* Less than eight thousand people lived here, so it was small, but not *one-hundred-people* small.

Pereira had been the only cop remotely eager to ride with him today. She'd also been the first to offer something like a lead.

He let her do her thing and knock on the door herself.

"Brad? It's Amy Pereira, you in there?"

Still no response.

Seth knocked harder, rattling the screen, then projected his voice through the house. "Mr. Bailey? This is the police, we just wanna talk." Nothing. He turned to Pereira. "Think he went for a walk?"

Pereira huffed. She wasn't much older than him—maybe thirty—and she had tawny skin and an ovular face, big hazel eyes. Pretty. "I dunno, it's a steamer today. His work's closed Sundays and his truck's here, so he's gotta be somewhere in there."

"And you're sure this guy knew Eliza? I'm looking for someone with the initials DB, not BB."

"You're also looking for Eliza's dealer, right? Brad ain't a seller, but he sure is an addict. He's gotta know who Eliza was buying from."

"True. Too bad he's not answering."

A bad feeling cooked inside him. Seth moved to the bay window and peeked inside the house. The lights were off and the curtains were drawn, but as he leaned closer, an off smell—something rotting—hit his nose.

He knew that smell.

To be sure, he took another angle until he could see clearly into the living room.

Somebody was slumped on the couch inside. He could make out their arm, limp beside them.

And their green flesh.

“We’ve got a body.”

“You kidding!?” Pereira exclaimed.

“No. Call it in.”

With his gun at the ready, Seth booted the bottom of the front door. It flew right open, spewing out the pungent stench of decomposing human flesh. There was nothing else like it. He held his weapon forward while trying to shield his nose, at the same time Pereira choked and coughed beside him.

“Dispatch, this is Officer Pereira—I’m at 258 Willowdale Ave. We’ve got a dead body, advanced state of decomposition, suspected overdose. Requesting backup immediately.”

A man’s voice crackled through the radio. “*Copy that, Pereira. En route.*”

Seth moved up the hall and cleared each room. There were only two, a bathroom and a bedroom, no basement. No one else was here. He put his gun away and covered his face with his elbow as he returned to the living room. The acrid stench burned his nostrils, no matter how hard he tried not to breathe it in.

“Oh, good lord,” Pereira was saying. “Good freakin’ lord, death has really got a thing for me lately. Damn it, *damn it.*”

He understood what she meant; she’d filled him in on the drive over. Pereira had been the one to find Haylock dead from a heart attack behind the wheel, crashed into a pole with a bag of White Castle in the passenger seat. A midnight trip for fast food had turned fatal, ending an esteemed homicide detective’s forty-year career. She’d also been the one to answer the call about Eliza’s murder just days before and was the first officer on the scene.

This was a different kind of death. Brad Bailey’s body had become bloated, oozing liquids and turning all different

shades of yellow and green. On the coffee table, next to an ashtray, there was a needle, a spoon, and a lighter. *Heroin.*

Taking in the room, covered in beer cans and garbage, the story here became clearer.

Seth's stomach turned over. His mother once told him, somewhere in the haze between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, that he'd end up like this. Alone, surrounded by needles, *rotting*.

"How long you think he's been here?" Pereira asked. "Dang, no one even reported him missing."

Seth squared his shoulders and let himself breathe, putrid as it was. "I'm no coroner, but based on the color and stage of decomposition, a week or so."

"Eliza died six days ago. She could've been here before he croaked."

"Yeah, and looks like he was having a party. This should be treated like a crime scene—try to get forensics in, find out who was in this house before he died. I'd love to know how none of his 'friends' came back to check on him." He couldn't hold back the edge of anger in his voice, but this one hit close to home. "He needed a fucking hospital. I'm gonna go look around."

Snapping on a pair of latex gloves, Seth moved through the house. It was borderline dilapidated with posters of naked women on the walls. It reminded him of the type of seedy apartments he used to buy dope from back when he was growing up in Brooklyn. He'd never liked the feeling of a place like this, even before he was a cop.

Inside Brad's room, the bed was unmade and clothes littered the floor. Careful not to disturb anything, Seth stepped inside and took in the picture of this guy's life. He wasn't sure what he was searching for—something to show his murder victim had been here, but that could be

anything. He stopped at the cluttered nightstand beside Brad's bed.

