

BY J.B. WOODS

The
**DEEPEST
WATER**

In a timber town, everybody knows something.



ROSEBURG, OREGON · OCTOBER 2003

CHAPTERS 1–23 · CATCH-UP EDITION

The
Deepest Water

A serial mystery

STORY BY J.B. WOODS

Written with A.I. assistance

Roseburg, Oregon · October 2003

In a timber town, everybody knows something.

A work of fiction. Characters and events are invented; places are real.

The Deepest Water

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CATCH-UP EDITION · CHAPTERS 1–23

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New chapters run every morning in The Morning Courier.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

As you first meet them

AT THE UMPQUA LEDGER

Tess Halloran — a reporter who came home to Roseburg after losing her job at a Portland daily

Walt Brenner — her editor, gruff and protective

Gloria Bordiam — a newer reporter with strong opinions about what Tess should eat

THE MISSING

Gordon Pryce — owner of the shuttered Pryce Lumber mill

Harlan Voss — a Douglas County commissioner

THE FAMILIES

Evelyn Pryce — Gordon's wife

Trent Pryce — their son, running for county commission

Tiffany Voss — Harlan's much younger wife

THE LAW

Sheriff Ray Coyle — Douglas County's sheriff

Deputy Cal Walters — a young deputy

Christine Mason — an FBI profiler

FRIENDS

Teresa Juniper & Kally Hawthorn — Tess's friends, who run Eye Spy Investigations

Big Dave — a veneer-plant supervisor who knew Tess's father

Buck — Tess's old neighbor from Winston

Del & Flo — the diner in Glide: pie, coffee and advice

AT THE IDLE HOUR

Josh "Tic Tac" Foster — a regular who rattles a box of mints and notices things

Darla Foster — his older sister, who tends bar

Herb — a regular who dances with his pet rock, Rocky

AROUND TOWN

Owen Marsh — the boy Tess once babysat, all grown up

Heather — the front-desk clerk at the Holiday Inn by the river

CHAPTER 1

Lights On Till Eleven

Roseburg, Oregon · October 2003

THE UMPQUA LEDGER kept its lights on until eleven, whether or not anyone was working, because Walt Brenner believed a dark newsroom told the town it had stopped paying attention.

Tess Halloran was the only one left at a desk. She had spent the evening on a county budget story no one would read, typing to the hum of the police scanner Walt refused to turn off. Rain slid down the front window and blurred the view across the river to the shuttered Pryce Lumber mill — the one that had once employed half of Douglas County, and her father, until the day a fir came down the wrong way in 1991.

Walt came out of his office holding a single sheet of paper as if it might bite.

“Gordon Pryce,” he said.

“What about him?”

“Left the Elks Lodge Friday night around ten. Told the bartender he was driving home. Never got there.” He set the sheet on her keyboard. “His wife called the sheriff Saturday morning. Sheriff says a grown man is allowed a weekend.”

Tess read it twice. Gordon Pryce did not take weekends. He took meetings, and he took credit, and in the twelve years since he’d closed the mill he had taken a seat on every board in Roseburg that would have him.

“It’s Monday,” she said.

“It’s Monday,” Walt agreed. “And Coyle still hasn’t put out a word. No release, no phone call. You know what that tells me?”

“That he’s embarrassed.”

“That he’s scared.” Walt lowered himself into the chair across from her, knees cracking. “I want you on it. Quietly. Talk to the wife, talk to the Lodge. Don’t make it a story until it’s a story.”

“You’re giving me the biggest man in town?”

“I’m giving you the only reporter I’ve got who grew up here and still asks questions.” He paused. “And the only one who doesn’t owe the Pryces anything.”

She almost laughed. If anyone was counting, the Pryces owed her. Nobody was counting.

Walt stood to go. The scanner crackled — static, a dispatcher’s flat voice, then a deputy’s, half-swallowed by the rain.

“...Unit Four, I’m at a pullout on 138, eastbound... got a vehicle here, looks abandoned. Dark Lincoln. Keys in it. Driver’s door is standing open...”

Walt stopped in the doorway. Neither of them moved.

Gordon Pryce drove a dark Lincoln. Everyone in Roseburg knew that.

Tess was already reaching for her coat.

CHAPTER 2

Whoever Left It There

Highway 138 · October 2003

THE PULLOUT SAT a few miles past Glide, just short of Toketee Falls, where the North Umpqua bends hard against the rock and the firs close in on both sides like they’re keeping something.

By the time Tess got there, a deputy had strung yellow tape between two trunks and parked his cruiser across the gravel. The Lincoln sat at the far end, rain beading on the black paint, the driver’s door still hanging open. The dome light had died hours ago.

“Ledger,” she said, holding up her notebook.

“Sheriff says nobody.” The deputy couldn’t have been twenty-five. “Sheriff says especially you.”

She stood in the rain long enough to see what there was to see. No skid marks. No broken glass. The front wheels turned neatly toward the river, as if someone had parked with care. Then the kid started toward her, and she left.

It was after one when she pulled into Del’s Riverside Diner in Glide, the only lights for twenty miles. Del Ostrander was wiping down the counter as if he’d been expecting her.

“Tess Halloran. You look like the river spat you out.” He poured coffee before she asked. He had known her since she was eight, when her father stopped here every morning on his way up to the landings.

Above the register hung the week’s specials, pecked out on the old Royal typewriter Del kept by the grill — *Meatloaf Wednesday. Marionberry pie, fresh.* Every lowercase e sat a hair below the line, like the key had gotten tired.

“Heard the scanner,” Del said. “That Pryce’s car?”

“Can’t say.”

“Means yes.” He slid a slice of pie across the counter. “Eat. You’ll want your strength for Ray Coyle.”

At seven she was on the sheriff’s front porch. Coyle opened the door in his undershirt, a mug in one hand, and looked at her the way men look at weather.

“Tess.”

“Gordon Pryce’s car, Sheriff. Where’s Gordon Pryce?”

Behind him a radio murmured. He didn’t answer right away.

“Wallet’s on the seat,” he said finally, quiet. “Two hundred dollars in it. Nobody robbed that man.” He started to close the door, then stopped.

“And Tess — whoever left that car there wanted it found.”

CHAPTER 3

The Sister at the Bar

Glide & Roseburg · October 2003

BY NOON ON Tuesday the rain had thinned to a gray mist that hung in the canyon like smoke, and Tess was back on Highway 138 with a notebook on the passenger seat and nothing in it worth printing.

The pullout had been scraped clean. The tape was gone, the Lincoln was gone, and a Douglas County truck sat idling on the shoulder while a deputy she didn't recognize ate a sandwich and watched her not stop. She drove on to Glide.

Del's was half full — a pair of fallers in suspenders, two retired couples splitting a club sandwich, a Forest Service kid reading a paperback. Del was working the grill himself, and he lifted his spatula at her like a flag.

"Twice in one week," he said. "Folks'll talk."

"Folks already are." She took the stool nearest the register, under the specials, and ordered the soup because it was the only thing she could afford to leave half-eaten. "Del, you know that pullout. The one past the falls."

"Know it?" He set a bowl of split pea in front of her and wiped his hands on his apron. "Honey, I drove log trucks out of these hills for thirty years. I've been down every spur road between here and Diamond Lake — some of them before they had names, a few after they stopped having them." He nodded east, toward the canyon. "That turnout's got nothing. No trailhead, no view worth the gas. Nobody stops there by accident."

"So somebody stopped there on purpose."

Del shrugged, the way old men shrug when they've said exactly as much as they meant to. "I make soup, Tess. You're the one with the questions." Then, softer: "Your dad would've liked that about you."

She ate half the soup and left a tip bigger than the bill.

* * *

The Idle Hour Tavern had been pouring beer on Roseburg's south side since before Tess was born, and it smelled like it — fryer grease, spilled Rainier and the wet wool of forty people who'd come in out of the weather. Saturday's Ducks game was replaying over the bar with the sound off. Nobody was watching it.

She saw Big Dave before he saw her, which took some doing. He filled most of a booth by the pool table, a supervisor's clipboard folded into his back pocket and a Carhartt jacket that had been orange once. He ran a shift at the veneer plant south of town, and he had known her father for twenty years.

"Well, hell," Dave said when she slid in across from him. "Tessie Halloran. I heard you were home. I heard you were back at the Ledger. Figured you'd be too good for this place."

"Nobody's too good for this place, Dave."

That got a laugh out of him, the big rolling kind. He waved two fingers at the bar, and a bottle of Rainier and a glass of something brown appeared in front of her without anyone asking what she wanted.

"Your dad could drop a fir on a dime," he said, and for a second his face went somewhere else. "Best faller Pryce ever had. And Pryce knew it, too. Didn't stop him from closing the mill." He drank. "You're here about Gordon."

"Everybody knows why I'm here."

"Everybody knows everything in this town, honey. They just don't say it to reporters." He lowered his voice anyway. "I'll tell you what I heard, and you didn't hear it from me. Gordon's been in a mood all summer. Men in suits from Portland walking the old mill site with him. Somebody said he was finally going to sell the land. Somebody else said he was scared. Gordon Pryce, scared." Dave shook his head. "I never saw it."

"Scared of what?"

"If I knew that, I'd be the sheriff." He glanced toward the bar, then back. "You want to know who sees everything around here, you ask Tic Tac. He's in here most nights. Knows everybody's business and half of it's even true."

"Tic Tac?"

"Don't ask me how he got the name. Nobody remembers."

Tess finished her beer, thanked him, and carried the untouched glass of brown liquor to the bar, where a heavysset bartender was polishing the same spot on the wood he had been polishing when she walked in.

"I'm looking for Tic Tac," she said. "Is he around tonight?"

The bartender didn't answer. He didn't have to. A woman two stools down — fifty, maybe, with a smoker's rasp and a denim jacket buttoned to the throat — reached over without a word, picked up Tess's glass, and drained it in three swallows.

She set the empty glass down carefully, like it was something borrowed.

"That one was yours," the woman said. "Now it's mine. That's how it works in here. You come in asking about people, you pay for it."

"I just want to talk to him."

"Everybody just wants to talk." The woman leaned in close enough that Tess could smell the whiskey. "You're Frank Halloran's girl. The reporter. So let me save you the trouble." She tapped a nail on the bar, once for each word. "Leave. Him. Alone."

Big Dave had gone quiet in his booth. So had the pool table.

Tess put a five on the bar for the drink she hadn't drunk. "You know him."

"I'm his sister." The woman turned back to the television, to a game nobody was watching. For a long moment Tess thought that was the end of it. Then, without looking at her, the woman said it — quietly, the way people say the things they've been wanting to say to somebody for days.

"My brother already told Ray Coyle what he saw Friday night. Coyle didn't want it either."

CHAPTER 4

Forty Dollars a Plate

Roseburg · October 2003

ON WEDNESDAY MORNING Tess took the long way to the Ledger, down Main Street past the white Methodist church with the crooked bell tower, and she slowed without meaning to.

Three weeks earlier she had covered Janet Marsh's funeral there — six inches on the obituary page, a photo of a woman in a garden hat. Tess remembered the service for one reason: Del Ostrander standing alone at the back, his cap crushed in both hands, crying like a man who had lost something bigger than a regular customer. She had meant to ask him about it. Then Gordon Pryce disappeared, and she hadn't.

Walt was waiting at her desk with a cup of coffee he had clearly poured for himself.

"Coyle still isn't talking," he said. "The Pryce family hired a lawyer from Eugene. The wife's not taking calls." He set the cup down, reconsidered and kept it. "What have you got?"

"A bartender who won't answer questions, a woman who drank my whiskey, and a man named Tic Tac who saw something Friday night."

"Tic Tac." Walt said it the way he said the names of city council members. "Does Tic Tac have a real name?"

"Working on it."

"Work faster." He started to leave, then turned. "You know who finds people for a living in this town. Buy them dinner."

She did. Kally Hawthorn picked up on the second ring. "Eye Spy Investigations, we see what you don't." A beat. "Tess? Oh my God. Teresa, it's Tess!" Somewhere behind her, Teresa Juniper let out a whoop.

The two of them had been Tess's friends since high school — the kind who covered for you and then made you pay for it later. Now they ran their own private investigation firm with offices in Roseburg, Klamath Falls and Medford, and they rotated through all three like circuit judges. This week, by luck, they were home.

"Brix," Teresa said, taking the phone. "Seven o'clock. You're buying."

* * *

Brix Grill sat in an old brick building downtown, all warm light and exposed timber, the kind of place that made you forget the rain for an hour. Kally was already there when Tess walked in, dark hair pinned up, legal pad on the table like a place setting. Teresa arrived two minutes later, shaking water off a leather jacket and apologizing to nobody in particular.

