

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Broken

Karin Slaughter

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About the Book

When the body of a young woman is discovered deep beneath the icy waters of Lake Grant, a note left under a rock by the shore points to suicide. But within minutes, it becomes clear that this is no suicide. It's a brutal, cold-blooded murder.

All too soon, former Grant County medical examiner Sara Linton – home for Thanksgiving after a long absence – finds herself unwittingly drawn into the case. The chief suspect is desperate to see her, but when she arrives at the local police station she is met with a horrifying sight – he lies dead in his cell, the words 'Not me' scrawled across the walls.

Something about his confession doesn't add up and, deeply suspicious of Lena Adams, the detective in charge, Sara immediately calls in the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Shortly afterwards, Special Agent Will Trent is brought in from his vacation to investigate. But he is immediately confronted with a wall of silence. Grant County is a close-knit community with loyalties and ties that run deep. And the only person who can tell the truth about what really happened is dead . . .

About the Author

Karin Slaughter grew up in a small south Georgia town and has been writing since she was a child. She is the author of the international bestsellers *Blindsighted*, *Kisscut*, *A Faint Cold Fear*, *Indelible*, *Faithless*, *Skin Privilege*, *Triptych*, *Fractured*, *Genesis* and *Broken*. She is also the author of the darkly comic novella *Martin Misunderstood*, and editor of and contributor to *Like a Charm*, a collaboration of British and American crime fiction writers. She lives in Atlanta.

Also by Karin Slaughter

Blindsighted
Kisscut
A Faint Cold Fear
Indelible
Faithless
Triptych
Skin Privilege
Fractured
Martin Misunderstood
Genesis

Like a Charm (Ed.)

Broken

Karin Slaughter



arrow books

For Victoria

PROLOGUE

ALLISON SPOONER WANTED to leave town for the holiday, but there was nowhere to go. There was no reason to stay here, either, but at least it was cheaper. At least she had a roof over her head. At least the heat in her crappy apartment occasionally worked. At least she could eat a hot meal at work. At least, at least, at least . . . Why was her life always about the least of things? When was there going to come a time when it started being about the most?

The wind picked up and she clenched her fists in the pockets of her light jacket. It wasn't so much raining as misting down a cold wetness, like walking around inside a dog's nose. The icy chill coming off Lake Grant made it worse. Every time the breeze picked up, she felt as if tiny, dull razors were slicing through her skin. This was supposed to be south Georgia, not the freaking South Pole.

As she struggled for her footing along the tree-lined shores, it seemed like every wave that lapped the mud brought the temperature down another degree. She wondered if her flimsy shoes would be enough to keep her toes from getting frostbite. She had seen a guy on TV who'd lost all his fingers and toes to the cold. He'd said he was grateful to be alive, but people will say anything to get on TV. The way Allison's life was going right now, the only program she'd end up on was the nightly news. There'd be a picture – probably that awful one from her high school yearbook – beside the words 'Tragic Death.'

The irony was not lost on Allison that she would be more important to the world if she were dead. No one gave a crap about her now – the meager living she was scraping out, the

constant struggle of keeping up with her classes while juggling all the other responsibilities in her life. None of it would matter to anybody unless she turned up frozen on the lakeshore.

The wind picked up again. Allison turned her back to the cold, feeling its freezing fingers probe her rib cage, squeeze her lungs. A shiver racked her body. Her breath was a cloud in front of her. She closed her eyes. She chanted her problems through chattering teeth.

Jason. School. Money. Car. Jason. School. Money. Car.

The mantra continued well past the penetrating gust. Allison opened her eyes. She turned around. The sun was going down faster than she'd thought. She turned around, facing the college. Should she go back? Or should she go forward?

She chose to go forward, tucking her head down against the howling wind.

Jason. School. Money. Car.

Jason: Her boyfriend had turned into an asshole, seemingly overnight.

School: She was going to flunk out of college if she didn't find more time to study.

Money: She wasn't going to be able to live, let alone go to school, if she cut back any more hours at work.

