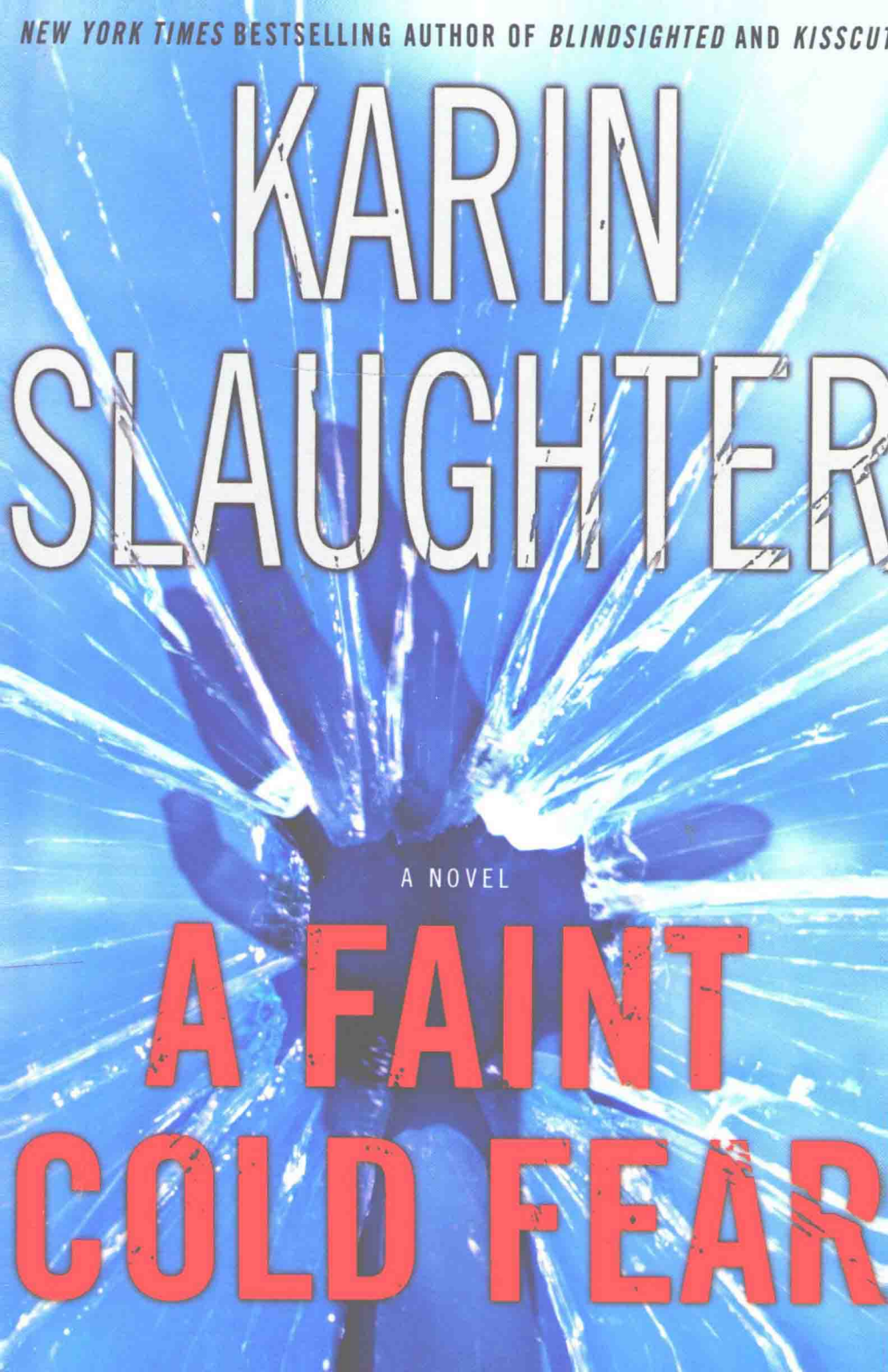


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BLINDSIGHTED* AND *KISSCUT*

# KARIN SLAUGHTER

A close-up photograph of a hand shattering a pane of glass. The hand is positioned in the center, with fingers spread, and the glass is exploding outwards in all directions, creating a starburst pattern of sharp, translucent shards. The background is a deep blue, and the overall lighting is bright, emphasizing the sharp edges of the broken glass.