They ordered — steak for Teresa, salmon for Kally, whatever was fastest for Tess — and a bottle of Oregon pinot noir that Kally swore she had tracked down like a fugitive. For half an hour, nobody said the word "Pryce." They talked about old boyfriends, Teresa's new office cat in Klamath Falls, and

the time Kally tailed a cheating husband to a church potluck and wound up winning the pie auction.

Tess laughed harder than she had in a week. Then she set down her fork.

"Can I ask you both something? Professionally."

Kally clicked her pen. "We charge for professionally."

"You're drinking my wine."

"Fair."

"Have either of you ever heard of somebody who goes by Tic Tac?"

Kally and Teresa looked at each other, and then — at exactly the same moment, as though they had rehearsed it — they said, "Oh, Josh Foster?"

Tess blinked. "Josh Foster."

"Yeah, we know him," Teresa said, reaching for the bread. "Everybody who does what we do knows Josh. He's always in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Or the right place, if you're him," Kally said. "He's got his nose where it doesn't belong most of the time. Car accident on Stephens Street? Josh saw it. Bar fight in Winston? Josh was there. Somebody's husband sneaking out of a motel off the freeway at two in the morning?"

"Josh was in the parking lot," Teresa finished. "Where there's trouble, there's Josh."

"Mostly he hangs out at the Idle Hour," Kally added. "You can set your watch by him."

"I met his sister there," Tess said. "She drank my drink."

Teresa winced. "Darla. She's protective. Their folks were a mess, and Darla basically raised him. You go after Josh, you go through her first."

"Have you ever looked at him? For real?"

"A few times," Kally said, suddenly careful, the way she got when a conversation touched a client file. "Background checks, a couple of insurance jobs where his name came up. He always turns up clean. Trouble follows him, or he follows trouble — honestly, we've never figured out which." She shrugged. "He's mostly all talk, no action. That's what we know, Tess."

Tess wrote the name in her notebook and underlined it. Josh Foster. After three days of Tic Tac, it looked almost ordinary.

They split a slice of marionberry cheesecake three ways and argued about the check until Tess won by handing her card to the waitress before anyone saw. Outside, the rain had stopped. The street shone under the lamps.

"We're in Medford most of next week," Teresa said, hugging her. "If you ever head that direction, call us. We'll do this again, and I'll actually pay."

"You'll never pay."

"I'll never pay," Teresa agreed.

Tess was unlocking her car when Kally caught her arm. She glanced back toward the restaurant, then lowered her voice.

"One more thing. It's probably nothing." She hesitated. "Josh called our office Monday morning. Wanted to know how much we charge to run a license plate."

"What did you tell him?"

"Forty dollars." Kally let go of her arm. "He hung up."

CHAPTER 5

If I End Up in the River

Roseburg · October 2003

THE PRYCE HOUSE sat on the hill above the South Umpqua like it had been built to look down on things, which, Tess supposed, it had. White columns, a circular drive, and a lawn so green it looked painted. Six new campaign signs stood along the curb: **PRYCE FOR COUNTY COMMISSION — A NEW GENERATION.**

Trent Pryce answered the door before she knocked. Thirty-five, tan, in a pressed blue shirt with the sleeves rolled exactly twice. He had his father's jaw and none of his father's patience.

"Tess Halloran," he said. "I wondered when the Ledger would show up."

"I'm sorry about your dad, Trent. I'm not here to make it worse."

"Nobody ever is." He stepped outside and pulled the door almost shut behind him. Through the gap Tess caught a glimpse of a woman in a gray cardigan standing at the far end of the hall, perfectly still — Evelyn Pryce, watching the way people watch the weather on television.

"What happened Friday night?" Tess asked.

"Dad went to the Lodge like he does every Friday. Called the house around ten, said he was going to take a drive and clear his head. He did that sometimes, up the river." Trent's voice was steady, rehearsed. "He never came home."

"Was something bothering him?"

"The mill land, the lawsuit, the campaign. Pick one." He shrugged. "I was home all night. Watched the game with Mom. You can put that in your paper."

Before Tess could ask which game, a silver Mercedes rolled up the drive and a man in a camel overcoat climbed out with a leather portfolio under his arm.

"Martin Kessler," he said, not offering a hand. "The family's attorney. Any further questions go through my office in Eugene." He looked at Trent. "Inside."

Trent went. The door closed. One of the campaign signs had blown over in the wind; nobody came out to fix it.

* * *

Abby's Pizza was nearly empty at one-thirty — a mother with two toddlers in the corner booth, a pair of mill workers arguing about the Ducks. Tess ordered a personal pepperoni and a Diet Coke and spread her notes across the table like a hand of solitaire that wouldn't come out.

Trent's alibi. The lawyer. The wallet with \$200. A man who drove up the river to clear his head and wound up at a pullout where nobody stops by accident.

She didn't see him come in. One moment the booth across from her was empty, and the next a wiry man in his forties was sliding into it — Mariners cap, flannel shirt, a three-day beard

and a little plastic box of breath mints he rattled in one hand like a maraca.

Tic tac. Tic tac.

"Heard you been asking about me," he said.

"Josh Foster."

He grinned, pleased to be known. "My sister says you're Frank Halloran's girl. Says I shouldn't talk to you." He shook out two mints, offered her one. She took it. "Darla says a lot of things."

"She said you told the sheriff what you saw Friday night."

The grin faded. Josh glanced toward the door, then the window, then back. When he spoke again his voice was lower and a lot less cocky.

"I was night fishing down by Colliding Rivers. Steelheading. Wasn't catching nothing, so around ten-thirty I packed up and headed home on 138." He turned the mint box over in his fingers. "Gordon Pryce's Lincoln comes past me going east, up the canyon. Everybody knows that car. And right behind it — I mean right behind it, maybe two car lengths — there's a pickup. Dark color. Running with no lights."

Tess stopped writing. "No lights?"

"None. Then about a quarter mile on, the lights snap on, like whoever's driving just remembered." He let out a breath. "I told Coyle on Saturday. Coyle asked me how many beers I had. I said two. He wrote down six."

"Did you get a plate?"

Josh looked at her for a long moment, and Tess saw something she had not expected: fear, real and plain, the kind men like him spend their whole lives covering with jokes.

"I got part of it," he said. "And I'm not telling anybody until I know whose truck it is. Not Coyle, not Darla, not you." He tapped the mint box against the table. "That's how people end up in rivers, Tess. They tell the wrong person what they saw."

"Then why tell me anything?"

He slid out of the booth and pulled his cap low. "Because if I end up in the river," he said, "I want somebody to tell Darla I wasn't all talk."

He was gone before she could answer. Through the window she watched him cross the parking lot, hands in his pockets, rattling the little box.

Across the street, a dark pickup that had been idling at the curb pulled out, unhurried, and turned the same way he was walking.

CHAPTER 6

Patient as the Rain

Roseburg · October 2003

BY SEVEN THAT evening the rain had settled into the steady, patient kind that Roseburg did best, and Tess had run out of coffee, printer paper and excuses not to eat a real dinner. She pulled into the Fred Meyer lot, sat for a minute with the engine off, and watched the wipers she had forgotten to turn off sweep the same arc across the glass.

A dark pickup. No lights. Half the trucks in the lot were dark pickups.

The store was bright and warm and smelled like rotisserie chicken, and for a few aisles she let it be ordinary. Paper. Coffee. A frozen lasagna she would not cook. She was reaching for a box of granola bars when a voice behind her said, “Well, I’ll be. Tessie Halloran.”

Nobody had called her Tessie in twenty years.

She turned and there was Buck — broader in the middle and grayer at the temples, but the same red suspenders, the same ball cap pushed back on his head like he was always just about to scratch it. For the first eighteen years of her life Buck had lived on the other side of the fence in Winston. He had taught her to cast a fly line using a paper plate for a trout.

“Buck.” She hugged him, cart and all. “You look exactly the same.”

“Liar. You look like your mother, though, and that’s a compliment.” He held her at arm’s length. “Heard you came home. Heard you’re writing for Walt now.”

He grinned. “Can’t stay long. I’m on my way to Abby’s. Got a double pepperoni waiting, side of tomatoes, side of jalapeños.” He held up a finger. “No spuds. They try to give you the potato wedges. I’m not a fan. Never have been.”

Tess laughed for the first time all week. Then the grin faded a notch on Buck’s face, and he leaned on the handle of her cart. “Hey. You heard about Gordon?”

She nodded. “I’m looking into it.”

“Any idea where he could be?”

“Not yet. Not a clue.”

Buck shook his head slowly. “Fifteen years I worked for that man. Sixteen, almost. Gordon hired me himself, you know — came and found me when the plant in Sutherlin let everybody go. Said he wanted somebody who’d already made every mistake there was to make.” “We used to fish together, Saturdays. After the mill closed, well. Nobody had much to say to anybody.”

He was quiet a moment. Then he said, almost offhand, “Ever thought of checking his hidden fishing hole?”

Tess looked up. “His what?”

“Gordon’s spot. He loved disappearing up there, back in the day. Took off with a rod and a sandwich and came back Sunday smelling like creek water.” Buck lowered his voice like the granola bars might be listening. “Cavitt Creek. And up Little

River, out past Glide. He was crazy about the trout up there. Said the fish were smarter than most of the men he did business with.”

* * *

Little River. Cavitt Creek. Tess turned the names over in her head. Both ran off Highway 138 at Glide, the same road where the Lincoln had turned up with its wheels pointed neatly at the water. Close, but not the same. If Gordon Pryce had gone to his fishing hole, why was his car sitting at a pullout miles east of it, past the turn he would have taken?

It didn’t explain the car. It didn’t explain anything. But it was the first thing anyone had told her about Gordon Pryce that sounded like a man instead of a bank account.

Buck checked his watch and straightened up. “Well. Nice seeing you again, Tessie. Time for me to head to Abby’s before they give my pizza to somebody who likes potatoes.” He touched the brim of his cap. “Have a good night.”

“You too, Buck.”

* * *

In the car she sat with the groceries on the passenger seat and her notebook open on the wheel. *Cavitt Creek. Little River. Hidden spot. Nobody knew.*

Better to send people who were paid to be careful. She dialed Eye Spy from the pay phone outside the store, because her cell had one bar and the bar was lying. It rang four times before the machine picked up. “*You’ve reached Eye Spy Investigations. We see what you don’t.*”

“Kally, it’s Tess. Before you two head to Medford — can you take a drive up Little River Road this weekend? Cavitt Creek too. Gordon Pryce had a fishing spot up there nobody knew about. Probably nothing.” She hesitated. “Look for anything that says he was there. Or anything that says he wasn’t. Call me.”

* * *

Her rental on Pine Street was dark when she pulled in. She left the lasagna in the freezer, kicked off her wet shoes and saw the red light on the answering machine blinking in the kitchen. One message.

She pressed the button.

A long breath first, and the sound of a bar behind it — glasses, a jukebox, somebody laughing too loud. Then a woman’s voice, rough and low, trying very hard to sound angry instead of scared.

“*This is Darla Foster. You know who I am.*” A pause. “*Josh didn’t come in tonight. He always comes in. Thursdays he’s here by six, every Thursday for eleven years.*” Another pause, longer. “*His truck’s not at his place. His fishing gear’s gone. Nobody’s seen him since lunch.*”

The tape hissed. Tess realized she was gripping the edge of the counter.

“*He talked to you today. I know he did.*” Darla’s voice cracked, just once, and then hardened again. “*So you tell me, Frank Halloran’s girl. Where is my brother?*”

The machine clicked off. In the quiet, the rain kept tapping on the kitchen window, patient as ever, like it had all the time in the world.

CHAPTER 7

The Third Time Today

Roseburg · October 2003

TESS KNEW BETTER than to walk into the Idle Hour alone on a Friday night asking about Josh Foster. At five-thirty she called the veneer plant and asked for Big Dave.

"Tessie," he said, over the scream of a saw somewhere behind him. "Twice in one week. People are going to talk."

"I need to go back to the Idle Hour."

"Josh is missing." The saw wound down. "Give me till the whistle," Dave said. "Don't go in without me."

* * *

He was waiting in the gravel lot at six-fifteen in the same Carhartt jacket. A Roseburg police cruiser idled across the street, the way one usually did on a Friday.

"Rules," Dave said. "You stay where I can see you. And if I say we're leaving, we're leaving."

"Yes, Dad," Tess said, and Dave held the door. "Your dad would've said the same thing."

The Idle Hour on a Friday was a different animal than it had been on Tuesday. Every stool was taken, smoke hung under the lights, and the crowd was as mixed as a county fair: millworkers in their boots, a pair of bikers, two nurses in scrubs, and old-timers playing cribbage. Nobody here was a tourist. Nobody ever had been.

At the pool table a skinny kid in a Raiders jacket lost three games in a row to a logger for a dollar each. Then the logger put twenty on the rail, and the kid ran the table without looking up.

At the far end of the bar the Idle Hour's two owners, brothers drunker than anyone they served, were flipping a quarter to decide who would pay for the round in front of them. Both drank anyway.

