

**THE  
GIRL  
IN  
THE  
MOTEL**

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Megan's hands trembled as she unlocked her motel room's deadbolt. Clouds covered the sky all the way to the horizon while bright sodium lights hummed like giant bug zappers in the parking lot and illuminated the asphalt. As she pushed open her door, the smell of stale cigarettes, bleach, and some kind of lemon cleanser wafted over her. No one was around. Even the prostitutes had left to attend the fireworks.

Megan should have brought a gun. She knew half a dozen people who would have sold her a pistol without asking a question, but her sister had persuaded her not to buy one. If the people chasing her found her unarmed, they might simply take her hostage, but if they found her with a gun, they'd kill her without hesitation.

According to the calendar, it was early spring still, but winter had relinquished its grasp on St. Augustine months ago. The crocuses had long since bloomed and then returned to the earth. Soon, there'd be day lilies and honeysuckle growing alongside central Missouri's roadways and streams. Spring was usually Megan's favorite time of the year. It symbolized new beginnings and a

renewal.

Now, she couldn't help but feel chilled despite the balmy weather.

She slipped her key into the front pocket of her purse and then looked over the parking lot one last time to make sure she was alone. There was a strip club across the street and a truck stop down the block. Aside from two scruffy-looking men walking beside one another along the side of the road, nobody was out. Neither of them looked toward the cheap motel across the street, and neither seemed to notice her at all.

She was alone still. Good.

The moment she stepped into the room, she shut the door behind her, drew the curtains over the window, and then locked the deadbolt. The suite she had rented only had one exit and one large window. She would have liked a second escape route, but she didn't plan to stay long enough for anyone to find her.

She sat on the bed and leaned forward, running her hands through her hair. She had made it. She was safe. She had left in time.

A tear slid down her nose and onto her jeans. Megan tried to hold it in, but a sob welled in her gut. Twelve years ago, Megan and her sister had framed a gangster for murder. It had worked perfectly. The police had arrested Christopher and sent him to prison for the rest of his life, and for twelve years, Megan and her sister had hidden from his crew.

Now, hiding wasn't enough.

A week ago, Christopher's men had found them, and Megan and Emily had been running ever since. It was the most exhausting thing she had ever done. She deserved a break.

Marijuana was illegal in Missouri, but that didn't stop people from buying and smoking it. Megan and her sister, Emily, specialized in selling high-end strains to doctors, lawyers, and business people. When working, she and her sister wore business clothing and carried briefcases. They took credit cards and gave invoices with fake product names. Anyone who saw them dropping off their illicit goods might think they were attorneys or realtors; instead, they were two of the most successful drug dealers in St. Louis.

Megan reached into her purse for a small glass pipe hand painted in psychedelic colors. Though she sold marijuana, Megan had never seen herself as a drug dealer. In her mind, she helped people who needed help, none more so than the cancer patients she was lucky enough to service. Where modern medicine gave them poison so powerful it robbed their lives of joy, she gave them relief. She was proud of that.

She sorted through her sample packages until she found an Indica strain her cancer patients loved.

Almost the moment she lit up, the knot in her belly unwound, the muscles of her shoulders loosened, and she felt better, more like herself. Everything would blow over. She'd be fine.

She took deep breaths before putting her pipe on the

dresser beside the television and then reaching into her purse for her cell phone. Megan hadn't told any of her clients when she left town. Some of them would feel betrayed, but they'd find new suppliers soon enough. Only Emily knew where she was. That was how it should have been. Her sister was the only person she could trust.

She took more deep breaths and then closed her eyes. Her suite had cost three hundred dollars a night, but she was lucky to even get that. It was Spring Fair week, something St. Augustine was famous for.

Megan had never been to St. Augustine's Spring Fair, but everybody in the state knew about it. For one week, St. Augustine—a tiny college town along the Mississippi River—turned into the biggest tourist attraction in the Midwest. There were free concerts every night, fireworks displays, art fairs, beer gardens, and then a hot air balloon race to close the festivities. It was perfect for her needs. The fair brought in tens of thousands of people, allowing Megan to disappear in the crowds.

She pressed the power button on her phone to wake it up. She had sent her sister a dozen text messages over the past few hours, but Emily had yet to respond. It made her gut twist. Once more, she called her sister's number, and just as before, Emily's phone didn't even ring before going to voicemail.

"Em, it's me. Where are you? I'm in St. Augustine. I went by Joe's house, but I couldn't find her. I'll try again later tonight. I know she'll help, but I'm getting worried. I need to talk to you. I've sent you a dozen messages.

Where the hell are you?”

She paused for a moment, feeling her throat tighten again.