Car: Her car had started smoking this morning when she cranked it up, which was no big deal since it had been smoking for months, but this time the smoke was on the inside, coming through the heating vents. She'd nearly suffocated driving to school.

Allison trudged along, adding 'frostbite' to her list as she rounded the bend in the lake. Every time she blinked, it felt like her eyelids were cutting through thin sheets of ice.

Jason. School. Money. Car. Frostbite.

The frostbite fear seemed more immediate, though she was reluctant to admit that the more she worried about it, the warmer she felt. Maybe her heart was beating faster or

her walking pace was picking up as the sun began to set and she realized that all of her whining about dying in the cold might come true if she didn't hurry the hell up.

Allison reached out, bracing herself against a tree so that she could pick her way past a tangle of roots that dipped into the water. The bark was wet and spongy under her fingertips. A customer had sent back a hamburger at lunch today because he said the bun was too spongy. He was a big, gruff man in full hunting gear, not the sort of guy you'd expect to use a delicate word like 'spongy.' He had flirted with her and she had flirted back, and then when he left there was a fifty-cent tip on his ten-dollar meal. He'd actually winked at her as he walked out the door, like he was doing her a favor.

She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. Maybe her grandmother had been right. Girls like Allison didn't go to college. They found work at the tire factory, met a guy, got pregnant, got married, had a couple of more kids, then got divorced, sometimes in that order, sometimes not. If she was lucky, the guy didn't beat her much.

Was that the kind of life Allison wanted for herself? It was the kind of life that was written in her blood. Her mother had lived it. Her grandmother had lived it. Her aunt Sheila had lived it until she pulled a shotgun on her uncle Boyd and nearly took his head off. All three of the Spooner women had at some point or another thrown away everything for a worthless man.

Allison had watched it happen to her mother so often that by the time Judy Spooner was in the hospital for the last time, every bit of her insides eaten away from the cancer, all Allison could reflect on was the waste of her mother's life. She'd even *looked* wasted. At thirty-eight years old, her hair was thinning and nearly all gray. Her skin was faded. Her hands were clawed from working at the tire factory – picking tires off the belt, pressure-testing them, putting them back on the belt, then picking up the next tire, then

again and again, over two hundred times a day, so that every joint in her body ached by the time she crawled into bed at night. Thirty-eight years old and she welcomed the cancer. Welcomed the relief.

One of the last things Judy had told Allison was that she was glad to be dying, glad that she didn't have to be alone anymore. Judy Spooner believed in heaven and redemption. She believed that one day streets of gold and many mansions would replace her gravel drive and trailer-park existence. All Allison believed was that she had never been enough for her mother. Judy's glass was perpetually half empty, and all the love Allison poured into her over the years would never fill her mother up.

Judy was too far drawn into the muck. The muck of her dead-end job. The muck of one worthless man after another. The muck of a baby holding her down.

College was going to be Allison's salvation. She was good at science. Looking at her family, it made no sense, but somehow she understood how chemicals worked. She understood at a basic level the synthesis of macromolecules. Her grasp of synthetic polymers came hand in glove. Most important, she knew how to study. She knew that somewhere on earth, there was always a book with an answer in it, and the best way to find that answer was to read every book you could get your hands on.

By her senior year in high school, she had managed to stay away from the boys and the drinking and the meth that had ruined just about every girl her age in her small hometown of Elba, Alabama. She wasn't going to end up being one of those soulless, washed-out girls who worked the night shift and smoked Kools because they were elegant. She wasn't going to end up with three kids by three different men before she hit thirty. She wasn't going to ever wake up one morning unable to open her eyes because some man's fist had beaten them shut the night before. She

wasn't going to end up dead and alone in a hospital bed like her mother.

At least that's what she'd been thinking when she left Elba three years ago. Mr. Mayweather, her science teacher, had pulled every string he could grab to get her enrolled in a good college. He wanted her to get as far away from Elba as possible. He wanted her to have a future.

