

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Genesis

Karin Slaughter

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Karin Slaughter

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Day One

One

Two

Three

Four

Day Two

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Day Three

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Day Four

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Three Days Later

Twenty-Five

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Copyright

About the Book

Someone had spent time with her - someone well-practised in the art of pain . . .

Three and a half years ago former Grant County medical examiner Sara Linton moved to Atlanta hoping to leave her tragic past behind her. Now working as a doctor in Atlanta's Grady Hospital she is starting to piece her life together. But when a severely wounded young woman is brought in to the emergency room, she finds herself drawn back into a world of violence and terror. The woman has been hit by a car but, naked and brutalised, it's clear that she has been the prey of a twisted mind.

When Special Agent Will Trent of the Criminal Investigation Team returns to the scene of the accident, he stumbles on a torture chamber buried deep beneath the earth. And this hidden house of horror reveals a ghastly truth - Sara's patient is just the first victim of a sick, sadistic killer. Wrestling the case away from the local police chief, Will and his partner Faith Mitchell find themselves at the centre of a grisly murder hunt. And Sara, Will and Faith - each with their own wounds and their own secrets - are all that stand between a madman and his next crime . . .

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*, *Broken* and *Fallen*. She is also the author of the darkly comic novella *Martin Misunderstood*, and the 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
Broken
Fallen

Like a Charm (Ed.)

Genesis

Karin Slaughter



arrow books

*To my readers . . .
thank you for trusting me.*

PROLOGUE

THEY HAD BEEN married forty years to the day and Judith still felt like she didn't know everything about her husband. Forty years of cooking Henry's dinner, forty years of ironing his shirts, forty years of sleeping in his bed, and he was still a mystery. Maybe that was why she kept doing all these things for him with little or no complaint. There was a lot to be said for a man who, after forty years, still managed to hold your attention.

Judith rolled down the car window, letting in some of the cool, spring air. Downtown Atlanta was only thirty minutes away, but out here in Conyers you could still find areas of undeveloped land, even some small farms. It was a quiet place, and Atlanta was just far enough away so that she could appreciate the peace. Still, Judith sighed as she caught a quick glimpse of the city's skyscrapers on the distant horizon, thinking, *home*.

She was surprised at the thought, that Atlanta was now a place she considered her home. Her life until recently had been suburban, even rural. She preferred the open spaces to the concrete sidewalks of the city, even while she admitted that it was nice living in so central a location that you could walk to the corner store or a little café if the mood struck you.

Days would pass without her even having to get into a car – the type of life she would have never dreamed of ten years ago. She could tell Henry felt the same. His shoulders bunched up around his ears with tight resolve as he navigated the Buick down a narrow country road. After decades of driving just about every highway and interstate

in the country, he instinctively knew all the back routes, the doglegs and shortcuts.

Judith trusted him to get them home safely. She sat back in her seat, staring out the window, blurring her eyes so that the trees bordering the road seemed more like a thick forest. She made the trip to Conyers at least once a week, and every time she felt like she saw something new – a small house she'd never noticed, a bridge she'd bumped over many times but never paid attention to. Life was like that. You didn't realize what was passing you by until you slowed down a little bit to get a better look.

They'd just come from an anniversary party in their honor, thrown together by their son. Well, more likely thrown together by Tom's wife, who managed his life like an executive assistant, housekeeper, babysitter, cook and – presumably – concubine all rolled up into one. Tom had been a joyful surprise, his birth an event doctors had said would never come about. Judith had loved every part of him on first sight, accepted him as a gift that she would cherish with every bone in her body. She had done everything for him, and now that Tom was in his thirties, he still seemed to need an awful lot of taking care of. Perhaps Judith had been too conventional a wife, too subservient a mother, so that her son had grown into the sort of man who needed – expected – a wife to do everything for him.

Judith certainly had not enslaved herself to Henry. They had married in 1969, a time when women could actually have interests other than cooking the perfect pot roast and discovering the best method to get stains out of the carpet. From the start, Judith had been determined to make her life as interesting as possible. She'd been a room mother at Tom's school. She'd volunteered at the local homeless shelter and helped start a recycling group in the neighborhood. When Tom was older, Judith took a job doing light bookkeeping for a local business and joined a running team through the church to train for marathons. This active

lifestyle stood in stark contrast to that of Judith's own mother, a woman who toward the end of her life was so ravaged from raising nine children, so drained from the constant physical demands of being a farmer's wife, that some days she was too depressed to even speak.