“I’m scared. I don’t know where you are. Please just tell me you’re safe. Call me, okay?”

She pulled the phone from her ear and ended the call. For a moment, she stared at the screen, expecting it to light up with an incoming call or text message. Nothing happened, though, so she leaned back on the bed and rubbed her eyes. She wanted to smoke again, but that’d knock her out, and she needed every ounce of awareness she had.

As she lay there, the room’s silence weighed on her chest, making her lungs tight. She’d have to get used to silence, though. Until she and Emily were safe, they’d each have a lot of silent nights far from home.

Their plan had been simple. Emily would prepare a cabin in Mark Twain State Park while Megan went to St. Augustine to get help from the only cop in the world who would help them. Cell reception near the state park could get spotty, but Megan needed to hear her sister’s voice. She needed to know Emily was okay.

Megan took deep breaths, calming herself and allowing the cannabis she had just smoked to work its potent magic on her system. She had to think this through. It was almost nine at night. Joe was a police officer, but even police officers had to come home. Megan had already spent most of the day trying to track her down, but she hadn’t been able to find her. She’d

swing by her house again after the fireworks, but for the moment, she let herself sink into the soft bed. Slowly, she began to drift to sleep.

Then, somebody pounded on the door.

Megan's breath stopped, and she bolted upright, shooting her eyes around the room for a hiding spot. She thought about squeezing under the bed, but the people after her weren't stupid. She had nowhere to go, so she dug through her purse for a can of pepper spray. She had bought it years ago but never needed to use it. Hopefully it would still work.

The person at the door knocked again.

"Pizza."

It was a man's voice, one she didn't recognize. The men who had found her earlier both had the raspy voices of lifelong smokers. This voice was smooth and mellow. She held her breath, waiting and hoping he'd go away, but he knocked again.

"I've got your pizza," he called again. "Get it while it's hot."

Her fingers trembled, and her belly ached, but she palmed her pepper spray and walked to the door to look through the peephole. Her legs felt like rubber. The man outside wore a red shirt and matching red hat from a place called the Pizza Palace, and he carried an insulated pizza delivery box.

"You've got the wrong place," she called, only realizing once the words left her mouth that her voice trembled. She coughed and drew in a deep breath, forcing

her voice to sound calm. “I didn’t order a pizza.”

The driver stepped back and looked at his order slip. Then he furrowed his brow and looked at the door again.

“You sure?” he asked. “I’ve got a medium, hand-tossed pepperoni with a small Greek salad and a side order of cheese bread for room 127 at this motel. It’s already paid for and everything.”

“That’s my room, but I didn’t order anything. Just take your pizza and go. Okay?”

“Okay. Sure,” he said. “Sorry to bother you.”

He took two steps but then stopped and turned toward the door.

“If you’d like, I can leave it at the front desk for you to pick up. Or I can even just put it on the ground. It’s paid for. Tip and everything. If I take it back, we throw it out. I’d hate to waste good food.”

Megan’s stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast almost twelve hours ago.

“Fine. Just put it on the ground. I’ll pick it up.”

“Great,” he said, kneeling. “Have a good one.”

The driver walked back toward his truck just as a firework burst over the distant tree line. It took a few seconds for the sound to hit. Somewhere close, thousands of people would be watching the display without a care in the world. It seemed unfair. As the pizza guy pulled out of the lot, she cracked open her door and then looked left and right before picking up the box.

More fireworks crested the hill, illuminating the night

sky in reds and purples. She leaned against the doorframe, allowing herself to enjoy the spectacle. To her surprise, the dazzling display calmed her. It seemed so normal. Everything would be okay. Joe was a cop. She'd help them survive. This wasn't the last fireworks display she'd see.

As Megan reached behind her for the door, another crack echoed in the distance. It was louder and higher-pitched than the boom of the fireworks. Megan barely registered the noise before the round tore into her chest and all the lights in the world went out one final time.

I hated fair week. It was just after seven in the morning, and the line at Rise and Grind, our local coffee shop, was already out the door. If I could believe the conversations people were having around me, the shop was out of blueberry scones and running low on pecan rolls. St. Augustine had a lot of wonderful things, but those pecan rolls were sometimes my only reason for rolling out of bed in the morning. If the tourists took that from me, I'd never forgive them.

I glanced at my watch. My boss had scheduled roll call to start at seven-thirty, but most of my colleagues would show up late. Last night had been long and rough. Tommy B's, a local dive bar, had given away free beer to celebrate the first night of fair week. It had not gone well. Our uniformed officers on foot patrols had spent half the night breaking up fights while the rest of us arrested drunk drivers. It was not fun.

