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LOIS WINSTON—author of the best-selling Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries

# DEAD

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A SAM RIVERS MYSTERY

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# CATCH

CARY J. GRIFFITH

## CHAPTER 1

Holden Riggins lay in the bottom of his boat, still as a stone-cold corpse. The day had dawned clear but sharp. There was a light breeze out of the northwest, causing Lake Vermilion's surface to ripple. The breeze kept the fishing boat's anchor rope taut.

Holden wore a faded black down coat with oil stains blotting its front. He liked to fry whitefish in Crisco, and he worked part-time as a small motor mechanic, so the stains could have been Crisco or engine oil or both. The coat had been patched in two places, obvious because the patching tape was a shade too dark. His Carhartt work pants were worn to a faded taupe, with their bottoms frayed over a pair of scuffed leather work boots.

Holden's feet were splayed out, and his arms flung from his sides like a pair of catawampus windmill blades. The palm of his right hand was face down, with a crudely fashioned S-I-N-K tattooed on the top knuckle bone of each finger. The palm of his left hand faced the sun. You could not see it, but atop his left-hand fingers—cleaner, more stylized, and recent—tattoos spelled F-I-S-H. His face was round and puffy, and beneath a pair of black plastic-rimmed glasses, his eyes were shut tight as a toad. Most people would have thought the tattoo off the corner of his left eye was a mole. It could have been a teardrop. Holden had done prison time, and in convict parlance, a teardrop meant either a long sentence or testament to having killed someone. But it also had the shape of a crudely fashioned, 2-ounce split shot sinker.

Regardless, lying in the bottom of his boat, his body had the kind of terminal flaccidness of someone who had been pole-axed in the middle of the night and left for dead.

Holden was in his late 30s but had the wizened appearance of someone much older. In his early 20s, he had learned to appreciate the day's first beer buzz. By his mid-20s, he followed the beer with harder chasers. By the end of his 20s, he had become intimately familiar with most controlled substances. Growing up in Northern Minnesota, he had always been an outdoors guy, and the sun, combined with hard living, had turned his skin leathery with occasional age spots appearing on his face and across the backs of his hands.

Less than 3 feet from his prone body, an empty bottle of Old Crow rested against the boat's live well compartment. Near the bow lay a half-filled fifth of Jack Daniels.

If not for the above-freezing embrace of Vermilion's red waters and the sun, which an hour earlier had crested the boat's gunwales, the man would have been covered in a patina of hoarfrost, already dead from a heart attack triggered by hypothermia. But Vermilion had kept Holden Riggins alive, though it was uncertain it could keep him alive much longer.

In the distance, the faint sound of an outboard motor cut through the midmorning like a chainsaw felling trees. Holden, of course, could not hear it. The sound did not reach over the boat's gunwales. Besides, his body temperature was nearly 95 degrees. If he had been conscious, he would have been shaking like a man with delirium tremens.

On the leeward side of the boat, 20 yards into the lake, a pair of empty white jugs anchored each end of a 40-foot whitefish

gill net. Minnesota DNR regulations were very specific and strict about fishing with nets. Except for a few weeks in late fall, netting was forbidden. Holden knew all about the regulations, in part because he had been fishing his entire life. Also, more than once, he had been arrested and convicted for poaching. The most severe penalty had been eight years earlier, when he was caught selling illegally netted walleye to local restaurants. Technically, it was a violation of the Lacey Act, and because he was selling the fish commercially, he was convicted of a felony.

There had been other violations, although none recently. For the last seven years, Holden had been clean, or at least he had not been caught committing an illegal act. There were a few people who believed Holden was a changed man. He had turned over a new leaf, so some said. There were many others, less sanguine, who believed he had finally figured out how to avoid getting caught. These people opined the Holden Rigginses of the world don't change; they just get smart, or lucky.

Regardless, today, October 14th, there was nothing untoward about Holden's gill net. It was strung 3 feet deep across familiar shallows. The net was perfectly situated to catch whitefish, which in late fall swam up out of Vermilion's depths to spawn. There was nothing illegal about Holden's net because last Thursday had been the whitefish netting season opener, and Holden had a license.

The motorboat was growing closer.

Beyond Holden's whitefish net, the lake bottom dropped to a rugged, well-known 25-foot-deep rocky bottom. Locals knew it as prime walleye habitat and a great place to fish. But again, walleye could never be taken with nets. Minnesota's walleye had to

be caught the old-fashioned way, with hook, line, sinker, and live bait or lures or both. Or any one of a huge number of variations involving fishing poles, reels, and tackle.

Walleye fishing in Minnesota was big business. New boats similar to Holden's Lund 1600 Renegade easily sold for tens of thousands of dollars and were outfitted with fish finders, GPS, live wells, rod storage compartments, swivel pedestal seats, steering wheels, gauge-filled dashes, and more. And providing you only used some variation of hook, line, sinker, and bait, whatever boat and fishing technology you could leverage was legal.

But Holden's boat was old. Years earlier, he had purchased it used, and now its hull was scraped and dented. He had none of the newfangled electronics typical of boats purchased today. In many ways, Holden's boat was a counterpoint to the Minnesota DNR runabout, whose gleaming hull rested 30 yards shoreward, tethered to an overhanging cedar branch. Affixed to the boat's aft was a shiny black 150-horsepower Mercury outboard motor, now drifting up and down in the chop, its propeller occasionally scraping against the lake's boulder-strewn bottom.

Twenty yards farther out into Vermilion, beyond Holden's legal nets, bobbed a pair of faux pine branch floats. If you boated by, you would think they were tree debris, to be avoided if you did not want your motor to get caught up. The faux branches anchored each side of a 15-foot-long, 25-foot-deep gill net, set in a way designed to produce a maximum walleye harvest. Pound for pound, a single catch of walleye in that net would fetch enough money to keep a grown man stocked with Old Crow for a year. Maybe Jack Daniels too.

Annually, Minnesota restaurants sold \$25 million of the prized fish, none of it commercially harvested in the state. Most restaurants and grocery stores purchased their walleye from Canadian fisheries or the Red Lake band of Chippewa, the only Minnesotans who could legally harvest and sell the fish.

Because of the cold and time of year, there was almost no one on Lake Vermilion. The lake contained more than 40,000 acres of water, dotted with 365 islands. It was strung across Northeastern Minnesota in a series of channels and bays that were so ragged and jagged that it had 341 miles of shoreline, the most of any Minnesota lake. There were a lot of places to lose oneself on Vermilion, which is why the distant sound of the motorboat, growing closer, was surprising.

The index finger on Holden's left hand, the one tattooed with an elaborate "F," twitched.

