

**SAMPLE OF**

*Mad Money & Murder*

A Pond Investigations Mystery

Book 1

Jenni Stand

A  
POND INVESTIGATIONS  
MYSTERY

Published by Laughing Owl League LLC

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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MAD MONEY & MURDER  
by Jenni Stand

For further information, visit [laughingowlleague.com](http://laughingowlleague.com)

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### **Dedication**

I dedicate this book to my wonderful husband and daughter, Rob and Katy, for both their support and someone to bounce ideas off as I work my stories out.

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To my neighbor, Stacey, I made sure a certain word was spelled correctly. You know, the Irish way.

To Cindy at Office Depot, you can read my book now.

### **Location Notes**

Restaurant note: While the restaurants mentioned in this book are real, the employees and situations I created for my series are not.

The Bijou was a real movie theater. It offered a full menu, wine and beer list, besides the traditional movie theater fare. Sadly, it closed before I got to see a movie there. I've continued as if it still exists. This is a work of fiction, after all.

## Chapter One

“I quit!” Elizabeth Susan Pond said aloud for the first time.

Liz stared down into the murky, receding waters of the San Antonio River below her. She and her lifelong best friend were standing on one of the many limestone footbridges connecting the walking paths that made up the historic San Antonio River Walk.

“What?” Pam Whitlow asked.

“I quit. I’m not going to be a private investigator anymore,” Liz replied, studying her reflection in the river water. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. She looked tired. The dark circles under her green eyes were obvious, even in her distant reflection.

“What? Why? You can’t. I won’t let you.” Pam crossed her arms. Her long, striped, knit sweater swished around her knees. Her long brown hair flowed around her shoulders.

Liz smirked at the woman she loved like a sister, and she may as well be since they were born on the same day, in the same hospital, only one room apart. “And how are you going to stop me? Stopping someone from doing what they want isn’t very Zen of you.”

“You’re right. But stopping someone from making a huge mistake is. You found what you love to do.”

Liz opened her mouth to interrupt.

Pam held up a finger to stop her. “Normally. I was going to say that. Normally, you love your work. And you’re good at it. Great at it. People dream of being that lucky.”

“Yes, I know. And fine, I’ll admit it, I’m good at it, but Regina Masterson...” Liz turned back to look at the river, wiping away the single tear as it rolled down her cheek. The memory of her last case, her first real failure as a private investigator, brought tears to her eyes.

Pam's voice softened. "Regina would have been grateful that you found her body for her family. You started looking for her, even when the police saw no reason to believe anything was wrong. You did right by her, regardless of the unfortunate outcome."

"I know, you're right. I keep telling myself that, but it's not been enough to get me back into the office."

"Of course, I'm right. I'm the wise one in this friendship, remember?" Pam teased, bumping Liz's shoulder with her fist. "And you should, you know. Get back into the office, I mean."

Liz filled her lungs deeply, released a loud rush of air, and resumed staring down into the dark waters below. It was that time of year again. Every January, the waters were drained from sections of the man-made river that ran through the heart of San Antonio, Texas. The sophisticated lock system designed to help prevent flooding when it rained needed routine maintenance. While the water was drained and filtered, the concrete riverbed and locks received a thorough cleaning and inspection, and any necessary repairs were completed. Locals had even created a weeklong party to celebrate the annual event, called the Mud Festival. Complete with a king and queen, a mud pie-eating contest, and a pub crawl of the many bars and pubs along the River Walk. A wide banner hung high between two tall cypress trees bordering the river, advertising the festival to begin the following Sunday, the day the waters returned.

Liz enjoyed this time of year. Since she lived, worked, and jogged next to the San Antonio River, she appreciated the city's efforts to take care of the landmark. This year was different, though. Liz was too distracted to enjoy either the annual draining or the preparations for the upcoming festivities.

"Liz?"

Her best friend's voice drew Liz back to the conversation at hand. "You don't understand. I've lost all faith in my investigative skills. Look at me! I'm a trained and licensed private investigator with a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice, and neither helped me find Regina before it was too late!"

"No one blames you for that. No one expects you to be perfect. And no one has a perfect record! Regina's parents don't blame you, do they?" Pam asked, placing a hand on her hip.

Liz could feel her friend's firm gaze on her as she shook her head. "But that doesn't stop me from feeling guilty. Right now, I don't feel like I could locate a ream of paper in an office supplies store without a map. And that's just part of my worries!"

She pushed away from the cool limestone parapet of the bridge. The pair of friends walked off the stone footbridge in front of her building and turned left. It was early evening and the Walk was busy. The crisp January night wasn't keeping people from enjoying a diverting night out at the bars. Someone bumped into her, and besides an offhand, "Excuse me," Liz's disappointment came to the forefront, because she *saw* nothing. And therein lied her other problem.