A NOVEL

# A FAINT COLD FEAR

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Karin Slaughter



WILLIAM MORROW

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**SUNDAY**

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Sara Linton stared at the entrance to the Dairy Queen, watching her very pregnant sister walk out with a cup of chocolate-covered ice cream in each hand. As Tessa crossed the parking lot, the wind picked up, and her purple dress rose above her knees. She struggled to keep the jumper down without spilling the ice cream, and Sara could hear her cursing as she got closer to the car.

Sara tried not to laugh as she leaned over to open the door, asking, "Need help?"

"No," Tessa said, wedging her body into the car. She settled in, handing Sara her ice cream. "And you can shut up laughing at me."

Sara winced as her sister kicked off her sandals and propped her bare feet on the dashboard. The BMW 330i was less than two weeks old, and Tessa had already left a bag of Goobers to melt in the backseat and spilled an orange Fanta on the carpet in the front. Had Tessa not been nearly eight months pregnant, Sara would have strangled her.

Sara asked, "What took you so long?"

"I had to pee."

"Again?"

"No, I just like being in the bathroom at the damn Dairy Queen," Tessa snapped. She fanned her hand in front of her face. "Jesus, it's hot."

Sara kept her mouth shut as she turned up the air-conditioning. As a doctor, she knew that Tessa was merely a victim of her own hormones, but there were times when Sara thought that the best thing for all concerned would be to lock Tessa in a box and not open it until they heard a baby crying.

"That place was packed," Tessa managed around a mouthful of

chocolate syrup. "Goddamn, shouldn't all those people be at church or something?"

"Hm," Sara said.

"The whole place was filthy. Look at this parking lot," Tessa said, swooping her spoon in the air. "People just dump their trash here and don't even care about who has to pick it up. Like they think the trash fairy's gonna do it or something."

Sara murmured some words of agreement, eating her ice cream as Tessa continued a litany of complaints about everyone in the Dairy Queen, from the man who was talking on his cell phone to the woman who waited in line for ten minutes and then couldn't decide what she wanted when she got to the counter. After a while Sara zoned out, staring at the parking lot, thinking about the busy week she had ahead of her.

Several years ago Sara had taken on the part-time job of county coroner to help buy out her retiring partner at the Heartsdale Children's Clinic, and lately Sara's work at the morgue was playing havoc with her schedule at the clinic. Normally the county job did not require much of Sara's time, but a court appearance had taken her out of the clinic for two days last week, and she was going to have to make up for it this week by putting in overtime.

Increasingly, Sara's work at the morgue was infringing on clinic time, and she knew that in a couple of years she would have to make a choice between the two. When the time came, the decision would be a hard one. The medical examiner's job was a challenge, one Sara had sorely needed thirteen years ago when she had left Atlanta and moved back to Grant County. Part of her thought her brain would atrophy without the constant obstacles presented by forensic medicine. Still, there was something restorative about treating children, and Sara, who could not have children of her own, knew that she would miss the contact. She vacillated daily on which job was better. Generally, a bad day at one made the other look ideal.

"Getting on up there!" Tessa screeched, loud enough to get Sara's attention. "I'm thirty-four, not fifty. What the hell kind of thing is that for a nurse to say to a pregnant woman?"

Sara stared at her sister. "What?"

"Have you heard a word I've said?"

She tried to sound convincing. "Yes. Of course I have."

Tessa frowned. "You're thinking about Jeffrey, aren't you?"

Sara was surprised by the question. For once her ex-husband had been the last thing on her mind. "No."

"Sara, don't lie to me," Tessa countered. "Everybody in town saw that sign girl up at the station Friday."

"She was lettering the new police car," Sara answered, feeling a warm flush come to her cheeks.

Tessa gave a disbelieving look. "Wasn't that his excuse the last time?"

Sara did not answer. She could still remember the day she'd come home early from work to find Jeffrey in bed with the owner of the local sign shop. The whole Linton family was both amazed and irritated that Sara was dating Jeffrey again, and while Sara for the most part shared their sentiments, she felt incapable of making a clean break. Logic eluded her where Jeffrey was concerned.

