

Dear Reader:

Twenty years have passed since I sat down to write a story about Sara Linton, Jeffrey Tolliver and Lena Adams. While *Blindsighted* was not the first book that I wrote, it was the first book that I thought other people might want to read. Until that point, I had worked on what would be called Serious Literary Fiction. It was impressed upon me in college that thrillers were *genre fiction*, two words that were uttered with the same contempt my English professors might use when describing a pile of excrement. So you might say that dropping out of college was one of the best decisions I ever made. I gave up all the heady literature on navel-gazing and the injustices of the human condition and returned to my original loves: Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, Patricia Highsmith and Daphne Du Maurier. I found that reading thrillers made me want to write them, and writing them was a revelation. I hate to sound all arty, but I did not find my voice until I wrote *Blindsighted*. Writers are always told to write what they know, but I think they should also write what they *want* to know, and I have always been fascinated by what motivates people to commit violent crime.

Unfortunately, the types of crimes I write about happen constantly – not just on a daily basis, but sometimes

by the minute. I came across the idea for the plot of *Blindsighted* in my regular life as a sign company owner. Part of my job required me to show up at a large office building once a month to check on my clients. One morning, I arrived to find everyone on edge. Over the weekend, a woman had been raped in the bathroom. The police were there. Everyone was being interviewed. No suspects were found. Fast forward to the next month, and two more women were raped in different bathrooms. Another month passed and two more women were attacked. By that time, the building management had installed digital locks on the doors. Only the women were supposed to have the codes. Some were using the restroom in pairs, but of course that's difficult to arrange when you're working. Six months passed before the perpetrator was caught. The police figured out that he was accessing the women's bathroom through the drop ceiling.

In all honesty, I was unnerved every time I walked into that building, even after the rapist was arrested. Every woman lives with an undercurrent of fear just beneath the surface of her life. You don't think about it all the time, but a sudden noise, a stranger's glance, an unwanted touch, can bring it rushing to the surface. There was nothing more terrifying to me than thinking about being inside a bathroom stall, believing I was in a safe place, and experiencing one of the worst kinds of violations any human being can experience.

What I learned from those tense months was probably one of the most important lessons a thriller writer can ever learn: the crimes we write about happen to real people. I am always aware of that truth whenever I start a book. I take no delight in writing about violence, but I've learned that it's a useful tool for exploring the themes that interest me. The focus of my work has never

been on the crime, but on what the crime leaves behind. How does someone recover from the worst day of their life? How does a grieving parent, sister, partner, lover, friend, find the strength to carry on?

Of course, you can have a riveting, action-packed, earth-shattering plot and none of that matters if you don't have good characters to tell the story. I was driving on I-285 when I first came up with Sara Linton. Atlanta traffic is notoriously bad, and 285 is particularly murderous, so coming up with a medical examiner/doctor character was a completely natural thing. Sara's last name was taken from one of my favorite novels, *Wuthering Heights*, and I managed to sneak in a Catherine and Eddie alongside Hareton Earnshaw to round out her family. Unfortunately, I couldn't be too obvious with a Heathcliff, but Jeffrey Tolliver was a good stand-in. His name was taken from a sign I passed on my way to work every day. I only realized a few years later that the law firm that inspired the name was actually Tolver. Thanks, fiction!

Once I had Sara and Jeffrey in my mind, everything else started to fall into place. It's a great act of hubris to begin a novel and think that there's not only going to be a sequel, but several books in a series, but that's exactly how I felt. I knew less than halfway through *Blindsight* that *Kisscut*, *A Faint Cold Fear* and at least *Indelible* would happen. This gave me breathing room to map out Sara and Jeffrey's journey. Above all, I wanted them to be adults, which meant that the tension between them couldn't come from breaking up and making up every book. The crimes I wrote about provided a backdrop to explore the arc of their relationship across the six novels that make up the Grant County series. They didn't joke about death. They took what they did seriously and understood their choices would have real consequences. When they finally got together, it meant

something because you understood the mountains that they'd climbed to get there.

But I also needed to balance them out with someone who was firmly not in the adult category. That's where Lena Adams came in. (Her first name came from Salena Quintanilla, who was an amazing singer. Her last name came from my kindergarten teacher, the first of many teachers I had who encouraged me to tell stories.). At the time of Lena's creation, she hewed the closest to me, not least of all because I was still in my twenties, and your twenties are a fantastic time to be young and stupid. I grew up as a strange girl in a small town that did not embrace strangeness, so I knew what it was like to be an outsider. One of the characteristics that makes Lena stand apart is that her grandmother was Mexican-American, but other than her Latinx features, Lena feels no connection to her heritage. She was raised in a predominantly white, small southern town. Her uncle Hank was a known drug addict and general reprobate. As a child, Lena was poor and isolated, her only friend her twin sister Sibyl. All of these circumstances made for a very angry young woman, and I quickly found out there is nothing more exhilarating than channeling all of the things you would never do or say in real life into a character like Lena Adams.

