

# ***STONEBRIDGE***

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**R.M. Lowery**

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*Thank you for your consideration.*

## *Chapter One*

**T**he dead girl was young, not yet eighteen. A man walking his dog found her by the river just after sunrise, according to a police spokesman. I had to take his word for it. The scene was locked down tight.

I paced around the media staging area, corralled with a half dozen other reporters, including a TV crew from Chicago that had made the fifty-mile drive to Stonebridge because, apparently, Chicago had run out of its own dead bodies.

Freeing my phone from my pocket, I checked the time. It was nearly 10 a.m. The department had promised us an update at 9:15. They probably hoped that by delaying, the miserable September humidity would make us give up and leave. It was tempting. It had been warm all day yesterday, in the high seventies, and then it rained all night. The early morning sun was now

heating the moisture trapped in the soil and vegetation, engulfing the area in a fog. The air felt heavy, like being under water. The taste of dampness sat on my tongue with no way to wash it away.

I broke away from the staging area, away from the presser that was obviously never going to happen. I wandered the perimeter of the police tape toward the parking lot off Route 31. My sneakers sank in the wet mud, the leg of my jeans absorbed the moisture from the ground. Reminders of this morning's crime scene that would be with me the rest of the day.

On the edge of the parking lot, I found only one detective. Standing tall, wearing a bright white button-down shirt with a blue tie, his thumbs tucked into his belt, he guarded the perimeter. "Damnit, Larsen." He spoke without looking at me. "Why can't you stay where they tell you to stay?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

He shook his head, and I'm pretty sure he rolled his eyes, too, though his mirrored sunglasses made it impossible to know for sure.

I stopped in front of him. "What can you tell me?"

He stared past me, pretending I wasn't there.

"There has to be something you can tell me."

He glanced toward me. "I don't know shit."

"Off the record."

He peeked at me over the top of his aviator sunglasses. "Totally off the record?"

I tucked my notebook in the back pocket of my jeans. "Of course."

"In that case..." He leaned toward me and motioned for me to come closer, which I did. "I don't know shit."

I sighed, just as annoyed with myself as I was with him. I'd known Alex for most of the thirty-two years I'd been alive, long before anyone called him Detective Zavada. I should know to expect sarcasm by now. "Why can't you ever give me a straight answer?"

He chuckled, proud of his ability to trick me. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Okay, now that that's out of your system, is there *anything* you can tell me?"

"Sorry, dude. There's a tight lid on this one. What are you even doing here? Aren't newspapers dead?"

"The report of print's death was an exaggeration."

He smirked, clearly happy he'd derailed the conversation. It was time to get it back on track, so I lobbed him an easy question. "How about this? Can you at least confirm that Kane County sheriff's deputies and Illinois State Police are aiding in the investigation?"

He nodded. "They are."

"How old is the girl?"

He stretched his arms out in front of his body, then folded them across his chest. "You know, you're drawing attention to me. Once your newshound buddies get here, I'll have to go back to pretending I don't know shit."

I turned toward the staging area. No one was coming our way. Another attempt at dodging my questions. "I hear the girl's under eighteen. Is that true?"

He exhaled a morose sigh. "Yeah."

"My editor, Murph, he's hearing a name over the scanners." I checked my phone's messages to verify the name he'd given me. "Grace Sutherland. Is that her name?"

"Yeah. ID was in her jacket."

I was finally getting somewhere. But one big question remained. "Is this a homicide investigation?"

He shifted his attention to his loafers as he kicked a large rock to the side. "Dude, I've probably told you too much already. You got any idea how much shit I'd be in if my name appears next to any of this?"

"It never has, and it never will. You know that."

He looked up from the ground and took a deep breath. "I know. I trust you."

"So, is this a homicide?"

He nodded in confirmation.

"Thank you. I know I'm putting you in a weird spot."

"I'd better get back to it. I just came over here for some fresh air."

I thanked Alex again. Without another word, he disappeared into the woods and I schlepped back to the staging area where there was still no sign an update was coming any time soon. I texted Murph to let him know the girl's name had been confirmed. He could start some research on her, attempt to track down known friends or family members.

Of course, detectives probably already located her family. Soon, her parents would get a call—a call no one wants. The phone will ring and they'll answer. They'll hear the words of the

caller, but the words won't sink in right away. It'll feel like a dream, like they're watching it happen to someone else. Though, eventually, the words will sink in and they'll never be able to forget the call.

I got that call once. Almost two years ago, just a little after six in the evening. I answered quickly, thinking it was a source calling back about a robbery story I was working on. But it wasn't my source. It was my aunt.