Tessa warned, "You just need to be careful with him. Don't let him get too comfortable."

"I'm not an idiot."

"Sometimes you are."

"Well, you are, too," Sara shot back, feeling foolish even before the words came out of her mouth.

But for the whirl of the air-conditioning, the car was quiet. Finally Tessa offered, "You should've said, 'I know you are, but what am I?'"

Sara wanted to laugh it off, but she was too irritated. "Tessie, it's none of your business."

Tessa barked a loud laugh that rattled in Sara's ears. "Well, hell, honey, that's never stopped anybody before. I'm sure damn Marla Simms was on the phone before the little bitch even got out of her truck."

"Don't call her that."

Tessa waved her spoon in the air again. "What do you want me to call her? Slut?"

"Nothing," Sara told her, and meant it. "Don't call her anything."

"Oh, I think she deserves a few choice words."

"Jeffrey's the one who cheated. She just took advantage of a good opportunity."

"You know," Tessa began. "I took advantage of plenty of good opportunities in my time, but I never chased after a married one."

Sara closed her eyes, willing her sister to stop. She did not want to have this conversation.

Tessa added, "Marla told Penny Brock she's put on weight."

"What were you doing talking to Penny Brock?"

"Stopped-up drain in their kitchen," Tessa said, smacking her mouth around her spoon. Tessa had quit working full-time with their father in the family plumbing business when her swollen belly made it impossible to navigate crawl spaces, but she was still capable of taking a plunger to a drain.

Tessa said, "According to Penny, she's big as a house."



Despite her better intentions, Sara could not help but feel a moment of triumph, followed by a wave of guilt that she could take pleasure in another woman's widening hips. And ass. The sign girl was already a little too full in the flank for her own good.

Tessa said, "I see you smiling."

Sara was; her cheeks hurt from the strain of keeping her mouth closed. "This is horrible."

"Since when?"

"Since . . ." Sara let her voice trail off. "Since it makes me feel like an absolute idiot."

"Well, you am what you am, as Popeye would say." Tessa made a great show of scraping her plastic spoon around the cardboard cup as she wiped it clean. She sighed heavily, as if her day had just taken a turn for the worse. "Can I have the rest of yours?"

"No."

"I'm pregnant!" Tessa squeaked.

"That's not my fault."

Tessa went back to scraping her cup. To add to the annoyance, she started scratching the bottom of her foot on the dashboard's burlwood inlay.

A full minute passed before Sara felt an older sister's guilt hit her like a sledgehammer. She tried to fight it by eating more ice cream, but it stuck in her throat.

"Here, you big baby." Sara handed over her cup.

"Thank you," Tessa answered sweetly. "Maybe we can get some more for later?" she suggested. "Only, can you go back in and get it? I don't want them to think I'm a pig, and"—she smiled sweetly, batting her eyelids—"I might have ticked off the kid behind the counter."

"I can't imagine how."

Tessa blinked innocently. "Some people are just sensitive."

Sara opened the door, glad for a reason to get out of the car. She was three feet away when Tessa rolled down the window.

"I know," Sara said. "Extra chocolate."

"Yeah, but hold up." Tessa paused to lick ice cream off the side of her cell phone before she handed it out the window. "It's Jeffrey."

Sara pulled up onto a gravel embankment between a police cruiser and Jeffrey's car, frowning as she heard stones kicking up against the side of her car. The only reason Sara had traded in her two-seater convertible for the larger model was to accommodate a child's car seat. Between Tessa and the elements, the BMW was going to be trashed before the baby came.

"This it?" Tessa asked.

"Yep." Sara yanked up the parking brake and looked out at the dry river basin in front of them. Georgia had been suffering from a drought since the mid-1990s, and the huge river that had once slithered through the forest like a fat, lazy snake had shriveled to little more than a trickling stream. A cracked, dry carcass was all that remained, and the concrete bridge thirty feet overhead seemed out of place, though Sara could remember when people had fished from it.

"Is that the body?" Tessa asked, pointing to a group of men standing in a semicircle.