Though, Judith had to admit, she had herself been a somewhat typical woman in those early years. Embarrassingly, she was one of those girls who had gone to college specifically to find a husband. She had grown up near Scranton, Pennsylvania, in a town so small it didn't merit a dot on the map. The only men available to her were farmers, and they were hardly interested in Judith. Judith could not blame them. The mirror told no lies. She was a bit too plump, a bit too bucktoothed, and a bit too much of everything else, to be the sort of woman Scranton men took for a wife. And then there was her father, a stern disciplinarian whom no sane man would seek out for a father-in-law, at least not in exchange for a bucktoothed, pear-shaped girl who had no natural talent for farming.

The truth was that Judith had always been the odd one in the family, the one who didn't quite fit in. She read too much. She hated farmwork. Even as a young girl, she was not drawn to animals and did not want to be responsible for their care and feeding. None of her sisters and brothers had been sent away for higher education. There were two brothers who had dropped out of ninth grade, and an older sister who had married rather quickly and given birth to her first child seven months later. Not that anyone bothered to do the math. Enveloped in a constant state of denial, her mother had remarked to her dying day that her first grandchild had always been big-boned, even as an infant. Thankfully, Judith's father had seen the writing on the wall so far as his middle girl was concerned. There would be no marriage of convenience with any of the local boys, not least of all because none of them found her remotely

convenient. Bible college, he decided, was not just Judith's last – but her only – chance.

At the age of six, Judith had been struck in the eye by a flying piece of debris as she chased after the tractor. From that moment on, she'd always worn glasses. People assumed she was cerebral because of the glasses, when in fact the opposite was true. Yes, she loved to read, but her tastes ran more toward trashy dime novel than literary. Still, the egghead label had stuck. What was it they used to say? 'Men don't make passes at women who wear glasses.' So, it was surprising – no, more like shocking – when on Judith's first day of college in her first class, the teaching assistant had winked at her.

She had thought something was in his eye, but there was no mistaking Henry Coldfield's intentions when, after class, he had pulled her aside and asked her if she'd like to go down to the drugstore and have a soda with him. The wink, apparently, was the beginning and end of his gregariousness. Henry was a very shy man in person; strange, considering he later became the top salesman for a liquor distribution company – a job he passionately despised even three years past retirement.

Judith supposed Henry's ability to blend had come from being the son of an Army colonel, moving around the country so often, never staying at one base more than a few years at a time. There was no passionate love at first sight – that came later. Initially, Judith had simply been attracted to the fact that Henry was attracted to her. It was a novelty for the pear from Scranton, but Judith had always been at the opposite spectrum of Marx's philosophy – Groucho, not Karl: She was more than willing to join any club that would have her as a member.

Henry was a club unto himself. He was neither handsome nor ugly; forward nor reticent. With his neatly parted hair and flat accent, *average* would be the best way to describe him, which Judith later did in a letter to her older sister.

Rosa's response had been something along the lines of, 'Well, I suppose that's the best you can hope for.' In her defense, Rosa was pregnant at the time with her third child while her second was still in diapers, but still, Judith had never forgiven her sister for the slight – not against herself, but against Henry. If Rosa failed to notice how special Henry was, it was because Judith was a poor writer; Henry too nuanced a man for mere words on a page. Perhaps it was all for the best. Rosa's sour observation had given Judith a reason to break from her family and embrace this winkingly introverted, mercurial stranger.

Henry's gregarious shyness was only the first of many dichotomies Judith had observed in her husband over the years. He was terrified of heights, but had earned his amateur pilot's license as a teenager. He sold alcohol but never imbibed. He was a homebody, but he spent most of his adult life traveling through the Northwest, then the Midwest, as promotions moved them around the country much like the Army had done when Henry was a child. His life, it seemed, was all about making himself do things he did not want to do. And yet, he often told Judith that her company was the one thing that he truly enjoyed.

Forty years, and so many surprises.

Sadly, Judith doubted her son held any such surprises for his spouse. While Tom was growing up, Henry was on the road three weeks out of every four, and his parenting came in spurts that didn't necessarily highlight his more compassionate side. Subsequently, Tom became everything his father had shown him during those growing years: strict, unbending, driven.