A photograph rested on top of a pile of junk. It showed a teenage Brad Bailey in a suit and a pretty girl with a moonlike face, wearing a red prom dress. She smiled drunkenly at the camera and held up a lit joint. With her long, dark blonde hair parted in the center, she looked old school, the type of beauty you'd see in a 70s magazine; a girl out of time. For a split second, he almost thought she was Eliza, but Eliza's features had been sharper, more catlike. Still, their palettes were nearly identical, down to the rosy white skin and light green eyes.

He was about to put it down when something on the bedside table made him pause.

Three dime bags.

He picked one of them up. A bag like this had been found in Eliza's pocket, but that one was empty, and this one was full. Black tar heroin. He pressed the ball between his fingers.

A rush.

Hot lava in his veins.

Melting like—

"Winslow?"

He stood, holding the bag so tight his palm became sweaty inside his latex glove. "What is it?"

Pereira appeared beside him and saw the two remaining bags on the nightstand. She let out a toothy whistle. "Wow, surprised his good buddies didn't swipe this from him."

Without thinking, he slipped the third bag into his pocket before Pereira saw he'd picked it up. The regret was instant—*old habits die hard*—but it was too late to change it now.

He focused on the photo of Brad and the girl. "Who is this?"

"Oh, that's Claire Dyer. Her daddy owns The Stalk and

Barrell, restaurant and bar on the east side. Fairview home-grown, been here for generations. They've even got their own corn farm. Practically makes them royalty in a town like this."

Seth took out his phone and brought up Eliza's high school yearbook photo from his case files. "What do you think?"

"They sure look alike," Pereira said. "Coincidence?"

"Probably," Seth said, putting the phone away.

"I've never heard anything about Brad dating Eliza, but I've been told he dated Claire Dyer in their high school days. She dumped him after grad, but I guess he never moved on. She sure did, though—she's been with Dillon Beamish ever since."

"Dillon Beamish," Seth said, feeling out the name. "DB?"

"Shit. Maybe."

He scanned the room and stopped on a short bookshelf piled with junk. Tucked at the bottom was a hardcover book with gold letters embossed on the spine: FAIRVIEW HIGH, CLASS OF 2017.

Pereira followed as he grabbed the book and flipped through the pages until he found Brad's high school photo, and Claire Dyer's not far after it. They'd been sophomores. He flipped to the seniors and found Eliza Johnson's photo, exactly as he had in his files. And on the page before, there was a picture of a guy with a buzzcut, pockmarked cheeks, and eyes so dark, they were nearly black. He wore a white beater with no hint of a smile. Dillon Beamish.

"Same class, same year," Seth said. He closed the book and put it back on the shelf. "Haylock was so focused on Eliza's recent history, but these are the people who knew her for her entire life."

“Wow,” Pereira said. “Maybe Eliza and Dillon had a thing.”

“Maybe they never stopped.”

“Well, you’re in luck—both Claire and Dillon should be working at the bar right now.” Nerves flickered over her face. “But hey, just a tidbit: avoid the accusations if you wanna stay in Chief Wells’s good book. Claire’s daddy happens to be one of the biggest financial contributors to our humble police force.”

“Don’t worry. If they have nothing to hide, they have nothing to worry about.”

“Famous last words,” Pereira said grimly. “You’ll find them at The Stalk and Barrell on East Street.”

TWO

“Daddy, we need to talk.”

Claire’s fists shook at her sides and her voice trembled as she tried to look strong in front of her dad and his friends. Her dad bounced her baby nephew, Sully, on his lap and held a hand of cards. He blinked at her like she was stupid.

“What is it, sweetie?”

“Alone. *Please?*”

Around the table in the back room of the bar, Claire’s dad and his buddies were having one of their poker games. She knew better than to act up when the bikers were in town—especially those sleazy ones that came in from Illinois, and *especially* when they were playing poker—but she’d just been told something she couldn’t wrap her head around.

Her dad flashed a dangerous smile. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait till later. We’re in the middle of a game here, baby girl.”

“I think something happened to Brad. Kay said she saw a bunch of cop cars and an ambulance at his house. Do you know anything about it?”

"*Know* anything?" He glowered at her, all serious eyes. They were the color of ice, so different from hers. "Brad Bailey was a worthless junkie, sweetheart. Sounds like he OD'd. Breaking news: bear takes shit in woods. Why would I *know* anything about it?"

A gut feeling, mostly. Claire's dad had always hated Brad, and he used to say that someday, Brad would "get what was coming."