Grant Tech was in Georgia, and it wasn't far away in miles so much as far away in feeling. The college was enormous compared to her high school, which had a graduating class of twenty-nine people. Allison had spent her first week on campus wondering how it was possible to be in love with a place. Her classes were filled with kids who had grown up with opportunities, who'd never considered *not* going to college straight out of high school. None of her fellow students snickered when she raised her hand to answer a question. They didn't think you were selling out if you actually listened to the teacher, tried to learn something other than how to give yourself French tips or weave extensions into your hair.

And the area around the college was so pretty. Elba was a blight, even for south Alabama. Heartsdale, the city where Grant Tech was located, felt like a town you'd see on television. Everyone tended their yards. Flowers lined Main Street in the spring. Total strangers waved at you with a smile on their face. At the diner where she worked, the locals were so kind, even if they were bad tippers. The town wasn't so big that she got lost. Unfortunately, it wasn't so big that she didn't meet Jason.

Jason.

She'd met him her sophomore year. He was two years older, more experienced, more sophisticated. His idea of a romantic date wasn't sneaking into a movie and doing it quick in the back row before the manager kicked you out. He took her to real restaurants with cloth napkins on the tables. He held her hand. He listened to her. When they had

sex, she finally understood why people called it making love. Jason didn't just want better things for himself. He wanted better things for Allison. She'd thought what they had was a serious thing – the last two years of her life had been spent building something with him. And then suddenly, he had turned into a different person. Suddenly, everything that had been so great about their relationship was the reason it was falling apart.

And, as with her mother, Jason had somehow managed to make it all Allison's fault. She was cold. She was distant. She was too demanding. She never had time for him. As if Jason was an affectionate saint who spent his days wondering what would make Allison happy. She wasn't the one who went on all-night benders with her friends. She wasn't the one getting mixed up with weird people at school. She sure as hell wasn't the one who got them involved with that jerk from town. How could that be Allison's fault if she had never even seen the guy's face?

Allison shivered again. Every step she took around this damn lake, it seemed like the shoreline squeezed out another hundred yards just to spite her. She looked down at the wet ground beneath her feet. It had been storming for weeks. Flash floods had taken out roads, cut down trees. Allison had never been good with bad weather. The darkness got to her, tried to pull her down. It made her moody and tearful. All she wanted to do was sleep away the time until the sun came back out.

'Shit!' Allison hissed, catching herself before she slipped. The cuffs of her pants were caked in mud, her shoes nearly soaked through. She looked out into the churning lake. The rain was sticking to her eyelashes. She brushed back her hair with her fingers as she stared at the dark waters. Maybe she should let herself slip. Maybe she should let herself fall all the way into the lake. What would it be like to let herself go? What would it feel like to let the undertow take her farther to the center of the lake where her feet no

longer touched the ground and her lungs could no longer find air?

This wasn't the first time she'd thought about it. It was probably the weather, the relentless rain and dreary sky. Everything seemed more depressing in the rain. And some things were more depressing than others. There had been a story in the paper last Thursday about a mother and child who'd drowned in their Volkswagen Beetle two miles outside of town. They were within spitting distance of the Third Baptist Church when a flash flood cut through the street and whisked them away. There was something about the design of the old Beetles that made them able to float, and this newer model had floated, too. At least at first.

The church crowd who'd just left their usual potluck were helpless to do anything for fear of getting caught up in the flood. They watched in horror as the Beetle spun around on the surface of the water, then tipped over. Water flooded into the cab. Mother and child were tossed into the current. The woman they interviewed in the paper said she would go to sleep every night and wake up every morning for the rest of her life seeing that little three-year-old's hand reaching out from the water before the final time the poor thing was pulled down.

Allison could not stop thinking of the child, either. Even though she had been at the library when it happened. Even though she'd never met the woman or the child or even the lady who spoke to the paper, she could see that little hand reaching up every time she closed her eyes. Sometimes, the hand grew larger. Sometimes, it was her mother reaching out for her help. Sometimes, she woke up screaming because the hand was pulling her down.