There was something else to it as well. Judith didn't know if it was because Henry saw his sales job as a duty to his family rather than his passion, or because he hated being away from home so much, but it seemed that every interaction he had with their son held an underlying tension: *Don't make the same mistakes I've made. Don't get trapped*

in a job you despise. Don't compromise your beliefs to put food on the table. The only positive thing he recommended to the boy was marrying a good woman. If only he had been more specific. If only he hadn't been so hard.

Why was it that men were such exacting parents to their male children? Judith guessed they wanted their sons to succeed in places they had not. In those early days, when Judith was first pregnant, the thought of a daughter had spread a rapid warmth through her body, followed by a searing cold. A young girl like Judith, out there in the world, defying her mother, defying the world. It gave her an understanding of Henry's desire that Tom do better, be better, have everything that he wanted and more.

Tom had certainly succeeded at his job, though his mouse of a wife was a disappointment. Every time Judith came face-to-face with her daughter-in-law, she itched to tell the woman to stand up straight, speak up, and for the love of God, grow a backbone. One of the volunteers at the church had said the other week that men married their mothers. Judith hadn't argued with the woman, but she'd defy anyone to find a lick of similarity she shared with her son's wife. Except for the desire to spend time with her grandchildren, Judith could never see her daughter-in-law again and be perfectly happy.

The grandchildren were the sole reason they had moved to Atlanta, after all. She and Henry had uprooted their retirement life in Arizona and moved almost two thousand miles to this hot city with its smog alerts and gang killings just so they could be close to two of the most spoiled and ungrateful little things this side of the Appalachia.

Judith glanced at Henry as he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, humming tunelessly as he drove. They never talked about their grandchildren except in glowing terms, possibly because a fit of honesty might reveal that they didn't much like them - and then where would they be? Their lives turned upside down for two small children who

were on gluten-free diets, strictly regimented nap-times and tightly scheduled play dates, but only with 'like-minded children who shared the same goals.'

So far as Judith could see, the only goal her grandchildren had was to be the center of attention. She imagined you couldn't sneeze without finding a like-minded, self-centered child, but according to her daughter-in-law, it was an almost impossible task. Wasn't that the whole point of youth, to be self-centered? And wasn't it the job of the parent to drill that out of you? Certainly, it was clear to all involved that it wasn't the job of the grandparents.

When little Mark had spilled his unpasteurized juice on Henry's slacks and Lilly had eaten so many of the Hershey's Kisses she'd found in Judith's purse that she'd reminded Judith of a homeless woman at the shelter last month who was tweaking so badly on methamphetamines that she'd wet herself, Henry and Judith had merely smiled - chuckled, even - as if these were merely wonderful little quirks that the children would soon grow out of.

Soon was not coming soon enough, however, and now that they'd reached the ages of seven and nine, Judith was starting to lose faith that one day, her grandchildren would turn into polite and loving young adults who did not feel the urge to constantly interrupt adult conversation and run around the house screaming at such high decibels that animals two counties over started howling. Judith's only consolation was that Tom took them to church every Sunday. She of course wanted her grandchildren exposed to a life in Christ, but more importantly, she wanted them to learn the lessons taught in Sunday School. *Honor thy mother and father. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Don't think you're going to waste your life, drop out of school and move in with Grandma and Grandpa any time soon.*

'Hey!' Henry barked as a car in the oncoming lane shot past them so close that the Buick actually shook on its tires.

‘Kids,’ he grumbled, gripping the wheel tightly in his hands.

The closer he got to seventy, the more Henry seemed to embrace the role of cranky old man. Sometimes, this was endearing. Other times, Judith wondered how long it would be before he started shaking his fist in the air, blaming all the ills of the world on ‘kids.’ The age of these kids seemed to range anywhere from four to forty, and his irritation ticked up exponentially when he caught them doing something that he used to do himself, but now could no longer enjoy. Judith dreaded the day they took away his pilot’s license, something that might come sooner rather than later considering his last checkup at the cardiologist had shown some irregularities. It was one of the reasons they had decided to retire to Arizona, where there was no snow to shovel or lawn to maintain.

She said, ‘Looks like rain.’

Henry craned up his neck to see the clouds.

