

Icy fingers of cold air pressed against Declan Matthews' shirt as the wind blew through the trees. Once upon a time the wooded area, less than a mile from his childhood home, would have been a place of refuge. Now it was tainted with death.

The massive tree, which had been brought down by lightning at least fifty years earlier, still made for a perfect bridge over the cold brook that calmly passed beneath it.

It was there that they had found his sister. She had died on that bridge of nature, right where she'd once played as a child.

He heard the footsteps on the dry leaves behind him, but he didn't turn. There was no reason to.

Vaughn moved in beside him, just as an old friend would do, without a word.

They'd shared many hours together in this spot. It was more than a tree in the woods. It had been a pirate ship, a lunar landing site, and a jungle with man-eating monkeys. It had also been a place to camp and have long talks. Or when they'd gotten older, a place to sneak off with one of their dads' beers and a cigar. He'd brought Lacy Pratt out to the log once for a massive make out session, which ended successfully in his car later that night. Of course, that would only be the beginning of the women who refused to talk to him after a relationship ended.

Vaughn shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. "Christ, Declan. I don't even know what to say."

"There's nothing to say."

"I can't believe something like this would happen here. Everyone knows everyone. Who could have done this?"

Declan hated the small town mentality, even if the town was no longer small, as it had been in his early youth. Small was why he'd moved so far away. Ask anyone in a small town who could have done something like murder a married mother of two, and they'd tell you no one. Give them a name and they'd give you a million reasons that person was a saint. He appreciated living in a big city where everyone was guilty of something. He was a lawyer, so he knew what he was talking about. He'd put enough deadbeats away for a long time.

He clenched his fists to his side. "People talk, V. Someone will spill and I'll see them hang for it," he said through gritted teeth. And he meant it. He'd found great restraint in his job, but this wasn't part of his job. This was his little sister, and he'd take revenge if it meant finding the bastard that left her on that log, dead.

"Am I going to have to put a watch on you, Matthews?" The voice came from behind them and both men turned.

Of all people, Lacy Pratt moved toward them. A badge hung around her neck and a gun was holstered on her hip. She looked as if she'd walked out of a detective show on TV in her black slacks and starched white shirt. Her long locks, which he'd once tangled his fingers in, had been traded for a shorter cut that didn't quite hit her shoulders.

As she moved closer, she tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I'm really sorry about what happened. Stacy was a vital part of our community and a good friend," she said, her eyes locked on his.

He realized these were the first words she'd spoken to him in fifteen years. What a crappy thing to have to say.

"Thanks. What's all this?" He nodded toward her badge and she looked down.

"Detective Pratt. I'm working the case."

He felt those icy cold fingers on his back again, but this time the sharpness dug into his skin.

"How long have you been a detective?"

Lacy inched closer, her hands on her hips. "You got a problem with me and this case?"

"I have a problem with this case for sure." He mimicked her stance. "But I don't think that's what I asked. I asked you how long you've been a detective."

He saw the shift in her demeanor as her eyes softened. "Eight years."

"Are you good at your job?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Damn good."

"I'm glad to hear that. I want the S.O.B. caught and I want him to pay."

"We're doing everything we can to..."

"I want more. Someone killed my sister. That's not just something I'm going to forget very quickly. Not only that, they killed her five miles from her house and a mile from where she grew up. And why here? Why did they bring her here?"

Lacy turned to Vaughn. "Give us a minute, will ya?"

Vaughn exchanged looks with Declan, to which Declan gave him a nod to do as she'd asked. He was well aware of the others patrolling around the woods looking for anything that would tie someone to his sister's death. He sure as hell hoped they'd find something.

"Do you have any leads?" he asked looking toward the log which he thought he might cut into fire wood and burn out of the sheer necessity of making it go away.

"Every single person around is a suspect at this point."

He shifted his glance to look at her standing next to him. He'd admit, for five-three, she was as intimidating as hell with her stance and gun.

"So you've begun questioning everyone?"

"We're doing our job, Matthews."

The last name thing wasn't sitting well with him. "Did you forget my first name?"

"I tried to forget everything about you, but here you are."

He let the stab at him sting as it was meant to. "Well, I'm here now. And I want to know what we're going to do."

"We're going to do our jobs and you're going to let us."

Declan ran his tongue over his teeth. "Get on it then. My family needs some closure."

Lacy pulled her phone from her pocket. "I have some questions for you. I'm going to record our conversation. You got a problem with it?"

"Ask away," he said, facing her and crossing his arms in front of him.

She pushed the button on her phone and then looked up at him. "Where were you yesterday at approximately four-thirty in the afternoon?"

Declan felt himself wince, and when he looked at her, he knew she'd caught that. What the hell did he have to lose?

"I was with my divorce lawyer."

The flash of amusement that lit in her eyes was hard to miss, but she kept her demeanor. "I'll need the name and location of the lawyer and the meeting."

"Fine."

"Divorced, huh? Sucks."

"Tell me about it. Since I've gone there, I've been divorced for two years now. But it seems my ex-wife thinks I withheld income stats from them and she'd like a little more of my hard-earned money. Let me also put out there that I actually walked in on her in my bed with her ex-husband whom she's planning on remarrying."

"Ouch. Kick to the balls, huh?"

"Exactly."

"Can't imagine you'd lie about that, but I still have to check it out."

"I'd expect you to be thorough." Declan dropped his arms and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I took the first flight out of New York this morning. There'll be a paper trail for you too."

"Good to know."

"I haven't been to see my parents yet. I came right here," he admitted. "Have you seen them?"

Her expression softened. "They're devastated."

"Of course."

"Your mom began to clean the house and your dad, well, I don't know how many shots he had."

"What about Tom?"

Lacy tucked her phone back into her pocket. "Yeah, we talked to him. I've been at this a long time, and I've never seen a man as big as him break down as he did. One of those things that'll stick with me."

"Genuine shock?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I suggested maybe he should even go to the hospital. But he refused."

"The kids?"

"They were sleeping by the time we got to him. The department sent counselors over this morning to be there."

Declan pinched the bridge of his nose as a headache began to creep in. "They don't deserve this. No one deserves to live without their mother."

Lacy reached out and touched his arm. "I know how it feels. They'll be okay, but they'll never forget."

Declan lifted his gaze. "I forgot you grew up without your mother. I'm sorry."

"It's why I do what I do. There's a lot of sick people out there, Matthews. I'm here to stop them, and someday no kid will lose their mother like this."

"Maybe you should have gone to talk to my niece and nephew."

She tucked a fallen strand of hair behind her other ear. "If they need me I'll be there. They're good kids."

He nodded in agreement. "I should head to my parents' house. What happens now?"

She expelled a long breath. "We will need someone to positively identify her."

Declan squeezed his eyes closed then opened them slowly. "You really need that?"

"I'm afraid so. Tom said he'd do it, but..."

"I'll do it," he offered. "Dear God, never thought it would be something I'd do, but I'll do it."

Lacy pulled her card from her pocket and handed it to him. "Go to your folks and get settled in. I can meet you in town when you're ready."

He looked down at the Rolex on his wrist, which once was a big deal and now meant crap to him in the scheme of things. "I'll meet you there at three?"

"I'll be there," she confirmed. "Give my condolences to your family."

"I will."

She hesitated for a moment, then shot him a sympathetic smile before she left him alone again with the cold blowing through the trees.