I crossed my arms and glanced at a little girl standing near me. Her mother struggled to carry a tray laden with coffee cups and pecan rolls while steering her daughter to

one of the outdoor tables beside the shop.

“Did you see the fireworks last night?” asked the girl.

I smiled at her and shook my head.

“I was fighting with drunk men at a bar. My partner said he liked the fireworks, though.”

“They were awesome,” she said.

“Glad to hear it.”

The mom hurried her daughter away from me as the line crept forward. When I reached the counter, Sheryl, Rise and Grind’s proprietor, smiled at me.

“Morning, Joe. I thought you’d be by, so I saved you a pecan roll. You want the usual latte to go?”

I smiled my first real smile since getting up that morning. “Yes, thank you. You’re truly a saint.”

“That’s what I’m told,” she said, smiling. “I’ll bring it out as soon as I can.”

I thanked her again and took a step back from the counter to wait. A man in his early twenties stood beside me. He was about six feet tall and looked as if he weighed around a hundred and ninety pounds, most of which was muscle. His black hair was unkempt, and his eyes were bloodshot. He looked and smelled as if he had slept the previous evening in a ditch, but I tried not to judge people. I nodded a polite hello to him and then ignored him.

“I heard you tell that girl outside you were fighting drunk guys at the bar last night,” he said, taking a small step toward me. “Sorry I wasn’t there. We could have been a team.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You need something?”

His gaze traveled down my torso. I wore jeans, a white oxford shirt, and a black blazer. Beneath my blazer, I wore a vertical shoulder holster, which held a Glock 19 chambered for a nine-millimeter round. On my belt, I wore a silver badge from the St. Augustine County Sheriff’s Department. Somehow, I didn’t think he was checking out my sidearm.

“Are you local, or are you in town for the fair?”

“I’m a local,” I said, putting my hands on my hips to push my blazer back and expose my badge. “What do you need?”

He looked at my chest and then my hips.

“So you’re a cop?”

I raised my eyebrows. “That’s what my paycheck says.”

He didn’t seem too interested in talking after that, which I appreciated. As I waited for my coffee, my phone buzzed. Even in bucolic St. Augustine, early-morning phone calls never portended good news. I sighed before answering.

“It’s Joe. Yeah?”

“Morning, Joe. Hear you got into a fist fight last night. You doing okay?”

The voice belonged to Travis Kosen, my boss. I had met him twelve years ago when I was still a teenager and he was a detective in St. Louis. I must have done something right in those first few meetings because I became a cop seven years later once I finished college and

got my first job in his department.

“I’m fine, and it wasn’t a fist fight. A drunk guy took a swing at me, missed, and fell down. I put cuffs on him before he could stand up again.”

“So you won.”

My lips curled into a tight smile. “If that’s your definition of winning, I guess I did. I’m on my way in. What do you need?”

The boss grunted. “We’ve got a murder at the Wayfair Motel.”

I rubbed sleep out of my eyes and groaned.

“I haven’t even had my coffee yet. It’s too early for a body.”

Two or three tourists looked at me askance, but I ignored them.

“Death pays little mind to our creature comforts,” said Travis. “Nicky and Dave were the first on site. You’re the lead. As soon as I can find him, Harrison will be your second on this one.”

Sheryl whistled to get my attention as she placed my order on the counter. I picked my breakfast up, mouthed a thank you to her, and pinned my phone to my head with my shoulder as I stepped from the counter.

“Delgado and Martin won’t appreciate this. It’s their turn.”

“They’re already on a case,” said Travis. “Theft from a motor vehicle out on Pinehurst.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, this’ll go over real well. Our two most experienced investigators miss out on

a homicide because some rich guy on Pinehurst thinks the kid next door broke into his BMW.”

“I believe it’s a Mercedes, and they’ll get over it,” said Travis. “You seen your partner this morning?”

“Nope,” I said, sipping my drink. “You try the parking lot outside Club Serenity?”

“Are you implying your partner passed out in his car outside a cheap strip club?”

I smiled to myself.

“I hear they raise their prices for lap dances during fair week. It’s actually a very expensive strip club.”

“I think I’ll try his house first,” said Travis.

“Well, if you strike out, don’t blame me, boss.”

“Just get to the motel, smartass.”

He hung up before I could say anything else. I balanced my pecan roll on top of my drink and then slipped my phone into my pocket. The man who had admired my chest earlier took a step closer.

“You have a nice smile. You should break it out more often.”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “Why are we talking?”

“You’re here. I’m here. It seems like fate brought us together.”

I didn’t even roll my eyes. I just walked away.

“You’ve got to tell me,” he said, hurrying to walk beside me. “What happened on May 12th?”