‘Good night to start my book.’

His lips curled up in a smile. Henry had given her a thick historical romance for their anniversary. Judith had given him a new cooler to take to the golf course.

She squinted her eyes at the road ahead, deciding she should have her vision checked again. She was not so far from seventy herself, and her eyes seemed to be getting worse every year. Dusk was a particularly bad time for her, and her vision tended to blur on objects that were at a distance. So it was that she blinked several times before she was sure of what she was seeing, and only opened her mouth to warn Henry when the animal was right in front of them.

‘Jude!’ Henry yelled, one arm shooting out in front of Judith’s chest as he wrenched the steering wheel to the left, trying to avoid the poor creature. Judith thought, oddly, about how the movies were right. Everything slowed down, time inching by so that each second seemed to take an eternity. She felt Henry’s strong arm bolt across her breasts,

the seatbelt biting into her hip bones. Her head jerked, slamming into the door as the car swerved. The windshield cracked as the animal bounced against the glass, then hit the roof of the car, then the trunk. It wasn't until the car shuddered to a stop, spinning a full 180 degrees on the road, that the sounds caught up with Judith: the *crack, thunk, thunk*, all overlaid with a high-pitched screaming that she realized was coming from her own mouth. She must have been in shock, because Henry had to yell at her several times, 'Judith! Judith!' before she stopped screaming.

Henry's hand was tight on her arm, sending pain up her shoulder. She rubbed the back of his hand, saying, 'I'm all right. I'm all right.' Her glasses were askew, her vision off-kilter. She put her fingers to the side of her head, feeling a sticky wetness. When she took away her hand, she saw blood.

'It must've been a deer or . . . ' Henry put his hand to his mouth, stopping his words. He looked calm but for the telltale up and down of his chest as he tried to catch his breath. The airbag had deployed. A fine, white powder covered his face.

Her breath caught as she looked ahead. Blood had splattered the windshield like a sudden, violent rain.

Henry pushed open the door but did not get out. Judith took off her glasses to wipe her eyes. The lenses were both broken, the bottom part of her bifocal on the right side missing. She saw that the glasses were shaking, and realized that the tremor came from her own hands. Henry got out of the car, and she made herself put on her glasses and follow him.

The creature was on the road, legs moving. Judith's head ached where it had smacked into the door. Blood was in her eyes. That was the only explanation she had for the fact that the animal – surely a deer – appeared to have the shapely white legs of a woman.

‘Oh, dear God,’ Henry whispered. ‘It’s – Judith – it’s—’

Judith heard a car behind her. Wheels screeched against asphalt. Doors opened and closed. Two men joined them on the road, one running toward the animal.

He screamed, ‘Call 9-1-1!’ kneeling down beside the body. Judith stepped closer, then closer yet. The legs moved again – the perfect legs of a woman. She was completely nude. Bruises blackened her inner thighs – dark bruises. Old bruises. Dried blood caked around her legs. A burgundy film seemed to cover her torso, a rip at her side showing white bone. Judith glanced at her face. The nose was askance. The eyes were swollen, lips chapped and split. Blood matted the woman’s dark hair and pooled around her head as if in a halo.

Judith stepped closer, unable to stop herself – suddenly a voyeur, after a lifetime of politely looking away. Glass crunched beneath her feet, and the woman’s eyes shot open in panic. She stared somewhere past Judith, a dull lifelessness to her gaze. Just as suddenly, her eyelids fluttered closed, but Judith could not suppress the shudder that went through her body. It was as if someone had walked over her grave.

‘Dear Lord,’ Henry mumbled, almost in prayer. Judith turned to find her husband gripping his hand to his chest. His knuckles were white. He stared at the woman, looking as if he might be ill. ‘How did this happen?’ he whispered, horror twisting his face. ‘How in God’s name did this happen?’

DAY ONE

ONE

SARA LINTON LEANED back in her chair, mumbling a soft 'yes, Mama' into her cell phone. She wondered briefly if there would ever come a point in time when this felt normal again, when a phone call with her mother brought her happiness the way it used to instead of feeling like it was dragging a piece of her heart out of her chest.

'Baby,' Cathy soothed. 'It's all right. You're taking care of yourself, and that's all Daddy and I need to know.'