Claire swallowed the lump in her throat. Her dad's friends continued to watch her, and she felt uneasy under the weight of their stares. They were all like him: early sixties, tattooed, tougher than a leather boot, some with rat tails and cut-off denim vests. She hated the way they scanned her body like she was some sort of tasty meal. It'd started when she was fourteen and had only gotten worse now that she was twenty-four. It was a nauseating feeling, knowing the men who watched her grow up wanted to screw her.

The door to the bar dinged, snapping the tension in two. Claire peered through the window on the door to the main area of the bar. No customers were here this early, but a man she'd never seen before entered. In fact, she'd never seen a man like him on anything but a TV screen—clean-cut, tall, with creamy skin that contrasted against his dark attire and short brown hair. If it weren't for his boyish, clean-shaven face, she'd think he was much older.

Her dad's hulking frame appeared behind her, still holding Sully. "Well fuck me, that's him, boys. The kid detective I told ya'll about. I guess he's replacin' Haylock, and the state sent 'im quick 'cause of that bitch who got killed."

Claire winced. *Eliza*. Her name had been Eliza.

"We oughta find the bastard who killed 'er ourselves, bringin' more city detectives 'round here. I could handle Haylock, but I dunno about this one."

"I'll go talk to him, find out what his deal is." Claire went to leave, but stopped and scooped Sully into her arms. He came with her willingly, making a cute giggling noise.

"That's my girl." Her dad patted her back. She tried not to let him see her flinch.

Putting on her game face—a big, bright smile—Claire breezed out behind the bar, Sully heavy in her arms. She was still baffled her tiny sister had created such a big-ass baby. He cooed and gurgled as she walked over to the man. A badge shaped like a shield was mounted to his belt, catching the amber shade of the bar lights. Claire did well to keep the bar tidy, the surfaces of the tables glossy, in spite of the dive bar aesthetic.

"Hi, good mornin'!" she chimed. "Sorry about the baby here, we don't normally get folks in before noon. Can I help you?"

The man nodded like it was no big deal. He must've been warm in that outfit—slacks and a charcoal button-up, rolled up to his forearms. "Good morning, miss." Inky blue eyes lingered on her for a moment too long. His voice was deep and smooth, but not unkind. "Are you Claire Dyer?"

She nodded. She hadn't expected him to full name her. "I am... can I help you?"

"I'm Detective Seth Winslow. I'm working with Fairview PD. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions."

She tensed up. "Is this about Brad? One of our regulars lives on his street, said she saw some cops and stuff... he's dead, isn't he?"

The detective's features softened. "I'm afraid so."

Claire sucked in a breath. The pain in her chest intensified, but at the same time, she felt lighter. Back in high school, she'd lived in fear of a visit like this. But time had numbed those feelings.

In a horrible way, she was almost relieved.

She held onto Sully tighter, appreciating his warm skin on hers. "I see. Well, I hadn't known Brad in years, so I don't think I can help you."

"Do you mind if we sit somewhere and talk?"

He clearly wasn't going anywhere, so Claire bottled those feelings inside and told herself she'd crack into them later. "Sure thing." She zipped from behind the bar and looked up at the detective, quite a few inches taller than her, and managed a toothy smile. He didn't react. "I hope you don't mind my nephew tagging along," she said, leading him across the bar with her arms full of Sully. "My sister Clem's out shopping with her husband Marty, so I'm on baby duty."

"The conversation might not be the most kid-friendly."

They reached a booth, far from the back room. Claire sat on one side with Sully, the detective on the other. "It's all right, he hasn't even said 'mama' yet. Don't let his size fool you—he's only six months old." She tickled his belly. "Ain't that right, Sully?"

Sully giggled. When Claire glanced up at the detective, there was a ghost of a smile on his face. A dimple on each one of his pale cheeks. Everyone had to smile when they saw a cute baby. It reminded her that he was a person, just like her. No need to be nervous of him.

And he did look young, maybe only a few years older than she was. She remembered the last detective who'd breezed into town, that grizzled old man with a belly that could hold more beer than she could pour, who was respectful till he had a drink or ten in him, then the comments about "pretty girls like her" started to come out. It was sad he'd died and all, but that guy had told her to "smile more" one too many times. And Claire already *was* a smiler.

The subtle handsomeness of the man in front of her caught her off guard.

“First and foremost,” Detective Winslow said, “I’m sorry for your loss. I understand you knew Mr. Bailey well.”

