

PROLOGUE

No question about it. He was glad to be home. All the years away gave him a new perspective on the place where he was born. When he left, all he could think about was getting as far away as possible and leaving painful memories and those who had hurt him behind. Most important of all, he wanted to find somewhere more exciting to live his life with no history and no one watching his every move. Freedom was a drug he couldn't get enough of.

For a while the cities were glorious. New York, Chicago, Atlanta, and most fun of all, New Orleans. For a brief period, the resentment and rage that had sent him on his quest receded. Only for a while, though, and then it would ease back in like a cat slinking into the house after a night of roaming. Restlessness and discontent shadowed him no matter where he went.

But it finally hit him. Home beckoned, and only at home would he discover the inner peace he sought. Dorothy was right when she said there was no place like home.

So here he was, and peace was already beginning to settle in. The tricks he'd picked up in his years on the road helped him now. The time away had made him wiser and better equipped to deal with those around him who criticized his every move. Best, he was able to begin the work needed to create his masterpiece. All that came before was much like going away to school. With every step and every move, he'd learned and tucked each bit of knowledge away. Now he was a graduate and ready to put his education to good use.

The house was another piece of the puzzle proving his path was the correct one. When he walked inside, it seemed as if someone had designed it with him in mind. Just off the Little Spokane River and Highway 395, it sat on a piece of land that provided ample privacy. Inside, it was nice and, more important, functional and roomy. The basement proved to be the crowning piece. Unfinished, with concrete walls and floor, one end was lined with nicely built storage shelves, and on the other, a utility sink hunkered next to a washer and dryer. Nothing else cluttered the room. He couldn't have designed it better himself.

Tonight, he flipped on the light to illuminate the space and walked down the stairs. He'd already lined up his first set of jars on the shelves, and the only thing he needed to do to make all of them complete was to properly label them, which he would do just as soon as he finished tidying up. Grabbing the remote control he kept on one shelf, he pointed it toward the ceiling. There on the very top shelf lurked a state-of-the-art stereo he'd purchased at a local big-box store and installed himself, mounting speakers in each corner of the room. When the music began to play, he smiled. It was Mozart tonight. Classical and a very good choice, if he did say so.

He uncoiled the garden hose that was hooked on one end to the utility-sink faucet, and on the other end he attached a spray nozzle. With the tap turned all the way to hot, he began to spray down the walls and the concrete floor. Bloody red water flowed to the drain set in the middle of the floor. He hummed along with the music as he washed away the evidence of his evening's work, stopping only when the water finally ran clear.

CHAPTER ONE

Being able to see dead people sucked. Circe Latham didn't care how cool it looked in the movies; in real life it was just plain a pain in the ass. At least until she stumbled on a way to make it less disruptive in her life. These days it was a lot more manageable and often fascinating. And the sanity that came along with it was life altering in a way she could never explain.

Today was one of those days when she felt useful and not the freak she really was. There was a good chance someone dead would come to her and she was the only one who'd know. Sort of. Zelda would catch it too, although unlike Circe, Zelda wouldn't see them; she'd smell them. After all, that's what human-remains detection dogs did, and Zelda was an amazing one. Not that she was prejudiced, but her dog rocked.

After nearly two years of training a minimum of three to four days a week, they'd passed their certification tests and were field ready. Since certifying they'd been called out at least a dozen times, including being loaned out to several different counties. If someone was nearby, they would find them. Or rather if a body happened to be in the area, they'd locate it.

"You ready, girl?" Circe asked when she came downstairs outfitted in hiking pants, a nondescript moisture-wicking shirt, and her favorite hiking boots. Unlike a search for a missing person when she would put on a team shirt and jacket clearly identifying her as a

search-and-rescue volunteer, people doing recovery searches many times tended to work under the radar. Neither she nor Zelda wore anything identifiable. For a lot of reasons, it was better that way.

Zelda was already wound up and she hadn't said a word to her yet. Every time Circe pulled on a pair of hiking pants, Zelda knew exactly what was going to happen next and started pacing in anticipation at the garage door. Living with a working dog was an adventure hard to explain to people who'd never spent any time with one. She couldn't slide anything by her because she was as smart as they came and always up for a search anywhere, anytime, including right now. Nothing made Zelda happier than to be out in the field working.

From the counter Circe grabbed two full-sized water bottles, one for her and one for Zelda. Searches were no different from any endurance event, and the motto "hydrate, hydrate, hydrate" was an unwritten law for both the handler and the dog.

Zelda's intense black eyes watched her as she slipped the full bottles into her waist pack. She smiled and nodded toward the door. "Let's go then." As Circe held the door to the garage open, Zelda raced through.

Inside the back of her SUV, Circe slipped a harness on Zelda and then hooked it to the safety belt that would keep her secure in case of an accident. Some handlers let their dogs ride loose in the back of their vehicle, and some always kept them in crates. Circe went for the middle ground and chose the seatbelt harness. That way Zelda could see out the windows and stay safe at the same time. Of course, it was also easier to talk to her during their trips, and she loved talking to Zelda. She could say anything and felt less alone. Not to mention Zelda always kept her secrets.

It took about thirty minutes to drive from their house at Long Lake to the parking area near the Sandifur Bridge just west of downtown, known for years as People's Park. Part of the city's urban-renewal effort, the bridge was a relatively new addition to an area that for decades hosted unofficial nude sunbathing. These days visitors were more likely to see runners, hikers, and dog walkers here. Nature-loving nudists were forced to move along, although

on a sunny day it wasn't unheard of to run into someone sunbathing sans clothing. Circe knew that one firsthand.

When today's call came in, Circe couldn't help but wonder why this particular spot. Given the high usage in the area, it seemed an odd place to be called in to search. Then again, a good portion of land west of the bridge had been left in a natural state and remained largely unused. If she was to make an educated guess, they would most likely center the search in that rough, overgrown acreage.

When she pulled into the gravel parking area, a familiar sedan already sat there and she parked next to it. "Hey, Brian," she said to the tall, good-looking sheriff's deputy.

"Thanks for coming, Circe." Brian Klym stood bent over a laptop that perched on the hood of his unmarked cruiser. "I'll have the area for you in a sec."

She nodded and reached back through the open door of her car to retrieve the GPS unit currently in one of the pockets of her harness. After she freed it from the Velcro strip securing it in the harness, she handed it off to Brian so he could download the search area into it. While she waited, she put a bright-orange collar on Zelda, a tracking device that her GPS would pick up attached to it. When they were done with the search, Brian would be able to download the data from her unit, and it would show him exactly what ground both Circe and Zelda had covered. She did so love modern technology.

