

# PROLOGUE

Sara Linton held the phone to her ear as she watched an intern assess a patient with an open gash on the back of his right arm. The newly minted Dr. Eldin Franklin was not having his best day. He was two hours into his emergency department shift and he'd already had his life threatened by a drug-altered MMA fighter and performed a rectal exam on a homeless woman that had gone very, very wrong.

"Can you believe he said that to me?" Tessa's outrage crackled through the phone, but Sara knew her sister didn't require encouragement to complain about her new husband.

Instead, she kept her eye on Eldin, wincing as he pulled Lidocaine into a syringe like he was Jonas Salk testing the first polio vaccine. He was paying more attention to the vial than he was to his patient.

"I mean," Tessa continued. "He's unbelievable."

Sara made conciliatory noises as she switched the phone to her other ear. She found her tablet and pulled up the chart for Eldin's patient. The gash was a secondary concern. The triage nurse had noted the thirty-one-year-old man was tachycardic with a temperature of 101, and experiencing severe, acute agitation, confusion, and insomnia.

She looked up from her tablet. The patient kept scratching his chest and neck as if something was crawling on his skin. His left foot was shaking so hard that the bed shook along with it. To say that the man was in full-on alcohol withdrawal was to say that the sun was going to rise in the east.

Eldin was picking up on none of the signs—which was not

completely unexpected. Medical school was by design a system that didn't prepare you for the real world. You spent your first year learning how the systems of the body work. Year two was devoted to understanding how those systems could go wrong. By year three, you were allowed to see patients, but only under strict and often needlessly sadistic supervision. Your fourth year brought about the matching system, which was like the worst beauty pageant ever, where you waited to see if your residency was going to be served at a prestigious, major institution or the equivalent of a veterinary clinic in rural East Jesus.

Eldin had managed to match at Grady Memorial Hospital, Atlanta's only public hospital and one of the busiest Level I trauma centers in the country. He was called an intern because he was still in the first year of his residency. Unfortunately, that didn't stop him from believing that he had seen it all. Sara could tell his brain had already checked out as he leaned over the patient's arm and began numbing the area. Eldin was likely thinking about dinner or a girl he was going to call or maybe compounding the interest on his many student loans, which roughly equaled the cost of a house.

Sara caught the head nurse's eye. Johna was watching Eldin, too, but like every nurse ever, she was going to let the baby doctor learn the hard way. It didn't take long.

The patient pitched forward and opened his mouth.

"Eldin!" Sara called, but she was too late.

Vomit blasted like a fireman's hose down the back of Eldin's shirt.

He staggered, experiencing a moment of shock before starting to dry heave.

Sara stayed in her chair behind the nurses' station as the patient fell back against the bed, a momentary sense of relief washing over his face. Johna pulled Eldin to the side and began to lecture him as if he were a toddler. His mortified expression was familiar. Sara had interned at Grady. She had been on the receiving end of similar lectures. No one warned you in medical school that this was how you learned how to be a real doctor—humiliation and vomit.

"Sara?" Tessa said. "Are you even listening to me?"

“Yes. Sorry.” Sara tried to turn her focus back to her sister. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying how hard is it for him to see the fucking trash can is full?” Tessa barely paused for a breath. “I work all day, too, but I’m the one who has to come home and clean the house *and* fold the laundry *and* cook dinner *and* take out the trash?”

Sara kept her mouth shut. None of Tessa’s complaints were new or unpredictable. Lemuel Ward was one of the most self-involved assholes Sara had ever met, which was saying a lot considering she had spent her adult life working in medicine.

“It’s like I got secretly signed up for *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

“Was that from the show or the book?” Sara worked to keep the bite out of her tone. “I don’t remember a taking-out-the-trash scene.”

“You can’t tell me that’s not how it started.”

“Dr. Linton?” Kiki, one of the porters, rapped her fingers on the counter. “Curtain three is being brought back up from X-ray.”

Sara mouthed a thank-you as she checked her tablet for the films. The patient from curtain three was a thirty-nine-year-old schizophrenic who had signed himself in as Deacon Sledgehammer and presented with a golf-ball-sized welt on his neck, a temperature of 102 and uncontrollable chills. He’d freely admitted to a nearly lifelong heroin addiction. Subsequent to the veins in his legs, arms, feet, chest and belly collapsing, he’d resorted to injecting subcutaneously, or what was called “skin-popping.” Then he’d started injecting directly into his jugular and carotid arteries. X-rays confirmed what Sara had suspected, but she took no pleasure in being right.

“My time is just as valuable as his,” Tessa said. “It’s fucking ridiculous.”

Sara agreed, but she said nothing as she walked through the emergency department. Usually, this time of night they were covered up in gunshot wounds, stabbings, car accidents, overdoses and a fair share of heart attacks. Maybe it was the rain or the Braves playing Tampa Bay, but the department was blissfully calm. Most of the beds were empty, the whirs and beeps of machines punctuating occasional conversation. Sara was technically the attending pediatrician, but she’d offered to cover for another

doctor so that he could attend his daughter's science fair. Eight hours into a twelve-hour shift, the worst thing that Sara had seen was Eldin getting splattered.

And to be honest, that had been kind of hilarious.

"Obviously, Mom was no help," Tessa continued. "All she said was, 'A bad marriage is still a marriage.' What does that even mean?"

Sara ignored the question as she punched the button to open the doors. "Tessie, you've been married for six months. If you're not happy with him now—"

"I didn't say I'm not happy," Tessa insisted, though every word out of her mouth indicated otherwise. "I'm just frustrated."

"Welcome to marriage." Sara walked toward the bank of elevators. "You'll spend ten minutes arguing that you already told him something instead of just telling him again."

"That's your advice?"

"I've been really careful not to offer any," Sara pointed out. "Look, this sounds like a shitty thing to say, but you either find a way to work it out or you don't."

"You found a way to work it out with Jeffrey."

Reflexively, Sara pressed her hand to her heart, but time had eased the sharp pain that usually accompanied any reminder of her widowhood. "Are you forgetting I divorced him?"

"Are you forgetting I was there when it happened?" Tessa paused for a quick breath. "You worked it out. You married him again. You were happy."

"I was," Sara agreed, but Tessa's problem wasn't an affair or even an overflowing trash can. It was being married to a man who did not respect her. "I'm not holding out on you. There's not a universal solution. Every relationship is different."

"Sure, but—"

Tessa's voice fell away as the elevator doors slid open. The distant beeps and whirs of machinery faded. Sara felt an electric current in the air.

Special Agent Will Trent was standing at the back of the elevator. He was looking down at his phone, which allowed Sara the luxury of silently drinking him in. Tall and lean. Broad shoulders. Will's charcoal three-piece suit couldn't hide his runner's body. His

sandy-blond hair was wet from the rain. A scar zig-zagged into his left eyebrow. Another scar traced up from his mouth. Sara let her mind ponder the exquisite question of what the scar would feel like if it was pressed against her own lips.

Will looked up. He smiled at Sara.

She smiled back.

“Hello?” Tessa said. “Did you hear what—”

Sara ended the call and tucked the phone into her pocket.

As Will stepped off the elevator, she silently cataloged all the ways she could’ve made more of an effort to look presentable for this chance meeting, starting with not twisting her long hair into a granny bun on the top of her head and ending with doing a better job of wiping off the ketchup that had dribbled down the front of her scrubs at dinner.

Will’s eyes zeroed in on the stain. “Looks like you’ve got some—”

“Blood,” Sara said. “It’s blood.”

“Sure it’s not ketchup?”

She shook her head. “I’m a doctor, so . . .”

“And I’m a detective, so . . .”

They were both grinning by the time Sara noticed that Faith Mitchell, Will’s partner, had not only been on the elevator with him but was standing two feet away.

Faith gave a heavy sigh before telling Will, “I’ll go start the thing with the thing.”

Will’s hands went into his pockets as Faith walked toward the patient rooms. He glanced at the floor, then back at Sara, then down the hallway. The silence dragged out to an uncomfortable level, which was Will’s particular gift. He was incredibly awkward. It didn’t help matters that Sara found herself uncharacteristically tongue-tied around him.

She made herself speak. “It’s been a while.”

“Two months.”

Sara was ridiculously delighted that he knew how much time had passed. She waited for him to say more, but of course he didn’t.

She asked, “What brings you here? Are you working on a case?”

“Yes.” He seemed relieved to be on familiar ground. “Guy chopped off his neighbor’s fingers over a lawnmower dispute. Cops rolled up. He jumped into his car and drove straight into a telephone pole.”

“A real criminal mastermind.”

There was something about his sudden burst of laughter that made Sara’s heart do a weird flip. She tried to keep him talking. “That sounds like an Atlanta police problem, not a case for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.”