*Jakob? I'm calling with some bad news.*

A terrible way to start any conversation, but I suppose there's no good way to start a conversation that will include the words *your father's been killed*.

**N**o official announcement had been made, but the presser seemed to be starting. Three cops wandered toward us, one from each agency investigating the girl's death. Without preamble, one began to address us.

"Morning, everyone. I'm Officer Erik Kritzer, public information officer for the Stonebridge Police Department. At about six thirty-seven this morning, nine-one-one dispatchers received a cellphone call from a citizen stating his dog had discovered a body in the Blackhawk Woods. Our officers responded within minutes and we found the body of sixteen-year-old Grace Anne Sutherland covered by shrubbery near the banks of the Fox River. At this point, we are treating this as a suspicious death. Responding officers also..."

His attention shifted to the black Chevy Suburban which had just pulled into the parking area behind him. Before it even came to a full stop, two men in suits hopped out and fumbled to open the rear door for the portly passenger, Mayor Steven Haywood.

"Um, pardon me." Kritzer returned his attention to the mayor. "We will have to get back to you in just a moment."

My fellow journalists barked questions at the PIO, but he ignored them. He and the other two cops with him had all run toward the mayor, like obedient children returning to the side of their controlling father.

Flanking the mayor were two high-profile cops, members of the mayor's recently-formed multi-county drug task force. Their presence led me to think police thought the death of Grace Sutherland was linked to drugs. Either that or the mayor—who's up for re-election this spring—

thought the murder of a young girl would be a great opportunity to bolster his “tough on crime” campaign motto.

A voice grumbled behind me. “Well, that was sure worth the wait.”

I turned to see Brian Jensen from the Kane County Times angrily shoving his notebook into the pocket of his shirt.

“Well, shit.” He mindlessly swatted bugs away from his face. “They’d already told us most of that. I coulda found out more by interviewing the goddamned dog.”

Brian’s a grumpy, old school reporter who hates things like the internet and police spokespeople. He worked with my father for a few years when Dad was at the Times, and in many ways, Brian reminds me of my father. Gruff but lovable.

“What now?” He tossed his hands wildly into the air. “Do they expect us to stand out here all fucking day?”

“You know how the cops around here are. They wouldn’t want to say anything without running it by the mayor first. Someone might accidentally tell us the truth.”

“You nailed that one on the goddamned head, Larsen. Now all we’re gonna get is Haywood’s version of things. He’ll spin this shit six ways to Sunday, promising tragedies like this will never happen again during his reign. Five-fuckin’-dollars says that son of a bitch uses this girl’s death to remind the good people of Stonebridge why they need him as mayor.”

“Good luck finding anyone to bet against that.”

“I sure do wish your father was still here. He wouldn’t let Haywood get away with this shit.”

“Yeah, so do I.”

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. Sometimes I run my mouth without thinking. This must be bringing up some awful memories for ya. I didn’t mean to make you relive that shit.”

“I’m fine.” That was a lie.

“Jesus, all I meant was your father was one helluva muckraker who never let Haywood get away with anything. I know he’s goddamned proud of ya, you know that too, right?”

“I know.” I didn’t know though. In fact, I’m pretty sure he was disappointed in most of my career choices.

“Believe it. It’s the truth. He got to see what a good reporter you’ve become. I know that meant the world to him. And now you’re at the same paper he spent most of his life writing for, hell, I think he’d be damned proud of that, too.”

It was time to change the subject, or at least shift it a little. “So what did my father do when government officials strung him on for hours without giving any real updates?”

“He’d do what any good reporter does. Go and find the real story.”

Brian was right. Now that Mayor Haywood was involved, nothing useful would come from this presser. If I wanted to know what really happened to Grace Sutherland, I’d have to find the truth on my own.

Breaking away from the staging area, I again wandered the perimeter of the police tape, this time toward the road along the western edge of the woods. The closer I got to the road, the more cops I could see. Once I reached the road, it became clear what they were protecting. In front of me, maybe twenty feet away, a sobbing woman—presumably the dead girl’s mother—was attempting to rush beyond the crime scene tape. Several officers were holding her back, attempting to direct her toward the parking lot.

Perhaps some reporters would see this as an opportunity. Sure, I could run toward her, notebook in hand shouting, *Ma’am, excuse me. Jakob Larsen with the Stonebridge Gazette, can I speak with you?* But it didn’t feel right. Not now. Not moments after she’d learned her daughter’s body was lying in the woods.

Maybe it’s wrong. Maybe a good reporter would have put personal experiences aside, chased the mother down, gotten a good quote, and filed a story from the side of the road. If so, then I’ll never be a good reporter because I know too well the pain Grace’s mother is feeling right now.

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