The question made me stop. My back was straight as I adjusted the sleeve on my blazer to cover the date tattooed on my wrist.

“It’s none of your business. Stop talking and stop following me.”

“May 12, 2006. It can’t be when you graduated from high school. You’re not that old.”

He probably thought I was playing hard to get. I wasn’t, so I kept walking out of the shop. He must have taken that as a challenge because he followed me. I almost told him off, but I knew that wouldn’t have deterred him.

“Is that the date you lost your virginity?” he asked, lowering his voice. “I bet it was in the back of your boyfriend’s car.”

“If you keep following me, I’ll arrest you for harassing a police officer.”

He held up his hands and stopped walking. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“No, you weren’t,” I said. “You said something outrageous to persuade me to talk to you despite my request that you leave me alone. Now you’ve got two choices. You can either stop following me, or I’ll call my station and let them know I need help. Half a dozen large men will come and drag you to a jail cell. They might Tase you on the way. They might even pepper spray you. It all depends on who answers the call. It’s your choice. What do you want to do?”

He opened his mouth to say something, but then he thought better of it and walked back inside. I watched the door shut before turning and looking for my truck.

Rise and Grind occupied the bottom story of a hundred-year-old, three-story brick building in downtown

St. Augustine. There were restaurants, antique stores, and a candy shop up the street. Already, the sidewalks were growing crowded with tourists and vendors. Many of them would go to the art fair that afternoon when it opened, but for now, most of them looked content to wander the historic downtown area.

I slipped through the crowd and walked half a block to my car where I took my first bite of my pecan roll. It was worth getting out of bed for, but I couldn't focus on it too much. I had a body to see.

**January 1998**

It was so cold in the car I could see my breath. Mom had left a few hours ago, and already snow and ice had piled up against the window, blocking some of my view of the motel's parking lot. I huddled under a thick pile of threadbare sweaters in the back of our car.

My mom and I didn't know where we'd spend the night most days, so we kept our clothes in bags in the back of her old SUV. She'd be mad when she found out I had used her sweaters as a blanket, but she wouldn't hit me if I promised to put them away.

We didn't sleep in the car often, but it wasn't too bad when we did. In the summer, we'd open the windows and let the breeze in. In the winter, we'd snuggle together in the back. I liked those nights. We were like a real family then.

It hadn't always been like this. When I was little, Mom and I had an apartment. I had a room with a window and a bed. It was nice. Mom slept on the pullout sofa. She had made us dinner almost every night, but even when she forgot to come home, Mrs. Sanders, the

old lady who lived next door, took care of me. I liked Mrs. Sanders. She gave good hugs. Unfortunately, the man who ran our building was stupid and made us leave. That's what my mom screamed as we were leaving, at least.

After that, we lived in a big building with a lot of other women and their kids. I liked it there, too, because there were always people to play with. We all went to church every day, but that wasn't too bad. We even got to eat dinner together at night. I had friends there, so I liked it. The nuns who ran that place were stupid, too, though, so we couldn't stay long. My mom, I guess, was too smart for them.

Tonight, though, we'd sleep in a real bed. Mom had a job. I didn't know what it was, but she visited men and made them happy. I guessed they talked or something. Afterwards, we'd have a hotel for the night, and we'd order a pizza or Chinese food. The next day, we'd sleep until ten or eleven in the morning. Sometimes, if my mom was in a good mood, we'd go to Walmart. She'd buy me socks. She always told me socks were important. If you wore socks, you wouldn't get sick.

Sometimes, people would get mad at Mom and tell her I should be in school, but they didn't know what they were talking about. I went to school some. When we lived in the apartment, I had gone every day. It was fun, and I had learned stuff, but not the stuff I learned with my mom. Mom taught me to wear socks to avoid getting sick and to go to restaurants right when they closed to get free

food.

Restaurants always gave out free food at closing time. The managers were always nice, too. They smiled at me. Sometimes they even gave me ice cream. They didn't seem to like my mom, but as long as I was there, they were nice. I didn't know what Mom had done to them, but sometimes people were just stupid.

That was something else Mom taught me. The world had two kinds of people: smart and stupid. Most people were stupid, but there were smart ones, too. Sometimes I wondered whether some people Mom thought were stupid were actually smart, but I didn't know.

I wrapped my arms around my chest, clutching an itchy wool sweater. A tickle built in the back of my throat. My nose already felt a little stuffy. I had been sneezing a lot, but I didn't want my mom to know that. She always got mad when I got sick. She liked to work and said she got sick every time I got sick. Nobody, she said, wanted to be with her if she had a runny nose. Runny noses didn't bother me, but my opinion didn't count. I wished I had money to pay her to make her happy, but I didn't.

