

Chapter 19: Sheriff John Moore

I'd had a feeling about Emily Holt. A hunch, you might call it. In my line of work, you learn to pay attention to hunches. It was a hunch that probably saved Jessie McIntosh's life up at the children's lodge a couple of years ago. It was a hunch that saved the lives of seven of my men when Iraqi insurgents ambushed us back in '93, and a hunch of an entirely different sort that saved me from what would have undoubtedly been a terrible marriage in '95. More recently, a hunch had gotten me to the doctor in time to save my own life.

Then there are the times I should have listened, but didn't. Like September 15, 1991, the day my gut told me Boston College's tight end was going to go low. I should have listened to it, but I didn't, and I ended up with a blown-out ACL and a blown-up football career. I'd made a habit of listening since then.

Now, I had a hunch about Emily Holt. I hadn't asked for her license or registration because technically, I hadn't pulled her over. Instead, I'd happened upon her, as it were. And so far as I know the law—and I like to think I know it pretty damned well—it's not illegal to fall out of cars or slide down mountains, at least not in the state of West Virginia. Weird as hell, but not illegal, not even in any of our old, obsolete laws, and we've got some doozies.

For example, anytime a train runs within a mile of a community of a hundred people or more, the community has to build a station. That one goes a long way toward explaining why a little town like Cedar Hollow rates a train station. But don't fall asleep on that train; that's illegal. You can't legally whistle underwater—at least not for fun, and why the hell else would you be whistling underwater?—you can't legally swear in public, and you can't legally own a red flag, but by God, you can fall out of cars and slide down mountains all day long, if that's what you want to do.

Apparently, that was what Emily Holt wanted to do.

All of which made me curious. I didn't have her license or registration, but what I did have was her plate number. That was all I needed. It didn't take long to uncover a missing person's report, filed with the Orange Park Police Department outside of Jacksonville, Florida. The report was taken by Officer Rick Higgins.

No way in hell, I thought. I knew a Rick Higgins, or at least had at one time. Marine Corps Base Quantico, 1992. I graduated third in my class. Rick Higgins graduated first. Hell of a guy, Rick. I wondered at the chance of this Higgins being the same one.

“Festus!” he said by way of greeting when he finally came on the line.

Yep, same one. Festus was the limping deputy sheriff from the old television series *Gunsmoke*. I’d had the name bestowed upon me shortly after my arrival at Camp Pendleton, and despite my best efforts, it had followed me to Quantico. I’d lied to the recruiting officer, lied to the doctors, and lied to everyone in between, but there were some days the bum knee got the best of me, and try as I might, I couldn’t completely hide that fact.

I wasn’t a liar by nature, but when the hoped-for football career went south and I returned to the Pittsburgh suburb I’d grown up in, one thing was clear: I couldn’t stay there. My stepfather was drinking as much as ever and my mother was still under his thumb. Me, though, I’d changed. The first time the old man came at me with a closed fist, I snapped his arm up behind his back and drove him to his knees. It was time to go, and a recruiting station downtown helped me leave.

“Einstein,” I replied, using his old nickname. Damn, the man was smart. There’s no doubt in my mind I’d have been a lot farther down the list than third if it hadn’t been for Higgins.

“It’s good to hear from you, man,” he said. “I heard you’d gotten yourself elected sheriff out in the middle of nowhere. Is that true?” His Boston accent brought back memories of late nights spent pouring over regulations. *Think, Festus*, he used to say. *You know this shit. Just think for a minute.*

“It’s true,” I confirmed. “Wasn’t a lot of competition.”

He laughed. “Well, congratulations, anyway. So is this a work-related call, then?”

“Fraid so,” I answered, and nearly smiled. Neither of us had been much good at small talk. It was just like Higgins to jump straight to the point, another trait of his I appreciated. “I believe we’ve got a woman you’ve been looking for.”

“Emily Holt,” he said.

“That’s the one.”

“She been arrested?”

“No. No, nothing like that. She’s taken a room at the boarding home here in town. Cedar Hollow,” I clarified. “West Virginia,” I clarified more. Many people as close as Huntington had never heard of Cedar Hollow. I was fairly certain no one in Jacksonville, Florida had.

“She okay, then?”

“Well,” I hesitated. “She’s in one piece, if that’s what you mean.”

“You read the report.”

“I did. Possible mental health issues, you said. I don’t think she’s a danger to herself or anyone else. She’s a little out there. A little strange. But nothing to take in front of a mental health commissioner. In my opinion, that is.”

“Good. That’s good. Lost her husband a year ago. Her kids got worried when they realized she’d taken off without telling them. They thought she might be having a hard time dealing with the anniversary of his death. All right, then,” he said, all business. “I’ll take care of things on this end.”

“I’ll go find Mrs. Holt and let her know her kids are worried. Shouldn’t be too hard to find. Probably lying in a road somewhere.”

“What? I thought you said she wasn’t a danger.” I could almost hear him sitting up straighter.

“She’s not. I don’t think she’s trying to hurt herself. She just seems to like our asphalt.”

“Well, all right, then. You said she was strange. That makes me believe it. Next time we talk, we need to catch up a little bit.”

I agreed, and we disconnected.

I’d been serious when I stated Mrs. Holt should be easy to find. According to the sign at the entrance to town, 219 people called Cedar Hollow home. Anyone would be easy to find in Cedar Hollow. If she wasn’t at the boarding home or the diner, I’d take Main Street to Deer Jump, and if experience was anything to go by, I’d find her there. Just hopefully not lying in the road.