Sara felt tears sting her eyes. This would hardly be the first time she had cried in the doctors' lounge at Grady Hospital, but she was sick of crying – sick of feeling, really. Wasn't that the reason she had left her family, left her life, in rural Georgia, and moved to Atlanta – so that she would no longer have the constant reminder of what had come before?

'Promise me you'll try to go to church next week.'

Sara mumbled something that might sound like a promise. Her mother was no fool, and they both knew that the possibility of Sara ending up on a pew this Easter Sunday was highly unlikely, but Cathy didn't press.

Sara looked at the stack of charts in front of her. She was at the end of her shift and needed to call in her dictation. 'Mama, I'm sorry, but I need to go.'

Cathy exacted a promise of another phone call next week, then rang off. Sara kept her cell phone in her hand for a few minutes, looking at the faded numbers, her thumb tracing the seven and five, dialing out a familiar number but not sending through the call. She dropped the phone into her

pocket and felt the letter brush against the back of her hand.

The Letter. She thought of it as its own entity.

Sara normally checked her mail after work so she didn't have to drag it around with her, but one morning, for some unknown reason, she had checked her mail as she was heading out. A cold sweat had come over her as she recognized the return address on the plain white envelope. She had tucked the unopened envelope into the pocket of her lab coat as she left for work, thinking she would read it at lunch. Lunch had come and gone, and the letter had remained unopened, traveling back home, then out to work again the next day. Months passed, and the letter went everywhere with Sara, sometimes in her coat, sometimes in her purse to the grocery store or on errands. It became a talisman, and often, she would reach her hand in her pocket and touch it, just to remind herself that it was there.

Over time, the corners of the sealed envelope had become dog-eared and the Grant County postmark had started to fade. Every day pushed Sara farther away from opening it and discovering what the woman who had killed her husband could possibly have to say.

'Dr. Linton?' Mary Schroder, one of the nurses, knocked on the door. She spoke in the practiced code of the ER. 'We've got a P-O-P-T-A female, thirty-three, weak and thready.'

Sara glanced at the charts, then her watch. A thirty-three-year-old woman who had passed out prior to admission was a puzzle that would take time to solve. It was almost seven o'clock. Sara's shift was over in ten minutes. 'Can Krakauer take her?'

'Krakauer *did* take her,' Mary countered. 'He ordered a CMP, then went to get coffee with the new bimbo.' She was obviously perturbed by this, and added, 'The patient's a cop.'

Mary was married to a cop; hardly shocking considering she had worked in the emergency room at Grady Hospital

for almost twenty years. Even without that, it was understood at every hospital in the world that anyone in law enforcement got the best and quickest treatment. Apparently, Otto Krakauer hadn't gotten the memo.

Sara relented. 'How long did she lose consciousness?'

'She says about a minute.' Mary shook her head, because patients were hardly the most honest reporters when it came to their health. 'She doesn't look right.'

That last part was what got Sara out of her chair. Grady was the only Level One trauma center in the region, as well as one of the few remaining public hospitals in Georgia. The nurses at Grady saw car wrecks, shootings, stabbings, overdoses, and any number of crimes against humanity on an almost daily basis. They had a practiced eye for spotting serious problems. And, of course, cops usually didn't admit themselves to the hospital unless they were at death's door.

Sara skimmed the woman's chart as she walked through the emergency department. Otto Krakauer hadn't done more than take a medical history and order the usual bloodwork, which told Sara there was no obvious diagnosis. Faith Mitchell was an otherwise healthy thirty-three-year-old woman with no previous conditions and no recent trauma. Her test results would hopefully give them a better idea about what was going on.

Sara mumbled an apology as she bumped into a gurney in the hallway. As usual, the rooms were overflowing and patients were stacked in the halls, some in beds, some sitting in wheelchairs, all looking more miserable than they probably had when they'd first arrived for treatment. Most of them had probably come here right after work because they couldn't afford to miss a day's wages. They saw Sara's white coat and called to her, but she ignored them as she read through the chart.

Mary said, 'I'll catch up with you. She's in three,' before letting herself get pulled away by an elderly woman on a stretcher.

Sara knocked on the open door of exam room 3 – privacy: another perk afforded cops. A petite blonde woman was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed and clearly irritated. Mary was good at her job, but a blind person could see that Faith Mitchell was unwell. She was as pale as the sheet on the bed; even from a distance, her skin looked clammy.