Aside from being a trained private investigator, Liz had another skill, one she was born with. Elizabeth Susan Pond was a psychic. As she grew up, she learned the names of her various paranormal abilities. Clairvoyance allowed her to see the future and the past, while psychometry enabled her to know the history of an object. She also had a smidge of empathic ability, a skill that helped her sense the emotions of the people around her. Even to Liz, this sounded unbelievable. But she stopped fighting disbelief in her abilities a long time ago. As a rule, Liz didn't tell anyone. She could count the number of people who knew about her unique talents on

one hand. Five. That was all the people who knew her deepest secret, including the woman beside her.

“You still aren’t *seeing* anything?” Pam whispered after they broke free of the crowd.

Liz shook her head. “Nothing. Meditation isn’t helping, mostly because I can’t do it.”

“What do you mean, you can’t do it? You’ve been meditating since we were kids, when Aunt Audrey figured out it could help with your visions.” Pam’s voice dropped to a whisper with that last word.

“I mean, I can’t do it. Every time I close my eyes—” a shudder spread across Liz’s shoulders, “—all I see is what I saw the night we found Regina. The barn, Regina dead on the floor, and candles everywhere. I’ve thrown out all my candles. I can’t stand the smell or sight of them anymore.”

Pam cringed at the description. “I can’t imagine. Are you still having nightmares?”

Liz nodded. Nightmares for someone like Liz were especially torturous, since sometimes they came true.

“So, you aren’t *seeing* anything. Nightmares are the mind’s way of helping you deal with trauma. You can’t meditate. Wow! Let’s tackle this one at a time. First, I know it’s weird for you not to have your—” Pam paused as a large group passed them. “—*crocheting* work anymore.”

Liz looked at her friend, her eyebrows crinkled, then she remembered. *Crocheting* was the word they used when they were kids whenever they talked about her visions in public. She smiled at her friend.

“You’ve been very stressed for the past month, and everyone knows how stress can affect all kinds of things in the human body and mind. Maybe, just maybe, for you, stress can also affect your *crocheting*.”

More people bumped into them as they walked.

Liz's bottom lip popped out as she considered the idea. "That's reasonable."

"As for meditating, you have access to not one, but *two* yoga and meditation teachers. Your mom and I can help you overcome this hump. You don't have to close your eyes to meditate. You can simply focus on a single object, or even a blank wall. I've never done it, but I'll find information on it, and we'll learn it together. What's next?"

Liz smiled at her friend's direct approach to problem-solving. "Work. I'm considering a career change. Maybe focus on my locksmithing job instead? Part-time brings in extra money, and the change to full-time wouldn't be that difficult."

"One tragic case doesn't mean you should give up what you enjoy doing. You've told me you've never fully relied on your, um, other skills in your investigations, so you can still do the work. Except, of course, when you go after one of your hobby cases."

The mention of her hobby cases brightened Liz's face. Even though she had lived her whole life with ESP, she was a dyed-in-the-wool skeptic. She had met no one like herself in all her twenty-eight years. The "psychics" she came across were frauds. Nothing more than criminals milking innocent people of their life's savings and trust. This infuriated Liz. If a client came through her door, talking about how they were bilked by some con artist claiming to be psychic, Liz took the case pro bono.

"I would miss taking down those criminals."

"I'm sure. And the victims appreciate your hard work on those fraud cases. Let's put a pin in that for the moment. What would you call this new locksmith endeavor?"

"Pond's Locks?" Liz offered weakly.

"Dr. Pick!" Pam grinned brightly.



Liz laughed. “That sounds more like a banjo-playing dentist!”

“Pond Security? Nah, that sounds like a bodyguard company. No one would believe you as a bodyguard, even with your boxing skills.” She dismissed her own suggestion before Liz responded.

“Pond’s Picks?”

“That’s a good one!” Pam raised her hands, as if she was framing it on a billboard.

“Pond’s Picks. You lock it. We pick it!”

“That sounds like a tongue twister!”

The two friends tried saying it five times fast. They both failed miserably, laughing at their failures. Memories of reciting tongue twisters when they were little girls flowed through Liz’s mind. Of course, then, there was usually a mouthful of crackers involved.

As their laughter subsided, Liz looked around, noticing that the crowds had thinned. The pair passed under the Presa Street bridge and stopped.

“Wow!” Pam and Liz said in unison. They were standing in front of the newest addition to the River Walk, a new hotel.

Liz’s eyes followed the beams, admiring the handiwork. She respected the people who created a building like that—everyone involved, from the architect to the construction crew. The ability to go from an idea to a completed structure fascinated her. “I hear they are getting a five-star chef to run the restaurant,” Liz commented, not taking her gaze off the structure.

“Really? I’ve heard they are creating this whole Zen garden greenhouse experience on half the roof next to the pool!”