Something tickled my nose, so I covered my mouth to keep myself from sneezing all over Mom's sweaters.

And then the police car pulled into the lot.

Two men in uniforms got out. They had guns and a lot of other stuff on their belts. I slunk lower in the SUV so they wouldn't see me.

I didn't know much about police officers except that they were mean. Mom always said the police wanted to

take me from her. They were motherfuckers. I didn't know what that word meant, but my mom's boyfriend told me it. He was weird, and he always smelled bad. And he was always smoking these cigarettes he made himself.

He and Mom broke up a long time ago, but he still came around some. When he was around, we'd drive to a park so I could get out and play. He and Mom would stay in the car for a while. They must have been working because Mom didn't want me around then. After they finished their work, he'd take us out to eat. Sometimes, we even stayed in his apartment. I slept on his couch while he and Mom slept in his room. Sometimes, we'd even stay there for a few days, but then he and Mom would fight, and we'd leave.

One of the police officers stopped outside my mom's room and knocked hard. The other one ran for the front office. I slunk even lower in the car so my back touched the floorboards. I pretended I was invisible. They couldn't see me if I didn't move, I thought.

Within seconds of the police officers arriving, an ambulance pulled into the lot. Curious, I sat up a little. The door to my mom's room was open. My stomach plunged into my feet. My nose had been itchy for a couple of days, but I hadn't told Mom because I didn't want her to get mad. She must have gotten sick, though. I was so stupid. I should have told her. She could have worn thicker socks.

I sat upright and put on my shoes so I could tell the paramedics that Mom just needed socks.

Then I saw a police officer walking from one car to another. He had a flashlight, and he was looking in the backseat of each vehicle. I slipped my shoes on but didn't get the laces tied before I had to slide down again and hide.

The cop was right beside our car, peering into the windows of a hatchback beside us. I held my breath as he panned his light across the gap between our vehicles.

Then I felt it in the back of my throat. A sneeze.

The light passed over the sweater covering my face. I shut my eyes tight, hoping he would go away. If he caught me, he'd take me away. I didn't know where I'd go, but that was what Mom always told me. Stay away from the police. They'd break up our family.

So I stayed there and felt the tickle grow in my throat. Then, the light left my car as the cop went to the vehicle beside ours. My shoulders relaxed, and I felt better. Then it happened. A great, loud sneeze—like something out of a cartoon. The light panned to my car again.

I didn't know what else to do, so I scrambled onto the middle seat and opened the door. The night air was freezing, and the wind bit through my sweater and jeans. The moment my feet hit the asphalt, I ran.

"She's running," said the cop.

To my seven-year-old ears, his voice was a wicked snarl, a battle cry from a monster who would catch me and eat me up. I sprinted. The tears froze on my cheeks. I didn't know where I was, only that I had to get away.

There was a grocery store beside the motel, so I ran toward that, unsure where else to go.

“Honey, stop!” he called. “It’s okay.”

I hardly heard him. My feet pounded across the pavement. The cold squeezed my chest and made my lungs hurt, but still I ran. My shoes were loose, so I kicked them off. When I reached the grocery store, the front doors slid open, and I went inside. A man in a red apron near the door saw me coming and pulled a cart out of my way.

“You okay, honey?”

Like the police officer, I ignored him, too. I had to run. I had to find somewhere safe. Mom had taken me into that grocery store before, so I knew the layout. I ran through the produce section, pulling apples onto the floor behind me. There were two police officers chasing me. One of them knocked into a display of bananas, making a mess on the floor. He stopped, but the second guy kept going.

*Please, God, don't let him get me.*

I said it over and over in my head, pleading and crying at the same time.

Finally, I reached the rear of the store. Between the deli and a bakery, there was a hallway that led toward the bathroom, and I darted right toward it. The cops were both men. They couldn’t go into the girls’ bathroom, so I was safe. Once I got in, I huddled under the sink with my back to the wall and my arms across my chest, breathing hard. No one was in the stalls.

For a moment, I was alone. Then the door cracked open.

“County police. Is anybody in here?”

I held my breath.

*Please go away. Please go away. Don't eat me.*

I pleaded with him in my mind, and I prayed to whatever God had ears to hear. Then the door swung open, and I saw him. He had a bushy brown beard, brown eyes, and a hateful black gun on his hip. When he saw me huddled beneath the sink, he knelt down near the door but stopped moving otherwise.

“Hey, hon,” he said. “I’m Ross. Are you Mary?”

I pulled my legs tighter to my chest but said nothing.