If she was telling the truth, Allison's mind had turned toward dark thinking long before the newspaper story. She couldn't blame the weather completely, but certainly the constant rain, the unrelenting overcast, had churned up inside of her mind its own kind of despair. How much easier

would it be if she just gave in? Why go back to Elba and turn into some toothless, haggard old woman with eighteen kids to feed when she could just walk into the lake and for once take control of her destiny?

She was turning into her mother so fast that she could almost feel her hair going gray. She was just as bad as Judy – thinking she was in love when all the guy was interested in was what was between her legs. Her aunt Sheila had said as much on the phone last week. Allison had been whining about Jason, wondering why he wouldn't return her calls.

A long drag on her cigarette, then, during the exhale, '*You sound just like your mother.*'

A knife in her chest would have been faster, cleaner. The worst part was that Sheila was right. Allison loved Jason. She loved him way too much. She loved him enough to call him ten times a day even though he never picked up. She loved him enough to hit reload on her stupid computer every two minutes to see if he had answered one of her nine billion emails.

She loved him enough to be out here in the middle of the night doing the dirty work that he didn't have the balls to do.

Allison took another step closer to the lake. She could feel her heel start to slip, but her body's automatic need for self-preservation took over before she fell. Still, the water lapped against her shoes. Her socks were already soaked. Her toes were beyond numb, to that point where a sharp pain seemed to pierce through the bone. Was that what it would be like – a slow numbing falling into a painless passage?

She was terrified of suffocating. That was the problem. She'd loved the ocean for maybe ten minutes as a kid, but that had changed by the time she turned thirteen. Her idiot cousin Dillard had held her under the water once at the municipal pool, and now she didn't even like to take baths because she was afraid she'd get water up her nose and panic.

If Dillard were here, he'd probably push her into the lake without her even having to ask. That first time he'd held her head down under the water, he hadn't shown a bit of remorse. Allison had thrown up her lunch. She was racked with sobs. Her lungs were burning, and he'd just said, 'Heh-heh,' like an old man who pinches the fire out of the back of your arm just to hear you squeal.

Dillard was Sheila's boy, her only child, more disappointing to her than his father, if that was even possible. He huffed so much spray paint that his nose was a different color every time you saw him. He smoked crystal. He stole from his mama. The last Allison heard, he was in prison for trying to rob a liquor store with a water pistol. The clerk had cracked open his skull with a baseball bat by the time the cops got there. The result was that Dillard was even dumber than before, but that wouldn't have stopped him from passing up a good opportunity. He would've given Allison a good shove with both hands, sending her headfirst into the water as he let out his little cackle. 'Heh-heh.' All the while she'd be flailing, working her way up to drowning.

How long would it take before she passed out? How long would Allison have to live in terror before she died? She closed her eyes again, trying to think about the water surrounding her, swallowing her. It would be so cold that it would feel warm at first. You couldn't live long without air. You'd pass out. Maybe the panic would take hold, sending you into some kind of hysterical unconsciousness. Or maybe you would feel alive – shot through with adrenaline, fighting like a squirrel trapped in a paper bag.

She heard a branch snap behind her. Allison turned, surprised.

'Jesus!' She slipped again, this time for real. Her arms flailed out. Her knee collapsed. Pain took away her breath. She slammed face-first into the mud. A hand grabbed the back of her neck, forcing her to stay down. Allison inhaled the bitter coldness of the earth, the wet, oozing muck.

Instinctively, she struggled, fighting the water, fighting the panic that flooded into her brain. She felt a knee jam into the base of her spine, pinning her firmly to the ground. Burning pain seared into her neck. Allison tasted blood. She didn't want this. She wanted to live. She *had* to live. She opened her mouth to scream it at the top of her lungs.

But then – darkness.

MONDAY

ONE

FORTUNATELY, THE WINTER weather meant the body at the bottom of the lake would be well preserved, though the chill on the shore was bone-aching, the sort of thing that made you strain to remember what August had been like. The sun on your face. The sweat running down your back. The way the air conditioner in your car blew out a fog because it could not keep up with the heat. As much as Lena Adams strained to remember, all thoughts of warmth were lost on this rainy November morning.