“Cool. I can’t wait to explore during the grand opening!”

As local business owners, they were invited to such events, especially along the River Walk. While Liz had her investigation company, Liz's mom, Audrey, and Pam co-owned the popular yoga studio called Alamo Bells Yoga next door.

"Me too! Brrr! I'm getting cold," Pam commented, turning away from the skeletal structure.

"It's dropped a few degrees since we started our walk, that's for sure." Liz crammed her icy hands into her jacket pockets as they walked past Marriage Island, a tiny heart-shaped islet in the river that has hosted many unions. Tall trees hid the night sky, but with thousands of twinkle lights dangling from the branches along the river, it was easy to imagine you could see the stars.

"Do you want to go up and over or keep walking?" Liz asked as they wandered in the direction of the next bridge.

As she walked along, something in the river—what remained of the river, anyway—caught her eye.

"What's that?" she spoke aloud, as curiosity got the better of her.

Liz stepped off the sidewalk onto the limestone gravel, passing metal planters and solar lights. A black chain attached to decorative wrought-iron posts created a safety line under the bridge's shadow—the city's way of keeping pedestrians from tumbling into the river. Liz stopped at an opening in the low chain fence and looked down into the riverbed. The water was much lower now and vertigo threatened Liz's balance as she leaned precariously over the edge.

"What *is* that?" she repeated as she crouched down.

"Probably another coffee maker, like last year. I'm freezing. Let's go up and over. We can make hot chocolate at your apartment."

"Just a second."

The waters continued to recede as she watched. The cold air settled around Liz in her stillness.

A muddy, bloated, deformed face stared at her out of the murk.

A scream lodged in Liz's throat. Liz fell onto her backside in shock, crab-crawling her way to the sidewalk, the gravel hard against her icy hands as she scrambled away from the eerie sight.

## Chapter Two

“Pam, no!” Liz jumped to her feet as Pam stepped toward the river’s edge to look. “Don’t! You don’t need to see that!”

“What’s going on? What is it?” Pam asked, her eyes round.

Liz took a jagged breath before answering. “Wait. Just wait. I have to make sure. Stay here. Promise me?”

Pam nodded, her lips pressed together.

Liz turned and crept back to the edge. She had to be definite about what she saw before calling the police. No muffled scream this time. Just a wave of sadness. Someone’s daughter laid dead about twenty feet below, staring at her with milk-clouded eyes. Her mud-caked blond hair was plastered to her cheeks. Most of her body was submerged in the silty mud on the river’s bottom.

Something else caught Liz’s attention. She kneeled, hung onto the cold iron post with her free hand, and studied the odd-shaped items next to the poor woman’s waist.

It took her only a moment to recognize them. She had a similar set at home. A pair of neoprene-covered barbells were tied to the dead woman’s slim waist with a thin cord. The number displaying the weight, while dingy, was still visible. Each barbell weighed fifty pounds. Someone wanted to ensure this body stayed out of sight for as long as possible. If it hadn’t been for the annual draining, who knew how long it would have lurked below the surface.

Liz’s gaze moved to the woman’s clothing. The color of her dress was almost imperceptible, and one shoe was missing. She realized the dress was, in fact, a uniform. A frigid chill ran down her spine.

“Oh no!” Her hand flew to her mouth as her gaze flicked to the top left of the uniform, trying to avoid looking directly at the woman’s face again. She recognized the logo. She knew who the victim was.

Liz stood up and stepped back onto the sidewalk, taking Pam’s elbow to keep her from satiating her curiosity. Liz looked further down the river at the next hotel they had been about to approach on their walk. The matching logo from the grimy uniform, lit up in glowing red neon, adorned the side of the hotel high above the lights of the River Walk.

“We have to call the police,” Liz told Pam.

“What’s down there? You should sit down. You’re as white as a sheet!” Pam attempted to lead Liz to the stone bench nearby.

Liz refused to move while she dialed 911 on her cell phone, keeping her eyes on the San Antonio River Suites logo, the body of Brittany Cabot out of sight behind her. “Hello? I have to report finding a body.”

“What?” Pam gasped as her hand flew to cover her mouth.

Liz tightened her grip on her friend’s elbow to keep her from moving. “Yes, I’m sure. She’s in the San Antonio River. She’s under the Navarro Street bridge.” A pause. “My name is Liz Pond.” Another pause. She recited her cell phone number.

The dispatcher’s reassuring voice came through the speaker. “I’ve dispatched a squad car to your location. Are you all right? I can stay on the line with you while you wait.”

A grim smile crossed Liz’s lips, even though the dispatcher couldn’t see it. “No. I’ll be fine. I have a friend with me. But thank you.” Liz hung up and turned back to her friend.

“A body, really?” Pam looked slack-jawed toward the gap in the iron chain.