Then the jukebox kicked into an old Merle Haggard song, and a small man in a fishing vest stood up from his booth with a gray stone wearing two googly eyes, held it out like a dance partner and began to waltz.

Nobody looked up but Tess. "That's Herb," Dave said. "And that's Rocky. They've been together longer than most marriages in this county."

* * *

Darla was behind the bar. Same denim jacket buttoned to the throat, but now a bar towel over one shoulder, pulling taps with the bored speed of ten thousand shifts. The heavysset bartender from Tuesday washed glasses off to one side.

Darla saw them coming. Her eyes went from Dave to Tess, and her mouth went flat.

"Two Rainiers," Dave said, putting a big hand on the bar. "And she's with me."

Darla set the bottles down harder than she needed to. "You got my message," she said.

"He talked to you, and now he's gone." Darla's voice was low, rough, meant for Tess alone. "You want to tell me that's a coincidence?"

"I don't know what it is yet." Tess kept her hands on the bar where Darla could see them. "He told me he saw something Friday night. I think it scared him. I think he went somewhere to be safe."

"Josh doesn't get scared. Josh gets stupid." But something in her face moved when she said it, like a crack in old paint.

"I'm only here to help, Darla," Tess said quietly. "That's all. If you hear from him — if anybody hears from him — call me. Day or night. Please."

Darla didn't answer. She turned away and filled a pitcher for the cribbage table. But she didn't tell Tess to leave, either.

* * *

The door opened and the room changed temperature.

Two Roseburg police officers came in out of the dark. Conversations stopped. The kid in the Raiders jacket pocketed his twenty. Herb kept dancing.

The older officer walked straight to the bar. "Evening, Darla. Looking for Josh."

"Get in line," Darla said.

"Somebody went through the back window at Umpqua Gold & Coin down on Oak last night. Took a tray of rings and a coffee can full of old silver dollars." "And Josh has a way of always standing right where the trouble is. Have him call the station, Darla. That's all I'm asking. Save us all some time."

"If I see him," Darla said, "I'll tell him."

Tess finished her beer. On her way off the stool she folded a twenty and slid it under the empty glass, far more than one Rainier was worth. Darla's eyes went to it. She didn't thank her. She didn't say a word. But she didn't push it back, either. She picked it up, folded it once more, and slipped it into the pocket of the denim jacket. It was the first thing Darla Foster had ever taken from her without a fight.

* * *

The officers were halfway out the door when the engine noise hit — a big V-8 wound all the way up, coming fast down the street. Through the front window Tess saw a dark pickup blow past the Idle Hour, no lights, doing sixty at least on a road built for twenty-five.

The officers ran. The cruiser's lights came on, red and blue washing across every face in the bar, and its siren tore the night open as it fishtailed out of the lot after the truck.

Half the Idle Hour crowded to the window and watched the lights shrink down the street and vanish.

Ten minutes later the cruiser crept back the other way, no siren, no lights. Too much of a head start.

Behind them, Darla had come out from the bar. She stood at the window with her arms folded, one hand resting over the pocket where the twenty was.

“That truck,” she said, so quietly that only Tess heard it.
“That’s the third time today it’s gone by.”

CHAPTER 8

Your Case, Not Ours

Roseburg · October 2003

THE TIP CAME in Saturday afternoon, passed along from the city side with a note stuck to it: *Your case, not ours.*

Deputy Cal Walters of the Douglas County Sheriff's Office read it twice at his desk. A man named Earl Haskins, who worked graveyard at a cabinet shop out past the airport, said he'd been driving home Friday night when a dark pickup came screaming through downtown with no lights — the same truck, he figured, that Roseburg police had chased away from the Idle Hour.

And Earl said he knew that truck. He'd seen it parked at the Holiday Inn down by the river, two or three times that week, always in the back row by the water. He drove that way to and from work, and, as he put it, "Nobody parks back there unless they don't want to be seen."

Walters was twenty-eight and had been a deputy for four years. He was also the only man in the office who had actually read Josh Foster's statement about a dark pickup trailing Gordon Pryce's Lincoln up Highway 138 — and then watched the sheriff put it in a drawer.

* * *

Sunday morning the Holiday Inn lobby smelled like burnt coffee and carpet cleaner. Behind the desk, a young woman with a HEATHER name tag juggled credit cards and the phone.

When the line cleared, Walters stepped up and showed his badge. "Morning. I'm looking for a dark pickup. Full-size, maybe black, maybe dark green. Somebody's seen it parked out back by the river this week."

Heather thought about it honestly. "I'm sorry. I don't really pay attention to the trucks. Half our guests drive pickups."

"You keep a record of what guests are driving?"

She shook her head. "We don't have them fill in car information at check-in. Just name, address, a card."

"Lot of people check out this weekend?"

"Sundays are always busy." She glanced at the screen. "We've had a lot go already, and more to come. Hunters, leaf people, a wedding party. If your truck was here, it could be halfway to Eugene by now."

Walters slid a card across the counter. "If you see a truck like that out there — or if anybody on staff remembers one — call me. Day or night."

On the way out he walked the back lot anyway. The last row of spaces sat right above the riverbank, where the South Umpqua ran fast and green below the hotel's outdoor decks. The rooms back here faced the water. Locals knew better than to ask for them; the bank dropped off steep, and the river had swallowed more than one careless fisherman over the years.

The back row was empty now, just oil stains and a flattened coffee cup.

* * *

He had been back at the office less than an hour when the front desk buzzed: somebody with something she'd found in the river.

She was a retired schoolteacher named Lorraine Pettibone, seventy if she was a day, in a raincoat and rubber boots, with a fat beagle named Moose on a leash. She walked Moose every morning along the river path behind the Holiday Inn, she said, rain or shine, and this morning Moose had stopped dead at the edge of the shallows below the decks and refused to budge.

"I thought it was a dead fish," she said. "Then the sun came out and it flashed."

She set a dish towel on the counter and folded it open. It was a hunting knife — a big one, a fixed blade nearly as long as Walters' hand, with a handle of stag horn gone dark with water. A little rust had started along the edge. But when he tilted it toward the window, he could read the words etched into the steel, worn but plain:

DOUGLAS COUNTY ROADS · 1987

"I didn't think it was something you just throw in the river," Mrs. Pettibone said. "Not a nice knife like that."

* * *

Sheriff Ray Coyle's office door was half shut. Walters knocked and went in without waiting, which he had never done before.

Coyle was behind his desk with the Sunday paper and a cup of coffee, his reading glasses low on his nose. He listened without a word while Walters told him about the tip, the hotel lot and the busy checkouts. When Walters got to the river and laid the knife on the blotter, still on Mrs. Pettibone's dish towel, the sheriff stopped listening altogether.

He took off his glasses. He turned the knife slowly with one finger until the engraving faced him.

"Where exactly," Coyle said, "did she find this?"

"In the shallows below the decks, sir. Right under where the truck's been parking."

Coyle's face had gone a shade Walters had never seen on it, the color of old paper.

"Sheriff, if that truck is the same one Josh Foster saw following Pryce—"

"Log it as found property," Coyle said. "Lost and found. Nothing about the hotel. Nothing about any truck."

"Sir, with respect, the Foster statement—"

"Nothing, Deputy." Coyle didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. "Close the door on your way out."

Walters closed it. But the top half of the sheriff's door was glass, and from his desk across the room he could see Coyle sitting there, not moving, the knife on the blotter in front of him like something that might bite.

Then the sheriff picked up his phone and dialed a number without looking it up. He waited, the receiver pressed hard to his ear. Walters watched him wait a long time.

Nobody answered. Coyle hung up and dialed again.
Whoever he was calling, it wasn't the crime lab.

CHAPTER 9

Up Little River

Little River · October 2003

LITTLE RIVER ROAD leaves Highway 138 at Glide and climbs east into the Umpqua National Forest, and for the first ten miles Teresa was sure every pullout was the one.

"There," she said, pointing. "That one." Kally called it a deer path. "Deer don't leave beer cans," Teresa said.

"Gordon Pryce wasn't a beer-can guy." Kally kept her eyes on the road and her hands at ten and two. "Tess said nobody knew where his spot was. If you could see it from the road, half of Douglas County would have fished it."

They had started at nine Sunday morning with a thermos of bad coffee, a county map and Tess's message from the Eye Spy answering machine written on an index card: *Cavitt Creek. Little River. Look for anything that says he was there. Or anything that says he wasn't.* By noon they had checked Cavitt Creek Falls, walked both banks under the old covered bridge on Cavitt Creek Road, and found nothing but wet socks.

The rain had quit, but the woods still dripped. The river ran loud and clear over rock the color of old pennies, and the maples along the water had gone yellow overnight.

Past the Wolf Creek turnoff, Kally slowed for a narrow gravel spur that dropped off the road at an angle you would only see going east. No sign. A cable gate, rusted open and grown over with blackberry.

"If I wanted to hide a fishing hole," Kally said, and pulled in.

* * *

The spur ended in a flat spot under big firs, a fire ring of river rock half buried in needles, and a faint trail down to a deep green pool where the river bent. It was the kind of place you could stand for an hour and never see another soul.

Teresa took the upstream bank. Kally worked down along the water, poking at the brush with a stick she'd decided was her investigation stick.

She almost stepped on it.

It was wedged under the roots of a fallen alder at the edge of the gravel bar, half sunk in the mud: a green metal tackle box, the old-fashioned kind with a folding handle and two latches. One latch had rusted through. The lid sat cracked open an inch.

"Holy smokes, Batman," Kally shouted, "look what I just found!"

Teresa came crashing down the bank. Kally was already pulling a pair of vinyl gloves out of her jacket pocket and snapping them on with great ceremony.

She crouched. She leaned in. She did not touch it. "What are you waiting for?" Teresa asked.

"There's a worm on it." Kally pointed with one gloved finger, from a safe distance. A fat nightcrawler lay draped across the handle like it owned the place. "You know I'm a germaphobe. You pick it up."

"You're wearing gloves," Teresa said. Kally informed her that the gloves were for evidence, not worms.

Teresa sighed, flicked the worm into the brush and lifted the box out of the mud with a sucking sound. She eased the lid open the rest of the way.

Scratched into the inside of the lid, in letters somebody had carved with a knife point a long time ago, were two initials: G.P.

"It could be anybody," Teresa said slowly. "Gary Pickett. Glenn Peterson."

"Up Gordon Pryce's secret fishing hole?"

Teresa turned the box in her hands. The paint was faded nearly gray. The hinges were orange with rust, and a layer of silt had settled into every corner of the trays. Most of the lures were corroded into one lump. "Look at this thing, though. This has been out here for years. Five, maybe. Somebody could've lost it long before any of this."

Then the smell reached Kally.

It came out of the bottom tray in a slow, ripe wave: river mud and rotted bait and something worse underneath. Kally made a sound like a cat with a hairball. She staggered back a step, one hand over her mouth.

"That's not just old bait." Kally pointed again, her eyes watering. Tucked in the corner of the top tray, sitting on the silt, was a small torn packet — the kind of mayonnaise packet you get with a sandwich from a 7-Eleven. Ripped open. Smeared.

That was the last straw. Kally turned and marched up the bank, gagging loudly every third step.

"To the car. Meet me there and we'll discuss." She stopped at the top of the bank and called back over her shoulder, "I'd kill for a Dunkin' Donuts iced coffee right now. One thing I still miss about back East."

"That mayonnaise to me," Kally said with great dignity, "is like hot dogs to you, served on a paper plate."

Teresa closed her eyes. "Did you really have to mention hot dogs right now?"

* * *

They sat in the car with the windows down and the tackle box on a garbage bag in the back seat, and for a while neither of them said anything.

"Okay," Teresa said finally. "The box is old. Years old. Everything in it is rusted. But that packet was sitting on top of the silt. Not under it."

Kally looked at her. "So either somebody had a sandwich up here five years ago and the river was very polite about it—"

"Or somebody's been here a lot more recently than five years."

At the little store by the bridge in Glide, Kally dialed Tess from the pay phone while Teresa stood guard over the back seat as if the tackle box might make a run for it.

Tess listened to the whole thing without interrupting once. When Kally finished, there was a long pause on the line.

"Don't tell anyone else you found it," Tess said. "Not the sheriff's office. Not anybody. Bring it to me."

CHAPTER 10

August 1987

Roseburg · October 2003

THE UMPQUA LEDGER newsroom on a Monday morning smelled like burnt coffee and wet wool, and Tess had been watching the door since eight.

At nine-fifteen it swung open and Kally walked in carrying a black garbage bag at arm's length, the way you'd carry something that might still be alive. Teresa followed with the patient face of a woman who had heard about this bag the whole drive in.

Kally held up a hand. "Before I hand this over, I need you to understand something." She paused for effect. "You have no idea what I went through to get this."