“I saw you lost your shoes in the parking lot. Are you hurt?”

I eyed him but said nothing. He nodded as if I had said something profound anyway and then sat down with his knees bent in front of him. The door opened again, but he waved away whoever was behind it before I could see them.

“Your mom got sick. We’re taking her to the hospital.”

“She wasn’t wearing socks,” I said without thinking. “That makes you sick. And my name is Joe. Only my teachers call me Mary, and I hate them.”

He looked down at his hands. “Your mom overdosed on something, but we’re not sure what yet. She’s going to the hospital. We think we got to her in time.”

I didn’t know what an overdose was, so I didn’t

respond. Officer Ross stayed with me for two hours. He even turned off his radio. He did most of the talking and told me about his two daughters in middle school. One was a cheerleader, but the other played basketball. I told him about how important socks were, and then I told him which restaurants gave out the best food at closing time. That seemed to make him sad.

After I ran out of things to talk about, he asked whether I wanted a blanket. He didn't have one with him, so somebody outside the bathroom gave it to him. I got out from under the sink, and he draped it over my shoulders. It warmed me up, which was nice. I let him pick me up after that. He seemed sad, so it felt like the right thing to do.

As we walked out of the grocery store to another ambulance, he whispered that everything would be okay. Without realizing it, I cried and sobbed against him. I couldn't help it. He kept telling me I had nothing to be afraid of and that he'd keep me safe, which made me cry even harder.

My mom had told me a lot of things. She told me to shut up at least once a day; she told me that socks would keep me from having to go to the doctor; she told me to be quiet when the police came by; and she told me never to upset her boyfriend by crying when he was over. She never told me she'd keep me safe, though, and she never told me everything would be okay.

I didn't cry because that police officer scared me; I cried because he didn't. I felt like somebody cared about

me. I felt safe.

And even then I knew it would never last.

The Wayfair Motel was a two-story building wrapped in white aluminum siding. From a distance, it looked pleasant enough, but on closer inspection, it was hard to miss the cigarette butts and broken glass, the cracked asphalt, or the broken spindles on the second-story railing. The parking lot was full of minivans and other family cars. During fair week, the motel did a brisk business with tourists, but during the rest of the year, few of its guests stayed overnight.

I parked in an open spot near the front office, ate the last of my pecan roll, and grabbed a fresh notepad from my glove box before stepping out of my old truck. Three uniformed officers stood near a pair of police cruisers parked in the fire lane at the far end of the building. A fourth officer strung yellow crime scene tape from the support poles that held the second story aloft.

A local man named Vic Conway owned the Wayfair Motel and surrounding businesses. He had sat on the County Council for almost two decades and even ran for a seat in the Missouri House of Representatives once. That was before my time, though. I only knew him as a

dirty old man who owned a strip club, truck stop, and a cheap motel by the interstate.

The Wayfair Motel was the crown jewel in Vic's portfolio. Whether by design or happenstance, his businesses formed a cozy triangle for the young and desperate. Young women—some fourteen or fifteen years old—came from St. Louis and the surrounding areas to work the parking lot of the truck stop as prostitutes. Those industrious enough could earn upwards of a thousand bucks a night, half of which Vic took for protection.

When those girls turned eighteen, they got boob jobs and worked in the strip club. After their dancing shifts were over, many took clients to the Wayfair for paid trysts. Girls could earn good livings well into their late twenties, but once his employees got too old to dance or turn tricks, Vic hired them as maids for his motel or clerks for his convenience store.

We had half a dozen active investigations into Vic's activities, but none of them ever went anywhere. He had enough money to buy off most witnesses, and those he couldn't buy disappeared. Sooner or later, he'd slip, and we'd put him in prison, but not today.

The uniformed officers perked up when they saw me. St. Augustine County had almost fifty sworn officers on staff, and we all knew each other well. Some of my colleagues had a gift for police work, but most didn't. Everyone tried their best, though, which was all I could ask for.

“What have we got?” I asked, reaching into the inside pocket of my blazer for a pair of polypropylene gloves. I snapped them on and then took out my notepad. Nicole Bryant stepped forward. She was in her mid-forties and had brown hair pulled back from her face. At five-seven, I wasn’t tall, but I had at least three inches on her.

“Morning, Joe,” she said, reaching to her utility belt for her own notepad. “Dispatch received the phone call from the front desk at 6:43 this morning. A guest had returned home and found what he thought was blood on the ground. He contacted the front office, and they contacted us. Dave and I arrived at 7:09 and found what appeared to be blood spatter on the ground outside room 127. No one inside the room answered our knock. Fearing that we might have had someone hurt inside, we contacted the front office. The clerk let us in with his master key. Inside the room, a young woman lay on the floor. I felt her neck for a pulse and found nothing. I then stepped out. Nobody else has been inside, and nobody’s touched anything.”