If Holden had not been nearly comatose, he would have recognized the sound of the approaching outboard. Like the patrol boat tethered to the nearby shoreline, the distant drone was definitely a 150-horsepower four-stroke Mercury, standard issue for the Minnesota DNR. From the approaching noise, he might have suspected the authorities were on their way. If he remembered or had been aware of any of the things that happened the previous night, he might have worried. But he was just beginning to regain consciousness; besides, he would have never guessed that the reason for the patrol's approach was because, five hours earlier, a call was made to Minnesota's Turn-in-Poachers (TIP) line.

"TIP line," Dispatch answered, before dawn. "Can I help you?"

“Uhhh,” the caller began, not unusual for TIP line calls. “Think I got somethin’ to report.”

“A violation?”

“Well, don’t know exactly.” The voice sounded old, but with that inflection that identified a Northern Minnesotan. A man.

“What did you see?”

“On Lake Vermilion. Out across Big Bay. Near that big island. Two boats, one of them DNR, pretty sure. But nobody in sight. Leastways, that I could see.”

“And you think there was some kind of violation happening?”

“Looked fishy, know what I mean? Where the hell was they? And there were net floats. Could a been whitefishin’, but looked like there were two nets. That ain’t legal. Is it?”

“No, sir. Unless there were two people with licenses. Are you sure one of the boats was DNR?”

“Two empty boats. One of them DNR. I was a ways out, headed to my car. But when I seen the boats I come up close and hit them with my high beam. When no one popped up, I yelled. But . . . nothin’.”

“Can you tell me a little bit more about where exactly you saw them?”

The voice paused and then said, “North of the casino water tower. Clear ’cross Big Bay. Just ’bout a straight line, I’d guess. Up close to that long island.”

Dispatch repeated the location. She had been to the Lucky Loon Casino and was familiar with that part of Lake Vermilion. She didn’t know the island he referenced, but there were a lot of islands on that big body of water, and she thought she

remembered seeing a map that showed a long island, due north of the water tower.

“What made you think the boat was ours?”

“It was . . . new like. With a big black Merc on the back. Pushed up to shore, just sittin’ there empty. But I seen that DNR sign on its bow. That yellow-and-blue map?”

“Map of Minnesota with M-N-D-N-R in big letters?” Dispatch said.

“That’s it.”

Lake Vermilion was in District 5, which was Conservation Officer Charlie Jiles’s territory. Dispatch had the rosters for all the COs, since they were typically the first to respond to TIP calls. But Charlie had the weekend off, and COs were forbidden to use their official boats for anything personal. She knew Charlie Jiles. He had a reputation. He was a good officer, but he didn’t always follow the rules.

“Can you describe the other boat? Was it against the shore too?”

“Nope. Bout 30 yards out, I’d say. A Lund. An old Lund. Just anchored there.”

“We’ll check it out,” she finally said. “Would you like to leave a phone number in case we have any other questions?” Dispatch had already captured the number from caller ID. But something about the caller sounded a little off. She wanted a name and was leading up to asking for it, thinking the phone number would be a good first step.

Then the line went dead.

Most people were reluctant ratters. DNR regulations could be ambiguous, and most were willing to give fellow outdoors people



the benefit of the doubt. Others who might recognize a larcenous act refused to get involved because they were acquainted with or related to the perpetrator. And then there were a minority who thought if someone could get away with a little larceny, especially when it involved Minnesota's abundant natural resources, more power to 'em. This caller's voice sounded like it belonged to one of those guys—a *Northern Minnesota good ole boy*, she thought. And if the caller was coming across the lake before dawn, to get his car, he most likely lived in a cabin you could only reach by boat. And if he lived on the lake, surely he knew the name of that big island.

Something was a little off, but one thing was certain: they needed to check it out.

TIP calls were dispatched out of Brainerd, and it had taken nearly four hours to marshal two neighboring COs—Jennie Flag out of Grand Rapids and Bernie Olathe from Two Harbors—and get them over to Vermilion to follow up. Flag had trailered her boat. The pair then put in at the Lucky Loon Casino docks, feeling anything but lucky. The late morning was sunny but cold. Not ideal for being on water that in another three weeks would be solid ice.

They both knew fellow Officer Charlie Jiles. He lived alone in Eveleth, and Dispatch had told them he had the weekend off. Dispatch had called his cell as soon as they'd received the tip, but it rolled over to his voicemail. Must have had it off. Each of the COs tried him on their way over, and then Flag had tried him again from the dock. But again, no answer, which was regrettable because the day was bracing. Flying full throttle across Vermilion's red surface in 26-degree cold was going to be, well, frosty.

Once they motored out of Hemingway Bay, they cut due north, starting across the big open water. Flag pushed the throttle all the way down, and the runabout surged forward. The riffle on the lake's surface was mild enough, so the boat almost immediately planed level, flying like a hockey puck flung across a mile-long expanse of smooth ice. Both officers wore tight wool stocking caps pulled down over their ears, heavy down coats, and wool gloves. All of it DNR khaki green. To avoid the windchill and keep their hats from blowing off, they kept their heads hunkered behind the boat's windshield. Once into Big Bay, Officer Olathe raised a pair of high-powered binoculars, scanning far out over the huge expanse of water, searching along the distant shoreline.

This part of Vermilion is more than a mile across, so it wasn't until they neared the middle that Olathe thought he saw two boats, one of them silver, tucked up close to the opposite shore. He pointed in that direction, and Flag corrected their course.

There was movement, back in the bottom of Holden Riggins's boat. Following the finger twitch, his hand had seemingly come alive. It trembled in the cold. Holden slowly awakened. Almost immediately he felt cold. In direct proportion to his rising consciousness, his body began to shake. And apart from the bone-rattling nature of the shakes, it was a good thing. Intense shivering is the body's way of creating movement and heat. The ambient temperature didn't help, but the overhead sun did.

Now he could hear a boat approaching. He had a vague notion of hope, thankfulness, maybe even luck. But what he felt most was awful. In fact, he was pretty certain he was going to be sick, if he

didn't freeze first. He was disoriented and nauseous and trying to regain consciousness and body heat all at the same time, and it was taking a toll.

When he was finally able to sit up, with a touch of vertigo that made the world unstable, he thought he recognized the motor's sound, a 150-horsepower Merc. DNR, if he had to guess. He hoped whoever it was had a bottle of aspirin and blankets or some kind of heater and something to drink. His mouth felt like someone had stuffed it with a dirty sock and wired his lips shut. Sitting up, he could barely peer over his boat's gunwale. He looked out into Big Bay and saw a boat, definitely approaching, maybe a quarter mile out.

Then he had to lay back down, bracing himself with his hands for support. His hands felt like a pair of ice chunks. He knew he had to move. He had to get up and move.

He rolled to one side, coiling into a fetal position. He stayed there for a moment until he was able to push himself up.

He was shaking, but not like a leaf. More like the start of an epileptic seizure. Only Holden's shaking didn't stop, and he swore his teeth were rattling as rapid as a woodpecker's thrum.

