

CHAPTER 2

The day had already gone to shit. Icicles at the end of my ponytail were whipping me in the face, stinging what the wind hadn't.

March in Ohio is Russian roulette. One day, say yesterday when I spent all day in court, could be glorious, 60 degrees, sun-filled, and have a sky so clear and blue it seems to underscore how miraculous life is. Then there are other days, say today when I must be outside for hours, which could fall somewhere between icy drizzle, misery, and dreary winter hellscape.

"You could use this," Harshan said, handing me chai. "Prema made two."

"I love her. I love her so much." I drank gratefully. Prema's chai was the nectar of the gods. It was also the only thing standing between me and hypothermia.

"Showering before going to see a corpse?"

"Had to. The chlorine itches if it stays on too long."

"See where being ambitious in the morning gets you."

"Away from this." I patted his stomach.

Harshan isn't fat but he has gained a little weight since he got married a year ago. He actively pretends to not care, but I've worked with him long enough to know better. To be fair, his new marriage has been hard on my waistline too. Prema, his wife, comes from a big family, and can't scale her delectable cooking down for two which means I don't have to cook anymore, but I now need to swim daily because I know no moderation.

"Did we beat Diane here? I don't see her stuff."

"No, she's already down at the scene." I started walking, Harshan sloshed behind me.

"This is what people get for participating in outdoor recreation this time of year."

"We're getting paid for this Harsh."

"Not us, the people who discovered the bo-"

The rest of his sentence was the first casualty of the icy patch. I barely had time to react to the abrupt termination of dialogue. As his body came hurtling towards me, I instinctively lifted my arm and braced for impact.

We went careening down an embankment coming to rest about 6 feet in front of the yellow crime tape.

"I saved the tea," I shouted holding up my cup, steam mocking us from above the frosty mud puddle we came to rest in.

"Your priorities are garbage." Harshan muttered as he untangled himself from underneath my leg; his tea, the second casualty, was equally distributed between his parka and pants, his cup was lost to the wooded trail.

"Well good morning," said a female voice crouched a few inches above the dormant brush. Her jacket with "Medical Examiner" emblazoned on the back, was already saturated from the relentless precipitation and the tufts of auburn hair that had escaped the knit cap were plastered to the side of her head.

She stood up in the middle of the roped off square and tried, in vain, to debulk the grit from her gloved hands, the "Dr. Diane Charles" that I knew to be embroidered on the front of her jacket was illegible due to a cluster of burrs.

"Good morning, Diane," I greeted cheerfully without acknowledging our unconventional entrance.

"You two okay? One of my techs has a first aid kit if you need it."

"No offer to examine us?" I joked.

"Sarah, I wouldn't be talking to you if you needed my kind of exam. I haven't done a live one in 20 plus years." Diane was one of those people ready with witty repartee at any hour.

I surveyed the damage. Mud and forest detritus covered most of my outfit, but I was otherwise unscathed. Besides the tea, Harshan had a large tear in his pant leg and mud was spattered over most of his clothing and face. I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"Bloody winter," Harshan grumbled under his breath. Harshan and Prema were Sri Lankan, and while they loved living in the US, they were not fans of Ohio winters.

A woman stood up next to Diane. I immediately stopped laughing and adopted a professional demeanor.

"Sarah, Harshan this is Dr. Tuyen Keel chief medical examiner for Indianapolis; she goes by Tiffany."

"It's easier for Americans," she said turning to face us.

Harshan and I recoiled.

"Sorry," she apologized, clicking off the head lamp. "Forgot it was on."

"No problem." I extended my hand. "Special Agent Sarah Lowery."

Harshan extended his.

"Special Agent Harshan Rupasinghe."

She shook our hands in turn.

Dr. Tuyen “Tiffany” Keel was a short but exceptionally fit Asian woman who was, I guessed, a few decades into her profession given her title, confident aura, and liberal grey streaks but she otherwise looked as though she would blend seamlessly with a group of first year med students.

“I’m really glad Diane convinced you to come out.” Her precise diction suggested her education was extensive, her time in America, decades.

“Tiffany is also a forensic anthropologist.”

Diane and Tiffany looked at each other eventually seeming to come to some sort of agreement.

“About a year ago, parts of a John Doe were found on a trail by Ogle Lake, a couple of months ago, they were sent to me,” Tiffany stated. It was neither question nor comment, but the lack of resolution hung thick in the air.

“Tiffany and I went to med school together and talk about cases from time to time,” Diane elaborated somewhat vaguely.

Hairs prickled on the back of my neck, wherever this was going, it wasn’t good. I looked at Harshan, unconvinced his silence was from a sour mood alone; he had been and was continuing to scan and rescan our surroundings.

“When we met for dinner last month, I told Diane about the Brown County John Doe I had examined.”

“Okay.”

“Then my office got a call a few days ago that some hikers found a pelvis about 20 yards from where we’re standing,” Diane continued.

More hairs rose.

“You’ve found body parts before, why are we here?”

“Because we’re worried the same person killed them,” Diane admitted.

Harshan stopped scanning and looked at the women. We both sensed more.

“So, a potential killer crossing state lines is the only reason we’re here?”

The women glanced at each other guiltily.

“Back to Ogle Lake. The femur and ribs the dog walker found were first sent to M.E. who covers Brown County, while the Sheriff conducted a series of searches to look for more bones.”

Tiffany rummaged around her field pack, found and unlocked her phone, and turned the screen towards us.

“They eventually found this.”

Harshan and I leaned over her shoulder and looked at the screen.

"What the..." Harshan began.

"...Fuck?!" I finished.

"The Sheriff's exact words."

"Please tell me that's some sort of birth defect."

She swiped the screen and advanced to the next picture.

"Diane found this yesterday."

Here is a pearl of wisdom that I would like to share. When two hyper educated, renowned medical examiners gather in an Ohio state park in miserable wintery weather and show you pictures of two different skulls with the teeth filed down to pointed peaks to resemble some demonic caricature, it is best to get in your car, resign from the FBI, and find a second career, or in my case, a third. I will know for next time.

"Is there any way in the world this could be from some natural process?" I asked already knowing the answer but grasping at straws felt like the only thing I could do after being blindsided.

"No."

"Part of some obscure religious ceremony?"

"No," Tiffany answered rather quickly.

"You seem pretty confident about that." It came out snarkier than I had intended. She responded in kind.

"When I was finishing my residency, I thought one day I might find skulls with mutilated teeth in rural Indiana and Ohio, so I got my PhD in physical anthropology with a dissertation focus on skeletal manipulations in religious ceremonies just to be safe."

A long, awkward pause followed; I looked at Harshan, Harshan looked at Diane, Diane looked at Tiffany, and Tiffany looked at the pictures. Even the clouds gave their opinion, dumping more sleet and freezing rain on top of us. This day was turning out to be so delightful, I couldn't wait for more.