"Probably," Sara answered, wondering if they were on college property. Grant County comprised three cities: Heartsdale, Madison, and Avondale. Heartsdale, which housed the Grant Institute of Technology, was the jewel of the county, and any crime that happened inside its city limits was considered that much more horrible. A crime on college property would be a nightmare.

"What happened?" Tessa asked eagerly, though she had never been interested in this side of Sara's job before.

"That's what I'm supposed to find out," Sara reminded her, reaching over to the glove box for her stethoscope. The clearance was tight, and Sara's hand rested on the back of Tessa's stomach. She let it stay there for a moment.

"Oh, Sissy," Tessa breathed, grabbing Sara's hand. "I love you so much."

Sara laughed at the sudden tears in Tessa's eyes, but for some reason she could feel herself tearing up as well. "I love you, too, Tessie." She squeezed her sister's hand, saying, "Stay in the car. This won't take long."

Jeffrey was walking to meet Sara as she shut the car door. His dark hair was combed back neatly, still a little wet at the nape. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, perfectly pressed and tailored, with a gold police badge tucked into the breast pocket.

Sara was in sweatpants that had seen better days and a T-shirt that had given up on being white sometime during the Reagan administration. She wore sneakers with no socks, the laces loosely tied so she could slip in and out of them with as little effort as possible.

"You didn't have to dress up," Jeffrey joked, but she could hear the tension in his voice.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but I think there's something hinky—" He stopped, looking back at the car. "You brought Tess?"

"It was on the way, and she wanted to come. . . ." Sara let her voice

trail off, because there really was no explanation, other than that Sara's goal in life at the moment was to keep Tessa happy—or, at the very least, to keep her from whining.

Jeffrey recognized the situation. "I guess arguing with her wasn't worth it?"

"She promised to stay in the car," Sara said, just as she heard the car door slam closed behind her. She tucked her hands into her hips as she turned around, but Tessa was already waving her off.

"I've gotta go," Tessa said, pointing toward a line of trees in the distance.

Jeffrey asked, "She's gonna walk home?"

"She's going to the bathroom," Sara explained, watching Tessa head up the hill toward the forest.

They both watched Tessa navigate the steep slope, her hands hooked under her belly as if she were carrying a basket. Jeffrey asked, "Are you gonna be mad at me if I laugh when she rolls back down that hill?"

Sara laughed with him instead of answering his question.

He asked, "You think she'll be okay up there?"

"She'll be fine," Sara told him. "It won't kill her to get some exercise."

"Are you sure?" Jeffrey pressed, concerned.

"She's fine," Sara reassured, knowing that Jeffrey had never been around a pregnant woman for any length of time in his life. He was probably scared Tessa would go into labor before she got to the trees at the top of the hill. They should all be so lucky.

Sara started to walk toward the scene but stopped when he did not follow. She turned around, waiting for what she knew was coming.

He said, "You left pretty early this morning."

"I figured you needed the sleep." She walked back and took a pair of latex gloves out of his coat pocket, asking, "What's hinky?"

"I wasn't that tired," he said, in the same suggestive tone he would have used this morning if she'd stuck around.

She fidgeted with the gloves, trying to think of something to say. "I had to let the dogs out."

"You could start bringing them."

Sara gave the police cruiser a pointed look. "Is that new?" she asked, feigning curiosity. Grant County was a small place. Sara had heard about the new patrol car before it was even parked in front of the station.

He said, "Got it a couple of days ago."

"Lettering looks good," she said, keeping her tone casual.

"How about that," he said, an annoying phrase he had lately picked up when he did not know what else to say.

Sara did not let him get away with it. "She did a really nice job."

Jeffrey kept his gaze steady, as if he had nothing to hide. Sara would have been impressed had he not used the exact same expression the last time he'd assured her he was not cheating.

She gave a tight smile, repeating, "What's hinky?"

He let out a short, irritated breath. "You'll see," he told her, heading toward the river.

Sara walked at her normal pace, but Jeffrey slowed enough for her to catch up with him. She could see that he was angry, but Sara had never let Jeffrey's moods intimidate her.

She asked, "Is it a student?"

