

The background of the cover features a close-up of a woman's face with brown eyes and long dark hair, looking directly at the viewer. Below her face is a large, ornate black metal gate with stone pillars, set in a lush garden with various plants and flowers. A path leads through the gate into the distance.

NOT THIS TIME

A Novel

VICKI
HINZE

Author of *Forget Me Not* and *Deadly Ties*

CROSSROADS CRISIS CENTER, BOOK THREE

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Saturday, June 5 at 6:00 p.m., Seagrove Village, Florida

He was late. The country club's parking lot was nearly full, but Detective Jeff Meyers spotted an empty slot in the last of five rows. He parked and cut the engine, grabbed the invitation to Harvey and Roxy Talbot's remarriage off the center console, and then rushed through the humid heat back to the main entrance.

Cold air blasted him in the face. He breathed deeply, relishing it. No doubt all the Crossroads Crisis Center staff were already out in the courtyard. He hated to show up for a classy event late *and* sweaty, but thanks to clashing factions at Ruby's Diner over the coming mayoral election, there hadn't been time to shower and change clothes.

Bypassing a grouping of sofa and chairs, Jeff headed toward the back of the building. With all its polish and gold-framed original art, the club was too elegant for his tastes, but the people were friendly enough to make it semi-comfortable. There was no need to ask anyone where to go, which was a good thing, since not a soul was in sight—*kind of funny, that*—but Annie and Nora, the self-appointed Seagrove Village wedding planners, had made sure if a body found the front door, there'd be no confusion.

Rose petals on the cool marble floor created a path between white stretch columns to a set of french doors that led outside to the courtyard. A sign would have worked, but the club didn't allow them. There were limits to its tolerance for things that pricked at its perception of class.

Since Roxy had her heart set on the inner courtyard, they had scheduled the ceremony later in the day to avoid the relentless heat, but it still radiated. With reluctance, Jeff left the cool lobby and closed the french doors behind him. Doing his job or not, he would get his ears blistered by Nora for being late. His only hope was that the village matriarch was so focused on the ceremony she wouldn't notice. She was getting up in age and bat-blind, seeing walls only when she bumped into them, but Jeff had never known Ben Brandt's housekeeper to miss a thing that mattered to her, which meant Jeff was going to get reamed. He resigned himself to it.

Nora had put everyone on notice. This ceremony had to be perfect for Harvey and Roxy. Dr. Harvey Talbot worked at Ben's crisis center and Nora worked for Ben. That put Harvey under Nora's protective wing as one of her "boys." She was beloved in the village, and anyone who messed with her would answer to everyone—Jeff included.

Truly, Harvey and Roxy getting back together was a miracle, and all the villagers were glad to see it. They never should have gotten divorced. Harvey hadn't wanted it, but Roxy was with the FBI and she'd pulled a case that involved NINA—Nihilists in Anarchy—a group of terrorists with a criminal wing so ruthless, it gave Homeland Security, law enforcement, and crooks cold chills. Roxy had divorced Harvey to get him out of the line of fire so NINA wouldn't hurt him or use him to get to her. Not that she'd explained that to Harvey, which is why he'd been as miserable as a man on death row. Apparently, so had she.

Jeff followed the rose-petal trail onto a stone walkway that wound between fat shrubs and fountains that cooled the air with a welcome mist. He'd like to pause to cool down but didn't dare; if he was lucky, he'd get to hear the "I do agains."

Intended to seat fifty, the intimate courtyard was surrounded on all sides by brick buildings that held in the heat. He rushed his steps, rounded a cluster of petite palms and spiny palmettos—and came to a dead halt.

Bodies lay everywhere.

All the white-slatted chairs stood empty, and every guest who should have been in one was sprawled on the ground. Under the arch draped in leafy greenery and pink roses lay Harvey and Roxy and Reverend Brown.

Jeff didn't dare move. Hyperalert, he scanned the scene. The Crossroads group was clustered together. Nora lay facedown, her arm outstretched as if reaching for her companion, Clyde Parker, who was flat on his back with a toppled chair parked half on his stomach. It wasn't moving. With breaths, that chair should be moving.

Jeff whipped out his phone and hit speed dial, phoning the station. *Busy*. No surprise; most who'd answer were here, supine on the grass. The silence in the courtyard was deafening. They all lay motionless. *What had happened here?*

His heart thudding, he pulled his gun, continued searching. *Nothing*. Fearing a trap, he checked the rooftops but saw only clear blue sky. The lingering scent of something pungent burned his nose. It sure wasn't the flowers, but he couldn't tag its source. The building's walls had trapped the scent, but now a breeze stirred. Whatever the smell, it was faint and fading fast; another minute or two and it'd be gone.

Chemical. Get out of here. You're getting exposed.

He ignored the warning. He was already exposed, and these people mattered to him; he couldn't just leave them. Keeping his eyes peeled, he thumbed off the safety and readied for rapid firing, then moved toward the people closest to him: Beth Dawson and her SaBe Inc. co-owner, Sara Jones-Tayton. Sara's husband, Robert, wasn't with her. *Strange*. He seldom missed a social event, and Sara rarely attended one without him. Beth and Sara volunteered at Crossroads, kept the center's computers safe from hackers, and helped out Quantico when it got in a pinch. Crumpled on the grass behind the chairs, they too must have arrived late and not made the last half-dozen steps to their seats.