Walt had wandered out of his office with his coffee mug. Tess looked at Kally's muddy boots and felt her stomach tighten. "What happened? The deep woods?"

"The swamps by the river? Did you fall in?" Tess lowered her voice. "Was it an animal? A bear? Kally, was it a cougar?"

"No, Tess," she said. "Mayonnaise!"

Tess looked at Walt. Walt looked at Tess. "Okay," Teresa said, stepping between them, "enough of that. Let's review what we found."

* * *

They were halfway to the conference room when Gloria Bordiam swiveled her chair into their path.

Gloria had been at the Ledger six weeks, and in that time she had told Tess her blouse was too wrinkled for an interview, that a woman her age shouldn't eat white bread, and that a good reporter tells her colleagues everything she's working on.

"Tess! I'm ordering us both the taco salad from Los Dos for lunch," Gloria said, as though it were settled. "I've been craving it all morning."

Tess said she'd brought a sandwich. "You'll want the taco salad," Gloria said, and her eyes slid to the garbage bag. "What's that?" "Laundry," Kally said, and kept walking.

Walt shut the conference room door behind them. In here, the way Walt liked it, a story stayed between the people working on it until it was ready, and not one minute before.

"Coffee?" Tess offered. Teresa was a tea drinker. Kally wanted an iced coffee — "Please. I've earned it."

Tess considered the sad Mr. Coffee on the counter and the empty cupboard above it. "Yeah. Neither of those is going to happen." She set three bottles of water on the table.

* * *

Kally laid the bag on the table and peeled it open with two fingers. The smell came out first, river mud and something worse, and Walt reached over and cracked the window without a word.

Teresa lifted the lid. In the gray light the letters inside were plain enough: G.P., carved with a knife point a long time ago.

Walt leaned in for a long minute. "Gordon's initials," he said finally. "Or a hundred other people's." Teresa pointed to the rust: years out there, five maybe.

If Tess walked this box into the sheriff's office, Ray Coyle would log it and lose it in the same drawer as Josh Foster's statement.

"You two keep it," she said. "Lock it up at Eye Spy. Nobody touches it until we know whose it is."

* * *

The newsroom went quiet all at once. Through the glass Tess saw everyone turning toward the television in the corner. They came out in time to see the KDRC Channel 9 bulletin: *Douglas County Commissioner Harlan Voss has not been seen since Sunday evening. His wife reported him missing this morning.*

Then the picture cut to a woman in the driveway of a big house on the hill, a silver Mercedes behind her: big sunglasses on a cloudy day, a camel coat that cost more than Tess's car, diamonds at her ears and throat.

"Harlan, please come home," she said into the microphone. "If anyone has seen my husband, call the sheriff." Then she turned and walked back to the house. "Well," Gloria announced to the room, "that's Tiffany."

"Twenty years younger than Harlan, if she's a day. Nobody in town knows her real name. Nobody. She just likes being called Tiffany." She lowered her voice, though not by much. "Never worked a day in her life. And people have talked for years about her and Gordon Pryce, if you know what I mean."

She was still watching the screen as the clip replayed. Everybody else saw the jewelry, the coat, the car. Tess watched the woman's hands, gripping the microphone hard enough to whiten her knuckles, and the way she'd turned away too fast, like someone trying to get inside before she fell apart. Tiffany Voss wasn't posing. She was scared.

And something else surfaced, a scrap of old gossip Tess had heard since she came home. Years ago, Tiffany and Josh Foster had been friends. Real friends, people said, though she'd never once set foot in the Idle Hour. It was beneath her. Now Josh was gone, and so was Harlan.

* * *

By six the newsroom had emptied out. Tess came back from the darkroom with a stack of prints and stopped.

There was an envelope on her desk. No stamp, no return address, just her name typed across the front: TESS HALLORAN.

The only other light on was in Walt's office, where Walt was on the phone with his back to the door.

She slit the envelope open. Inside was a single sheet of cheap typing paper with one line on it, typed on an old manual machine. The letter e was faint every time it appeared, as if that key barely struck the page.

Ask them about August 1987.

Tess read it three times. Then she sat down slowly and looked at the dark window, where her own reflection looked back. Ask who?

CHAPTER 11

Behind the Hedge

Roseburg · October 2003

NOBODY IN ROSEBURG had ever been inside the Voss house.

Harlan and Tiffany went to their friends' houses, never the other way around. They met people for dinner downtown and drove home alone. No relatives from out of town ever stayed a week.

From the road it looked grand, the way it had on Channel 9. Up close it was mostly hedge and high fence. Only the garage was left in the open, bare of shrubs and lit by driveway spotlights, so the silver Mercedes sat there like a jewel in a display case.

Tess rang the bell Tuesday morning and waited. Nothing. She knocked, harder. Nothing. Every shade in every window was pulled down tight.

She was halfway down the driveway, past the Mercedes, when a side door of the garage opened.

"Can I help you?"

Tiffany Voss stood in the doorway in a rhinestone-trimmed sweatshirt and the cowboy boots that made her four inches taller. Her mascara had run in long gray tracks, and her eyes were red all the way through.

"Tess Halloran," Tess said. "I'm a reporter with the Umpqua Ledger." She braced to be told to get off the property.

"How can I help you?"

Tess blinked. "Excuse me?"

"How can I help you?" Tiffany said again.

"Could I ask you a couple of questions?"

Tiffany pressed her lips together hard. "If it will help find my husband, I'll talk to anyone. Including a reporter." She held the door wider. "Why don't you come inside."

* * *

Tess had pictured what the whole town pictured: a chandelier, paintings, a housekeeper. There was none of it.

The room Tiffany led her into was dim. Brown carpet that needed a good scrubbing, a brown couch, brown drapes, a brown recliner angled at a television. Nothing on the walls but a calendar from a feed store. Dust lay on the end tables thick enough to write your name in. It wasn't a rich woman's house. It was a tired house, and an ordinary one, and it said very plainly that the woman in the rhinestones and the Mercedes was someone Tiffany only got to be when she left it.

Tiffany sat on the edge of the recliner. "What questions do you have? And can you help find my husband?"

"I'll do everything I possibly can," Tess said, and meant it. "Has Sheriff Coyle been out to see you? Has anyone from law enforcement talked to you?"

"Deputy Walters." Tiffany said it with something close to gratitude. "Cal Walters. He came Monday, and again last

night. He sat right where you're sitting and wrote down everything. He gave me his home number." Her mouth tightened. "The sheriff called once. For two minutes. He asked if Harlan drank."

"Do you have any idea where your husband might be?"

"No."

"What was the last thing he said to you before he left? Did he say where he was going?"

"No." Tiffany shook her head slowly. "All I know is, he was talking to Josh Foster. And then he left."

Tess's pen stopped. "Wait. What? Josh Foster? Tic Tac?"

"Yes."

* * *

"Sunday, about six," Tiffany said. "The phone rang and Harlan took it in his den and shut the door. Harlan never shuts the door. I heard him say, 'Slow down, Josh.' And then a lot of nothing. When he came out he already had his jacket on. He said, 'That was Josh Foster. Don't wait up.' And he took his truck."

"His truck, not the car?"

"Harlan hates that car." A small, broken laugh. "The car is mine."

Tess chose her next words carefully. "Mrs. Voss, Josh Foster has been missing since Thursday. Nobody's seen him. His sister's frantic."

The color left Tiffany's face all at once. "No. He was fine. He called. He was—" She stopped and pressed both hands flat against her knees. "Josh is the only person in this town who was kind to me when I came here. I didn't know anyone. I didn't know how anything worked. My car died in the Safeway lot my first winter and everybody walked past. Josh fixed it in the rain and wouldn't take a dollar." She looked at Tess. "I know what people say about me. That I married Harlan for the house. That I had something going with Gordon Pryce."

"Gordon was polite to me. That's all. In this town, if a man is polite to a woman like me, they decide what it means." She wiped her face with the heel of her hand. "Josh never cared what anybody said. He'd wave at me from his truck. That's all it ever was. A wave."

Tess asked if Harlan said what Josh wanted. "No. But Harlan was scared when he came out of that room." Tiffany's voice dropped. "I have been married to Harlan for eighteen years. I have never once seen him scared."

* * *

The phone in the kitchen rang.

Tiffany flinched as if she'd been struck, then hurried to it. Tess heard her say, "Yes. Yes, Deputy, it's me," and then nothing for a long moment. When Tiffany came back to the doorway, she was holding the wall.

"That was Deputy Walters," she said. "They found Harlan's wallet."

"A truck stop," Tiffany said. "Up on I-5, at Rice Hill." Tiffany stared past her at the drawn shades. "That's forty miles north."

“Harlan never goes north,” Tiffany whispered. “Never. Everything he cares about is up the river.”

CHAPTER 12

The Tin in the Gravel

Roseburg & Rice Hill · October 2003

THE WOMAN KNOCKED on Sheriff Ray Coyle's door at eight-fifteen Wednesday morning, and nobody had told him she was coming.

Deputy Cal Walters saw it all from his desk. She was about fifty, in a dark wool coat, with a leather briefcase that had been around the block. She didn't wait to be invited in.

"Sheriff Coyle. Christine Mason, FBI. The state asked us to take a look at your missing men."

Coyle stood up so fast his chair hit the wall. "Nobody asked me." "No," she said. "They didn't."

"This is my county. I know every road and every family in it, and I don't need or want your help."

Walters stood. "Sheriff, maybe we could all sit down and—" Coyle turned on him. "Mind your own business, Deputy. You speak when you're spoken to." His face was red to the collar. "Do I make myself clear, Deputy?"

"Yes, sir."

Christine Mason hadn't moved. She set her briefcase on the corner of Coyle's desk as though she'd been working there for years. "Let me make something clear too, Sheriff. I've been doing this for twenty years. I don't work for you. If you're here to help, I'm glad to have you. If you're not, get out of my way."

For a long second the only sound in the office was the radiator ticking. Then Coyle sat back down.

* * *

She asked for everything on Gordon Pryce and Harlan Voss, and she started with the wallet.

A cashier at the Rice Hill truck stop had found it Tuesday in the trash by the diesel pumps, Harlan's license and forty-one dollars still inside.

Rice Hill wasn't much, if you didn't know it: a freeway exit twenty-five miles north of Roseburg, a truck stop, a drive-in, a motel and a lot of quiet. People went there for the hunting and fishing and the hills, and for peace and privacy. For a doctor or a hardware store you drove on to Oakland or Sutherlin.

Mason laid two slips of paper side by side on the blotter.

The first was from the K&R Drive-In, a Rice Hill fixture for decades, known for its burgers and shakes made with Umpqua ice cream. One cheeseburger, one fry, one chocolate shake. Sunday, 9:12 p.m. Paid cash.

The second was from the Ranch Motel: one night, one guest, Sunday. Also cash.

"Mrs. Voss says her husband never goes north," Walters said, before he could stop himself.

Coyle shot him a look. Mason didn't.

"Then that's interesting, isn't it?" She tapped the receipts. "Men who disappear on their own don't keep their receipts. And men who steal wallets don't keep somebody else's, tuck

them neatly back inside, and toss the whole thing where the first cashier who empties the trash will find it." She looked up. "Either Harlan Voss changed every habit he ever had, or somebody wants us looking north."

"Or a drifter off the interstate," Coyle said. "Happens all the time."

"Does the truck stop have a camera?"

Walters had already checked. "One, over the register. VHS. They tape over it every three days."

"So Sunday's gone." Walters nodded.

Mason wrote something in a small notebook. Her eyes drifted to the shelf by the door marked LOST & FOUND, where a dish towel was folded around something long, and she looked at it a moment too long. Coyle saw her look. Walters saw Coyle see it.

At five o'clock the sheriff told Walters to go home. Not to finish his reports. Home.

* * *

At seven-thirty the phone on Tess's desk at the Ledger rang. She almost let it go.

"The FBI's in town." A man's voice, low and careful, the way people talk when they're standing at a pay phone and watching the street. "A profiler. Christine Mason. Coyle threw a fit."

"Who is this?"

"Ask her about the receipts in Harlan's wallet. The K&R and the Ranch Motel." A pause. "Sunday night. Cash."

Then the line went dead.

Tess held the receiver. The voice had been young, polite even in a hurry. She thought she knew it. She decided not to think about that yet.

Tiffany had said Rice Hill was forty miles north. It was closer to twenty-five. Tess was there in thirty minutes.

* * *

The Ranch Motel sat back off the frontage road, a long, low row of doors with a gravel lot and a big dark field behind it. The night clerk, a kind, tired woman with reading glasses on a chain, tried to help. She remembered a man paying cash Sunday night, she said, but she hadn't looked at him much. Sundays, people came and went. She hadn't seen him leave.

Tess walked around back with her flashlight. The gravel behind the motel ran out to a line of scrub oak and a dumpster that smelled of old fry grease. Tire ruts cut through the wet ground, fresh enough that water still stood in them. She swept the light along the ruts, slowly, the way her father had taught her to search the woods.