He was certain he was going to be sick, and just about the time the approaching boat drew close enough to see him, he managed to place his knees on the boat's side bench, hang his head over the gunwale, and heave.

It was a mix of solids and liquids, something that had no business seeing the light of day. He had a vague memory of last night's dinner at the casino restaurant, a recollection that triggered a gag reflex. He paused long enough to catch his breath, and then . . . this

time he choked up bile, accompanied by a low-throated growl. He wavered a little, afraid he was going to pass out, still coming awake.

The two COs were within 20 yards.

“You okay?” a man yelled.

Holden barely looked up. No, he was not okay. He was sick. But he was alive. He was at least regaining consciousness enough to both hear what the man said and understand it. He wasn’t yet thinking clearly, because otherwise he would have realized it was a stupid question. Neither could he speak yet, so for now he just shook his head once: No.

The other officer was at the helm, and Holden squinted to see her throttle down, edging the boat forward so that in another minute—Holden’s head still precarious over the gunwale—the runabout’s bow kissed the edge of Holden’s Renegade.

Holden couldn’t move anything but his head. He bent it and squinted at them sideways, recognizing khaki green DNR uniforms, one man and one woman, but not much else.

“Water,” he said, dry and squeaky, like a frog. Making an effort to talk threatened to precipitate another expulsion. This time he managed a dry swallow.

Officer Flag reached down into her pack and brought out a water bottle. She handed it to Olathe, who was gripping the side of Holden’s boat. He took the bottle and stepped into the Renegade and sat down next to Holden, noticing the empty Old Crow and half-filled Jack Daniels resting on the boat’s floor. No wonder the man was sick.

“You been out here all night?” Olathe said, unscrewing the water bottle cap.

Holden didn't look at the officer. He stared at the water, still shivering, and said, "drink," whispered and raspy.

Olathe started to hand the bottle over but quickly realized there was no way Holden's shaky hands could grip it. He was still leaning over the gunwale, partially prone. Olathe managed to bring the bottle to Holden's lips and tilt it and Holden sipped, some of it dribbling down his chin.

The three-day beard growth on Holden's face was coarse enough to sand the chrome off a trailer hitch. His hair was salt and pepper, short and greasy. Given the F-I-S-H and S-I-N-K tattoos, his raggedy attire, the booze bottles, and disheveled demeanor, Olathe thought the man looked more Skid Row than Lake Vermilion. He looked like a drunk on an all-night bender, just coming around, lucky to be alive.

While Olathe was giving Holden water, Officer Flag stepped back to a rear compartment. She pulled out a DNR-issued wool blanket and handed it to Olathe, who spent the next couple of minutes unfurling and wrapping it around the shivering drunk.

After another couple of minutes and small sips, Officer Olathe said, "What's your name?"

Holden finally looked up at him, as if starting to wake from a bad dream. "Holden," he said. "Riggins," the name squeezing out of him.

By now Olathe and Flag had scanned the area and absorbed the scene. They needed to get over to the DNR boat, tethered against the shore. They could see a standard-size whitefish gill net, strung 100 feet along the shallows, near Holden's boat. Out beyond the whitefish net, Flag recognized the faux pine branch

floats. She had seen them at an outfitter's supply store over in Ely. They were supposed to be natural looking floats used to anchor duck and geese decoys, and while those seasons were open, there were no decoys in sight. She wasn't sure how they were being used here, but judging from the fact they hadn't drifted an inch in this light breeze, she wanted to see what kept them anchored.

The COs had also registered a violation of the open container law, given the bottles in the bottom of Holden's boat. Probably drunk while boating. Possibly illegal netting if he didn't have a license. Hopefully, nothing more. But it didn't look good.

And where was Charlie Jiles?

The whole scene was a clusterfuck, as Officer Flag liked to say. She was one of a handful of women COs in the state, so she felt like her language needed to be a little salty. She also grew up the middle child, a girl, in a family of four boys, so she learned their rough-and-tumble ways and how, when necessary, to land a blow. But both officers remained silent because, if Holden was a perp, they didn't want to piss him off. They wanted him to cooperate.

By the time Holden's hands finally settled enough to grip the water bottle on his own, Officer Olathe took another turn looking around. His eyes followed the same objects and jumped to the same conclusions as Officer Flag. They needed to get over to the runabout. They'd checked the numbers and verified it was Jiles's boat. Now they needed to make sure Officer Jiles wasn't lying in its bottom.

When Olathe finally turned to consider the shoreline, he said, "Any idea why there's one of our boats tied up to the shore?"

With some effort Holden swiveled his head and glanced at the nearby shoreline. Then he peered back into the lake and said, “First I seen it.”

Olathe caught Flag’s eye, and they exchanged a wordless comment, part irritation, part concern, mostly disbelief.

“We gotta have a look at that boat,” Olathe said. “Stay put.”

Holden nodded, clearly in no shape to do more than drink water and shiver more heat into his hands and limbs.

After Olathe was back in the runabout, Flag pulled away from the Lund, steering toward the shoreline. She nudged the gunwale up close to Charlie’s DNR boat, and Olathe grabbed hold of its edge. A red fire extinguisher was out of its side bracket, laying on the boat’s bottom. There was no sign of fire. A DNR officer’s hat lay near the extinguisher. Beside the captain’s chair they saw a Styrofoam cup stuck in a cup holder, frozen coffee dregs in its bottom. It was Charlie’s boat, but where was he?

They took another moment to radio Dispatch and tell them what they had found. Other than Holden Riggins, who needed medical care and who they still needed to question, and an empty DNR runabout, nothing.

Dispatch told them they had been unable to reach Officer Jiles by phone. They should secure his boat, search the area, and if they were unable to find him, one of them should drive the boat in.

It was all very strange. They would need to search this part of the island. It was Temple Island, they had seen, finally consulting a map. From Charlie’s boat, the shoreline rose rocky, steep, and poplar-covered to a granite overlook. There was a towering white pine way up on top. From there they figured they could get a better

view of the entire area, but neither of them was looking forward to the climb.

They still needed to check on the faux pine bough floats, which they both suspected were probably attached to an illegal net. They had decided to check on the floats first, when Holden called over to them.

“Hey,” he said, the word still scratchy in his throat, but sounding stronger. “Somethin’,” he managed, “in my net,” pointing to the net’s middle.

Flag pushed away from Charlie’s boat, put her motor in gear, and pattered to where Holden had pointed between the two white buoys. But it wasn’t until they were right on top of it that they recognized, through Vermilion’s red water, a body caught up and submerged in Holden’s net. When they squinted through the lake’s choppy surface, they noticed the body was dressed in khaki greens.