“Yes. Please, you don’t want or need to see it. Trust me.”

Pam shook her head, even as she couldn't take her gaze off the gap in the chain, knowing what was beyond. "I'll take your word for it." Pam returned her focus to Liz. "Are you okay? You're still dealing with the effects of the *last* body you found."

Liz nodded, hugging her arms around her chest. She rubbed her arms for warmth. The air around Liz felt colder than it did only minutes earlier. She stepped farther from the edge of the river. And, as a result, they stood farther from the body. Pam followed her without argument.

"I wonder who it is?" Pam asked quietly.

"I already know," Liz answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You do?" her friend asked, her eyes the size of saucers.

"As far as I know, there's only been one staff member who has gone missing from that hotel," Liz pointed to the hotel just beyond the bridge, "and that person is Brittany Cabot." Even thinking about the name caused Liz to experience pangs of guilt. "Her roommate, Rosemary, asked me to look for her when she disappeared in early December. I couldn't take the case, though." Liz paused.

"Because you were already working on Regina Masterson's missing person case. You did nothing wrong," Pam consoled, rubbing her best friend's back. "You only work on one case of that type at a time. If I remember correctly, you referred her to someone else. It's not your fault the other investigator didn't find her before it was too late."

Liz knew her friend was correct, but that didn't keep the guilt at bay. She led Pam away from the river's edge, putting more distance between them and the gruesome sight below. After only a few minutes of waiting, Liz was shivering. The temperatures weren't so bad, but standing still reminded Liz that it was still winter, even in Texas.

Bouncing on her toes to stay warm in the cold January night air, Liz pulled her thin green jacket tighter around her torso, hugging herself with her arms tight across her chest. She looked over at Pam and saw her friend mirroring her movements in an attempt to get warm.

“I hear sirens,” Pam commented through chattering teeth.

“I hope they’re for us.”

A young couple approached the friends, their arms around each other as they walked, hands in each other’s back pockets. Their heads were down and almost touching. They were so engrossed in each other that they ignored Liz and Pam.

“Hurry up!” Liz said out loud as the sirens continued to echo among the buildings. The words came out louder than she expected.

The young couple stopped and turned toward them.

“Excuse me?” the young lady asked, attitude in each syllable. Her fingers tapped on her left hip with three-inch-long acrylic nails painted bright fuchsia.

Liz raised her hand with a smile of apology. “Sorry, I was talking to my friend.” She gestured to Pam. “Our friends are taking forever to get here.”

The young man smiled at Liz and Pam, running a hand through his dark, close-cropped hair. “Are you okay waiting by yourselves?”

His girlfriend’s jaw dropped as she turned on him.

“I can’t believe you’re hitting on her! Or is it the skinny one?” She gestured to Pam with a jerk of her head. She crossed her arms, tapping her foot on the sidewalk.

Liz could swear flames shot out of the young woman’s eyes.

The poor young man stammered, “No. No, baby, of course not. I was just being polite. You know I’d never do that to you.”

The angry young woman spun on her heel and stomped away, not glancing at Liz and Pam again.

The boyfriend looked at the two women. “Will you really be okay waiting? We can wait with you.”

Liz shook her head.

Pam smiled. “We’ll be fine.” The sirens were getting closer. “Our, uh, friends will be here soon.”

Liz nodded. “Yes, thanks. You better get going. Oh, and good luck!”

The young man relaxed and gave them a crooked smile. “She’s not that bad. Just jealous over, well, everyone.”

“Matthew!” The screech echoed from beyond the Navarro Street bridge.

He waved and turned. “I’m coming!” he called out.

Liz smothered a giggle as she turned to Pam. “Poor guy. He is *so* running in the *wrong* direction.” She could hear them arguing, his voice deep, hers shrill, their voices faded as they got farther away.

Pam snickered as she let out a quick breath of air. “Whew, I was worried they’d see the body! Can you imagine?”

Liz shivered as she nodded. “I know I wouldn’t want to be the one dealing with her if she had an *actual* reason to be upset.”

Sirens drew her attention to the street overhead. Red and blue lights flashed off the buildings and through the stone parapet of the bridge above.

“Whew!” Relief washed over Liz. The police were there.



An officer stuck his head over the edge. “Are you the person who called the police?” he called down.

“Yes.” Liz waved.

“Be right down.” The officer disappeared from sight.

A few moments later, she saw the tall, uniformed officer emerge from the bottom of the stone staircase next to the bridge. His gleaming white teeth flashed brightly against his dark skin as Liz and Pam approached him under cover of the dimly lit bridge.

Liz held out her hand. “Hi. I’m Liz Pond, and this is my friend, Pam Whitlow.”