His mouth went stone dry. These were all his friends—many of them since birth. Were they all dead?

Nothing. Not one unexpected sight or sound or movement. He tried the station again. *Still busy*.

A table draped in crisp white linen stood between the others and him. Flowers and crystal filled one end; a two-tier wedding cake, the other. The breeze bent all the leaves to the north, and that faint, pungent smell had disappeared. Whatever it was, it'd dissipated.

Get out, Jeff. Wait for Hazmat.

The internal battle escalated to a war. He should wait for a hazardous-material team, but his heart wouldn't let him. Covering his mouth and nose with his handkerchief, he stepped behind the table and bumped his back against the brick building, then slid down the rough wall to Beth. *Don't let her be dead. Please.*

In a cold sweat, he squatted and pressed his fingers to her throat. A steady thump pulsed against his fingertips. She was alive. *Thank God.*

"Beth?"

No answer.

"Beth?" They had dated a couple times. He had been crazy about her, but she just hadn't been into him, so they settled for being friends. "Can you hear me?"

No response.

What about the others?

No. Backup first. You need backup.

Reverting to his life as a beat cop, he reached for the radio clipped to his collar before remembering he no longer had one and his phone was already in his hand. Darting, wary, he tried the station yet again. Finally, it rang.

"Seagrove Village Police."

The rookie, Kyle Perry. "It's Jeff Meyer. Who's there with clout?"

"The chief's in, but he's in conference."

"Get him."

"I can't, Detective. He said not to disturb him."

It was quicker to switch than to fight a rookie under orders. "Who else is there?"

"Coroner Green."

Hank would do. “Get him on the phone.”

A moment later, Hank came on the line. “Hey, why aren’t you at the ceremony?”

“I just got here. Everyone’s out cold, Hank.” Jeff briefed him, requested backup, and then added, “I need a Hazmat team—medical too, but put them in a holding pattern away from the building until Hazmat gives an all clear.”

“What do you think happened?”

Sara Jones-Tayton was breathing. Shallow and slow, pulse thready but there. “I don’t know.” Jeff stood, his knees crackling. Still no one conscious in sight. He moved on to the next closest group. “No signs of a struggle. They’re just all on the ground, out cold.”

“White powder? Oily residue? Funny smell? Anything like that?”

“No residue or powder. I caught a whiff of something when I arrived, but it’s gone now. There’s nothing else to see—wait a second.” Beth lay on her side, her hand buried beneath her. He looked closely, then checked the others, homing in on their hands. Beth, Sara, Kelly Walker, and Lisa Harper all had strings tied to their fingers—and Roxy did too. “Five women have strings tied to their fingers. Looks like monofilament.”

“Fishing line?”

“Appears so.” He followed the lines to where they converged. “All five lead to one place—the wedding cake.” Jeff double-checked, then added, “To the bride. She’s half buried in the bottom layer of the cake—not Roxy, the plastic bride that usually sits on top of the cake.” He moved closer. The plastic was cracked, its edges jagged. “The plastic groom was ripped off.” Jeff checked beneath the table. “He’s missing.”

“T-T-The plastic groom is missing.” Hank stuttered. “H-Harvey—”

“Is here.”

“Then what does it mean?”

“I don’t know, but this was no accident.” Not with those strings. Jeff didn’t like where his mind was going, yet he’d have to be a brick short to ignore the obvious. “Professionals knocked out everyone and singled out specific targets.”

“Oh man. Not NINA again.” Hank sounded as nervous as Jeff felt.

The international terrorist organization that, to fund its ideological objectives, black-marketed anything of value—weapons, intelligence, drugs, people. “It’s crossed my mind already.” They’d had two run-ins with NINA; of course it’d crossed his mind.

“I could see NINA coming after Kelly or Lisa—and Roxy busted up their human-trafficking operation—but why Beth and Sara? They can’t identify anyone in NINA.”

“They helped us take NINA down in the human-trafficking case.” When it came to computers, Beth and Sara were two of the best on the planet. Their SaBe was a megasuccessful software company, and everyone in the village knew they helped out the government all the time. Quantico tried repeatedly to hire Beth full time but couldn’t afford her, and before Sara married Robert Tayton, she’d spent nearly as much time at Quantico as she had at home. NINA could want them both out of the way for that. “Revenge, maybe?”

Jeff turned to examine the next of the fallen. Darla Green, the widow of the deceased mayor, lay alone. Jeff wiggled his fingers into position on her throat. *Breathing*. He moved on.

Hank grunted. “NINA can’t afford idle revenge. If they’re behind this—”

“Who else has the ability or guts to pull off something like this?”

“No one who’d actually do it. But that means there’s more to it than revenge.”

“We don’t even know what *it* is yet.” Jeff kept moving through the crowd, person to person, finding throat pulses and growing more and more relieved. “Whatever it is, we never saw it coming. They came in and did what they wanted—they could have killed them all.” That truth sent shards of fear slicing through Jeff’s veins. His friends—all his friends—could have been murdered on his watch.

“But they didn’t kill them.”

“Not this time.” Jeff gazed down, then glanced over, seemingly seeing dou-

ble senior women. His heart sank, then slammed against his chest wall. “Maybe something is still in the air, Hank. I’m seeing two Noras.”