Something small and silver winked back at her.

She crouched. It was a little hinged tin, the kind breath mints come in, dented on one corner and lying half in a puddle beside the deepest rut.

She didn't need to pick it up to know. She had heard it rattling across the table at Abby's a week ago, in the restless hand of a man in a Mariners cap.

If I end up in the river, tell Darla I wasn't all talk.

Tess knelt in the cold gravel with the flashlight shaking just a little in her hand, and for a long moment she couldn't make herself reach for it.

CHAPTER 13

The Brass Key

Rice Hill, Winston & Glide · October 2003

TESS PICKED IT up with a paper napkin from the glove box, the way she'd seen detectives do it on television, and felt foolish and careful at the same time.

The tin rattled. She thumbed back the lid under the flashlight. Tic Tacs, half a dozen of them, white and swollen from the rain. Of course. It was where he got his name.

Underneath the mints lay a small brass key, old and worn smooth, the kind that opens a padlock or a cabin door. Stamped into the bow, in tiny square numbers, was a date.

1987.

Tess stood in the dark behind the Ranch Motel for a long time. *Ask them about August 1987.* Coincidence, she told herself. Half the keys in Douglas County were older than she was.

She didn't believe it for a second.

She would not take it to Ray Coyle. She couldn't take it to Cal Walters without getting him fired. That left one person. From the motel pay phone she called Walt at home, and Walt, who knew everybody's number, knew which motel the FBI woman was staying in.

* * *

Christine Mason picked the place: Carlos, a Mexican restaurant in Winston, quiet on a Wednesday night. They took a booth in the back corner, away from the window.

"I grew up out here," Tess said, because she was nervous. "Wildlife Safari's just up the road. Abby's Pizza is down the street. Everybody in Winston has had a birthday at one or the other."

Mason didn't smile, but she didn't look impatient either. She looked like someone who had sat in a lot of corner booths with a lot of nervous people. Tess slid the napkin across the table and told her everything: the anonymous call, the receipts, the tin in the tire rut. Then the envelope on her desk, and the three words typed inside it.

Mason lifted the key with a pen and turned it in the light. She was quiet a long time.

"Who else knows about this?"

"You."

"Keep it that way." Mason sealed the key and the tin in an evidence bag and wrote on it in neat block letters. "You did right not taking this to the sheriff's office. I'm not going to tell you why I think so. And Ms. Halloran — whoever wrote you that note knows where you work. Be careful who you open your door to."

* * *

The Idle Hour was ten minutes away. Tess didn't call Big Dave. She told herself it was too late to bother him, and sat in

the parking lot with her hands on the wheel until her heart slowed down.

Darla wasn't behind the bar tonight. She was alone at a corner table with a glass she wasn't drinking. When she saw Tess, she didn't get up and she didn't tell her to leave.

Across the room, Herb had Rocky out again, waltzing the googly-eyed stone between the pool tables and humming. Every few turns he bumped their chairs. "Pardon us," he said, both times.

Tess told her about the tin.

Darla held together for almost a minute. Then she put both hands over her face, and the sound that came out of her was nothing Tess had ever heard in a bar.

"He's out there," she said. "He's in a ditch somewhere, or the river, and nobody's ever going to find him. I raised that boy."

Tess put a hand on her arm and left it there.

When Darla could talk again, her voice was low. "Josh knew things, Tess. About Gordon. About Harlan. He said they were both in danger — that people who knew what he knew didn't stay safe." She wiped her face with a bar napkin. "That's all he'd tell me. I swear that's all I know. And knowing things was going to get him killed."

They traded numbers on the back of a coaster. Anything new, either of them, any hour. Herb and Rocky waltzed past again. Nobody laughed.

* * *

Thursday morning Tess drove up the river to Glide with the windows down, to stay awake.

Flo met her at the door of Del's the way she had for as long as Tess could remember: same pink uniform, same pencil behind her ear, same "Sit anywhere, hon." The whole place smelled of fresh rolls coming out of the oven, and in the pastry case sat a chocolate cream pie so tall and glossy it looked better than any pie Tess had ever seen.

Del came out of the kitchen wiping his hands and took one look at her. "You haven't slept."

"Not much."

He poured her coffee and set a slice of the chocolate cream in front of her without asking. Tess told him about Rice Hill and the receipts, but not the tin. Something made her keep that back.

Behind the register, tucked into the frame of the old business license, was a faded snapshot she'd never noticed: a teenage girl squinting into the sun, laughing at whoever held the camera.

"Who's that?"

Del glanced back. "My niece. Long time ago." He refilled her cup. "Listen. You didn't hear this from me. Couple of fellas sat at that counter late Saturday night, after the bars closed. Talking about Owen Marsh."

Tess set her fork down. "Janet Marsh's boy?"

"Janet's boy. Out of prison and back in town, they said." Del's big hands were very still on the counter. "And he's been asking around about Harlan Voss."

CHAPTER 14

The Twin Knife

Canyonville & Roseburg · October 2003

WALT MADE HER take Friday off. “You look like something the river spit out,” he said, which from Walt was tenderness.

So Tess drove south on I-5 with no plan at all and pulled off at Exit 99, Canyonville, where Seven Feathers rose out of the hills, all lights and parking lot. She hadn’t been inside in seven years. She still didn’t know how to play anything but the quarter slots, so she fed a twenty into a machine with cherries on it and let the noise wash over her.

She was down to her last few quarters when the voices started.

Two security officers had a man backed against a row of slot machines near the cashier’s cage — or tried to. He was enormous, six-foot-five if he was an inch, two hundred and fifty pounds of shoulders and neck, and he was leaning over the shorter officer with his finger an inch from the man’s badge. People were edging away.

Tess knew the face before she knew why. Then she did.

When she was fourteen she had lived next door to Janet Marsh in Winston. Janet was raising her boy alone, and whenever she had to run an errand or grab something for dinner, she knocked on the Hallorans’ door. An hour or two, never more. Owen had been eight: all elbows and trouble, the kid who got sent to the principal for starting fights and once flooded the boys’ room by stuffing a toilet with rocks just to see what would happen. Even then you could tell he was going to be a handful. He never knew his father. There was never a man around to tell him no.

At eighteen he’d started going in and out of prison and had never really stopped. Stolen cars, mostly — his crime of choice. Fights. The worst of it Tess remembered from the newsroom: Owen coming out of the courthouse after a carjacking trial and going after a TV reporter on the steps, which turned a short sentence into a long one. He hated reporters. Reporters had put him on the news.

She walked over anyway.

“Hey, Owen!”

He turned, fist still half raised. His face went through about four expressions. “Tess?”

“Owen, come with me.”

Something in him unwound. The security officer, red-faced, pointed to the doors. “Both of you. Out. Now.”

* * *

They walked loops around the parking lot while the wind came down off the hills, Owen with his hands jammed in his jacket and Tess half a step behind his long stride. They caught up the way you do with someone you once fed peanut butter sandwiches to: carefully, then all at once. He was sorry about the funeral; he hadn’t been allowed to go. She was sorry about

his mother. He nodded and didn’t say anything for a whole loop.

Then Tess said, “I’ve been writing about Gordon Pryce.”

He stopped walking. “Well, I had nothing to do with that, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not.”

“That weekend I was at my favorite place. Screw and Brew, in Cannon Beach. You ever heard of it, Tess?” His whole face changed when he talked about it. “It’s a bar and a hardware store put together. You can smell their sandwich a mile down the road. They smoke their own pastrami. So good.” He grinned. “Freddy’s the cook. Great chef. I met him when we were both doing a little time. He turned it around, and so have I. I’ve cleaned up my act, Tess.”

“A bar and a hardware store,” she said.

“It’s the perfect place to go when you’re hungry and need a hammer.”

They both laughed, and for a second he was eight again, standing on a kitchen chair to reach the peanut butter.

Then he looked at his watch. “Time for me to head back to Roseburg.”

“Where are you staying? At your mom’s house?”

His face closed. “Bank took it. She owed a lot of money. Never paid her taxes, something like that. I came home and there was a lockbox on the door.” He shrugged his enormous shoulders. “I’ve been staying at the Holiday Inn. The one by the river.”

* * *

At four-forty that afternoon, Marisol Reyes was pulling the last of the old furniture out of Room 118 at the Holiday Inn by the river.

The hotel was in the middle of a top-to-bottom makeover — new carpet, new beds, new everything — and 118 was one of the outside rooms on the river side, the ones locals didn’t like to book. Marisol tipped the ottoman onto its side to carry it, and the bottom lining sagged and split, and something heavy slid out and hit the floor.

A knife. A big one, with a stag-horn handle. The blade was dark with something that had dried a long time ago, or not so long.

She did not touch it. She went to the house phone and called the front desk, and Heather at the front desk said, “Don’t touch it. Don’t let anybody in. I’m calling Deputy Walters.”

Cal Walters was there in eleven minutes. He crouched beside the ottoman with his flashlight and didn’t say anything for a long time. The handle was stag. The blade was engraved, the way he already knew it would be.

DOUGLAS COUNTY ROADS · 1987.

The twin of the knife sitting on Ray Coyle’s Lost & Found shelf.

Behind him, Heather cleared her throat. “Deputy? The guest two doors down checked in last week. Big man. Paid cash.” She looked at her clipboard. “Name’s Marsh.”

CHAPTER 15

The Door That Wasn't Locked

Roseburg · October 2003

WALTERS DIDN'T ANSWER Heather right away. On the phone she had told him two things. The first was the knife. The second was something Marisol kept repeating, in Spanish and then in English, until Heather finally understood: the back door of 118, the one onto the deck over the river, wasn't right.

He went to it now. The deadbolt was turned. The handle wouldn't budge. It looked locked, every bit of it. He gave it one hard tug, and the door swung open onto the deck and the sound of the water below.

"You see?" Marisol said from the hallway. "It looks closed. It is not closed. Somebody did that."

Somebody had. There were fresh scratches in the old paint around the strike plate, the screw holes reamed out wide. Anyone on the riverbank could climb onto that deck, walk into 118, walk out again — and never once pass the front desk.

He bagged the knife and asked both women to keep the room shut. Then he went out to the pay phone by the ice machine — not his radio — and dialed the number on a card he'd carried in his shirt pocket since Wednesday.

Then he walked two doors down and knocked. Hard.

"What do you need?" a sleepy voice yelled.

"Deputy Walters, Douglas County Sheriff's Office. Please open the door. We'd like to talk to you."

The chain rattled. The door opened and filled up with Owen Marsh — rumpled T-shirt, hair flattened on one side, six-foot-five of him blocking out the lamp. "Yes. What do you want, Deputy?"

"We're investigating something a couple of rooms down from you. Have you heard any disturbance in Room 118?"

"No." Owen rubbed his face. "Except I know they're remodeling. Those rooms weren't available." He leaned on the doorframe. "I like 118, actually. I've stayed there on and off through the years, when I wasn't talking to my mother. We had our disagreements. I wanted to stay away from her and the house." He shrugged. "But it's been a few years."

Walters wrote it down. He did not say the word knife. He did not say the word lock.

"That's about all the time I have for you, Deputy. Unless you're arresting me." Owen laughed, a big easy laugh, and grabbed a jacket off the chair. "I'm heading to the Idle Hour. Have a nice night."

He crossed the lot to a dark blue pickup, climbed in and started it up.

A dark pickup. Walters watched the taillights. Maybe just a coincidence.

* * *

The truck was turning onto the street when a gray sedan pulled in beside the cruiser. Christine Mason got out in her

raincoat, notebook already open, and watched it go. "That him?"

"Owen Marsh." Walters gave her what he had: Janet Marsh's boy, in and out of prison since eighteen, stolen cars and fights, the TV reporter he went after on the courthouse steps. "I didn't get much out of him. But he told me he's stayed in 118 before. Says it's a room he likes."

Mason's pen stopped. "Well, that's interesting. That's certainly nothing you'd expect from anybody hiding something. Or he's just not too bright."

He showed her the door. She tugged it once herself, then looked over the railing at the dark water below. "Your dog walker found the first knife right down there."

"So somebody had a private door into this room. For how long, we don't know." They stood by her car while the light went out of the sky, going over all of it — the Lincoln on 138, the wallet at Rice Hill, Josh Foster's tin in a puddle. Three men gone, if you counted Josh. She filled two pages.

The radio on his shoulder crackled. "Walters." Coyle. "Get back to the office. Now."

"Sheriff, I'm in the middle of —"

"I know what you're in the middle of. Bring it with you. Now."

Coyle never said the word knife either. He didn't have to. Somebody had already told him, and whatever else Walters had found — the door, the room, the man in the dark blue truck — Coyle didn't care. He wanted the knife.

"Go," Mason said quietly. "And Cal? Write up that door tonight. In your own notebook."