At least six inches taller than Liz, the handsome officer accepted her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze in greeting. “Officer Marcus Sanders,” he replied. “Wait.” He wrinkled his brow and turned back to Liz after shaking Pam’s hand. “Liz Pond. The private investigator?”

Liz’s eyebrows shot up.

Officer Sanders smiled kindly. “I helped on the Regina Masterson case last year. Don’t worry. I won’t be offended if you don’t remember me. A dozen officers showed up at that crime scene, but there was only one private investigator. And, well, a lot happened that night.”

Liz nodded, shaking off the memory of that horrible night for the second time that evening. “Well, sadly, it looks like this missing person’s case didn’t end any better.”

She led the officer to the fence opening at the river’s edge and pointed.

Pam stood near the stone wall by the bench to wait.

Officer Sanders leaned over the edge and grimaced. He straightened up. “So young. What a shame.” His hand reached for the radio handset clipped to the shoulder of his black uniform. “We got a live one here, Mike. Call it in.” A short crackle of static followed when he released the handset.

He led Liz over to stand next to Pam. He pulled a pen and notepad from his chest pocket and flipped the pad open with a practiced flick of his wrist. “From what you said, Ms. Pond, you think you know who she is?”

*Crap*, Liz thought. *No backing out now*. She nodded. “Yes. I suspect she is—was—Brittany Cabot. She worked at the San Antonio River Suites.” Liz gestured with a nod to the hotel past Officer Sanders’s broad shoulders. He turned and looked up. The vivid logo glowed on the side of the building. Stepping over to the river’s edge to take another look, the officer nodded when he saw the same logo that had captured Liz’s attention. He returned to the women.

“Excellent memory.” His pen flew across the notepad.

Liz bit her lip before speaking. “Her roommate approached me to find her when she first disappeared. But—” Liz paused, her gaze drifting to the nearly empty river, grateful she couldn’t see the body from this vantage point.

“But, what?” Officer Sanders asked, his pen poised, his gaze steady on her face.

“But I was already working on the Masterson case. And I’ll only work on one active missing person’s case at a time. I referred her roommate to a different investigator. I don’t know if she ever went to see him.”

The officer jotted down more notes, his pen flew across the small pad. “We can’t save them all. That’s the hardest lesson of police work.”

Liz frowned. “For private investigators too.”

He turned to Pam. “Did you notice anything when you found the body, Ms. Whitlow?”

“Pam, please. And no, I didn’t. I haven’t even seen it. Liz wouldn’t let me after she realized what it was.”

Officer Sanders nodded. “Good. You don’t need that kind of thing in your memory. Trust me. I’ll need your contact information if there are other questions.”

The women each recited their full names and phone numbers for the officer.

He closed his notebook and put it away. “A detective-investigator will be here—”

A high-pitched scream interrupted him. The trio whirled around toward the scream’s source.

“Oh no!” escaped Liz’s lips. The harried young man and his high-strung girlfriend were on the other side of the River Walk, and they’d seen the body. Scream after scream escaped the girlfriend’s mouth.

The sound reverberated off the buildings bordering the river.

Liz squeezed an eye closed and turned her head away from the sound.

“Wow, she can hit those decibels!” Officer Sanders flinched and grabbed his handset. “Mike, we have civilians on the other side of the river. Where’s that backup?” Before his partner could answer, more sirens and flashing lights drowned out the other officer’s response and the young lady’s screams.

“Excuse me, ladies. I’ve got to get them moving before they draw a crowd. Will you be okay waiting here for a minute? The detective will want to speak with you both when he gets here.”

Liz nodded. “We’ll be fine. Please, try to get her to stop screaming.”

“Yes, please.” Pam agreed, covering her ears with her gloved hands as yet another shriek floated across the river.

Officer Sanders jogged back to the stone stairs. He disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the river moments later. A few more curious onlookers had arrived, drawn by the young woman's screams. The officer stood at least a head taller than the small crowd of gawkers.

Liz heard him politely, but firmly, ask people to move along and stop taking pictures. She nodded when she heard him.

"Please, allow the victim some dignity. Don't share those pictures. Just delete them."

In today's age of social media and technology, it would be only a few minutes before pictures of the crime scene were all over the internet, and not long after, the news.

Officer Sanders finally reached the young couple and the first request out of his mouth was: "Please! Stop screaming!" loud enough that even Liz and Pam could hear him.

The young lady was so shocked at the officer's demand, she stopped screaming immediately. "Oh my!" she said, turning her tear-streaked face to his stern one. "Will you please take me home? I just can't handle this!" She placed a manicured hand gently on his arm.

Liz snorted.

Pam giggled.

The officer gingerly removed the woman's hand from the black sleeve of his uniform.

Her bottom lip puffed out in an obvious attempt at a sexy pout.

He looked at the nervous young man next to her. "Cadet?" Marcus Sanders asked with all the force of a drill sergeant.