Next she slipped on the chest harness that would hold her GPS once Brian was done with it, as well as a handheld radio and a compass, along with other useful items like a small notebook and pen. The chest harness made it easy to grab any of the items while out in the field without having to stop and dig through a backpack. She also took out her waist pack with two water bottles, flagging tape, latex gloves, and the most important item, Zelda's fleece-covered tug toy. Zelda worked for the toy and would do anything for the chance to play tug with Circe.

"Okay," Brian said as he walked her way. "It's not a huge area and you won't need the GPS to grid it, but we'll want to track and mark anyway."

After she became a K9 handler she learned pretty quickly that the GPS unit was a critical part of the search, even if the area was small and easily covered without walking it in tight grids. The data contained in the unit gave her all the information she needed to know what ground they'd covered and if they left any holes.

"Our area," Brian said as she tucked the GPS back into its pocket on her harness, "is the area south of the river, west of the bridge, and bordered by the roads on the north and east. Make sense?"

Circe was surveying the search area as he talked. Given the parameters he described, she was able to visualize the search. She nodded as she clipped a leash to Zelda's collar. "Got it."

"Where do you want to start?"

Brian had done enough of these searches with her to understand how she and Zelda worked. Before they even started, she needed to determine the best pattern, based on prevailing conditions. By understanding wind direction and terrain features, she could set Zelda up for the best chance of success. Of course, she would find the dead regardless of either of those elements, but she still wanted to let her dog do her job as best she could.

No one, not even the other members of her K9 team, knew of her special skill. Everyone thought Zelda did all the work, and she wanted to keep it that way. People didn't need to know the dead came to her. Some secrets were better kept as just that: secrets. Besides, Zelda was a solid HRD dog, and regardless of what Circe saw, she did the work and deserved the praise.

She turned full circle, feeling the breeze on her face, and when she determined the direction of the wind, she stopped and looked at Brian. "We'll start from there." She pointed to the southwest corner of their designated area. "We'll walk north along the west border and then do fifty-meter diagonal grids east and west."

It was a relatively small space and probably didn't need to be walked in a grid pattern. But keeping to the same routine was good for both her and Zelda.

Brian nodded. "Got it."

In large search areas she'd have a navigator along who would keep her grid lines straight and uniform, which made sure they covered

all their allotted space. Her job as a handler was to keep an eye on the dog. Today was different. The area was small enough that covering it wouldn't be an issue so she could act as both K9 handler and navigator.

With Brian at her side, they walked to the corner she'd pointed out as their starting point. The breeze kissed her cheeks as she leaned down and unclipped the leash from Zelda's collar. "Are you ready?" she asked Zelda, whose answer came in the form of an excited yip. She nodded and put her on the command to work with a single word that had no meaning.

Zelda took off. Brian didn't ask about the nonsense word or what it meant because he knew. It was the command for Zelda to find human remains. The work of an HRD team was delicate in the best of circumstances, and the nonsense word used for the command served two purposes. First, it had no real meaning so no one would accidentally use it and confuse the dog. Second, at times, family members of the missing person would attend a search, and the last thing those family members wanted to hear was a reminder that the dog was searching for the body of their loved one.

At the sound of that single word, Zelda's head went down and her eyes became even more focused. She was in full working mode. Zelda lived for this moment, and it never got old watching her work. Circe only regretted that she hadn't discovered the world of search dogs earlier. Out in the field, side by side with this fabulous dog, not only could she do meaningful work with something she couldn't escape, but she could participate in a heartfelt partnership. She couldn't imagine her life without Zelda.

Less than three minutes in the field, she realized this search would be a short one. Circe saw the victim shortly after they began. She didn't have to alter her pattern because the young woman was standing directly in her path. At the sight of the disheveled woman, who couldn't have been more than twenty-one, her heart ached. No one should lose their life that young. She was wearing high heels, short shorts, and a snug T-shirt that had once been a pale color but was now crimson with blood from a wound in her chest. Her bleached-blond hair hung in dirty strands down to her shoulders. Clearly, she'd seen some rough times in her few decades.

“Help me,” she said, her voice whispery on the light breeze.

Circe never talked back, for she’d learned as a child that while she could sometimes hear them, they never heard her. Instead she focused on Zelda, watching for the telltale change in body language. It always happened the same way. She would see them, and shortly thereafter, Zelda would scent them. This case wasn’t an exception. Seconds after the woman appeared, Zelda’s ears twitched and her tail went down. She had her scent.

Without saying anything, she put a hand out to stop Brian from walking any farther. She wanted to give Zelda a chance to pinpoint her find. Both of them stopped walking and simply stood still as Zelda worked the scent cone. After they stopped it took less than a minute of searching with her nose close to the ground before Zelda gave her alert. She turned her head to Circe, who simply waited, her dark eyes focused and intense, as if saying, “Here.”

“Good girl,” Circe said with enthusiasm at the same time she pulled the fleece toy out of her waist pack. Zelda kept her eyes on the toy, though Circe still made Zelda wait as she walked closer. Finally, as she stood very close to her, she said, “Okay.” At the same time she tossed the fleece toy. Zelda sprang up and raced after the toy with joy and enthusiasm in every step.

Brian marked the spot with red flagging tape, while Circe continued to play with Zelda and her toy. His face was somber as he stared down at the piece of ground. “I was afraid we’d find something,” he said. “Everything I’d managed to pull together seemed to point to this place. As much as I was hoping I was wrong, I had a really bad feeling about this one.”

The bad feeling had eluded Circe until the dead woman showed herself. After that, she’d had a hard time avoiding the dread that shadowed her like a dark cloud. Too often the dead that came to her were victims of violence. That’s why they lingered. They were searching for peace or perhaps a way home. It never failed to make her feel sad even when she realized she could help in some small measure.

She’d like nothing better right now than to load up and go home, except that wasn’t the way she did her job. Glancing down at

her GPS, she saw a fair amount of area still left open and unchecked. If she went home now, all she'd be able to think about was quitting before the job was done. "We've covered only about a quarter of the designated area," she said. "Shall we do a quick run-through of the rest?"

She'd learned early on in her search training never to walk away, even if she discovered remains quickly. Her teachers and mentors had drilled a mantra into her: always, always finish the entire area. Besides, it went against her own internal code to do only half a job.

