

IN TOO DEEP

by
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2005

PROLOGUE

Arcane, Alabama

“Come on, Lizzie, hurry!” Jay yelled as they ran through the woods. “We gotta get to Papaw’s house by suppertime!”

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’.” Lizzie ran as hard as she could, but she never could keep up with her older sister.

The shortcut to their grandpa’s house was always an adventure Lizzie enjoyed. It led deep into the woods, a good ways from their aunt Dayne’s house. The house they had been living in ever since their mother left them as babies.

Jay stopped to wait for her, hands on her hips. “You better hurry up. I got better things to do than to wait for your ass.” She kicked a pebble at Lizzie with her worn sneakers. Her tanned and sockless legs were covered with tiny scratches and scrapes from her rough play outdoors.

“Oh yeah? Well, at least I ain’t getting boobs!” Lizzie taunted, earning herself a rough shove.

“Shut up, you little shit! I ain’t getting no boobs.” Jay clasped her hands quickly over her tank top, hiding the budding mosquito bites on her eleven-and-a-half-year-old chest.

“Are too. And if you ain’t nicer to me, I’m gonna tell Bobbie Hollaway that you got hair on your twat.” Lizzie scampered ahead of her sister, knowing she was about to get pummeled.

She ran hard and fast, glancing back over her shoulder to measure Jay's advance. A ledge loomed ahead, and Lizzie slammed to a halt, Jay gaining on her rapidly. She peered down the embankment, trying to decide whether or not she should risk the steep descent. As her eyes skimmed over the heavily overgrown area below, something caught her attention, something so out of the ordinary that she completely forgot about Jay and the impending ass-kicking.

"You're dead, dickhead!" Jay shouted victoriously as she slammed into her from behind.

Lizzie almost toppled, but turned and threw her arms around her sister to steady herself. Her eyes never left the strange sight at the bottom of the embankment.

"Git your hands off me, you freak." Jay shoved her away. "What's your problem?"

Lizzie pointed and said with a gasp, "Look."

"What?" Jay peered into the ravine.

They stood in silence for a moment, trying to see an object partly hidden by a rotting log. Lizzie walked a few yards along the ledge to get a better look. But on her final step, the soft red earth gave way and she fell with a shriek, rolling over and over until she slammed into something that stopped her momentum.

She lay there, eyes clenched shut, her brain spinning. She could hear Jay calling and coming after her, and she tried to get up, not knowing which limb to move first. Pain seeped through her body, and a terrible smell filled her nostrils, almost burning them.

"Lizzie!" Jay came to a running stop behind her. "Oh my God. Lizzie, git up." Her voice was a strangled whisper.

"I cain't." She opened her eyes for the first time.

"I said git up!" Jay yanked her up and away by the waistband of her jean shorts.

Lizzie cried out as her left arm fell limply to her side. She studied it in silence, too shocked to say a word. Adrenaline surged through her as pain registered. She looked up to speak to Jay but then, with a hoarse cry, focused on what it was that had stopped her fall.

There, amidst the dead leaves and the rotting log, lay the nude body of a young woman. Lifeless eyes bulged unnaturally from the

woman's head, along with her tongue, which fell to rest outside of her mouth. Angry red and purple marks streaked across her neck where someone had squeezed the life out of her. One leg was tucked beneath her at an impossible angle, and an arm cast back over her head as if she had tried to fend off a blow.

Flies swarmed all over the body as it lay exposed in the Alabama heat.

"Come on." Jay nudged Lizzie from her trance. "Let's git outta here."

"But what about her?" Lizzie couldn't tear her gaze away from the dead girl's eyes.

"She's dead! She ain't going nowhere." Jay had started to make her way back up the embankment, and she turned to make sure her sister was following. "Come on," she urged. "We gotta go tell."

Lizzie gave the dead girl one last look and dragged herself out of the ravine. Fear rocked through her, along with the pain from her arm. She struggled to keep up with Jay, afraid if she fell behind, the body would rise and come for her. As she hurriedly made it to the top, a figure startled them, stepping out from behind a large tree.

"Well, looky what we have here," the man said with a sly grin, a worn toothpick stuck between his teeth.