Most of the time, they would have needed a search warrant to enter someone’s room, but the blood and lack of response gave them exigent circumstances. It sounded like a good search. It also sounded as if they had protected the scene well.

“That’s good work. Nicky, call Harry. He’s supposed to be my second on this case. Tell him everything you told me and then tell him to get to the station. I need him

to fill out an affidavit for a search warrant for the motel room.”

She wrote the request down and nodded but then looked at me with her eyes narrowed.

“We still need a search warrant with a body on the ground?”

I nodded. “Yeah. You had exigent circumstances, which allowed you to go into the room, but there’s no murder scene exception to the Fourth Amendment.”

She nodded. “Learn something new every day. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Once you get in touch with Harrison, call Dr. Sheridan and tell him we’ve got a body and need his expertise. Once you’ve got that done, I need you to start a log book so we can keep the scene secure.”

I looked to the other officers. “Dave and Bill, I need you knocking on doors. We need to talk to as many guests as we can before they leave. If anybody heard or saw anything weird last night, tell me. I want to talk to them myself.”

Dave nodded, but Bill looked a little uncertain.

“I’m supposed to be working the information booth at the fair this morning,” he said.

“Now you’re working a homicide,” I said. “Is that a problem?”

He blinked a few times and then straightened. “Shouldn’t we wait for the real detectives on this? Delgado and Martin will be taking over anyway, right?”

My cheeks grew warm, and I locked my eyes on his.

Bill had at least four inches and fifty pounds on me, but he took a step back beneath my glare. I pushed my jacket back to expose the badge on my hip.

“Do you see my badge, Officer Wharton?”

He straightened. “Yeah, I can see your badge.”

“Does it look like the ones Detectives Martin and Delgado carry?”

He closed his eyes but said nothing. I repeated my question, so he crossed his arms and nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I am a real detective, and this is my case. Do you have a problem with that?”

He tilted his head to the side. “It’s just that they handle the murder cases is all. I’m used to working with them. You’re a good detective on burglaries and thefts, but this is a murder. Have you ever worked a murder?”

“Stop talking,” I said. “I’m the detective assigned to this case. I earned it, and it’s mine. Do as I asked or go home. Your choice.”

He stood straighter. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch. I’m just trying to clarify everybody’s role on this.”

I nodded toward his cruiser. “Get out of my crime scene. You’re done for the day.”

“I’m doing my job, lady.”

“If you were doing your job, you’d be knocking on doors right now with Officer Skelton. You’re not, which means you’re wasting my time. Now get in your car, call Trisha, and ask her to send somebody who brought his big-boy pants to work today.”

He muttered something, so I took a step closer to him.

“Something you want to share?” I asked.

“I’ll talk to Travis about this,” he said. “You can’t just send me away like I’m some kind of naughty kid.”

“As the primary detective on the case, I can, and I am,” I said. “Now leave, or I’ll write you up for insubordination.”

He straightened to his full height and then looked down his nose at me. He was trying to be intimidating, but I didn’t plan to back down. After a few seconds of posturing, he got in his car and left, and I took a deep, relieved breath.

My department had over a dozen female officers, but I was the only female detective, and they had made me claw and fight my way to the position. I’d earned my badge the same way every other detective on staff had: I busted my ass. This was my job. I wouldn’t let some lazy asshole tell me how to do it.

Once Bill left, I looked to Officer Marcus Washington. He stood straight and nodded.

“Marcus, you’re going across the street. There are security cameras outside the truck stop and strip club. Find out whether any were pointed this way last night. Once you’ve done that, talk to the manager and any dancers you can find at Club Serenity. Ask them whether anybody saw something weird. They’re not going to talk to you, but we might get lucky. While you’re over there, if you find any prostitutes working the truck stop this early,

detain them, call for backup, and then interview them to see whether they saw anything.”

He nodded and looked over his shoulder to the truck stop before looking at me again.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I looked at each of my officers.

“Everybody clear on what to do?”

Nicky said yes. The men nodded again.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s get to it.”

I watched for a moment while my team shuffled off to do their tasks. Our officers weren’t perfect, but they did good work on most cases. St. Augustine didn’t get too many murders, and when we did, we had three experienced detectives on staff. I had assisted other detectives on four homicides, but this was my first murder as the primary officer.

A small part of me—the part I allowed everyone else to see—knew I had the experience and expertise to work the case. The other part of me—a far bigger part—was scared shitless.