"Yeah," Brian said as he tucked the roll of marking tape back into his pocket. "This should be it, but let's see what Zelda has to say."

She liked working with Brian so much because he respected her dog. Anyone who genuinely liked Zelda and appreciated what she could do was pretty darned fine in her book. She nodded and motioned to Zelda, who ran back and dropped the toy at Circe's feet. She picked it up and tucked it into her waist pack once more. Then she looked down at Zelda, who stood gazing at her with intensity. She leaned down and quietly said to her, "There's more."

Those two words sent Zelda off running again, with a renewed expression of deep concentration. She'd had her time to play with her toy, and now it was time to work again. She loved her job and would search for hours if Circe asked her to. In fact, Circe would wear out long before Zelda would.

Circe glanced down at her GPS to make sure she was maintaining the pattern she'd decided upon earlier. So far, so good. It wasn't a large area, and so the remaining search should go quickly.

No big deal to finish up. Or that's what she thought until ahead of her another young woman rose from the ground. When the woman was on her feet, she stilled, with her head down and her hands clasped in front of her. She was young, maybe sixteen or seventeen, with short dark hair tinted holly red and styled into spikes that stood up from her scalp. Seconds after Circe saw her, Zelda caught the scent, so Circe didn't have to alter her pattern to bring her into the scent cone. Beneath a tall pine, Zelda dropped

her head low to the ground and sniffed back and forth until she was satisfied she'd located the right spot. Then Zelda alerted a second time as she looked up at Circe once more.

"Ah, Brian," she said. "We have another one."

With agonizing slowness, the young woman's head came up and her green eyes held Circe's gaze. Unlike the first woman, she made no attempt to speak to her, at least not verbally. The sadness radiating from her eyes tore at Circe's heart. She was, or had been, young, yet the pain etched on her face spoke of a life filled with very real nightmares. She hated to even consider what horrors had created those shadows.

Once Brian stood beside Zelda, Circe looked away from those sad eyes and again fished the toy from her pack. She tossed it to Zelda, who caught it easily and began to run with joy as she shook her head from side to side.

"Ah, sonofabitch," Brian muttered as he took the roll of marking tape out of his pocket and began to pull a length of it off the roll. "This, I wasn't expecting." His face was grim and his hands shook as he set about marking the spot Zelda had pinpointed for them.

While he worked, she continued to play with Zelda, tugging on the toy and tossing it for her to chase. When Brian was done she told Zelda to bring it in, her command to give the toy back. She didn't have to ask twice. Zelda trotted up next to her and dropped the toy.

The second woman was a sad surprise, particularly considering that the area they were searching wasn't large. It was bad enough that one woman had lost her life. Two was unthinkable. She'd never found remains this close together before. From all appearances, someone didn't want to be bothered with doing a good job covering up their horrid deeds. Then again, she'd been hunting for dead bodies long enough to know that when it came to murder, there were no rules.

"This is fucked up," Brian muttered as he stuffed the roll of flagging tag back into his pocket. "I need to call in the SPD investigators and crime-scene unit. This is going to be big."

Though the area they were dealing with was small, it still technically fell within the jurisdiction of the Spokane Police Department, or the

SPD, as everyone around here referred to them. Brian was working an active case that had originated in the county, though his investigation had brought him to this spot within the city limits. In order to conduct this search, he'd coordinated it with the SPD.

Now, he had to let them know the areas Zelda had alerted them on. They would approach the marked areas as potential crime scenes because only Circe knew for certain that bodies were buried there. Of course, she couldn't tell Brian that the bodies were buried beneath the pine-needle-strewn ground. He wouldn't believe her anyway. Brian, and the rest of the local enforcement community, did, however, trust Zelda's nose firmly enough for her findings to stand up in court.

Circe looked down at her GPS and sighed. Despite the two discoveries, they still hadn't covered a chunk of the land. For a small area, it sure was taking a lot of time to check it all. She was pretty confident they wouldn't find anything else, but she couldn't walk away without doing the job correctly. True, Brian had asked her to come out and search for a body, as in a single body, and as tragic as it was, they had found one. Locating two was a fluke. Despite the two finds, they wouldn't go home until they cleared every inch.

"Come on, Zelda," she said and waved her arm to her left to let her know the direction she wanted her to cover. This was another skill they'd learned as a team, directional signals. Search up, search down, search left, search right, and she communicated all those instructions with the simple wave of the hand. "There's more."

As before, Zelda took off with her nose low and her eyes focused. Circe and Brian followed her. Every so often Circe glanced down to make sure they were traversing the ground they needed to. It pleased her to see the lines on her GPS were relatively straight and that with two more passes, they'd have covered it all.

They were halfway through with the second pass when a sound floated across the wind. Slowly, Circe turned her head. She noticed two things at once: Zelda was giving her alert, and right behind her stood a woman whose soft voice was saying, "Help me."



Paul Garland draped his jacket over the back of his chair and dropped heavily into it. For the hundredth time he wondered whose dumb-ass idea it had been to move in with Brenda. Oh yeah, it was his dumb-ass idea, and in fact, he'd been the one to suggest they do it in the first place. Talk about a total disaster. Six months ago he got her to leave, and he'd love to say it was over except that wasn't how it was going down. No matter what he said, she still wasn't letting go. She might be physically out of his house, but she was most certainly not out of his life.

Today was another one of *those* days. After arming the alarm system, he pulled the back door shut and had put one foot on the step when he stopped momentarily. He silently prayed he was simply hallucinating, except he wasn't that lucky. There she stood with several of his shirts and a plate of his favorite cookies, right next to his car where he'd parked it in the driveway last night. If he hadn't been too lazy to pull it into the garage, he'd have been safe, or not. The lack of a car in the driveway probably wouldn't have stopped her. Instead of waiting for him by his car, she'd have been knocking on the back door. She gave new meaning to the term undeterred.

Head up, he kept going down the steps and hoped she didn't notice that her appearance rattled him. Calm, collected, and as awful as it sounded, cold, was the only way to approach her. Right now, he didn't look at the shirts, and he sure as hell didn't take the cookies, even if, truth be told, she baked a mean cookie. From painful experience he'd learned that any tiny bit of kindness from him and she was packing her things to move back in.

Stalker was the first word that came to mind, but he didn't want to go there. Experienced police detectives did not have stalkers. He was a goddamn professional and should know better than to get involved with someone unbalanced enough to become a terrorizing factor in his life. Except that's exactly what he did, and now he couldn't seem to extricate himself from an untenable position.