## CHAPTER 2

Sam Rivers awakened in the Twin Cities suburb. He had been following the media's coverage of the frost line as it crossed the Canadian border, traveling south, and took another two days to hit the Cities.

"A cold front," the meteorologists called it. "We knew it was coming, and it's finally here."

Sometimes, Sam thought, weather people predicted the inevitability of a Minnesota winter the way ministers predicted sin, with a rueful smile and the certainty that something bad was about to happen. Minnesotans could count on it.

Sam knew the cold snap wouldn't last. They were predicting four to five more days of low temperatures, and then some kind of warming trend. They didn't use the phrase "return to summer" because the idea the first hard frost would be followed by a few days of the year's most beautiful light, color, and heat would put a positive spin on their dour prognostications. It was the time of year for the meteorological glass to be half-empty. Regardless, Sam, who usually considered himself a glass-half-full type, refused to let the predictions of continued cold affect him.

He pulled on a pair of smart wool socks, faded blue jeans, a blue and gun metal gray Pendleton shirt, and a black lightweight down coat. He found a pair of black fleece gloves in his coat's pockets, from when he had stuffed them there at the end of spring. He

decided it was another example of how fortuitous circumstances happened all the time, if you were open to considering them in that kind of light.

He also found a black headband, reminding himself the cold was only bothersome if you failed to prepare for it. Finally, he pulled on his hiking shoes, which brought his lean 190 pounds to just over 6 foot, 2 inches.

Hiking shoes weren't exactly U.S. Fish & Wildlife standard issue, but since it was Sunday, he wasn't exactly following protocol. Not that Sam Rivers, a special agent for the USFW, cared about standards or protocol. He cared most about teasing the right result out of the morass of details that threatened to swamp our daily lives. When working on a case, some people called it finding justice. Sam, who believed justice could be ambiguous, would never use such a charged word to describe his work or life's choices. He appreciated ambiguity and believed what he did was more akin to choosing the right path, in life as well as work. The clear choice almost always presented itself, though it wasn't always the easiest one to make.

He was thinking along these lines partially because it was Sunday. In many cultures Sunday was a sacred day. Sam, who considered himself more spiritual than religious, appreciated the day because it was the only morning he woke up with his phone turned off. And he would keep it off, at least until he and Carmel had a chance to spend time together, preferably in a way that honored the spiritual focus of the day.

The weather, day of the week, and the phone notwithstanding, Sam was preoccupied. He was thinking about choices. Big

choices. Hard choices. When it came to Carmel, the woman he had been seeing and living with, off and on, for several months, he knew there was a discussion they needed to have. About their future. Together.

Were they marching toward matrimony? Despite several months of profound intimacy, he couldn't tell for certain how Carmel felt. Or how he felt. Not about love. Sam loved her. Intensely. And she loved him. But how did they imagine their paths continuing?

Was she expecting him to kneel on bended knee? The idea of proffering a ring seemed so . . . old-fashioned, traditional. Nothing wrong with it, Sam knew. But neither of them considered themselves traditional.

When he imagined their conversation, he was damned if he could feel the right words surface, the ones that would accompany the right next step. He wanted to feel centered about what to say, and when. And he wanted to have a sense of what Carmel wanted, and how she might respond.

He felt as good and right about Carmel Rodriguez as he had about anything in his 37 years, a bone sense and soul certainty.

And yet doubt awakened him in the middle of the night, like an owl pestered by a murder of crows.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized the simplest course of action was to put it out of his mind.

The status quo was practically perfect, so why rock the boat? Why interject the complexity his question was certain to create? There was Carmel's 12-year-old daughter, Jennifer. She was a great kid, who had a devoted father and mother, and Jennifer and Sam

got along well. But how would she feel about a change in her mother's circumstances, even if it were only on paper?

His assignment from the USFW's Denver office to Minnesota was temporary, which meant it could change at any moment, sending him back out West. Carmel's life was firmly entrenched in Minnesota. Sam was familiar with long-distance relationships. From his experience, the success of distant relationships was directly proportional to the miles between them. Anything longer than a two-hour drive was doomed to fail.

And then there was Carmel.

Sam was certain she liked the idea of continuing to live together, providing the stars were in alignment. But glimpses into anything beyond the next week or two, let alone a lifetime, were about as clear as two ships stuck in a Lake Superior fog.

Compounding Sam's doubt was the baggage they both shouldered.

Carmel had been married to Carlos for 10 years. Then Carlos fell in love with another woman. When he asked her for a divorce and told her why, it hit Carmel like a runaway freight train. It had taken a year of struggle, but finally she'd realized she and Jennifer could survive the wreckage, even though it would take some time for her heart to catch up to her head. That was four years ago.

The demise of Sam's marriage had been more like a morphine drip for a terminal patient. Sam and his ex-wife, Maggie, both knew their marriage was over long before either of them had the courage to say it. It had finally been Maggie who summoned the nerve. Sam felt relieved. And then he spent several months feeling profound sorrow and anger and a sense of inadequacy—he had

known the truth, but he lacked the courage to speak it. For a long time after Maggie, he felt like he had wandered into Minnesota's trackless Big Bog and was hopelessly lost.

What their pasts told them was that the best intentions could, over time, go awry. Seriously awry. There were no road maps for journeys of the heart. The idea of spending your life with another person was like binding one of your legs to your partner's and running a three-legged race through a Byzantine maze. A maze that ran to the end of days, if you were fortunate enough to have that kind of run.

And while he and Carmel often professed love for each other, there was no guarantee that if Sam asked her to marry him, Carmel would say, "yes." She would be well within the bounds of reason to say, "no," or "let's wait," or even, "really?"

At some point, Sam knew, he trusted his instincts and his fallible heart would tell him the right time, the right words to say, and the right path to take.

In almost all things Sam Rivers believed he knew the right choice, the right next step. He just had trouble taking it.

Earlier, Carmel had rolled off her side of the bed and began getting dressed. She pulled on black hiking pants and wool socks. She donned a gray fleece pullover that hugged every contour of her strong upper body. Her hair fell thick over her shoulders. If Sam was being objective, he would have said she was 5 feet, 6 inches tall, with a medium build. True enough, but for him there was nothing medium about her. She didn't worry about her weight because she ate well and either spent time in the gym, or outdoors,

or was busy caring for the myriad animals that entered her veterinary practice. Most evenings she fell into bed literally dog-tired, since many of her patients were canines, some requiring a strong hand and firm mind. She liked sex, on her schedule, but usually in the morning, or in the afternoon on the weekends, or occasionally at the end of a late night after plenty of wine, in the dark. She had a pair of opalescent eyes that missed almost nothing, especially when they settled their high beams on Sam. And she liked to laugh, with Sam and at him, and especially at the antics of their canine family. Occasionally, something could ignite her wrath—bad drivers, animal abusers, stupid politics—turning her normal equanimity into something fierce and fiery. But she was quick to recover her temper and never stayed angry long.