I took a breath and did the same thing I did when I was a girl standing on the high-dive board for the first time: I jumped in.

I walked toward the room, taking pictures of the exterior door frame with my cell phone. Though we needed a search warrant to process the scene for fingerprints and other forensic information, I could still look around and take pictures now. Those things I found in plain sight, I could use in court. Anything else, I’d have

to wait for a warrant.

I stepped over the blood in the doorway and walked inside. Aside from the blood, the room looked clean. Someone had rumped the comforter near the foot of the bed, but it didn't look as if anyone had slept in it. The victim's body was near the bathroom, but I didn't pay her much attention yet. She wasn't going anywhere.

There was a brown leather purse stamped with gold rosettes on a table near the front window. A brass buckle on the side of the bag identified it as a Louis Vuitton. If it was real, it would have cost more than I made in a month.

I snapped pictures of the purse with my cell phone before crossing the room. There was a black Tumi suitcase on the dresser beside the television. Whoever the victim was, she had liked expensive things.

Since I was already deep into the room, I looked at the body next. She lay on her belly with long black hair covering her face. Her skin—at least so far as I could see it—was caramel colored, and she looked young. She wore gray yoga pants and a loose-fitting turquoise shirt. By her clothes, she could have just come from the gym, or maybe she was getting ready for a relaxing night inside.

There was a large exit wound on her back. About a year ago, the sheriff and I had worked a homicide in which a man shot his neighbor with a .45-caliber full metal jacket round at about four feet. The entrance wound on the victim's forehead was about the size of a dime, but the exit wound on the back of his skull was the

size of a golf ball. Whatever hit my victim here was larger. This wasn't a handgun; it was a rifle, and a damn big one. Somebody should have heard it go off.

Aside from the blood, her shirt looked clean. A shot at point-blank range would have left powder marks, but I couldn't see any.

I left the body and focused on the table by the front window. I could think of two scenarios to explain what I had seen. In the first, the shooter hid outside in the parking lot with a rifle until the victim opened her door. The moment he saw her, he opened fire. He then crossed the parking lot while carrying his rifle, dragged the victim inside, and then shut the door to hide the body.

In the second scenario—the one I found more likely—we had two murderers. The first murderer knocked on the door and then ducked. When the victim opened the door, the second murderer opened fire. The first murderer then dragged the victim inside and shut the door behind him.

However it happened, we'd have ample forensic evidence. Unfortunately, I doubted we could use it. A motel room wasn't a public space, but even if we could find a usable fingerprint or hair that placed a suspect at the scene, he could claim he had been in that room weeks ago. It was a seedy motel, and I doubted the maids got on their hands and knees to scrub the place down between guests.

We'd collect as much evidence as we could, but this investigation wouldn't come down to forensics. We'd have

to find our shooter the old-fashioned way: We'd comb through our victim's life to find out who wanted her dead, we'd talk to everyone within a two-block radius to see whether they saw anything, and then we'd use forensic evidence to bolster our case in court.

And it all started with our victim.

I unzipped her purse and caught a whiff of marijuana. Inside, she had a glass pipe and several vacuum-sealed bags full of dope. It was more weed than a recreational user would have. Her wallet was near the bottom, so I pulled it out and put the purse down.

Then I saw the victim's picture on her driver's license, and I brought my hand to my mouth. I couldn't look away from her picture, but the longer I looked, the weaker my legs felt. It was her. I hadn't seen her in twelve years, but she was never far from my mind. I palmed her license and backed out of the room, my heart thudding in my chest and my legs threatening to buckle with every step. Once I reached the parking lot, I called my boss.

"Hey, Travis, it's Joe Court. I'm at the Wayfair Motel with the body. I need you to come out here. The victim's dead."

Travis paused for a moment but then spoke slowly. "I know the victim is dead. That's why I sent you out there."

"No, Travis, you're not hearing me. The victim is dead. I'm looking at her ID right now. It's a fake. It says her name is Kiera Williams, but this is Megan Young."

Again, Travis paused. "That can't be right. Megan

Young died twelve years ago.”

“Yeah, but no one found her body. I think we now know why.”

For a third time, Travis paused before speaking. “I’m on my way. I hope you’re wrong.”

“Me, too.”

I hung up and stepped outside the crime scene tape. Several motel guests had already woken up and left, but most were still in their rooms. It seemed like a peaceful morning, but that would change. If I was right, news vans from every TV station, radio station, and newspaper in St. Louis and the surrounding area would descend on that parking lot like locusts.

Because if that was Megan Young in that room, and if she had died last night, my boss and his former partner had sent a man to prison twelve years ago for a murder that never happened.

This would be bad.