



Seven years later

“Sir, I’m headed to the gym to get him now. He doesn’t have good cell service there.” Detective Greer Bennett strode into the Lexington City Gym, irritated and cold. “In fact, I’m probably about to lose service too.”

“Get out there now, Bennett. Homeland is already on it, and I’m not so keen in giving up before we even start.”

“Yes, sir.”

Her frown deepened as the click sounded.

Pushing through the doors to the basketball courts, her nose wrinkled as she pocketed her cell phone and unzipped her jacket. Although it was in the forties and robust fall weather outside, it was a balmy eighty degrees in the gym.

“Hey, Greer.”

She nodded to Paige with a smile. “How’re you feeling?” Climbing the steps, she took a seat next to Paige, who rolled her eyes.

“Oh, just great. Rick insisted I come with him today and as it turns out, all the other wives had something much better to

do. So, I've been shopping." Paige waved her phone with a wink as she let out a laugh. "I'll have everything ready for this baby one way or another."

"Serves him right. But unfortunately, we have a case."

"I figured that's why you're here." She turned her attention to the game. "Rick!"

Glancing over the court, Greer tried to keep her eyes off Thomas, but as usual, it didn't do much good. His large size and big grin were too hard to ignore.

"Yeah?"

Her gaze shifted to her partner.

"Greer says it's time to go."

Rick tossed the ball behind him as he jogged up to the stands. "What's up?"

"Mansfield has been trying to call you for the past hour. He's hot."

Rick shrugged as he wiped his face off. "He's always hot. What's going on?"

"Something at an empty lot in Pine Valley. Apparently, it's big because Homeland already has a man there. The sheriff needs some help and requested you."

Greer gripped Paige's hand to help her stand. Rick took over, walking his six-month-pregnant wife down the steps.

"And next time you make her come and sit on these awful bench seats just to watch you play ball, I'm going to come down here and school you."

"That last time was a lucky shot."

"Yeah, sure."

"Greer."

Following Paige off the bleachers, she turned. Her jaw clenched as Thomas jogged toward her, that big grin on his face.

Forcing a smile, she nodded and shoved her hands in the jacket pockets. "How's it going?"

“Things are about the same. You?”

“I’m good. Look, I’ve got to go—”

“Yeah, same old, same old.”

She frowned at his condescension “See ya around, Thomas.”

Before she could get to the outer door of the gym, a hand gripped her arm. Yanking free, she found Thomas’s frame in her space.

“I’d like to talk sometime. Anytime. Call me.”

Forcing her eyes to his, she sighed. She had been drawn to him like a moth to a flame when they first met six months ago. As those icy blue eyes stared, it was hard to keep from being drawn in once again.

“Nothing’s changed. You want something I can’t give. Let’s just leave it.”

He pushed in, lightly taking ahold of her waist. “I don’t want to leave it.”

“So, you’ve changed your mind?”

He shrugged. “Not sure, but I am certain I’m not ready to just walk away.”

“It’s been almost a month. And I can honestly say, I’m not ready to go back down that road.” She swallowed hard as his eyes flitted around her face, landing often on her lips. “I have to go.”

Pulling back, she turned and all but ran to the front of the gym, high-tailing it outside to find Rick standing outside his car and talking to Paige.

“If you ever leave me like that again—”

“Look,” Rick held up his hands in defense. “I can’t stop him, G. He’s going to keep talking until you listen.”

“I’m done listening.”

“Rick, stop it. She’s made her decision, and you should tell him that.” Paige’s voice quivered, and Greer stooped over to look in the window.

Paige wiped her face and blew out a deep breath.

“You okay?”

Paige just waved her off. “Hormones. I’m fine. But I am upset that things didn’t work out for you. He seems like such a good guy.”

She sighed and straightened. “He is, just not the guy for me.”

With a nod to Rick, she headed for the car. Slamming the door, she started the engine and turned up the heat. Chewing on the inside of her cheek, the past few months rushed through her mind. “God, tell me I made the right decision.”

After the disaster in Nashville, moving back to Lexington last year seemed the best idea. Poised to partner with her old high-school friend in the town she graduated in, the pieces started to fit. Her life finally felt whole again.

Then Thomas entered the picture.

Blowing out a deep breath, she held her head in her hand as Rick slipped into the car.

“Let’s go.”

“You’re not even going to change?” She eyed him with a wrinkled nose.

Rick shrugged. “I smell fine.”

With a shake of her head, she put the address that would lead them to the scene in the GPS—well outside the city in the rural community of Pine Valley.

Chit-chat about baby supplies and the status of the high school football team evolved into a more personal discussion.

“Look, whatever happened between you and Thomas, you need to fix it. I’m tired of all the questions about you every Saturday.”

She clenched her jaw a moment. “He wanted to get engaged.”

“Okay. So, you don’t want to get married?”

“We dated a month. He never even told me he loved me,

and I'm not all that sure I could say I loved him. My work interfered with half our dates, and we had to plan around his EMT schedule. We weren't close enough to get engaged."

"I get that. But you two seemed to click."

"Well, yeah, we did. But honestly, I think a lot of that was the newness of everything. You remember that, right? When you first start dating someone, and it's all new and attraction, and that's pretty much it. We didn't know each other well enough to know if we wanted the same things and the future ..." she trailed off, feeling an ache.

The thing was, at thirty-four, she wanted a future. She wanted to get married, maybe even have a family. But she wasn't willing to just give in because an amazingly handsome guy she wasn't even sure she loved was willing to give that to her after a handful of dates.