Every thriller writer has to make a choice about tone before they tell a story. They can either be as realistic as possible or fade to black when the bad stuff happens. Obviously, I chose to be realistic, but I did not understand at the time that my choice would be considered controversial. When I was first published, there was only a handful of women who were categorized as 'muscular' crime writers – Patricia Cornwell, Kathy Reichs and Mo Hayder, to name a few. I think 'muscular' was the only way critics could wrap their heads

around women writing realistically and graphically about crime. My early reviews were peppered with manly adjectives (when they were not taking me to task for being so un-ladylike – in particular, Lena’s use of the word ‘fuck’ came up often, because it’s okay to rape and murder but a lady using the F-word is a bridge too far). Many of my interviews in those early years started with questioning why I wanted to write about violence against women, as if it was unnatural for a woman to be interested in crimes that predominantly affect women. Another memorable question I repeatedly got was, ‘why do you write about such strong women?’ I got so fed up that I finally started saying I would answer that question when people started asking my male counterparts why they wrote about such strong men.

While I still occasionally get asked those incredibly reductive questions, the handful of women writing *masculine* thrillers has grown into a massive, extended middle finger of women who are just writing about whatever the hell they want to write about. The field has become refreshingly diverse and even more socially conscious, bringing new voices and perspectives to the genre. As a writer, I am thrilled to have the company. As a reader, I am tickled to have so many exceptional books to choose from.

Which brings me to some larger points I want to make about the Grant County series – and that is that the world has changed a lot since the US publication date of September 4, 2001. Back then, Yahoo! was still big. Apple was a niche computer maker. 9/11 was days away and 7/7 was four years into the future. Mobile calls were charged by the minute. AOL and instant messaging were cutting edge. People couldn’t Netflix and chill; they just had to chill.

In preparation for this 20th anniversary edition, I had considered updating some references in the text,

especially the technology, by replacing fax machines with email, Blackberrys with Androids and iPhones and Sara's Z3 with a Z4, but in the end, I decided it was best to leave everything the same. Books should exist in the time and place in which they were written, even if that time and place still had VCRs and *cellular telephones* with springy cords that were hard-wired into your car.

One thing that struck me after all of these years was the surprising strain of vigilante justice that runs through the Grant County series. Jeffrey has no problem laying hands on suspects. He throws them against walls, lets Lena slap them around, and contrives to make sure they are punished for their crimes, even when the law might say otherwise. It's clear from my writing that this is all okay, because Jeffrey is the good guy and you're supposed to root for him. My opinion on this subject has taken a sharp turn during the ensuing years. We all know the American criminal justice system is in great need of reform, and the proliferation of cell phones has shown us what happens when cops get it wrong. Everyone is for vigilante justice until the justice part is taken out. We are a nation of laws for a reason.

Another thing that stood out was Lena's heritage. I chose to make her Latinx because I didn't want to be another white writer who only writes about white people – with the occasional one-dimensional minority character thrown in for comic relief or criminality. I think it's important to write about the world as you see it. Atlanta is a majority-minority city. We have several thriving immigrant populations as well as the largest African-American middle class of any major American city. I wanted my work to reflect at least a small part of that wonderful diversity, and in my Will Trent series, I continue to strive to be inclusive.

In current times, it's become a tricky thing to write

about heritages you don't share. My focus was on Lena's identity as a female police officer, because I knew from watching a close family member on the force how all-consuming, exhilarating and just damn hard that struggle can be. Even as I continue to write Lena today, I am hyper aware that she needs to remain true to her law enforcement identity. I believed twenty years ago as I continue to believe now that a writer's only job is to tell a good story. Whether or not that story resonates is up to the reader.

Which brings me back to you, dear Reader. Thank you so much for the last nineteen years, and the opportunity to write twenty books – and I hope many more. When I look back at the Grant County series, I feel proud that I was able to accomplish the things that I set out to do, and to continue that work into my standalone novels and the Will Trent series. While I was working on my twentieth novel, the *Silent Wife*, I became keenly aware of how entwined my life is with Sara Linton's. We have both been through so much together (though she remains remarkably younger than me). In the last two decades, Sara and I have lost people, met new friends, moved houses twice, driven various BMWs, learned from our mistakes and prepared ourselves to make new ones. We've grown stronger in a way that allows us both to be more vulnerable. In short, we have seen a lot of shit and we still manage to get out of bed every day and do our jobs.

I am so grateful for this journey, and delighted that I get to keep telling more stories.

Karin Slaughter
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Atlanta, Georgia

MONDAY

ONE

Sara Linton leaned back in her chair, mumbling a soft 'Yes, Mama' into the telephone. She wondered briefly if there would ever come a point in time when she would be too old to be taken over her mother's knee.

'Yes, Mama,' Sara repeated, tapping her pen on the desk. She felt heat coming off her cheeks, and an overwhelming sense of embarrassment took hold.

A soft knock came at the office door, followed by a tentative 'Dr. Linton?'

Sara suppressed her relief. 'I need to go,' she said to her mother, who shot off one last admonishment before hanging up the phone.