The boyfriend jumped to attention and stopped the movement of his right arm mid-salute. "Yes, sir!" His arms snapped straight to his sides.

Officer Sanders's lips twitched. "Are you responsible for this young lady?"

"Yes, sir!" the cadet replied, still at full attention, chin up, eyes forward.

“Make sure she gets safely home, then!”

“Yes, sir!” The young man saluted this time. He grasped his girlfriend’s taloned hand and dragged her reluctantly away from the officer.

Officer Sanders shook his head.

More uniformed officers arrived to break up the growing crowds on both sides of the river.

Officer Sanders returned to Liz and Pam. “I can spot a cadet at fifty paces. You two were no help, though,” he commented under his breath.

“I’m sorry,” Liz apologized. “If you’d seen that couple earlier, you’d laugh too. Let’s just say a double standard is alive and kicking in their relationship.”

Pam muffled a giggle.

Liz’s gaze drifted across the river now that the screaming had ceased. Dozens of people were milling around the river’s edge. Some were taking pictures, some with their mouths covered in shock. One person stood out, though. It was Rosemary Travers, the victim’s roommate. It didn’t look like she’d noticed Liz.

Rosemary whispered into the ear of a man next to her. They moved through the crowd without a second look at the grisly scene.

Liz watched them leave as more uniformed officers arrived to secure the scene. Bright yellow police tape was draped across the sidewalk, drawing onlookers like flies to honey.

Officer Sanders drew the ladies into a hushed conversation about the upcoming mud festival and a debate over which bar would win the “mud pie”-eating contest ensued.

Liz knew it was the officer’s attempt to take their minds off the matter at hand.

It wasn't long before they heard a deep voice demand, "Who was the first officer on the scene?"

The change in Officer Sanders was immediate. He went from relaxed to standing at attention. He raised his thick arm and gestured toward the detective standing under the bridge.

Liz turned in the direction of the wave and saw Detective-Investigator A. J. Sowell striding out of the shadows toward them, his worn brown leather jacket zipped to his neck, the faintest trace of a white shirt underneath.

"Officer Sanders." The men shared a firm handshake.

Detective Sowell turned to her after nodding at Pam. "Liz? What are you doing here?"

"Hi, A. J. I found the body," she replied quietly. A wave of gratitude at the sight of a familiar face washed over her. This was the first time she'd seen the detective since Regina Masterson's funeral. Before that, they'd work together daily for a week trying to find her and her kidnappers.

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that. I'll need to speak with you both. Do you mind waiting over here while I get a handle on this situation?"

Liz nodded and turned to the uniformed officer. "Thanks for your help, Officer Sanders." She smiled up at the tall man, offering him her hand.

"You're welcome, Ms. Pond. Pam." He squeezed each of their hands before stepping away with the detective.

"That's A. J.?" Pam whispered when they were alone.

"Yes," Liz whispered in reply.

"Wow, he's cute!"

“Pam, not now!” Liz rolled her eyes as she chided her friend. She resumed rubbing her arms and shoulders for warmth. Her whole body felt as cold as ice. “Aren’t you freezing?”

Pam shook her head. “I’m cold, but I think I’m getting used to it.” She held her sweater snugly around her torso with her crossed arms.

“Lucky you. I feel like there is no warmth left in my body!” Liz commented, rubbing her legs. As she straightened up, Pam placed her hand on Liz’s forehead and studied her face.

“I think you might be going into shock. I’ll ask someone for a blanket. Be right back.”

Pam left her alone and disappeared up the staircase. Liz watched as officers and crime scene professionals streamed through the area. She overheard someone requesting a ladder so they could reach the body. They were wearing standard black rubber boots on their feet that came to the knees of their blue coveralls, meant to protect both the technicians and the crime scene’s integrity.

Liz watched A. J. speak with Officer Sanders for a few minutes, ending with the pair stepping to the edge of the emptying river. She was grateful that she didn’t have to look at Brittany’s remains again. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind of the body’s identity.

A. J. shook his head and took Officer Sanders’s hand again. The uniformed officer walked away, giving Liz and Pam a last wave before disappearing up the staircase to the bridge above.

Running his hand through his short brown hair, A. J. returned to Liz. “I hate it when they’re so young,” he whispered when he reached her side, the corners of his mouth turned down.

Liz didn’t need her empathic ability to recognize the sadness he felt. She nodded. “Me too.” Liz studied his face while she resumed rubbing her arms for warmth.

“You okay?” A. J. asked. “You look pretty pale.”

Liz grimaced as she looked into his warm brown eyes. “I think so. Just freezing. Pam thinks I’m in shock.”

“Do you want a blanket? I can ask Officer—”

Liz stopped him, placing her chilled hand on the sleeve of his jacket. “Pam already went to ask for one.”