At least this morning, his strategy of ignoring her had worked. When he refused to make eye contact or acknowledge her presence in any way, she hadn't tried to stop him when he got in his car and slowly backed out of the driveway. It took effort not to glance into

the rearview mirror to see what she was doing. For all he knew, she was still standing there, shirts in one hand and cookies in the other, her hair perfect and her makeup flawless.

Now, he ran his hands through his hair, thinking he needed a haircut, then almost laughed. With the Brenda problem on the front burner, the last thing he really cared about was a stupid haircut. First things first: get Brenda out of his life and then a haircut. Besides, there could be an upside to letting his appearance go. Maybe if he let his hair get long and shaggy he'd look like shit and Brenda would lose interest in him. At this point he was willing to try anything.

"What's up, pretty boy?"

He smiled at the sound of his partner's voice. He sure wished Diana played on his side of the fence because she was the kind of woman a man could count on. Honest, straightforward, and beautiful, she was special and he adored her. He knew he rated high in her book too, but she'd never be interested in him. Wrong sex. Even if he wasn't, it was never a good idea to mix professional and personal. He was resigned to be content with the relationship as it stood. He'd rather have her as a partner and a friend than not have her in his life at all.

"Nothing that can't be fixed," he shot back. Man, he hoped that was true.

"Ya sure?"

Slowly he nodded. "Yeah." He was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince Diana.

So much for trying. She studied him with her deep-brown eyes and obviously didn't believe him. He also knew she wouldn't press the issue further. It was one of the things that made this partnership hum. They always had an unspoken communication, and it worked better than with any other partner he'd ever worked with in the past. She knew when to push and when not to.

"Well, let me know if I can help," she said as she patted him on the shoulder and headed to her desk, which was right next to his.

"Copy that." As much as he appreciated the offer he wasn't about to take her up on it right at the moment. Maybe someday, far down the road, though he doubted he'd ever share this debacle. Even

as close as they were, the situation with Brenda was too embarrassing to share. No way did he plan to tell anyone in the department what was going on with the crazy ex-girlfriend. Ultimately, he'd handle it himself without it ever needing to go public. Some things were best kept in the closet with the door bolted.

Diana's cell rang just as she dropped down into her task chair, and he listened to her side of the conversation with interest. It wasn't that he was being nosy. To the contrary, picking up on a few key phrases, he could tell it was a call-out and so he listened openly. When she put the phone back in the holder at her waist, she looked over at him and nodded toward the door.

"Three bodies down in People's Park."

"Seriously?" That place drew all sorts of people, like nudists, dope smokers, nature lovers, runners, and cyclists. Murderers weren't the typical park user. At least not in recent years. When he was a kid it was a dangerous place, but that time was decades past, and now it was as safe as any place in an urban area.

"As a heart attack."

He grabbed his jacket and followed her out the door. If nothing else, this promised to be very interesting. At least for a few hours, he wouldn't have to think about Brenda, and that appealed to him on a grand scale. Nothing like a murder or two to take his mind off his own problems.

So far at least, Brenda had kept her impromptu visits on a personal level like at his house, the gym, or the grocery store. He'd changed gyms and grocery stores, and would move except he refused to let anyone push him out of his own home. In the last six months at least she'd steered clear of his office. His mother had always taught him to be grateful for the little things.

"I'm driving," Diana said when they were outside in the parking lot.

"Oh, come on, Dale Earnhardt. I think it's my turn." To say Diana had a lead foot was being polite. She had to have been a Formula One race-car driver in a former life while he was more like the city bus driver, always looking out for the safety and comfort of his passengers.

“You drive like an old lady.” She didn’t even glance at him as she opened the driver’s side door of the unmarked cruiser and got in.

He’d be offended if her remark hadn’t contained a grain of truth. “And you should have your license suspended.” Another grain of truth.

She was sliding on her black, wrap-around sunglasses. “Blah, blah, blah. Just get in, buckle up, and shut up.”

He shook his head. In his time with Diana, he’d also learned that it wouldn’t do him a bit of good to argue. The woman possessed an impressive stubborn streak. If she wanted to drive, by God, she was going to drive, and he really couldn’t do much to change the situation. The fact that he was taller, heavier, and carried a bigger gun didn’t faze her. He got in, buckled up, and shut up.

CHAPTER TWO

Two words rolled through Diana's mind on the short drive from the Public Safety Building to the parking lot at People's Park: serial killer. Her dad had been part of the team that ultimately took down serial killer Robert Yates. Unfortunately, not before Yates killed thirteen women and terrorized an entire city. Even after they put him in prison for the rest of his life, her dad was convinced there were more victims. While still on the job he pushed hard for the city and county to keep searching. It didn't do any good. They couldn't afford to spend more tax dollars on a killer who'd never be free again. Retired now, her dad was still working the case, though so far he hadn't been able to prove his theory. Dad was a good detective, and ultimately if more bodies turned up, he'd solve the case. She believed he was right, and not just because he was her father.

By the time they arrived in Peaceful Valley, marked cars blocked both Riverside Avenue and Clarke Road, barring entrance to the People's Park parking area. A cruiser backed up enough to let her pass through the barricade, and she parked next to a dark-blue SUV with a National Search Dog Society sticker on the back window—the K9 handler's rig.

At the south end of the Sandifur Bridge, Brian Klym from the County Sheriff's Department was standing beside a woman holding a loose leash with a bored-looking German shepherd at the end of it. The HRD dog that discovered three bodies in the park brought back all the memories of the days when her dad worked 24/7 on the

Yates case. He was a big proponent of utilizing whatever resources were available, and that included dogs. His respect for what dogs could do was well-known, and he would approve of what this dog was able to highlight today. Dad had also taught her there was no such thing as a coincidence, and three bodies buried in one area less than five acres total was no coincidence. Something very bad had happened here.

“Come on,” she said to Paul. “Let’s see what Brian has for us.”

“Hey, Erni, Garland, ’bout time you two got here.” Brian held out a hand.

Diana took his extended hand and shook it. “Got here as quick as we could.”

“Hey,” Paul said as he also shook Brian’s hand.

Brian and Paul had gone through the academy together, and Paul always said he was a good guy who would probably end up being sheriff someday. It was nice to know he was someone they could work with, since this would more than likely end up being a joint investigation. Most of the time the two departments worked fine together, but occasionally tension and power plays made it difficult. She didn’t think this would turn out to be one of those times.