Perhaps most importantly, she shared Sam's reverence for animals and the natural world.

Once she had finished getting dressed, she pulled on a light down purple jacket, thin black wool gloves, and hiking shoes.

While the two adults finished dressing for the outdoors, their three dogs—Frank, Liberty, and Gray—each reacted in familiar ways. Frank and Liberty were Carmel's dogs. Liberty was a 45-pound black-and-white springer spaniel mix—the one who always woke them in the morning with a smile and the need to pee. Liberty was shifting her intent eyes from Sam to Carmel and back again, looking for the certain sign. Carmel finally obliged and made a playful step in Liberty's direction and the springer jumped like a horse doing giddyap, racing toward the door. Then racing back. Then repeating the back and forth, unable to contain herself.

Frank was a 60-pound energetic chocolate lab mix with the agitated intensity of an adolescent on Adderall. *Or maybe a buzz saw*, Sam thought. When Liberty did her giddyap, Frank followed in hot pursuit, ricocheting down the stairs toward the back door.

"You love to rile them up," Sam said.

"One of my favorite things," Carmel said, grinning. "After riling you up."

Sam's wolf-dog hybrid Gray had now matured into a 2½-year-old who stood 36 inches at the shoulder and weighed 97 pounds. He was regal and intelligent and, Carmel had once said, "one of the finest specimens of canine-lupine crossbreeding I have ever seen." Though she was always quick to add that she opposed wolf dogs, all things considered. They could be problematic, even dangerous pets. "But sometimes you get lucky."

Gray was a rescue animal. Breeding wolf dogs was legal in Minnesota. But more than a year earlier, Sam had busted a breeder for cruelty to animals. One of the few wolf dogs that survived was the 6-month-old Gray, who bonded to Sam as instantly as superglue. And Sam, still rattled after his divorce, had welcomed his companion the way a brother welcomed another into the pack.

Gray peered at his two agitated cousins and cocked his head, as if to say, "It is hard to imagine I am genetically connected to you two." Gray knew a walk in the woods was about to ensue. And while he was excited, too, his temperament was more reserved, providing no crimes were being committed or no pack members were being threatened.

Carmel's house backed up to a 47-acre wood. While Frank and Liberty vied to be first through the door, Gray hung back, wanting

no part of their frenetic, meaningless competition. Gray knew he would get out the door in good time. He also knew he was a born alpha, head of the pack the three dogs made while hunting through the woods.

Finally, Carmel managed to open the door, and all of them headed for the back steps. Frank and Liberty leaped, while Gray joined Sam and Carmel, following them onto a frozen, leaf-littered woodland path, heading into the frost-covered trees.

They moved 50 yards up the path. The dogs were out in front. Every footfall left an imprint. At the top of the path, they turned right and hiked along a trail that cut through a new stand of poplars, their leaves rustling golden in the morning light. Many of the leaves had already fallen, and now the five of them walked over the golden path through the trees.

For the next half hour Sam, Carmel, Gray, Frank, and Liberty hiked through the woods. The dogs remained off leash. They hunted left and right through the trees. The humans talked about their day and planned their afternoon. Jennifer was coming over after dinner, the start of her week with her mom.

“I can help you move your stuff into the study,” Carmel said. “Maybe set up the Murphy bed and give you a massage.”

It was a euphemism, they knew.

There were two promontories in the woods and the pack summited both, taking their time at the top to consider the view.

Finally, feeling energized by their immersion in forest and field, they returned to Carmel’s house.



Once inside, their pack considered them expectantly, knowing breakfast was about to appear.

After preparing their bowls, Sam finally retrieved his phone, turned it on, and checked his messages. Overnight he had received two calls, both from an old friend, Vermilion County Sheriff Dean Goddard. The sheriff had called again this morning and left a message.

“Hi, Sam. Dean Goddard again,” the sheriff said. “Can you give me a call when you get a chance? This morning, if at all possible?” And then the recording ended.

Other than occasional, infrequent texts, it had been almost two years since Sam had spoken with the sheriff. But he knew him well enough to recognize the man’s brevity. Something was afoot, especially because he was calling on a Sunday morning. And judging from the sheriff’s tone, rather than the more familiar gibing with which both men were familiar, whatever he wanted must be important.

Sam hit “call back” and after two rings the sheriff picked up. “Special Agent Rivers.”

The sheriff was the same height as Sam, but thicker through the shoulders, chest, belly, and legs. A big man, providing he hadn’t changed. The minute Sam heard the voice he imagined him sitting, his booted heels resting on the corner of his messy desk.

“It’s been too long, Sheriff,” Sam said. “At least a couple of years. And you’re still sheriff?”

“They keep electing me. I keep at it.”

Two years earlier, before an election, the sheriff’s extramarital affair became public. After the dust settled, the good citizens of

Vermilion County recognized the complicated situation for what it was. They put politics and cultural considerations aside and kept Dean Goddard in the job for which he was born. The sheriff had subsequently gotten divorced and then married Susan Wallace, one of the area's most prominent doctors.

"And how's Dr. Wallace?"

"She went and got herself pregnant."

"Ha!" Sam said. "She should know better."

"She claims it was planned, but I don't remember that part."

"When's she due?"

"Due date was last Friday, but she thinks it's going to be early this week. It better happen soon because every spare moment of mine is spent in some kind of complicated nesting ritual. Later today I'm supposed to paint the kid's bedroom robin's-egg blue."

The image was incongruous, but people change, Sam thought. "You having a boy?"

"Yup."

"You're in for a wild ride, sheriff."

The sheriff chuckled and said, "I believe I'm ready for that kind of ride."

Sam and the sheriff were around the same age. Sam told him he could understand the sheriff's perspective.

The sheriff asked about Sam and his latest exploits. They discussed the drug busts Sam had made the previous spring. Sam's work had made another splash in the Twin Cities press, and the sheriff had followed it with interest and chagrin. Sam never tried to shine a light on himself or his work. But the nature of the

crimes on which he worked made it difficult to keep a low profile. Especially when his wolf-dog partner Gray was involved.

The sheriff remembered Gray and asked about him. Then there was the sheriff's curiosity about Sam's personal life, and Sam told him about Carmel.

"You sound serious."

Sam paused. "Maybe."

"Fish or cut bait, Rivers."

Sam smiled. "For a man who likes to come right to the point, I still have no idea why you called."

"Well," he finally said. "I've got a situation up here."

"And you think I can help."

"I don't know. That depends. Do you know a guy by the name of Holden Riggins?"