Her husband did not seem to be helping matters as he paced the room. He was an attractive man, well over six feet, with sandy blond hair cut close to his head. A jagged scar ran down the side of his face, probably from a childhood accident where his jaw slid across the asphalt under his bicycle or along the hard-packed dirt to home base. He was thin and lean, probably a runner, and his three-piece suit showed the broad chest and shoulders of someone who spent a lot of time in the gym.

He stopped pacing, his gaze going from Sara to his wife and back again. 'Where's the other doctor?'

'He got called away on an emergency.' She walked to the sink and washed her hands, saying, 'I'm Dr. Linton. Can you catch me up to speed here? What happened?'

'She passed out,' the man said, nervously twisting his wedding ring around his finger. He seemed to realize he was coming off as a bit frantic, and moderated his tone. 'She's never passed out before.'

Faith Mitchell seemed aggravated by his concern. 'I'm fine,' she insisted, then told Sara, 'It's the same thing I said to the other doctor. I feel like I've been coming down with a cold. That's all.'

Sara pressed her fingers to Faith's wrist, checking her pulse. 'How are you feeling now?'

She glanced at her husband. 'Annoyed.'

Sara smiled, shining her penlight into Faith's eyes, checking her throat, running through the usual physical exam and finding nothing alarming. She agreed with Krakauer's initial evaluation: Faith was probably a little

dehydrated. Her heart sounded good, though, and it didn't seem like she'd suffered from a seizure. 'Did you hit your head when you fell?'

She started to answer, but the man interjected, 'It was in the parking lot. Her head hit the pavement.'

Sara asked the woman, 'Any other problems?'

Faith answered, 'Just a few headaches.' She seemed to be holding something back, even as she revealed, 'I haven't really eaten today. I was feeling a little sick to my stomach this morning. And yesterday morning.'

Sara opened one of the drawers for a neuro-hammer to check reflexes, only to find nothing there. 'Have you had any recent weight loss or gain?'

Faith said 'No' just as her husband said 'Yes.'

The man looked contrite, but tried, 'I think it looks good on you.'

Faith took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Sara studied the man again, thinking he was probably an accountant or lawyer. His head was turned toward his wife, and Sara noticed another, lighter scar lining his upper lip – obviously not a surgical incision. The skin had been sewn together crookedly, so that the scar running vertically between his lip and nose was slightly uneven. He had probably boxed in college, or maybe just been hit in the head one too many times, because he obviously didn't seem to know that the only way out of a hole was to stop digging. 'Faith, I think the extra weight looks great on you. You could stand to gain—'

She shut him up with a look.

'All right.' Sara flipped open the chart, writing down some orders. 'We'll need to do an X-ray of your skull and I'd like to do a few more tests. Don't worry, we can use the blood samples from earlier, so there won't be any more needles for now.' She scribbled a notation and checked some boxes before looking up at Faith. 'I promise we'll rush this as much as we can, but you can see we've got a pretty full house today. X-ray's backed up at least an hour. I'll do what I can

to push it through, but you might want to get a book or magazine while you wait.'

Faith didn't respond, but something in her demeanor changed. She glanced at her husband, then back at Sara. 'Do you need me to sign that?' She indicated the chart.

There was nothing to sign, but Sara handed her the chart anyway. Faith wrote something on the bottom of the page and gave it back. Sara read the words *I'm pregnant*.

Sara nodded as she crossed through the X-ray order. Obviously, Faith hadn't yet told her husband, but there was a different set of questions Sara needed to ask now, and she couldn't do so without giving away the news. 'When's the last time you had a pap smear?'

Faith seemed to understand. 'Last year.'

'Let's take care of that while you're here.' Sara told the man, 'You can wait outside.'

'Oh.' He seemed surprised, even as he nodded. 'All right.' He told his wife, 'I'll be in the waiting room if you need me.'

'Okay.' Faith watched him leave, her shoulders visibly slumping in relief as the door closed. She asked Sara, 'Do you mind if I lie down?'

'Of course not.' Sara helped her get comfortable on the bed, thinking Faith looked younger than her thirty-three years. She still had the bearing of a cop, though - that no-nonsense, don't-bullshit-me squareness to her shoulders. Her lawyer-husband seemed like an odd match, but Sara had seen stranger combinations.