"Probably," he said, his tone still clipped. "We checked his pockets. There wasn't any ID on him, but this side of the river is college land."

"Great," Sara mumbled, wondering how long it would be before Chuck Gaines, the new head of security at the college, showed up and started questioning everything they did. Chuck was easy to dismiss as a nuisance, but Jeffrey's prime directive as chief of police for Grant County was to keep the college happy. Chuck knew this better than anyone, and he exploited his advantage whenever he could.

Sara noticed a very attractive blonde sitting on a cluster of rocks. Beside her was Brad Stephens, a young patrolman who had been a patient of Sara's a long time ago.

"Ellen Schaffer," Jeffrey provided. "She was jogging toward the woods. Crossed the bridge and saw the body."

"When did she find it?"

"About an hour ago. She called it in on her cell phone."

"She jogs with her phone?" Sara asked, wondering why she was surprised. People could not go to the bathroom anymore without taking their phones in case they got bored.

Jeffrey said, "I want to try to talk to her again after you examine the body. She was too upset before. Maybe Brad will help calm her down."

"Did she know the victim?"

"Doesn't look like it," he said. "She was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Most witnesses suffered from this same sort of bad luck, seeing something in a few moments that stayed with them for the rest of their lives. Fortunately, from what Sara could see of the body in the center of the riverbed, the girl had gotten off lightly.

"Here," Jeffrey said, taking Sara's arm as they approached the bank. The land was hilly, with a downward slope toward the river. A path had been worn into the ground by rain falloff, but the silt was porous and loose.

Sara judged that the bed was at least forty feet wide at this spot, but

Jeffrey would have someone measure that later. The ground was parched beneath their feet, and she could feel grit and clay working their way into her tennis shoes as they kicked up dust walking toward the body. Twelve years ago they would have been up to their necks in water by now.

Sara stopped halfway to the scene, looking up at the bridge. The design was a simple concrete beam with a low railing. A ledge jutted out a couple of inches from the bottom, and between this and the railing, someone had spray-painted in black letters DIE NIGGER and a large swastika.

Sara got a sour taste in her mouth. She said derisively, "Well, that's nice."

"Ain't it, though," Jeffrey replied, just as disgusted as she was. "It's all over campus."

"When did it start?" Sara asked. The graffiti looked faded, probably a couple of weeks old.

"Who knows?" Jeffrey said. "The college hasn't even acknowledged it."

"If they acknowledged it, they'd have to do something about it," Sara pointed out, looking over her shoulder for Tessa. "Do you know who's doing it?"

"Students," he said, giving the word a nasty spin as he resumed walking. "Probably a bunch of idiot Yankees who think it's funny coming down south to play hicks and crackers."

"I hate amateur racists," Sara mumbled, putting on a smile as they approached Matt Hogan and Frank Wallace.

"Afternoon, Sara," Matt said. He held an instant camera in one hand and several Polaroids in the other.

Frank, Jeffrey's second in command, told her, "We just finished the pictures."

"Thanks," Sara told them, snapping on the latex gloves.

The victim was lying directly under the bridge, facedown on the ground. His arms were splayed out to the side and his pants and underwear were bunched up around his ankles. Judging from his size and the lack of hair on his smooth back and buttocks, he was a young man, probably in his twenties. His blond hair was long to the collar and parted on the back of his head. He could have been sleeping but for the splattering of blood and tissue coming out of his anus.

"Ah," she said, understanding Jeffrey's concern.

As a formality Sara knelt down and pressed her stethoscope to the dead boy's back. She could feel and hear his ribs move under her hand. There was no heartbeat.

Sara looped the stethoscope around her neck and examined the

body, calling out her findings. "There's no sign of the kind of trauma you'd expect with forcible sodomy. No bruises, no lacerations." She glanced up at his hands and wrists. His left arm was turned awkwardly, and she could see a nasty pink scar running up the forearm. From the look of it, the injury had happened within the last four to six months. "He wasn't tied up."

The young man was wearing a dark green T-shirt, which Sara lifted to check for further signs of damage. A long scrape was at the base of his spine, the skin broken, but not enough to bleed.