Brian inclined his head toward the woman with the dog. “This is Circe Latham and her K9, Zelda. Circe, these two are detectives Erni and Garland from the SPD.”

Paul stepped forward and offered his hand to Circe. “Call me Paul.”

Diana also shook Circe’s hand, whose grip was firm and confident. She liked that. “Nice to meet you Ms. Latham. I’m Diana Erni.”

While this wasn’t the first time she’d heard of the extraordinary team of Circe Latham and Zelda, it was the first time she’d actually met them. Word in the department was that this dog was hands down the best HRD K9 in Eastern Washington and that they were the go-to team whenever there was a search for remains. Hard to see it right now, considering Zelda was currently sprawled out on the ground looking singularly uninterested in the humans around her.

“Please just call me Circe.” The woman’s voice was quiet and pleasant. In fact she was pretty and gentle looking, and not at all what Diana expected to see in a K9 handler who dealt exclusively in recovery searches.

Diana nodded. “Circe it is. So, tell me what you found?”

Something in Circe’s body language must have alerted Zelda because she popped up from her sprawl and sat next to her, leaning into her leg. Circe’s hand dropped to her dog’s head and she absently began to stroke it. “Pretty much a routine search, with Zelda alerting on the first body fairly quickly. At that point I figured we’d found all we were going to, but since we’d only covered a small portion of the area, we continued to be thorough. That’s when Zelda alerted two more times. A fair bit of a surprise.”

Many thoughts were racing through Diana’s mind as she listened to Circe. “Could she have alerted on parts from the first body?”

It was a morbid but necessary question. True, this area was on the fringe of the downtown core and rather urban. At the same time, around these parts wildlife was always hanging near the river. The city didn’t seem to intimidate deer, skunks, or raccoons. Last year just a mile down the road in Riverside State Park a cougar was scaring the crap out of runners, hikers, and cyclists. Sometimes cougars or coyotes scavenged human remains, so her question had a great deal of merit.

Circe was shaking her head. “I can see where you’re going with this and why. As much as I hate to say it, we’ve seen it happen before, and any other time I might say it’s a probable theory. Not this time. I’ve watched Zelda enough to know the difference between a small source and a full body. This was most definitely full body. Three full bodies,” she added quietly.

Diana stuck her hands in her pockets and studied Circe’s face for a long minute as she bit on her upper lip. Bottom line: she believed her. Not just because of everything she’d heard about this exceptional K9 team but because her gut told her to. She put a lot of store in gut instinct. It had saved her ass more than once.

“Okay then, three bodies it is.” She cut her gaze over to Paul. “Well, let’s take a look at what they found.”

He nodded, and she could tell he was already working through the investigation they were about to embark on. One thing about Paul, he was always thinking. He was a good guy in so many ways, she wondered for probably the hundredth time why he was still single. Though she knew he dated, he was pretty tight-lipped about his personal life, especially lately. She sensed something was up with him on the home front. Given enough time he'd let her in. For now, he needed space, which was fine. They had a lot of work in front of them and not much time for personal issues.

Zelda, as it turned out, wasn't going with them to look at the body locations. Circe walked with her back to the SUV with the stickers and motioned for her to jump in. After a quick "stay," Circe shut the back and then turned to them. "This way," she said and began to walk briskly.

"You're not bringing her?" Diana asked. She couldn't help it, she was curious.

Circe shook her head. "No. She's done her work and was rewarded. She's entitled to her rest now. I don't want to work her through a scenario she's already covered."

"Would she alert again if she came with us?"

Circe nodded. "Yes."

"Interesting," Diana said softly.

"Very."

Diana didn't miss a step as she followed Circe from the parking lot to an area defined by yellow police tape stretched between five spindly pine trees. Techs were already on task, carefully moving dirt from the first spot where Zelda alerted earlier. By the time the four of them arrived, the meticulous work of the techs had uncovered the unmistakable form of a human being. Judging by the slim build and feminine clothing, it was a woman.

At the sight, Diana's heart grew heavy. It didn't matter how many times she saw something like this; she always experienced the same wash of emotion. She hated the feeling of being too late. No one deserved to be treated like this, and what made this one even sadder was the fact that two more bodies were buried in shallow graves nearby. It was wrong on so many levels.

After studying the makeshift grave, Diana turned full circle and swept her gaze over everything, taking in the trees, the grass, the pine needles, and the streets. For at least a moment, she tried to be inside the head of a killer, to see what he saw, to understand why he decided to bring his victims here. Why this spot? It was beautiful in this place, natural and wild. Close to the high-use areas but far enough away to provide a bit of privacy. Only a little, though, and that was the element she found most disconcerting. If he wanted to be away from prying eyes, this was definitely not the place to be. The observation led her to only one conclusion: someone liked a bit of danger.

Circe touched her shoulder and inclined her head toward the west. Time to go survey the others, Diana gathered from her look, and so she nodded. It was important to study those locations as well to see what the killer saw and try to understand why the killer would come here to conceal his heinous deeds.

Dry grass crunched beneath their feet as they walked away from the first marked area, and the low murmur of voices floated on the air. Every crime scene was marked by solemnity and sorrow. This one was even more so. It was as if all of them felt the travesty of the three deaths personally. She sure knew she did and vowed to find the sonofabitch who did this.

The two makeshift graves of the other victims were mirror copies of the first. If she had any doubts the same person committed these murders, they evaporated. At each site, she went through the same motions, studying the grave itself and the surrounding area. Again she had the same sense that whoever did this liked to flirt with danger. Yes, each grave had a bit of privacy, but the risk of exposure was always present. The cover that the sprinkling of bushes and pine trees provided wasn't that deep. If a single cyclist had cruised through, everything would have been out in the open. That made her nervous, because it meant the bastard had balls of stainless and would be hard to catch.

"I hate this," she said under her breath. It was her job to investigate murders, and she'd gone into this profession willingly knowing what she'd be faced with. Despite her father's best efforts

to shield his family from the work he did, Diana had always known and admired how he tried to make the world a better place by catching killers and putting them away. She wanted to follow in his footsteps.

Day in and day out she faced the dark side of the human condition, yet this shook her up. It took darkness to a level that frightened even someone conditioned to it. From firsthand experience, she knew what staring into the face of the devil could do to someone. Her father's eyes were still haunted even after he'd put a serial killer away for life. She worried that someday that same look would stare out from behind her own eyes.