A. J. leaned against the cool stone bench, his gaze moving to the controlled chaos by the river. “You know who it is, don’t you?” It wasn’t a request for information but agreement.

Liz nodded, looking at her hands, “Brittany—”

“Cabot,” A. J. finished for her.

Suddenly, Liz couldn’t control the emotions slamming into her soul. Her hands shook, and her gaze locked on them. *Why can’t I make them stop shaking?* was her last thought before time slowed, her mind spun, and the world went dark.



### Chapter Three

When a thick gray wool blanket draped around her shoulders, Liz came out of her stupor, blinking unevenly as the world around her gradually came into focus.

“Liz?” A. J. was kneeling in front of her, rubbing her shoulders briskly.

She looked around before focusing on A. J.’s handsome face, only inches from her own. *When did I sit on the ground?* She thought, but out loud, she asked, “A. J.? What happened?”

He stopped rubbing her shoulders, pulling the blanket tighter around her body. One hand went to her cold cheek. “You’re in shock. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Liz shook her head. “No. I’m okay. Let’s do this.” She ran through a quick breathing routine. She felt her heart rate slow, and the mental cobwebs disappeared. Mostly.

A. J. placed a firm hand under each elbow and helped her up.

“If you’re sure.” A. J. kept one hand on her arm.

Liz wiped a hand across her forehead. “I’m good. I promise.” She stared at the blanket for a minute, as if noticing it for the first time. Shrugging, she pulled it tighter around her chilled shoulders.

“Okay, I only have a couple of questions. What were you doing when you found the body?” A. J. pulled his pad and pen from his dark cargo pants pocket. He kept his body between Liz and the activity by the river.

“Pam and I were just walking. I’ve—” Liz gulped, “—I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. Where’s Pam?” A shiver ran through her body under the heavy woolen blanket.

“She’s up on the bridge with Officer Sanders. They threw down the blanket for you. She’ll be back in a minute.” A. J. rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing. “I’m sorry I haven’t called to check on you. Things have been busy at the department lately.”

Liz gave him a small smile. “It’s okay.” Their eyes met.

A. J. broke eye contact and cleared his throat. He glanced down at his notepad. “Did you notice the time when you found her?”

Liz shook her head. “No, but it was only a minute before I called 911, if that helps.” She pulled out her phone and brought up the list of recent calls. She told him the time.

A. J. nodded, stating that he’d get that recording from the 911 central office.

A uniformed officer walked up to A. J. and whispered in his ear.

The detective nodded, mumbled, “Thanks,” and turned back to Liz. “Look, they’re bringing her up soon, and you don’t want to see that. I’ll call you tomorrow. Okay?” He looked around. All the officers were busy as more curious pedestrians showed up.

Liz didn’t argue. What she had seen already was more than enough for her. She started to take the blanket off, but he stopped her.

“You’re freezing. How about you drop it by my office at the station tomorrow? I’ll make sure it gets back to Officer Sanders.” A. J. readjusted the blanket around her shoulders.

“Thanks, A. J.” Liz turned, keeping her gaze away from the river.

Pam jogged toward them from the staircase. “Sorry, the officers wouldn’t let me pass until Officer Sanders intervened. What did I miss?”

A. J. answered for Liz. “She’s in shock and needs to go home. Pam, a quick question. Did you see anything?”

Pam shook her head. “No, Liz wouldn’t let me near once she realized what she was seeing.”

“Lucky you. Are you okay? No symptoms of shock?” he asked, studying her face.

“No, I’m fine. But that’s probably because I’m the only one here who hasn’t found a murder victim twice during the past month.”

Liz and A. J. shared a look and frowned.

The trio walked to the yellow police tape that crossed the sidewalk, holding back the crowd of curious onlookers. A. J. raised it so Liz and Pam could duck under and step to the other side. “Are you okay getting home? I can have an officer escort you.” He placed a hand on Liz’s elbow.

Liz smiled genuinely for the first time since he arrived. “We’re good, but thanks.”

A. J. ignored her response.

Liz straightened up and A. J.’s hand moved to her back. His hand massaged her back in slow circles, distracting Liz.

The detective’s gaze scanned the crowd. “Murphy!” A. J. called out and waved to a tall man standing in the middle of the throng.

William “Mac” Murphy, a local reporter and crime blogger, elbowed his way through the crowd until he stood next to Liz and Pam. “Sowell.” He greeted A. J. with a handshake. “Hi, Liz. I thought that was you. What’s going on?” He nodded to Pam as he pushed his glasses up his nose, pulling out a pen and notepad from the dark leather satchel by his hip.

“No comment,” A. J. answered reflexively. “Sorry, habit. Look, Murphy, I’ve got a lot to do. Can you see Liz and her friend home? Oh, Mac, this is Pam Whitlow.” A. J. gestured between them by way of introduction. “Liz is in shock, and I don’t want them to walk home alone. I’d ask an officer, but they’re all pretty busy.”