“The finger-chopper works for a drug dealer we’ve been trying to take down. We’re hoping we can persuade him to talk.”

“You can *chop* down his sentence in return for his testimony.”

There was no thrill of his laughter this time. The joke fell so flat that it could’ve been a piece of sandpaper.

Will shrugged. “That’s the plan.”

Sara felt a blush working its way up her neck. She desperately tried to find safer ground. “I was waiting for a patient to come up from X-ray. I don’t usually hang around elevators.”

He nodded, but that was all he offered before the awkwardness roared back in. He rubbed his jaw with his fingers, worrying the faint scar that ran along his sharp jawline and down into the collar of his shirt. The glint of his wedding ring flashed like a warning light. Will noticed her noticing the ring. His hand went back into his pocket.

“Anyway.” Sara had to end this before her cheeks burst into flames. “I’m sure Faith is waiting for you. It’s good seeing you again, Agent Trent.”

“Dr. Linton.” Will gave her a slight nod before walking away.

To keep herself from staring longingly after him, Sara took out her phone and texted an apology to her sister for hanging up so abruptly.

*Two months.*

Will knew how to get in touch with her, but he hadn’t gotten in touch.

Then again, Sara knew how to get in touch with Will, but she hadn’t either.

She silently went back over their brief exchange, skipping the *chop* joke so that her face didn’t start glowing red again. She

couldn't tell if Will was flirting or if he was being polite or if she was being stupid and desperation had set in. What she did know was that Will Trent was married to a former Atlanta police detective with a reputation for being a raging bitch and a regular habit of disappearing for long stretches of time. And that despite this, he was still wearing his wedding ring.

As Sara's mother would say, *A bad marriage is still a marriage.*

Fortunately, the elevator doors opened before Sara could spiral any farther down that rabbit hole.

"Hey, doc." Deacon Sledgehammer was slumped in his wheelchair, but he made an effort to straighten up for Sara's benefit. He was wearing a hospital gown and black wool socks. The left side of his neck looked painfully red and swollen. Round scars dotted his arms, legs and forehead from years of skin-popping. "Didja find out what's wrong with me?"

"I did." Sara took over from the orderly, pushing Deacon down the hall, fighting the urge to turn back toward Will like Lot's wife. "You've got twelve needles broken off in your neck. Several of them have abscessed. That's why your neck is swollen and you're having such a hard time swallowing. You've got a very serious infection."

"Damn." Deacon let out a raspy breath. "That sounds like it could kill me."

"It could." Sara wasn't going to lie to him. "You're going to need surgery to remove the needles, then you'll need to stay here at least a week for IV antibiotics. Your withdrawal will have to be managed, but none of it's going to be easy."

"Shit," he mumbled. "Will you come visit me?"

"Absolutely. I'm off tomorrow, but I'm here all day Sunday." Sara scanned her badge to open the doors. She finally allowed herself to look back at Will. He was at the far end of the hall. She watched until he turned the corner.

"He gave me his socks."

Sara turned back to Deacon.

"Last week when I was over by the capitol." Deacon pointed down to the pair of thick socks he was wearing. "It was cold as hell. Dude took off his socks and gave 'em to me."

Sara's heart did the weird little flip again. "That was kind."

“Fuckin’ cop probably bugged ’em.” Deacon pressed his finger to his lips to shush her. “Be careful what you say.”

“Understood.” Sara wasn’t going to argue with a schizophrenic suffering from a life-threatening infection. The fact that she had auburn hair and was left-handed had already led to a lengthy discussion.

She angled the chair toward curtain three, then helped transfer Deacon into bed. His arms were skeletal, almost like kindling. He was malnourished. Grime and dirt were clumped into his hair. He was missing several teeth. He was nearly forty, but he looked sixty and moved like he was eighty. She wasn’t sure he would make it through another winter. Either the heroin or the elements or another raging infection would get him.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Deacon leaned back in the bed with an old man’s groan. “You wanna call my family.”

“Do you want me to call your family?”

“No. And don’t be callin’ no social services neither.” Deacon scratched his arm, his fingernails digging into a round scar. “Listen, I’m a piece of shit, okay?”

“That hasn’t been my experience.”

“Yeah, well, you got me on a good day.” His voice caught on the last word. It was sinking in that he might not see tomorrow. “My mental health being what it is, and my addiction. I mean fuck, I love dope, but I don’t make it easy for people.”

“You were dealt a bad hand.” Sara kept her tone measured. “That doesn’t make you a bad person.”

“Sure, but what I put my family through—they disowned me ten years ago this June, and I don’t blame ’em. I gave ’em plenty of reasons. Lying, stealing, cheating, beating. I told you—a real piece of shit.”

Sara leaned her elbows on the bed railing. “What can I do for you?”

“If I don’t make it, will you call my mom and let her know? Not so she feels bad or nothin’. Being honest, I think it’ll be a relief.”

Sara took a pen and pad out of her pocket. “Write down her name and number.”

“Tell her I wasn’t scared.” He pressed the pen so hard into the



paper that Sara could hear the scratch. Tears seeped from his eyes. “Tell her that I didn’t blame her. And that—tell her that I loved her.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, but I promise I’ll call her if it does.”

“But not before, okay? Cause she don’t need to know I’m alive. Just if I’m . . .” His voice trailed off. His hands shook as he returned the pad and pen. “You know what I’m saying.”

“I do.” Sara briefly rested her hand on his shoulder. “Let me call up to surgery. We’ll get a central line started so I can give you something to help make you comfortable.”

“Thanks, doc.”

Sara closed the curtain behind her. She picked up the phone behind the nurses’ station and paged surgical for a consult, then tapped in the orders for the central line.

“Hey.” Eldin had showered and changed into a fresh pair of scrubs. “I front-loaded my drunk with IV diazepam. He’s waiting for a bed.”

“Add multivitamins and 500 milligrams thiamine IV to prevent—”

“Wernicke’s encephalopathy,” Eldin said. “Good idea.”

Sara thought he sounded a little too confident for someone who’d just been sprayed with projectile vomit. As his supervisor—even if it was only for the night—it was her job to set him straight so that it didn’t happen again.

She said, “Eldin, it’s not an idea, it’s a treatment protocol to prevent seizures and to calm the patient. Detox is hell on earth. Your patient is clearly suffering. He’s not a drunk. He’s a thirty-one-year-old man who’s struggling with alcohol addiction.”

Eldin had the decency to look embarrassed. “Okay. You’re right.”

Sara wasn’t finished. “Did you read the nurse’s notes? She took a detailed social history. He self-reported four to five beers a day. Is there a rule of thumb they taught you last year?”

“Always double the number of drinks a patient reports.”

“Correct,” she said. “Your patient also reported that he was trying to quit. He stopped cold turkey three days ago. It’s right there in his chart.”

Eldin's expression turned from embarrassed to outraged. "Why didn't Johna tell me?"

"Why didn't you read her notes? Why didn't you notice your patient had acute onset super-flu, and was scratching at phantom ants crawling on his skin?" Sara watched the shame return, which was to his credit. He recognized that he was the one to blame. "Learn from this, Eldin. Serve your patient better the next time."

"You're right. I'm sorry." Eldin took a deep breath and hushed it out. "Jesus, am I ever going to get the hang of this?"

Sara couldn't leave him lying in the dirt. "I'll tell you what my attending told me: I believe you're either a damn good doctor, or you're a psychopath who's managed to fool the smartest person who's ever supervised you."

Eldin laughed. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"You did your residency here, right?" He waited for Sara to nod. "I heard you were locked in for a fellowship with Nygaard. Pediatric cardiothoracic surgery. That's hellu impressive. Why did you leave?"

Sara was trying to formulate an answer when she felt another change in the air. This wasn't the electric current she'd felt when she'd seen Will Trent standing at the back of the elevator. This was years of her doctor's intuition telling her that the rest of the night was about to go sideways.

The doors to the ambulance bay burst open. Johna was running down the hall. "Sara, MVA happened right outside. Mercedes versus ambulance. They're pulling the victim from the car right now."

Sara jogged toward the trauma bay with Eldin close behind. She could feel his anxiety ramping up, so she kept her voice calm, telling him, "Do exactly as I say. Don't get in the way."

She was slipping on a sterile gown when EMTs rushed in with the patient strapped to a gurney. They were all soaking wet from the rain. One of them called out the details. "Dani Cooper, nineteen-year-old female, MVA with LOC, chest pain, shortness of breath. She was going about thirty when she hit the ambulance straight-on. Abdominal wound looks superficial. BP is 80 over 40,

heart rate's 108. Breath sounds are shallow on the left, clear on the right. She's alert and oriented. IV in the right hand with normal saline."