Paul put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Yeah, it's screwed up, that's for sure, but we'll find out who did this and why. We got this, D."

She shook her head as she let out a long sigh. "We haven't had a serial killer working here since Yates." Her hand in her pocket, she fingered the small stainless whistle on the end of her keychain. When Yates was leaving bodies around the county, her father had given her the little whistle just in case. She'd had in her pocket ever since.

"He was one messed up motherfu—"

She gave him a look. She certainly shared his assessment of the captured serial killer. Even so, probably best not to voice that sentiment in mixed company. It was the kind of thing they could say to each other inside the confines of their car but not out here.

"Yes, he was," she said and patted his hand where it still rested on her shoulder. She let her gaze travel down to the techs who worked with infinite care and respect to extricate what was now clearly the body of another woman from her earthen casket. "With Yates locked up for life, I really hoped never to use the words serial killer again."



Rage broiled inside his chest volcano hot. It surprised him that those crowded outside the yellow length of police tape didn't pick

up on his rage. Then again, when it came right down to it most people were clueless.

That's what made it all so easy. Stupidity was a sickening epidemic that made him weary. How people could be so dense baffled him. The world shouldn't be like this. So much potential for greatness existed if someone could clear the path of the clutter and the junk. Or perhaps more accurately, the fools and idiots. Good thing he was the man for the job.

The work was easy if one had the skills. It was a bit like manning a snowplow: put the blade down and plow forward. He had done the job and buried the trash in this meadow, leaving the ground above clean and renewed. Or it would have been if not for that woman and her dog. They were destroying all his good work. Besides, it wasn't like he hadn't rewarded these women for their contribution. On the contrary, he'd buried them with care and a prayer of thanks for their sacrifice. In life these three did nothing of value. They polluted their bodies and the world around them. In death, they joined with him to create something magnificent. How could that possibly be wrong? It was a win-win all the way around, at least until these assholes dug them up.

One by one, black body bags were removed and put into the back of the van from the medical examiner's office. He could barely resist the urge to scream "NO." Labor such as this deserved to be honored for what it was: righteous. To remove the evidence of the work he'd done to better this world wasn't just wrong; it was almost criminal. Why couldn't they leave well enough alone?

He couldn't do a thing. Once the police stepped in like this, the control rested with them. No argument to the contrary could change a thing. The mindset of law enforcement barred them from seeing the big picture or the good work of those who did it. They were only interested in the letter of the law. They failed to understand the existence of higher laws.

In some respect, the fault was probably partially his. His time away made him sloppy. When he left so long ago, the good folk of the city rarely traversed this area. Vagrants and druggies had gathered here, to be certain. The kind of people who would call cops

wouldn't have been caught here in broad daylight. Clearly that had changed, so shame on him for not checking first. The assumptions he made when he chose this place were based on outdated information and ultimately turned out to be wrong. He would be more careful from here on out.

His work had to continue, and so he had to eliminate discoveries like this. He knew only one way to make sure that happened. A plan began to reveal itself, and as it did, the feelings of rage began to fade. As usual, he found a solution to the problem. There was always a solution if one was smart enough to think of it and brave enough to carry it through.



By the time they made it home, Circe was exhausted. It was always this way when they found a body. It was as if the spirits of the departed drew strength from her in order to make their appearance. The fact that three of them came to her today was overwhelming. She felt like she'd been through a prize fight and lost.

Zelda was obviously tired too. Though she couldn't see the departed like Circe could, her skill at detecting the odor of the deceased took a toll on her just as it did on Circe. She firmly believed her dog felt each find as deeply as she did. Zelda hit her water bowl for a long, loud drink and then crawled up on the end of the sofa and promptly went to sleep.

Some people took exception to animals on the furniture, but not Circe. They both lived in this house, and they both had a right to enjoy the comfort of cushioned furniture. Her one concession to sharing her home with a large dog was to choose leather for the sofa and the chairs. It was an expensive route to take, but the cleanup was a hundred times easier than if she'd opted for cloth. Because she got black leather, it rarely looked like a dog had just slept there for hours. Worked for her and, judging by the dog now snoring softly on the sofa, worked for Zelda too.

In the kitchen she pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge and poured herself a glass. She just wanted to sit down, put her feet

up, and enjoy the lovely dry Riesling she'd picked up from a local winery owned by an old high-school buddy. It seemed to flow through her veins and quiet the buzzing that had started when the first woman appeared to her. There were other ways to relax like yoga or mediation, and she employed those methods on occasion. Wine, on the other hand, was a quicker and more satisfying route that called loudly to her at this moment.

With the remote she picked up from the end table, she clicked on music and smiled as the strains of a blues song by Susan Tedeschi filled the room. This was what she needed to decompress after a search like the one today. Good wine, great music, and a comfortable chair. Circe closed her eyes and let her body relax.

It wasn't easy. Intellectually she understood that what she could do was important. But finding a way to work without people realizing that she, not Zelda, was the one locating the dead was a daunting challenge. Once she had discovered a way to use her special talent, it kept her sane yet at the same time wore on her because it took her to the dark side of humanity too often. To come face-to-face with that horror hurt all the way to her soul.

Today was one of those days that seemed to hurt just a little more. Every time a murder victim was discovered she wanted to break down and sob. How could a person do something like that? Why would they do something like that? Life, all life, was precious, and to steal it from someone and then toss them aside like garbage was nothing short of pure evil. Whoever did this, who took not one life but three, surely sat at the right hand of Satan.

How much she wanted to see only the bright side of humanity: the people who helped the less fortunate, mentored children, and rescued animals. She wanted to watch parades and smile, sing in choirs and dance with wild abandon. That was the world she wanted to live in and couldn't. It had been denied to her from the day of her birth.

For whatever reason, she hadn't been given the option to live in the world of her dreams. Most of the time she reconciled herself to the fate she'd been handed. She took what she couldn't escape and used it to try to do some good. Usually it was enough. Today it made

her sad. Something about those three women pulled at her heart. She hoped the police would track down the monster that did this and make sure it never happened to another. Sometimes, though, the monsters slipped through the cracks, and she hoped this didn't turn out to be one of those times.

The wine was doing its job and the muscles in her shoulders relaxed. A movie might be what she needed to take relaxation to the next level. She clicked through the list of recent releases, settling on a movie featuring a favorite comedic actor who, no matter how many times she watched him, always made her laugh. She was seconds into the film when her doorbell rang.