* * *

The answering machine was blinking when Tess came out of the shower Saturday morning.

"It's Cal." Traffic noise; a pay phone. "Call me at this number. Not the office."

She called. He talked fast and low, and she wrote it all on the back of an envelope: the ottoman, the knife, DOUGLAS COUNTY ROADS · 1987. A back door that looked locked and wasn't. Owen Marsh, two doors down.

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because Coyle took that knife into his office last night and shut the door," Walters said. "And because you're the only one asking the right questions." He hung up.

Tess looked at the envelope a long time. Then she dialed again.

"Eye Spy Investigations."

"Kally, it's Tess. Would you and Teresa look into something for me? It's a paid assignment. And I promise not to pay you in mayonnaise."

Kally laughed so hard she had to set the phone down. Tess could hear Teresa asking what was so funny.

"I need you two to head to the coast," Tess said. "Cannon Beach. Pay a visit to a place called the Screw and Brew."

"The *what*?"

"Yeah, I know. I'll fill you in right after I make a few calls."

She hung up and looked at the last words on the envelope,
the ones she had underlined twice.

Dark blue pickup.

CHAPTER 16

The Screw and Brew

I-5 To Cannon Beach · October 2003

"ROAD TRIP!" TERESA slapped the dashboard as Kally backed out of the Medford office lot at seven Sunday morning. "We are off to the coast and the Screw and Brew!"

"Not before coffee," Kally said, and swung into the first drive-through coffee stand she saw. An iced coffee for her, October drizzle or not. Two extra-large teas for Teresa: one for now, she said, and one for later. Later lasted about ten minutes.

They climbed onto I-5 north. "Have you ever heard of Haystack Rock?" Teresa asked.

"Can't say I have."

"Two hundred thirty-five feet of basalt, standing right up out of the beach. Tide pools all around it. When we get to Cannon Beach, we need to check it out. It's a beautiful area."

"We're going for a sandwich."

"And a rock."

Kally had grown up back East. She still didn't trust a beach you couldn't swim at.

Six hours to the coast if nobody stopped, seven or eight if somebody did. Thirty minutes in, Teresa shifted in her seat. "Can we stop at the rest area?"

"Already?"

"Already."

"I guess you shouldn't have had both those teas."

Teresa smiled sweetly. "You know what I could go for right now? A teaspoon of mayonnaise."

Kally made a small strangled sound. "Okay, okay. There's a rest area coming up." Teresa laughed all the way into the parking lot.

* * *

Back on the road, they got down to business. Tess had called back Saturday afternoon with everything she had, and Teresa read it off the back of a gas receipt. Owen Marsh, twenty-eight, Janet Marsh's boy. In and out of prison since eighteen. And Freddy, the cook at the Screw and Brew.

"So the two of them first met when they were locked up together," Kally said. "And Owen told Tess he was with Freddy the weekend Gordon Pryce disappeared." She tapped the wheel. "I wonder why he even mentioned that to Tess. Nobody asked him."

"Unless," Teresa said, "he's been plotting an alibi."

"Yes. Interesting." Kally thought about it for a mile. "Here's how we play it. We walk in for their world-famous pastrami sandwich, and we pick up a hammer. The hammer gets us talking. The sandwich gets us asking who the chef is and can we meet him. Now we just need to figure out how to get Owen's name into the conversation."

"Well, we have about five hours to go to come up with a plan." Teresa paused. "Oh, by the way. Can you stop at the next rest area?"

"Again?"

"Again."

"Ugh."

The next stop turned out to be the truck stop at Rice Hill, of all places. Teresa went in. Kally waited by the car and looked over at the diesel pumps, where somebody had dropped Harlan Voss's wallet in the trash.

Somewhere past Eugene, they had a whole new business plan.

"A pet cemetery," Teresa said. "I've always wanted to do that."

"You have an office cat."

"Who will live forever. Other people's cats, though. Little headstones. Little flowers."

Kally laughed until Salem.

* * *

They rolled into Cannon Beach a little after two. Teresa pointed out the window at a dark shape rising out of the mist past the rooftops. Kally said, "Later."

The Screw and Brew had two doors. They took the hardware side first. It had everything you would expect at a Home Depot, packed into a room the size of a large living room: nails by the pound, paint, rope, fishing line, a whole wall of hammers. They picked out a sixteen-ounce claw hammer and followed their noses through the doorway to the Brew side.

The smell of pastrami was in the walls. You could tell it had been smoked there for years, and you could tell right away why travelers and locals kept coming back. It was a paradise for smoked-meat lovers. There was nothing fancy about the place. The chairs should have been replaced twenty years ago. The walls were covered with business cards and knickknacks, with no theme anybody could name. It sat about twelve, and that was pushing it.

Good timing, then: two seats together at the end of the bar were still open.

The waitress's name tag said SALLY. She had a sad look on her face that Kally couldn't quite read. Tired, maybe. Red around the eyes.

"What can I get for you today?"

Teresa was looking past her, at a hand-lettered sign taped above the bar: WE ARE SORRY, BUT PASTRAMI IS NOT AVAILABLE TODAY.

"No pastrami today?"

"No. I'm sorry. Haven't you heard?" Sally looked from one of them to the other. "You two must be from out of town." She leaned in and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Freddy. Our smoker chef. They found him last night in the alley across town. Somebody stabbed him to death."

Kally set the hammer down very carefully on the bar.

"Did they catch who did it?" Teresa asked.

Sally shook her head. "Nobody saw a thing."

Behind the bar, through the kitchen doorway, a big black smoker sat cold with its door propped open. Somebody had set a coffee can of grocery-store carnations on top of it.

Kally and Teresa looked at each other. They had spent six hours figuring out how to get Owen Marsh's name into the conversation.

Now there was nobody left to ask.

CHAPTER 17

Alive a Minute Ago

Roseburg · October 2003

THE PHONE RANG at a quarter past nine Sunday night. Tess caught it on the second ring.

“Tess, you won’t believe it.” Kally’s voice crackled over a pay-phone line, wind roaring behind it. “This is worse news than the time I saw a waitress drop an egg on the floor, pick it up and serve it to a dinner guest.”

“Kally. What happened?”

“Freddy is dead.”

Tess sat down on the arm of the couch.

“We had a whole plan to talk to him, and he’s dead.” From somewhere behind her came Teresa’s voice: “I repeat — he’s dead.”

Kally kept going. “Stabbed to death. In an alley across town, last night. No witnesses anybody knows of, no suspect. And worst of all, we never even got to try the pastrami.” A pause. “There’s nothing out here now but a big rock. We’re scrambling.”

“Come home,” Tess said. “Drive careful.”

“Tess, will you do something for us? Find out if Owen is still at the Holiday Inn, by any chance.”

“I’ll call first thing in the morning and find out his status.”

“Have you talked to that FBI agent again? Mason?”

“Not since Wednesday.”

“It would be nice if she or Sheriff Coyle would talk to the press and give people some kind of update,” Kally said. “Things are getting ridiculous, Tess. Three men gone from Roseburg, knives turning up, and now a dead cook on the coast. Nobody in Roseburg knows anything, and nobody is telling them anything. People back home are scared.”

Tess had been thinking the same thing all week. Roseburg was scared. At the Ledger, the phone rang every afternoon with the same questions. At Fred Meyer, people walked to their cars with their keys already out, looking over their shoulders.

“Okay, Tess,” Kally said finally. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

* * *

Monday morning, Tess dialed the Holiday Inn before her coffee finished brewing.

“Holiday Inn, this is Heather.”

“Good morning. Could you connect me to Owen Marsh’s room, please?”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Marsh checked out three days ago.”

Three days. Tess counted back. Friday. The same night Deputy Walters had knocked on his door, the same night he’d laughed and said he was heading to the Idle Hour and driven off in the dark blue pickup.

“Did he say where he was going?”

“I wouldn’t know that, ma’am.”

Tess tapped her pen against the counter. “Can I ask — have all the rooms been remodeled now? Including 118?”

“Yes, all the renovations are complete.”

“Is anyone staying in Room 118 tonight, by chance?”

“No, ma’am. That room is available, if you’re interested in booking it.”

“No,” Tess said. “Not at the moment. But maybe in the near future.” She thanked Heather, told her to have a great day and hung up.

She stood there a long time with her hand still on the phone. Where in the world was Owen Marsh? Who had killed Freddy — and why? Was any of it connected, or was a cook stabbed in an alley in Cannon Beach just a terrible coincidence, half a day’s drive from here?

She didn’t believe much in coincidences anymore.

* * *

Monday nights at the Idle Hour were slow. By half past ten there were five people left: two loggers arguing about the Ducks, a woman feeding quarters into the jukebox, and Herb, in his fishing vest, sharing a booth with Rocky, whose googly eyes caught the beer-sign light.

Darla was wiping down the taps when the phone behind the bar rang.

“Idle Hour. Can I help you?”

A breath on the line. Then a voice she would have known anywhere, pitched so low she had to press the receiver hard against her ear.

“Darla. It’s Josh. I don’t have much time, so just listen.”

Her knees went soft. She grabbed the edge of the bar, and the tears came before she could stop them. “It’s you. Tic Tac, it’s —”

“Quiet,” he hissed. “Don’t say my name.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Pryce and Harlan are alive,” Josh whispered. “At least they were —”

A sharp crack came over the line, loud and flat. A gunshot. Darla had grown up around enough deer camps to know one.

Then nothing. No click, no dial tone, just a dead, empty hiss.

“Josh?” she whispered. “Josh!”

She put the receiver down with shaking hands, then picked it right back up and dialed the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office. A dispatcher answered.

“I need Sheriff Coyle. Right now. It’s about my brother, Josh Foster.”

“The sheriff’s gone for the night, ma’am. I can take a message and have someone —”

Darla hung up. She remembered what Coyle had done the last time Josh had something to tell him: six beers written down instead of two.

She dug through the cash drawer until she found the coaster, soft at the corners, with a number written on the back in Tess’s handwriting. She dialed it.

It rang once. Twice.

“Hello?”

“Tess,” Darla said, and her voice cracked down the middle.
“It’s Darla. My brother’s alive. Or he was a minute ago.”

CHAPTER 18

The Phone Didn't Ring

Roseburg · October 2003

TESS WAS ALREADY reaching for her keys. “Darla, where are you? Are you at the Idle?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t move. I’m on my way.”

Tess drove across town with the wipers going and both hands on the wheel. The last two loggers were pulling out of the lot when she got there. Inside, the jukebox had gone dark, the chairs were up on half the tables, and Herb and Rocky had gone home. Darla sat alone at the end of the bar with the phone in front of her like it might ring again.

Tess pulled up a stool. “Okay. Tell me everything. Could you hear anything in the background at all? Did he say where he is? Did it sound like somebody was holding him — or is he just hiding?”

Darla’s face crumpled. “I don’t *know*!” She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. “It was so quick, Tess. He was whispering. Then there was this loud sound. It sounded like gunfire. And then everything just went quiet.”

Tess put a hand on her arm. She looked at the phone, then at the door, then back at Darla.

“We need to get Agent Mason here.”

“The FBI lady?”

“She’s the only one I trust with this.” Tess took the bar phone and dialed the number for Mason’s motel from memory. Mason picked up on the second ring, wide awake. Tess told her all of it — the call, the whisper, the words about Pryce and Harlan, the shot. Darla filled in what Tess missed.

“Stay where you are,” Mason said. “Both of you. Lock the door.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, headlights swept across the front window. Tess unlocked the door, and Christine Mason walked in, raincoat dark with rain.

She wasn’t alone.

Behind her came Deputy Cal Walters, hat in his hands. And behind him, filling the doorway, came Sheriff Ray Coyle.

Tess and Darla stared. Neither one had to say it out loud. *What the hell?*

Darla got off her stool. “What are *you* doing here, Sheriff?”

“Darla Foster,” Coyle said, “you’re being detained for questioning. You can answer some questions. But you have the right to remain silent, and if you want an attorney, one can be appointed for you.”

“Detained?” Tess said. “She called *you* people.”

Mason stepped forward. Her voice was calm and flat. “We want you to understand something, Ms. Foster. As of tonight, your brother is a suspect in the disappearances of Gordon Pryce and Harlan Voss. We want to know exactly what was

said in your conversation with Josh tonight. And we want you to tell us where he is.”

Darla’s mouth fell open. Then her face went red.

“I don’t need no damn attorney,” she said, “because I don’t know *anything* — except I know Josh had nothing to do with whatever happened to those two men!”

Coyle didn’t blink. “Tomorrow morning at nine, we’re holding a press conference at City Hall. We’re going to tell the people of Roseburg and the rest of the state to be on the lookout for Josh Foster, and to call the sheriff’s office or the FBI if they’ve seen him. He’s considered armed and dangerous.” He let that sit. “You want us to change our minds, Darla, you need to tell us what you know. Because he’s on our radar. So where is he?”