‘Found her,’ the dive captain called. He was directing his men from the shore, his voice muffled by the constant shush of the pouring rain. Lena held up her hand in a wave, water sliding down the sleeve of the bulky parka she had thrown on when the call had come in at three this morning. The rain wasn’t hard, but it was relentless, tapping her back insistently, slapping against the umbrella that rested on her shoulder. Visibility was about thirty feet. Everything beyond that was coated in a hazy fog. She closed her eyes, thinking back to her warm bed, the warmer body that had been wrapped around her.

The shrill ring of a phone at three in the morning was never a good sound, especially when you were a cop. Lena had woken out of a dead sleep, her heart pounding, her hand automatically snatching up the receiver, pressing it to her ear. She was the senior detective on call, so she in turn had to start other phones ringing across south Georgia. Her chief. The coroner. Fire and rescue. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation to let them know that a body had been found on state land. The Georgia Emergency Management

Authority, who kept a list of eager civilian volunteers ready to look for dead bodies on a moment's notice.

They were all gathered here at the lake, but the smart people were waiting in their vehicles, heat blasting while a chill wind rocked the chassis like a baby in a cradle. Dan Brock, the proprietor of the local funeral home who did double duty as the town coroner, was asleep in his van, head back against the seat, mouth gaping open. Even the EMTs were safely tucked inside the ambulance. Lena could see their faces peering through the windows in the back doors. Occasionally, a hand would reach out, the ember of a cigarette glowing in the dawn light.

She held an evidence bag in her hand. It contained a letter found near the shore. The paper had been torn from a larger piece – college ruled, approximately eight and a half inches by six. The words were all caps. Ballpoint pen. One line. No signature. Not the usual spiteful or pitiful farewell, but clear enough: *I WANT IT OVER.*

In many ways, suicides were more difficult investigations than homicides. With a murdered person, there was always someone you could blame. There were clues you could follow to the bad guy, a clear pattern you could lay out to explain to the family of the victim exactly why their loved one had been stolen away from them. Or, if not why, then who the bastard was who'd ruined their lives.

With suicides, the victim is the murderer. The person upon whom the blame rests is also the person whose loss is felt most deeply. They are not around to take the recriminations for their death, the natural anger anyone feels when there is a loss. What the dead leave instead is a void that all the pain and sorrow in the world can never fill. Mother and father, sisters, brothers, friends and other relatives – all find themselves with no one to punish for their loss.

And people always want to punish someone when a life is unexpectedly taken.

This was why it was the investigator's job to make sure every single inch of the death scene was measured and recorded. Every cigarette butt, every discarded piece of trash or paper, had to be catalogued, checked for fingerprints, and sent to the lab for analysis. The weather was noted in the initial report. The various officers and emergency personnel on scene were recorded in a log. If a crowd was present, photographs were taken. License plates were checked. The suicide victim's life was investigated just as thoroughly as with a homicide: Who were her friends? Who were her lovers? Was there a husband? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Were there angry neighbors or envious co-workers?

Lena knew only what they had found so far: a pair of women's sneakers, size eight, placed a few feet away from the suicide note. Inside the left shoe was a cheap ring - twelve-karat gold with a lifeless ruby at the center. The right shoe contained a white Swiss Army watch with fake diamonds for numbers. Underneath this was the folded note.

I want it over.

Not much of a comfort for those left behind.

Suddenly, there was a splash of water as one of the divers surfaced from the lake. His partner came up beside him. They each struggled against the silt on the lake bottom as they dragged the body out of the cold water and into the cold rain. The dead girl was small, making the effort seem exaggerated, but quickly Lena saw the reason for their struggle. A thick, industrial-looking chain was wrapped around her waist with a bright yellow padlock that hung low, like a belt buckle. Attached to the chain were two cinder blocks.

Sometimes in policing, there were small miracles. The victim had obviously been trying to make sure she couldn't back out. If not for the cinder blocks weighing her down, the

current would have probably taken the body into the middle of the lake, making it almost impossible to find her.