“Probably Nathara, Nora’s identical twin. She’s here from New Orleans to take Nora to some eye specialist.”

“Oh.” Jeff had never seen her before. He blew out a relieved breath and checked them both. *Strong. Steady.* He moved on, past Nora and her sister, and placed his fingertips on the next throat. *Nothing.*

He tried again.

Still nothing.

Tried a third time but it just wasn’t there. No pulse.

A lump rose in Jeff’s throat. “Oh, man.”

“What?”

Jeff’s eyes burned. *Bury it. You’re a professional. Remember it.* His throat went thick and strain flooded his voice. “You’ll need to come out too, Hank. I—I, um, can’t lock down the crime scene by myself, and the rookie won’t be much help.”

“Got it. Backup’s already on the way.”

Not the kind of help he required. “I need backup *and* high-powered help.”

“How high?” Uncertainty elevated Hank’s voice.

A tear leaked from Jeff’s eye. “All the way.” Hank was sharp on the uptake. The chief was too. They’d know to contact Homeland Security and to get the FBI on-scene immediately.

“Al won’t like it. Not without some preliminary work being done first.”

Hank Green was wrong on that. “The chief will dial the phone.” Jeff looked into sightless eyes that once had twinkled kindness and his own vision blurred. He gently swept the eyelids closed with his fingertips and searched for his voice. “This has to be some kind of chemical attack. We don’t have the resources—”

“Let’s don’t jump to conclusions, Jeff.”

He started snapping photos with his cell phone. Hank, not the chief, was

reluctant to call in outsiders. Why? Protecting the village tourism? He was running for mayor... "You either jump or get dragged into this one, Hank. Chemical is all that makes sense."

"We don't have to rush to judgment. They're alive. We can—"

"I'm afraid we do need to rush," Jeff interrupted. The first forty-eight hours were critical to successfully solving any case. Stats backed him up on that. "We have a fatality."

A long second passed. Then another. "Visitor or villager?"

Jeff's voice cracked. He cleared his throat. No way was he identifying this victim over the phone. Word would sweep through Seagrove like wildfire. "A villager." He moved over to the cake, snapped a shot. A curled edge of paper was half buried in the frosting. "Whoever did this left a message. It's attached to the bride buried in the cake."

"Can you read it without disturbing it?"

Jeff moved around, positioned at an angle and the bold black print became clear. "I can read one word." Chills slammed through his chest, spread like fingers to his limbs. He jerked away, stiffened.

"What does it say?"

"Boom."



*Saturday, June 5 at 6:00 p.m., Magnolia Branch Community,
Oakton County, Florida*

The ink hasn't dried on our last arrest report and the jerks are at it again." Ken Matheson slid into the cruiser and passed his partner, Bill Conlee, a giant-sized foam cup of sweet tea. "Which jerks? NINA?"

Nihilists in Anarchy were on everyone's watch list since it had been active for the second time in a year down south in Seagrove Village. Detective Jeff Meyers had personally briefed the adjacent east and west panhandle counties on two separate incidents—one smuggling bioterrorists into the country and one human-trafficking women out of the country—but nothing on any of their current cases linked to NINA. Yet with NINA expanding its activities, who knew for sure?

Ken shivered. Butting heads with NINA was way out of his league, and he was smart enough to know it. First sign, he'd suggest Bill contact Detective Meyers. With help, he'd battled and beat NINA twice.

Calmer with his mind settled on the matter, Ken parked his own cup between his legs and clicked his safety belt into place. Warranted or not, Bill drove like a demon was on his heels and woe be to his younger partner if he complained. Their first time out, Ken had learned to buckle up, hang on, and keep his mouth shut.

"Maybe NINA." Bill took a sip of tea. "I meant the pornographers we arrested up off 126 and old Magnolia Branch Road—in that rusty abandoned shed down from Race Miller's."

Race Miller's place was a fifty-acre plot north of Nilge Reservation out in the middle of nowhere. After Hurricane Ivan ripped through, it had taken two years to get electricity back out to Race—a fact he'd reported to the sheriff's office every day, knowing they couldn't do a thing but report it to the co-op. That whole northeast corner of the county was just about uninhabited, which meant it was prime real estate for dopers, transients, and, apparently, now for pornographers.

"Told you we should've shot 'em. We had just cause. The jerks pulled weapons on us."

Bill laid a glare on Ken and without a word left the Pac-a-Sack convenience store's gravel-and-dirt parking lot, swinging wide to miss a pothole large enough to swallow a truck, and then pulled onto Highway 90.

"Okay, okay." Ken looked out onto the road. It was twilight and the scent of rain hung heavy in the air. "Lighten up, Deacon. I didn't shoot a soul." He sipped at his sweet tea. "But I could've and it would've been totally legal."

Bill spared him a sidelong glance that made his forehead look even wider and his jaw disappear into his double chin. "Your professional ethics and morals need work, partner."

"I'm all over it," Ken said, though they both knew he wasn't and the well-intended reprimand wouldn't do a bit of good. He was doomed for life to float in humanity's sea as pond scum. And he liked knowing where he fit.

Bill draped his wrist over the steering wheel. "After the last bust, Race sold that shed."

"Hadn't heard. To who?"

"Didn't ask. Not my concern."

"Will be if the same kind of folks bought it."