"What is it?" Jeffrey asked.

Sara did not answer, though something about the scrape seemed odd to her.

She picked up the boy's right leg to move it aside but stopped when the foot did not come with it. Sara slid her hand under the pant leg, feeling for the bones of the ankle, then the tibia and fibula; it was like squeezing a balloon filled with oatmeal. She checked the other leg, finding the same consistency. The bones were not just broken, they were pulverized.

A set of car doors slammed, and Sara heard Jeffrey whisper, "Shit," under his breath.

Seconds later Chuck Gaines walked down the bank, the shirt of his tan security uniform stretched tight across his chest as he tried to navigate the slope. Sara had known Chuck since elementary school, where he had teased her mercilessly about everything from her height to her good grades to her red hair, and she was just as happy seeing him now as she had been on the playground those many years ago.

Lena Adams stood beside Chuck wearing an identical uniform that was at least two sizes too big for her small frame. A belt kept the pants up, and, with her aviator sunglasses and hair tucked under a wide-brimmed baseball cap, she looked like a little boy playing dress-up in his father's clothes, especially when she lost her footing on the bank and slid the rest of the way down on her bottom.

Frank moved to help her, but Jeffrey stopped him with a look of warning. Lena had been a detective—one of them—up until seven months ago. Jeffrey had not forgiven Lena for leaving, and he was bound and determined to make sure no one else under his command did either.

"Damn," Chuck said, taking the last few steps at a jog. There was a light sheen of sweat over his lip despite the cool day, and his face was red from the effort of walking down the bank. Chuck was extremely muscular, but there was something unhealthy about him. He was always perspiring, and a thin layer of fat made his skin look tight and bloated. His face was round and moonish, his eyes a bit too wide. Sara did not know

if this was from steroids or poor weight training, but he looked like a heart attack waiting to happen.

Chuck gave Sara a flirty wink, saying, "Hey, Red," before jutting out his meaty hand toward Jeffrey. "How they hanging, Chief?"

"Chuck," Jeffrey said, reluctantly shaking his hand. He gave Lena a cursory glance, then turned back to the scene. "This was called in about an hour ago. Sara just got here."

Sara said, "Hey, Lena."

Lena gave a slight nod, but Sara could not read her expression behind the dark sunglasses. Jeffrey's disapproval of this exchange was obvious, and if they had been alone, Sara would have told him what he could do with it.

Chuck clapped his hands together, as if to assert his authority. "Whatcha got here, Doc?"

"Probably a suicide," Sara answered, trying to remember how many times she had asked Chuck not to call her "Doc." Probably not nearly as many times as she had asked him not to call her "Red."

"That so?" Chuck asked, craning his neck. "Don't it look to you like he's been fiddled with?" Chuck indicated the lower half of the body. "Looks like it to me."

Sara sat back on her heels, not answering. She glanced at Lena again, wondering how she was holding up. Lena had lost her sister a year ago this month, then gone through hell during the investigation. Even though Sara could think of a lot of things she did not like about Lena Adams, she would not wish Chuck Gaines on anyone.

Chuck seemed to realize no one was paying attention to him. He clapped his hands together again, ordering, "Adams, check the periphery. See if you can sniff up anything."

Surprisingly, Lena acquiesced, walking downstream.

Sara looked up at the bridge, shielding her eyes from the sun. "Frank, can you go up there and look for a note or something?"

"A note?" Chuck echoed.

Sara addressed Jeffrey. "I imagine he jumped from the bridge," she said. "He landed on his feet. You can see his shoe treads punched into the dirt. The impact pulled down his pants and broke most if not all of the bones in his feet and legs." She looked at the tag on the back of the jeans, checking the size. "They were baggy, and the force from that height would be pretty substantial. I imagine the blood is from his intestines detaching. You can see where part of the rectum was turned inside out and forced from the anus."

Chuck gave a low whistle, and before she could think to stop herself, Sara looked up at him. She saw his lips move as he read the racial epithet

on the bridge. He flashed a bright, obvious smile at Sara before asking, "How's your sister?"

Sara saw Jeffrey's jaw lock as he gritted his teeth. Devon Lockwood, the father of Tessa's child, was black.