Jay eased Lizzie behind her with one arm. "Look, mister, we don't want no trouble." Lizzie could hear the uncertainty in her tone.

The stranger looked Jay up and down, jangling the keys on his belt loop with one hand. He had on worn jeans, stained with grease and dirt. His T-shirt was tattered and full of holes; sweat stains marked the armpits. He stank of raw onions, a smell almost as strong as the rotting flesh of the dead girl.

"Well, it looks like you've done found it." He laughed out loud and pulled the toothpick from his mouth to toss it on the ground. He glanced down beyond them at the body in the ravine and snickered. "I see you girls met Mary. See, she didn't play nice with me. But you will, won't you."

He took a step toward them, knowing they couldn't back up much more. "Ain't you a purdy little thing." He reached out and tried to stroke Jay's cheek, but she ducked away from him and came

back up quickly, hitting him square in the balls. The man bent over and grabbed himself, moaning in pain. “You little bitch.”

Pulled hard by her sister, Lizzie ran as best she could, but the man gained on them fast, fueled by his anger and pain. He grabbed at Lizzie’s hair, and Jay turned, clawing and pounding at him, causing him to lose his grip.

“Run, Lizzie, run!” she screamed.

The man laughed as Jay continued to try and fight him. Bear-hugging her from behind, he carried her off back into the woods, kicking and screaming.

For a split second, Lizzie stared after them, torn, legs shaking. Pain and nausea tried to make itself known. She glanced down. An unnatural bulge swelled beneath her flesh, and she knew she couldn’t fight the man with one arm. Terrified for Jay, she forced herself to run and not look back.

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty Years Later

July

Corona County Desert, Valle Luna, Arizona

The victim was male and appeared to be middle aged, gray hair at his temples. He was on his back, the bottom half of his body nude. His genitalia were bloodstained, and a single bullet hole marked his forehead. His hands were already bagged in brown paper bags to preserve any forensic evidence under the fingernails. The bags were sealed just below wrists purple with ligature marks. He had been bound very tightly by his killer.

Newly appointed homicide detective Erin McKenzie pulled off her silver-framed Revo sunglasses and tucked them into the collar of her sleeveless silk blouse. She wiped the sweat from her brow and didn't know whether to blame the desert heat or her nerves for the flush of perspiration she was feeling. It was her first week in Homicide, and she hadn't expected to get assigned to such an important case so soon. She could tell by the silent, wary glances her way that the two male detectives at the scene were in the dark as to what she was doing there.

She had only been briefed a short time ago herself and didn't know the full details of the case yet. Martin Stewart, the older of the men, was staring her down. She knew the overweight detective by reputation but had never been properly introduced. Taking the bull by the horns, she walked over.

"Good to meet you, Detective," she said, matching her colleague's stare with one of her own.

He looked away first and started coughing wheezily. He wasn't happy about her presence, that much was evident. It was a different story with the younger detective. Jeff Hernandez was a friend from earlier days at the Academy and knew she was one of the most credible vice officers in the department.

On his knees next to the DOA, he looked up and met her smile, pulling down his surgical mask to do so. Casting a glance in Stewart's direction, he said, "Just ignore him. He's pissed because you're invading his crime scene and because he quit smoking last week. How are ya, Mac?" He let go of his mask and it snapped back into place.

"I'm not here to step on anyone's toes." She knelt next to him, and they both glanced toward the red-faced man scowling and leaning against the Valle Luna P.D. crime scene van.

"He's pretty much an asshole all of the time," Jeff said. "Don't take it personally."

"I'll watch my step." Erin laughed softly. Stewart was obviously a lost cause, and she didn't want to get into a pissing contest with him over territory. She knew she was being thrown into their turf, and the fact she was female didn't help matters any. She tucked one hand into her black slacks. "So, what have we got here?"

"This poor bastard was one Jonathon Bale. Got I.D. from the wallet we found in his pants over there." A pair of expensive-looking tailored pants lay next to the body, turned inside out with the underwear exposed as if they had been pulled off quickly. "Fifty-two-year-old from Scottsdale, married with two adult sons. Wealthy business owner. One prior for a DUI two years ago."

"Who found him?" Erin put her shades back on. It was two in the afternoon, and the desert sun pierced her eyes.