## CHAPTER 3

It had been a long time since Sam had heard the name, but it only took a second to recall him. They had been best friends their 12th summer, living on the edge of Defiance. Sam remembered a short, stout boy wearing a dingy, nondescript T-shirt and dirty jeans. He had round, wire-rimmed glasses with lenses so thick they magnified his eyes. His belly pushed out over the lip of his beltless pants, holding them tight. His stringy brown hair was unruly. Sam remembered how Holden's mother, a sweet woman like Sam's own, cut Holden's hair with shearing scissors, to keep it out of his eyes and off his collar.

"I know him," Sam said. "Or knew him. When we were kids. But it was a long time ago."

"Hard to imagine you were friends with Holden Riggins."

"It was just a summer. I think we were, what, 12?"

"I guess your good sense and respect for the law didn't wear off on him."

The sheriff's remark reminded Sam of the fatal accident that resulted in their parting of ways. Holden had been pestering his dad all summer to take them fishing in the Boundary Waters. The weekend before school was set to resume, the three of them

entered the woods. On their first day they set out in a canoe to fish the middle of Pine Lake. As they neared the lake's center, Holden's dad, who was drunk, failed to recognize a storm building on the horizon. It hit them like a juggernaut, and howling wind and rain capsized their canoe. Holden's father, who had used his life vest for a cushion, drowned.

After Holden's dad died, Holden's mom moved them across Minnesota's Iron Range to the city of Virginia. Sam recalled feeling sad about Holden's departure. Holden had been his first good friend, and when he left there was an unexpected emptiness in Sam's life, at least for a while.

After their move, Sam hadn't seen Holden until the 9th grade. Growing up and attending different Iron Range schools, Sam and Holden's paths occasionally crossed at inter-high school events. But when they did, Sam barely recognized Holden, acknowledging him with a slight nod. When Holden did the same, Sam assumed it was because Holden would just as soon forget anything that reminded him of their fishing trip into the wilderness.

From what Sam had heard, Holden's high school years had been troubled. Run-ins with the law. Alcohol. Drugs. Nothing like the boy Sam remembered.

"His dad died in a canoe accident," Sam said. "Too young. I think it was hard on Holden, afterwards."

"Fathers can be tough," the sheriff said. He knew about Sam's father, who the sheriff at one time tried to arrest for murder. Before the sheriff managed the arrest, Sam's father escaped into a subzero Northern Minnesota night, where he was attacked and killed by a feral pack of wolf dogs.

“My old man was different,” Sam said. “He was mean from the start and lived long enough to inflict plenty of pain. When my old man caught me stepping out, there was hell to pay. Holden’s dad was just a quiet guy who drank too much and died when we were kids. I don’t think he ever laid a hand on Holden. But he never paid much attention to him, either. When my old man died, I felt relieved. Holden was devastated.”

“Did you know Holden racked up quite a record? At least in his younger years.”

“I heard something about that. But I haven’t spoken to him in years. After his mom moved them to Virginia, we pretty much lost touch. I’d heard he started hanging out with the wrong people and did some stuff. Mostly drugs, as I recall.”

“Definitely drugs. Busted for selling marijuana. Then dealing meth. He was arrested for B&E, but plea bargained to a lesser charge to avoid jail time. DWI three times in his 20s. There are a few drunk and disorderly, one involving assault. But the thing that got him a year and a half in lockup was poaching and selling walleye. There are some other game violations, but you know how those went.”

Sam did. Hunters and fishermen could pile up a stack of game violations but only receive misdemeanors. They’d get fined, which stung them. Sometimes they had their firearms, fishing poles, or nets confiscated. They almost always lost their hunting and fishing privileges, at least for a while. But they always avoided jail time. That is, unless they were caught poaching and selling their catch commercially. In 1900, Congress passed the Lacey Act, which, among other violations, made the sale of illegally acquired fish a felony. Violators of the Lacey Act could be fined *and* imprisoned.

“Holden was selling the walleye commercially?” Sam said.

“Until he got caught. He was netting walleye out of season, cleaning them, and then passing off the frozen filets to local restaurants as Canadian. Did pretty well, so I’ve heard.”

“Until he got caught.”

“Yup. Did 18 months for the felony. And appears to have been pretty much clean ever since. That was,” there was some shuffling paper in the background, “seven years ago, when he turned 30.”

Sam and Holden were both 37.

“Nothing after that,” the sheriff said. “Until now.”

“Poaching again?”

“We think so. And murder.”

“Murder?”

“Looks like it. For now, we’re holding him on lesser charges. But I suspect he’ll be charged with murder in the next day or two. A couple of conservation officers answering a TIP line call found him midmorning yesterday. It appears he was illegally netting walleye, though he denies it. He had a legal whitefish net, and a license for the whitefish. The local CO was tangled up in his whitefish net. Dead.”

“Oh God,” Sam said. “Who was it?”

“Guy by the name of Charlie Jiles. Do you know him?”

Sam didn’t.

“I’ve met him a few times,” the sheriff said. “Kind of a gladder. Single. No kids, thank God.”

“How old?”

“51.”

“What’s Holden say about it?”

“Not much. Knows nothing about the walleye net, even though it was his and it was set 20 yards in front of his whitefish net. And of course, he doesn’t know anything about the conservation officer. Other than he knows him. Or knew him.”

“Did it look like murder?”

“Definitely. CO Jiles was experienced on Vermilion. He never struck me as a guy who took great care of himself. He was a little heavy and out of shape, the kind of guy who visited the bars and cradled a few too many longnecks. If he fell overboard in that cold water, it wouldn’t have taken long for him to become hypothermic and drown. But he had a nasty blow on his head. Either it was the blow that killed him, or he was knocked out and fell in the lake and drowned. That’s what we think, anyway.”

“Any sign of a weapon?”

“A fire extinguisher. In his boat.”

“A fire extinguisher?”

“Yeah. One of those emergency extinguishers. It was bagged on site and tested back here. It has the victim’s blood and some of his hair on it. And Holden’s prints.”

“So, you’ve got him,” Sam said, with a pang of sorrow for his old friend.

“Pretty much. Except he denies ever touching the thing. Or knowing anything about it.”

“What’s he say about his prints?”

“At first he said they couldn’t be his. When we assured him they were, he stopped talking.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”



“No,” the sheriff agreed. “When the COs got there, Holden was out cold in the bottom of his boat. Hypothermic. He’s lucky he didn’t freeze to death. When he started coming around and he was talking, he claims the last thing he remembers is having dinner at the casino, night before.”

“So, maybe he did it in a drunken rage and passed out.”

“He was definitely on a binge. We found an empty fifth in the bottom of his boat, beside a half-filled bottle of Jack Daniels. But he claimed the bottles weren’t his and he didn’t drink them.”

“Did the COs test him?”

“On site. Blew a .06.”

“I guess he drank something.”

“Looks to me like he drank a bottle and a half of whiskey.”

“And doesn’t remember anything.”