Tess and Darla stood there frozen. It was as if somebody had pulled the floor out from under the room.

“I don’t *know* where he is!” Darla screamed. “I thought she was coming here to help me —” she jabbed a finger at Mason — and you throw all this bullshit at me?”

She took a step toward Coyle until she was looking straight up at him. “You know what, Sheriff? You probably have more to do with the disappearance of those two men than anybody else in this town.”

Coyle’s jaw tightened. For once, he didn’t have anything to say.

“Now get out of my face.”

Tess caught Darla’s arm. “Do you know an attorney?”

Darla shook her head.

“I’ll find you one,” Tess said. “Tonight. Don’t say another word.”

Darla wasn’t listening. She was looking straight at the sheriff. “I’m all done talking to you people. Get the hell out of here — or arrest me.”

For a long second, nobody moved. The beer signs buzzed. Rain ticked against the window.

Walters stared at the floor. He hadn’t said a word since he came in, and he didn’t look like a man who agreed with any of it.

It was Mason who broke the silence. “Let’s go, Sheriff.”

Coyle settled his hat on his head and turned for the door. Then he looked back.

“Turn on the TV tomorrow, Darla. You’ll hear Tic Tac’s name.” He touched the brim of his hat. “Have a great night.”

The door swung shut behind them. Tess watched the taillights through the rainy glass — the cruiser first, then Mason’s gray sedan. As Mason pulled out, she glanced once toward the window. Tess couldn’t tell if it was a warning or an apology.

Behind her, Darla sank back onto her stool and put her head down on the bar.

“He didn’t do it, Tess.”

“I know.”

The phone sat silent between them. It didn’t ring again.

CHAPTER 19

Room 118

Roseburg · October 2003

BY TEN TO nine on Tuesday, the steps of Roseburg City Hall were crowded. Three TV vans sat at the curb with their masts up, and a podium waited at the top of the steps under a cold, bright sky.

Tess stood near the front with her notebook open. Gloria Bordiam had planted herself beside her, uninvited, with a Ledger camera around her neck. Kally and Teresa had come up from the Eye Spy office and found a spot by the flagpole.

Off to one side, by herself, stood Darla Foster in her denim jacket, arms folded tight. She had not slept. It showed.

At nine sharp, Sheriff Ray Coyle stepped up to the microphones. Deputy Cal Walters took a place behind his right shoulder. Christine Mason stood at his left, hands in her coat pockets, watching the crowd instead of the cameras.

“Good morning,” Coyle said. “I want to thank the media for coming out today to help us update the community and the state. I’m joined by Deputy Cal Walters and Special Agent Christine Mason of the FBI.”

“I want you all to be assured of something. The men you all know about, Mr. Gordon Pryce and Commissioner Harlan Voss, were targeted individuals. This is not a danger to the general public.”

“The FBI is in full support of this investigation. We plan on finding these men alive, and on prosecuting the individual or individuals responsible. At this time, we have no suspects. But we are leaving no stone unturned. We will find them.”

Tess’s pen stopped.

No suspects.

She turned her head. Ten feet away, Darla had already turned hers. Their eyes met, and Tess saw the same thing in Darla’s face that she felt in her own stomach. Twelve hours ago, in an empty bar, Coyle had promised to say Josh Foster’s name to every TV camera in the state. *Armed and dangerous.* Now he hadn’t said it at all.

Darla mouthed two words: *He lied.*

Tess nodded slowly. It had been a squeeze, nothing more. Coyle had walked into the Idle Hour to scare Darla and see what shook loose. He’d wanted to know what they knew.

From the back of the crowd came a voice Tess knew from childhood.

“Hey, Coyle!” Buck had his red suspenders on and his ball cap pushed back. “I bet you know more than what you’re saying! I never voted for you. You’re a loser and you always will be!”

A few people laughed. A few more didn’t. The cameras swung toward Buck and then back.

Coyle paused. For a second his jaw worked, the way it had in the Idle Hour. Then he leaned back into the microphone as if no one had spoken.

“If anyone has any information, please call the FBI at 1-800-CALL-FBI, or call the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office directly. Every call will be taken seriously.”

That was when Tess heard it.

An engine, wound tight and fast, two streets over. She looked up just in time to see a dark pickup flash through the intersection at Elm Street, too fast, gone between two buildings before she could see a plate, a color, a face. Just dark. Just a pickup.

Owen, she thought, before she could stop herself. *Owen’s dark blue truck.* But it was too far away to be sure of anything.

And at that same moment, on the opposite side of the square, something else caught her eye. In the park across the street, a figure dressed all in black stood half hidden behind the trunk of a big maple, watching the steps. When the heads turned toward Elm Street, the figure stepped out, head down, and started walking fast toward the far side of the park.

Darla’s voice cracked across the square.

“Josh!”

The figure didn’t turn, didn’t run, didn’t slow down. In a few more steps it was gone behind the hedges at the far corner, as if it had never been there at all.

Kally grabbed Teresa’s sleeve. The two of them looked at each other and said it at exactly the same time: “What the hell is going on?”

Walters had taken a step forward. Mason put a hand on his arm, and he stopped.

At the podium, Coyle folded his piece of paper in half. “That’s all we have for you this morning,” he said. “This is an ongoing investigation. I won’t be taking any questions.” And he turned and walked inside, while a dozen reporters shouted questions at his back.

* * *

The city had set up a lunch buffet for the media and the townspeople in the City Hall lobby: sheet pans of lasagna, a salad bar, rolls in plastic baskets and a coffee urn. People drifted in, still talking about the pickup and the figure in the park.

Teresa glanced toward the long tables. “Should we get some food at the buffet?”

Kally stared at her. “You are kidding me, right? Have you ever seen what goes on at a buffet? There are more germs on those serving spoons than on a toilet seat at a rest area.” She shuddered. “Think about that, Teresa.”

Teresa thought about it. She put the plate back.

Tess stepped outside, away from the noise, and stood on the steps where Coyle had stood. She took a long breath of cold air. Then she walked to the pay phone at the corner, dropped in a quarter and dialed a number she now knew by heart.

“Holiday Inn, this is Heather.”

“Hi, Heather. This is Tess Halloran. I called last week.” She watched the street where the dark pickup had gone. “I’d like to make a reservation, please.”

“Of course. Any particular room?”

“Yes,” Tess said. “Room 118.”

CHAPTER 20

Not a One-Glass Night

Roseburg · October 2003

BY THE TIME Tess got back to her little rental on Pine Street, the afternoon light was already going gold. She dropped her bag by the door, stood in the middle of the kitchen and tried to make the day add up.

No suspects. No Josh. A dark pickup on Elm Street. A figure in black behind a maple tree, there and then gone. Darla's voice cracking across the square.

She shook her head. Then she shook it again.

She took down a glass and a bottle of her favorite red, Cooper & Thief, and poured. One sip told her it wasn't going to be a one-glass night. She could already see the whole bottle in her evening plans.

She opened the refrigerator and considered what went best with it. Her eyes landed on a wedge of habanero cheese. Then she remembered the box of fancy crackers in the pantry she'd been saving for no good reason. After the City Hall buffet, she didn't want a real dinner anyway. Wine, cheese, crackers. Perfect.

She was slicing the cheese when she started laughing out loud, alone in her kitchen, remembering Kally at the buffet table. *More germs than a toilet seat at a rest area.*

She picked up the phone and dialed Eye Spy. One ring.

"Eye Spy. We are your eyes and ears. How can we help you?"

"Don't you two ever close that office?" Tess said.

"Not when Kally's organizing the files by color," Teresa said. "Again."

"I'm having wine and cheese for dinner," Tess said. "Tell Kally City Hall still has plenty of buffet food left over, if she's hungry."

From somewhere in the background came Kally's voice: "I heard that!" They both laughed.

"So," Tess said. "What did you think of that press conference?"

Teresa was quiet a moment. "Honestly? Not much there. Coyle talked for five minutes and said nothing. 'No suspects.' After Monday night, Tess? The man was calling Josh armed and dangerous twelve hours earlier."

"I know."

"What I keep thinking about is everything going on around us. A dark pickup flying down Elm Street right in the middle of it. And then that guy in black in the park, standing behind the tree, watching. When everybody turned toward the truck, he walked away. He didn't run. He just walked, like he knew nobody would follow him."

"Like the truck was the distraction," Tess said slowly.

"That's what bothers me," Teresa said. "Either it's the biggest coincidence in Douglas County, or somebody planned it."

Tess looked at her wine. "Plenty to think about. I just called to say hello. Have a good night, you two."

"You too. Lock your door."

"Always," Tess said, and hung up, and poured another glass. The first one had been too good.

* * *

She changed into sweats and her oldest flannel shirt, pulled her favorite blanket off the back of the couch and settled in with the cheese plate on her knees. She flipped through the channels until she landed on KDRC, Channel 9, where the late news was running highlights from City Hall: Coyle at the podium, Mason behind him, a quick shot of the crowd.

"Not too many highlights there," she told the television.

They didn't show the truck. They didn't show the park.

When she looked at the bottle again, it was nearly empty, and the clock on the VCR said 10:02. The day finally caught up with her. Her eyes grew heavy. The TV murmured on. She let her head sink into the cushion and began to drift.

THUD.

Tess bolted upright. The blanket slid to the floor.

It wasn't a knock. It was one heavy blow against the front door, hard enough to rattle the frame.

She sat frozen, listening. Nothing. No footsteps on the porch. No car door. Just the television and her own heart pounding in her ears.

She crossed the room on bare feet, reached for the switch and flipped on the porch light. Through the little window in the door she saw the steps, the empty yard and the wet street beyond. Nobody.

She stood there a long time. Then she turned the deadbolt, slowly, and opened the door a few inches.

Something was sticking out of the door at eye level.

A knife. A big one, driven so deep into the wood that it stood straight out on its own. A stag-horn handle. A broad, heavy blade. She didn't have to lean closer to know what was engraved along it, but she leaned closer anyway.

DOUGLAS COUNTY ROADS · 1987.

The river knife. The knife from Room 118. And now this one. A third.

A piece of paper was wrapped tight around the handle and held with a rubber band. Her hands shook as she slid it free and unfolded it under the porch light. Block capitals, in pencil:

STOP DIGGING OR YOU'LL GO FOR A SWIM TOO.

Too.

Tess backed inside, slammed the door and threw the deadbolt. She didn't touch the knife. She stood with her back against the door, breathing hard, the note shaking in her hand.

Somewhere out there in the dark, someone had stood on her porch close enough to touch her door. Someone who knew exactly where she lived.

And someone who wanted her to know it.

CHAPTER 21

Rubber Gloves and White Wine

Roseburg · October 2003

TESS CALLED THE only number she trusted, the one Cal Walters had given her from a pay phone. He picked up on the first ring, and nine minutes later his cruiser slid to the curb on Pine Street with no lights and no siren.

He pulled on gloves, worked the knife out of the wood with both hands and slid it into a long paper evidence bag. The note went into a smaller one.

"Did you see anything at all?" he asked. "A car going by? Somebody walking? What they were wearing? Anything?"

"No. Nothing. I turned the light on and there was nobody."

He looked at the bag in his hands. "Tess, I have to give this to the sheriff. I can't sit on it. Not after the last one. If I keep this quiet and he finds out, I'm done, and then I can't help anybody."

Walters swept his flashlight across the yard. A light rain had come and gone around ten, and the grass shone. At the corner of the lawn, where the grass gave way to the dirt of an old flower bed, the beam stopped. A single shoe print, pressed deep into the mud.

He made one call. Twenty-five minutes later Christine Mason's gray sedan pulled in behind the cruiser. She knelt in the wet dirt in her raincoat, mixed something in a plastic jug and poured it into the print like pancake batter.

"It needs half an hour to set," she said. Then she looked up at Tess. "Lock your door."

"I'll be out front till morning," Walters said. "Go get some sleep."

She didn't, much. Every hour or so she parted the blinds, and every hour the cruiser was still there.

* * *

By seven the next morning her bag was packed for two nights. She called the Holiday Inn and asked for an early check-in, and Heather said Room 118 could be ready by ten.

Then she called Eye Spy. "I think it's time I did some real reporting," she told Teresa. "Deep digging. I'm checking into the Holiday Inn by the river for a couple of nights. Would you two take the room next to mine? Just in case you notice anything strange going on around there."

"We'll be there by six," Teresa said. Tess didn't tell her why. Not on the phone.

On the drive over, the truth settled in. The room had been remodeled top to bottom — new carpet, new beds, new everything. Whatever had happened in 118 had been carried out to a dumpster weeks ago. She was probably about to spend good money on nothing.

But it wasn't really about the room. It was about not being on Pine Street tonight.

Room 118 smelled of new carpet and fresh paint. Tess set up at the little desk by the window and did what she would have done at the Ledger: two obituaries, a calendar of Halloween events, the last farmers market of the season. Ordinary work.