CHAPTER THREE

Diana sat at her desk with her head in her hands. Paul was long gone, as was most everyone else in her squad. Identifying the dead from the three shallow graves hadn't taken long. Whoever killed them must not have been too concerned with identification, because beyond the fatal injuries, their bodies were unmolested. Taking their fingerprints was quick and effective. From there, it was just a matter of routine. All three were in the system, so tracking down their names and next of kin had turned out to be relatively easy.

Notifying the families wasn't quite as easy. It didn't matter if a victim came from the wealthy upper South Hill or the poverty-laced West Central area, loved ones lost at the hands of another brought pain and sadness to those left behind in equal measure. In her line of work, it was clear that tragedy came to everyone regardless of their station in life. In situations like this, it was even worse. No one deserved to be murdered and then buried in the hopes of never being found.

Together she and Paul had delivered the news as gently as possible under the circumstances. The mother of Anna Sorto, the first victim, was so high Diana wasn't certain she even grasped what they told her. Her bottle-blond hair with black roots didn't look like it had come close to shampoo in weeks, and a couple of missing teeth hinted at her drug of choice. She wanted to get pissed off at these people who threw their lives away to drugs and street life,

except she never quite got there. Always in the back of her mind was the tiny question that kept anger away: why? Until she walked in their shoes she could never really know how or why they ended up at the sharp end of a needle or in a cold, dark grave. Until she did know, she wasn't about to cast the first stone. And so, she gave this mother what comfort she could, hoped it would break through the drug induced fog, and left her card on the cluttered coffee table just in case. Chances were she'd never hear from this woman, but then again, stranger things had happened.

The grandmother of Kathy Kane, the second victim, was the only family she had, and the news seemed to crush the life out of the woman, who had to have been at least eighty. The house was tiny, the furniture old and worn, yet it was clean and smelled of cinnamon as if she'd just baked an apple pie. The walls were adorned with photographs of a woman who must have been Kathy's mother and at least six more of Kathy at various ages. The face in the pictures was cute and alive with fun and laughter. What had happened to the little girl who smiled out at them from the frames of those pictures? Worried about leaving the grieving woman, Diana called social services to make sure someone could come be with her.

The third victim's family members were quite a surprise. They were far from the low-income housing of Anna's family or the small Shadle area home of Kathy's grandmother. The final house they pulled in front of was at least twice the size of Diana's own and solid ruby-red brick. The long driveway was also made of brick laid out in an intricate pattern and lined on either side with elegantly trimmed shrubs. It screamed old money.

Lana Falco's mother, petite and beautiful, had silver hair and expensive clothes. Though it certainly couldn't be an everyday occurrence in this neighborhood to open the front door and find a couple of cops standing outside, little surprise showed on Mrs. Falco's face. In fact, it was far from surprise. If Diana had been pressed to put a name to the expression, she'd have picked resignation.

Diana held up her badge and asked, "Mrs. Falco?"

Silence met her question as sad gray eyes studied their faces. Then she let out a long breath. "She's dead, isn't she?"

Keeping her shock behind a neutral expression, Diana nodded slightly. “We’re very sorry,” she said.

Stepping back, Mrs. Falco opened the door wider. “Please come in. I’ll get my husband.” She left them in the doorway to the living room, her shoulders slightly bowed as she disappeared down a hallway.

Diana leaned close to Paul and whispered, “Not what I was expecting.”

“Copy that,” Paul said under his breath. “Get the feeling she was expecting us?”

Diana nodded. The same thought had occurred to her. “I think she’s just been waiting. If it wasn’t today, it would have been tomorrow or the next day.” She grew quiet as the sound of footsteps approached.

A tall man with thinning gray hair and rimless glasses preceded his wife into the room. He held out a hand. “I’m James Falco. Please, have a seat.”

Diana and Paul both sat, and she delivered the awful news as gently as she could. These parents might have known that one day this visit would come, but it didn’t make the reality any easier to take. Heartsick pain showed in both sets of eyes.

Though Lana’s background was vastly different from that of the other two, her story wasn’t. As so often was the case, drugs and poor choices had taken Lana down a path leading far from the big brick house and the parents who tried every avenue to help her. Counselors, rehab, special schools, tough love. In the end, they had to let go because they discovered, as so many did, it was impossible to help a daughter who didn’t want to help herself.

After trying everything possible, they had walked away, knowing one of two things would ultimately happen. She would one day get sick and tired of the life and finally make the choice to go clean. Or, she would die.

Diana had learned quickly in her profession that drug abuse is an equal-opportunity employer. That reality was never more evident than after today’s notifications. The pain and heartache that the senseless murders of three young women caused showed equally

on the faces of their families, and it had nothing to do with their net worth. They all felt loss and grief.

That thought rolled over and over in her mind as she now sat at her desk staring down at the half-finished reports. It had been hard enough doing the notifications today; having to relive those moments as she put it down on paper was torture.

“You need to go home.”

Her head snapped up. She hadn’t heard anyone come in, yet there stood Greg Warner, wearing his trademark Carhartts and black T-shirt, gun and handcuffs on his belt. “Jesus, Greg, you just about gave me a goddamn heart attack.” Sometimes the guys on the late shift were like ghosts, which is probably why they were so good at night.

Greg smiled. “Good thing my first-aid card is current. I would have gotten to rip your shirt open and give you CPR.”

Diana laughed and stood. “You’re a sick bastard, you know that?”

He put a hand to his chest. “Ah, Diana, you wound me.”

“Yeah, well, you just want an excuse to get your hands on me.”

Greg had made a run for her early on. After he found out where he stood with her, they’d been friendly ever since. The situation could have turned out ugly, but he was pretty laid-back and didn’t take the rejection personally. All in all, a good guy. Too bad there weren’t more like him in the world.

This time he laughed. “Guilty. But seriously, what are you doing here this late? Go the hell home. I promise we’ll keep the city safe until you return in the morn.” He patted the butt of his gun.

She squeezed his shoulder as she walked by. Yeah, she slept a little easier knowing guys like Greg had her back. “The city’s all yours.”



Circe recognized the SUV in the driveway and it made her smile. She needed to get out another wineglass. When she opened the front door, Zelda’s best friend, Lila, zoomed in. Sixteen months

old, the German shepherd knew her way around Circe's house as well as she knew her own.

"Hey," she said to Vickie, who followed Lila through the door, although she opted to walk in rather than zoom.

