

Ferguson

THE ANGEL OF DEATH



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OF DEATH

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藏书章

a forensic mystery by
Alane Ferguson

SLEUTH
VIKING

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*For George Nicholson — agent,
friend, and guide.*

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Chapter One

"DO YOU KNOW how many laws we're breaking?" Cameryn Mahoney demanded.

Deputy Justin Crowley shrugged nonchalantly. He was driving his Blazer with one hand draped lazily over the wheel while the other brushed back his too-long dark hair from his eyes. "Well, if I had to guess, I'd say at least six," he answered slowly. A smile curled at the edge of his lips, making a kind of comma in his cheek as he added, "Maybe more."

"Six laws. And this doesn't worry you?"

Another shrug, only this time his shoulders barely moved. "Not particularly."

"Why does this not worry you?"

"Because there's a dead body on the side of the road, which can't stay there. That's a fact. The sheriff and the

coroner are out of town, which is also a fact. That leaves the two of us—Silverton's trusty deputy and its extremely capable assistant to the coroner"—he nodded in her direction—"to work the scene. In other words, it's just you and me. And we're doing it."

"This is crazy. *You're* crazy."

"Just doing my job."

Trees whizzed past as Justin downshifted around a hairpin turn on the Million Dollar Highway, a narrow two-lane road that ran like an umbilical cord from tiny Silverton all the way to Durango. To Cameryn's right, Colorado's San Juan Mountains towered above her in a granite block, while to her left the mountains fell away in a thousand-foot sheer drop, a yawning mouth of a valley bristling with Engleman spruce beside streams with fluted ice as thin as parchment. According to Justin, there was a body on this road that Cameryn was supposed to process, without tools or a gurney or even a pair of latex gloves. Messing up at the beginning of a case could mean disaster if it ever went to court. They shouldn't even think of processing a scene alone. It was insanity.

"You're chewing your fingernails again," Justin pointed out. He glanced at her for the briefest second, and in the relative dimness of the car's interior his eyes looked more green than blue, the color of a lake reflecting evergreens. "What are you so nervous about? I thought you liked this stuff."

"I *like* being prepared and I—this—this is all wrong. We should radio the police in Durango or Montrose. Or something."

"*Relax*. You've been so uptight lately—did you know that?"

"We were talking about the remains, Justin, not about me."

"All right, all right, back to the case. There's something funky about the body. All I'm asking for is your quick, professional opinion and then . . . boom." He hit the heel of his hand against the steering wheel. "You're outta there."

The seat belt cut into her neck as she twisted to face him, protesting, "But I'm *not* a professional. How can I give a professional opinion when I'm still in high school?"

"Ah, but you've got to admit you know more than I do," Justin replied. "You're a forensic guru. You're so good that—guess what Sheriff Jacobs calls you when you're not around! Come on, take a guess."

Cameryn closed her eyes and groaned. She knew what was coming. A quip, a sly remark about her working with the dead—she knew folks in Silverton whispered about her all the time, under their breaths, their words falling like snowflakes only to melt beneath her resolve. It didn't take much time with the living to remind Cameryn why she wanted to be a forensic pathologist. The dead didn't tell stories, except about themselves.

Although Justin seemed to register her groan, there was no stopping him this morning. “Jacobs calls you the Angel of Death.” The deputy grinned as though he’d just given her the highest compliment. “What do you think about that?”

She replied with her standard answer, the one she always gave, her Pavlovian response. “I’m into the science of forensics, not death.”

“Tell it to the sheriff. *I’m* not the one who gave you the name.” His eyebrows, dark half-moons, rose up his forehead as he smirked. “Angel.”

Another hairpin turn, only this time a huge semi-truck roared up the mountainside, belching greasy smoke into the morning air and leaving a gassy trail behind.

Like a vapor winding its way through the streets of Silverton, the idea that she loved death had dissipated throughout the tiny town of seven hundred citizens and had crept its way through the halls of Silverton High. It encompassed her friends, who squirmed at the fact that she’d seen the insides of a human body. It drifted over to her boss at the Grand Hotel, who made Cameryn soak her hands in bleach water before setting the tables, something he never asked the other servers to do. Her own grandmother, whom she called “Mammaw” after the Irish way, clucked whenever Cameryn read forensic books, convinced that the mere study of those

books would somehow condemn her soul to hell. But her father, the real coroner of Silverton, encouraged her. "You've got a talent, Cammie," he'd say. "You see things. What you have is a gift."

