

One

In probation work, there's no such thing as a routine day at the office.

This morning, flashing red and blue lights guided me to the crime scene. Coming to a stop behind the coroner's van, I parked my Jeep Wrangler and took a deep breath.

Coroner meant someone was dead. Not a good start to my day, but even worse for whoever I'd been called here about.

As I climbed out of my Jeep, I adjusted my sunglasses and surveyed the area. Yellow crime scene tape blocked off the entrance to the canal. Red tile rooftops peeked over six-foot walls that separated the waterway from the middle-class sea of stucco on either side. The canal, about ten feet wide, snaked smack in the middle of a dirt pathway that residents used to get their steps in.

It was nearing the end of September, and I was grateful for the hint of the cooler weather that would dip below one hundred for the first time in months. Ninety degrees might seem hot to some, but in Arizona, it was sweater weather.

I walked up to a uniformed cop and held out my badge. "I'm with probation. Detective Ramsey asked me to come."

It wasn't unusual for the police to contact us, but it wasn't common practice to be called to a crime scene. My curiosity mixed with dread.

The cop glanced at my identification. "Ms. Carson. Welcome to the shit show. Don't touch anything." He held the tape high so I could pass. I ducked underneath and secured my badge to my belt so the other officers could tell I belonged there.

Lots of Tempe Police blue uniforms and forensic staff mulled around the area, but I homed in on the tall, balding man standing close to the water. He had on plain clothes—khakis and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up. I figured he might be Ramsey, so I walked over to him.

He scribbled something on a small notepad and glanced at me as I approached. “You the PO?”

I nodded and dropped my gaze to the mound covered by a tarp at his feet. I wasn’t fond of seeing dead bodies. One reason I was a PO and not a cop.

“Thinking this might be one of your charges, Ms. Carson,” he said. “I gotta warn you, it’s not pretty. He was in the water for a while and birds, and god knows what else got to him. You got a strong stomach?”

No. At the mere thought of seeing the body, my breakfast threatened to make a reappearance, but I wouldn’t admit that. “I’m fine. Why do you think he was on my caseload?”

Ramsey shrugged. “Someone stuffed your business card in his mouth.”

I gulped air. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. You ready?” Ramsey reached down and pulled the sheet back before I could respond.

A bloated, green face, missing chunks of cheek, greeted me. Bulging eyes looked skyward. Bran flakes swirled in my stomach and crested in my throat. Without a word, I ran to the canal and vomited so hard I thought I’d hack up a vital organ or two.

“You okay, ma’am?” Ramsey sounded bored.

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and straightened. Memories of the same man, alive and animated, flashed in my mind. Not so long ago, he was proud of accomplishing a solid month of

sobriety. Now, I hardly recognized him. “Could you put the sheet back?” I said, keeping my back to the body on the ground.

“Sure.”

I waited a moment to give Ramsey time to cover the corpse and to compose myself. But that would take a while, and the detective didn’t seem like he had a lot of patience. The relationship between police and probation was fickle. We often needed each other, but POs were on the lower end of the food chain.

When I finally turned around, Ramsey was tapping his pen against his notebook. “So, you know the guy, or what?”

“Brian Johnson,” I said. “He was on abscond status. Haven’t seen him for a few weeks, maybe a month. He was doing well, but then he stopped reporting. He probably relapsed. I was gearing up to request a warrant for probation violations. What do you think was the cause of death?”

Ramsey shrugged again. “Too soon to tell, but most people who die of natural causes don’t end up in a canal or send a message like your business card does. They preserved it in a plastic Baggie, so we’d get the point no matter how long it took to find him.

I felt even sicker. Was the message for me? “Couldn’t you ID him through fingerprints? I thought you had all kinds of tech gadgets for that.”

“Sure,” Ramsey said. “But then I wouldn’t have seen your reaction. Plus, some of his fingertips are missing and what’s left probably isn’t usable. Dental records take time.” He pulled a business card out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me. “Call me if you think of anything else I might need to know.”

I turned back to the canal and vomited until I had nothing left to give.

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