Mr. Bailey. She hadn’t heard anyone call him that since high school, and it was always when he was in trouble. “Used to know him,” she corrected. “We dated on and off in high school, but then he got real into the drugs, and his goofy old self became less funny and more concerning. Most people stopped talking to him years ago.”

“Did you?”

Instinct caused Claire to turn toward the kitchen, because she felt someone’s eyes on her. It was Dillon, her boyfriend, who also worked as their cook during business hours. He watched through the window that led into the kitchen, burning a hole in her head. Detective Winslow didn’t seem to notice, his attention fixed on her.

“Mostly,” she said. “I’d text him every now and then to make sure he was still breathing. Probably been a year since I’ve sent one of those.”

He pulled out a photo, then put it on the table. “This was on the table beside Brad’s bed.” He slid it closer to her, and her heart dropped.

She hadn’t seen this in years.

It was her and Brad at prom. She looked drunk and stoned off her ass—*she had been*—and Brad was giving a goofy smile to the camera. Seeing it hit her over the back of the head with memories. She didn’t want to cry in front of this man, but in this photo, she didn’t see Brad, the addict—she saw Brad, the sweet guy who used to hold her hand and tell her how pretty she was. The girl in this photo had loved him from the bottom of her heart; all she’d ever wanted was to save him.

Claire dabbed the few tears that escaped and handed the photo back.

"I'm sorry," Detective Winslow said, his voice earnest.

"S'okay. I just always wished Brad would get better, and I'm sad to know he never did."

He tucked the photo away, then took out a fancy iPhone, opened something on it, and turned it to her. A picture of a dime bag with a red stripe along the top. "Have you seen this before?"

A tickle of familiarity, followed by an image in her head—more like a camera flash—of seeing something like this. Not years ago, but recently. As in a month ago, maybe less. It was in the back of Dillon's car while she was cleaning, but she'd passed it off as garbage because Dillon didn't shoot up or do any drugs like that.

"What is it?"

"It's black tar heroin. We found bags like this at Brad's house, but this one was found on Eliza Johnson's body. I'm sure you heard what happened to her."

"I-I did."

Damn it—she was losing her composure. Her palms dampened with sweat, her heart thumped so loud she was sure Sully might hear it. Why would the same dime bag be found at Brad's place, on Eliza's body, *and* in the back of Dillon's car?

Claire might've been kept in the dark, but she wasn't stupid. She knew her dad and his buddies were into some shady business, and she knew Dillon and Marty were part of it too. Maybe that was why the dime bag had been in Dillon's car—because they sold drugs. That must've been the connection the detective was looking for; find where the bags are coming from, open up a new world of people Eliza knew, people who could've killed her.

But Dillon, flawed as he might be, was no murderer.

"I've never seen it." The lie fell out. For a moment, she regretted it. But she had to protect her family. *Right?*

"Okay." He took the photo away. "Did you know Eliza at all?"

"Not really. She went to my school, but she was two grades ahead of me. That's about as far as I knew her."

"What about your boyfriend?"

"My boyfriend?" She never said she had one.

"Dillon Beamish." His expression showed no emotion. Claire had no idea how to read him. She'd tried flashing her girlish charms or whatever and he seemed completely unfazed.

Feeling cornered, she laughed. "No, he didn't. They were probably in the same class, but he never said anything about her. If he knew her well, he would've told me when she died."

"Of course. He wouldn't have any reason to lie about that."

She wasn't sure if he was telling her or asking her. "No, he wouldn't."

He offered a slight smile. "Sorry for all these questions. Since you all went to school with Eliza, I have a lot of history to catch up on."

"It's all right. This was never just about Brad, was it?"

He was decent enough to say, "No," and Claire appreciated the honesty. She watched him take out a notepad and pen from his pocket and set it up on the table. "One more question, Claire—do you know where Dillon was the night Eliza died? That was Monday, June 23rd."

Claire racked her brain for the answer. "Um, yeah, he was home. I remember it 'cause he was playing his video games real loud till the early hours. All those gunshots ticked me

off. I got the news about Eliza in the morning, and Dillon was in bed by then.”

The detective jotted things down, tilting his notepad enough to hide it from her vision.

“I’m sure you’re just doing your due diligence, right?” She laughed nervously. “I mean, my boyfriend can’t be a suspect here. He didn’t know Eliza.”

“Of course,” he replied, but this time, she sensed he was not being honest. “Maybe I could talk to Dillon myself. Is he around?”