The blinker's staccato clicking broke into her thoughts as Justin pulled onto a dirt overlook. He pointed expansively across the highway. "It's over there," he said, "behind that big boulder."

"You keep calling the body an 'it.' Is the decedent a male or female?"

"Hard to tell. Our little animal friends did quite a bit of chewing on it. That's not what's bothering me, though." He turned the key, and the engine coughed and died. "I think the best thing will be for you to see for yourself."

"I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Come on," he said. "Check it out."

Beyond the dirty windshield Cameryn saw a partial mound on the left side of the road, smaller than she'd expected, although the entire shape was impossible to discern from her angle. She got out of the Blazer and hurried behind the deputy as he crossed the highway. The lip of the road was narrow on the east side, the ground uneven, treacherous with rocks and roots. Beneath her, the faraway trees looked as though they were set in miniature. She slipped on a layer of faded leaves pooled at the trunk of a tree and made slick with melting frost, but Justin grabbed her elbow to steady her.

“Careful,” he said.

Panic whined inside her because she knew she shouldn’t be here. Maybe there was still time to call for help. . . .

“It’s right there,” Justin said, gesturing with his free hand.

Beyond the rock, rising like a half-shell, was a body, shadows dappling the surface of what looked to be the remains of a small person. The sickly sweet smell of decay filled her nostrils, but she ignored it as she moved closer, her heart drumming with nervous energy. Something was happening; it was as though a switch inside her had been thrown. Now the clinical side, the science part of her brain, pushed to the forefront, drowning out the objecting voices. Suddenly she wanted to see the body and examine it. There was a puzzle here, and it was possible she could put the pieces together to learn its secrets.

“I knew you’d get into it,” Justin said.

“Uh-huh. Shut up.”

Another step closer and she stopped in her tracks. The shape solidified in front of her, the mound a back that ended in a question mark of a tail. Tufts of fur bristled at the top of its ears, but the snout looked bent, like the crook in a branch.

“What is this?” she demanded, whirling around to face Justin. “You brought me out here to look at a *German shepherd*? You dragged me from work to look at *road-kill*?”

Rocking back on his heels, Justin returned her gaze. He was lanky, as tall as her father but much thinner. Hands in his back pockets, he said, "I never claimed the decedent was human."

"Oh, you are so hilarious," Cameryn snapped. She was relieved, of course, but, she had to admit, disappointed, too. Somewhere along the line she'd psyched herself up to see a human body. In the mountains, dead animals were a dime a dozen. "Why did you bring me here?"

Justin spoke as though he had all the time in the world. "I've discovered that in a small town, the deputy does all kinds of odd jobs. Dumping roadkill is one of them."

"Take me back, Deputy. I'm not a vet." Annoyed, Cameryn turned to leave. Justin caught her arm.

His voice became serious. "Just wait. The point is that when I saw the dog, right away I noticed there was something off about the body. I didn't want to dispose of it until I got a second opinion."

She began to pull herself free, but his grasp was firm. Then he gave her arm a squeeze, trying, it seemed, to cajole her. "Come on," he said, releasing her elbow. "You're already here, so you might as well look. Tell me what you see."

It occurred to Cameryn that, since Justin was driving, she really had no other way back, which translated to the fact that she had no choice but to examine the dead animal.

"Fine," she said at last. "I'll look. Then we go."

“Whatever you say. Angel.”

“Punk.”

Cameryn walked around the rock to get a better look at the carcass. Above her, the bare limbs of trees reached like scaffolding into the sky, creating a criss-cross pattern of shadow on the rock and the body beneath. The dog’s legs were already extended in rigor mortis, and its belly was distended. Fur stood in erratic tufts that reminded her of fish scales, and one ear was double-notched in a V as though it had been torn in a dogfight. A chunk of flesh was missing near its genitals. Wild animals had gnawed on the soft tissue, which was common in the mountains—nothing lasted in the outdoors, Cameryn knew. The tip of the German shepherd’s nose, as well as its eyes, were missing, and the end of its tongue was gone.

“How long do you think it’s been dead?” he asked.

“It’s hard to say. From the rigor I’d guess about thirty-six hours. Maybe more.”

Justin squatted. His elbows drilled his thighs; his hands hung limply between his knees. “Here,” he said softly, pointing to the dog’s head. “This is the reason I brought you. Do you see it?”

“You mean the eyes?” Crouching beside him, Cameryn studied the empty holes. “That could be from bird activity. Magpies are total scavengers.”