"You know, he ended things. I didn't want to talk about marriage just yet, it was too soon. After a few days of fighting, I told him I couldn't keep arguing about it and to drop it for a few more months. He said he wanted more, and if I wasn't ready, he needed to move on."

"Really? He made it out like you ended it."

"Of course, he did." She turned right into the empty lot.

The police tape fluttered in the wind as she parked the car.

"Did Mansfield say why Homeland was here?" Rick nodded at the black SUV parked on the other side of the drive.

She shook her head and stepped into the brisk fall air. "Nope. Guess we're about to find out."

Zippering up her jacket, her body shivered in the cool breeze.

They showed their credentials to the officer, and he let them by.

"Hey, Patrick. How's it goin'?" Rick led the way, smiling at the small-town sheriff who slid from his car to meet them.

"Ricky, glad you're here. I would hate to have to deal with some young city detective."

Rick clutched his chest. "I'm still young."

She chuckled. The man smiled.

"Well, you brought a friend."

She stuck out her hand. "Detective Bennett."

He shook it. The older sheriff looked to be in his sixties and had probably been in this rural community for decades.

"Nice to meet you, miss. Sheriff Patrick Tindall at your service."

"What in the world did you dig up?"

The man's gaze slowly left hers and turned to the backhoe sitting in the distance.

"Well, we had a new buyer come in here, wanted to put in one of those dollar shops. Anyway, the digging crew called about an hour ago. Said they found something shady. When I got here, it looked like some bones had been uncovered, so I called in the ME. He called a forensic somebody, and suddenly, Homeland is here, and I'm just trying to keep up."

She stood at the edge of the dug-out trench, whitewashed bones stuck out of the dark red dirt.

"Where's the forensic anthropologist?"

Patrick shrugged at Rick's question.

"She was here earlier. Said she had to get more equipment or something."

"She needed specialized digging equipment that you didn't have on hand." The deep voice echoed on the breeze from across the trench.

Her eyes leveled on a man in designer jeans and a sports coat. Six foot or so, the sports coat stretched tightly over his broad shoulders. Sunglasses covered his eyes as his dark hair fluttered in the fall breeze.

"And you are?"

"Special Agent Sullivan."

Federal. Great.

His square jaw clenched as he walked around the trench. Without a word, he pulled out his credentials to show them.

“Nice to meet you, Agent Sullivan. I’m Detective Rick Myers.” Rick grinned and shook the man’s hand.

Sullivan didn’t give her a second glance as he spoke to Rick. “I have a guess who this is, but until we get a positive ID, I’m left waiting. I’d appreciate being kept in the loop. Although, I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

“Sure, anything we can do to help. Right, G?”

The man was hard to read behind those sunglasses, but his stiff body language spoke volumes.

“Are you going to read us in?” she questioned.

He shook his head. “Nope, if it’s who I think it is, it’s my case.”

She stepped in front of Rick to gain the guy’s attention. “This is *our* case, and unless your director has affirmed your position, which I’m guessing he hasn’t ...” her eyebrow rose as Sullivan’s jaw clenched harder, “then we will, out of respect for your situation, allow you to hang around. But we’re not obligated to share any information.”

Pulling his sunglasses off, his green eyes darkened. “Is there a reason for your hostility?”

“Not hostile, just protective. It’s not the first time other agencies have asked for the same allowances and then pushed us off without the least bit of courtesy.”

“I won’t,” he growled.

“Sure. Last time a Fed took Rick here out to dinner, offered him a steak while his men took over the entire scene and body. He had no idea until he got back to work.”

Rick hit her back, and she turned.

“That was a long time ago when I was fresh. It won’t happen again.” Rick glared.

She turned back to face the agent. “No, it won’t.”

Stepping back to the scene, the icy gaze of both men sent chills up her neck.

“I don’t work that way. Law enforcement deserves respect—any law enforcement.”

Shaking her head at Sullivan’s comment, she slipped on gloves and sat on the edge of the hole.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Glancing up, she ignored the agent’s stern tone. Swinging her gaze to Patrick, she asked, “So, pictures have been taken and measurements made, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am. Did it all myself and already got the okay from the ME to move the body after the forensic woman gives the all clear.” He smiled, and she slid down the edge.

“Easy there, Greer. Don’t—”

She silenced Rick with a stare. “I think I can handle it. Besides, you three are a little too heavy-footed to get details.”

A chuckle from the sheriff made her smirk. Carefully easing around the body, she wedged herself between the trench walls and the scene markers.

Sweeping a gloved hand around the hip bone that stuck up on its side, she knelt low to get a good look at the brushed-away dirt that revealed the hip structure.

“Female, I’m guessing younger than thirty, mid-to-late twenties maybe?” She peered up to the agent. “That meet your requirements, Agent Sullivan?”

He nodded, sliding the sunglasses back in place.

Pushing hers back to hold her hair, she scanned the remains. Fragments of fabric, probably clothes, stuck up in between the bones and the dirt. The rubber sole of a boot barely shone through the dirt from the edge of the taped-off scene. She rose to tip-toe around for a better look. Stepping outside the scene, she had only about a foot of space as she wiped off the tread and dug around the boot.

“Find something?”

Remains

Ignoring Rick's call, her gut churned. There was something more here, something she wasn't going to like. Those boots weren't feminine, and with the angle ...

Grunting, she pulled at a large rock, turning it over to reveal a smooth surface underneath the dirt.

The limited space in the area left her trying to heave the large rock. She rolled it underneath to sit on. Her fingers worked their way into the space, clearing the smooth surface. The brittle white texture under her fingers confirmed her suspicions.

“There's another body.”