She asked the woman, 'How far along are you?'

'About nine weeks.'

Sara put this in her notes as she asked, 'Is that a guess or have you seen a doctor?'

'I took an over-the-counter test.' She changed that. 'Actually, I took three over-the-counter tests. I'm never late.'

Sara added a pregnancy test to the orders. 'What about this weight gain?'

‘Ten pounds,’ Faith admitted. ‘I’ve kind of gone a little crazy with the eating since I found out.’

In Sara’s experience, ten pounds usually meant fifteen. ‘Do you have any other children?’

‘One – Jeremy – eighteen.’

Sara made the notation in the chart, mumbling, ‘Lucky you. Heading into the terrible twos.’

‘More like terrible twenties. My son is eighteen years old.’

Sara did a double take, flipping back through Faith’s history.

‘Let me do the math for you,’ Faith offered. ‘I got pregnant when I was fourteen. I had Jeremy when I was fifteen.’

Not much surprised Sara anymore, but Faith Mitchell had managed to do it. ‘Were there any complications with your first pregnancy?’

‘Other than being fodder for a Lifetime movie?’ She shook her head. ‘No problems at all.’

‘Okay,’ Sara answered, putting down the chart, giving Faith her full attention. ‘Let’s talk about what happened tonight.’

‘I was walking to the car, I felt a little dizzy, and the next thing I know, Will’s driving me here.’

‘Dizzy like the room spinning or dizzy as in light-headed?’

She thought about the question before replying. ‘Lightheaded.’

‘Any flashes of light or unusual tastes in your mouth?’

‘No.’

‘Will’s your husband?’

She actually guffawed. ‘God, no.’ She choked on an incredulous laugh. ‘Will’s my partner – Will Trent.’

‘Is Detective Trent here so I can talk to him?’

‘Special Agent. You already did. He just left.’

Sara was sure she was missing something. ‘The man who was just in here is a cop?’

She laughed. ‘It’s the suit. You’re not the first person to think he’s an undertaker.’

‘I thought lawyer,’ Sara admitted, thinking she had never met anyone who looked less like a police officer in her life.

‘I’ll have to tell him you thought he was a lawyer. He’ll be pleased you took him for an educated man.’

For the first time, Sara noticed the woman was not wearing a wedding ring. ‘So, the father is . . .’

‘In and out of the picture.’ Faith didn’t seem embarrassed by the information, though Sara supposed that there wasn’t much that could embarrass you after having a child at fifteen. ‘I’d prefer Will didn’t know,’ Faith said. ‘He’s very—’ She stopped mid-sentence. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together. A sheen of sweat had broken out on her forehead.

Sara pressed her fingers to Faith’s wrist again. ‘What’s happening here?’

Faith clenched her jaw, not answering.

Sara had been vomited on enough to know the warning signs. She went to the sink to wet a paper towel, telling Faith, ‘Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.’

Faith did as she was told, her lips trembling.

‘Have you been irritable lately?’

Despite her condition, Faith tried for levity. ‘More than usual?’ She put her hand to her stomach, suddenly serious. ‘Yes. Nervous. Annoyed.’ She swallowed. ‘I get a buzzing in my head, like there are bees in my brain.’

Sara pressed the cold paper towel to the woman’s forehead. ‘Any nausea?’

‘In the mornings,’ Faith managed. ‘I thought it was morning sickness, but . . .’

‘What about the headaches?’

‘They’re pretty bad, mostly in the afternoon.’

‘Have you been unusually thirsty? Urinating a lot?’

‘Yes. No. I don’t know.’ She managed to open her eyes, asking, ‘So, what is it – the flu or brain cancer or what?’

Sara sat on the edge of the bed and took the woman’s hand.

‘Oh, God, is it that bad?’ Before Sara could answer, she said, ‘Doctors and cops only sit down when it’s bad news.’

Sara wondered how she had missed this revelation. In all her years with Jeffrey Tolliver, she’d thought she had figured out every one of his tics, but this one had passed her by. She told Faith, ‘I was married to a cop for fifteen years. I never noticed, but you’re right – my husband always sat down when there was bad news.’

‘I’ve been a cop for fifteen years,’ Faith responded. ‘Did he cheat on you or turn into an alcoholic?’

Sara felt a lump in her throat. ‘He was killed three and a half years ago.’