“Um—”

A rough hand smoothed over her shoulders. Claire turned into a block of ice. Her dad leaned over them, his white hair in a long ponytail, shaved short at the front, matching the goatee around his mouth. He’d swapped out of his denim vest and into that long-sleeved tartan button-up that did well to hide his tattoos. Now, he looked no different than a grandpa in a Wal-Mart ad, flipping burgers in front of a grill.

He playfully said, “Aww, come on, man, you always come into a man’s business and make his daughter cry?”

“I’m not crying, Daddy,” Claire muttered, wiping her eyes to be sure. Maybe there were a few stragglers left. Sully bounced on her lap. Claire had been so absorbed into the conversation, she’d nearly forgotten about him.

Detective Winslow’s expression didn’t change as he exchanged a firm, slightly-too-long handshake with her father.

“Ron Dyer,” her dad said. “I own this bar, been in my family for two generations now.”

“Detective Winslow. I was just asking—”

“I overheard ya. You were asking where my cook, Dillon, is, but I’m afraid he’s not in today. I sent ’im to grab some

supplies from a farm in the next town over, so he won't be back for a while."

Claire frowned. Dillon was in the back. Why were they lying?

"How long is a while, sir?" the detective asked.

"Sir!" Her dad cackled. "Hey, it's nice to have some respect 'round here. You're all right, kid. Polite. To answer your question: few hours, prob'ly, but Dillon's his own man. Will see 'im when I see 'im."

Detective Winslow did not seem convinced. He turned to Claire. "You don't know when he'll be back?"

"N-no idea." Claire's stomach lurched. Here she was, complicit in all these lies, when she didn't even know what she was lying for.

"Right," Detective Winslow said. "I need to talk to him. Could you let him know I stopped by?"

"Sure, man, no problem," her dad replied.

The door dinged, and a group of people came in—the Welsh family, equipped with Grandma Welsh, her daughter, her daughter's daughter, and a baby. They came in every Sunday like clockwork for bacon and eggs lunch, but this time, their timing was impeccable—the perfect out.

"Ahh, the lunch rush begins," her dad said.

Detective Winslow stood, and Claire did too, scooping Sully into her arms. "I'll come back at a better time." His gaze briefly met hers before he nodded at them both, then took off across the bar.

"I'm sure you will," her dad muttered.

As he left, the detective glanced at the kitchen window, but Dillon wasn't there anymore.

THREE

Back at the station, Seth leaned over his laptop in the conference room as late-afternoon light spilled through the windows, his coffee cold beside him. He'd spent most of his day getting up to speed on the case and reviewing potential camera angles from the night of the murder, but he didn't find anything Haylock might have missed. And his mind kept going back to Dillon Beamish.

If Claire Dyer wasn't going to tell him about her boyfriend's relationship with Eliza Johnson, then there were other ways to dig up the truth.

Social media. Like a gift from beyond the grave, Eliza had left her Facebook profile public. It hadn't been touched in years, but photos from her high school days were wide open. Before she ended up homeless and addicted.

Even the most recent photos were from eight years ago—Eliza, alone in front of a willow tree; Eliza at sunset, holding a fishing line in front of a lake; Eliza on a grassy trail, bathed in sunlight. She wore clothes from another era, yoga pants and hoodies that had long gone out of style. Even all the way

out here, at a high school in Missouri, some trends had been the same as when he'd been in high school in New York. It made him strangely nostalgic for a time he barely thought of anymore.

Someone had taken these photos of Eliza. When Haylock and the cops had interviewed those who knew her, they'd come up short-handed. She'd spent the recent years of her life in and out of the women's shelter and mostly slept on the street, so any friends she once had were long gone. She did have a phone, but had pawned it a month before, probably for drug money. As Seth skimmed past each picture, he checked the names of those who had liked them, but didn't see any of the names who'd earned a spot on his radar yet. *No DB.*

Seth sighed and leaned back in his chair. The conference room was much smaller than what he was used to. It was encased by windows looking out into the bullpen, where a handful of officers sat on desks throughout. A corkboard with crime scene photos pinned to it had been set up by Haylock, but Seth had created his own section too, just for his persons of interest. Dillon Beamish's picture had made the cut.

A knock at the door, and Pereira slipped into the room.

"Hey, we're all finished up at Brad's house. I tracked down some of the people who were there, but no one saw Eliza. They didn't run together after all."

"Any of them explain why they had a big party at his place, then didn't even think to even check on him for days after?"