Lake Grant was a thirty-two-hundred-acre man-made body of water that was three hundred feet deep in places. Underneath the surface were abandoned houses, small cottages and shacks where people had once lived before the area was turned into a reservoir. There were stores and churches and a cotton mill that had survived the Civil War only to be shut down during the Depression. All of this had been wiped out by the rushing waters of the Ochawahee River so that Grant County could have a reliable source of electricity.

The National Forestry Service owned the best part of the lake, over a thousand acres that wrapped around the water like a cowl. One side touched the residential area where the more fortunate lived, and the other bordered the Grant Institute of Technology, a small but thriving state university with almost five thousand students enrolled.

Sixty percent of the lake's eighty-mile shoreline was owned by the State Forestry Division. The most popular spot by far was this one, what the locals called Lover's Point. Campers were allowed to stake tents. Teenagers came here to party, often leaving behind empty beer bottles and used condoms. Occasionally, there would be a call about a fire someone had let get out of control, and once, a rabid bear had been reported, only to turn out to be an elderly chocolate Labrador who had wandered away from his owners' campsite.

And bodies were occasionally found here, too. Once, a girl had been buried alive. Several men, predictably teenagers, had drowned performing various acts of stupidity. Last summer, a child had broken her neck diving into the shallow waters of the cove.

The two divers paused, letting the water drip off the body before resuming their task. Finally, nods went around and they dragged the young woman onto the shore. The cinder

blocks left a deep furrow in the sandy ground. It was six-thirty in the morning, and the moon seemed to wink at the sun as it began its slow climb over the horizon. The ambulance doors swung open. The EMTs cursed at the bitter cold as they rolled out the gurney. One of them had a pair of bolt cutters hefted over his shoulder. He slammed his hand on the hood of the coroner's van, and Dan Brock startled, comically flailing his arms in the air. He gave the EMT a stern look, but stayed where he was. Lena couldn't blame him for not wanting to rush into the rain. The victim wasn't going anywhere except the morgue. There was no need for lights and sirens.

Lena walked closer to the body, carefully folding the evidence bag containing the suicide note into her jacket pocket and taking out a pen and her spiral-bound notebook. Crooking her umbrella between her neck and shoulder, she wrote the time, date, weather, number of EMTs, number of divers, number of cars and cops, what the terrain was like, noted the solemnity of the scene, the absence of spectators – all the details that would need to be typed exactly into the report.

The victim was around Lena's height, five-four, but she was built much smaller. Her wrists were delicate, like a bird's. The fingernails were uneven, bitten down to the quick. She had black hair and extremely white skin. She was probably in her early twenties. Her open eyes were clouded like cotton. Her mouth was closed. The lips looked ragged, as if she chewed them out of nervous habit. Or maybe a fish had gotten hungry.

Her body was lighter without the drag of the water, and it only took three of the divers to heft her onto the waiting gurney. Muck from the bottom of the lake covered her head to toe. Water dripped from her clothes – blue jeans, a black fleece shirt, white socks, no sneakers, an unzipped, dark blue warm-up jacket with a Nike logo on the front. The gurney shifted, and her head turned away from Lena.

Lena stopped writing. 'Wait a minute,' she called, knowing something was wrong. She put her notebook in her pocket as she took a step closer to the body. She had seen a flash of light at the back of the girl's neck – something silver, maybe a necklace. Pondweed draped across the victim's throat and shoulders like a shroud. Lena used the tip of her pen to push away the slippery green tendrils. Something was moving beneath the skin, rippling the flesh the same way the rain rippled the tide.

The divers noticed the undulations, too. They all bent down for a better look. The skin fluttered like something out of a horror movie.

One of them asked, 'What the—'

'Jesus!' Lena jumped back quickly as a small minnow slithered out from a slit in the girl's neck.

The divers laughed the way men do when they don't want to admit they've just soiled themselves. For her part, Lena put her hand to her chest, hoping no one noticed that her heart had practically exploded. She took a gulp of air. The minnow was floundering in the mud. One of the men picked it up and tossed it back into the lake. The dive captain made the inevitable joke about something being fishy.