“When they found him, he was shivering like a dog. Couldn’t even hold a water bottle.”

“Did you check the bottles for prints?”

“His all over them.”

“What’s he say about that?”

“That’s when he stopped talking.”

“Maybe he was starting to remember it,” Sam said.

“When I told him about his prints on the bottle, he just looked at me. But in a weird way, like he was boring holes into my head.”

“You mean, threatening?”

“No. Not that. Like he was reading me. Trying to figure something out.”

During the summer of their childhood friendship, Sam remembered Holden as a smart kid, but a risk taker. One of their favorite activities, living in Defiance, was to dare each other.

“Bet you can’t stick a grasshopper down your pants.”

“You can’t swallow a live minnow.”

“Can’t jump off the river bridge.”

“I’ll give you a quarter if you run through Defiance . . . naked.”

It was kid stuff. Nothing dangerous. Meant to test them and have a laugh and keep the boredom of a Defiance summer at bay. But Holden always had the last word on dares. He always took them the farthest.

None of the crimes the sheriff now related sounded like his old friend. Still, people change, especially when fired in the crucibles of puberty, high school, and early adulthood. And if he was still drinking and doing drugs or both, there was no accounting for the actions of an addict.

“Did he give you blood and urine?” Sam said.

“Yeah. Didn’t really have a choice. We’re having it tested. But it takes a while. They’re saying at least a couple of days because they’re backed up. We’ll see.”

Sam thought about motive and all the incriminating evidence. “If Holden got caught netting walleye and then selling it to local restaurants commercially, he’d go back to prison. This time longer.”

“Yup.”

“The CO catches him. Holden boards the CO’s boat. They fight and Holden hits him with the extinguisher. The CO falls in

and drowns. Holden, raging drunk, gets in his boat, but passes out before he can take off.”

“That’s what we think. Something like that.”

“When are you getting the medical examination (ME) report?”

“Probably late tomorrow. Could be Tuesday. That should tell us for certain when the victim died,” the sheriff said. “Holden works Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at a marina on Vermilion. All day Friday, he was working until late in the day. Then he boated to the casino for dinner. He’s got solid alibis, at least until dark.”

“Guess you’ll just have to wait and see what the medical examiner says,” Sam said.

“When they searched Holden’s boat, they also found an unregistered .45 pistol taped under one of the floorboards. But it hadn’t been fired and there was no gunpowder residue on his hands.”

Sam remembered a .45 from when they were kids. During that summer they had spent hours trying to get into a locked cupboard above Mr. Riggins’s workbench. Holden had finally picked the lock with one of his mom’s hairpins. The cupboard held half-filled liquor bottles, three *Playboys*, and a .45 pistol with several boxes of ammunition. Sam had been raised on guns, but the military .45 was a novelty. The *Playboys* too.

“Unregistered?” Sam said.

“Yup. And like I said, he’s a felon.”

Felons were not allowed to own or carry firearms. And no one is supposed to have an unregistered weapon.

“Another violation,” the sheriff said. “Like the open bottle. Since we didn’t catch him operating his boat, we can’t get him for

DWI. But we're running ballistics on the weapon, just to see if anything turns up."

"Not that you need anything else."

"No," the sheriff said. "It does not look good for Holden Riggins. Other than Holden's bizarre behavior, denials, and refusal to talk, which would be any attorney's advice, the evidence is stacked against him. At least enough to deny him bail, given his record."

"Who was your investigator?"

"Smith Barnes."

"Deputy Barnes hasn't retired yet?"

Smith Barnes was long and lean and had been getting ready to retire, last Sam heard. He was also incredibly thorough, intelligent, and quiet as a cat.

"After that stuff with your dad's gun club, he took some time off," the sheriff said. "He was thinking about retiring. Said he was going to use some of his vacation time to consider it. He was out two weeks before he came back to the office. Said if that was retirement, he wasn't interested."

Sam smiled. Sounded like Deputy Barnes.

"Barnes got some help from two of our newbies. Deputies Joe Haman and Sandy Harju."

"So why are you telling me all this?"

"Well, this isn't Holden Riggins's first rodeo. He's been here before. This is the first I've dealt with him because my term started 5 years ago. But before I started, Sheriff Diggs, who had been sheriff for almost 20 years, told me about certain people in the area you needed to keep an eye on."

"He gave you a list?"

“Nah,” the sheriff said. “That wouldn’t be right. Might even be illegal. We were just talking. Holden’s name came up, but I almost forgot about him because it’s been seven years and nothing,” the sheriff paused. “But Holden has had enough practice with the whole arrest and lockup routine to know he’s entitled to a phone call and a lawyer. Probably more to the point, he knows the first advice he’d get from an attorney would be to shut up. So I told him he could make his one call, thinking he’d call a lawyer.” The sheriff paused again. “Personally, I believe the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. And I think Holden Riggins was headed in this direction, at least 7 years ago. Maybe he just figured out how to beat the system. The guy looks like a cross between a Northern Minnesota backwoodsman and a gangbanger. This time he did a really bad, bad thing and got caught.”

Both men fell silent, thinking about the death of a conservation officer, an extremely rare tragedy.

“I still don’t see how I can help,” Sam said.

“Holden knows you’re a USFW special agent. If anything, a guy like you is gonna be investigating his crimes and making some kind of recommendation to our prosecutor’s office. But still, since his arrest, other than the handful of comments he’s already made, which wasn’t much, he’s basically said three words: ‘Call Sam Rivers.’”

## CHAPTER 4

The sheriff was correct about Sam Rivers. Working for the USFW, poaching was one of the crimes he frequently investigated and prosecuted. Fish and game laws were in place for solid reasons, mostly to do with the species they were protecting. When people poached, to Sam's way of thinking, they violated the species. That kind of violation required the maximum penalty.

"Any idea what he wants to talk about?" Sam said.

"He won't say," the sheriff said.

"Do *you* want me to speak with him?"

The sheriff paused. "Well, we're not getting anything out of him. I'm not sure what the USFW could do, but it's worth a try."

"Okay. Set up a call."

"Holden's insisting he'll talk to you in person. Privately."

"Given the circumstances, I don't think Holden's in a position to insist on anything."

"He is not. But it sounds like he has something to say, and speaking in private, one-on-one, is the only way he'll do it."

"He's got one call," Sam said. "If he wants to call me, so be it."

Sam was willing to listen to his old friend, but he was also thinking ahead. It was Sunday. Tomorrow was the start of Sam's

work week. He had been planning to head into his St. Paul office. Apart from catching up on overdue reports—something he had been putting off until his boss, Kay Magdalen, threatened him with a transfer back to Denver—Sam had nothing else on his schedule. Except, possibly, Carmel, and his conundrum about how to address the next level of their relationship. But a trip north had never figured into his plans. Especially in the service of an ex-con in Holden Riggins’s predicament, who had apparently been poaching again. And worse.