They both stood and moved away from the stinking body.

"Fourteen-year-old kid was out this morning riding his dirt bike." Jeff yanked the sweltering mask from his face and tossed it into the van, audibly drawing a deep breath of the fresher air. "Looks like number three."

"You do know what he means by 'number three,' don't you?" Stewart asked in a not-so-friendly tone. Without waiting for her to respond, he explained, as if talking to a slow learner, "You do know

about the serial killings, don't you? This guy makes *numero tres*." He held up three stubby freckled fingers just in case she needed to count them in order to understand.

Erin took a breath in through her nose, controlling her flaring temper. She hated assholes like this, who spoke to her as if she were a little girl. "Yes, I am aware of the recent killings."

Stewart puffed out his chest. "Well, then I guess you know that Hernandez and I are assigned to those cases and to this one as well." *Aha. So there it is. Territory. He might as well lift his leg and pee on the dead body.*

"Yes, I'm aware of that, also." She knew what he wanted, complete acceptance from her that they called the shots.

Stewart folded his arms above his belly. It was like a standoff at high noon. Erin almost waited for a tumbleweed to roll slowly by to add to the effect. It occurred to her that Stewart didn't seem to know she'd been assigned to the case as of this morning. From the way Jeff was smiling, she suspected he had some idea. Either that, or he was merely enjoying the banter between his colleagues.

She decided to lay her cards on the table for the both of them. "As of today, gentlemen, I have been assigned to the serial killings as well."

"No fucking way," Stewart erupted. He began pacing like a mad dog and mumbling to himself.

"I need to get up to speed pretty fast." Erin directed her comments to Jeff. "I need to know everything that's entailed in these killings. So I'm counting on you to fill me in on the details."

This stopped Stewart in his tracks. "Well no shit, Miss Fancy Pants! We're all wanting to know everything there is to know!" A throbbing vein on his forehead pulsed at her.

Erin glanced down at her pants. *Fancy Pants?* They were nice pants, but she wouldn't call them fancy. Jeff caught on, laughing at her gentle mockery of the clueless Stewart.

"Look. All I was told is that I'm going undercover on this case," she said. "That's as much as I know at this point."

Stewart stopped pacing and looked from her to Jeff, the slow-creaking wheels of his brain working loudly. "Adams?" he muttered almost to himself.

Some of the color drained from Jeff's face. "No way."

"Who's Adams?" Erin asked.

Stewart laughed heartily. "Holy shit. She'll eat this little tart alive." He walked away toward an approaching black coroner's van, mumbling, "'Bout fucking time."

Jeff stared off into the distance in silence.

"Jeff, who's Adams?" Erin asked him softly.

"Our main suspect in these killings."

Erin was slightly shocked. "A woman?" She looked over at the mutilated body. The killing seemed angry, violent, and very personal. "A woman did that?"

"Yeah, we're pretty sure. And she's flaunting it in our face too. Only we can't get anything to stick to her."

"Well, I have to admit that going in after a woman doesn't sound so bad." Her mind eased a little at the thought. At least she wouldn't be throwing herself at some horrible man who would try to screw *her* while she tried to screw information out of him.

Jeff laughed a little. It was a nervous laugh. "Listen, Mac, this is no ordinary woman. She's as cunning as they get, and I'm betting she doesn't have a conscience bone in her fantastic body."

Erin scoffed at his reference to the woman's body. She had never heard him talk like that about a female.

Picking up on her reaction, he said, "Yeah, she's good looking. Hell, she's gorgeous. And uses it to her full advantage. But there's a cold heart beating underneath that hot package, and if I'm right," Jeff paused on a sigh, "the team is going to send you in as bait."

Erin recoiled at the statement, completely thrown. "Bait?" She shoved her hands nervously in her pockets. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

Jeff grinned. "She's a lesbian."

Erin shook her head. To think, she had kidded herself into believing that she wouldn't have to prostitute herself on this undercover assignment, that she had been chosen for her skills this time. Why did she always have to seduce someone in order to get information out of them?

"This is crazy. How am I supposed to bait a woman?" *What in the world do they expect me to do?*

Jeff eyed her with obvious appreciation. “Trust me, Mac, what you got, she’s gonna want.”