Lena shot him a hard look before leaning down toward the body. The slit where the fish had come out was at the back of the neck, just to the right of the spine. She guessed the wound was an inch wide, tops. The open flesh was puckered from the water, but at one point the injury had been clean, precise – the kind of incision that was made by a very sharp knife.

'Somebody go wake up Brock,' she said.

This wasn't a suicide investigation anymore.

TWO

FRANK WALLACE NEVER smoked in his county-issued Lincoln Town Car, but the cloth seats had absorbed the fug of nicotine that seeped from every pore in his body. He reminded Lena of Pig Pen from the Peanuts comic strip. No matter how clean he was or how often he changed his clothes, the stench followed him like a dust cloud.

‘What’s wrong?’ he demanded, not even giving her time to shut the car door.

Lena shucked her wet parka onto the floorboard. Earlier, she had thrown on a jacket with two shirts underneath to help fight the cold. Still, even with the heat blasting, her teeth were chattering. It was as if her body had stored up all the chill while she was standing outside in the rain and only let it out now that she was safely sheltered.

She held her hands up to the vent. ‘God, it’s freezing.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Frank repeated. He made a show of pulling back his black leather glove so he could see his watch.

Lena shivered involuntarily. She couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice. No cop would ever admit it to a civilian, but murders were the most exciting cases to work. Lena was so pumped through with adrenaline that she was surprised the cold was getting to her. Through chattering teeth, she told him, ‘It’s not a suicide.’

Frank looked even more annoyed. ‘Brock agree with you?’

Brock had gone back to sleep in his van while he waited for the chains to be cut, which they both knew because they could see his back molars from where they were sitting. ‘Brock wouldn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground,’

Lena shot back. She rubbed her arms to coax some warmth back into her body.

Frank took out his flask and handed it to her. She took a quick sip, the whisky burning its way down her throat and into her stomach. Frank took a hefty drink of his own before returning the flask to his coat pocket.

She told him, 'There's a knife wound in the neck.'

'Brock's?'

Lena gave him a withering glance. 'The dead girl.' She leaned down and searched her parka for the wallet she had found in the pocket of the woman's jacket.

Frank said, 'Could be self-inflicted.'

'Not possible.' She put her hand to the back of her neck. 'Blade went in about here. The killer was standing behind her. Probably took her by surprise.'

Frank grumbled, 'You get that from one of your textbooks?'

Lena held her tongue, something she wasn't used to doing. Frank had been interim police chief for the last four years. Everything that happened in the three cities that comprised Grant County fell under his purview. Madison and Avondale carried the usual drug problems and domestic violence, but Heartsdale was supposed to be easy. The college was here, and the affluent residents were vocal about crime.

Even without that, complicated cases had the tendency to turn Frank into an asshole. Actually, life in general could turn him into an asshole. His coffee going cold. The engine in his car not catching on the first try. The ink running dry in his pen. Frank hadn't always been like this. He'd certainly leaned toward grumpy for as long as Lena had known him, but his attitude lately was tinged with an underlying fury that seemed ready to boil to the surface. Anything could set him off. In the blink of an eye he'd turn from being manageably irritated to downright mean.

At least in this particular matter Frank's reluctance made sense. After thirty-five years of policing, a murder case was the last thing he wanted on his plate. Lena knew that he was sick of the job, sick of the people it brought him into contact with. He had lost two of his closest friends in the last six years. The only lake he wanted to be sitting in front of right now was in sunny Florida. He should've had a fishing pole and a beer in his hands, not a dead kid's wallet.

'Looks fake,' Frank said, opening the wallet. Lena agreed. The leather was too shiny. The Prada logo was plastic.

'Allison Judith Spooner,' Lena told him, watching Frank try to peel apart the soaked plastic picture sleeves. 'Twenty-one. Driver's license is from Elba, Alabama. Her student ID's in the back.'