‘Oh, no,’ Faith gasped, putting her hand to her chest. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s all right,’ Sara answered, wondering why she’d even told the woman such a personal detail. Her life over the last few years had been dedicated to not talking about Jeffrey, and here she was sharing him with a stranger. She tried to ease the tension by adding, ‘You’re right. He cheated on me, too.’ At least he had the first time Sara married him.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Faith repeated. ‘Was he on duty?’

Sara didn’t want to answer her. She felt nauseated and overwhelmed, probably a lot like Faith had felt before she’d passed out in the parking lot.

Faith picked up on this. ‘You don’t have to—’

‘Thanks.’

‘I hope they got the bastard.’

Sara put her hand into her pocket, her fingers wrapping around the edge of the letter. That was the question everyone wanted answered: *Did they get him? Did they catch the bastard who killed your husband?* As if it mattered. As if the disposition of Jeffrey’s killer would somehow alleviate the pain of his death.

Mercifully, Mary came into the room. ‘Sorry,’ the nurse apologized. ‘The old lady’s kids just dropped her here. I had

to call social services.' She handed Sara a piece of paper. 'CMP's back.'

Sara frowned as she read the numbers on the metabolic profile. 'Do you have your monitor?'

Mary reached into her pocket and handed over her blood glucose monitor.

Sara swabbed some alcohol on the tip of Faith's finger. The CMP was incredibly accurate, but Grady was a large hospital and it wasn't unheard of for the lab to get samples mixed up. 'When was the last time you had a meal?' she asked Faith.

'We were in court all day.' Faith hissed 'Shit' as the lancet pierced her finger, then continued, 'Around noon, I ate part of a sticky bun Will got out of the vending machine.'

Sara tried again. 'The last *real* meal.'

'Around eight o'clock last night.'

Sara guessed from the guilty look on Faith's face that it had probably come out of a take-away bag. 'Did you have coffee this morning?'

'Maybe half a cup. The smell was a bit too much.'

'Cream and sugar?'

'Black. I usually eat a good breakfast – yogurt, fruit. Right after my run.' Faith asked, 'Is something wrong with my blood sugar?'

'We'll see,' Sara told her, squeezing some blood onto the test strip. Mary raised an eyebrow, as if to ask if Sara wanted to place a wager on the number. Sara shook her head: *no bet*. Mary persisted, using her fingers to indicate one-five-zero.

'I thought the test came later,' Faith said, sounding unsure of herself. 'When they make you drink the sugary stuff?'

'Have you ever had any problems with your blood sugar? Is there a history in your family?'

'No. None.'

The monitor beeped and the number 152 flashed on the screen.

Mary gave a low whistle, impressed by her own guess. Sara had once asked the woman why she didn't go to medical school, only to be told that nurses were the ones who practiced the real medicine.

Sara told Faith, 'You have diabetes.'

Faith's mouth worked before she managed a faint, 'What?'

'My guess is that you've been pre-diabetic for a while. Your cholesterol and triglycerides are extremely elevated. Your blood pressure is a little high. The pregnancy and the rapid weight gain – ten pounds is a lot for nine weeks – plus your bad eating habits, pushed you over the edge.'

'My first pregnancy was fine.'

'You're older now.' Sara gave her some tissue to press against her finger so the bleeding would stop. 'I want you to follow up with your regular doctor first thing in the morning. We need to make sure there's not something else going on here. Meanwhile, you have to keep your blood sugar under control. If you don't, passing out in the parking lot will be the least of your worries.'

'Maybe it's just – I haven't been eating right, and—'

Sara cut her off mid-denial. 'Anything over one-forty is a positive diagnosis for diabetes. Your number has actually inched up since the first blood test was taken.'

Faith took her time absorbing this. 'Will it last?'

The question was one for an endocrinologist to answer. 'You'll need to talk to your doctor and have him run some more tests,' Sara advised, though, if she had to make an educated guess, she would say that Faith was in a precarious situation. Except for the pregnancy, she would be presenting as a full-blown diabetic.

Sara glanced at her watch. 'I would admit you tonight for observation, but by the time we processed you and found you a room, your doctor's office would be open, and something tells me you wouldn't stay here anyway.' She had spent enough time around police officers to know that Faith would bolt the minute she got the chance.