Suddenly, the trauma bay was crowded with people in a well-choreographed, disarrayed ballet. Nurses, respiratory therapist, radiographer, transcriber. Every person had a purpose: running lines, drawing blood gas, cross and typing, cutting off clothes, wrapping the blood pressure cuff, pulse ox, leads, oxygen, and someone to track every step that was taken and by whom.

Sara called out, "I need a chem twelve with differential, chest and abdomen X-rays, and a second large-bore IV for blood in case we need it. Start a foley and get routine urine and drug screen. I need a CT of her neck and head. Page CV surgery to be on standby."

The EMTs transferred the patient onto the bed. The young woman's face was white. Her teeth were chattering, eyes wild.

"Dani," Sara said. "I'm Dr. Linton. I'm going to take care of you. Can you tell me what happened?"

"C-c-car . . ." Dani could barely manage a whisper. "I w-woke up in the . . ."

Her teeth were chattering too hard for her to finish.

"That's okay. Where does it hurt? Can you show me?"

Sara watched Dani reach toward her upper left abdomen. The EMTs had already placed a piece of gauze over the superficial laceration just below her left chest. There was more than that, though. Dani's torso was slashed dark red where something, possibly the steering wheel, had hit her with force. Sara used her stethoscope, pressing it to the belly, then listening to both lungs.

She called out, "Bowel sounds are good. Dani, can you take a deep breath for me?"

There was a wheezing of labored air.

Sara told the room, "Pneumothorax on the left. Prep for a chest tube. I need a thoracostomy tray."

Dani's eyes tried to follow the flurry of movement. Cabinets were opened, trays were loaded up—drapes, tubing, Betadine, sterile gloves, scalpel, Lidocaine.

"Dani, it's all right." Sara leaned down, trying to pull the

woman's attention away from the chaos. "Look at me. Your lung is collapsed. We're going to put in a tube to—"

"I d-didn't . . ." Dani labored for breath. Her voice was barely audible over the din of noise. "I had to get away . . ."

"Okay." Sara brushed back her hair, checking for signs of head trauma. There was a reason Dani had lost consciousness at the scene. "Does your head hurt?"

"Yes . . . it . . . I keep hearing ringing and . . ."

"All right." Sara checked her pupils. The woman was clearly concussed. "Dani, can you tell me where it hurts the most?"

"H-he hurt me," Dani said. "I think . . . I think he raped me."

Sara felt a jolt of shock. The sounds in the room faded so that all she could hear was Dani's strained voice.

"He drugged my drink . . ." Dani coughed as she tried to swallow. "I woke up and he . . . he was on top of me . . . then I was in the car, but I don't remember how . . . and . . ."

"Who?" Sara asked. "Who raped you?"

The woman's eyelids started to flutter.

"Dani? Stay with me." Sara cupped her hand to the woman's face. Her lips were losing color. "I need that chest tube now."

"Stop him . . ." Dani said. "Please . . . stop him."

"Stop who?" Sara asked. "Dani? Dani?"

Dani's eyes locked onto Sara's, silently begging her to understand.

"Dani?"

Her eyelids started to flutter again. Then they stilled. Her head fell to the side.

"Dani?" Sara pressed her stethoscope to Dani's chest. Nothing. The nineteen-year-old's life was slipping away. Sara put her panic in another place, telling the room, "We've lost the heartbeat. Starting CPR."

The respiratory therapist grabbed the Ambu bag and mask to start forcing air into the lungs. Sara interlaced her fingers and placed her palms over Dani's heart. CPR was a stop-gap measure intended to manually push blood into the heart and up to the brain until they could hopefully shock the heart back into a regular rhythm. Sara pressed down into Dani's chest with her full weight. There was a sickening crack as the ribs gave way.

“Shit!” Sara felt her emotions threaten to take over. She reined herself back in. “She has a flail chest. CPR is no good. We need to shock her.”

Johna had already brought over the crash cart. Sara could hear the defibrillator reaching full charge as the paddles were pressed to Dani’s limp body.

Sara held up her hands, keeping them away from the metal bed.

“Clear!” Johna pressed the buttons on the paddles.

Dani’s body lurched from three thousand volts of electricity aimed directly into her chest. The monitor blipped. They all waited the interminable few seconds to see if the heart restarted, but the line on the monitor flattened as the alarm wailed.

“Again,” Sara said.

Johna waited for the charge. Another shock. Another blip. Another flat line.

Sara ran through the options. No CPR. No shocking her. No cracking open her chest because there was nothing to crack. A flail chest was described as two or more contiguous ribs broken in two or more places, resulting in a destabilization in the chest wall that altered the mechanics of breathing.

From what Sara could tell, Dani Cooper’s second, third and fifth ribs had sustained multiple fractures from blunt force trauma. The sharp bones were free-floating inside her chest, capable of slicing into her heart and lungs. The nineteen-year-old’s chance of survival had dropped into the single digits.

All the noises that Sara had blocked out as she worked on Dani suddenly filled her brain. The useless hiss of oxygen. The grinding groan of the blood pressure cuff. The crinkling of PPE as they all silently played the diminished odds.

Someone turned off the alarm.

“Okay.” Sara spoke the word to herself and no one else. She had a plan. She peeled off the gauze covering the laceration on Dani’s left side. She poured Betadine into the wound, letting it spill over like a fountain. “Eldin, tell me about the costal margin.”

“Uh—” Eldin watched Sara’s hands work as she slipped on a fresh pair of sterile gloves. “The costal margin is composed of the costal cartilage anteriorly around and up to the sternum. The eleventh and twelfth ribs float.”

“In general, they terminate about the mid-axillary line and within the muscular of the lateral wall. Right?”

“Right.”

Sara picked up a scalpel from the tray. She cut into the laceration, carefully incising the fatty layer down to the abdominal muscle. Then she cut through to the diaphragm to make a hole about the size of her fist.

She looked at Johna. The nurse’s lips were parted in surprise, but she nodded. If Dani had any chance of survival, this was it.

Sara reached her hand into the hole. The diaphragm muscle sucked around her wrist. Rib bones traced along the back of her knuckles like the keys of a xylophone. The lung had flattened to an airless balloon. The stomach and spleen were slick and supple. Sara closed her eyes, concentrating on the anatomy as she reached into Dani’s chest. The tips of her fingers brushed against the blood-filled sac of the heart. Carefully, Sara wrapped her hand around the organ. She looked at the monitor and squeezed.

The flatline jumped.

She squeezed again.

Another jump.

Sara kept pumping blood through the heart, flexing her fingers and thumb, forcing the rhythm into the normal cadence of life. Her eyes closed again as she listened for a beep from the monitor. She could feel the roadmap of arteries like a topographical drawing. Right coronary artery. Posterior descending artery. Right marginal artery. Left anterior descending artery. Circumflex artery.

Of all the organs in the body, the heart was the one that inspired the most emotion. Your heart could be broken or filled with love or joy, or it could do a weird little flip when you saw your favorite crush in the elevator. You covered your heart to pledge allegiance. You patted your hand over your heart to convey fealty or honesty or respect. Someone who was cruel might be called heartless. In the South, you said *bless your heart* to someone who was not particularly bright. An act of kindness *does your heart good*. When Sara and Tessa were little, Tessa had often crossed her

heart. She would steal Sara's clothes or a CD or a book and swear that she didn't do it—*cross my heart, hope to die*.

Sara wasn't sure whether or not Dani Cooper would die, but she made a promise on the woman's heart that she would do everything she could to stop the man who'd raped her.

# THREE YEARS LATER

## 1

“Dr. Linton.” Maritza Aguilar, the attorney for Dani Cooper’s family, walked toward the witness stand. “Can you tell us what happened next?”

Sara took a breath before saying, “I rode on the gurney up to the operating room so that I could continue manually pumping Dani’s heart. I was scrubbed in to the procedure, then the surgeons took over.”

“And after that?”

“I watched the surgery.” Sara blinked, and even three years later, she could still see Dani lying on the operating table. Eyes taped closed, tube coming out of her mouth, chest splayed open, white shards of ribs scattered inside the cavity like confetti. “The surgeons did everything they could, but Dani was too far gone. She was pronounced dead at approximately two forty-five that morning.”

“Thank you.” Maritza went back to her notes at the table. She started flipping through the pages. Her associate leaned over to whisper something. “Judge, if I could have a moment?”

“Quickly,” Judge Elaina Tedeschi said.

The courtroom went quiet but for jurors shifting in their chairs and the occasional cough or sneeze from the half-filled gallery. Sara took another deep breath. She’d already been on the witness stand for three hours. They’d just come back from the lunch break, and



everyone was tired. Still, she kept her back straight, her head facing forward, eyes on the clock at the back of the room.

There was a reporter in the gallery typing on her phone, but Sara was doing her best to ignore the woman. She could not look at Dani's parents because their grief was almost as crushing as their hope that something, anything, could give them a sense of closure. Nor could she look at the jury. Sara didn't want to make eye contact with one of them and convey the wrong thing. The courtroom was hot and stuffy. Trials never moved as quickly or were as interesting as they appeared on TV. The medical facts could be dense and confusing. Sara needed the jury to focus and listen, not wonder why she had looked at them the wrong way.

This lawsuit wasn't about Sara. It was about keeping the promise she had made to Dani Cooper. The man who had hurt her had to be stopped.

She let her gaze glance over Thomas Michael McAllister, IV. The twenty-two-year-old was sitting between his high-priced lawyers at the defense table. His parents, Mac and Britt McAllister, were directly behind him in the gallery. Per Judge Tedeschi's instructions, Tommy was being referred to as *the respondent* rather than *the defendant* so that the jury was clear that this was a civil case and not a criminal trial. The stakes were not prison versus freedom but rather millions of dollars for the wrongful death of Daniella Cooper. Mac and Britt could well afford to pay, but there was something else at risk that even their enormous wealth couldn't guarantee: their son's good reputation.

So far, they'd done everything they could to make sure Tommy was protected, from hiring a publicist to shape the media narrative to retaining Douglas Fanning, a lawyer who was known as The Shark for his ability to eviscerate witnesses on the stand.

The trial was only two days in, and Fanning had already managed to keep out some of what he termed Tommy's "youthful indiscretions," as if every youth had been arrested at eleven years old for torturing a neighbor's dog, accused of rape their junior year of high school, and caught with a party-sized supply of MDMA in his backpack an hour before graduation. That's what \$2,500 an hour bought you: a predator turned into a choirboy.

Tommy was certainly dressed for the part, trading in the bespoke

suit he'd been sporting in an *About Town* gossip column last year for an off-the-rack black suit with a muted, light-blue tie and a not-too-crisp white Oxford shirt—all likely selected by a jury consultant who for months had focus-grouped the most advantageous keywords and strategies, then worked closely with Douglas Fanning to select the best jurors, and was now running a shadow jury somewhere close to the courthouse that was presented with the same evidence to help the defense shape their approach.

Even with all that, there was still no hiding the arrogant tilt to Tommy McAllister's chin. He had spent a lifetime in Atlanta's most cloistered spaces. His great-grandfather, a surgeon, had not only pioneered early joint replacement techniques but had helped start what had become one of Atlanta's major orthopedic hospitals. Tommy's grandfather, a retired four-star general, had overseen infectious disease research at the Centers for Disease Control. Mac was one of the most respected cardiologists in the country. Britt had trained as an obstetrician. It was no surprise that Tommy was continuing the family business. He was about to enter his first year of medical school at Emory University.

He was also the man who had drugged and raped Dani Cooper. At least that was Sara's belief.

Tommy had known Dani Cooper most of his life. They had both come up in the same private schools, been members at the same country club, hung out in the same social circles, and at the time of Dani's death, they were both enrolled in pre-med courses at the same university. The night that Dani had died, Tommy was seen arguing with her at a frat party. The discussion had been heated. He'd grabbed Dani by the arm. She'd wrenched away from him. No one could say what happened next, but it was Tommy's \$150,000 Mercedes Roadster that Dani was driving when she crashed into a parked ambulance outside the hospital. It was his sperm that was found inside her during the autopsy. It was Tommy McAllister who couldn't provide an alibi for the hours between when Dani left the party and when she'd arrived at Grady. It was also Tommy McAllister who knew the intimate details that were included in the threatening texts that Dani had received the week before she'd died.

Unfortunately, the Fulton County prosecutor could only act on

evidence, not belief. A criminal trial was decided on guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Sara would freely admit that there was doubt in this case. The frat party had been filled with other young men who were close to Dani. No one could contradict Tommy's claim that the argument had been resolved. No one could contradict Tommy's claim that Dani had asked to borrow his Mercedes. No one could contradict his claim that his sperm was inside of Dani because they'd had consensual sex two nights before she'd died. No one could definitively say that Tommy left the party with Dani that night. Lots of people at the party had known the intimate details of Dani's life. More importantly, no one could locate the burner phone that had sent the threatening texts.

Fortunately, a civil trial was decided on a preponderance of evidence rather than reasonable doubt. The Coopers had a lot of circumstantial evidence on their side. The wrongful death suit they had filed against Tommy McAllister asked for damages in the amount of \$20 million. It was a hell of a lot of money, but they were not in it for the cash. Unlike Mac and Britt, getting the case to trial had cost them their life savings. The Coopers had refused all settlement offers because what they wanted, what they needed in order to make sense of their daughter's tragic death, was for someone to be held publicly accountable.

Sara had warned them that they weren't likely to win. Maritza had told them the same thing. They both knew how the system worked, and it rarely favored the people who didn't have money. More importantly, the entire case hinged on whether or not the jury found Sara to be a credible witness. The trauma bay had been chaotic the night that Dani Cooper had died. Sara was the only one who'd heard the young woman say that she had been drugged and raped. Because of the nature of the case, that meant Sara's personal life would be put under a microscope. To break her testimony, they had to break her character. Everything that she had ever done, everything that had ever happened to her, was going to be dissected, analyzed and—most distressingly for Sara—criticized.

She wasn't sure what terrified her most: having the darkest parts of her life exposed in an open courtroom or breaking her promise to Dani.

“Dr. Linton.” Maritza was finally ready to proceed. She walked back to the stand, holding a sheet of paper between her hands. She didn’t offer it to Sara. She kept it close to her chest, trying to build suspense.

The trick worked.

Sara could feel the jury’s attention coming into focus when Maritza said, “I’d like to take a step back for a second, if you don’t mind? Review something from earlier today?”

Sara nodded, then, for the court reporter’s benefit, said, “Okay.”

“Thank you.” Maritza turned, walking past the jury box. Five women, four men, a typical Fulton County mixture of white, Black, Asian, and Hispanic. Sara could see their eyes following the lawyer, some studying her face, some trying to scrutinize the sheet of paper.

Maritza took her yellow legal pad off the table and placed it on the podium. She had her pen in her hand. She slipped on her glasses and looked down at her notes.

She wasn’t Douglas Fanning, but she was damn good at her job. Maritza didn’t need a jury consultant to tell her how to dress any more than Sara did. They were both women who’d come up in male-dominated fields and had both figured out that, for better or worse, their appearance mattered more to a jury than what came out of their mouths. Hair pulled back to show they were no-nonsense. Light make-up to show they were still making an effort. Glasses on to show intelligence. Modest skirt and matching blazer to show they were still feminine. Heels no more than two inches high to show they weren’t trying too hard.

*Show, show, show.*

Maritza looked up at Sara, saying, “Before the lunchbreak, you walked us through your education and credentials, but to remind the jury, you’re both a board-certified pediatrician and a board-certified medical examiner, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And the night Dani Cooper was brought into the emergency department, you were employed by the Grady Healthcare System as the attending pediatrician, but currently, today, you are employed by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation as a coroner, correct?”

“Technically, my title is medical examiner.” Sara allowed herself to look at the jury. They were the only people in the courtroom whose opinions mattered. “In all but four of Georgia’s counties, the office of coroner is an elected position that doesn’t require a medical license. If foul play is suspected, the county coroner will generally refer the death investigation to the GBI’s Medical Examiner’s Office. That’s where my colleagues and I come in.”

“Thank you for the explanation,” Maritza said. “So, when you initially examined Dani Cooper in the emergency department, would you say that you were calling on both fields of your extensive expertise?”

Sara considered the best way to frame her response. “I would say that I evaluated Dani first as a doctor, then later as a medical examiner.”

“Have you reviewed the autopsy report on Dani Cooper, already marked as Exhibit 113-A?”

“I have.”

“What, if any, were the toxicology findings on controlled substances?”

“The blood and urine screens were determined to be inconclusive.”

“Did that surprise you?”

“No,” Sara said. “At the hospital, Dani was given multiple therapeutics, including Versed, or midazolam, which was used as a pre-surgical muscle relaxer. In a toxicology screening, the drug can chemically mimic Rohypnol.”

“Previously, you explained to us that Rohypnol is a so-called date-rape drug, correct?”

“Yes.”

“As a doctor, or someone working in a medical facility, how easy would it be for you to steal a vial of Rohypnol, if you were so inclined?”

“Rohypnol wouldn’t be at a hospital. The drug is not approved by the FDA for use in the United States. And trying to steal a vial of Versed would be incredibly risky. There are multiple internal controls in place to prevent theft and abuse,” Sara said. “On the other hand, Rohypnol is readily available on the streets, so hypothetically, I would find a drug dealer and buy it from them.”

“Can you tell us if any DNA evidence was found during Dani Cooper’s autopsy?”

“Sperm was swabbed from Dani’s anterior vagina and cervix. The sample was sent to the GBI lab for processing. The lab was able to generate a DNA profile for comparison.”

“Can you tell us the lab’s conclusion?”

“The DNA was identified within a scientific certainty as matching the sample collected from Tommy McAllister.”

Maritza paused again, pretending to review her notes as she gave the jury time to catch up. Sara let her eyes travel toward Douglas Fanning. The Shark kept his head down as he scribbled on his legal pad, for all intents and purposes behaving as if nothing Sara said could possibly matter. He’d done the same thing during her deposition six months ago. At the time, she’d recognized it as a ploy to throw her off.

Now she was annoyed to realize that it was working.

Maritza cleared her throat before continuing, “Dr. Linton, can you tell me anything else you observed that night that seemed out of the ordinary?”

“I was told Dani was driving the car, but the laceration to her torso was here, on her left side, just below her ribs.” Sara indicated the area on her own body. “When you’re driving, the seat belt goes from your left shoulder to your right hip. If the laceration had been caused by a seat belt, it would have been on Dani’s right side, not her left.”

Maritza didn’t push for a conclusion, instead moving on to the next piece of the puzzle. “You’ve viewed Exhibit 108-A through F, the security footage from outside the hospital that night. It captured the respondent’s Mercedes driving straight into the ambulance, correct? What would be called a head-on collision?”

“Yes.”

“What other impressions did you form while watching the security footage?” Maritza saw Fanning begin to stir for an objection, and added, “Your impressions as someone who has been involved in motor vehicle accident investigations?”

Fanning settled.

Sara answered, “It appeared to me that the car was being driven toward the emergency department parking lot, then at the last

moment, the wheels straightened, the speed decreased, and the car hit one of the ambulances parked in the bays.”

“Okay, on the footage, you cannot see the driver through the windshield, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Also on the footage, you can see that Dani was pulled from the driver’s side of the Mercedes, correct?”

“Yes.”

“You stated earlier that you read the accident investigation report prepared by Sergeant Shanda London. Do you recall how fast the car was going when it ran into the ambulance?”

“The ECM showed the car was going twenty-three miles per hour at the moment of impact.”

“We heard about the ECM from Sergeant London yesterday morning, but can you give us a quick refresher?”

“The Electronic Control Module records all data in the seconds around a collision. The easiest way to think of it is like a black box on an airplane, but for your car.”

“And did anything else you read in the ECM data strike you as interesting?”

“Two things: it confirmed the deceleration I had noted on the security footage; the Mercedes went from thirty-four to twenty-three miles per hour. And it also revealed that the car did not brake before impact.”

“Your Honor?” Maritza approached the judge with the sheet of paper. “If I can refer to exhibit 129-A?”

Judge Tedeschi nodded, “Go ahead.”

Fanning finally deigned to look up. He slid his reading glasses down the bridge of his nose. The lenses were smudged. If Tommy McAllister was programmed to look like a young but struggling professional, Douglas Fanning was counterprogrammed to look like anything but the slick defense attorney to the mega-wealthy that he actually was. His long gray hair was pulled back into a braided ponytail. His suit was wrinkled, his tie stained. He affected a southern drawl that Sara hadn’t heard since her grandmother was alive. He often pretended to fumble for information in order to play down his Duke law degree. Where Sara and Maritza had made every effort to appear competent and professional, Fanning

would be afforded both of those qualities without appearing to give an actual shit.

“Dr. Linton.” Maritza finally placed the sheet of paper on the overhead projector. “Do you recognize this exhibit, marked 129-A?”

Sara had turned toward the monitor on the wall along with everyone else. “That is a copy of the body diagram I downloaded from the internet so I could make proper anatomical notations of my findings. That’s my signature at the bottom of the page along with the date and time.”

“You downloaded the form from the internet,” Maritza repeated. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to take photographs?”

“As a healthcare professional, any data I collect is subject to HIPAA, which is a federal law governing the storage and dissemination of sensitive healthcare information. My Grady-issued phone didn’t have a camera, and I couldn’t guarantee the security of my personal phone.”

“All right, thank you.” Maritza pointed at the screen. “Those Xs across the ribs, what do those represent?”

“The bone fractures that contributed to what is called a flail chest.”

“You explained that term to us this morning, so I’ll ask: in Dani’s case, could the seat belt be responsible for the flail chest?”

“Not in my opinion. The car wasn’t going fast enough to cause that damage.”

“What caused that damage?”

Fanning stirred again. He was making it clear that Sara had his attention now. His pen had made a slash mark on the pad. He made noises like he was about to object, but Maritza beat him to it.

“I’ll rephrase.” She kept her eyes on Sara. “In your experience as a medical examiner, Dr. Linton, what sorts of traumas can cause a flail chest?”

“I had a case where the decedent fell from the roof of a two-story office building. Another was driving a truck that impacted a concrete highway divider at approximately ninety miles an hour. Another was a child who’d been beaten to death by a caretaker.”

The courtroom collectively flinched.



Maritza continued, “So, we’re not talking going twenty-three miles per hour and smacking into the side of a parked ambulance?”

“Not in my opinion.”

Fanning made another slash.

“A previous expert witness told us that the airbag inside of the Mercedes was placed under recall six months prior to the accident. It deployed, but we have no idea of knowing whether it deployed properly. Does that change your evaluation?”

“No. In my opinion—” Sara saw Fanning make yet another mark on his legal pad. “Even if there had been no airbag, Dani’s chest impacting the steering wheel at that rate of speed would not have caused the severity of those injuries.”

“In Dani’s case, was there a lot of bleeding from the flail chest?”

“Yes, but internally—inside the body. Externally, the only visible blood came from the superficial laceration.”

“Dani had a collapsed lung. Did that make it difficult for her to talk?”

“Yes, her air supply was restricted. She could only speak in a whisper.”

“As a doctor, given Dani’s dire medical situation, do you attach more significance to her telling you that she had been drugged and raped?”

“Yes,” Sara said. “Generally, when I have a patient in significant distress, their focus is on getting out of that distress. Dani’s focus was on telling me what had happened to her.”

Maritza returned to the body diagram on the screen. “What’s that X mark on the back of Dani’s head?”

“It indicates blunt force head trauma.”

“Can you explain to the jury what you mean by ‘blunt force head trauma?’”

Sara started to answer, but she was suddenly gripped by anxiety. Fanning was openly staring at her, his dark, beady eyes taking in every detail as he clutched the pen in his hand. She dreaded his cross-examination almost as much as he clearly relished the thought of it.

Maritza gave her a barely perceptible nod. They both knew what was at stake here. This was for Dani. This was about Sara keeping her promise.

She made her voice steady as she told the jury, “A blunt force head trauma refers to a blow to the head that doesn’t penetrate the skull, and results in either a concussion injury, a contusion, or both.”

Maritza asked, “What did Dani Cooper have?”

“A grade three concussion.”

“How did you come to this conclusion?”

“Among other things, I found an edema at the back of her head post-mortem.”

“What’s an edema?”

“A collection of fluid in the tissue or cavities of the body.” Sara told the jury, “It’s basically swelling. You injure yourself—like you bump your knee on your desk. The body sends fluid as a way of saying, ‘Hey, be careful with your knee while I try to repair it.’”

“Grade three.” Maritza was clearly trying to help Sara get her footing back. “Explain that, please.”

“There are five grades of concussion, escalating in severity. Grade three is characterized by loss of consciousness for less than one minute. There are also other factors such as pupillary reaction, pulse, blood pressure, respiration, speech patterns and response to questioning, and of course the edema.”

“Could the headrest in the driver’s seat be the cause of Dani’s grade three concussion?”

“Not in my opinion.” Sara saw Fanning’s pen slash again as she turned back toward the jury. “We think about the headrest as something to make us comfortable when we drive, but it’s actually designed for our safety. If you’re involved in a front- or rear-end collision, your head jerks forward and back. The head restraint keeps you from experiencing severe whiplash, or damage to your spine, or even death. Given the rate of speed at which the Mercedes was traveling, the protective structures inside the head restraint would not have caused that trauma.”

“Did you have occasion to look inside the Mercedes before it was towed away?”

“Yes.”

“What was your first impression?”

“There was no blood on the airbag.”

“Why is that significant?”

“As we’ve discussed, Dani had a superficial laceration on her left side that bled through her shirt. If the injury had occurred during the accident, I would expect to see blood on the airbag.”

Maritza paused before moving to the next piece of the puzzle. The jury was engaged now. Most had started writing in their spiral notebooks. “Let’s focus on that word, ‘laceration.’ It has a specific medical meaning, doesn’t it, Dr. Linton?”

Fanning sat back in his chair. His reading glasses came off, but he kept his pen at the ready. He knew that he had shaken Sara before. He was trying to do it again.

Sara tried to concentrate on the jury, explaining, “We classify a wound as a laceration when the muscle, tissue or skin is cut open or torn. From a forensic standpoint, they are classified as split, stretched, compressed, torn, or chopped.”

“What type was Dani Cooper’s laceration?”

“Split, so basically enough blunt force was used to break apart the skin.”

“And ‘superficial’ means?”

“To be obvious, superficial means that it’s not deep,” Sara answered. “So, bleeding, but not requiring sutures. The blood would eventually coagulate and the wound would heal on its own.”

“Was there anything inside the Mercedes that could’ve caused the laceration?”

“Not that I could find.”

“You searched the vehicle?”

“I did,” Sara answered. “Dani’s injuries didn’t make sense to me. I wanted an explanation.”

“How much time did you spend looking at the car?”

“I had around ten minutes before the tow truck arrived.”

“Twelve minutes, according to the security footage,” Maritza provided. “In your experience, as both a doctor and medical examiner, what have you seen that can cause a superficial laceration in that same spot during an automobile accident?”

“Broken glass, though the Mercedes’ windows were all intact. The seat belt, but again, Dani’s injury was on the left when a driver would have an injury on the right.” Sara had to pause before continuing. Her mouth had gone dry. They were getting

to the end of Maritza's questions. "There are also projectiles that could be inside the vehicle at impact. I've seen laptops, plastic toys, iPads, phones—anything with a hard edge can cause that type of laceration if it's moving at speed on impact."

"Did you find anything of that nature in the car?"

"No. From what I could see, the only item in the car was a shoe, a black slide sandal that was jammed under the front seat. The rest of the interior was completely clean."

"We heard earlier that the car was moved off to the curb so the ambulance bay would be clear. Do you know how long the car sat unattended?"

"I don't know the exact time, but Dani was in surgery for roughly three hours."

"All right, let's go back to your drawing." Maritza pointed toward the screen again. "These round red marks you indicated here on Dani's backside. Can you explain their significance?"

"In my opinion—" Sara saw Fanning make another tick on his notepad. "Those appear to be marks left by fingers digging into the skin. You can see the pattern suggests someone gripped the back of her left leg and buttock."

"Did you witness anyone in the trauma bay or operating room grabbing her in these areas?"

"I did not."

"What about the ambulance crew when they took her out of the car?" Maritza clarified, "I know you weren't present outside when Dani was removed, but could they have caused those marks?"

"The marks I saw on Dani's body were not recent. I would say by their color that they were several hours old."

"What are you using to base this timeframe on?"

"A bruise occurs when an injury causes blood to leak into the skin or the tissue behind the skin. Over time, the leaked blood loses oxygen and starts to change color. This process can take a few hours or a few days. That's when you see the blue, purple, or even black color. Dani's bruises were red in color. In my opinion—" Sara caught Fanning's pen moving yet again. "—the color indicates the bruises were at least an hour old. Possibly more."

"You base this on your experience as a doctor?"

“As a pediatrician,” Sara said. “Children routinely find ways to give themselves lots of bumps and bruises. They’re often not the most reliable narrators of their mishaps.”

One of the jurors gave a knowing nod. She was early thirties, probably a mother with a toddler at home. Sara had noticed the woman from the outset. She’d thought of her as “The Note-Taker” because, of all the jurors, the woman had been taking the most notes.

“Dr. Linton.” Maritza clasped her hands together as she leaned against the podium. “Let me get the sequence of events straight, if you don’t mind. You were told that Dani Cooper was driving the car?”

“Yes.”

“But the laceration on her side could not have resulted from the impact of the car hitting the ambulance?”

“Not in my opinion.”

Fanning ticked another mark.

“And the flail chest, in your opinion, was not caused by the car hitting the ambulance?”

“Not in my opinion, no.”

*Tick.*

“And the blunt force trauma to the back of her head was not caused by the car hitting the ambulance?”

“Not in my opinion.”

*Tick.*

“And the fingerprint marks on Dani Cooper’s left thigh and buttock, in your opinion, were not caused either by the accident or how she was handled inside the hospital?”

“Not in my opinion.”

*Tick.*

“So, as a medical examiner who has seen victims from hundreds of vehicle collisions, and a doctor who has treated hundreds of patients who’ve been involved in vehicle collisions, and as the physician who both treated Dani Cooper and saw the video footage that recorded the car accident, how do you square all of these contradictory findings?”

“They can’t be squared,” Sara said. “The damage to Dani Cooper’s body was not caused by the car accident.”

Maritza gave the jury another long moment to let that sink in. “Dr. Linton, are you saying that someone hurt Dani Cooper before she got behind the wheel of that car?”

“In my professional opinion, Dani was severely beaten with a blunt object. Somehow, she managed to get into the Mercedes. She drove to the hospital, but lost consciousness as the car rounded toward the emergency department parking lot. Her body went lax. Her hands dropped from the steering wheel. Her foot released the pedal. The car coasted into the ambulance.” Sara looked directly at the jurors. “Dani knew that her injuries were life-threatening. She begged me with her last breath to stop the man who’d hurt her.”

There was total silence in the courtroom.

The jurors stared back at Sara. The Note-Taker rested her chin in her hand, clearly mulling over the information.

There was only a faint *click* as the clock on the wall marked the passing of another hour.

The silence was broken by Douglas Fanning giving a heavy sigh. He picked up his reading glasses, then noisily flipped through the pages of his legal pad. There had been ample opportunity for him to object during Sara’s testimony, but he’d kept his mouth closed. Sara wasn’t delusional enough to think he’d been silenced by her mastery of the subject matter. Fanning was confident that his cross-examination would be so brutal that the jury would start to doubt every word that had come out of Sara’s mouth.

“Thank you, Dr. Linton.” Maritza looked at the judge, “Your Honor, no further questions at this time.”

Tedeschi looked at the clock. Sara was torn between wanting to get the next part over with and dragging it out another day, but the judge’s hand did not reach for the gavel.

“Mr. Fanning,” Tedeschi said. “We’ve got about an hour left on the schedule. Would you like to break for the day and resume tomorrow morning?”

Douglas Fanning stood, smoothing down his tie over his round belly. “No thank you, Your Honor. This won’t take long.”

Sara slowly exhaled as Fanning gathered his things. Her heart was pounding inside her chest. Her hands had turned sweaty. As a doctor, she had learned to compartmentalize her feelings. You

couldn't help a patient when you were swallowed up by panic or grief. Now, facing down a man whose only job was to humiliate and embarrass her, she had to work to strengthen her resolve.

Fanning drew out the moment. He took a long drink from a glass of water. He was trying to unnerve Sara again. She was a very good witness, the crux of the Coopers' case. Tommy's jury consultant, the media person, particularly his parents, would've all discussed during strategy sessions that Fanning's main objective was to blow Sara's credibility into a thousand pieces.

Britt McAllister in particular would've been able to provide ample ammunition.

"Dr. Linton." Fanning gripped the sides of the podium with visible exuberance. "Do you know how many times in the last five minutes you uttered the phrase '*in my opinion*'?"

Sara nodded, because she'd kept track of his ticks. "I believe it was twelve times."

Fanning pressed his tongue into the side of his cheek, but she could see the flash in his eyes. He wasn't irritated. He was delighted. Blood in the water.

He said, "That's right. Twelve times, you said the phrase '*in my opinion*'. That's because what you just told us—all this conjecture about Dani being beaten then getting in the car—that's all just your opinion, right?"

Sara knew better than to equivocate. "Yes."

"We're all here in this courtroom because of your opinion, right?"

She clasped her hands in her lap. "I can only speak for myself. I'm here because I was asked to testify."

"The circumstances surrounding Dani's tragic death—you said they just didn't look right, based on your opinion." He looked at her over his glasses. "Yes?"

"Yes."

"You persuaded the Fulton County Medical Examiner to perform an autopsy on Dani Cooper, right?"

"You would have to ask Dr. Malawaki about his thought processes."

"But you gave him your opinion, right?"

"Yes."

"And Sergeant Shanda London, the motor vehicle accident

investigator for the Atlanta Police Department—you gave her your opinion, right?”

“Yes.”

Fanning returned to his legal pad. He traced his finger down the side as if he wanted to make sure he hit all the important facts, but this was all just preamble. “At what point did you find out that the Mercedes belonged to Tommy McAllister?”

“Sergeant London told me.”

“Sergeant London testified that you responded, and I quote, ‘Shit, I went to school with his father.’ Is that right?”

“Yes.” Sara let her lips part for a tiny breath of air, steeling herself against what was to come. “Mac and I were at Emory medical school together, then we both interned and served our residencies at Grady Hospital.”

“During that time, Tommy’s mother, Dr. Britt McAllister, was also at Grady, right?”

“Yes.” Sara felt the knot of tension draw tight. “Britt is older. I believe she was five or six years ahead of us.”

Sara caught Britt stiffening in her seat. Britt had always been sensitive about the age difference. And the fact that she’d locked down Mac during his undergrad by getting pregnant with Tommy.

“Are y’all close?” Fanning asked. “You and the McAllisters? Do you socialize with them?”

“I haven’t seen either of them in fifteen years.”

“Because you left Grady after your residency?”

“Yes.” Sara had to stop to swallow. He was circling closer to the target. “I moved home to be with my family.”

“We’ll get back to that.” Fanning studied her carefully to see how she responded to the warning. “Don’t you worry.”

Sara kept her expression passive. She waited for him to ask a question.

“In medical terms, what is a fellowship?”

“After you fulfill your residency, you can choose to either start practicing general medicine or continue your education in a specialty field. For the latter, you enter into what’s called a fellowship where you receive hands-on advanced training in a particular sub-specialty.”



“A specialty being something like pediatric cardiothoracic surgery?”

“Yes.”

He said, “Tommy’s father, Mac—he was your fiercest competitor during your residency, right?”

“Residents are constantly evaluated against each other. We were all each other’s fiercest competitors.”

“Be that as it may, it was you and Mac who were both in contention for a very prestigious fellowship in pediatric cardiothoracic surgery, right? The Nygaard Fellowship?”

She fought the urge to clear her throat. “You would have to ask Dr. Nygaard who she was considering.”

“But Mac got the fellowship and you—as you said—went home, right? Back to South Georgia, where you worked in a pediatrician’s office. Right?”

Sara swallowed down the part of her ego that wanted to tell him that she had eventually bought the practice. “Yes, that’s right.”

“As a doctor—as a medical examiner—in *your opinion*, which is more prestigious, being a pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon in Atlanta or working for someone else in a South Georgia pediatric clinic?”

He wanted her to sound defensive. Sara wouldn’t give that to him. “In the medical hierarchy, Mac is definitely above me. He’s one of the top surgeons in Atlanta.”

Fanning’s eyebrow went up. It wasn’t just Atlanta. Mac was consistently in the top five of every national ranking. “Nevertheless, that must feel like quite a comedown. One minute you’re at the height of your profession, the next minute you’re dealing with earaches and runny noses.”

The judge stirred, clearly expecting an objection, but Maritza had told Sara she wouldn’t object unless Sara looked to her for help.

Sara kept her eyes on Fanning. He was gripping the podium again, preparing to go in for the kill. All she could do was wait for it to come.

“Dr. Linton,” he said. “You have a personal stake in all of this, don’t you?”

Her stomach clenched. “A nineteen-year-old woman died. I take that very personally.”

“But there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?”

Sara wasn’t going to make it easy on him. “Every doctor cares about their patients, but when you lose one, you carry them in your heart for the rest of your life. I made a promise to Dani that I would see this through.”

“*See this through.*” He repeated the phrase with a preacher’s zeal. “My daughters tell me there’s a phrase—hashtag believe women. Do you support that, Dr. Linton? Do you believe women?”

Sara tasted bile in her mouth. He was seconds away from the strike. “In general, or do you mean specifically?”

“Well, when you’re investigating a crime involving sexual assault, do you always go into it believing that the woman is telling the truth?”

“If I’m investigating, that means the victim is deceased, so no, I don’t approach the case assuming the victim lied about being murdered.”

One of the jurors laughed.

The sound was loud and sharp in the cavernous room.

It had come from the Note-Taker, the probable mom of a toddler, the woman who’d been paying close attention all along, the person Tommy’s jury consultant probably believed would be elected forewoman when the jury convened to discuss their verdict.

The woman was clearly mortified by her outburst. Her hand covered her mouth. She gave the judge an apologetic look. Then she shook her head at Sara in apology, too.

Sara didn’t respond, but she let out a long, slow breath. The laugh had changed things. The knot of tension had gone slack. She could feel it in every part of her body.

So could Fanning. He looked down at his notes. He ran his tongue along his top teeth. He said, “Your Honor, may I have a moment, please?”

“Quickly,” Tedeschi said.

Fanning went back to the table to confer with his colleague. Sara couldn’t hear them, but she knew what they were saying. Did the laugh mean that the Note-Taker was on Sara’s side? If Fanning went after Sara, would that turn the potential forewoman

against Tommy? Would the woman sway the jury to do the same? Was their carefully prepared trial strategy really going to fall apart because a thirty-something-year-old mother had laughed?

There was nothing Sara could do but wait.

She looked down at her hands. She saw the glimmer of her engagement ring. The stone was cheap green glass, scratched on the side. She'd had to replace the original silver band with white gold because it had tarnished on her finger. The only thing that Sara loved more than the ring was the man who had given it to her.

"Dr. Linton?" Douglas Fanning returned to the podium.

Sara looked directly into his beady little eyes. She let go of the anxiety and dread. There was literally nothing she could do right now that would influence the next words that came out of his mouth. The only thing Sara could control was her reaction. The relief that came from acceptance made the corner of her mouth tug up in a smile.

She said, "Yes?"

"The, uh—" Fanning had lost his place. He nervously looked back at his colleague. Then he flipped through the pages of his notes. "Experts are moving away from the old grading system for concussions, correct?"

"It depends on the hospital, but at the time of Dani's death, that was the protocol."

"All right." He paused to clear his throat. "Grade three concussions—do those come with memory loss? Amnesia?"

Her mouth opened. She was able to take her first full breath. "Sometimes, but it's generally temporary."

"What about speech difficulties?"

Sara took another breath. Fanning was the one who was flustered now. She was fine. "Sometimes, but again, they're—"

"Temporary." The fact that he'd finished the sentence for Sara was a clear sign of his retreat. He wanted to get this over with. He stuck to the script on his legal pad. "What about hallucinations? Do those come with grade three concussions?"

"Rarely," Sara worked to keep the triumph out of her tone. "But it can happen."

"Your colleagues, Dr. Eldin Franklin and the head trauma nurse,

Johna Blackmon, both testified that they did not hear Dani say anything that night. Are you surprised by that?”

“No. As I said earlier, Dani was suffering from a collapsed lung.” Sara took another full, cleansing breath. “Also, in the trauma bay, everyone has a clearly defined role. I was in charge, so it was my job to communicate with the patient. Eldin and Johna had their own tasks.”

Fanning glanced down at his notepad. “Did Dani mention the anonymous text messages on her phone?”

“No.”

Another glance. “Drugging someone, assaulting them, those are serious crimes, correct?”

“Yes.”

Another glance. “Did you report to your colleagues what Dani had said to you?”

“No,” Sara said. “There wasn’t time.”

“How about up in surgery? Did you tell any of the surgeons or the nurses?”

“No.” Sara felt like she was on autopilot. “There wasn’t time.”

“The first person you told was over five hours later, right? You told Sergeant London about Dani’s claims, but only after the sergeant had told you that the car belonged to the son of your old rival, Dr. Mac McAllister. Right?”

“Sergeant London was the first person I told, yes.”

“Tell me.” Fanning turned the page to continue down the list of questions. “After consensual sex, how long can sperm stay in the vaginal area?”

“Whether the sex is consensual or not, ejaculated sperm can be found in the female reproductive tract anywhere from five to seven days later.”

“Do you have any proof of the date or time that the sperm was deposited?”

“No.”

“Do you have proof—such as a weapon you can show us—that something was used to hurt Dani that night?”

“No.”

“Do you have proof of what caused the bruises to her left thigh and buttock?”

“No.”

“Do you have proof that Dani didn’t freely take recreational drugs that night?”

“No.”

“Do you have proof that she left the party with Tommy McAllister?”

“No.”

“Do you have proof as to how she came to be driving his Mercedes?”

“No.”

“Do you have proof that she passed out behind the wheel before hitting the ambulance?”

“No.”

“Do you have corroborating proof that Dani told you she was drugged and raped that night?”

“No.”

“So there’s really no actual, verifiable proof of all this stuff that you’re alleging. Is there, Dr. Linton?” Fanning grabbed the legal pad off the podium. “It’s all just your opinion.”

Sara watched him walk back toward the table. She waited as he sat in his chair. Placed his pad on the table. His pen. Smoothed down his tie. Straightened his suit jacket. Looked up at the judge. Sara was holding her breath again as Fanning’s mouth opened.

He told the judge, “I’m finished with this witness, Your Honor.” And it was over.

Three years of heartache. Six months of dread. Nearly four hours of testimony.

It was finally over.

Sara expected to feel elation, but what she felt instead was a dulling of her senses. She heard the judge dismiss her as a witness, but the sound traveled slowly. Sara could have been moving through water as she stood up, found her purse, and stepped down from the stand. Only then did she look at Maritza, who gave her an approving nod. Dani’s mother and father offered pained smiles of encouragement. Sara could feel the newspaper reporter staring at her, madly typing into her phone. Britt was staring, too, but not out of curiosity. She was clutching Mac’s arm. Their animosity was

like a malevolent presence in the courtroom. The heat of their hatred followed Sara until the doors closed behind her.

The hallway was almost empty. It was late in the day. There was a crowd waiting at the elevators. Sara couldn't face being around people right now. She walked in the opposite direction, finding the bathroom. She bypassed the sinks and went into the last stall. She sat on the toilet, put her head in her hands, and let herself cry.

For Dani. For her parents.

And finally, out of the glare of the courtroom, away from the reporter and Douglas Fanning and the jury and Britt-fucking-McAllister, Sara cried for herself. She had survived. She had done everything possible to keep her promise to Dani. All the anxiety and fear that had haunted Sara every time she thought about testifying was slowly ebbing away. She looked down at the ring on her finger, reminding herself that life always found a way to get better.

The bathroom door slammed open.

The sound was like a shotgun going off.

Sara warily raised her head. She saw a pair of navy Manolo Blahniks stab their way across the tiled floor. They stopped in front of the sinks. The faucet was turned on full blast. There was a moment of nothing but the loud rush of water circling down the drain before the woman let out a low, mournful moan.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "Oh-God-oh-God-oh-God."

The woman's knees buckled. She sank to the floor. Her ten-thousand dollar Hermès Kelly bag dropped alongside her, the contents skittering across the tiles. Make-up, keys, wallet, tampons, chewing gum. Sara had pulled back her feet as a pair of Cartier sunglasses shot under the stall door and smacked against the base of the toilet. She recognized the glasses. They had been hanging from the pocket of the purse that matched the shoes that matched the Versace suit that was being worn by Britt McAllister.

"God!" Britt cried. She doubled over, her head nearly touching the bathroom floor.

Sara kept her feet lifted out of the way. There were countless reasons for her to dislike Britt McAllister, but she could not take pleasure in seeing another woman literally bent over by grief. The

moment was too raw, too personal. Sara wanted nothing more than to disappear. Then she looked down at the sunglasses and the earlier wariness came rolling back in. She waited through almost a full minute of Britt's tears, hoping, praying, that Britt would abandon the glasses and leave.

Britt did not.

She sniffed as she sat up, trying to collect herself. She sniffed again. Regardless of the glasses, she would want a tissue to dry her eyes. The lock on the stall door rattled when Britt tried to push it open.

Sara felt physically ill.

"He—" Britt's voice caught. "Hello?"

Sara didn't know what to do but pick up the sunglasses. She stood from the toilet. She opened the door.

Britt was still on her knees. She looked up at Sara. The surprise registered a beat too late. Britt was clearly under the influence of something. She was swaying. Her pupils were pinpricks. Her eyes had a tell-tale glassiness. Sara noticed a silver pill case had fallen open under the sink basin. The tiny blue pills had a distinctive V-shape missing from the centers that identified each as 10mg of Valium. There were over a dozen, which was a hell of a lot to keep in your purse.

Sara turned off the faucet. She placed the sunglasses by the sink. Every single molecule in her body wanted to leave. Britt had never been an easy woman to get along with. She was petty and conniving and often vicious, but she was also a mother whose son was on trial. No matter Tommy's guilt, he was still her child.

Sara rolled out some toilet paper. She handed it to Britt, asking, "Do you want me to get Mac for you?"

"No, I—" Britt's hand went to her mouth as she tried to hold back her emotions. "Please, Sara. Please tell me it's not too late."

Sara heard the raw desperation behind the request, but it had the opposite effect. Was this woman literally on her knees begging Sara to go back into the courtroom and lie? "My testimony is over. I told the truth about what happened."

"Don't you think I know that?" Britt yelled, her hands clenching in the air. "I know you told the truth! I know what he did to that girl!"

Sara was too stunned to respond.

"I know who he is." Britt's hands dropped into her lap. She looked away from Sara, staring at the floor. "I've lived with the fear for twenty years. I know exactly who he is."

Sara couldn't move. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe.

*I know what he did to that girl.*

"He'll stop now," Britt whispered. "Tommy's scared. I know he'll stop. There's still time for him to become a good man."

Sara could feel her heart pounding inside her chest. Her mind was racing. She knew that Tommy had been accused of raping another girl two years before Dani had died.

*I know who he is.*

Slowly, Sara knelt in front of Britt. She didn't know what she was going to say until the words came out of her mouth. "How do you know what he did to Dani?"

"I heard them."

"You heard them?" Sara tried to keep the anguish out of her voice. Dani could've been saved. "You heard Dani being—"

"It's not Tommy's fault. He still has time to change." Britt started shaking her head. "He'll learn from this. He's not like Mac."

Sara felt overwhelmed by what she was hearing. She could barely process the information. "Was Mac involved, too?"

"Mac is always involved." Britt's tone was flat, matter-of-fact. "I can't stop the rest of them, but I can save my boy."

"The rest of them?" Sara repeated. "Britt, what do you mean?"

Britt did not answer. Instead, she wiped her eyes with her hands. Mascara smeared across the tips of her fingers, down her face. She seemed to notice her scattered belongings for the first time. Wallet. Lipstick. Keys. Her eyeshadow palette had broken apart, dusting the tile with earthy hues. Britt started circling her finger into the powder. Sara watched, almost transfixed, as Britt's words ricocheted around her brain.

*I know who he is. I've lived with the fear for twenty years.*

Twenty years ago, Tommy was only two years old. No mother lived in fear of her two-year-old becoming a monster. Was she talking about Mac? What had Mac done?

*Mac is always involved.*



“Britt.” Sara worked to keep her voice from trembling. “Please talk to me. I don’t understand. Did Tommy go to Mac for help the night that Dani died?”

Britt didn’t answer.

“Who is *them*?” Sara could hear herself pleading, but she didn’t care. “You said you couldn’t stop the rest of them. Who is *them*?”

Britt finally looked up at Sara. She narrowed her eyes, trying to focus. “What are you doing?”

Sara noted the change in Britt’s demeanor. Reason had started to cut through the fog of Valium. Still, she tried, “Please talk to me. Tell me what happened to Dani.”

“How would I—” Britt’s hand went to her face. She looked around the bathroom as if she had just realized where she was. “Were you hiding in the stall? Waiting on me?”

“No,” Sara said. “Britt, you just told me—”

“I didn’t tell you a damn thing.” Britt picked up her keys, the lipstick. She started throwing stuff back into her purse. She snatched the sunglasses off the counter as she struggled to stand. “Given your tragic past, I’d think you’d avoid the handicap stall.”

Sara felt as if she’d been slapped in the face. This was the Britt McAllister she remembered: angry, nasty, filled with spite.

Britt said, “Whatever you think you heard—”

“I know what I heard.” Sara stood, going back into the stall. She grabbed her purse off the back of the toilet and turned to leave.

Britt blocked the way. “I’m not going to let you destroy my child.”

“Dani Cooper was somebody’s child, too.”

“What do you know about being a mother?”

Sara felt every ounce of cruelty in the question. Britt of all people knew why she wasn’t a mother. Sara was finished holding herself back. “You’ve done a great job with Tommy. Is this the second or third time he’s been accused of rape?”

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you?” Britt rested her hand on the wall, making it clear that Sara wasn’t going anywhere. “Saint Sara the plumber’s daughter with your cheap costume jewelry and your kitten heels, holding forth on high like you know every-fucking-thing.”

Sara wanted to shove her back to the ground. “What I know is that I will move you myself if you don’t get the fuck out of my way.”

“What do you make at the GBI, a hundred grand a year?” Britt gave a derisive snort. “Mac’s already cleared two mil this quarter.”

“Wow!” Sara filled the word with sarcasm. “Send him my congratulations for profiting off my misfortune.”

“You think what happened to you fifteen years ago was misfortune?” Britt laughed. “Just a spot of bad luck?”

“Fuck your bad luck.” Sara clenched her fists. This was bullshit. Britt was playing one of her psychotic games. “Move out of my way.”

“Poor Saint Sara. So brilliant. Such a tragic loss. Fifteen long years of not knowing, of suffering, because you couldn’t see what was right in front of you.”

Sara blocked out her words. She had to get out of here before she lost it. “I told you to—”

“Sara!” Britt hissed out her name like a snake. “You’re not listening to me. What happened to you. What happened to Dani. It’s all connected.”

Sara felt her mouth moving, trying to form a response, but nothing would come out.

“Don’t you remember the mixer?”

Sara had lost her voice, her senses, her reasoning.

Britt laughed again. “You stupid cunt. You don’t know anything at all.”