“I thought of that. But look closer. It almost seems like

they, I don't know . . . exploded or something. Tell me if I'm crazy."

"You're crazy."

"I'm being serious, Cameryn. Say the word and I'll dump the carcass. But I really want your opinion before I do."

For a few moments she was silent, thinking. She bent close, only inches from the dog, breathing from her mouth to help fight the smell. The inside of the eye socket was exposed, and the vitreous humor—the transparent jelly that filled the eyeball—was missing. Ants had found their way into the orbs along with a few small beetles, which darted around the inner lid. A starburst pattern had seeped into the short hairs around the lids, giving it the appearance of painted lashes. The look was almost comical, and that fact alone made her sad.

"Have you ever seen this dog before?" Justin asked.

"No. My guess is that he belonged to someone who has a cabin in these mountains. It was a pet, though."

When Justin looked at her blankly, she added, "It was wearing a collar. See? The fur's pressed down around its neck in a ring. It must have worn a collar all its life."

"Then where's the collar now?"

Cameryn shrugged. "Who knows? There's no impact wound to speak of, at least on this side," she said, her gaze searching the ribs and abdomen. "By the way, it's a male."

"I can see that. Do you want to turn him over?"

"I would if I had my gloves."

"I've got a pair of work gloves in my Blazer." A moment later, Justin was back sporting thick leather gloves, as heavy as a falconer's gauntlet. He wore a green aviator-style jacket with the gold star emblazoned on the chest, which was regulation, although the faded jeans and cowboy boots were not. Grabbing the dog's back leg, he raised the stiff body. More beetles skittered out and disappeared into the nearby leaves. Although it was November, Cameryn knew insects worked year-round, drawn to the warmth of decomposing flesh.

Then something caught her eye: on the back side, Cameryn could see a place where the soft tissue had been ripped open by scavenger teeth.

"That's odd," she said. She picked up a stick and inserted it into the cut, separating the tissue from the bone. "See the muscle there? It's gray."

"From decomposition?" he asked.

"Maybe. I've just never seen decomp look like this before. The texture's off, too." She shook her head. "Weird."

"Do you think we should do an autopsy on it to see what happened?"

"If it's on an animal it's called a necropsy, and no," she said, rubbing her hands on her jeans as she stood. "I don't think we need to do one. I mean, the truth is, dogs die. Just like people. Things come, then they go, and then it's over—that's all there is."

For a beat he stared at her, releasing the dog's hind leg from his gloved hand. The carcass made a sickening thump on the ground. His eyes locked onto hers, and without flinching she returned his gaze.

"What?" she finally asked. "What's wrong?"

A pause, and then, "You."

"What about me?"

"I . . . I didn't think you'd turn like this. You've changed, Cameryn. You're not like yourself anymore."

She snorted. "You *are* crazy. I'm totally and completely fine."

"No, you're not." His green-blue eyes narrowed into crescents as he stood, towering over her. "The truth is, you haven't been fine ever since I gave you that letter from your mother."

The sound of his words was like a knife going through her, but she didn't move. She stood as stiff as the carcass on the ground.

Justin put his hand on her arm again, more gently this time. "You can talk to me about Hannah," he said. "Anytime you want."

"Are we done? Because I'd like to go now."

"You flinched when I said her name."

"Hannah is none of your business."

"It is my business. I'm the one who put the two of you together. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even know she's alive. I feel responsible, that's all."

Her mother Hannah, who had been missing for years, had suddenly reemerged from the shadows like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Now everyone, it seemed, hovered over Cameryn, anxious to find out what was happening inside her head, as though they possessed a set of sharp autopsy instruments all their own, poised and ready to pick her mind and dissect her heart. But she wasn't willing to share what had happened with Hannah, especially not with Justin. Or with anyone. And so, in order to conceal her feelings, she hid behind the mask she had perfected for public scrutiny: rigidity without, hiding the storm within.

He took a step closer, near enough that she could smell the wintergreen on his breath. As she looked up, her dark hair fell down her back, almost to her waist, that waterfall of hair that she wished she could disappear inside. But there was no hiding this morning, not from Justin's sharp gaze.

"I'm your friend and I care about you, Cammie," he began. "You may not see what's happening, but I do."

"If you really cared you'd leave me alone."

She raised her chin and kept her eyes cold, folding emotion inside her with neat hospital corners, tucked under where no one could see. "You want my professional opinion?" she asked. "Here it is: The dog is dead. There's nothing you can do except make a note of it and move on."

Overhead, a magpie cawed. When Cameryn looked