"She's fine, Chuck," Sara answered, forcing herself not to rise to the bait. "Why do you ask?"

He flashed another smile, making sure she saw him looking at the bridge. "No reason."

She kept staring at Chuck, appalled at how little had changed about him since high school.

"This scar on his arm," Jeffrey interrupted. "It looks recent."

Sara forced herself to look at the victim's arm, but her anger caught in her throat when she answered, "Yes."

"Yes?" Jeffrey repeated, a definite question behind the word.

"Yes," Sara said, letting him know she could fight her own battles. She took a deep, calming breath before saying, "My best guess is it was deliberate, straight up the radial artery. He would've been taken to the hospital for that."

Chuck was suddenly interested in Lena's progress. "Adams!" he yelled. "Check up thataway." He pointed away from the bridge, the opposite direction she had been heading.

Sara put her hands on the dead boy's hips, asking Jeffrey, "Can you help me turn him?"

As she waited for Jeffrey to put on a pair of gloves, Sara searched the tree line for Tessa. There was no sign of her. For once Sara was grateful Tessa was in her car.

"Ready," Jeffrey said, his hands on the dead boy's shoulders.

Sara counted off, and they turned the body as carefully as they could.

"Oh, fuck," Chuck squeaked, his voice going up three octaves. He stepped back quickly, as if the body had suddenly burst into flames. Jeffrey stood up fast, a look of total horror on his face. Matt gave what sounded like a dry heave as he turned his back to them.

"Well," Sara said, for lack of anything better to say.

The bottom side of the victim's penis had been almost completely skinned off. A four-inch flap of skin hung loosely from the glans, a series of dumbbell-style earrings piercing the flesh at staggered intervals.

Sara knelt by the pelvic area, examining the damage. She heard someone suck wind through his teeth as she stretched the skin back to its normal position, studying the jagged edges where the flesh had been ripped from the organ.

Jeffrey was the first to speak. "What the hell is that?"



"Body piercing," she said. "It's called a frenum ladder." Sara indicated the metal studs. "They're pretty heavy. The impact must have pulled the skin off like a sock."

"Fuck," Chuck muttered again, staring openly at the damage.

Jeffrey was incredulous. "He did this to himself?"

Sara shrugged. Genital piercings were hardly commonplace in Grant County, but Sara had dealt with enough piercing-related infections at the clinic to know that this sort of thing was out there.

"Je-sus," Matt muttered, kicking at some dirt, still turned away from them.

Sara indicated a thin gold hoop piercing the boy's nostril. "The skin is thicker here, so it didn't pull out. His eyebrow . . ." She looked around on the ground, spotting another gold hoop pressed into the clay where the body had fallen. "Maybe the clasp popped open on impact."

Jeffrey pointed to the chest. "What about here?"

A thin trickle of blood stopped about two inches below the boy's right nipple, which was torn in two. Sara took a guess and rolled back the waistband of the jeans. Caught between the zip and a pair of Joe Boxers was a third hoop earring. "Pierced nipple," she said, picking up the hoop. "Do you have a bag for this?"

Jeffrey took out a small paper evidence bag, holding it open for her, asking with great distaste, "Is that it?"

"Probably not," she answered.

Cupping the young man's jaw between her thumb and forefinger, Sara pressed open the mouth. She reached in carefully with her fingers, trying not to cut herself.

"His tongue was probably pierced, too," she told Jeffrey, feeling the muscle. "It's bisected at the tip. I'll know when I get him on the table, but I imagine the tongue stud is in his throat."

She sat back on her heels, removing her gloves and studying the victim as a whole rather than by his pierced parts. He was an average-looking kid except for the line of blood dribbling from his nose and pooling around his lips. A reddish blond goatee hugged his soft chin, and his sideburns were thin and long, curving around his jawline like a piece of multicolored yarn.

Chuck took a step forward for a better look, his mouth dropping open. "Aw, shit. That's—Shit . . ." He groaned, thumping himself in the head. "I can't remember his name. His mama works at the college."

Sara saw Jeffrey's shoulders slump at the news. The case had just gotten ten times more complicated.

From the bridge Frank yelled, "Found a note."