Nelly Morgan slid open the door, giving Sara a hard look. As office manager for the Heartsdale Children's Clinic, Nelly was the closest thing Sara had to a secretary. Nelly had been running the place for as long as Sara could remember, even as far back as when Sara was herself a patient here.

Nelly said, 'Your cheeks are on fire.'

'I just got yelled at by my mother.'

Nelly raised an eyebrow. 'I assume with good reason.'

'Well,' Sara said, hoping that would end it.

'The labs on Jimmy Powell came in,' Nelly said, still eyeing Sara. 'And the mail,' she added, dropping a stack

of letters on top of the inbasket. The plastic bowed under the added weight.

Sara sighed as she read over the fax. On a good day, she diagnosed earaches and sore throats. Today, she would have to tell the parents of a twelve-year-old boy that he had acute myeloblastic leukemia.

‘Not good,’ Nelly guessed. She had worked at the clinic long enough to know how to read a lab report.

‘No,’ Sara agreed, rubbing her eyes. ‘Not good at all.’ She sat back in her chair, asking, ‘The Powells are at Disney World, right?’

‘For his birthday,’ Nelly said. ‘They should be back tonight.’

Sara felt a sadness come over her. She had never gotten used to delivering this kind of news.

Nelly offered, ‘I can schedule them for first thing in the morning.’

‘Thanks,’ Sara answered, tucking the report into Jimmy Powell’s chart. She glanced at the clock on the wall as she did this and let out an audible gasp. ‘Is that right?’ she asked, checking the time against her watch. ‘I was supposed to meet Tessa at lunch fifteen minutes ago.’

Nelly checked her own watch. ‘This late in the day? It’s closer to suppertime.’

‘It was the only time I could make it,’ Sara said, gathering charts together. She bumped the in-box and papers fell onto the floor in a heap, cracking the plastic tray.

‘Crap,’ Sara hissed.

Nelly started to help, but Sara stopped her. Aside from the fact that Sara did not like other people cleaning up her messes, if Nelly somehow managed to get down on her knees, it was doubtful she would be able to get back up without considerable assistance.

‘I’ve got it,’ Sara told her, scooping up the whole pile and dropping it on her desk. ‘Was there anything else?’

Nelly flashed a smile. ‘Chief Tolliver’s holding on line three.’

Sara sat back on her heels, a feeling of dread washing over her. She did double duty as the town’s pediatrician and coroner. Jeffrey Tolliver, her ex-husband, was the chief of police. There were only two reasons for him to be calling Sara in the middle of the day, neither of them particularly pleasant.

Sara stood and picked up the phone, giving him the benefit of the doubt. ‘Somebody better be dead.’

Jeffrey’s voice was garbled, and she assumed he was using his cellular phone. ‘Sorry to disappoint you,’ he said, then, ‘I’ve been on hold for ten minutes. What if this had been an emergency?’

Sara started shoving papers into her briefcase. It was an unwritten clinic policy to make Jeffrey jump through hoops of fire before he could speak to Sara on the telephone. She was actually surprised that Nelly remembered to tell Sara he was on the phone.

She glanced at the door, mumbling, ‘I knew I should’ve just left.’

‘What?’ he asked, his voice echoing slightly on the cellular.

‘I said you always send someone if it’s an emergency,’ she lied. ‘Where are you?’

‘At the college,’ he answered. ‘I’m waiting for the deputy dogs.’

He was using their term for the campus security at Grant Tech, the state university at the center of town.

She asked, ‘What is it?’

‘I just wanted to see how you were doing.’

‘Fine,’ she snapped, pulling the papers back out of her briefcase, wondering why she had put them there in the

first place. She flipped through some charts, shoving them into the side pocket.

She said, 'I'm late for lunch with Tess. What did you need?'

He seemed taken aback by her curt tone. 'You just looked distracted yesterday,' he said. 'In church.'

'I wasn't distracted,' she mumbled, flipping through the mail. She stopped at the sight of a postcard, her whole body going rigid. The front of the card showed a picture of Emory University in Atlanta, Sara's alma mater. Neatly typed on the back beside her address at the children's clinic were the words, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?'

'Sara?'

A cold sweat came over her. 'I need to go.'

'Sara, I—'

She hung up the phone before Jeffrey could finish his sentence, shoving three more charts into her briefcase along with the postcard. She slipped out the side door without anyone seeing her.

Sunlight beamed down on Sara as she walked into the street. There was a chill in the air that had not been there this morning, and the dark clouds promised rain later on tonight.

A red Thunderbird passed, a small arm hanging out the window.

'Hey, Dr. Linton,' a child called.

Sara waved, calling 'Hey' back as she crossed the street. Sara switched the briefcase from one hand to the other as she cut across the lawn in front of the college. She took a right onto the sidewalk, heading toward Main Street, and was at the diner in less than five minutes.

Tessa was sitting in a booth on the far wall of the

empty diner, eating a hamburger. She did not look pleased.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Sara offered, walking toward her sister. She tried a smile, but Tessa did not respond in kind.

‘You said two. It’s nearly two-thirty.’

‘I had paperwork,’ Sara explained, tucking her briefcase into the booth. Tessa was a plumber, like their father. While clogged drains were no laughing matter, very seldom did Linton and Daughters get the kind of emergency phone calls that Sara did on a daily basis. Her family could not grasp what a busy day was like for Sara and were constantly irritated by her lateness.

‘I called the morgue at two,’ Tessa informed her, nibbling a french fry. ‘You weren’t there.’

Sara sat down with a groan, running her fingers through her hair. ‘I dropped back by the clinic and Mama called and the time got away from me.’ She stopped, saying what she always said. ‘I’m sorry. I should have called.’ When Tessa did not respond, Sara continued, ‘You can keep being mad at me for the rest of lunch or you can drop it and I’ll buy you a slice of chocolate cream pie.’

‘Red velvet,’ Tessa countered.

‘Deal,’ Sara returned, feeling an inordinate sense of relief. It was bad enough having her mother mad at her.

‘Speaking of calls,’ Tessa began, and Sara knew where she was going even before she asked the question. ‘Hear from Jeffrey?’

Sara raised up, tucking her hand into her front pocket. She pulled out two five-dollar bills. ‘He called before I left the clinic.’

Tessa barked a laugh that filled the restaurant. ‘What did he say?’

‘I cut him off before he could say anything,’ Sara answered, handing her sister the money.

Tessa tucked the fives into the back pocket of her blue jeans. ‘So, Mama called? She was pretty pissed at you.’

‘I’m pretty pissed at me, too,’ Sara said. After being divorced for two years, she still could not let go of her ex-husband. Sara vacillated between hating Jeffrey Tolliver and hating herself because of this. She wanted just one day to go by without thinking about him, without having him in her life. Yesterday, much like today, had not been that day.

Easter Sunday was important to her mother. While Sara was not particularly religious, putting on panty hose one Sunday out of the year was a small price to pay for Cathy Linton’s happiness. Sara had not planned on Jeffrey being at church. She had caught him out of the corner of her eye just after the first hymn. He was sitting three rows behind and to the right of her, and they seemed to notice each other at the same time. Sara had forced herself to look away first.

Sitting there in church, staring at the preacher without hearing a word the man was saying, Sara had felt Jeffrey’s gaze on the back of her neck. There was a heat from the intensity of his stare that caused a warm flush to come over her. Despite the fact that she was sitting in church with her mother on one side of her and Tessa and her father on the other, Sara had felt her body responding to the look Jeffrey had given her. There was something about this time of year that turned her into a completely different person.

She was actually fidgeting in her seat, thinking about Jeffrey touching her, the way his hands felt on her skin, when Cathy Linton jabbed her elbow into Sara’s ribs. Her mother’s expression said she knew exactly what was going through Sara’s mind at that moment and did

not like it one bit. Cathy had crossed her arms angrily, her posture indicating she was resigning herself to the fact that Sara would go to hell for thinking about sex at the Primitive Baptist on Easter Sunday.

There was a prayer, then another hymn. After what seemed like an appropriate amount of time, Sara glanced over her shoulder to find Jeffrey again, only to see him with his head bent down to his chest as he slept. This was the problem with Jeffrey Tolliver, the idea of him was much better than the reality.

Tessa tapped her fingers on the table for Sara's attention. 'Sara?'

Sara put her hand to her chest, conscious that her heart was pounding the same way it had yesterday morning in church. 'What?'

Tessa gave her a knowing look, but thankfully did not pursue it. 'What did Jeb say?'

'What do you mean?'

'I saw you talking to him after the service,' Tessa said. 'What did he say?'

Sara debated whether or not to lie. Finally, she answered, 'He asked me out for lunch today, but I told him I was seeing you.'

'You could've cancelled.'

Sara shrugged. 'We're going out Wednesday night.'

Tessa did everything but clap her hands together.

'God,' Sara groaned. 'What was I thinking?'

'Not about Jeffrey for a change,' Tessa answered. 'Right?'

Sara took the menu from behind the napkin holder, though she hardly needed to look at it. She or some member of her family had eaten at the Grant Filling Station at least once a week since Sara was three years old, and the only change to the menu in all that time had been when Pete Wayne, the owner, had added

peanut brittle to the dessert menu in honor of then president Jimmy Carter.

Tessa reached across the table, gently pushing down the menu. 'You okay?'

'It's that time of year again,' Sara said, rummaging around in her briefcase. She found the postcard and held it up.

Tessa did not take the card, so Sara read aloud from the back, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' She put the card down on the table between them, waiting for Tessa's response.

'From the Bible?' Tessa asked, though surely she knew.

Sara looked out the window, trying to compose herself. Suddenly, she stood up from the table, saying, 'I need to go wash my hands.'

'Sara?'

She waved off Tessa's concern, walking to the back of the diner, trying to hold herself together until she reached the bathroom. The door to the women's room had stuck in the frame since the beginning of time, so Sara gave the handle a hard yank. Inside, the small black-and-white tiled bathroom was cool and almost comforting. She leaned back against the wall, hands to her face, trying to wipe out the last few hours of her day. Jimmy Powell's lab results still haunted her. Twelve years ago, while working her medical internship at Atlanta's Grady Hospital, Sara had grown familiar with, if not accustomed to, death. Grady had the best ER in the Southeast, and Sara had seen her share of difficult traumas, from a kid who had swallowed a pack of razor blades to a teenage girl who had been given a clothes hanger abortion. These were horrible cases, but not altogether unexpected in such a large city.

Cases like Jimmy Powell's coming through the children's clinic hit Sara with the force of a wrecking ball. This would be one of the rare cases when Sara's two jobs would converge. Jimmy Powell, who liked to watch college basketball and held one of the largest collections of Hot Wheels Sara had personally ever seen, would more than likely be dead within the next year.

Sara clipped her hair back into a loose ponytail as she waited for the sink to fill with cold water. She leaned over the sink, pausing at the sickly sweet smell coming from the basin. Pete had probably dumped vinegar down the drain to keep it from smelling sour. It was an old plumber's trick, but Sara hated the smell of vinegar.

She held her breath as she leaned back over, splashing her face with water, trying to wake up. A glance back at the mirror showed nothing had improved, but a wet spot from the water was just below the neckline of her shirt.

'Great,' Sara mumbled.

She dried her hands on her pants as she walked toward the stalls. After seeing the contents of the toilet, she moved to the next stall, the handicap stall, and opened the door.

'Oh,' Sara breathed, stepping back quickly, only stopping when the sink basin pressed against the back of her legs. She put her hands behind her, bracing herself on the counter. A metallic taste came to her mouth, and Sara forced herself to take in gulps of air so that she wouldn't pass out. She dropped her head down, closing her eyes, counting out a full five seconds before she looked up again.

Sibyl Adams, a professor at the college, sat on the toilet. Her head was tilted back against the tiled wall, her eyes closed. Her pants were pulled down around her

ankles, legs splayed wide open. She had been stabbed in the abdomen. Blood filled the toilet between her legs, dripping onto the tiled floor.

Sara forced herself to move into the stall, crouching in front of the young woman. Sibyl's shirt was pulled up, and Sara could see a large vertical cut down her abdomen, bisecting her navel and stopping at the pubic bone. Another cut, much deeper, slashed horizontally under her breasts. This was the source of most of the blood, and it still dripped in a steady stream down the body. Sara put her hand to the wound, trying to halt the bleeding, but blood seeped between her fingers as if she were squeezing a sponge.

Sara wiped her hands on the front of her shirt, then tilted Sibyl's head forward. A small moan escaped from the woman's lips, but Sara could not tell if this was a simple release of air from a corpse or the plea of a living woman. 'Sibyl?' Sara whispered, barely able to manage the word. Fear sat in the back of her throat like a summer cold.

'Sibyl?' she repeated, using her thumb to press open Sibyl's eyelid. The woman's skin was hot to the touch, as if she had been out in the sun too long. A large bruise covered the right side of her face. Sara could see the impression of a fist under the eye. Bone moved under Sara's hand when she touched the bruise, clicking like two marbles rubbing together.

Sara's hand shook as she pressed her fingers against Sibyl's carotid artery. A fluttering rose against her fingertips, but Sara wasn't sure if it was the tremor in her own hands or life that she was feeling. Sara closed her eyes, concentrating, trying to separate the two sensations.

Without warning, the body jerked violently, pitching forward and slamming Sara onto the floor. Blood

spread out around both of them, and Sara instinctively clawed to get out from under the convulsing woman. With her feet and hands she groped for some kind of purchase on the slick bathroom floor. Finally, Sara managed to slide out from underneath her. She turned Sibyl over, cradling her head, trying to help her through the convulsions. Suddenly, the jerking stopped. Sara put her ear to Sibyl's mouth, trying to make out breathing sounds. There were none.

Sitting up on her knees, Sara started compressions, trying to push life back into Sibyl's heart. Sara pinched the younger woman's nose, breathing air into her mouth. Sibyl's chest rose briefly, but nothing more. Sara tried again, gagging as blood coughed up into her mouth. She spat several times to clear her mouth, prepared to continue, but she could tell it was too late. Sibyl's eyes rolled back into her head and her breath hissed out with a low shudder. A trickle of urine came from between her legs.

She was dead.

TWO

Grant County was named for the good Grant, not Ulysses, but Lemuel Pratt Grant, a railroad builder who in the mid-1800s extended the Atlanta line deep into South Georgia and to the sea. It was on Grant's rails that trains carted cotton and other commodities all across Georgia. This rail line had put cities like Heartsdale, Madison, and Avondale on the map, and there were more than a few Georgia towns named after the man. At the start of the Civil War, Colonel Grant also developed a defense plan should Atlanta ever come under siege; unfortunately, he was better with railroad lines than front lines.

During the Depression, the citizens of Avondale, Heartsdale, and Madison decided to combine their police and fire departments as well as their schools. This helped economize on much needed services and helped persuade the railroads to keep the Grant line open; the county was much larger as a whole than as individual cities. In 1928, an army base was built in Madison, bringing families from all over the nation to tiny Grant County. A few years later, Avondale became a stopping point for railroad maintenance on the Atlanta-Savannah line. A few more years passed, and Grant College sprang up in Heartsdale. For nearly sixty years, the county prospered, until base closings, consolidations,

and Reaganomics trickled down, crushing the economies of Madison and Avondale within three years of each other. But for the college, which in 1946 became a technological university specializing in agri-business, Heartsdale would have followed the same downward trend as its sister cities.

As it was, the college was the lifeblood of the city, and police chief Jeffrey Tolliver's first directive from Heartsdale's mayor was to keep the college happy if he wanted to keep his job. Jeffrey was doing just that, meeting with the campus police, discussing a plan of action for a recent outbreak of bicycle thefts, when his cell phone rang. At first, he did not recognize Sara's voice and thought the call was some kind of prank. In the eight years he had known her, Sara had never sounded so desperate. Her voice trembled as she said three words he had never expected to come from her mouth: I need you.

Jeffrey took a left outside the college gates and drove his Lincoln Town Car up Main Street toward the diner. Spring was very early this year, and already the dogwood trees lining the street were blooming, weaving a white curtain over the road. The women from the garden club had planted tulips in little planters lining the sidewalks, and a couple of kids from the high school were out sweeping the street instead of spending a week in afterschool detention. The owner of the dress shop had put a rack of clothes on the sidewalk, and the hardware store had set up an outdoor gazebo display complete with porch swing. Jeffrey knew the scene would be a sharp contrast to the one waiting for him at the diner.

He rolled down the window, letting fresh air into the stuffy car. His tie felt tight against his throat, and he found himself taking it off without thinking. In his

mind, he kept playing Sara's phone call over and over in his head, trying to get more from it than the obvious facts. Sibyl Adams had been stabbed and killed at the diner.

Twenty years as a cop had not prepared Jeffrey for this kind of news. Half of his career had been spent in Birmingham, Alabama, where murder seldom surprised. Not a week went by when he wasn't called out to investigate at least one homicide, usually a product of Birmingham's extreme poverty: drug transactions gone wrong, domestic disputes where guns were too readily available. If Sara's call had come from Madison or even Avondale, Jeffrey would not have been surprised. Drugs and gang violence were fast becoming a problem in the outlying towns. Heartsdale was the jewel of the three cities. In ten years, the only suspicious fatality in Heartsdale involved an old woman who had a heart attack when she caught her grandson stealing her television.

'Chief?'

Jeffrey reached down, picking up his radio. 'Yeah?'

Marla Simms, the receptionist at the station house, said, 'I've taken care of that thing you wanted.'

'Good,' he answered, then, 'Radio silence until further notice.'

Marla was quiet, not asking the obvious question. Grant was still a small town, and even in the station house there were people who would talk. Jeffrey wanted to keep a lid on this as long as possible.

'Copy?' Jeffrey asked.

Finally, she answered, 'Yes, sir.'

Jeffrey tucked his cell phone into his coat pocket as he got out of the car. Frank Wallace, his senior detective on the squad, was already standing sentry outside the diner.

‘Anyone in or out?’ Jeffrey asked.

He shook his head. ‘Brad’s on the back door,’ he said. ‘The alarm’s disconnected. I gotta think the perp used it for his in and out.’

Jeffrey looked back at the street. Betty Reynolds, the owner of the five-and-dime, was out sweeping the sidewalk, casting suspicious glances at the diner. People would start walking over soon, if not out of curiosity, then for supper.

Jeffrey turned back to Frank. ‘Nobody saw anything?’

‘Not a thing,’ Frank confirmed. ‘She walked here from her house. Pete says she comes here every Monday after the lunch rush.’

Jeffrey managed a tight nod, walking into the diner. The Grant Filling Station was central to Main Street. With its big red booths and speckled white countertops, chrome rails and straw dispensers, it looked much as it probably had the day Pete’s dad opened for business. Even the solid white linoleum tiles on the floor, so worn in spots the black adhesive showed through, were original to the restaurant. Jeffrey had eaten lunch here almost every day for the last ten years. The diner had been a source of comfort, something familiar after working with the dregs of humanity. He looked around the open room, knowing it would never be the same for him again.

Tessa Linton sat at the counter, her head in her hands. Pete Wayne sat opposite her, staring blindly out the window. Except for the day the space shuttle *Challenger* had exploded, this was the first time Jeffrey had ever seen him not wearing his paper hat inside the diner. Still, Pete’s hair was bunched up into a point at the top, making his face look longer than it already was.

‘Tess?’ Jeffrey asked, putting his hand on her shoulder. She leaned into him, crying. Jeffrey smoothed her hair, giving Pete a nod.

Pete Wayne was normally a cheerful man, but his expression today was one of absolute shock. He barely acknowledged Jeffrey, continuing to stare out the windows lining the front of the restaurant, his lips moving slightly, no sound coming out.

A few moments of silence passed, then Tessa sat up. She fumbled with the napkin dispenser until Jeffrey offered his handkerchief. He waited until she had blown her nose to ask, ‘Where’s Sara?’

Tessa folded the handkerchief. ‘She’s still in the bathroom. I don’t know –’ Tessa’s voice caught. ‘There was so much blood. She wouldn’t let me go in.’

He nodded, stroking her hair back off her face. Sara was very protective of her little sister, and this instinct had transferred to Jeffrey during their marriage. Even after the divorce, Jeffrey still felt in some way that Tessa and the Lintons were his family.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

She nodded. ‘Go ahead. She needs you.’

Jeffrey tried not to react to this. If not for the fact that Sara was the county coroner, he would never see her. It said a lot about their relationship that somebody had to die in order for her to be in the same room with him.

Walking to the back of the diner, Jeffrey felt a sense of dread overcome him. He knew that something violent had happened. He knew that Sibyl Adams had been killed. Other than that, he had no idea what to expect when he tugged open the door to the women’s bathroom. What he saw literally took his breath away.

Sara sat in the middle of the room, Sibyl Adams’s head in her lap. Blood was everywhere, covering the body, covering Sara, whose shirt and pants were soaked

down the front, as if someone had taken a hose and sprayed her. Bloody shoe and hand prints marked the floor as if a great struggle had occurred.

Jeffrey stood in the doorway, taking all this in, trying to catch his breath.

‘Shut the door,’ Sara whispered, her hand resting on Sibyl’s forehead. He did as he was told, walking around the periphery of the room. His mouth opened, but nothing would come out. There were the obvious questions to ask, but part of Jeffrey did not want to know the answers. Part of him wanted to take Sara out of this room, put her in his car, and drive until neither one of them could remember the way this tiny bathroom looked and smelled. There was the taste of violence in the air, morbid and sticky in the back of his throat. He felt dirty just standing there.

‘She looks like Lena,’ he finally said, referring to Sibyl Adams’s twin sister, a detective on his force. ‘For just a second I thought . . .’ He shook his head, unable to continue.

‘Lena’s hair is longer.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, unable to take his eyes off the victim. Jeffrey had seen a lot of horrible things in his time, but he had never personally known a victim of violent crime. Not that he knew Sibyl Adams well, but in a town as small as Heartsdale, everyone was your neighbor.

Sara cleared her throat. ‘Did you tell Lena yet?’

Her question fell on him like an anvil. Two weeks into his job as police chief, he had hired Lena Adams out of the academy in Macon. Those early years, she was like Jeffrey, an outsider. Eight years later he had promoted her to detective. At thirty-three, she was the youngest detective and only woman on the senior squad. And now her sister had been murdered in their

own backyard, little more than two hundred yards from the police station. He felt a sense of personal responsibility that was almost suffocating.

‘Jeffrey?’

Jeffrey took a deep breath, letting it go slowly. ‘She’s taking some evidence to Macon,’ he finally answered. ‘I called the highway patrol and asked them to bring her back here.’

Sara was looking at him. Her eyes were rimmed with red, but she hadn’t been crying. Jeffrey was glad of this one thing, because he had never seen Sara cry. He thought if he saw her crying that something in him would give.

‘Did you know she was blind?’ she asked.

Jeffrey leaned against the wall. He had somehow forgotten that detail.

‘She didn’t even see it coming,’ Sara whispered. She bent her head down, looking at Sibyl. As usual, Jeffrey couldn’t imagine what Sara was thinking. He decided to wait for her to talk. Obviously, she needed a few moments to collect her thoughts.

He tucked his hands into his pockets, taking in the space. There were two stalls with wooden doors across from a sink that was so old the fixtures for hot and cold were on opposite sides of the basin. Over this was a gold speckled mirror that was worn through at the edges. All told, the room was not more than twenty feet square, but the tiny black and white tiles on the floor made it seem even smaller. The dark blood pooling around the body didn’t help matters. Claustrophobia had never been a problem for Jeffrey, but Sara’s silence was like a fourth presence in the room. He looked up at the white ceiling, trying to get some distance.

Finally Sara spoke. Her voice was stronger, more confident. ‘She was on the toilet when I found her.’

For lack of anything better to do, Jeffrey took out a small spiralbound notebook. He grabbed a pen from his breast pocket and started to write as Sara narrated the events that had led up to this moment. Her voice became monotone as she described Sibyl's death in clinical detail.

'Then I asked Tess to bring my cell phone.' Sara stopped speaking, and Jeffrey answered her question before she could get it out.

'She's okay,' he provided. 'I called Eddie on the way here.'

'Did you tell him what happened?'

Jeffrey tried to smile. Sara's father was not one of his biggest fans. 'I was lucky he didn't hang up on me.'

Sara did not so much as smile, but her eyes finally met Jeffrey's. There was a softness there that he had not seen in ages. 'I need to do the prelim, then we can take her to the morgue.'

Jeffrey tucked the pad into his coat pocket as Sara gently slid Sibyl's head to the floor. She sat back on her heels, wiping her hands on the back of her pants.

She said, 'I want to have her cleaned up before Lena sees her.'

Jeffrey nodded. 'She's at least two hours away. That should give us time to process the scene.' He indicated the stall door. The lock was busted off. 'Was the lock that way when you found her?'

'The lock's been that way since I was seven,' Sara said, pointing to her briefcase beside the door. 'Hand me a pair of gloves.'

Jeffrey opened the case, trying not to touch the blood on the handles. He pulled out a pair of latex gloves from an inside pocket. When he turned around, Sara was standing at the foot of the body. Her expression

had changed, and despite the blood staining the front of her clothes, she seemed to be back in control.

Still, he had to ask, 'Are you sure you want to do this? We can call somebody from Atlanta.'

Sara shook her head as she slipped on the gloves with practiced efficiency. 'I don't want a stranger touching her.'

Jeffrey understood what she meant. This was a county matter. County people would take care of her.

Sara tucked her hands into her hips as she walked around the body. He knew she was trying to get some perspective on the scene, to take herself out of the equation. Jeffrey found himself studying his ex-wife as she did this. Sara was a tall woman, an inch shy of six feet, with deep green eyes and dark red hair. He was letting his mind wander, remembering how good it felt to be with her, when the sharp tone of her voice brought him back to reality.

'Jeffrey?' Sara snapped, giving him a hard look.

He stared back at her, aware that his mind had wandered off to what seemed like a safer place.

She held his gaze a second longer, then turned toward the stall. Jeffrey took another pair of gloves out of her briefcase and slipped them on as she talked.

'Like I said,' Sara began, 'she was on the toilet when I found her. We struggled to the floor, I rolled her on her back.'

Sara lifted Sibyl's hands, checking under her fingernails. 'There's nothing here. I imagine she was taken by surprise, didn't know what was going on until it was too late.'

'You think it was quick?'

'Not too quick. Whatever he did, it looks planned to me. The scene was very clean until I came along. She would've bled out on the toilet if I hadn't had to use the

rest room.’ Sara looked away. ‘Or maybe not, if I hadn’t been late getting here.’

Jeffrey tried to comfort her. ‘You can’t know that.’

She shrugged this off. ‘There’s some bruising on her wrists where her arms hit the handicap bars. Also’ – she opened Sibyl’s legs slightly – ‘see here on her legs?’

Jeffrey followed her directions. The skin on the inside of both knees was scratched away. ‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘The toilet seat,’ she said. ‘The bottom edge is pretty sharp. I imagine she squeezed her legs together as she struggled. You can see some of the skin caught on the seat.’

Jeffrey glanced at the toilet, then looked back at Sara. ‘Think he pushed her back on the toilet, then stabbed her?’

Sara didn’t answer him. Instead, she pointed to Sibyl’s bare torso. ‘The incision isn’t deep until the middle of the cross,’ she explained, pressing into the abdomen, opening up the wound so that he could see. ‘I’d guess it was a double-edged blade. You can see the Y shape on either side of the puncture.’ Sara easily slipped her index finger inside the wound. The skin made a sucking noise as she did this, and Jeffrey gritted his teeth, looking away. When he turned back, Sara was giving him a questioning look.

She asked, ‘Are you okay?’

He nodded, afraid to open his mouth.

She moved her finger around inside the hole in Sibyl Adams’s chest. Blood seeped out from the wound. ‘I’d say it’s at least a four-inch blade,’ she concluded, keeping her eyes on him. ‘Is this bothering you?’

He shook his head, even though the sound was making his stomach turn.

Sara slipped her finger out, continuing, ‘It was a very

sharp blade. There's no hesitation around the incision, so like I said, he knew what he was doing when he started.'

'What was he doing?'

Her tone was very matter-of-fact. 'He was carving her stomach. His strokes were very assured, one down, one across, then a thrust into the upper torso. That was the death blow, I would imagine. Cause will probably be exsanguination.'

'She bled to death?'

Sara shrugged. 'Best guess right now, yeah. She bled to death. It probably took about ten minutes. The convulsions were from shock.'

Jeffrey couldn't suppress the shudder that came. He indicated the wound. 'It's a cross, right?'

Sara studied the cuts. 'I'd say so. I mean, it can't really be anything else, can it?'

'Do you think this is some kind of religious statement?'

'Who can tell with rape?' she said, stopping at the look on his face. 'What?'

'She was raped?' he said, glancing at Sibyl Adams, checking for obvious signs of damage. There was no bruising on her thighs or scrapes around the pelvic area. 'Did you find anything?'

Sara was quiet. Finally she said, 'No. I mean, I don't know.'

'What did you find?'

'Nothing.' She snapped off her gloves. 'Just what I told you. I can finish this back at the morgue.'

'I don't -'

'I'll call Carlos to come get her,' she said, referring to her assistant at the morgue. 'Meet me back there when you're finished here, okay?' When he didn't answer, she