Vickie didn't say a word, just enveloped her in a hug that was warm and tight. She didn't realize until that second how much she needed that hug. Tense muscles suddenly relaxed and her shoulders felt lighter. Her heart felt lighter too.

"What's this for?"

"Oh, please," Vickie said as she let her go. "You know exactly what that was for. Go sit your ass down. I'm getting my own glass of wine and will join you in a sec."

"Well, you are older and wiser so I guess I have to do what you say."

"And you're a little bitch," she said with laughter in her voice. "Now go sit before you collapse."

People became best friends for a reason and stayed best friends for even more reasons. She and Vickie had been tight since the day they met. Sometimes she wondered if they were perhaps friends in another life too. Made sense on so many levels, at least in her mind. Before Vickie returned from the kitchen she grabbed the comfy corner spot on the sofa left vacant when Zelda headed through the dog door and out to the backyard with Lila. It would do Zelda some good to run and play for a little while.

Vickie was back in minutes, carrying a wineglass in one hand and the bottle of wine in the other. She grinned and told Circe, "Figured I'd save time by just bringing the bottle with me." She filled her glass and, after putting the bottle on the low table in front of the sofa, took a seat on the opposite end. She kicked off her shoes and pulled her legs up onto the cushions.

Circe smiled both at the wine and at the way Vickie settled in. "Good plan." It was going to be that kind of night.

"Uhm, good," Vickie said after a sip. "Now, tell me what happened today."

"We got called out."

Vickie tilted the wineglass in her direction. “I know *that*, girlfriend. I saw your bright shining little face on the six o’clock news. I want to know the rest of the story.”

Emotion rolled up, washing away the momentary sense of calm brought on by Vickie’s impromptu visit, and for a minute she couldn’t say a word. Vickie simply waited her out, which was one of the benefits of having a friend who really understood. She trusted only one person in her life enough to share the truth. Even with Vickie it had taken years before she’d finally summoned the courage to tell her. At the time she’d figured Vickie would react like her family had done when she was a child. She was a licensed professional, after all, and while crazy wasn’t in her vocabulary—at least not professionally—that’s undoubtedly what she was sure to believe Circe to be. When she realized Vickie actually believed her, she’d broken down and sobbed. Every bottled-up emotion from a lifetime of pretending poured out, and still Vickie stayed her friend. There wasn’t enough money in the world to buy that kind of loyalty and friendship.

Holding her wineglass between both of her hands, she stared at the wine and started to speak. “When I saw the first woman I thought, great, we’re done here, but you know how it is. You go out to do a job, you want to do it right. So Zelda and I kept walking our grid intending to cover the whole area. We should have blasted through it in half an hour, tops. Then a second woman appears and then a third! Three women, Vic. Three murdered women. What kind of sick sonofabitch does something like that?”

Vickie reached over and covered her hand with one of hers. “Oh, kiddo, I’m sorry. That is so messed up. You’ve got to feel like your ass has been kicked.”

She nodded. Oh, she felt like she’d been kicked all right, and not just in the ass. Her head and her whole body as well. “I’ve never experienced anything like this, and I hope to God I never do again. It was so wrong.”

When she was a child, the dead usually came to her one at a time. Before she was old enough to grasp what it all meant, she’d thought of them as friends. Odd friends with not a lot to say, and

sometimes hurt and bloody, but friends nonetheless. She knew even back then they didn't mean her any harm. It was the only world she knew, and so she was comfortable there even if no one else understood.

But she truly had never experienced anything like today. It went beyond the multiple victims who'd come to her. Today it all felt different and not in a good way, and not because the women were murder victims. They certainly weren't her first. As a K9 handler she was in on a number of finds where the victims lost their lives through foul play. It was all part of what she and Zelda had signed up for. They trained for it and they were prepared.

What made today different was the whispered plea, "Help me." Those who came to her seemed to know their fate, and what she typically heard, if she heard anything at all, was, "Thank you." They wanted to be found and seemed to know that because of her they were going home at last. They would no longer be cold, lost, and alone. So why today did two of these women ask her for help?

Vickie leaned forward, picked up the bottle of wine, and topped off her nearly empty glass. Her eyes studied the dark liquid as though it was something new. Then her gaze shifted and her eyes met Circe's. "You know, I'd really like to be all cheerful and comforting and tell you this is the last time you'll feel like this, but I'm not going to lie just to make you feel better. I'm not *that* friend."

Circe smiled despite the less-than-comforting words. In an odd way they actually were a form of comfort rooted in Vickie's never-wavering dependability. She wasn't the kind of friend who told her whatever she thought would make it all okay. No, she always told her the truth even if it was painful and ugly. Her honesty was one reason they stayed close. She loved Vickie's attitude about life, along with her way of seeing things for what they were and then dealing with them. Despite all the ugliness she encountered in her own day-to-day work, she found a way to keep the light in her world. It was a gift she freely shared with her friends, and Circe, for one, was grateful she was one of those friends.

"Given what you're doing and given what you can do, this won't be the last time something like this will happen. You just have

to find a way to deal with it and work through it. You have the guts, girlfriend. You just have to use them.”

Good advice. Not so easy to follow. Today made her uneasy on so many levels. Usually bringing someone home left her feeling complete and like she and Zelda had done a good job. But right now it felt as though a loose end was hanging out there, and a sense of urgency was pressing her to pick it up. Whatever it was, she needed to discover it and tie it up before she would find peace.

As if that wasn't enough to leave her with a sense of uneasiness, a niggling feeling at the back of her mind said this wasn't a simple case of murder, or serial murder, given the multiple victims. Calling serial murder simple was a bit of an oxymoron. Something far darker and more sinister lay at the heart of the murder of those three women, and she wouldn't be able to rest until she knew what it was. They asked her for help and she intended to give it to them.

Circe held up her wineglass and stared at it for a long moment, almost seeing the young women and hearing their pleas for help. The mild scent of the wine tickled her senses as she tipped the glass back and forth. It wasn't a crystal ball and the answers were definitely not there, no matter how much she wished they were. She brought the glass to her lips, closed her eyes, and savored the wine's sweet taste. Opening her eyes once again, she picked up the bottle.

Vickie had the right idea when she'd brought the bottle out here. It was going to be the kind of night that called for the whole thing. Trying to push through to an answer wouldn't work. Instead, she poured a healthy amount of wine into her glass and smiled. Sometimes finding the answer meant letting go. She tapped her glass against Vickie's. “Bottoms up.”