Late in the afternoon she walked the grounds and followed the path down toward the river. The bank was steep here, and the water ran fast and green. Under the lower bridge a few men sat around a fire pit, hands out to the flames. One of them, in an old Army jacket, watched her all the way past. She nodded. He didn't. Nothing else. Just the river.

* * *

When she got back, Teresa's car was pulling into the lot. Heather handed them the key to Room 116, right next door, and by six-thirty the three of them were sitting on the beds with a bag of tortilla chips, a jar of salsa and a bottle of white wine.

Tess waited until the glasses were poured. Then she told them about the thud, the knife and the note.

"What?" they said together.

"We were on the phone with you last night!" Teresa said.

"Nobody was around when I looked outside," Tess said. "Nobody at all."

It got very quiet. Tess looked for something, anything, to change the mood — and found it. On the second bed sat Kally's suitcase, open. Inside: her own bed sheets, folded, and a box of yellow rubber gloves.

Tess burst out laughing. "Kally. You brought your own sheets?"

"And I'm scrubbing that shower before anybody touches it," Kally said. "You have no idea what lives in hotel showers."

It was after eleven when Tess stood up to go. At the door she turned around. "If you hear me screaming, break down the door."

They barely laughed.

* * *

In 118 she went over everything once more. New lamps, new curtains, new mattress. No ottomans anywhere. She unlocked the back door and stepped out onto the deck. The rain was long gone; the night was clear and cold, and below her the river ran loud in the dark. It was beautiful.

Then she went back in, turned the deadbolt and pulled the curtain across the glass.

She was tired in a way she hadn't been in years. She had barely slept the night before, and a whole bottle of Cooper & Thief hadn't touched the worry. She set the alarm for seven, turned off the lamp and was asleep before she could think another thought.

At 3:08, by the red numbers of the clock, a cold draft woke her.

The curtain was moving.

She lay perfectly still. The sound of the river was louder now, much louder — the way it had been out on the deck. Somebody was standing at the foot of the bed, dark against the

dark.

Her eyes went wide.

“It’s you!”

CHAPTER 22

Pale as Chalk

Roseburg · October 2003

THE SCREAM CAME through the wall at 3:08.

Teresa was on her feet before she was awake. Kally was already at the door in her socks. After Tess left, she had stripped the hotel bed, put on her own sheets, scrubbed the shower in her yellow rubber gloves and only then taken a shower herself; it was nearly midnight before she lay down. They ran into the cold breezeway and pounded on 118.

“Tess! Tess!”

Nothing. Teresa threw her shoulder into the door. It didn’t move. Kally tried, and bounced off. The new doors at the Holiday Inn were solid all the way through.

“The front desk,” Teresa said. “Go!”

They ran the length of the building to the lobby. Heather looked up from the night desk — alone on the overnight shift, with even maintenance off until Monday — saw their faces and grabbed the master key without asking a single question. On the way back she was already dialing 911 on the cordless phone.

Heather’s hands shook so badly that Teresa had to take the key from her. The lock clicked. The door swung open.

Kally and Teresa stepped inside, and both of them went as pale as chalk.

The room was empty.

The bed was torn back. A couple of towels lay on the floor. The curtains were blowing into the room, because the glass door to the deck stood wide open, and the cold air smelled of the river.

Tess was gone.

* * *

Sirens echoed across the upper end of Roseburg within minutes. Two Roseburg police cruisers came first, then Sheriff Coyle’s Crown Victoria with Deputy Walters right behind. Christine Mason’s gray sedan came last, fast, and she was out of it with her weapon drawn before the engine stopped.

“Everybody out of the room,” Walters said. “Don’t touch anything. Please.”

Kally and Teresa stood in the breezeway with blankets Heather had found for them, and watched through the doorway as flashlights moved over everything.

There wasn’t much to see. No broken lamp. No overturned chair. Hardly any sign of a struggle at all — just the bed, the towels and the open door. Out on the deck, Walters ran his light along the boards and the railing, then down the bank. Wet grass, black water. No footprints anyone could see in the dark.

Somewhere far down the river, a motorboat droned, faint and steady. Everybody heard it. Nobody could see it.

Mason crouched at the deck door and worked it gently with a gloved hand. She turned the deadbolt, tugged, and it swung

open anyway. The strike plate was new. The paint around it looked fresh. And yet the door didn’t hold.

“Same as before,” she said quietly. “Either they never fixed it right, or somebody came back and fixed it his own way.”

Coyle stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips, muttering to himself. Nobody could make out the words. Out on the walkway, Walters and Mason talked in low voices with their backs to him.

* * *

Kally couldn’t stop shaking. Teresa held her arm.

“Somebody knew she was in there,” Kally whispered. “Didn’t they? The same person who put the knife in her door.”

“Maybe,” Teresa said. “Or maybe not. Maybe he came back to 118 for his own reasons — and walked in on her. Maybe he was as scared as she was.”

Kally was quiet a long moment. Then she said, “What if somebody always knows when 118 is empty?”

“Think about it. The door’s rigged. The room’s rented and unrented. Somebody uses it like a back door. Somebody tells him when it’s free — and tonight, for whatever reason, nobody told him.” Kally lowered her voice even more. “Someone who works here.”

Teresa glanced toward the lobby, where Heather sat on a bench with her head in her hands. “That,” she said slowly, “is a very interesting theory.”

“We should talk to the people who work here. Housekeeping. The night desk. All of them.”

“Tomorrow,” Teresa said. “Today. Whatever this is.”

* * *

By five, the Roseburg police had cleared out. Coyle, Walters and Mason photographed the room, the deck and the bank, and walked the grounds with flashlights. At the bottom of the riverbank, under the lower bridge, the fire pit was cold and the little camp was empty. Everyone who had been sleeping there was gone.

Coyle came back to the lobby and stood over Heather.

“Lock that room,” he said. “Nobody goes in. Nobody rents it. You understand me? We’ll get back to you.”

Heather nodded without looking up.

It was past seven when the sky over the river finally began to gray. Mason was still out on the grounds. Down at the water’s edge, below the deck of 118, where the mud was soft, she stopped.

A shoe print. Sharp-edged. Fresh.

She climbed the bank to her sedan, took out her kit and went back down. She mixed the casting powder and water in a plastic jug, poured it carefully into the print and knelt beside it while it set, the river sliding past a few feet away.

When she lifted the cast, she turned it over in the gray light and studied the tread for a long time.

She had poured one just like it the night before last, in the mud at the corner of Tess Halloran’s lawn on Pine Street.

She was almost sure they matched.

CHAPTER 23

Count to a Hundred

Roseburg · October 2003

“TESS, YOU WERE not supposed to be in Room 118.”

The voice was low and close, and it was the first thing she heard after the scream died in her throat. A gloved hand was over her mouth. He knotted a hand towel from the bathroom across it, tight enough that she could breathe but not call out. Then he yanked a pillowcase off the bed and pulled it down over her head, and the room went dark.

“Stay calm,” he said. “Don’t run. Nobody is going to hurt you.”

He walked her out through the curtain, onto the deck and down the wet bank, one hand clamped around both of her wrists. Cold grass. Mud. The roar of the river. He lifted her into something that rocked under her feet — a boat — and set her on a bench. She heard a box rattle under the seat, and then a plastic strip cinched tight around her wrists. A zip tie. The kind you bundle a tarp with. A motor sputtered, then settled into a low, muffled hum — quieter than any boat motor she had ever heard, as if someone had made it that way on purpose. They ran with the current for a long time, and Tess counted bridges by the echo, and then lost count.

When the boat scraped gravel, he led her up another bank to a truck with a high metal floor, like the back of a moving van. The door rolled shut. The road turned to gravel, then to something much worse, and she braced her feet and bounced against the wall for what felt like an hour.

* * *

When the pillowcase came off, a lantern was burning.

She was in a room dug into a hillside, walls of stacked logs, a ceiling of poles and black plastic and, she guessed, a great deal of dirt and brush on top. A cot. A propane stove. Plastic jugs of water. Shelves of canned beans, crackers, coffee — and, on the end of one shelf, a little pile of mayonnaise packets.

Tess stared at them. *Kally*. The fishing hole.

He cut the strip on her wrists and untied the towel from her mouth. Then he sat down on an upturned crate across from her, and in the lantern light she saw his face again — older, thinner, a gray beard grown in — the face she had seen at the foot of the bed.

“Somebody at that hotel always told me when 118 was empty,” he said. “Always. That was the deal. Last night my source failed me.” He rubbed his eyes. “I’m sorry you were the one who paid for it.”

“People think you’re dead,” Tess said. Her voice came out a whisper.

“Good. That’s better for everybody. I am being hunted, Tess.”

“By who?”

He was quiet a long time.

“Ever since the mill closed, people have been angry,” he said. “And money is owed. A lot of it. We shipped more than lumber out of that mill. Things hidden in the loads. The people on the other end are very dangerous, and they are from very far away.” He looked at her. “And plenty of the people involved are right here. People who never worked a day at the mill.”

Tess stared at him in complete awe. All those years of the town grieving that mill, and nobody had ever said a word.

“What was in the loads?”

“The less you know, the safer you’ll be.”

She thought of the knife in her front door. Of the note. *Go for a swim too*. She opened her mouth to ask — and he stood, turned the lantern down, and the moment was gone.

* * *

The day passed in pieces. Thin light through a crack where the poles met the hill. Crackers and a can of peaches. A wool blanket that smelled of wood smoke. She slept once and woke to find him by the door, listening to the woods.

When the crack of light turned orange, he picked up the pillowcase.

“Before I take you back,” he said, “I need your word. Nobody hears about this place. Nobody hears you saw me.”

Tess looked at the shelves, the cot, the little pile of mayonnaise packets. “You have my word.”

“I believe you.” He turned the pillowcase over in his hands. “I knew your father, Tess. I could never hurt you. I need you to know that.”

Back in the truck. The gravel again, and the bad road, and then pavement, smooth and fast. After a long while she heard big rigs roaring past, close, and the truck slowed onto gravel and stopped.

He walked her a few steps and cut the new strip on her wrists. “Count to a hundred before you take that off.”

She counted. At forty she heard the truck door. At sixty, gravel spitting. At a hundred she pulled the pillowcase off.

Dusk. A gravel turnout beside I-5, the freeway roaring past. A quarter mile up the road, the lights of the Rice Hill truck stop were just coming on — the same truck stop where Harlan Voss’s wallet had turned up in the trash.

The truck was gone.

Tess stood in the cold, shaking, and the questions came all at once. What was in the loads? Who was hunting him? Who at the hotel was his source? Did he know anything about the knives — the one in the river, the one in the ottoman, the one in her own front door? And why did a man who said he would never hurt anyone keep a box of zip ties under the seat of his boat?

So much more I wanted to ask him, she thought. She had sat across from the biggest story in Roseburg for a whole day, and fright had kept her mouth shut. She was angry with herself. As a reporter, she had failed.

But she was alive. Right then, that mattered more than any story.

Then she said the name out loud for the first time all day.

“Gordon Pryce. Maybe you’re a good man after all.”

A SERIAL MYSTERY

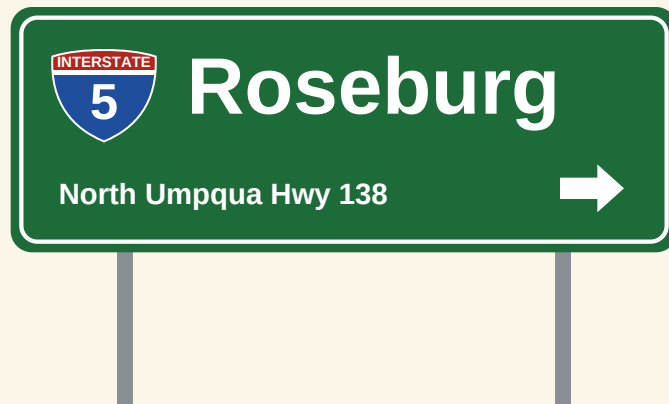
The Deepest Water

In a timber town, everybody knows something.

October 2003. Roseburg, Oregon, is still sore from the mill closures of the '90s. Then Gordon Pryce, owner of the shuttered Pryce Lumber mill, leaves the Elks Lodge on a Friday night and never comes home. His Lincoln turns up at a pullout on the North Umpqua with his wallet still on the seat.

Tess Halloran came home to start over. Laid off from a Portland daily, she's back at the Umpqua Ledger in the town where her father worked as a faller for Pryce Lumber. Now she has the biggest story Roseburg has seen in years, and a sheriff who would rather she left it alone.

Then a second man disappears. With two friends who run a detective agency, a tavern full of regulars who see more than they say, and an unsigned note on her desk that reads "Ask them about August 1987," Tess starts digging. Somebody in Roseburg knows exactly what happened. Somebody would like her to stop.



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