Pereira wore a pensive look. "Not a lot on that, but we still don't know everyone who was there. Chief Wells doesn't think we should bother with a further investigation, with it being an OD and all. Thing is, we'd be waiting a while for a

forensics team anyway. State can only send them quick if there's a homicide. Otherwise, get in line, you know?"

Seth sighed in irritation. "Right."

"I'm gonna keep fighting for it, see what I can find out."

He linked his fingers behind his head, growing tired. He hadn't eaten anything all day, and it didn't occur to him until just now. He still had to go check into the town's only motel—he could worry about food then.

Pereira came over and peeked at his screen. "Didn't take you for a Facebook guy."

Snapping out of it, Seth reassumed his position over his laptop, using the wireless mouse to scroll through Eliza's profile. "Social media always tells us something. I couldn't find Dillon at the bar, but Claire said he didn't know Eliza. Felt like she was holding something back."

He clicked past another photo, checking the likes. Nothing. Then another. But when he clicked the next, one name on the list stared back at him, practically in red flashing letters.

Dillon Beamish.

"And here we go," Seth said. "They didn't know each other, but here's Dillon Beamish liking one of Eliza's posts from ten years ago."

"Huh, would you look at that?" Pereira said.

Vindicated, Seth scrolled back even further. Eliza's life shuttered by in reverse. It wasn't long before she couldn't be much older than twelve in the photos. Playgrounds and classrooms started to appear as the backdrops.

And in one, Eliza stood next to a jungle gym, making bunny ears behind a boy's head. The boy was scrawny with a grumpy face, short brown hair and eyes to match. A young Dillon Beamish.

It was posted by Eliza herself. The caption: *that's my pickle!*

"They were close enough for nicknames," Seth muttered.

"Childhood friends," Pereira agreed. "Hell, I had no idea. I only moved here a few years ago, so I'm pretty rusty on my Fairview history myself."

He stood, his heart beating louder, that feeling he always got when he sensed he was onto something—that he'd found critical evidence. He had a long way to go yet, but this was a start.

"I'm gonna get these printed off and pay Claire and Dillon another visit."

"It's nearly five p.m. on a Sunday," Pereira said. "If I were you, I'd try their place. Let me grab you the address."

"Thanks. This time, Dillon better show up."

Seth parked his car, an unmarked Chevrolet Caprice that was older than him, outside unit thirty-six in Sunny Stone Trailer Park. Among the rows of mobile homes that had seen better days, this one was nicer—sky blue with a garden struggling to survive in the summer heat, a few decals of birds with their wings spread on the paneling. Windchimes tinkled through the breeze as he got out, along with the distant smell of a campfire.

To his left, on the property next door, an elderly woman in a hot pink tracksuit watered her garden, glowering at him. He held up a hand to wave. Her unfriendly demeanor immediately fell off.

"Evenin', good-lookin'!" She dropped her watering can and limped toward the picket fence dividing the properties. "You must be that new detective I've been hearin' about. You can call me Glenda, or just Glen."

Huh. Word did travel fast here.

"Yes, ma'am. Detective Winslow."

She gave him a coy smile, revealing a mesh net of wrinkles on her cheeks. "Sure are a cute one."

He'd rather she didn't do that, but he offered a smile anyway to be polite. "That's very nice of you, ma'am. Do you know the couple who lives here?"

"Dillon and Claire? 'Course I do! What kinda neighbor would I be if I didn't know the lovebirds next door? I keep waitin' for the day that pretty young Claire comes 'round with a ring on her finger. Young love, right, darlin'? I'm sure you know all about it." Her milky eyes searched his left hand for a ring she wouldn't find.

"Do you ever hear any fighting or yelling or anything like that?"

"Oh, Lordy, I'm surrounded by so many drunk shitheads in this park, I wouldn't be able to tell where it's coming from if it was in my own dang backyard."

"So there is yelling."

Glenda shrugged. Even if there were issues with Claire and Dillon, he doubted she would tell him. He took out his phone anyway and pulled up Eliza's yearbook photo.

"Have you ever seen this woman around the park?"

She tilted her head back and adjusted her glasses, then wrinkled her nose in something like disgust. "No, but I seen the other one. The one with the boobs."

"Sorry, *who*?"

"Don't know 'er name, but she looks kinda like Claire with her hair and all that, but much less decent. Dressed like a floosy, showed up bangin' on Claire and Dillon's door 'bout a month ago, but Dillon told 'er to scram. Smelled like trouble."

If that person had been Eliza, it'd be a game changer. "You're sure it wasn't this woman?"

Glenda scrutinized the photo. “Nope, wasn’t her. That’s Gilly’s daughter, Eliza—I heard what happened to ’er, poor thing. Nope, never seen Eliza ’round here, but I’ve seen that other girl. She’s no good, no good at all, that one.”

He lowered his phone. *Damn it.*

“Detective?”

Seth turned. Claire held open the screen door to her trailer, watching them.

He bowed away from Glenda. “Excuse me.”

“See ya, sugar!”

Claire had a cautious expression as he approached her front porch. She wore the same clothes as earlier: a white T-shirt and a pair of denim shorts, low-waisted. And while she’d welcomed him into her family’s bar with a full smile earlier, now her posture was more tense, guarded. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail. She had elvish ears and a beautiful face; wide-set eyes and full lips, a small nose tinged with pink.

He tried not to give it too much thought as he said, “Evening, Claire. Is Dillon home?”

She leaned into the doorframe. “He’s not here.” She had a drawl to her voice, but her words were clipped. Night and day compared to the smiley girl earlier.

“Huh. He wouldn’t be avoiding me, would he?”

“No, no, he wouldn’t do that.”

Seth peered into the trailer behind her. A fist-shaped hole perforated the drywall at the end of the hall. Claire took notice of him looking, then moved her body in front of it. He said nothing, but glanced up her arms for any sign of trauma. She hugged herself tighter.

“That’s not what it looks like, and you’re not gonna find any bruises on me. I wouldn’t be with someone like that.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you—that wasn’t my intention.”

She deflated. "That's all right... I get it, you're a cop or whatever." She took a breath and glanced over her shoulder again, then bit her lip. "Dillon should be home soon, so..."

He needed to see the inside of that trailer. "You mind if we talk inside while we wait?"

"I was in the middle of cleaning, but... sure, come on in."

Inside, it was too warm and smelled like layers of Lysol and candles on top of pot smoke, like the latter was trying—and failing—to be eliminated. The parquet floor shone, freshly streaked from a mop. He found himself looking down at Claire in the very narrow hallway. Nibbling on her lip, she peeked up at him once before she gestured for him to follow.

"Sorry about the mess. Dillon had a party last night." Claire scurried around the living room, throwing bottles and cans into an already half-full recycling bag. Ash from cigarettes spread like sand all over the coffee table, like whoever was smoking didn't even bother to use a tray. Another hole in the drywall above the couch, parallel to paintings of nice flowers on the wall. Sunflowers, daisies. Hand-painted with a C in the corner of each.

"Must've been some party," Seth said, hands in the pockets of his slacks. It was probably cozy in here without the mess.

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't know." Claire stuffed another can into the bag. "He doesn't like me hanging around his friends, so I normally screw off whenever they're over."

"Why would he not want you hanging around his friends?"

"'Guy time' or something. You can sit down, if you want. No need to tire your legs out."

Seth went to sit on the couch, but jolted back up when something hard poked his leg—an empty beer bottle shoved between the couch cushions. Claire noticed at the same time

and rushed over, stuffing it in the bag. Her cheeks were beet red, like she could burst into tears at any moment.

Shit.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, it’s just—I don’t normally live like this. I had this whole place spotless yesterday, then those idiots went and mucked everything up and—” She took a breath. “I’m embarrassed, is all.”

Maybe asking to come in was a dick move. But she had nothing to be embarrassed about; a mess from a party was the least of his concerns.

“Don’t worry, I was a cop in New York City. Believe me when I say I’ve seen worse. Why didn’t Dillon clean it up himself?”

“I hate living in a pigsty, so I just do it myself.”

I see. Dillon had an interesting way of showing his appreciation for his girlfriend’s hard work, but there were more ways to torture someone than physical. Something wasn’t right here.

He sat down on the couch, and it caved in when he did so, evidence that it was well-used by someone a lot heavier than Claire. She was about five-foot-six, skinny. She sat on the armchair adjacent to him and pulled out her ponytail. She rolled the band over her fingers, a nervous habit.

A framed photo on the end table caught his eye, clear of the party’s leftovers. It showed a woman who looked remarkably similar to Claire—that long, dark blonde hair with the slightest wave to it, parted in the center. She wore a blue dress and smiled at the camera, showing off her laugh lines by a sunny cornfield, and must’ve been in her late twenties.