“I am not!” Liz argued weakly, even as she pulled the blanket tighter around her cold frame. She looked between the two men and Pam. She could tell she’d already lost this battle.

A. J. ignored her protest, his serious gaze focused on Mac. “And don’t ask her any questions, please. Call me later, and I’ll see what answers I can give you. Deal?”

Liz muttered next to them.

Mac nodded. “Sure, I have your number. Come on, Liz.” He stepped to the side, holding his arm out to allow her to move ahead of him. He shoved the pad and pen back into his messenger bag simultaneously. “Pam, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Pam responded, stepping past the tall blond, blue-eyed reporter.

“But, I...” Liz shivered from head to toe. “Fine!” She gave up. She turned to the detective. “Bye, A. J. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Get some rest, Liz.” Their eyes met.

She nodded as he moved away.

Liz, Pam, and Mac turned their backs on the busy crime scene.

The detective shouted orders to uniformed officers to get the crowds under control, his voice echoed off the buildings behind them.

Their progress was slow as they wove their way through the crowd. Questions flew from every direction when onlookers realized the women had come from the other side of the police tape, but they were left unanswered. Mac pushed his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose again when they finally broke through the crowd to an empty sidewalk.

Liz squinted up at him. “Since when did you wear glasses?”

“Since I was three,” he replied automatically, running his hand through his wavy blond hair. “Oh,” he grinned, “I’m waiting for a new contacts prescription, so in the meantime....” He tapped the frames with his index finger.

“Oh, okay. You don’t need to walk us home, but thanks. Bye!” Liz walked away from him, pulling the blanket up before it trailed on the ground, grateful she could move unimpeded at last.

Pam chuckled as she followed her friend.

Mac hurried, his long strides allowing him to catch up with the pair with little effort. Reaching out, his hand dropped onto her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. “Wait. Come on, Liz. Detective Sowell asked me to make sure you got home.” He tightened the woolen cover around her shoulders. His expression changed to one of concern, and his voice softened. “Hey, are you okay? You aren’t hurt or anything, are you?” His gaze ran over her blanket-wrapped form before looking at Pam.

Liz looked up at the tall man in front of her. She bit back a retort when she saw he was genuinely concerned. “Thanks, I’m okay. Crap. Fine!” A huff escaped her mouth, and a puff of mist reminded her how cold it was. “I found a body in the river. Apparently, I’m suffering from a touch of shock.” Annoyance tinged the last words out of her mouth. She hadn’t meant to tell him anything. Her petulance toward the reporter diminished. “Look, I’m sorry, Mac. It’s been a long night.”

She turned away when she spotted the hotel’s logo over Mac’s shoulder. *Poor Rosemary*, she thought. Liz remembered the victim’s roommate worked in the same hotel and probably wore the same uniform. A wave of sadness washed over her.

“Liz?” Mac’s voice snapped her out of her musing.

“Yeah?” She looked up at him and then around. Relief flooded her body. At least she hadn’t found herself on the ground this time.

“You kind of spaced out for a second.” His jaw stiffened, and he straightened the leather strap of the satchel crossing his chest. “Come on,” he took her arm through the thick blanket. “I promised I’d get you two home. Which way do we go?”

Liz gestured meekly down the river. “That way.” And just like that, exhaustion slammed into her, and suddenly she was grateful for his help. It took all she could muster to place one foot after the other. A yawn stretched her jaw to the point of agony.

Mac matched his normally long stride to Pam and Liz’s slower pace.

The blanket drew curious looks from couples walking along hand-in-hand, but the trio ignored their stares.

After several minutes of walking in silence, the reporter asked, “Liz, are we still going in the right direction?”

“Okay. Just tired,” Liz responded vaguely as a yawn overtook her words. Her eyes watered. And she wiped the tears away with a corner of the scratchy wool blanket.

Mac shook his head. “That must have been one hell of a shock you received. Are we still going in the right direction?” he repeated. He looked to Pam, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, we won’t go up out of the River Walk until we get through Casa Rio,” Pam responded helpfully, taking Liz’s other elbow in her hand.

Liz nodded, not bothering to cover her mouth as more yawning followed the first one. She massaged her cheek, cursing under her breath as more tears flowed down her cheeks. She wasn’t crying, but her eyes always watered when she was exhausted.

“Do you know who it was?” Mac asked quietly.

More yawns. Liz shook her head. “Police will identify her,” she replied when she could finally speak between yawns. *For crying out loud!* She thought, when she realized she just told him the victim was a woman.

A broad smile crossed his face at her slip-up. “It’s okay. I’m going to find out. I promise I won’t ask any more questions. