

Maximum Exposure

Max Revere, #1

by Allison Brennan, 1969–

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Dear Reader

Characters usually come to writers as either fully formed individuals or works in progress. Maxine Revere came to me almost fully formed.

It's sort of a funny story how Max came about. In 2010 I was interviewing literary agents. I shared this idea I had, a series focusing on an investigative reporter named Max Revere who traveled the country solving cold cases. The first book would solve a murder from his past, the crime that had set him on his journalist path. Dan Conaway at Writers House was enthusiastic about the concept and the character, but asked, "What if Max was Maxine?"

As soon as he said that, not only did I realize Dan was going to be my new agent, but Max also blossomed to life. I'd had this idea for two years, but it wasn't until I got over the idea that Max was a guy that her character evolved. And Maxine Revere was born.

Notorious begins the series with Max going back—to her hometown, to her roots, to ultimately face the tragedy of her best friend's murder thirteen years ago, which paved the road she's since traveled. Home is the beginning for all of us; for Max it was also an ending.

A few months ago, my editor asked me to write a prequel to *Notorious*, a short story that gives a snapshot of who Max is and why she does what she does. Why does she care about cold cases? Why did she agree to host a cable crime show when she doesn't like working for anyone but herself? Why would she drop everything to look for a missing college student, when she has no ties to the community he disappeared from and no relationship with his family?

While I love writing short stories, my idea of "short" usually falls in the novella range, and this story is no exception. I'm grateful that my editor told me I could tell the story any way I wanted, and I hope you enjoy reading *Maximum Exposure* as much as I enjoyed writing it. And, mostly, I hope you like Maxine Revere as much as I do.

Happy reading,
Allison Brennan

Chapter 1

Investigative reporter Maxine Revere couldn't explain what drew her toward a particular investigation. She couldn't articulate why she wasn't interested in a cold case across the city, but would jump on a cross-country flight to pursue an even colder case.

She appreciated the fact that she didn't have to explain herself to anyone.

Independently wealthy, she could pursue any lead that caught her attention. For her news articles, she'd conduct a preliminary investigation to decide if she wanted to spend the time solving the case, then write a proposal and send it to one of three editors she liked to work with. They'd give her the flexibility and the credentials to follow through, and she'd submit her report when she was done. Sometimes—most of the time—she went ahead with the full investigation even before anyone wanted the story. For her books, she immersed herself in a community with the people who were affected, hoping not only to tell the story of the crime—victims, survivors, perpetrators—but also understand everyone involved.

She couldn't imagine doing anything else with her life.

Because of the success of her true crime books and the popularity of her in-depth reports, she received hundreds of letters every month from families and friends of victims who wanted her to look into a violent crime, most often a disappearance or a homicide. Letters from killers claiming they were innocent rarely appealed to her, nor did the claims of innocence by loved ones who believed—or wanted to believe—that their mother/ husband/ boyfriend/ daughter/ friend was railroaded by the system.

Though she couldn't explain to anyone else why she was going to Colorado to investigate the disappearance of Scott Sheldon from his college campus, as soon as she read the letter from his mother, she knew she *was* going.

First, she called Scott's mother, Adele Sheldon. She rarely pursued an investigation without the blessing of one of the family members. In this case, Adele was both surprised and relieved that Max had called her. Max listened to the mother talk about her son and his disappearance, repeating most of the information from the letter, but adding an important detail: search and rescue had only last week actively started to look for his body. Adele gave her the contact information of a detective in Colorado Springs, someone at the Park Service, the head of campus police, and Scott's former college roommate. It was a good start.

Max made contact with the detective, who wasn't helpful, because both the college and the campground Scott went missing from were out of her jurisdiction. The campus security chief didn't take her call—supposedly out of the office—but Max left her contact information. She briefly spoke to the head of the park service search team, Chuck Pence, who confirmed the pertinent details. She wanted to talk to him further when she arrived in Colorado Springs. Max read all newspaper and online reports on Scott's disappearance, but there wasn't much written.

After the preliminary research, Max called Adele again to confirm that Scott's mother still wanted her help. The woman sobbed.

"Y-yes," she said. She took a deep, audible breath. "I need to know what happened to my son. I need the truth."

Truth. Most people thought they were strong enough for the truth, but sometimes they resented Max for digging into their life, their family, their friends.

Max always believed the truth was better than not knowing, and not everyone concurred with her philosophy.

"It might not be what you think, Mrs. Sheldon. We might learn things about your son you wished you didn't know."

"I don't care," she said. "Not knowing what happened, not having his body to bury, is worse than anything you might learn. My son was a good boy. Smart. Shy. Trusting. He never forgot my birthday; he cared deeply for his sister, Ashley. I love him. I want to say good-bye. Maybe you don't understand."

She understood exactly how Mrs. Sheldon felt. Max hadn't lost a child, but she'd lost people close to her.

She said, "I'll be there."

Max booked a flight without checking her calendar. When she looked at her schedule the next morning, she saw that she was supposed to have lunch with Ben Lawson.

Max dialed his number, glad that this time she had a legitimate excuse to cancel. She'd canceled on her old college friend twice already. The first time, he'd been understanding; the second, he was irritated.

Third time? He would be irate.

"Don't you dare cancel on me," he said before she could even get a soothing *hello, how are you?* out of her mouth.

"It's work, Ben."

"It's *always* work."

"I'm a busy woman."

"You're an *impossible* woman. We're having lunch."

"My flight leaves at three, I need to be in a cab by twelve forty-five."

"Meet me right now."

"I need to pack."

"You're not canceling on me again, Maxie."

"Do *not* call me that, Benji."

He let out an exasperated sigh. "I need to talk to you about something. It's important."

"Everything with you is important." Ben always had something going on. He worked in film, had done something out in L.A. for a few years after he graduated from Columbia, and now worked for a television station here in New York City. Max had no idea what he actually did, only that he had three phones and never stopped talking.

"I'm serious, Max. Please."

Ben never said please. Now Max was curious. "Eleven thirty, same place."

"I'll change the reservation. Thank you." He hung up quickly, as if she might change her mind.

She stared at the phone. A please and a thank you? Now she was not only interested, but suspicious, too.

She didn't have much time before she had to meet Ben. She packed a large suitcase plus her overnight bag, which should be enough for the four or five days she planned to be in Colorado Springs. If she decided to stay longer, she'd ask her neighbors—who took care of her place during her frequent travels—to ship out anything she might need.

Max left her luggage with her doorman so she didn't have to lug it to the restaurant. She lived in TriBeCa, on Greenwich Street, and Ben lived on the Upper West Side. That he would come all the way down here to have lunch at the Tribeca Grill was partly because of the good food, but mostly because he wanted something from her. Ben was a schmoozer and glad-hander, but he was also busy and selfish. He expected people to come to him.

But Ben knew Max; she liked her neighborhood. It was certainly in his favor that he'd made reservations at one of her favorite restaurants. Someone who didn't know her might think that Ben was manipulating her, but when it came to her old friend, she supposed she allowed him to do it. He'd never been able to convince her to do anything she really didn't want to do, but he did have an uncanny ability to see through her bullshit. She admired that.

Ben was already at the restaurant when she arrived. She eyed her old friend before he spotted her. Ben hadn't changed. He was tall and slim, with an intensity about him, as if everything were either critical or top secret, and she'd always wondered why he hadn't gone into politics. He had that Teflon coating that seemed so perfect for politicians and car salesmen, but he combined it with the boyish charm of a high school quarterback. When Max wanted to irritate him, she'd call him "Ken" because he had that too-perfect, polished smile to go with his WASP appearance.

He spotted her almost immediately, which wasn't hard, because she was six feet tall with dark red hair. He looked relieved, as if he'd feared she might not show.

"I said I'd be here." She gave him a light kiss. She and Ben had never had a romantic relationship—the thought made her want to laugh out loud. In fact, they weren't naturally friends. Ben and her college roommate, Karen Richardson, had been close, and Karen's death their senior year ended up bringing Ben and Max closer. Ironic, perhaps, because Karen had once told Max that her life would be perfect if her two best friends actually *liked* each other.

Max wouldn't say that she *liked* Ben, but she respected him—and for her, respect was more important than the emotions involved in liking or disliking anyone.

Ben said, "You've been avoiding me."

"Not well enough." She stared pointedly at her watch. "I'm walking out of here at twelve forty. My car service is picking me up at my apartment at twelve forty-five."

"Then order."

She laughed and leaned back as Ben looked over the menu.

"What?" he said.

"No small talk, no how have you been?"

"You hate small talk."

"That never stopped you before when you want something."

The waiter came over and they ordered. Max added a glass of pinot grigio and Ben stuck with iced tea.

"I have a fantastic opportunity for you." He ran a hand through his dark blond hair, which fell immediately back into place across his forehead. His dark eyes were bright with excitement. "Your own television show."

Max stared at him. "A television show," she said flatly.

"*Your* television show."

“No.”

“You didn’t listen to my pitch.”

“I don’t need to listen to your pitch.”

“Yes, you do. I don’t think you understand what an amazing idea this is. It’ll be like a news magazine, but better. We’ll be integrating all communications media—television, a Web site, podcasts, social media, print. It’s cable, more flexibility, more edge. Multiple venues will get your reports out to more people.”

The excitement in Ben’s voice grew as he spoke. Max was grateful her wine arrived.

“I like my job,” she said after sipping her drink.

“You don’t have a job.”

She snapped her fingers. “Exactly. I investigate the cases I want, write the articles I want, do what I want. Do you sense the theme?”

“You do what you want because you’re rich.”

“You make being rich sound like it’s a bad thing.” She sipped her wine and assessed Ben over the rim of her stemware. “You’re not exactly collecting welfare, Mr. Lawson, grandson of Tobias Lawson the Third, the self-made and successful businessman who owns half of Boston.”

Her attempt at getting under his skin failed. He said, “You’re scared.”

She laughed again. “Ben, you know me well enough to know I don’t scare easily.”

“Not by anything out there—” He waved his hand loosely toward the quaint cobblestone intersection. “—but by change. You’re not even thirty, but you’re an old stick-in-the-mud, as my grandmother would say.”

“Then let me stick in the mud here and leave me alone. I don’t want a television show.”

“Your books are doing fine, but you only write one every two or three years. Newspaper readership is way down, and they’re still scrambling to get their online component growing. You pay for your own research, your trips, your investigations. If you had a television show, production would pay all that.”

“Because, like you said, I’m rich. If I want to spend my money investigating a cold case in Small Town, USA, I can. If I sell the article, great. If not, I don’t care.” Except she did. She cared because if she couldn’t find anyone interested, the story wouldn’t get the exposure it deserved. But that had nothing to do with television.

As if she hadn’t spoken, he continued. “Cable television is not the crazy aunt in the attic anymore.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Is that even a saying?”

“We’ll have an entire *team* working for you. I would be your producer—”

“Hell no—”

“And you would have a say in what cases we cover.”

“Say? I would have *a say*? My answer was no at the beginning, and now it’s ‘over my dead body.’”

“I don’t accept that.”

Their food arrived but neither of them picked up a fork. Usually, Ben amused or annoyed her; today he was pissing her off. “Ben, we’ve known each other for ten years. Have you ever in your wildest dreams imagined me taking orders from anybody?”

"You wouldn't. You'd be the boss."

"It doesn't sound like it."

He sighed, played with his food. "Max, without you, there is no show. *You* are the show."

"I don't want to be the show."

"You're blunt, you're beautiful, you have an uncanny ability to see through people's bullshit and get them to spill their secrets. In two years, I can make *Maximum Exposure* the top news show on the network and the top investigative show on cable television." He held up his fingers in a V. "Two years!"

"You're calling it *Maximum Exposure*?" Unbelievable. "That's a play off my name, isn't it?"

"It's perfect. You expose the truth. The good and the bad. You're honest. You're driven. You already have a name because of your books, you have a platform. Not just a platform, but stage presence. I've watched every interview you've ever done on television, and—"

"What?" she interrupted. "Why would you do that?"

"I'm a news junkie. You know that. And because of Karen..." For a second, he hesitated, and she saw the young college boy that he'd once been. Then the producer Ben Lawson was back. "I follow crime. You're a natural. The camera loves you, even if you're in the middle of a swamp with gnats swarming your head."

"You saw that?" She hadn't thought that feed, when she found three boys dead in a Louisiana swamp, was picked up by any station other than the local Baton Rouge affiliate.

"This is the natural next step for you. Or are you going to be satisfied running around the country solving crimes like Nancy Drew on steroids?"

"Now you're being insulting."

"You're good, dammit! You're wasting your talent."

Max stabbed a fork into her salad and stuffed the mix of chicken and lettuce into her mouth before she let loose on Ben. He was right, she was blunt—so much so that she could go for his jugular right now, and just say good-bye to their odd and unnatural friendship.

She didn't want a television show. She didn't want a staff, didn't want to report to anyone or have anyone report to her. She liked her life just the way it was. It was comfortable. She could fly off to Colorado Springs to investigate the disappearance of a college student that may or may not have involved foul play, and not worry that she was going to say or do something that would screw with ratings and cost people their jobs.

She liked being the only one she was responsible for. She liked her freedom. She *needed* her space. And Ben, of all people, should understand that.

The word no was on the tip of her tongue, when Ben said, "Don't say yes now."

"I wasn't going to." But she smiled. She couldn't help it. Ben had that way about him, making her crazy one minute and laughing the next.

"Think about it, Max. I'll e-mail you my proposal, the one I used to sell the idea to Robert and Catherine Crossman, and maybe it'll explain things better than I have."

"You explained things well enough," she said.

“Go on your trip. Read my proposal. And tell me yes when you come back.”

The smile disappeared. “Don’t be cocky. I don’t want to do this.”

“Yes, you do.” He visibly relaxed. “We have ten minutes before you have to leave to catch your plane. Tell me about this trek to Colorado Springs. Who, what, why, when, where, how.”

“College student Scott Sheldon, missing for six months after walking away while on a camping trip with friends.”

“Dead?”

“Probably.”

He stared at her. “You’re going because of Karen.”

“No, I’m not.” But there was some truth to his observation. Karen disappeared while she and Max had gone to Miami for a wild spring break their senior year. She was definitely dead—the police had found evidence of a violent death with an extensive amount of blood—but her body was never found. Max had spent a year of her life searching for answers, and still no one knew what happened beyond a theory that couldn’t be proved. And a killer had walked away.

She swirled her wine in her glass, but didn’t drink. “Scott’s mother wrote to me. She doesn’t know what happened to him. If I can find out—well, she might be able to sleep better.”

Adele Sheldon had said, *I need to know what happened to my son. I need the truth.*

Max was good at uncovering the truth. Not everyone appreciated it; not everyone was truly strong enough to handle it. But Adele Sheldon was a grieving mother with no body to bury. She accepted that her son was dead, had told Max that if he were alive, she’d know in her heart. *I’m in limbo, Ms. Revere. I want to bury his body.*

Ben didn’t say anything for a minute. He leaned back, a sad and wistful expression on his handsome face. She wished she had something to say, something cutting or witty, but her mind was blank. They were both thinking about Karen, a girl they’d loved, and Scott Sheldon, a boy they didn’t know. All hostility she’d felt toward Ben for his ridiculous idea to give her a television show dissolved.

“What happened to the kid?” Ben asked.

“I won’t know until I talk to his friends or find his body.”

“You’re searching for his body?”

“That’s the plan.”

He leaned forward. “This would be a great report for your television show.”

“I don’t have a television show,” she said, glaring at him again.

He smiled, picked up *her* wineglass, and drained it. “Not yet.”

Chapter 2

Max woke up at 4:30 A.M. in a luxurious suite of the Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, cursing Ben for her uneasy sleep. Seeing him and talking about

Karen had brought up all the memories, failures, and frustration of that year in Miami after Karen disappeared. Max often had insomnia—she fell to sleep easily enough, but if she woke at two or three in the morning, it was rare she could go back to sleep.

She'd stayed at the Broadmoor many times in the past; it was one of her favorite resorts. The executive suite had a fireplace, balcony and breathtaking view of the snow-covered mountains. Max appreciated quality accommodations, and didn't mind paying for them. She pulled herself out of bed and decided to wake up with strong coffee and a bubble bath.

Ten minutes later, she sighed as she sank into the hot, scented water. She sipped the sweetened coffee and closed her eyes.

When she should have been relaxing in the deep tub, her thoughts instead went back to Miami, back to when she was twenty-two and enjoying spring break with her best friend and roommate. Columbia had hooked them up their freshman year and it should have been hate at first sight—Karen was everything Max was not. Karen was short, Max was tall; Karen was chatty, Max was reserved; Karen was a slob, Max was neat. Blond hair to red hair; brown eyes to blue; middle-class family to wealthy family.

Yet, somehow, they worked. It was books, Max believed—they both loved books, both were lit majors, and they had the same sense of humor. Better, Karen didn't lie. She was as blunt and straightforward as Max, and Max ended up trusting Karen more than she did anyone.

She'd needed Karen at a time in her life when everyone she'd known and grown up with proved to be untrustworthy. Her friends, her ex-boyfriend, her family. Max had wanted to be far from home, moving from California to New York, and she didn't look back. Max didn't want to care for anyone except herself. She understood—because she had always been honest with herself—that the reason she didn't want any close friends was because she had abandonment issues. First her mother dumped her on her rich grandparents' doorstep and walked away, sending her sporadic postcards that had ended abruptly when she was sixteen; then nine years later, her friend Lindy was killed the week of their high school graduation. She didn't want to get attached to anyone it would hurt her to lose.

But Karen was the type of girl who latched on and didn't let go. When Max was irritated with her, she called Karen a parasite, impossible to get rid of. But now, more than ten years after they'd met, Max knew Karen was exactly what she'd needed to reconnect with the flawed but compelling human race.

Karen wasn't perfect. She was a flirt. She drank too much. She slept with the wrong guys and got her heart broken more times in their first year of college than Max had in her lifetime. They needed each other—Karen to bring Max down off her pedestal and enjoy living again, and Max to protect Karen from herself.

But in the end, she couldn't protect Karen. Karen had disappeared, and though Max and law enforcement knew she was dead, they'd never found her body, nor brought her killer to justice.

The one time Karen lied to her had proved fatal.

Max sighed and stretched. The water had cooled uncomfortably, so she quickly finished her coffee, pulled the drain, and rinsed off under a hot stream of water through the dual jets. She dressed in layers, since the early spring morning was

cold, then dried her thick hair and put on make-up while drinking another cup of coffee.

Finally, she felt ready to start the day.

She called room service for breakfast and more coffee. She didn't like to eat in her hotel room, but she couldn't bring her desk down to the restaurant and she had work to do.

After room service left, she ate a blueberry scone and reviewed her e-mail. While on the flight yesterday, she'd planned her day, but Max preferred to remain flexible when starting an investigation. She had the basics of the case, but it wasn't so cut-and-dried as she'd have liked.

First, there were jurisdictional issues. The college was in the county, not the city of Colorado Springs. The campsite where Scott Sheldon had disappeared was in a national park, putting the location under the federal government. The National Park Service rangers were responsible for the initial search and rescue, but they had a joint operation with the county and adjoining cities. Adele Sheldon had told her she filed the missing persons report with the college and with Colorado Springs PD, and Detective Amelia Horn was her contact. Why CSPD? Neither the college nor the campsite was in the city. Who was really in charge? Detective Horn had nothing to add when Max spoke to her, pointing out that CSPD *wasn't* in charge.

Max pulled out a trifold board she'd created last night and set it up on the credenza. The time line was clear, even though it made no sense.

Last Halloween Eve, nearly six months ago, was a Friday. Scott Sheldon told his roommate that he was going camping with three friends—Tom Keller, Arthur Cowan, and Carlos Ibarra. They planned to be back Sunday morning.

According to the statements by Scott's three friends, they'd been drinking and joking Friday night. At some point, Scott got angry—no one claimed to know exactly what set him off—and he grabbed his backpack and left. When he didn't return, they assumed he was sleeping in the truck, which was parked an hour's hike from the campsite.

The next morning, Scott still hadn't returned. The weather turned from overcast to rain, and Keller, Cowan, and Ibarra returned to the truck. When they didn't find Scott, they looked for him in the area, but the rain came down hard and heavy. They left—there was nothing in the notes saying that they went back to the campus on Saturday, but that was implied. It snowed late Saturday night and the boys said they trekked back to the campsite Sunday morning and looked for Scott. They didn't call the rangers, they didn't alert campus security, *nothing*, until Sunday afternoon.

That was the part of the story that set off Max's instincts. Why had it taken them so long to tell anyone that Scott was missing? Why did campus security wait until Monday morning to notify the park service? By that point, the storm was so severe, they could search for only a few hours each day. By the end of the week, the roads to that area of the mountain were impassable.

There was no doubt in her mind that Scott Sheldon had died on that mountain, but the question was how and when. The fact that he was missing for nearly forty-eight hours before the three boys had alerted *anyone* told Max they were lying about something.

She reviewed her notes until eight when she called Chuck Pence with the park service. He was based in Colorado Springs, near the police station, but Pence was on the search and rescue staff and had led the effort to find Scott. His specialty was working with tracking dogs.

He wasn't there, and the staff said he was already in the field. Max left a message and reviewed her schedule. She'd wanted to talk to Pence first for more background on the search and what, if anything, they'd found that hadn't made it in the official files, but that would have to wait. She considered talking to Detective Horn again, but after their phone conversation, Max suspected it would be a waste of time. If she learned anything new, she'd talk to the police. She'd go to the college first and talk to Scott's roommate, then track down the others.

While she drove the thirty minutes to the Cheyenne College campus, she got two calls, which she sent to voice mail. The first from Ben. She wasn't going to talk to him about the television show until after this case, and she was already thinking of more ways she could tell him no—since the blunt no she'd already given him didn't work. The second call came from her editor. Max didn't have anything good to tell her, and Emma was going to be disappointed.

Max had written four true crime novels, the first about Karen's disappearance and the subsequent investigation. The latest book was coming out this summer, and Emma wanted another proposal. But Max didn't have a case that excited her. She read the crime blotters, tracked the news—there were a lot of interesting cases, some even more interesting than Scott Sheldon's disappearance. But nothing jumped out at her as thrilling enough to invest several months of her life into research and interviews, then another six to nine months verifying facts and writing the book. Writing the last book had nearly gutted Max. She'd investigated claims of elder abuse in a Miami facility and uncovered a ten-year reign of terror by the director she dubbed the Wicked Nurse of Miami. Not very creative, and her editor had cut all but two references to the nickname from the book, but it was still the way Max thought of the bitch who seemed to take pleasure in making sick, old people suffer.

She didn't want to go through that again, not yet. She briefly considered the Scott Sheldon case, and maybe there was something here that would warrant a full-length book, but Max didn't see it yet. She first needed to talk to the people involved—maybe shining a new light on the matter would get them to talk—or slip up, if they were harboring a violent secret.

It was nine when she arrived in the visitors' parking lot. The campus was small, at least by Max's standards—three thousand undergraduates, half of whom commuted to the campus, and an even smaller graduate program. A typical liberal arts college, where students predominately majored in the humanities and arts, though there was a new earth science building and a recent influx of students majoring in environmental science and conservation. Not a surprise, considering the campus was in the Rocky Mountains.

The grounds may have been modest, but they spread out and up the mountainside, with tree-lined cement trails winding around the perimeter. A quad, of sorts, was built around a possibly natural waterfall, which filled a small lake. A stream meandered out, and judging from the marks in its banks, it was lower than it had been in the past. Still, the campus seemed like a rather idyllic place. No

towering redwoods and pines as in California and much of the Rocky Mountains, but this place still had the fresh clean air and crisp cold Max loved.

She used to go skiing all the time—in far colder weather than this. She still skied when she could, but more and more she spent her hours investigating or planning an investigation. This was the first winter she hadn't spent time at her cousin's resort in Vail. Too many cold cases had grabbed her interest, and she'd also been finishing the book about the Wicked Nurse of Miami.

Her work—vocation, really—consumed her, and taking time off to have fun just hadn't seemed important after the tragedies she immersed herself in. And as her editor, who was probably her closest friend in New York, had told her, Max was a workaholic.

Max had downloaded a campus map, but each path was well marked with signs and arrows directing her. She was looking for Rock Creek dorm, where Scott Sheldon had lived for the two months before his disappearance. His roommate had been Ian Stanhope, an environmental science major from Denver. Scott had been an environmental science major as well—and in fact, Scott and Ian seemed to have lived parallel lives.

Both were strong but not straight-A students; both were at Cheyenne on partial merit scholarships. Both had one younger sibling—Scott, a sister; Ian, a brother—and parents who divorced while the boys were in junior high school. Had they become close friends or bitter enemies? Sometimes, similarities made you hate a person because they highlighted—often unintentionally—your own flaws.

She didn't have a sense of who they were as people, only who they were on paper. Scott hadn't been involved with athletics; Ian was on the baseball team for the college, a D-III school. Through social media, it appeared that Ian had many friends, lots of direct and indirect connections to college, his high school, and Denver. Scott's profile had been taken down, probably by his mother or sister, but his mother told her that he'd been soft-spoken and reserved, with only a few friends growing up.

How few? Had he made friends during his two months at Cheyenne before he disappeared? Was he homesick? Did he like college? Were his grades okay or was he struggling? Was there a girlfriend his mother didn't know about? Ex-girlfriend? His mother said he didn't have a history of depression, but a family might miss that, especially if the depressed person tried to keep it from them. Or if the onset was sudden. These were all things she would find out.

She knocked on Ian Stanhope's door again and considered that he might not be there. Classes, socializing, studying.

A small guy came out of the room next door, backpack over his shoulder. "If you're looking for Ian, he's probably at the gym if he doesn't have class."

"Can you point me in the right direction?"

"South exit, right, and follow the signs to Cougar Stadium."

Max followed the directions and less than five minutes later was standing in the lobby of a rather impressive athletics facility for a small college. The gym portion was well equipped with several weight machines, treadmills, and an area for free weights. It was clean and bordered on two sides by windows, which looked out into trees. Half the machines were being used.

She referred to a photo of Ian, then looked around. She spotted him working with free weights. Ian watched her approach, a mixture of apprehension and pleasure in his expression.

“Ian Stanhope?” she asked.

“That’s me.” He grinned and wiped his sweaty face with his shirt. He was a good looking nineteen-year-old with blond hair that fell into his eyes. That he didn’t push it away bothered Max. Could he even see through the mess?

“I’m Maxine Revere.” She handed him her business card. “I need a minute of your time.”

“Why would a reporter want to talk to me?” he said, a half smile still on his face.

“Do you have a class?”

“Not until noon.”

“Great.”

He looked from her to her card. “You’re from New York.”

“Yes.”

He lost his smile and didn’t move. He tossed his head, moving his clump of overgrown hair to the side. “What do you want to talk to me about?”

“I’m looking into Scott Sheldon’s disappearance, from last October. You were his roommate.”

“I wasn’t on the camping trip.”

“I promise, I won’t take too much of your time.”

He mumbled, “I have class.”

“At noon, right? We’ll be done before then.”

Usually, for Max, the direct approach worked best. She didn’t like playing games or manipulating people into talking to her. But sometimes, she needed a gentle touch. She couldn’t tell if he was more upset or worried, but something was up with him.

She said, “How about if I give you twenty minutes to shower and change, and I’ll meet you at the student union? Coffee, brunch. My treat.” There was always the chance he would bail, but she knew where to find him.

“Is something wrong?”

“Other than your roommate has been missing for six months?”

“I mean, no other reporters have been around here asking about Scott. Like, ever.”

“I specialize in cold cases. Twenty minutes enough time?”

“Yeah—the quad has a food court,” he said. “I’ll meet you there. The student union is just vending machines. Gross stuff, really.”

She walked out, noting that Ian watched her before he disappeared through the locker room doors.

She’d definitely thrown him off, but she didn’t know why. Ian hadn’t been part of the foursome who’d gone camping, so what did he have to worry about? Unless he knew something he hadn’t told the police.

While she waited, Max checked her e-mail and text messages. Ben had sent her a message asking if she’d read his proposal. She didn’t respond. The truth was she had read it on the plane—and she still wanted to say no. The proposal was outstanding, and he’d addressed all her concerns, even though she hadn’t told

him what they were. He even resolved issues she wouldn't have thought to question, as if he'd known she'd come up with problems on the fly.

Ultimately, she had to decide if this was what she wanted to do with her life—or at least the next few years. Right now, she was very comfortable. She liked what she did; she liked her freedom.

It didn't take long before Ian strode purposefully to her table and sat down. He had combed his hair back, so it wasn't falling in his eyes as much. She smiled, pushed her papers back in a folder, and sipped her coffee. "What can I get you?"

He put a water bottle in front of him. "I can't eat right after I work out. But thanks." Ian looked around the quad sheepishly, as if he didn't want anyone to see him talking with her. "I don't understand why a reporter is interested in Scott," he said.

"I specialize in cold cases. My Web site lists the articles and books I've written."

His eyes widened. "You're writing a book about Scott?"

"Not a book, an article. I spoke to his mother, Adele Sheldon, and she asked me to look into his disappearance."

"Oh." He stared down at his hands, not meeting her eyes. "I met Ms. Sheldon when we moved in. Her and Scott's sister, Ashley. And then when she came to get his things. It was—uncomfortable. I felt bad."

I felt bad. "Bad" didn't cut it. Max had been much closer to Karen than Ian had been to Scott; the pain and rage she'd allowed to simmer were a dark fuel that drove her for the year after Karen disappeared. But Karen was not Scott; Max was not Ian.

"I understand that you didn't know Scott before you became roommates."

He shook his head. "We got paired up by the school. Same major, and like me, he's neat. Some of the guys in my dorm—well, they're slobs. I didn't want a slob. So we got along."

"I read the police reports. You told Detective Horn that Scott was quiet, you never saw him do drugs or drink, that he kept to himself. Is that accurate?"

Ian nodded. "He wasn't a bad guy once you got to know him."

That was an odd comment. "But before someone got to know him? Did other people not like Scott?"

"No, of course not." He frowned, drank some water.

"Ian, no one's perfect."

He shrugged. "No one had a problem with him."

Max switched focus. "You told police that he went camping with friends on Friday, October thirtieth. He didn't return with the others, but you didn't contact campus police."

"It's not my fault he got lost!"

"I didn't say it was your fault." She assessed him. He was upset, but why? "You didn't go on the trip, did you?"

"No. I feel bad about the whole thing. I mean, if I thought I was supposed to call the police when he didn't come back, I would have. I didn't know the guys he went with, not well. Scott was—he was a little strange, okay? But one-on-one, he was cool, we got along. Not best friends or anything, but okay. He just hung out with different people."

"Can you give me some names?"

“Don’t you have the police report? I’m sure they all talked to the police. He didn’t have a lot of friends.”

“Tom Keller, Arthur Cowan, Carlos Ibarra,” Max read from her notes, though she knew the names by heart. “Did he know any of them before?”

“Before what?”

“From high school, his hometown.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What about you?”

“No. I didn’t like Scott’s friends. I don’t even think Scott liked them much, but they hung together.”

“What I don’t understand is why no one contacted campus police immediately. Why they waited for so long.”

He reddened. “You’re talking about me.”

“Should I be?”

“I should have called, okay? But I didn’t think about it.”

“Even after the storm Saturday night and Sunday.”

“I just—Look, I’ve felt like shit since I found out he wandered off and died on that mountain. I wish I could have changed it, but you weren’t there, you don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Then tell me.”

He wanted to talk about it. She could see it in his eyes. He was torturing himself over something.

“Look, I didn’t think. Scott was out, I had a girl in, I figured he was hanging with his friends. We’re in college. It’s not like we keep tabs on each other. He said they were going camping for the weekend. When the storm hit, I thought he and the others might have gotten stuck getting out. But I didn’t think anyone was in danger. I figured if they were in trouble, someone else would have known about it.” His knuckles were white as he gripped the table. “I didn’t know Scott had gotten lost until Monday morning when campus security came by looking for him.”

Max could see it. A nineteen-year-old boy, on his own for the first time. Probably didn’t even think Scott was his responsibility. Maybe the instinct would have developed over the year; maybe not. But one thing was certain: Ian Stanhope felt guilty about his inaction.

But did Ian’s inaction cost Scott Sheldon his life? Any more so than that of the boys he went camping with? Max didn’t see that. It was the other three who should have done something, said something, sooner.

“Do you know why the other three didn’t tell anyone on Saturday that Scott was lost? Do you know why they waited so long?”

“You’ll have to ask them.”

“Do you know where I can find them?”

“You found me.”

“Because you were Scott’s roommate.”

He shifted uncomfortably. He looked like a man, but he wasn’t, and his boyish uncertainty shone through. “I didn’t like Scott’s friends. They were all weird, like him.”

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know.”

“Not jocks?” she suggested.

“Not *anything*. Like, put a dozen loners together and you have a dozen loners in the same room. They weren’t like a team, or a group, or even in the same major, or what.”

“So you haven’t seen any of them in the last six months.”

“One of the guys, Tom Keller, is in my math class. But we don’t meet today. Tomorrow at ten. Pike Hall, if you want to stake it out.”

“I’m here today.”

It took him a good minute before he said, “Jess Sanchez. She was a friend of Scott’s, she’s okay. She’s the only one who seemed to be worried about Scott at the time, anyway.”

“You weren’t?”

“Look, I said Scott was weird. Honestly? I thought he’d show up Monday and be all, like, why were you so worried? I’m really sorry about everything, but I don’t know what I could have done different.”

Max considered that. If she and Karen hadn’t become close friends while they were roommates, would Max have worried if Karen was out all weekend? Probably not. She might even have been relieved to have the room to herself.

“I’ll talk to Jess,” Max said. “Where can I find her?”

“She works at the bookstore on campus. You can’t miss her. She wears all black, has a nose ring, and is tiny. She looks like a freak, but like I said, she was the most normal out of all of them.”

Ian left and Max read over the police report again.

Jess Sanchez hadn’t been one of the group that Scott went camping with and Scott’s mother hadn’t said anything about a girlfriend. Was Jess a friend or something more? Why hadn’t she contacted campus police if she was worried, as Ian implied?

Time to find out.

Chapter 3

Ian’s description of Jess Sanchez was accurate. She was indeed tiny in every way—barely five feet tall, not even one hundred pounds. Black hair, brown eyes, naturally tan skin, a nose stud, and multiple piercings in her small ears. She looked more American Indian than Hispanic as her name suggested. She agreed to talk to Max after Max told her she was a reporter writing about Scott Sheldon’s disappearance, but her tone was indifferent. She told the guy she was working with that she’d be back in ten minutes; then they stepped outside.

“It’s freezing,” Jess complained as she zipped up her coat and pulled a cap over her short hair.

“Is there a lounge where we can sit?” It was cold, but the sky was so clear, it looked like it would shatter.

“I’m fine. So why are you here after nearly six months? No one cared when he got lost.”

“No one?”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. Search and rescue. Too dangerous, they said, to look for him in the storm. So Scott’s probably dead because it was too cold for everyone else.” She shoved her hands into her pockets and walked briskly. Fortunately, her legs were short and Max easily kept up with her.

“Jess, search and rescue did everything they could with the information they had. And, like you, I don’t think Scott survived.”

The girl stopped walking. Her cheeks were bright from the cold. “I didn’t say that.”

“Let’s look at the possibilities: One, Scott ran away, voluntarily disappearing. There’s no evidence to support that. Two, Scott stomped off in anger like his friends said, and has built a shelter and survived for six months. Or three, Scott died on that mountain before anyone started looking for him.”

Jess frowned, but didn’t say anything. Max continued. “There’s no evidence that Scott ran away or that he survived. I’m pretty certain he’s dead, and so is search and rescue. Even his mother, and parents are the most likely to believe that their child found some way to survive the unsurvivable. But I think there’s more to what happened that weekend than what your friends told the police.”

“*My* friends?”

“Tom Keller, Carlos Ibarra, and Arthur Cowan.”

“They’re not *my* friends.”

Max raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“Art and Carlos used to be. But not anymore.” She averted her eyes, and the anger in her voice went down a notch.

“Why?” Max asked bluntly.

She shrugged, still didn’t look Max in the eye.

“Because of what happened with Scott?”

“No.” Jess was being evasive.

“What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know.”

Maybe not, but she knew *something*.

“I have to go back to work.” Jess turned abruptly and headed back the way they’d come.

Max followed. “Jess, I’m not leaving until I find the truth. Scott’s family deserves to know what happened. They deserve to bury a body, don’t you think?”

Jess stopped walking. She stared straight ahead, not facing Max. “I wasn’t on the camping trip. I don’t know what happened. I just—”

“What?”

“I just don’t think what they said happened did. But if it didn’t, they’re not going to say anything about it now, so we’ll never know the truth.”

She spoke fast, but Max understood. Jess thought her friends—her former friends—had lied.

“Tell me what *you* think.”

“I can’t. I mean, I don’t know what to think! Look, I really have to go.” She opened the door to the bookstore.

“Where can I find them?” Max asked her.

“Art and Carlos are on the top floor of Canyon Hall. Room four-twelve. Tom’s in the same dorm, but I don’t know his room.”

Jess closed the door on her. Max decided to let her go—for now. She’d be back to push Jess after the guilt and suspicion had had time to do their job.

Max almost smiled. She hadn’t even been here a day, and already her suspicions were proved right—meaning, she wasn’t the only one who thought what happened the weekend Scott disappeared was odd. Time to track down Scott’s so-called friends and dig for the truth.

* * * * *

No one, answered when Max knocked on room 412. She considered her options.

She considered searching their room, but there were a lot of people going in and out. And if Cowan and Ibarra returned and found her inside, she might have a difficult time getting them to talk to her. Not to mention that being kicked off campus would make it harder to uncover the truth.

She walked down the staircase and passed three girls who were chatting about a party in another dorm. They’d heard about it on Twitter.

Max snapped her fingers. *Social media*. These were college kids; they made a career out of telling the world where they were and what they were doing.

She leaned against a wall on the first floor, just inside the main entrance, and pulled out her phone. She opened her social media app and found Arthur Cowan’s social profiles through his affiliation with Cheyenne College. Once she found Cowan, she found Tom Keller through a common association. Arthur and his roommate, Carlos Ibarra, had privacy settings on their accounts, so she couldn’t see their status reports or pictures, but Tom posted publicly—apparently everything he did when he did it.

Tom had been tweeting for the past hour from his English class about how bored he was, and it took Max only a few minutes to learn he was in Edwin C. Becker Hall. While walking across the campus, she pulled up his social media photos and found a recent likeness. She also found photos of Cowan and Ibarra and now could pick them out in a crowd.

She asked a passing student what classroom Mr. Thurston taught in, and was directed to the second floor of Becker Hall.

Max leaned against the wall outside Thurston’s class and thought about how to approach Keller. He seemed to have found his wild side in college. Numerous photos showed him visibly intoxicated at parties. Didn’t these kids know that everything they posted on the Internet was permanent? Max supposed a future employer might overlook a few drunken college parties, but Tom was going to have to grow up.

She could use that.

The English class was over at 12:10, so Max had a few minutes to dig into Keller. There wasn’t much more than what she’d found on his social media pages. He was interested in video games, drinking, girls, and not much else. There was also something missing.

She scrolled back through his photos as far back as they went—nearly three years—and there were no pictures taken while camping, fishing, or hiking. If fact,

he appeared to have no interest in camping. Odd, considering where he went to college.

It might not mean anything, but she felt the twinge she got when information didn't fit. She wished she could scour the pages of Cowan and Ibarra. She was able to scroll through their friends—Jess Sanchez was in both lists. Would Jess let Max use her log-in to access their pages? Max would definitely ask.

Students began to exit the class a few minutes before it was officially over. Keller was one of the first kids out, and Max immediately followed him. He was a tall and gangly kid, not quite beefy enough to fill out his frame. He slouched slightly, as if he'd grown early and never been comfortable with his height.

"Tom," she called out when they were at the base of the stairs.

He turned and spotted her, gave her an obvious look up and down. "You're not in my class," he said with a flirty grin. "Unless you're the new teaching assistant."

"Maxine Revere, reporter." She handed him her card. "Let's talk."

He stared at her card, his brows pulled together. "Reporter?"

"Scott Sheldon."

He handed back her card. "I need to go."

"I have a few questions."

He brushed past her. "I have nothing to say."

"Why? If what you said happened is true, why don't you want to talk about it?"

He turned and stared, his eyes narrow. "If? What's your deal? What do you mean, 'if'? I told everyone what happened. Why do you care?"

"Scott is classified as a missing person. Were you aware that the rangers are still looking for his body? When they find him, they'll know what happened."

The kid, already white, paled even more. "They know what happened because we told them what happened. You have no right to harass me."

Keller's voice rose, squeaky and worried. Others in the hall looked over, overtly curious. Max didn't care. She wasn't the one with something to hide.

"I'm not harassing you, Tom."

"I don't have to talk to you."

He bumped into a group of students in his haste to get away from her. He scowled at them, then pushed open the double doors and hurried outside into the steadily falling drizzle.

Something was definitely up.

* * * * *

Max went back to the bookstore to talk to Jess about her social media password, and Jess told her she couldn't talk.

"When do you get off?" Max asked.

"Two thirty. I really don't want to get involved."

"You already are, and I think you know that." But Max could wait if it would encourage Jess to cooperate. She said, "I'll be back in two hours. Just to talk, okay?"

"Whatever," Jess said, and went to ring up a student.

Max went outside and frowned at the wet sky. If she was here on campus until three or later, she wouldn't have time to visit the campsite. Tomorrow, she'd do it first thing.

She located the campus security office on the map and walked briskly to the small building west of the main administration wing. By the time she arrived, her coat and hair were more than a little damp.

The office was dry, warm, and set up like a police bull pen with a front desk separated by a low partition and ten or twelve desks, each backing to another. Four of the desks were currently occupied. The receptionist smiled. "May I help you?"

She handed the woman her card. "I called two days ago, but no one returned my call."

The receptionist returned Max's card. "You can go to the administration building and talk to the public affairs director."

"I need to speak with the head of security."

"Is it a security matter?"

"Yes."

It was, after all, a matter of how they conducted their security operations.

"You're not a student."

"No."

"You'll have to speak to the public affairs director. I can't help you."

Max wanted to push, but she assessed the receptionist as well as the security officers who were giving her the eye. The eye that told her they were suspicious of outsiders.

"What is the public affairs director's name?" Max asked. She had the information in her notes, but she hadn't planned on speaking to public affairs unless as a last resort.

This was a last resort.

The receptionist typed rapidly. "Stephanie Adair," she said. She wrote the name and phone number on a notepad. "If you go to the administration building, the front desk will be able to help you."

All polite, now that she knew Max was leaving.

Max would return. She had questions, and if they didn't answer them, the *no comment* she recorded would speak volumes.

Max left for the administration building next door, wondering if they were that rigid with all reporters, or just the reporter who said she was looking into Scott Sheldon's disappearance. Was the receptionist the person she'd first spoken with? Why hadn't she given her Adair's name on the phone? Had she been briefed on the case and told to divert any future calls—or visits—to the media rep?

She went inside and asked for Stephanie Adair. She was directed to an office on the second floor. The girl at the desk was young, likely a college student, and immediately called Ms. Adair when Max asked for her.

"Ms. Adair said she'll be a couple minutes, if you'd like to wait."

Like most everything at Cheyenne College, the administration building was modern, more like an office building than like a college. Two empty cubicles filled the room behind the student receptionist, stacks of paper and a computer on each. Lots of plants and a picture window looking out onto the quad made the office appear bigger and brighter.

A couple minutes turned into ten before Ms. Adair stepped out of the door behind the receptionist. She, too, looked young enough to be a college student, but she was dressed better and wore quite a bit of makeup.

She smiled and extended her hand. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Revere. You caught me on a phone call, and I have a lunch meeting. But if you'd like to walk with me, I'll see what I can help with."

"Thank you," Max said automatically, though she had the feeling Adair was trying to get rid of her.

Adair walked briskly down the hall toward the main staircase. "What can I help you with?" she asked.

"I'm investigating the Scott Sheldon disappearance."

Adair sounded perplexed. "Scott Sheldon? I don't know who that is. Should I?"

"He was a student who disappeared last October while camping with three other students."

"Oh, yes, I heard about that. I only started in this position in January."

Great. She was new. But that might actually help Max. "I'd like to speak to the security chief about the matter. According to the police files, that would be Frank Hansen, and he's still on staff."

"Yes, Chief Hansen is still here. Policy is that any press inquiries about the college, faculty or students go through my office."

"I have questions, you shouldn't have to play the delivery girl. If you could simply grant permission—"

Adair stopped at the bottom of the staircase which opened into the wide lobby. "If you e-mail me your questions, I'll talk to Chief Hansen and get them answered."

"It would be better if we talked face-to-face. You're welcome to be there."

Adair smiled. She looked pleasant, but she was being hard-nosed. "No, that's not possible. But I promise, I'll get your questions answered quickly." She handed Max her business card. "My email and phone number are on the card."

Max didn't like the answer, but she wasn't going to get a concession out of Adair. Max slipped the card into her purse and forced out, "Thank you."

"I'll walk you to the parking lot."

"I have other things to do."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but since you're not a student or faculty or guest of either, you need to be cleared by the administration building and given a pass before you're permitted to be on campus. Security reasons. I'm sure you understand." Adair smiled, too brightly, and led the way to the parking lot.

"And how do I do that?" Max asked.

"The front desk can direct you to the visitors' office."

Max turned and went back into the building, leaving Adair staring after her, confused.

Let her be confused. Max had more questions, and she wasn't leaving until she had answers.

Chapter 4

By the time Max was done jumping through the hoops necessary to get a one-day visitor's pass, it was close to two thirty. Max returned to the bookstore and waited under a dripping tree for Jess to get off work. As soon as the petite girl walked out, she rolled her eyes.

"I have a three-o'clock class."

"I'll walk with you."

"What do you want?" she said. Her voice was almost a whine.

"I'd like your Facebook password."

"What?" She shot her a slanted gaze. "You're insane."

"I went through Tom Keller's profile because it was public, but Arthur and Carlos have private pages. I noted that you were on their friend list. Therefore, if I can use your account, I can see what they've posted."

"Why?"

"Because they lied. I don't know why or what about, but they weren't being completely honest about what happened on the mountain when Scott disappeared."

"They wouldn't hurt him," Jess said, defiant.

Max hesitated. "That's a bit of a leap. Did they have a reason to hurt Scott?"

"No," she mumbled.

"Mrs. Sheldon needs to know what happened to her son. I think search and rescue has been looking in the wrong place. They would have found him by now."

"Not if he got lost. Maybe they are looking in the wrong place, but only because Scott got lost," she repeated.

"I won't tell anyone you let me use your account."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know yet. Just snooping right now." She was trying to lighten the mood, but Jess didn't smile.

"All right. Whatever." She stopped walking and tore a piece of paper out of one of her notebooks. She scribbled down an e-mail address and password. "I'm changing my password when I get out of my class," she said. She was going for an angry tone, but it came out sad. "Just—if you find out what happened, what *really* happened, would you let me know?"

"I promise."

Max watched Jess walk off, then turned and followed the signs to the library. The building was too warm, but right now Max needed the heat—her hair was wet, and while her coat kept her torso dry, her jeans were uncomfortably damp. She went to the restroom and brushed her hair, then pinned it up to keep the strands out of her face. Then she went out to the main room and planted herself at a table near windows that looked out at the Rocky Mountains towering high above the campus. While she loved Columbia and thrived in a city, Max also appreciated the peace that this small college enjoyed. It reminded her that maybe she needed a vacation.

Right. Because you relax so well.

Most of her vacations became working vacations.

Max pulled out her iPad and logged in to Jess's Facebook account. Jess seemed to be pretty typical in her usage—she logged in nearly every day, posted funny

pictures, photos of her friends, a lot of posts about events at the bookstore and rallies on campus. Most of the pages she followed were indie music bands, heavy on alternative music.

She clicked through to Arthur Cowan's page. He wasn't a social media nut like his friend Tom Keller, but he posted consistently. His interests were rather eclectic—but it was clear he spent a lot of time in the outdoors. He had pictures posted of him and friends skiing, and based on the level of difficulty of the slopes, he had experience.

She scrolled through his pictures, many of them outdoors with small groups of friends, mostly including Carlos. Few, if any, with Tom. He had a lot of people he was friends with on Facebook, but few comments on his posts—almost all from Carlos, his younger brother who was in junior high, and someone from his English class who posted odd snippets of apparent humor that Max didn't quite understand. From the few comments over the past year along with the photos, Max put together a clear portrait of Arthur Cowan: he was a prankster, and while some people found him hilarious, most thought his jokes were in poor taste. At least a dozen posts were people telling him he did something “not cool” and Arthur would tell them to lighten up or that it was just a joke.

He was athletic, but seemed to participate only in individual sports like skiing. Carlos and Arthur had gone to high school together, and seemed to be inseparable. Three months ago, several people ragged on him for writing profanity on a kid's face with permanent marker, because the kid was the first to pass out drinking at a party.

Max flipped over to Carlos Ibarra's page. He hadn't posted anything for three weeks, and his last post was a photo of him and Arthur during spring break in Los Angeles. They were on the beach. That photo had become his avatar. Carlos had even fewer friends than Arthur, and as Max looked at the history between them, it became clear that Carlos and Arthur were joined at the hip. They did everything together, they both majored in business, they shared a dorm room. Arthur was clearly the dominant personality.

She frowned. What did all this tell her? Absolutely nothing.

Not nothing, Max. There's a pattern here. One of these things is not like the other.

Tom. He wasn't part of Arthur and Carlos's two-man clique. He was a year younger—Scott's age. He tried too hard to make friends, as evidenced by his constant parties and incessant posting and poor attempts at humor. No one consistently popped up on his page. He was awkward and a bit nerdy, drank because it was social and he thought he could make friends. Max had known kids like him in college—the ones who were the life of the party, but mostly because people laughed at them.

How had Tom Keller hooked up with Arthur and Carlos? Why had the four of them gone camping?

Tom was the weak link. Carlos and Arthur were longtime friends; Tom wasn't part of their clique. If Max could get him to talk to her about that weekend, then maybe the truth would come out.

Max was about to log out of Jess's account when another thought occurred to her. Jess hadn't been social with these boys since Scott disappeared, at least publicly, but it was clear she'd known them. Max clicked over to Jess's private

messages. She didn't want to invade her privacy more than necessary, so she skimmed the names until she found one familiar.

Scott Sheldon.

Even though his account was deleted, the messages he'd sent to Jess were archived on her page. Reading them, it was clear that they were friends and might have liked each other more, but both talked around it. That would fit with Scott's shy reputation.

Thursday night, before he left on the camping trip, Scott had sent Jess a message.

S: Why are you mad that I'm going camping with the guys?

J: Since when did Art and Carlos become "the guys"? Art's a jackass. I told you that last week.

S: It's not easy for me to make friends. Ian thinks I'm a nerd, and all he talks about is baseball. I played baseball one year, when I was 9. I was the worst player on the team and once, when I tried to catch a fly ball, it hit my forehead and I passed out. I don't fit in anywhere, and Art is nice to me.

J: Scott, you'll find your niche. We're friends, right? Art is only nice because he wants something.

S: It's just for the weekend. I'll call you when I get back, okay?

J: Whatever.

Jess was irritated with Scott. She'd followed up that conversation with a message Sunday morning.

Are you around? The weather sucks, call me, I want to make sure you got back okay.

Max scrolled further and found a thread between Art and Jess more than a year ago. She immediately realized that Jess and Art had dated a few times, and Jess called it off.

A: Why are you so mad at me?

J: You're an asshole, and if you don't know why I'm mad, go fuck yourself.

A: Come on, it was a joke. Can't you take a joke?

J: It wasn't a joke to anyone but you and Carlos. I'm done.

A: Well screw you, you have no sense of humor.

Max copied and pasted both threads of messages. She wanted to ask Jess about this, but the girl was still in class. Max checked Tom's social media hive, and he hadn't posted anything since she confronted him outside his English class. Mr. Social Animal had gone silent.

More than a little interesting.

She went back to Art's page and looked through the photos that were posted immediately prior to the camping trip. Scott was in a few, mostly from a party the weekend before. Jess was in a few of the group shots with Scott, and so was Tom.

On the day they left, there were some photos posted to Art's page via his phone from the interior of Carlos's four-wheel drive. Another photo of Art, Tom and Scott at the campsite holding beers. Then nothing else from the trip.

That seemed ... odd for someone who documented his life on social media. She went back to Tom's page, and he hadn't posted anything after 4 P.M. that day. His last tweet was:

Going camping! Haha. #nointernet #techwithdrawal

If there was no Internet, when had they posted the picture from the campsite?

She looked at the information. It was posted Saturday morning, at 8:35 A.M.

Sometimes, there was a weak cellular connection and it could take an unusually long time to upload a picture, but that should drain the phone battery. They could have brought extra phone batteries or a portable charger. Anything was possible. Still, something seemed ... weird. Not that they were drinking at 8:35 A.M., but because that picture, based on the sun and quality of light was obviously taken in the late afternoon. That was confirmed by the tag Art had added:

Me and buds, last camping trip of the season. We have plenty of beer and food! Haha.

She downloaded the picture. There was information embedded in most photos uploaded from a mobile device. She didn't remember how to access it, but she'd call a friend when she got back to the Broadmoor who would do it for her.

Max packed up, slipped back on her coat which had nearly dried, wrapped her scarf around her neck, and walked outside. The light, steady rain continued. Great. She should have retrieved her umbrella earlier.

She headed straight for the Canyon Hall and up to the fourth floor. She listened outside room 412. People were talking inside, though she couldn't make out specific words. She knocked loudly. A few seconds later, the door opened.

Arthur Cowan was a lot shorter than she'd thought—about her height of five foot ten. He stared at her—first her face, then his eyes dipped down to her breasts, which were covered by her coat, then back to her face. "Hell-o," he said.

"That's the reporter," a voice came from the room. Max couldn't see Tom Keller, but it sounded like his whine.

"Maxine Revere," she said, and held out her card.

Art frowned. "We have nothing to say to you." He started to close the door.

Max put her boot in the opening. "You don't know my questions."

"Tom says you're writing an article about Scott. That you think we lied."

"Tom," Max said, pushing open the door and stepping into the dorm room. "That's not what I said."

The room was a mess, and she thought about Ian's comment about not wanting to live with a slob. The main room had two small couches and reeked of stale food and beer. Two open doors led to bedrooms, which were equally messy. There was so much clothing and paper scattered in one room, she couldn't see the floor.

"Hey," Art said when she brushed past him. "We didn't invite you in."

She said, "What really happened on that camping trip? Don't you think that Scott's family deserves the truth?"

"I'm calling campus security," Art said. But it was Carlos who pulled his phone from his pocket.

She had to talk fast. The papers she signed to get the visitor's pass included a whole slew of rules, including an admonition not to harass students. Some people might think that questions were a form of harassment, and since she'd already tipped her hand to Stephanie Adair, she didn't want to be removed from campus now.

"To confirm the time line, based on your statements to the police, you three, with Scott Sheldon, went to a known campground approximately an hour drive

from here. When you arrived, you decided to hike two miles to another campground, less popular but still on the map. Friday night, even though it was forty degrees and dipped down to subzero temperatures before sunrise, Scott walked off, angry, because of an argument. To quote Art, 'It was just a stupid disagreement.'"

She looked at the boys in turn. Tom stared at his feet, Carlos stared at Art, and Art stared at her.

She continued. "When Scott didn't return Saturday morning, you went back to the truck and didn't find him there. But instead of looking for him, or notifying the rangers' station, you left. In fact, you didn't notify anyone that Scott was missing until Sunday."

"There was a storm," Tom began. "We—"

"Shut up," Art said, sneering at Tom. "Don't talk to her." He stepped toward Max. "Get out."

If he thought he was intimidating, he was wrong. Max had gone up against far more intimidating men—and women—than Arthur Cowan.

"The storm didn't really turn bad until Saturday afternoon. You could have called the rangers' station, told them Scott was missing, they would have gone up there and looked for him until dark. Yet you waited until Sunday morning to inform campus security." She eyed the boys carefully: Art, red with anger; Carlos, still focused on Art, concerned; Tom, pale and twitchy. "After that, it's campus security who's at fault for not contacting the rangers until late on Sunday."

"It's not our fault he left," Tom said.

"Shut the fuck up, Tom!"

Art took a step toward her. She wasn't scared of the kid, but he was certainly hot under the collar. "Get out of my room. Now."

"Your reaction tells me you're a liar, Arthur. I will prove it."

He pushed her. She took a step back, raised an eyebrow. "Touch me again, and I *will* put you down, little man."

His eyes narrowed and he fisted his hands. Carlos stepped up. "Hey, Art, campus security is on their way."

"Get out!" Art screamed at her. This time, he kept his hands to himself.

She would have put him down. He was a powder keg. She glanced at Tom before she turned to leave. The kid was pale. She definitely needed to talk to him again, alone.

She opened the door. Art's eyes filled with hate and fear. A big temper problem. Known as a prankster. Maybe he took out his anger through cruel jokes.

Maybe one of his pranks turned deadly. She mulled that idea over in her head. Something to dig into, and Jess Sanchez was the best resource.

She left the dorm with the intention of hunting down Jess and pushing her about her past relationship with Art and asking her about the types of pranks he played—the ones that went beyond writing on his drunk friends. But as soon as she left the dorm room, she was confronted by two campus security officers.

"Ma'am, visitors need to check in with the administration."

She showed them her visitor's pass. "Were either of you on duty the weekend that Scott Sheldon disappeared?"

"You'll have to speak to the chancellor, ma'am."

"I should instead speak with your security chief."

"I'm sorry, we're not authorized to talk with the press. All press inquiries must go through the communications director." He paused. "But you know that."

"I do. I spoke to her earlier and she helped me get this visitor's pass." Which was true. Adair did direct her to the appropriate office to obtain it. "Thank you for your help."

She turned to head to the bookstore, hoping that the staff there would point her to Jess Sanchez's dorm. The taller officer said, "Ma'am, we've had a complaint that you were harassing three of our students. Your visitor's pass has been canceled, and we need to ask you to leave. If you would like to return, you'll need to check in with the administration."

She considered her options. She really wanted to talk to Jess, but she also wanted to investigate the picture she'd downloaded. She didn't want Art to figure out that she'd spoken to Jess, either. He might scare her into being silent. She seemed like a tough girl, but under the surface had been skittish. And fearful of Art.

"I'm leaving," she told the security officers. They escorted her to her car. She turned and thanked them. "You can tell your boss I'll be back with more questions."

She got into her car and saw the campus cops standing in the rain, watching her drive off.

Her phone rang. She'd forgotten to set up the Bluetooth in the rental, so pulled over to the side, right by the main entrance to the campus. She answered the unfamiliar number.

"Ms. Revere? This is Chuck Pence from the park service. I head up search and rescue. I got your message."

"I'm in town and would like to talk to you about the search for Scott Sheldon's body."

"You're in Colorado?"

"Yes, just leaving Cheyenne College right now after an enlightening conversation with Scott's friends. Do you have time to meet? I can come by your office now."

"I'm still on the road. I can meet you somewhere in two hours."

That would be close to six. "I'm staying at the Broadmoor. I'll meet you in the main lobby at six."

"I'll be the man with the dog."

She smiled and hung up. With a final glance at the Cheyenne College sign, Max pulled back onto the road and headed for her hotel. She would most certainly return.

Chapter 5

Max's friends had often criticized her that she was prone to judgment. She assessed people quickly, and experience had proved that her initial opinion was generally accurate. Even with her college roommate, Max had been dead-on with

her assessment—which included the fact that Karen had a big, fat, trusting heart. Max was drawn to that, maybe because she found it so difficult to trust anyone.

Chuck Pence walked in promptly at six with a beautiful golden retriever. But it wasn't just the dog that identified Pence to Max; it was also his no-nonsense manner and his no-nonsense voice, which Max remembered from their phone conversations.

Pence had the sharp eyes of a cop, but with a focused calm Max didn't often see in the police she worked with. His movements were minimal, suggesting both confidence and military or police training. His dog, which wore a service collar, was young, not much more than a puppy—maybe two years. That the dog obeyed the subtle commands of its owner told Max more about Chuck than anything else.

Quiet. Focused. Sharp. Max suspected he preferred dogs to people and probably didn't like crowds.

She already liked him.

She approached Chuck with a smile. "Mr. Pence, I'm Maxine Revere. Thank you for meeting with me." She surveyed the lounge.

"Trixie is a service dog," Pence said. "She can stay."

"There are heat lamps outside. It would afford more privacy."

"Lead the way."

She opened the terrace doors that led to the outdoor lounge. A few other brave souls were enjoying the crisp evening under heat lamps. The intermittent rain from the afternoon had cleared up; moonlight lit the high clouds. She found a table away from the doors.

The hostess approached with a smile. "May I get you and your guest anything, Ms. Revere?"

"Pinot grigio for me." She turned to Pence. "You?"

"Coffee," he said. "Black."

The hostess left and Max leaned back. Pence didn't. She began.

"First, thank you for coming out here. I would have been happy to meet with you tomorrow at your office."

"I'll be in the field tomorrow," he said. "You said you wanted to discuss the Scott Sheldon disappearance." He looked her in the eye. "I hope you're not here to give his mother false hope that he might be alive. It's been nearly six months, much of it in subzero overnight temperatures."

"I suspect, as you do, that he's dead. And has been since the weekend he disappeared. But I read the police reports and today spoke to some of the people involved, plus a girl who knew him and the three boys. Something is off about their story, and I want the truth. Scott's mother deserves to know what really happened."

Chuck didn't say anything as the hostess delivered their beverages. Max sipped her wine. She was in no rush.

"What makes you think that anything other than what's been said happened?"

He didn't have an accusatory or suspicious tone. Matter-of-fact with a hint of curiosity.

"I can't point to one specific reason why I think that the boys are lying. It's more a big picture feeling I get." She paused, not for the first time wondering if her past

and everything that had happened with Karen were clouding her judgment. And, not for the first time, she dismissed her worries.

I need to know what happened to my son. I need the truth.

“Adele Sheldon wrote to me after your office started looking again for Scott’s body. She convinced me that Scott wasn’t the type of person to put himself in danger. She has questions that haven’t been answered. He didn’t hike or camp, and—”

“And that makes him that much more likely not to understand the dangers of wandering off.”

Max gave Chuck a nod. “It also makes me wonder why he agreed to go camping that weekend with three boys he barely knew. He had no relationship with the kids before college. None of the kids was his roommate. They had some equipment, but not the type of gear seasoned campers would take in this climate.”

“I agree with you on the latter point, but I’ve been doing this for years. If I had a nickel for every camper who went up unprepared...” His voice trailed off. “What else? They were college students, irresponsible. Frankly, I’d call them stupid, and their stupidity got one of their friends killed.”

“That’s the thing—I don’t think they were friends.”

Max continued. “Jess Sanchez, who works in the bookstore, was a friend of Scott’s. She let me access her social media pages. She’s Facebook friends with all three boys. I looked through each photo archive, and there were no photos of Scott with any of them except for one.” She knew she was about to tread on dangerous ground here—but since there was no criminal investigation into Scott’s disappearance, and the picture had been posted publicly, she figured she was warranted. “I downloaded a photo taken at the campsite. However, it was uploaded the morning *after* it was taken. I sent it to a friend of mine in New York who can get the GPS data off the photo, when and where it was uploaded.”

“What is that going to tell you?”

“I don’t know yet, but in the police reports, the boys claimed they had no cellular reception at the campground, yet they also claim they didn’t leave until noon on Saturday. They must have uploaded it elsewhere. Then, on Twitter I found tweets from Tom Keller—who can’t seem to go ten minutes without telling the world something trivial about himself—sent Saturday night. Mostly innocuous stuff, but again, no cell coverage, so where was he when he was tweeting?”

Chuck said, “I have a daughter in college. I’m moderately tech savvy, and if I understand my social media, there’s the option of setting tweets and posts in the future, and it’s automatic, correct?”

“Yes. But the content didn’t appear to be preplanned, they were responses to other tweets. So my conclusion was that either they weren’t at the campground they said they were at, or they weren’t at the campground at all.”

Max let that information sink in. She drained her wine and put the glass aside.

Then she added, “Jess tried to talk Scott out of going. I learned after I talked to her that she had been in a relationship with Arthur Cowan last year, but hasn’t spoken to him—at least publicly or through social media—since Scott disappeared. I plan to talk to her soon, but campus police ran me off this afternoon.”

“Some cops don’t like reporters,” he said.

“That wasn’t it—trust me, I know when a cop doesn’t like me because of my job.” She smiled. Sometimes, it was fun playing with law enforcement, getting them riled up. But usually, she tried to be professional. “I cornered the boys in their dorm room, and they called security because I asked hard questions they refused to answer. They’re lying,” she said, not for the first time. “I’m going to prove it.”

“Your observations are interesting, but I still don’t understand what you’re getting at. Unless you’re saying that my team is looking in the wrong place.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’d like to go up with you tomorrow.”

“I planned to go today, but we had to call it off when a child went missing. We found her, thank God. She could have died tonight the way she was dressed. It may be April, but it still gets damn cold in the higher elevations. There’s one more quadrant that needs to be searched. At oh-eight-hundred.” He sipped his coffee.

She thought she might have to do a harder sell, but he seemed amicable to including her. “It bothers me that they waited twenty-four hours before telling campus police, and then the campus police waited until Monday morning before contacting the park service.”

“You and I read the same reports, Ms. Revere. And as I said, college boys can be brainless. But even if my team had been told Saturday night when the boys got back to campus, we couldn’t have gone up there. It was the first big storm of the season, came in earlier than anyone thought. Even me, and I’m pretty good about predicting storms.” He shrugged. “It was a tragedy, and those boys are going to have to live with this for the rest of their lives.”

It was hard for Max to explain her gut, what her instincts said, but she tried. “I think there was something else going on that weekend, something that put Scott in danger. And—” She stopped. What more could she say without treading into conjecture?

“And the only proof you have that the boys are lying is your gut.”

She wanted to say she had more than that, but she couldn’t. “I would call it ... circumstantial evidence. The photo. The fact they weren’t close friends. That Arthur Cowan is an expert skier and should have known better about weather conditions, or at a minimum alerted the ranger station the same night Scott disappeared. That they all acted suspicious when I asked questions. Nervous.”

He tilted his head and smiled. “Most college boys would be nervous when a beautiful, intelligent woman questions them.”

She laughed. “I hardly think that was the reason. Certainly not for Arthur Cowan, who was belligerent and threatening. If you need credentials, I can give you references, people in law enforcement and others who can vouch for me.”

“Ms. Revere,” he said, “why are you so far from home? You have no ties to Colorado or Colorado Springs. The Sheldons aren’t longtime family friends, are they?” Now she shook her head. “So why do you care?”

What did she tell him? That she didn’t know why she’d flown two thousand miles on her own dime to find out what had happened to Scott? That wasn’t completely true. Did she share a half truth? That Adele Sheldon’s letter pulled her heartstrings? Stirred her curiosity? She couldn’t stop thinking about him, or shake the deep belief that she could uncover the truth.

But lying wasn't something that came natural to her. Too many people in her life had lied—either to her face or by omission. She spoke the truth, but kept it simple.

“My best friend disappeared when we were in college,” she said. “Her body was never found. I know she's dead, just like my instincts tell me Scott Sheldon is dead. Except with Karen, there was evidence that she'd been murdered.” She paused, wished she had ordered a second glass of wine, but she sent the hostess away with a look ten minutes ago. “Her family still suffers with the unknown. I see them every year, and the pain—it's never left. But they still harbor an ounce of hope. That hope is trumped by the pain they feel with her loss—not the loss specifically anymore, but the *not knowing*. When I heard about this case, when I talked to Adele— I think I can help her find peace. I don't want her living with the unknown, like Karen's family. If Adele knows what happened, she can grieve and be there for her daughter.”

Karen's sister had lived in the shadow of Karen's disappearance for the past seven years. Laura would have graduated from college last year if her life hadn't been turned upside down. As it was, she barely graduated from high school, never went to college, was in and out of rehab. Scott's sister wasn't Laura, but Max had seen firsthand how the pain of grieving parents forever marked the surviving children.

“Do you have the proper clothes and footwear for a prolonged search?” Chuck asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Be at ranger headquarters by oh-eight-hundred, properly geared up. Like I said, there's one more grid to search. If Scott's body is up there, Trixie will find him.”

At the sound of her name, the golden retriever perked her ears up. She stood as her master rose. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Thank you, but I'm already late getting home. My wife is a patient woman, but I need to get back.”

Chapter 6

On Wednesday morning, Max arrived at the ranger headquarters at quarter to eight. The morning was cold but completely clear, and the weather report had said it would warm to the fifties.

Chuck introduced her to Tim and Ann Callow, volunteers with search and rescue. They were both lifelong residents of the area and had been part of the initial search team. Older than Chuck, but both appeared fit.

“Chuck told us you're a reporter from New York,” Ann said, overtly curious. “Sounds fascinating.”

“You won't catch me dead in a city like that,” Tim said with a grin.

"I'm a city girl at heart," Max said. "Though I enjoy the mountains. My cousin owns a ski resort in Vail, and I try to visit every year."

They chatted as they loaded up the four-wheel-drive truck and Chuck checked provisions. Chuck drove and asked Max, who sat in the passenger seat, "Is that a map of the search area?"

"Partly—I printed it from the park service Web site and marked it up based on the information I learned from the police reports. They parked here—" She put her finger on the map, then traced it south. "—and camped here."

"We've been focusing on the area between the campground and where they parked. The witnesses said he walked toward the car. But at night, he may have inadvertently left the trail. We've covered every area between, but now that we have had warmer weather, Trixie can be of more use. She's still young, not fully trained, but our last cadaver dog died."

From the backseat, Ann said, "We owned Mickie, Trixie's mother. She died six months ago, cancer. We still have the two male dogs from her last litter. Chuck took Trixie, and the other two bitches went to friends of ours in Denver who are training them for their own unit."

"Trixie is a great dog," Chuck said, "but training takes time. She's smart, though. Smartest dog I've had, and I've had plenty."

Max absently reached back and scratched Trixie behind the ears. She loved dogs, and the only thing she regretted about her career—and all the travel it entailed—was that she couldn't have her own pup. But it wouldn't be fair to the animal to be alone so much, or left with neighbors when Max was out of town.

While she petted Trixie with one hand, she marked off on her map where Chuck said they'd searched. "Why didn't you search south of the camp?"

"Like I said, we focused north and east because of the terrain and where the truck was parked. We also covered a mile perimeter from the campsite during the initial search. We had more than a dozen people the three days after we were notified—though we only had a couple hours each day where we could be out."

"So the perimeter was defined based on information those three boys from Cheyenne gave you."

He hesitated. "You sound suspicious."

"I am."

"Do you think Scott was murdered?"

"No," she said immediately, but then she wondered. "It would explain a lot, but at the same time, eventually the body will be discovered, and if it's clear he was murdered, a more thorough investigation would put those three under more scrutiny. But intent to kill is not the same thing as being responsible for a death. What if there was an accident and some reason the boys didn't want to admit to it?"

"Like if they had been drinking? Doing drugs?"

She nodded. "Maybe. Scott dies and they fear getting in trouble, so they leave him and make up a story about how he left without them."

"One of my first encounters with a corpse was finding a pair of young lovers who'd dropped acid about a hundred miles north of here. They hadn't brought any provisions, no sleeping bags. They were so wasted, they wandered off and we found them buried in leaves. Died of exposure in below-freezing temperatures."

Even in the summer, it gets really cold at the higher elevations when the sun goes down.”

Tim said, “Ann and I were up here during the initial search. Chuck and his team covered more ground than anyone thought possible, considering the storm. If there was an accident, it wasn’t at the campground.”

That validated Max’s theory. “Maybe,” she said cautiously, not wanting to offend the three, “you were searching in the wrong place.”

Chuck turned off the winding paved road onto a well-packed dirt and gravel road. Any remaining snow was deep in crevices and under trees, where little sunlight reached, but it looked like spring was fully blooming in the Rocky Mountains. They bounced around in the cab more than Max’s stomach liked, so she put her map away and focused on the terrain.

About a mile later, Chuck pulled over in a clearing. There were deep rivets from other vehicles that had come and gone, and several marked paths. “This is where the boys parked,” he said. “It’s a two-mile hike to the campground. We’ve covered everything around this area both six months ago and this past week.”

Max stretched her legs and brought out her map again. “This is the trail map that’s downloadable from the National Park Service Web site,” she said. She pointed to an area southeast of the campground. “What’s over here? This looks like a marked path.”

Chuck studied it, nodded. “It leads to an abandoned Boy Scout camp.”

“It also looks like a direct route to the highway.”

“It’s not—it’s treacherous, and the trail is impassable in winter.” But he studied the printout that Max had brought. “I can see why the route appears direct. But why would he go that way?”

“The question is, why would the others lie about the direction he took?”

Chuck considered for a long minute. “Ann, Tim, can you take this quadrant?” He pointed to a section west of the campground. “It’s the only area we haven’t covered in the last week. I’m going to take Trixie to follow Ms. Revere’s hunch about this trail.”

“No problem,” Tim said. He checked his watch. “It’ll take four hours, give or take.”

“We’ll meet back here, at the truck, at one thirty,” Chuck said. “Unless any of us find something. We’ll use the emergency band, keep the chatter to a minimum.”

“Be safe,” Ann said. She and her husband left, each with their own backpack and radio.

They walked down the trail that led to the campground. It took them thirty minutes, walking at a brisk pace, but the trail was relatively flat, making it easy. Trixie stayed with them until they reached the acre-size campground. Max looked around. There were two fire pits, neither of which had been used for months, if not years. The snow had completely melted, but there were some remnants in shaded areas. The clearing was nearly perfectly round, the west bordered by huge boulders that, when scaled, would likely reveal an amazing view. The rest of the clearing was framed by trees. To the west, they were spindly; to the east, thicker and taller as they went down the mountainside. They were still below the tree line and seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, but less than two miles from where campers could park. From far in the distance came the sound of running water.

“Peaceful,” Max said. “But when I was researching, there appear to be more popular—and populated—places to camp.”

“Many,” he agreed. “This is off the beaten path, so to speak. But it’s on the map, so it’s not unusual to have people come here. Because of the old Boy Scout camp, there’re visitors who like to hike the area.”

“Is that camp still viable?”

“It closed seven, eight years ago. It’s accessible only via a bridge over a narrow canyon, and it was destroyed one winter. There’s a newer camp a few miles north, and the local troop decided not to rebuild the bridge. You can still reach the camp, but it’s a long trek.” He hesitated. “If Scott went that way, it’s treacherous with steep drops.”

Chuck didn’t have to elaborate. Max could easily picture a scenario where Scott died of injuries he sustained while trying to find his way out of the forest.

Chuck let Trixie off her lead and gave her a command. The golden retriever delighted in her freedom and raced ahead, down a narrow, overgrown path. They followed. Less than fifty yards off the campground, the trail was covered with slushy snow while also dipping steeply down. Max couldn’t see Trixie anymore.

The temperature also dropped dramatically as the canopy of towering pine covered them.

“This is going to sound like a dumb question, but will Trixie just keep going until she finds something?”

“She’ll come back every five to ten minutes and get a confirmation from me to continue.” As if on cue, Max heard a rustling, and then Trixie appeared at a point where the trail seemed to disappear. Chuck gave her a hand signal, and the dog ran off again.

Chuck said, “This isn’t much of a trail at all, and if he went this way, I can easily see how he’d get lost. Some hikers like to go back to the scouting camp, but with the bridge out, most avoid it.”

“Could Scott and his friends have found it?”

“Yes, but why wouldn’t they have told us that was where they’d been?”

Max could think of a half dozen reasons, none of them innocent. An accident, murder, violence, drugs, drinking—any number of things. She’d become so jaded over the years that she wasn’t surprised at what people said or did to each other. Her instincts told her that those three boys had lied to the police about *something*; whether they were capable of murder was another question.

“Watch your step,” he said. “There’s a stream that cuts through up ahead. It shouldn’t be too wide yet, but with the melting snow, it’s going to be running and the ground’s slick. We cut off the search there, since there was no evidence he’d gone this way.”

They turned another sharp curve, and a stream came fast down the mountain in a twenty-foot waterfall and went under the path. A makeshift bridge had been built over it—but it didn’t look stable.

“One of the scout troops did that,” Chuck said. “Probably safe, but step over it if you can.” He went first, then held his hand out for Max. She took it and stepped over. Trixie showed her head, Chuck signaled her, and the dog ran off again.

The vast beauty of the mountains could turn to a nightmare—in the dark, in the winter, during a storm. Scott was out here, alone. Angry. Scared. Had he really

walked off? Gotten lost? Why? It didn't make sense, knowing what she did about him.

They continued on, more than a half mile past the stream. They'd already been walking for an hour. The only sounds were dripping water, birds, a faint rustle of leaves. There was no wind, no voices, no traffic.

Max could handle only so much silence before she started getting nervous. Chuck was ten feet in front of her because the path was too narrow for them to walk side by side. "If—," she began when Trixie barked.

The steady barking cut through the subtle sounds of the forest. Max slipped and fell on her ass. "Shit," she muttered.

Chuck turned, smiled, and offered her a hand again, which she gratefully took. He pulled her up with strength she wouldn't have expected from his trim frame. "Trixie found something."

"Could it be an animal?"

"She knows the difference. And if there was a threat, she has a different bark."

They continued down the path, an even steeper embankment than before, but Max managed to keep her balance by holding on to the tree trunks as she went. Then it leveled out. "The old scout camp is through there." He pointed straight ahead. "You can see where the bridge collapsed."

At first Max didn't see; then it was clear that it had been a rope bridge. Thick ropes were tied to a tree trunk on either side of a steep cavern that looked at least a hundred feet deep and twenty feet across. An echo of rushing water came up from the depths.

Max never considered that she was afraid of heights, but it would take a lot of cajoling for her to take a rope bridge over that cavern.

Trixie's steady barking came from the right. Away from the scouting camp.

They turned and walked steeply up a trail twenty yards before they found Trixie standing, her head facing into a grove of trees. Chuck called her back with a whistle, and she immediately came to him and stopped barking. He gave her a scratch and a treat, then some water.

Max tried to be patient, but it didn't come naturally. She inched forward, and Chuck followed.

Just off the trail, a black sleeping bag was bunched up against a tree, partly buried in leaves and dirt. There was some snow that hadn't melted, but as they approached, the ground was soft and muddy.

At first, Max didn't see anything other than the dark bag. Then she saw the fingers of a hand, barely exposed through the opening.

"Stay here," Chuck told her. He walked over, bracing himself against the tree trunk to keep from sliding down the slick mud. He pulled back the top of the sleeping bag and peered inside. A foul stench hit Max, and Trixie whimpered, then lay down with her head on her paws. If a dog could look sad, Trixie was miserable.

Max squatted down and scratched her behind the ears. "You're a good girl, Trixie," she said. Her voice cracked.

Scott Sheldon was most certainly dead, his body remarkably preserved in the cold climate.

"Well, shit," Chuck said. "You always hope they ran off with their girlfriend."

He knelt to inspect the body. “No obvious signs of injury. No visible blood—if there was blood, I suspect the animals would have found him long ago.”

“Their statements were identical,” Max said, anger rising. “They claimed that they were hanging out at the campsite, drinking beer, and joking around. Scott got mad and stomped off toward where they’d parked, two miles away. At night. But on the map, where they parked was in the opposite direction from this trail. So either they lied about the direction—”

“Or were too drugged up to notice,” Chuck suggested, and Max agreed that it was a possibility.

“Or,” she continued, “they lied about him leaving in the first place.”

“Before you jump to conclusions, Ms. Revere, let’s see what the coroner has to say. She’s a fine doctor. If there was foul play, she’ll figure it out.” He pulled out his radio and contacted Tim and Ann. “Tim? Go back to the truck and retrieve the gurney and body bag. Meet us at the campground. We’ll lead you to the body.”

Chapter 7

“What happened?” Adele Sheldon asked Max.

Max was in her room at the Broadmoor, sitting at her desk. She didn’t know what to say—a first for her.

“Detective Horn called me,” Adele said, a hitch in her voice. “I knew he was dead, I knew it, but...” Her voice trailed off on a sob.

“Would you like me to drive down and see you?” It was almost a two-hour drive. She didn’t want to go tonight, but she would, for Scott’s mother.

“No, I want you to find out what happened. You were there. You saw him.”

“We need to wait until the autopsy results.”

“That’s what the detective said.” Adele took a deep breath, worked to control her emotions. Max let her; she didn’t need to rush this. “I wanted him to be alive, but I knew in my heart that he wasn’t. I’m his mother; I think I’ve always known.”

“Though we can’t be sure until after the tests, there were no visible injuries.” To preserve evidence, Chuck and Tim had bagged Scott’s body while still in the sleeping bag. They examined him for visible head and chest wounds, but there were none.

“Did he suffer?” she asked, her voice small.

“It doesn’t appear so.” Max didn’t know what to say, so she said what she thought was accurate. What might give Adele a modicum of comfort. “If he died of exposure, he most likely fell asleep and then just didn’t wake up.”

Adele didn’t say anything. She probably knew that dying of exposure wasn’t as peaceful as Max implied. But would it help anyone to know if Scott had been in pain?

“I’m sorry, Adele.”

“It’s okay. Why did it take you to find him? They would never have found him if you didn’t light a fire under them.”

“We don’t know that. I spent the day with Chuck Pence, the head of search and rescue. He looked as long as he could after Scott’s disappearance, but we found your son in a different area than where they initially focused.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“They had time against them in the fall. The storm was getting worse, and they concentrated on the area between the camp and where the boys had parked their truck. Scott was found on the opposite side of the mountain, nearly two miles southeast of the campground; they parked two miles north of the camp. I suspect that Chuck and his team would have found Scott in the next couple of days. I met them; they weren’t going to give up. I just—made it go faster.” She didn’t mention at this point that it had been her suggestion to check the other trail, because that really didn’t matter—not to Adele. It would matter when Max talked to the three boys who left Scott alone on that mountain.

“Are you leaving?” Adele asked.

Max had thought about it. She didn’t know why seeing Scott Sheldon’s thawing body had disturbed her so much. She’d viewed an autopsy before, seen crime scene photos, once researched a child abuse case that left a little girl in a coma. That small, unconscious body had unnerved Max on multiple levels.

But this—she’d never seen a body so exposed. So ... vulnerable. So *dead*. An autopsy was clinical and scientific. She could separate the procedure from the person. Crime scene photos were two dimensional, violent and grotesque, but again, she could view them as a reporter and not with undue emotion.

But Scott ... he was right there, and had been for nearly six months. In his sleeping bag, suggesting he knew he couldn’t get back to the campground where his friends had pitched a tent. He’d curled up against the tree, in his sleeping bag, and died. Had he known? Had he thought he would wake up in the morning and find his way back? She’d already checked—the average temperature in Colorado Springs that night was fifteen degrees. Chuck told her that would mean in the mountains where the boys had camped it would have been even colder, likely below zero. Scott’s sleeping bag wasn’t designed for subzero temperatures.

Had he wandered around and gotten lost? Why?

“I’m going to wait until the autopsy results come in, talk to the detective, then talk to the boys again.”

“Do you think—something else happened?”

“I don’t know, Adele. I think—” Max didn’t want to share her theories with Adele. Not until she had proof. “I’m not sure that the entire story has been told.”

“Call me. I—I’m going to have a funeral for him. Detective Horn said a few days and I should be able to...” Again, her voice trailed off.

“Let me know about it. If I’m still here, I’ll come.”

“Thank you. Thank you.” Adele hung up and Max was relieved. The grief of parents twisted her stomach in knots. She had a headache—she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. She wasn’t hungry, but knew she needed to eat something or she wouldn’t be able to sleep. Especially when she couldn’t get Scott Sheldon’s dead body out of her mind.

She made a reservation at the Tavern, her favorite restaurant at the Broadmoor. She’d been to the resort many times in the past—it was one of her favorite places to relax—only this time, she didn’t feel relaxed.

Chuck called her cell phone as she was leaving for dinner. “I wanted to see how you’re doing. You were very quiet during the drive back.”

“It’s been a long day,” she said. “I’m dining at the Tavern, if you’d like to join me.”

He didn’t commit. “I’ll see.”

“You know where I am,” she said, and hung up. She didn’t want small talk; she didn’t really want to talk at all.

The restaurant was across the courtyard from the main building. She stepped out into pouring rain. The doorman handed her a complimentary umbrella, and she smiled her thanks, but had no energy to talk. Her thoughts were filled with images of Scott Sheldon dying alone—buried in snow, pounded with rain, covered with layers of mulch. Her melancholy turned to anger. There was no reason he should have died on that mountain.

She was seated immediately and ordered a crab cake appetizer and wine before she looked at the menu. The wine, thankfully, arrived first.

She stared at the fire across the room, sipped her wine, and tried to force her mind to go blank. It was something she had a hard time doing, turning off her thoughts. Either her mind had to be working or her body—preferably both. But today all she felt was cold, even in the warm restaurant and wearing her favorite cashmere sweater and snug wool slacks. She shouldn’t be cold, but even the hot shower after she returned from the mountain hadn’t warmed her.

The loss hit her. What had Scott been thinking those hours he lay in the cheap nylon sleeping bag? Had he known he was dying? How long did he stay there, too cold to move, too cold to call out? Was he disoriented? Severe hypothermia lowered the body temperature so much that victims got confused, often hallucinating and wandering, their heart rate dropping, their major organs slowly shutting down. Did it take a couple hours? All night? He would have lost consciousness before he died, but the hours leading up to that would have been full of fear and pain.

A miserable way to die.

But was there any good way to die?

By all accounts, Karen had been stabbed to death—how else could she have lost so much blood? Did she die faster than Scott, and did that make it some sort of blessing? Or was it more painful, more fearful? Did it matter? They were both young people, in college, with their lives ahead of them, and they were dead. One violently, and one by the stupidity of others.

Whether it was malicious or not remained to be seen.

Her crab cakes came and the waitress asked if she wanted to order dinner. “Not now,” Max said. “Another glass of wine, please.”

She nibbled on the crab cakes and watched as Chuck Pence crossed in front of the fire and sat across from her.

“Where’s Trixie?” Max asked.

“Home. Finding a body, even though she’s trained for it, is disturbing for her as well as us. My wife knows how to soothe her.”

“Have a drink with me,” Max said as the waitress came with her second glass.

He said to the waitress, “Scotch, neat.”

“Do you have a preference?”

“No,” he said.

“Top shelf, single malt,” Max told the waitress. “Thank you.”

“Reporting must pay well,” Chuck said.

“Not particularly.”

“Detective Horn told me you’re also a writer. Books.”

“True crime.” She didn’t feel the need to share more of her history with Chuck. “I’m sorry I was abrupt on the phone.” Apologies didn’t come easy to her, but she had been snippy, and Chuck had been helpful. “I appreciate that you took me out with you and the Callows today.”

“I wish there could have been a better outcome.”

“We both knew the outcome.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier.”

They sat in silence while the waitress brought Chuck’s Scotch. He sniffed, sipped, nodded. “Thank you.”

“Did you get the preliminary autopsy report?” Max was familiar enough with the process to know they wouldn’t get a final report until the exam and all tests came back.

“The autopsy is scheduled for tomorrow morning. Amelia said she’d call me when she knew anything.” He paused, sipped some more. “She doesn’t usually do that, but she knows this has been bothering me. And she suspects I’ll inform you.”

“Why doesn’t she call me?”

“She’s uncomfortable talking to the press.”

“She talked to me on the phone the other day.”

“Curiosity.”

“And you? You deal with the press all the time?”

“Never. But you don’t strike me as a typical reporter.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I did learn something at the coroner’s office. The visual exam of the body shows no external cause of death. There were some scrapes on his arms consistent with tree branches or falling and skinning his arm, but other than that, no visible wounds. X-rays showed a fracture in his left fibula. He probably could have walked on it, but it would have been painful. Because the body was frozen for so long, and based on average temperature for the area over the last six months, the coroner hopes to get a good tox screen, see if he was on drugs. Alcohol will be next to impossible to find—it breaks down in the system in a matter of hours, but it also speeds up hypothermia.”

“If he was found Saturday, would he have survived?”

“I can’t answer that. He was in apparent good health, he should have been able to survive, though he’d have had extreme hypothermia. By the second night, I would put his chance of survival—given what he was wearing and the sleeping bag—at less than twenty percent. If he’d fallen in the creek we crossed to find him, that would have lowered his body temperature dramatically and he wouldn’t have survived even more moderate temperatures than what he had. Without those answers, I can’t speculate.”

He paused, sipped his Scotch. “You’re suggesting that had the boys informed the rangers on Saturday that he was missing, we could have found him.”

“Yes.”

He let out a long, slow sigh. “I don’t know.”

“We found him in a different area than you originally looked.”

“Correct.”

Max nodded.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, Ms. Revere, but you’re thinking.”

“Max. My friends call me Max.” He was right; she was thinking. “What if they deliberately misled search and rescue?”

“Playing devil’s advocate, why? There’s no physical trauma. No signs of abuse, no bruising, minor scrapes consistent with the environment.”

“If something else happened—maybe drug related, maybe something Scott knew—something that, if he were found alive, he could tell that would get the others in trouble.”

“That’s a mighty big leap, unsupported by any evidence.”

“There’s plenty of evidence,” she said bitterly. “It’s a matter of how we look at it. Is Detective Horn going to talk to them?”

“Not until after the autopsy report comes back.”

“They’ll have plenty of time to synchronize their stories.”

“I think it would be best if you stayed in the background. Amelia is a good cop. If there’s something there, she’ll find it.”

“She told me on the phone that there was no evidence of foul play then, and if there’s no physical evidence now, there’s not going to be an investigation. It’s not like I’m impeding an official police inquiry. I can get Tom Keller to confess. He’s the weak link.”

“Confess to what?”

She stared Chuck in the eye. “The truth.”

* * * * *

Max rarely found herself drunk, but she was tipsy when she walked back to her hotel room. She hoped the alcohol would help her sleep, but suspected it would more likely contribute to vivid and disturbing dreams. She drank water while checking her e-mail. Her editor—she filed it away to respond to later. Ben, again nagging her about the television show. She e-mailed him back.

If you keep nagging me, I will block your e-mails and never return a phone call. I’ll let you know when I make my decision.

There were several other messages she ignored or deleted, and then she saw the note from her computer genius in New York, Grant Malone.

I analyzed the image you forwarded. It was uploaded at 8:39 a.m. local time on October 31. The image was uploaded via Wi-Fi, the code was also embedded in the image. I’ve attached the GPS location and verification of the Wi-Fi code.

She clicked on the attachment. The photo had been uploaded from a hotel off the interstate that was nowhere near the campground. In fact, they were thirty-seven miles away, in a warm hotel room while Scott Sheldon died a slow and painful death, cold and alone.

Chapter 8

When Max woke Thursday morning, she planned to go directly to the college campus and confront Tom Keller with the evidence, compel him to tell her the truth. But she needed more evidence than a photo she'd downloaded from the Internet. It convinced her, and it might convince Tom to talk, but Arthur Cowan was a wily bastard, and Max needed something irrefutable. Something else to sway Tom Keller that telling the truth was his only choice.

She doubted anyone at the hotel would remember three college boys after six months, but she might be able to convince one of the staff members to look up information for her. It was worth a shot.

And if they wouldn't do it out of the kindness of their hearts, Max had enough cash to convince them. It had worked in the past.

The hotel was twenty-five minutes north of Colorado Springs, outside the city limits and off the interstate—the same road they used before turning up the mountain to get to the campground. On the drive, Max called the campus bookstore to talk to Jess, but learned she didn't work Thursdays. Max couldn't convince the person who answered to give her Jess's cell phone number or her dorm room, and while Max couldn't blame them for protecting Jess's privacy, it was frustrating. She gave the person her contact information and said that it was urgent Jess contact her.

Urgent might be an overstatement, but Max had an idea, and Jess was her best bet to put it in action.

Then she called Chuck Pence, but he didn't answer. She left a message on his voice mail. She considered calling Detective Horn, but feared the cop would tell her to stay out of it. Max had no plans to do that. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, Karen had always said. Max never agreed with her ... until she became a freelance reporter. Asking for permission rarely worked.

Plus, she'd been in jail before, and it was no fun.

The embedded photo information identified not only the hotel's Wi-Fi, but also narrowed the location to the south wing. It wasn't until she parked in the guest lot that she realized she didn't have a plan that didn't involve bribery. Not everyone could be bribed. But she was here, she wasn't going to stop now.

She walked in and assessed the lobby. It wasn't a five-star hotel, but it wasn't a dive, either.

It was ten in the morning and the building was relatively quiet. She had three options—concierge, reception, or find the manager. There were two people at the reception counter, so Max picked the concierge, an older man in a well-cut suit. His nameplate read ANDERSON.

She approached with a confident smile and handed him her business card. "Maxine Revere. I'm following up on information about three guests who stayed here last October thirtieth. I'm hoping you can help me."

"We don't give out guest information, hotel policy."

"I completely understand, Mr. Anderson. I don't need personal information. I have the names of the guests, I would simply like to confirm that they were in fact guests on that night. Even a verbal confirmation would be sufficient."

She discreetly slid over a fifty-dollar bill.

He barely glanced at it, but his expression darkened. Dammit, she'd blown it. She rarely read people wrong; she thought for sure he would cave.

"I cannot help you, Ms. Revere, and if you persist, I will call security."

Jerk. She forced herself to smile and walked away, taking her fifty with her.

She could feel Mr. Anderson's eyes boring into her back, so she turned into the lounge. Fortunately, it was open. She wasn't much of a morning drinker, but right now she was out of options. She needed a backup plan, and that meant sitting down to think. It didn't help that she hadn't slept well last night, odd dreams of searching for Karen intermingled with finding Scott's body. Only, she found Karen—bloodied and staring at her as if everything were her fault.

Why didn't you do something?

Why indeed. Max couldn't save Karen from her bad choices. She hadn't even been able to prove who had killed her. But she wasn't going to give up finding out why Keller, Ibarra, and Cowan left Scott to die.

During her restless sleep, Max had come up with a theory. Arthur Cowan was the joker, and from what she'd seen on his social media pages, he could be cruel. What if he was still infatuated with Jess, but Jess wanted nothing to do with him? And then he thought Jess and Scott were together? Would he play a "prank" on Scott, leave him on the mountain? And if so, why hadn't Tom Keller or Carlos Ibarra stopped Art from doing it? Why hadn't they told someone sooner? Was Carlos so loyal to Art, and Tom so desperate to make friends, that they would do anything he wanted?

All the evidence—circumstantial though it was—told Max they'd left Scott Sheldon at that campsite, by himself, all night. And Scott must have thought they wouldn't come back, so he tried to get out on his own.

Why, dammit? There has to be a reason!

The bartender, a fit, attractive, forty-year-old black guy wearing slacks and a button-down white shirt, approached her with the clichéd line: "What's your poison?"

"Be honest. How are your Bloody Marys?"

He smiled, revealing perfect teeth. Max had always appreciated a nice smile. "The best in Colorado. I prepare my own mix fresh every morning."

"I want the good vodka, but make it weak."

He dipped his head and mixed her drink. She watched his fluid, sure movements. He set it in front of her and she read his name tag: JOHANN. "Why do you look so glum, pretty lady?"

She wasn't in the mood to flirt, so instead said bluntly, "I couldn't bribe your concierge."

Johann laughed, and his next words to her held a hint of an accent she couldn't immediately place. "Sugar, you should have asked me."

She slid over the fifty she was going to give to Mr. Anderson. "Keep it. You can't help me."

"Try me."

She sipped the Bloody Mary. Nodded appreciatively. "You're right. Best in Colorado. Better than my cousin's five-star Vail resort."

"I know."

"You know the resort?"

He winked. "I just know I'm the best."

She laughed and felt the tension washing away. “Six months ago, three college students stayed here. I know it, I have a photo they took elsewhere but uploaded through your hotel Wi-Fi. But I need to confirm it.”

“Aw, yes, our guest privacy. Wouldn’t you expect a hotel to respect your privacy?”

“It depends.”

“Depends?”

“I’m a reporter. Sometimes I want people to find me.”

“Did they drink?”

“Probably. But they were nineteen and twenty.”

“Did you have a fake ID when you were nineteen or twenty?”

“No,” she answered truthfully. Then she smiled. “But my college roommate did.”

He slid over a napkin and pen. He didn’t have to tell her to write down the names. She put them down—including Scott Sheldon. He didn’t look, but took the napkin and walked to the end of the bar, into a small office she hadn’t noticed until he stepped in and the light flickered on.

She wasn’t going to hold out hope, and instead enjoyed her drink. Already, a plan began to form. She knew Tom Keller was the weak link, but she’d also learned from Ian Stanhope, Scott’s roommate, that he and Tom shared a class together. If she could catch up with Ian, she could convince him to reach out to Tom. She’d play on the roommate’s guilt if she had to. She’d present the evidence to Tom—the photo would have to be enough. Max could spin the story, watch his reaction, play off it, until Tom broke down.

Johann returned and Max said, “Thank you for the delicious drink. It helped—I have a plan.”

He smiled. “I can tell you—though I can’t give you a copy—that the third name on your list signed for a room service charge that included a bucket of Corona. Our buckets come in four or eight; he signed for the eight bucket.”

Her heart thudded. She had them.

“How long do you keep the records?”

“One year.”

She drained her Bloody Mary and left the fifty on the bar. “Thank you, Johann. That’s just what I needed.”

* * * * *

Max drove toward the police station to give Detective Horn all the information she had and ask what she was going to do about it. If Max were the cop, she’d haul all three of those boys into the police station and question them until they admitted they killed Scott Sheldon. At this point, Max didn’t think it was an accident. Maybe they hadn’t *intended* for Scott to die, but their callous actions resulted in his death. Manslaughter at a minimum, and maybe even second-degree murder.

If *premeditated*? That would put this crime on a whole other field.

Her phone rang; it was Chuck Pence.

“You have news?” she asked.

“Officially, cause of death was hypothermia. Scott’s organs shut down. The coroner is sending tissue and blood samples for further analysis, particularly drug screenings, but right now the preliminary cause of death is accidental.”

“It wasn’t an accident!” Max pounded her fist on the wheel of her SUV.

Chuck remained silent. Max needed to control her temper. This case had gotten under her skin, and it wasn’t Chuck’s fault. “Chuck,” she said, “I have proof that Arthur, Carlos, and Tom left Scott at the campsite then drove to a hotel where they stayed the night.”

“Proof?”

“That photo I mentioned to you last night—my guy in New York pulled out the GPS of where and when it was uploaded. At a hotel, Saturday morning. The photo was tagged with the hotel’s Wi-Fi and GPS location. It’s a fingerprint. I spoke to the bartender and he pulled records from the night of October thirtieth—Carlos Ibarra ordered a bucket of eight Coronas. The night they were supposed to be at the campground.”

“The hotel just gave you that information?”

“I asked nicely.”

“You should tell Detective Horn. I’m not a cop, Max.”

“But you agree with me.”

“You can’t know that it wasn’t an accident.”

“If they left Scott Sheldon alone on that mountain with no means of getting home, except on foot, they are responsible for his death.”

“He should have been able to survive the night,” Chuck said. “We found his backpack and tent near the body. He never set it up; had he, he may have survived.”

“You don’t know that! And hypothermia causes delusions and poor judgment. And just yesterday you said if he’d fallen in the creek and gotten wet that hypothermia could happen faster. He may not have had the mental capacity to pitch the tent or consider that he *was* suffering. And if they were drinking, that speeds everything up, right?”

“There’s no indication that anyone forced him to drink.”

“Scott Sheldon is not to blame for his death,” Max said. “That’s like saying a woman wearing a short skirt is to blame for her rape.”

“That’s unfair,” Chuck snapped.

Maybe it was, but it was also true. “If those boys had not left the mountain, Scott would be alive. They played a cruel joke on him, and he ended up dead.”

“Good luck in convincing Amelia. You’re going to need a lot more than a photograph.” He hung up.

Max took a deep breath, but it didn’t make her feel any calmer. She hadn’t wanted to antagonize Chuck—she liked the guy—but didn’t he see what she saw?

Horn hadn’t impressed her as someone who saw the possibilities of the situation. Max needed something more, something that would convince the police that there was a criminal case to pursue, that three selfish college students had led another student to his death.

She drove past Colorado Springs and continued south, to Cheyenne College.

It was nearly noon when she walked into the bookstore. Jess wasn't there. She approached the long-haired guy behind the counter. "I'm looking for Jess," Max said.

"She doesn't work today."

"I called earlier. Maxine Revere. Did she get my message?"

"Like I said, she doesn't work today, and I'm not her personal message service."

"Do you know where I might find her?"

He sighed dramatically. "I'm not supposed to give out information about students."

Max didn't want to line this jerk's pockets, but she'd paid bigger assholes for information. She slid over a twenty.

"Music theory, Stevenson Hall."

She didn't bother to say thank you, and strode over the Stevenson Hall.

By the time she arrived, students were streaming from the building, some carrying instruments, others with the typical backpack or messenger bag. Her height was an advantage, and she stood on a small, decorative bridge that gave her a better vantage point. The gray sky suited her mood.

Max had to convince Jess that her theory was solid. The girl already suspected something went wrong that weekend, even if she didn't say anything at the time. Maybe Jess didn't realize she knew something important, or maybe she did but she was too scared to talk.

As the crowd thinned to a trickle, Max grew increasingly discouraged, fearing she'd missed Jess. Then she saw the petite sophomore walking with her head down, her messenger bag slung over her shoulder.

"Jess."

The girl barely looked at her. "Go away."

"I can prove they killed Scott."

Jess stopped, and looked at Max. Tears filled her dark eyes. "Wh-what?"

"They left him on the mountain. I don't know if it was supposed to be a joke, or if they intended to kill him, but it was malicious and they need to be held accountable."

"How do you know?"

"I have a photo uploaded to Facebook Saturday morning from a hotel, not from the campground. And Carlos Ibarra signed for a bucket of beer Friday night. I think you know why they didn't like Scott, why they would pull such a cruel joke that ended up getting him killed. Tell me, Jess. Scott deserves for the truth to be told."

Jess stood there shivering, but made no move to go inside. "I—I didn't know."

"I was with search and rescue when they found Scott's body yesterday."

Her eyes widened. "You found him?"

"Huddled in a sleeping bag under a tree. He died there, cold and alone, while Art, Carlos, and Tom were partying it up in a hotel."

Her lip quivered.

"Why did you stop talking to Art after Scott disappeared?" When Jess didn't say anything, Max pushed. "You dated him last year."

"Not for long. He's an asshole." Jess took a deep breath; then everything poured out. "His pranks are mean. He told me he found a kitten behind his dorm, then

held up this paper bag and threw it in the pond at the quad. I jumped in and it wasn't a kitten in the bag, it was a rock, and he stood there and laughed at me. Tried to convince me that it was just a joke, that he would never hurt an animal, but I didn't believe him. I broke up with him and he spread nasty rumors about me. He doesn't have many friends, except Carlos. I don't know why people believed him, but you know how people are."

"Were you and Scott involved?"

"No—maybe we could have been. But we were just friends. I told him not to go camping with Art, that he and Carlos couldn't be trusted. Once, when Art and I were making out in his dorm room, Carlos jumped out of the closet and they laughed at me. Art had my shirt off, it was so humiliating. I should have broken up with him then, but I believed him when he said he didn't know. It was only later—" She looked away.

Max reached out and squeezed her arm. "Jess, this isn't your fault. Art is a bully and enjoys hurting people."

Max added, "Did Art think that you and Scott were involved?"

She shrugged. "But he's never hurt anyone. His pranks are just mean."

"Hurting people doesn't mean physically hurting them. But this time, with Scott, he went too far. Help me prove it."

"He'll never admit it."

"He doesn't have to. I need you to get Tom Keller to meet you in your room."

"Tom's just like them—maybe not mean, but he tries so hard to get people to like him."

Max could work with that. "Please, Jess." Max was out of options. If Jess didn't agree to help, Max would have to turn over what she had to Detective Horn, and she didn't think it was enough. Max could think of a half dozen ways the boys could explain away why they were in the hotel, and without proof that they maliciously left Scott Sheldon to die, they'd get away with it.

Just like Karen's killer got away with murder, because her body had never been found and he had a damn good lawyer.

"You really think they left him up there? By himself?"

"I do."

Jess looked at her feet. "All right. I'll call Tom."

Chapter 9

Max sat with Jess in her dorm room, an awkward silence between them. "Jess, is there anything else you want to tell me?"

She'd been biting her nails ever since she got off the phone with Tom. "I shouldn't get involved."

"Someone has to stand up for what's right." In all the investigations Max had covered, too often people had turned their back on someone who needed help. Or, were blinded by the evil in another. And just as often, Max had met people who did help, who went out of their way to care for those who couldn't care for themselves.

People who recognized evil for what it was and did something to stop it. “Do you really think Art will stop being cruel? Do you think he’ll learn any lesson from this, other than he got away with it?”

“It had to be an accident.”

“That’s what you want to believe,” Max said. And maybe it was. Maybe Art didn’t want Scott dead, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t culpable in his death.

Something Tom had said when she first talked to him came back to her.

It’s not our fault he left.

The comment could be taken in two ways. Either he left because he was mad, or left the campground before they returned for him. What if Scott didn’t think they would return? What if they gave him the impression that they wouldn’t? And when the weather turned, he might have thought he had no other choice but to try to find his way out on foot.

Jess jumped when there was a knock on the door. Max got up to answer it.

It was Tom. He saw her and turned to leave.

Max grabbed his arm and pulled him into the room. “You’re not going until you tell me the truth.”

Tom looked at Jess. “What’s going on?”

“You killed Scott!”

Max winced. Going for the jugular wouldn’t get them answers.

“Is that what she told you? That’s not true!”

Max closed the door so they wouldn’t attract an audience.

“You went along with one of Art’s stupid jokes, didn’t you?” Jess said. “I thought you were better than that. I thought you were Scott’s friend. That’s what *he* thought.”

“I was! I liked Scott! He just wandered off. We didn’t know what to do.”

Max said, “Tom, I know what happened, and I can prove it. You, Art, and Carlos went to the campground with Scott. But you left him there. Maybe you were having a few beers, and thought it would be fun to play a joke. He goes to pee against a tree and you all leave. Or he falls asleep by the fire, and you sneak off. Whatever you did, he was alone, and you, Carlos, and Art drove thirty-seven miles to the interstate, checked into a hotel, and ordered Corona beer from room service.”

He stared at her, obviously stunned that she knew. “Then,” she said, “Art posted a photo of you, Carlos, and Scott at the campsite. Only, he didn’t realize that whenever you upload a photo through a mobile device, it logs certain information. In this case, the GPS and time *where* you uploaded it. Eight thirty-nine Saturday morning—through the hotel’s Wi-Fi, with the GPS putting you at the hotel that morning. The same morning you said you woke up at the campground and Scott was still not back.

“What I think—and jump in if I’m wrong—is that you went back there Saturday morning and Scott wasn’t there. You may or may not have looked for him; probably called for him a few times. But it was raining, and it was cold. You went back to the college late, then tried to find him again Sunday morning. But it was snowing and either you pretended to look, or you didn’t even go all the way to the campsite. You didn’t tell the campus police until Sunday that Scott was missing.”

Tom was so pale, Max knew she had pegged the truth. “Had you contacted search and rescue Saturday morning, when you first realized Scott wasn’t where you’d left him, Scott would have survived.”

Jess gasped.

Tom was trembling. “No. It wasn’t like that, not exactly.”

“Then how was it?”

“I can’t—”

“Fine. Don’t tell me. You’ll be talking to the police very soon. I’m meeting with Detective Horn to give her all the evidence I uncovered, in addition to a signed statement by the bartender that Carlos Ibarra’s credit card was used on a hotel charge the night you told police that you were camping in the mountains.”

She had no qualms about lying. She was pretty sure the police would be able to get a statement from the bartender. They could also get a warrant for the hotel guest records.

“I—I—I didn’t want to. It was just a joke, we didn’t know it was going to snow. We didn’t know he wouldn’t be there. If he’d stayed, we would have brought him back.”

“But he didn’t stay. He was scared, lonely, didn’t know you were going to return. Probably mad, too. He broke his leg, couldn’t move. We found his body yesterday. Two miles from the campsite, in the opposite direction from the entrance. He broke his leg because you and Art and Carlos left him up there alone with an inadequate sleeping bag.”

“I’m s-so sorry.” He bit his lip and stared at Jess. “Jess, I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“Tell that to his mother,” Max said.

“It was an accident. I didn’t want Scott to get hurt. I didn’t want to stay out all night, just a couple hours, but—”

“Was it Art’s idea? Or Carlos?”

“Art. It was his idea.”

Jess interjected, “And you didn’t have the balls to stand up to him? To tell him he was being a jerk?”

“I—I couldn’t. Art, well, I—I—,” Tom stuttered, unable to finish his thought.

Jess started to cry. “Art’s mean and spiteful and he makes you feel like anything that goes wrong is your fault. I know. Oh, God, this just sucks. Scott was a good guy.”

“I will get Scott justice,” Max said. To Tom, “If you confess, the police will go easy on you. Just remember—if you continue to lie, you’ll only get yourself into deeper trouble.”

She waited until Tom left, then picked up her iPad, which was sitting on Jess’s bed. She stopped recording. “Thank you, Jess.”

“I—I didn’t believe you.”

“Yes, you did, otherwise you wouldn’t have gone out on a limb to set this up.” Max put her iPad in her bag and said, “Stay away from Art and Carlos. Tom isn’t going to be able to keep this conversation secret, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m okay,” Jess said.

“Art lost his temper with me when I confronted him Tuesday. He pushed me. He’s a hothead. If he has a weapon, or uses his weight to bully you—”

"I'll stay away from him," Jess said. "I don't have classes tomorrow. I think I'll go visit my mom."

"Good idea. You have my numbers. Call me if you have any questions. And if Art harasses you, call the police."

Jess walked Max to the door. "Thank you. I—I didn't think anyone really cared what happened to Scott, but you do."

Max left the dorm room and walked through the campus to where she'd parked her car. She got in and called Detective Horn. It took several minutes before she could finally get her on the phone. "Detective, Maxine Revere."

"I remember. Chuck told me you put yourself in the middle of this investigation."

"You mean there's an investigation?"

"You know what I mean."

"There's an investigation now. I have evidence that Arthur Cowan played a prank on Scott Sheldon and left him in the mountains without any way to get back to the campus or phone for help. Carlos Ibarra and Tom Keller were complicit. They stayed in a hotel that night. I'll bring everything to you—"

"I already talked to Chuck. There's hardly enough evidence to counter what they've told us."

"Tom Keller confirmed everything. It was Cowan's idea and Tom went along with it because Cowan intimidated him."

Detective Horn didn't say anything for a long minute. "Bring me what you have," she finally said. "I'll see if there's anything here. But even if the boys left Scott up on that mountain on purpose, there may not be a crime here."

"Why the hell not?" Max said, then cringed. Being confrontational at this juncture wasn't going to help her get in the detective's good graces.

"I said I would look at what you have, but I'm not happy about any of this. A kid is still dead, and no one can bring him back."

Max stared at her phone. The detective had hung up on her.

Max tossed her phone on the passenger seat and pulled out of the parking lot. She mentally wrote a few possible headlines.

POLICE REFUSE TO SEEK JUSTICE

STUDENTS WHO LEFT COLLEGE BOY TO DIE ON MOUNTAIN WALK AWAY FREE AND CLEAR

DELAY IN NOTIFYING SEARCH AND RESCUE LEADS COLLEGE BOY TO DIE OF EXPOSURE

None of them were good. She'd leave the headline to her editor, but she already had half the story written in her head. She wanted to highlight Scott Sheldon's life, his innocence, his trust, his stolen future. She wanted to highlight the failure of a system that didn't have a clear process to deal with missing students. She wanted to expose the three boys—particularly Arthur Cowan—for their culpability in the death of a peer.

Max had never been religious, but she'd read Bible stories, and one that always stuck with her was the Good Samaritan. That someone would stop and help another, who was obviously ill and in pain, even though it wasn't expected of him—resonated with Max. It pained Max that others would walk by and not give the ailing person the time of day, avoiding them, *ignoring* them. And too many

people had looked the other way with the disappearance of Scott Sheldon. The boys who left him on the mountain. Tom Keller, who knew he'd done wrong but kept the secret. Ian Stanhope, Scott's roommate, who didn't think it was his responsibility to look out for his roommate. The campus police, who waited too long to notify the ranger station. Even the detective, who didn't think there had been a crime.

Someone had to stand for Scott.

Maybe because Max was hot under the collar, or maybe because she was preoccupied, trying to come up with a perfect headline for her article, she didn't notice that the car behind her was gaining until it was right on her tail. She glanced in her rearview mirror in time to see the large truck a second before it rammed her. She couldn't see the driver, it happened so quickly.

Her head hit the steering wheel even though her seat belt locked. She couldn't maintain control of her car around the bend.

Thoughts flitted in and out of her mind so fast, she barely acknowledged them. First, that she was in trouble. Then, that when she died she might finally find out exactly what had happened to Karen. Then her survival instinct kicked into high gear as she fought the urge to brake and instead sharply turned the wheel to avoid hitting a thick tree head-on.

The SUV spun twice, and didn't flip over. The air bags didn't deploy, maybe because there was no front-end collision. She rolled to a stop.

Her heart raced as she sat in the car, in the middle of the road, her hands gripped tight around the steering wheel.

She couldn't move. She wanted to. She wanted to get out of the damn car and walk—no, run—after the truck that hit her. She looked around, but didn't see it. Hit and run. Dammit, someone had rear-ended her and left. She was shaking, and she didn't want to be scared. She refused to be scared. Her breathing was shaky. She focused on slowing her heart rate, taking long, deep breaths.

She hadn't noticed another car pull over until the driver tapped on her window. "Ma'am? Are you okay, ma'am?"

She tried to nod. Her neck was stiff. But nothing felt broken. She took a deep breath. Her chest hurt where the seat belt dug into her skin.

But she was alive. She was alive and scared, and that made her angry.

"Ma'am?"

She slowly put the SUV in park. The engine wasn't on, probably stalled out or broken. With shaking hands, she fumbled with the door latch and finally opened it.

"Ma'am, my wife called 911. Help is on the way."

"Thank ... you."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't try to get up. I got the other driver's license plate. The police will find him."

"Good Samaritan," she mumbled. Her head hurt.

"You're bleeding," he said.

She touched her forehead and came back with a little blood. "I'm okay," she said. But she didn't try to stand. Her knees still felt weak, and her head was fuzzy.

And then she thought: Had someone hit her on purpose?

Chapter 10

Max took advantage of all the resort amenities that weekend, relaxing for the first time since before she took the elder abuse case in Florida. Had she really started that over a year ago? She might even stay here until her cousin's wedding next weekend, when she had to face her family back in California. If she did, she could attend Scott's memorial service on Wednesday evening.

She didn't relax easily, but swimming in the heated pool, soaking in the spa, and being pampered with massages—she finally felt the tension and stress from the tragedies and the car accident disappear.

The truck that hit her was registered to Carlos Ibarra. He had an alibi for the time of the collision—he was in class. Police questioned Arthur Cowan and Tom Keller, but both denied driving the truck. Police found it abandoned several miles from the accident. There were no prints at all in the cab, suggesting it had been wiped clean.

There was no doubt in Max's mind that Arthur Cowan had rammed her, but there was no proof, either.

She had to let it go.

She didn't want to.

When Chuck Pence called Monday afternoon, she invited him for a celebratory drink. "Bring your wife, and Trixie." Max would enjoy the company, both human and canine.

"I'll see," he'd said, and agreed to meet her at four.

She was sipping her wine on the outside terrace when she saw Chuck step out with Trixie. The woman on his arm was not his wife, however; it was Detective Amelia Horn. Immediately Max knew something was wrong.

She watched them approach her table. The cop wasn't looking at her, but Chuck was. His long face hung even longer.

Max leaned back and scratched Trixie while motioning for Chuck and Horn to sit down. The attentive waitress approached. Horn asked for water only. Chuck, a beer.

Max sipped her wine and waited for one of them to tell her what in their case was messed up.

It was Chuck who spoke. "Amelia asked me to come with her to explain the situation."

Max waited. Inside she was heating up; she knew what was coming before either of them said anything. But still, she waited, a vision of the calm she didn't feel.

"It was supposed to be a joke, like Tom Keller told you last week," Chuck said. "They didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

"Drunk drivers don't mean to kill anyone, but they still get prosecuted when they hit someone while driving drunk."

"It's not the same thing," Horn said.

"They left him on the mountain in below-freezing temperatures with a small tent and sleeping bag that was insufficient for the weather."

“Had Scott stayed at the campground, he would have survived,” Horn said.

“So it’s Scott’s fault that he’s dead? You’ll tell that to his mother?”

“I already spoke to Mrs. Sheldon. She understands. I explained that while the D.A. wasn’t filing criminal charges, she was welcome to file a wrongful death case in a civil court. But she doesn’t want to press charges.”

Max felt sucker-punched. “You sugar-coated it. Arthur Cowan is a bully who’s an expert skier and would have known that conditions could turn at any time.”

“They all admitted to what they did, that they went back up Saturday morning, looked for him, couldn’t find him, panicked when the storm got worse.”

“And waiting until Sunday to tell campus police? And campus police waiting until Monday to tell the rangers’ office so a search party could be sent out?”

“It’s a tragedy for everyone. The D.A. has already cut a deal. They pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of reckless endangerment and one year probation.”

“That’s unacceptable,” Max said.

“I don’t believe you’re a lawyer, or a cop, or have any say in what the D.A. does or does not do.”

“This is bullshit,” Max said. “Scott Sheldon is dead because of those three, who were sleeping in a warm hotel room while Scott died alone in the woods. Where’s the justice?”

“If this went to trial, their lives would be ruined, and the D.A. wasn’t confident he’d get a conviction. Their story was emotionally compelling, and Cowan already has a lawyer.”

“Of course he does.” Max had seen all this coming, but she thought something good would have come from the truth.

Adele Sheldon has a body to bury. She knows what happened to her son. That’s why you did this, Maxine. You came here for the truth, and that’s what you found.

But right now, it wasn’t enough.

“I didn’t have to come here and tell you any of this,” Horn said, and stood. “Our hands are tied.”

“They lied to you. They lied to everyone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And Carlos’s truck being used to run me off the road?”

“Look, I understand why you’re upset, and I would be, too. I pushed. But there’s no proof that Arthur Cowan was driving. None. No security camera, no witnesses. You didn’t see the driver. The witness who helped you didn’t see the driver. It could have been Tom Keller, or anyone else. We pushed both of them; neither budged.”

The waitress came with the water and the beer. Max stared at Trixie, who lay both alert and peaceful next to Chuck.

“Then there’s nothing more to say,” Max said. Not now, at any rate. But she’d been working on the article all weekend. She would expose to the public everything that had happened to Scott Sheldon, and who was responsible.

“I’m sorry,” Horn repeated, then left.

“I tried,” Chuck said quietly. “But without physical evidence, and all three sticking to the same story, it wasn’t possible to get the D.A. to change his mind. He didn’t even want to put up a plea deal, but Amelia convinced him that a misdemeanor and probation were better than nothing.”

"It's not fair."

God, she hated the feeling and couldn't believe she'd said it out loud. She damn well knew life wasn't fair. Her life had been a roller coaster for twenty-nine years. Was it fair that her mother had walked out on her, dumping her with her older grandparents? Was it fair that her college roommate was murdered and no one could prove who'd killed her? Was it fair that Scott Sheldon died the subject of a cruel joke?

Fairness had nothing to do with living. Max believed in the truth, believed that all truth was knowledge, and with that knowledge, justice would prevail.

Nowhere in that was there *fairness*.

She and Chuck sat drinking in silence.

Truth. The truth could be told. Because truth was a different brand of justice.

* * * * *

Max called Ben first thing Tuesday morning.

"I'll be back in New York next week. I sent you changes to your proposal."

"You'll do the show?"

"If you agree to my changes."

"Yes."

"You don't know what they are."

"I don't care."

She smiled, genuinely smiled, for the first time in days. "Yes, you will."

"Okay, give me the basics."

"I want creative control. I want to decide what cases I investigate and air. I liked your Web site idea, the short articles, the snippets around the country—we need to expand that."

"Did something happen in Colorado?"

For someone so self-absorbed, Ben had a knack for getting to the truth. She had to admire the trait.

"This case—a group of college kids left another student in the middle of nowhere as a prank. He died, they got off with probation. As if Scott Sheldon's life isn't worth the cost for a minimal sentence."

"What do you hope to accomplish, Max?"

"Shine a light on the cruelty of human nature, how the selfish choices of a group of kids resulted in the accidental death of another, how their lies and misdirection resulted in a mother not knowing what happened to her son for six months. Six months of the unknown. Of fear and worry. The emotional turmoil the callous actions of youth created in a family."

"Okay."

"Okay?" She expected him to argue with her, that the story wouldn't be "sexy" enough or big enough for a cable news show.

"I trust you, Max. I know you'll put the right angle, the right spin on it. But it won't fill up the forty-four minutes we need for the show."

"I can—"

"Hold it. This is my job, making this work. A theme—those left behind. Friends and families of missing persons. I'll find three other cases you can interview, and

we'll use your Colorado case as the positive, of persistence in finding the truth." He paused. "You'll have to talk about Karen."

"No."

"You wrote a book about it, it's a perfect lead-in for the show. You're the best person to understand how these families feel. Max, trust me on this—I'm not going to sensationalize Karen's disappearance. It's a hook. You know it. And I've read your book a half dozen times. You had a call to action—if anyone knows anything, they need to come forward. We can do the same call to action on this show. We'll find cases like Scott Sheldon, and call people to come forward."

She liked the idea. She really liked it. If she worked on cold cases, the chances were that most of these people were dead. But closure—that would help the survivors.

"Find a runaway," she said. "Someone who might come home if they knew their family ached for them."

"I knew you had a knack for this."

"I'm not doing a weekly show. I wouldn't be able to do these cases justice."

"Semimonthly."

"Monthly."

"Max—"

"But I liked your proposal about integrating with a Web page and current cases. We can do more of that if I'm not investigating a cold case every week, which takes time."

"You'll have a staff."

"Monthly."

"Fine."

"You gave in too easily."

"I actually pitched the show as a monthly program. I tweaked the proposal to give you something to negotiate away."

She laughed. Maybe Ben did know her better than she thought.

"Send me the contract when you have it drafted."

"It's already drafted. I'm sure you'll have changes."

"I'm sure you're right. I'll read it on the plane. I'm going to a wedding this weekend."

"You're not going to regret this, Max. This show is going to be huge. I promise."

But Max wasn't sure. If it wasn't successful, all that would be hurt was her own ego. But what would happen to her life if she and Ben made *Maximum Exposure* a success? Would she ever have time to work the cold cases she wanted? Would she regret giving up some of the control over her stories? Would people recognize her? One of the benefits of being an investigative journalist was that she was, basically, anonymous. People might look at her because she was tall or attractive or well dressed, but she wasn't famous.

This was cable, she reminded herself. Small beans. Maybe no one would watch it.

She said to Ben, "I'll see you in New York."

* * * * *

Six Weeks Later

Max stood in the doorway of her new corner office on the eighteenth floor of a state-of-the-art building on the Avenue of the Americas.

"It's small," Ben said, "but the view is great."

It was, and Max certainly couldn't complain. She would have preferred an older building with character, but the television studio needed technology and amenities that the larger buildings provided—including dishes on the roof to send and receive satellite transmissions.

She'd met the Crossmans and liked them a lot—more than she thought she would. Particularly Catherine, who had a sense of humor to go along with her sense of style.

"I'm going to work from home sometimes." Often.

"That's not a problem, but you need your own space here. I have a list of assistants for you to interview. I selected the top three from a large pool of applicants. I know you like to support the university, so I made sure they were all Columbia graduates. We also have an internship program with the college."

"Good." Maybe she and Ben would get along after all.

"What's wrong?"

She walked around to her new desk. There was nothing on it, but that would change. She sat in the chair. Comfortable, but it would need to be broken in. "Nothing's wrong."

"I have some news you might like." He pulled a letter from his pocket.

It was from Cheyenne College, the office of Stephanie Adair, addressed to Ben Lawson, Producer, *Maximum Exposure*.

"What?"

"Just read it."

She did, and she smiled. "They fired the chief of campus security."

"And implemented new security protocols related to when and how they report crimes or potential crimes to the local authorities."

"Good." She nodded as she scanned the letter a second time. "Good."

"It won't bring Scott Sheldon back."

"No."

But maybe the new procedures would prevent another mother from suffering the same grief as Adele Sheldon.

It would never be a perfect world. But keeping a bright light on the truth, exposing lies, highlighting evil, holding people accountable for their actions—or their inactions—would help.

"We're scheduled to tape in one hour. You should get down to makeup and get ready."

"Just give me five minutes."

Ben left, and Max walked over to the window, looked out, and took a deep breath.

Today was the first day of the rest of her life, but she would never forget those who'd died. Not Scott Sheldon, not Karen Richardson, and not her best friend from high school, Lindy Ames. A case that was still unsolved, and probably always would be.