“Who is that?” Seth asked.

“Oh, that’s my mom.” Claire shot a wistful smile at the photograph. “She sorta died when I was young.”

"Sorry to hear that. Can I ask how it happened?"

"A hiking accident, I'm told. I was only four, but I have memories. Not just of when she went missing, thankfully—memories from before that. Good ones."

He nodded. He also had memories of his mom, but he was nineteen when she died, and the last several years they'd spent together had been miserable. Well, *all* their years had been miserable, but especially the last several. But he wasn't here to prod for information about Claire's mother.

"So you and Dillon are pretty serious," he said. "You've been together a while?"

Claire shrugged. She didn't look too happy about it. "Going on six years now."

"Wow, that's longer than my longest relationship. How'd you two get together?"

"On top of the bar, my family also owns a corn farm just on the outskirts. That's where I grew up. Since my dad never had sons, he'd look to the local boys for help—give them an honest wage, sometimes a place to stay. Dillon never had a dad, and his mom took off on him when he was seventeen, so he would've been homeless if my dad didn't get him working on the farm. Dillon moved into our house when we were in high school, and the rest is history."

"But you were dating Brad Bailey when you were in high school, not Dillon," he said, for clarity.

"Mm-hmm. Dillon moved in when I was a sophomore and he was a senior. I was still with Brad." She kept fidgeting with the hairband, her movements growing faster, more erratic. "Not long after that, Brad got into the heroin, and things went downhill from there. By the time high school was over, and things with Brad were no good, Dillon and I sort of made sense. Cliché as it may be, it was like he'd been right under my nose the whole time."

“Sounds romantic.”

Claire laughed, but there was an edge of tragedy to it. She glanced around the room, her face betraying her true feelings. “Yeah, well.” She put on a timid smile. “You sure are learning a lot about my life, Detective. I’m not a suspect, am I?”

Seth offered a slight laugh. It was no offense to Claire, but they were looking for someone who could easily haul another person around. “No, of course not. Just making conversation.”

“Good. But why’re you here? I already told you Dillon didn’t know Eliza.”

She was being more receptive than he’d expected, so he pulled a manila folder out from his briefcase. He slid two glossy photographs onto the coffee table. Claire leaned forward, slipping her hair tie around her wrist to join her rope bracelets.

“This is a photo of Dillon and Eliza together as kids,” he said, tapping the first photo. “And here are several interactions they had on social media. Seems like they were friends to me, and pretty close ones at that.”

Claire examined the photographs. He watched her facial expressions, the tiny twitches in her nose and eyebrows. He took the next one out—a photo of Eliza’s tattoo. Claire recoiled. It was just an ankle, no gore, but anyone could tell this was not taken while Eliza was alive.

“And Eliza had a stick and poke tattoo on her ankle with the letters D and B, along with a heart,” Seth said. “I don’t know about Fairview, but when I was growing up, kids didn’t start getting tattoos until at least high school.”

“D and B could be anything.” Claire shook her head. “I don’t know what you want me to say. They were two years older than me, so I wasn’t close with them back then.”

"But Dillon lived at your house when he was in high school. Who was he dating at that time?"

"No one, I don't know. Dillon didn't bring girls around. My dad didn't allow that sort of thing."

Her cheeks were growing red, her movements more flustered. One wrong statement could scare her into self-preservation mode, and whether she was unhappy or not, Dillon was still her boyfriend. Seth needed to switch tactics.

"When I was growing up in Brooklyn," he began, "my mom brought home a lot of guys. I had a revolving door of stepdads living out of one tiny apartment, and all of them were different people, but none of them were good. It amazed me what kind of lies these guys would tell, sometimes to manipulate my mom, sometimes for no reason at all. They'd lie for the fun of it." He paused. "They'd also rough her up sometimes, then my mom would ask me to lie for them. She didn't want them to get in trouble."

Claire's face darkened. "I believe I already told you Dillon doesn't hit me."

"But he lies to you, doesn't he?"

"All men lie. I bet you did it just now with your stepdad story."

That story had been true, but it didn't matter now. There was only one question he truly cared about.

"Claire, are you sure Dillon was home the night Eliza died?"

"Huh? He was—"

The sound of the screen door flapping open cut into the trailer. Heavy footsteps stomped toward them, rattling the remaining beer bottles on the coffee table. A figure appeared in the entranceway, fists balled, brows pulled into a feral rage.

Dillon Beamish, in the flesh.