'College.' Frank breathed out the word with something like despair. It was bad enough Allison Spooner had been found on or near state property. Add to that the fact that she was an out-of-state kid attending Grant Tech, and the case just got twenty times more political.

He asked, 'Where'd you find the wallet?'

'In her jacket pocket. I guess she didn't have a purse. Or maybe whoever killed her wanted us to know her identity.'

He was looking at the girl's driver's license photo.

'What is it?'

'Looks like that little waitress who works at the diner.'

The Grant Diner was on the opposite end of Main Street from the police station. Most of the force ate there for lunch. Lena stayed away from the place. She usually brown-bagged it, or, more often than not, didn't eat.

She asked, 'Did you know her?'

He shook his head and shrugged at the same time. 'She was good-looking.'

Frank was right. Not many people had a flattering driver's license photo, but Allison Spooner had been luckier than most. Her white teeth showed in a big smile. Her hair was pulled back off her face, revealing high cheekbones. There

was merriment in her eyes, as if someone had just made a joke. This was all in sharp contrast to the body they had pulled out of the lake. Death had erased her vibrancy.

Frank said, 'I didn't know she was a student.'

'They usually don't work in town,' Lena allowed. Grant Tech's students tended to work on campus or not at all. They didn't mix with the town and the town did its best not to mix with them.

Frank pointed out, 'The school's closed this week for Thanksgiving break. Why isn't she home with her family?'

Lena didn't have the answer. 'There's forty bucks in the wallet, so this wasn't a robbery.'

Frank checked the money compartment anyway, his thick, gloved fingers finding the twenty and two tens glued together with lake water. 'She could've been lonely. Decided to take the knife and end it herself.'

'She'd have to be a contortionist,' Lena insisted. 'You'll see when Brock gets her on the table. She was stabbed from behind.'

He gave a bone-weary sigh. 'What about the chain and cinder blocks?'

'We can try Mann's Hardware in town. Maybe the killer bought them there.'

He tried again. 'You're sure about the knife wound?'

She nodded.

Frank kept staring at the license photo. 'Does she have a car?'

'If she does, it's not in the vicinity,' Lena pressed the point. 'Unless she carried forty pounds' worth of cinder blocks and some chains through the woods . . .'

Frank finally closed the wallet and handed it back to her. 'Why is it every Monday just gets shittier and shittier?'

Lena couldn't answer him. Last week wasn't that much better. A young mother and her daughter had been taken by a flash flood. The whole town was still reeling from the loss.

There was no telling what they'd make of a pretty, young college girl being murdered.

She told Frank, 'Brad's trying to track down somebody from the college who can get into the registrar's office and give us Spooner's local address.' Brad Stephens had finally worked his way up from patrol to the rank of detective, but his new job didn't have him doing much more than his old one did. He was still running errands.

Lena offered, 'Once the scene is cleared, I'll work on the death notification.'

'Alabama's on central time.' Frank looked at his watch. 'It'll probably be better to call the parents direct instead of waking up the Elba P.D. this early in the morning.'

Lena checked her own watch. They were coming up on seven o'clock, which meant it was almost six in Alabama. If Elba was anything like Grant County, the detectives were on call during the night, but not expected to be at their desks until eight in the morning. Normally at this time of the day, Lena would be just getting out of bed and fumbling with the coffeemaker. 'I'll put in a courtesy call when we get back to the station.'

The car went quiet except for the brushing sound of rain against steel. A bolt of lightning, thin and mean, sparked in the sky. Lena instinctively flinched, but Frank just stared ahead at the lake. The divers weren't worried about the lightning. They were taking turns with the bolt cutters, trying to disentangle the dead girl from the two cinder blocks.

Frank's phone rang, a high-pitched warble that sounded like a bird sitting somewhere in the rain forest. He answered it with a gruff 'Yeah.' He listened for a few seconds, then asked, 'What about the parents?' Frank grumbled a string of curses under his breath. 'Then go back inside and find out.' He snapped his phone shut. 'Jackass.'

Lena gathered Brad had forgotten to get the parents' information. 'Where does Spooner live?'