“Uhhh,” the sheriff started. “I understand, Sam. But there are extenuating circumstances. I assumed you’d want to speak with him, and I knew you were in the Cities, so I let him have his one call, which he made. To a lawyer.”

“So,” Sam said. “Give him a second call. It’s been done before.” Then, “It’s a bad time to be out of the office.”

“Sam, I wouldn’t normally push it. But like I said, something happened out there. I’m interested in what Holden Riggins remembers about it. Especially since I know the victim and he’s a law enforcement officer. Frankly, the guy was well-known up here. He had a lot of friends. Holden’s not talking, but I’m pretty sure he knows something. We can throw the book at him and probably convict, given the evidence. But we haven’t seen the ME report or the results from Holden’s blood and urine. The two COs who found him said he had to be out cold all night. And we know he was last seen at the casino the night before, after dark. Depending on the CO’s time of death, it could throw a wrench into our murder charges. At least it could give a good public defender a possible alibi on which to build a case.”

Barring the ME report and time of death, which would never change the other corroborating evidence—murder weapon, prints, proximity of victim, illegal net, etc.—it felt to Sam like the sheriff was pushing his participation unnecessarily hard. Then he thought of something.

“Any other extenuating circumstances I should know about?”

A pause. “We could use some outside help,” the sheriff said.

“Help?”

“Smith Barnes has no problem running with the investigation. He and Holden have some history that precedes me, and if given a chance, especially given the evidence, he’d just as soon take Holden into the woods and hang him from a white pine.”

Sam thought about it. “Smith needs to recuse himself.”

“I have two deputy investigators, but neither one of them are ready to lead an investigation. And I can’t, ’cause at any minute Dean Junior’s gonna show up.”

“You’re asking me to lead the investigation?”

“No,” the sheriff said. “Not at all. I’m asking you to hear what Holden has to say. And if he doesn’t confess, to follow up informally. I can give you Sandy Harju to help. She’s smart as a whip. In a year she’ll be running the place.”

“Wait a minute,” Sam said. “The dead man has . . . had a lot of friends. The evidence is overwhelming. The perpetrator is a known felon. But if by some bizarre chance a good defense lawyer can raise enough doubt in a jury to get Holden off . . .”

Another pause. “You see my problem.”

“You need someone from the outside, in case there’s some



heat,” Sam said. “From the public. From the dead man’s colleagues and friends.”

“I won’t deny it,” the sheriff said. “That’s part of it. But it’s not just the politics. If Holden doesn’t confess, I need to make sure he gets a fair shake. If some of my deputies were found to be biased, it could jeopardize our case.”

“I used to be his friend,” Sam said. “Don’t you think that could jeopardize your investigation?”

“Maybe if it was someone else,” the sheriff said. “But it’s you, and your policing of wild places and the critters that inhabit them is well documented.”

Sam knew it was true. He also knew he would follow the facts wherever they led, regardless of his past friendship with Holden Riggins, as tenuous as it may be.

“Maybe if you’d been friends your entire life,” the sheriff added, “instead of one summer when you were 12. As it is, nobody’s going to have problems with you helping out.”

“And I’m an outside federal employee. And when I’m done, I’m gone.”

More silence. But both of them knew Sam’s status as an outsider, a federal employee, and an official who would return to the Cities when he was finished were all helpful to Sheriff Dean Goddard.

Under the circumstances, Sam understood. And he was willing to help out an old friend . . . two old friends . . . even if he felt a little used. But if he told his boss he was headed up to Vermilion County to assist with a county law enforcement matter, her face would shade apoplectic. The request would need to be handled with care.

“Do you remember my boss?”

“How could I forget Kay Magdalen?”

Over the phone, Sam’s boss conveyed a sentiment that was a lot like a bull in a China shop, but with righteous intelligence instead of brute force. She was one of those people who could project power over airwaves.

“You need to call her and request my services. Tell her it’s an emergency. Tell her it’s a Lacey Act violation and involves the murder of a conservation officer.”

There was a long pause. Then, “Send me her phone number,” the sheriff said.

Sam said he would.

“I know it’s Sunday, Sam, and this came out of the blue. If you can get up here by this evening, I’ll make sure there’s a room for you at the Vermilion Falls Motel. Holden’s not going anywhere. Then tomorrow we can meet for breakfast and talk about this, before you have a chance to hear Holden out.”

“Is Barnes done with the arrest report?”

“Should be by this afternoon.”

“Have him send it when he’s done.”

“Sure. And Sam,” the sheriff paused. “Thanks for this.”

Sam reminded the sheriff he hadn’t done anything yet and hung up.

*Definitely surreal*, Sam thought. The best friend from Sam’s 12th summer was reaching out over all those years to ask for Sam’s help? Or to confess? Or, what?

On the other side of the ledger, the county law enforcement officer Sam respected and considered a friend was asking for help in the same matter.

Sam's current friendships were all with people he had met through work. People like Sheriff Dean Goddard, Kay Magdalen (who was more friend than boss), Carmel, and others. But when he thought about Holden Riggins, it was a friendship born out of an entirely different dimension.

They had bonded over difficult fathers, during a time when their only concern was how to spend a summer's day in the woods and waters around Defiance. Before their fateful trip into the wilderness, Sam recalled a moment when they stated, in definitive terms, their intentions to lead good lives, when they made their first cross-your-heart and hope-to-die pacts.

"Let's never drink," Sam recalled.

"And never smoke again."

"Be good to our moms."

"Study at school."

"Do hard things."

Sam recalled the statements because of how they'd sealed their pledge. Holden had seen a Western movie in which two Native Americans professed their friendship by cutting their arms with long knives and mixing their blood. Blood brothers. Neither Holden nor Sam was interested in inflicting so deep a wound, but even as boys they recognized the need for some kind of ritual to honor what they both considered sacred. So, they held the sharp end of a safety pin over a match flare, purifying its tip. Then they

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**JEFFREY B. BURTON**—award-winning author of *The Dead Years* and the Mace Reid K-9 Mysteries

## MURDER AND A MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR POACHING BUSINESS

Holden Riggins is a known poacher, so it's no surprise when two conservation officers (COs) find his fishing boat, anchored beside an illegal walleye net on Minnesota's Lake Vermilion. What is surprising is Holden's condition: He's nearly frozen to death. That's not the COs' most shocking discovery. Twisted and tangled within the twines of another nearby net is the dead body of their missing colleague.

The only person Holden will speak with is Sam Rivers, a special agent for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and a man Holden last saw when they were both 12 years old. Has Holden resurrected his illegal netting ring? Did he commit murder to evade the law? One thing is certain: Sam and his wolf dog, Gray, will follow the facts wherever they lead—but are they the ones reeling in suspects, or are they just the bait?

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