"When and if it becomes our business, we'll deal with it." Bill took the left onto Tyner Road, which led to Gramercy down in Seagrove or up to 126, which led—directly—to the old road to Magnolia Branch, a little community that bit the dust when construction exploded on northwest Florida's Gulf Coast thirty-odd miles south and Highway 126 lost favor to 331 over in Walton County.

Skipping the back roads cut nearly a quarter hour off the trip to Tallahassee or Pensacola, and Race Miller had been in a foul mood ever since.

'Course, he'd owned most of Magnolia Branch, and not one of his businesses had survived, so a man couldn't blame him for that. At least he still had his church, even if he hadn't found a preacher to run it since the community folded, but no nevermind. Race handled Sunday services himself, and Bill acted as a deacon.

He dragged Ken along every now and again, trying to save his soul, and Ken let him, in exchange for Bill not reporting Ken's little indiscretions, like him saying they should've just shot the porno jerks and spared the county the expense of a trial.

But truth was truth, even if saying it was a professional offense Bill should report to Sheriff Dobson, and if they had shot them, then he and Bill likely wouldn't be headed out to Race's right now. It was also truth, and Ken gave credit when due, that no one preached with more vigor than Race Miller.

Pines twisted and bent from a couple bad years of hurricanes lined the road, and dense wild growth lay low to the ground beyond it; scrub, mostly, with a stray pin oak or magnolia sprouted here and there. Spiny bushes Ken couldn't name but had seen all his life sprung up everywhere, and the thick woods filled in so dense that the sandy dirt floor didn't see much sun even in noonday light. The whole place was riddled with rattlers, mostly pigmy, and cottonmouths. Aggressive as all get out, those cottonmouths. Ken hated them.

Race's wife, Aline, hated snakes too. She had called Bill and Ken more than once to come handle "an intruder," which turned out to be of the slithering variety. The last two times she'd called, she vowed if she opened the dryer door one more time and a snake was in the tub, she was moving down to the village and Race could like it or not. Bill figured the snakes were crawling in through the outside vent, plugged the hole, moved the vent up from ground level to under the house eaves, and that had been that—no more snakes in Aline's clothes dryer.

Race was still a little ticked off about that too. Aline was an accomplished harper. No doubt Race had looked forward to her village stint giving him a little peace.

They passed a couple Hank Green for Mayor signs and at least a dozen for Tack Grady. It was a Seagrove Village election, but lots of folks up north had businesses and tight connections down south so politicians campaigned in both. “Who you figure’ll take mayor?”

Bill cocked his head. “Hard to say. Hank’s been a good coroner, but with his brother tagged as a NINA conspirator in that terrorist-smuggling business, I figure Tack’s got the edge.”

“I don’t know.” Ken weighed the matter. “John wasn’t mixed up with that—he was a God-fearing man. But Tack knows a load of people.” He’d owned a diner on the harbor for years, until the economy tanked and he lost everything. Tack Grady needed the job.

“It isn’t helping Hank that Darla’s just out of jail.”

Her being charged with John’s murder had been hard on Hank. “Yeah. The gossip mill is chewing on the whole mess again, but it would be anyway with Lance shunning her in court and all.” Darla was the richest woman in the county. It’d taken months to clear herself from her husband’s murder, but by then her relationship with their only son, Lance, was shot. The teenager lived with Hank, and they’d gone to court to make sure Lance could stay with him. Freezing his mom out had to be hard on her, but the whole mess was hard on the boy and Hank too. “Sad situation.”

“Tragic. The boy and John were close. He’ll never believe his dad came down on the wrong side of the law.”

Ken looked at Bill. “You don’t believe it either, do you?”

“No, I don’t. John Green was a good man and a good mayor.”

“So you’ll be voting for Hank?”

“I will.”

Ken would be too—and hoping it wasn’t a mistake. “I thought Tack was broke, but he’s sure campaigning like he’s got deep pockets.”

“You said yourself he knows everybody in the county.”

He did. Still...

They didn’t pass a single car on the road—or on old Magnolia Branch. Bill drove down to the fork, headed left, and the pavement gave way to a red dirt washboard that was hard on the cruiser’s shocks. The ice in Ken’s sweet tea sloshed against the sides of his cup, and he spotted the gap in the woods marked by a rotted-out post, which probably once held a mailbox. Whoever bought the place wasn’t getting mail here.

“That’s it.” Ken motioned left to a rutted path.

Bill turned into the ruts and headed up the mile-long trail paralleling Bear Creek. Halfway, he eased the cruiser up against the brush, stopped, then shoved the gearshift into Park. “Best walk it in from here or they’ll see us coming.”

Not eager to interact with nature but less inclined to complain and hear another lecture, Ken hauled himself out of the cruiser. They had walked in last time and had been successful. Maybe it’d be worth it. “Fair warning. If I get eaten up by chiggers again, I *am* gonna shoot the jerks.”

Bill sent him a “grow up, boy” look and seated his black-frame glasses on his nose with a paternal sigh. “Can’t tromp the woods and not run into what’s natural to ’em.”

Ken didn’t bother responding. He respected Bill. Admired him. But on occasion, living with his righteousness and calm acceptance was a pain in the backside for a regular guy. Just once, Ken wished the deacon would raise a little sand. Of course, the odds of that happening were about as good as Ken’s were of salvation and surviving Armageddon. Pond scum just couldn’t quite make it from here to there without a miracle, and he hadn’t seen any lately.

They moved down the trail. Twigs and dry leaves crunched underfoot. Even with twilight settling in, the humidity was heavy and it was still hot. In no time, Bill’s breathing turned raspy and Ken was sweating profusely. His sleeve was soaked from swiping at his face. Heat being this bad in early June, August and September would be pure killers.

Finally the trail narrowed to a path and the rusty metal shed came into

view. At one time it likely held farming equipment: combine, tractors, maybe a cotton picker. But the land was bitter, didn't welcome crops, with the exception of a little pot they came across now and then. Ken had wondered aloud once if maybe smoking a little wouldn't improve Aline's disposition. Big mistake. The deacon had taken serious exception—and Ken's backside had been parked on the front row pew for the next four Sundays.

He hadn't risked rendering many unsolicited opinions since then, or again made the mistake of commenting on Aline or her disposition.

Bill stopped at an old oak, cocked his head, and listened.

Had he sensed something? Ken hadn't picked up on a thing. Still, he waited a long minute before swatting at another mosquito buzzing his head. The pests were thick as thieves. "You want me to go round back?" he whispered, wondering when he would develop that instinct the sheriff called "cop's gut." Bill had it. Others on the force had it. But even after two years, Ken hadn't so much as sniffed a whiff of it. Would he ever?

"No sense in it." Bill pulled a folded paper napkin from his pocket, then mopped the sweat from his brow. "Shed's just got the one door."

"No cars around." Ken scanned the clearing, which was about the length of half a football field. The shed sat dead center. It looked empty, but he glanced at Bill for confirmation.

"Fresh tracks everywhere." Bill hitched his pants to shake a snagged leg loose from a briar. "Appears they've already hightailed it." He stepped out from behind the old oak's twisted trunk. "Let's take a look inside anyway."

Race Miller's place was within shooting distance. If he noticed something amiss, he'd been known to fire off a couple rounds before calling the sheriff. He could have scared 'em off.

"What for?" Ken was curious, not opposed to going inside. "They sure didn't hoof it up here, not hauling cameras and lights and all their equipment."

Bill didn't look back. "Got a feeling." He unstrapped his holster. If he needed to draw his weapon, he was ready. "Step left. Snake."

Ken grimaced at Bill's shoulders and took a couple steps left, avoiding a rat-

ter slithering away from them. His skin crawled. “What kind of feeling—exactly?” He didn’t like the sound of it.

“A bad one. A real bad one.” Bill took off walking toward the shed door.

The hair stood up on Ken’s neck. Bill had a decade more experience, and in the two years they’d been partners—Ken’s first assignment—he had come to respect the man’s cop’s gut. By anyone’s measure his instincts were honed razor-sharp. Tensing up, Ken thumbed the snap on his own holster and followed Bill in.

The broad shed door creaked and groaned and finally swung open. It was dark inside. Dark and hot and stuffy. “No filming going on in here today. New owners must be into something different.” Ken stepped back out to grab a breath of fresh air.

Bill reached for his flashlight. “We’re going in anyway.”

“Why?” The place gave Ken the creeps. “It stinks to high heaven and it’s empty.”

“We’re going in.” Bill’s tone didn’t welcome argument.

“All right, then.” Ken grabbed his flashlight and swatted at another mosquito buzzing his head. “Whatever you say.” It’d take a week to get the stench out of his pores.

Moving right, Bill motioned Ken left. They walked inside, fanning their flashlights. A glint caught Bill’s wedding band. His hand was on his gun. That set Ken’s teeth on edge and strummed his nerves. Bill never touched his gun without reason. “What’s going on, Deacon?”

He directed his beam to light up a distant spot on the floor. “That.”

Ken looked over. A mattress rested on the dirt. Likely somebody had dumped it in the woods. It happened all the time. Folks not wanting to pay the fee at the landfill would toss old washing machines, refrigerators, and such in the woods. Transient probably came up on it and dragged it into the shed to get out of the rain or something.

“What’s all over it?” Ken couldn’t make it out from this distance. “Too bright to be mud.”

"Ain't sure yet." Bill moved in close and then stopped beside the mattress. "Oh, sweet mercy." He made the sign of the cross.

The mattress was covered in blood.

Ken swallowed hard, swept the corners of the shed with light, but saw nothing, heard only his own pulse throbbing in his temples and the squishing, grumbling sounds of his stomach roiling.

"Mattress is saturated." Bill stooped to a crouch, then held his hand in a hover just above it. "Cold."

"In this heat?" Ken couldn't believe it. "Blood would be warm coming out of a body. How can it be cold? Besides, it's sweltering in here." Didn't make a bit of sense.

"Ain't sure yet." Bill slowly swept the mattress with his flashlight. "But, Lord, help 'em home. Nobody could lose this much blood and live."

Ken watched their backs, turned his light on a cluster of stuff to his right. Cracked wooden boxes stacked haphazardly and covered with inch-thick dust and cobwebs stretched between them and the wall. The boxes hadn't been moved for a while. Nearby, wadded paper, trash, and a couple kinds of cans and bottles littered the floor. And beside that—"Someone's tagged that area as a rest room."

Bill glanced over. "Chain marks in the dirt between the pole, the mattress, and the area you're talking about." His expression soured, then turned rigid and his jaw snapped tight. "Someone's been held hostage here...and died."

Ken feared Bill was right and examined the mattress closely. "There's no bullet hole."

"Could've been stabbed."

Yet another possibility occurred to Ken. "What about the porno folks? This could be fake blood. That could explain why it's cold." Stage setting.

"Yeah, it could." Bill stood, his knees snapping. He swiped his napkin over his face. Since walking into the shed, he looked as if he'd aged ten years. "Guess we ain't sure yet. Better call it in."

Ken radioed in a report to the sheriff's office and then turned to Bill. "You think that blood's human, don't you, Deacon?"

"Yeah, I do." Bill looked at his partner. "I surely do."

Ken knew that look. Bill would be chewing himself up for the next week for not getting here sooner and saving the poor slob who'd bled out on that mattress. He thought Ken didn't feel regret about such things, but he was wrong. For months to come, Ken would be kicking himself for not running a daily routine check on the shed to make sure the pornographers hadn't come back, especially since he hadn't known the property'd flipped owners.

"I'm gonna look around outside before dark falls." As bad as snakes and mosquitoes were out there, what was in here was worse. "See if they dumped a body anywhere close."



Bill watched Ken go. When he disappeared outside, Bill tapped the transmit button on the radio attached to his collar. "Millie, get Sheriff Dobson for me, will you?"

"Roger that, Deacon."

A short minute later, the sheriff's voice sounded through the radio. "Yeah, Bill. What'd you find up there?"

"Ain't sure yet, but you better get us some forensics help." Even breathing shallow, the stench rattled his stomach and set off his gag reflex. He fought it and kept fighting it.

"What do you see?"

"Blood." Bill rubbed his thumb over his .45's soft rubber Hogue grip. "Could be movie props, but it don't smell like it." He hesitated. "Sheriff, I got a bad feeling about this one. Might want to call Jeff Meyers to come take a look." He and his friends had experience. There hadn't been a murder in Oakton County in ten years. "Who owns this place now?" That might prove important.

“SaBe bought it from Race.”

Everyone in the tricounty area knew about SaBe. Beth Dawson and Sara Jones-Tayton started out with nothing and made a fortune. They were a real hometown success story, and neither of them forgot where they came from. Both did a lot to help out locals. “I can’t see them mixed up in something like this.”

“Me either. I’ll call Jeff.” The sheriff’s respect for those instincts came through loud and clear. “Protect the scene.”

“Yes sir.” Something glinted on the mattress like a glass shard and Bill took a closer look. It disappeared before his eyes. Must’ve been a trick of the light.

“Fatalities?”

“None located yet.” Bill blocked the overwhelming stench with a finger to his nose. “But if the blood I’m seeing is human, yeah. At least, one.” Sweet mercy, outside of car accidents—bad ones—he’d never seen so much blood. “Maybe more...”



Seagrove Village, Florida

Clyde Parker was dead. Nora sat in the grass weeping, holding his hand, her free arm wrapped around an also weeping Kelly Walker, who'd become like his adopted daughter. Dr. Lisa Harper had tried everything, but there was no reviving him. Clyde Parker had gone home.

Beth Dawson's heart ached. She loved Nora like a second mother and seeing her in pain had Beth's eyes stinging. Nora's twin, Nathara, on the other hand, woke up complaining and had hardly paused to draw breath. Beth had to restrain herself not to gag the woman.

"Come on, Nora. Let them do their work and get Clyde out of this heat." Nathara tried to forcibly lift her sister.

Mark Taylor didn't take it kindly. Lisa shot out an arm to keep him from interceding.

"Leave me be." Nora slapped at her sister's hand, her eyes as red as her lipstick.

Nathara tried again. Beth stepped forward before Mark could. "Nathara, Kyle, that officer near the arch, needs to take your statement."

Frowning, she straightened her askew hat and then followed Beth. "What's wrong with her? My sister's acting like an emotional fool." Nathara cast a reprimanding look back at Nora. "The man's had a good life. It's done now, and that's that."

Beth bit her lip to keep quiet and delivered Nathara and her attitude to Kyle. Once, when Lisa's mom, Annie, was in the hospital, Nora had warned everyone that her twin sister was there in a pinch but as mean as a snake. She was, bless her heart.

Hazmat set up a safe area, and everyone had to step behind makeshift screens, remove their clothing and put it in special biohazard bags, then get showered down head to toe in small, shallow swimming pools where the water was retained for safe disposal. They were given scrubs to put on—all blue ones—and paper socks.

When everyone else was done, Beth signaled Kelly, who nodded.

"Nora, we have to go shower now. They need our clothes."

"For what?" Nora looked up at her, her eyes red rimmed and weepy.

"To run some tests to find out what was done to us. It can help them figure this out." Kelly stood and offered Nora her hand.

"Jeff'll find 'em." Nora sniffed, took Kelly's hand, and tried to lift herself but couldn't. Ben and Mark stepped in and got her to her feet. "My knees are mushy, my boy," she told Mark. "Can you help me over to the kiddie pool? Annie? Where's Annie?"

"I'm right here, Nora." Lisa's mother rushed to get to her roommate.

Nora clasped her arm. "You tell Hank we'll be planning Clyde's funeral for Tuesday. I know what he wants and I won't have it not done right."

"I'll tell him, hon." Annie patted Nora's shoulder. "Don't you worry. We'll do exactly what Clyde wanted."

Jeff Meyers walked past. Nora snagged him. "You were late. I'd blister your ears, but considering somebody gassed us, I'm thinking it's a blessing you weren't here."

"There was a problem down at Ruby's—"

She cut him off. "Beth told me." Nora leaned hard on Mark, wagged a warning finger. "I don't care if the whole village erupts in a war, you'd best not be late for Clyde's funeral."

"No ma'am. I won't."

Her clouded eyes burned bright and her voice cracked. "You find 'em, Jeff. They took my Clyde." She shuddered, stiffened, and hiked her chin. "I'll have your word on it."

"Yes ma'am. I promise." Jeff slid Beth a help-me look.

"He'll be on time and he'll find them, Nora. Mark and Ben will help." *That should ease Nora's mind.* "They've stopped NINA twice." *First with Kelly Walker and then with Dr. Lisa Harper.* "They surely can get whoever did this."

"Could be them. That Karl Masson is still on the loose," Nora said. "Kelly and Lisa can identify him."

Masson was the latest NINA operative they'd battled and he'd escaped. His boss, Raven, had been tagged as existing, but despite enormous efforts by all resources, she remained a mystery. Nora's observation about Masson had Jeff frowning. He'd spent many a night awake in a cold sweat.

Mark dipped his dark head, his expression stern. "We'll handle it, Nora."

"I know you will." She reached up and patted his angular face.

"Definitely." Beth said it, and prayed it proved true. "You get cleaned up now, Nora. We've got things to do."

Mark and Ben walked Nora over. She tottered, still unsteady on her feet.

Annie scanned the clusters of people in the courtyard. "I need to find Hank."

"He's over with Clyde," Beth said. Now why was Sara staring at the cake, as still as a statue? That "boom" message and the strings being tied to their fingers had scared her socks off. Beth's too, but Sara seemed...worse. *Why?* Beth walked over. "You okay?"

"Robert still has his phone turned off." Tall and svelte, Sara lifted her blond head, her voice as vacant as her blue eyes. Her chignon had half fallen; strands of long blond hair brushed her shoulders.

Right now, Beth couldn't care less about Robert Tayton. "He'll turn up." *Bad pennies always do.* "I asked about you." Sara didn't look unreasonably anxious, but her reassurance would be welcome. Anxiety really complicated her lifelong medical challenges. "You okay?"

“No, I’m not.” Sara craned her neck and looked Beth straight in the eye. “I doubt I’ll ever be okay again.”

Sara wasn’t being melodramatic. She always had been fragile. “You can’t fall apart right now. Honest, Sara, you’re going to have to cope like the rest of us. Nora’s a wreck, Nathara’s grating on everyone’s last nerve, and there isn’t a soul who doesn’t think NINA’s behind this attack. We do *not* need you getting wound up and triggering an attack that lands you in the hospital, so just don’t go there.”

“NINA *is* involved.” Sara blinked hard, her eyes full of fear.

Beth stilled. The way Sara said that...she wasn’t speculating, she knew. But how could she? “What aren’t you telling me?”

For a second, Sara looked as if she might say, but then a shield slid down over her face and she disappeared behind it. “Nothing. Everyone says NINA’s involved.”

Her general remark sure felt specific—and it probably was, but Sara could be bullheaded. She always did things in her own time. Apparently whatever she might share she wasn’t going to—yet. “For me, the question isn’t *if* but *why*. They didn’t take anything or hurt anyone except Clyde, but I doubt they expected to kill him. So why attack this at all? What did NINA want to prove?”

Sara stiffened. “That they’re in control. That they can kill us all, or specific ones of us, any time they choose.”

Knocking them all out and tying fishing line to those women with NINA connections proved that. “Granted, but why the warning? We knew they could get to us. They’ve done it. Kidnapping Lisa, hunting down Kelly Walker. So why attack here now?”

A tear leaked out of Sara’s eye. “Because they can.”

“No.” Beth frowned. “There’s a specific reason. NINA’s disciplined and always specific. It never makes general statements. There’s more to this.”

Sara looked away. Her phone rang. “Maybe that’s Robert.”

Bad pennies. Giving Sara privacy, Beth joined Mark, Jeff, Ben, Harvey, and

Roxy, huddling with Hank. First break in the conversation, she asked, “What did they do to us?”

“Anesthetic.” Hank looked at Beth. “Used for surgery all the time. Not harmful.”

“Not harmful?” She lifted a hand. “So Clyde is dead because...?”

“*Typically* not harmful,” Hank said. “Clyde had complications due to other medical issues.”

Nora wouldn’t take comfort in that. As soon as the initial shock wore off, she’d be spittin’ mad—and poor Roxy looked equally devastated. She had looked forward to this day for months and now attackers had ruined it. Forfeiting three years of her marriage in a divorce she didn’t want but needed to keep her husband alive and safe... Hadn’t she sacrificed enough? Beth’s chest went tight. It just wasn’t right. “How can I help?”

“Anything you can run down on similar attacks would be great,” Mark said.

“Wait,” Jeff objected. “I’m not authorized to ask you to do that, Beth.”

“They knocked us all out.” She slid Jeff a loaded look. “I don’t need to be asked.”

Relief flashed across his face. He wanted to ask her to share what she found; she saw it in his eyes, but he wouldn’t. Tight budget.

And she wouldn’t make him. “I’ll courtesy copy you and Mark on everything—in case somebody catches me digging and takes exception.” Bending, she hugged Roxy and then Harvey Talbot. “I’m sorry these jerks messed up your special day.”

“Me too.” Roxy blinked hard. “But everyone else is okay, we have tomorrow, and that’s what most matters—except for Clyde.”

And Nora. Beth’s heart wrenched. Clyde had been Nora’s companion for a lot of years, ever since he’d been widowed. She’d feel his loss most, and that she had to infuriated Beth. She owed Nora more than anyone knew and was determined to find out who had done this.

Sara came over. "We can go now, right?"

Jeff nodded. "All the cars in the lot have been swept and everything's fine."

Sara's expression said it all. Her jerk husband, Robert Tayton III, was still missing.

Head down and shoulders slumped, Sara departed.

"Is she okay?" Roxy asked. "She looks ready to jump out of her skin."

She did. Something was definitely amiss. They were all upset, but Sara carried some extra burden. For some reason, she seemed to be blaming herself for this incident. Why?

Hank answered Roxy. "Sara's always been high strung. But if she made it through this without an attack, she'll be fine."

He was right about that.

"You calling in your old team?" Jeff asked Mark.

Mark had been in Special Operations. His team had all been in the village to help when Lisa had been abducted. Beth liked them all, but one team member was special. *Joe*. Her breath hitched. She'd love to see him—he'd planned to be here today for the ceremony—but something he wasn't free to discuss had come up.

That was often the case for the former Shadow Watchers. Spies who once spied on spies had a lot of things they weren't free to discuss, even after they left the intelligence community and just consulted on special assignments. Having consulted often with Quantico, Beth fully understood. It's impossible to take out of a person's head what you've put into it. Once in, to some extent, you were in for life.

"The team's tied up right now," Mark told Jeff.

Disappointment bit Beth hard. She tucked her chin-length hair behind her ear. This ordeal rattled her in a way she'd rarely been rattled. Joe had a soothing effect on her and others. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had a calm and confident air that made him serene even in crises. With eyes somewhere between blue and green and thick blond hair that curled low on his neck, the man was a woman magnet and just plain cool too, which is why she'd had cof-

fee and dinner with him dozens of times but hadn't allowed herself to fall for him.

He'd break her heart just like Max had, no doubt about it.

Max had been cool too—and he'd humiliated her, ditching her very publicly for a glamour girl. The same kind of glamour girl that gravitated to Joe and clung.

"Sorry, Beth. You're too...ordinary."

Even now, Max's words stung. Everyday average couldn't hold up to glamour. Never did, never would—which is why Joe, no matter how sincere he seemed or how charming, had to be kept at arm's length.

Still, his skills would be helpful. He'd been on the front line and instrumental in resolving Lisa's abduction. If this was about NINA, the villagers needed Joe. Beth did too. He subtly invited her to lean on him, and she could...but only just a little. Another broken heart she did not need.

Not that she was the same woman now she'd been with Max. Now, she was a successful businesswoman, rich, and confident in her skin—and that skin was slimmer now due to her daily beach runs, but it was still ordinary and everyday average. *Once burned, twice shy.*

Annie stood near Nora's shower screen, waiting patiently. Beth looked at Lisa. "You'll get your mom and Nora home, right?" They shared an apartment at the Towers, next door to Beth's beach house.

"Mark and I will handle it." Lisa nodded. "Don't worry, Beth. Mom's good at comforting the grieving. She'll take care of Nora."

Annie would. Beth started walking away, stopped, and looked at Mark. "If you hear from Joe, have him call me when he can." Her insides twisted. She needed a little of Joe's calm, even if it was from a distance.

Knowing glinted in Mark's gray eyes. "He'll like that."

Unable to miss Jeff's disappointment, Beth walked out toward her car. Jeff was a good man. He was also still half in love with her. If she had half a brain, she'd jump at him, but her heart wouldn't let her. He deserved someone to love him back, and she just didn't. So every day of her life, she prayed he'd find a

woman who would. So far, it hadn't happened, but like Nora always said: "In God's own sweet time."

Ironical that Beth felt the same way about Joe. And even more ironical was, despite Mark's comment, Joe was about as apt to be genuinely interested in her as she was in Jeff. Oh, Joe said he wanted a home and a family, one day—and he said it in a way that made her think he'd never really had either one—but she wasn't a fool. She was fine for coffee and conversation, but Joe would build that life with an extraordinary woman.

Beth sighed. *Love's fickle. That's that.*

Fire trucks lined the front of the parking lot. Every patrol car in the tri-county area seemed to be on site. From the cameras and lights, a ton of reporters had gathered just outside the police blockade. Their shouted questions garbled but one snagged her ear. "*Was it NINA?*"

The media all thought NINA was responsible too. Why?

Beth didn't know—yet.



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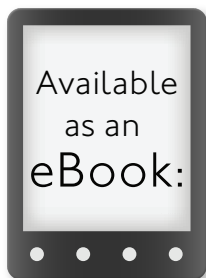
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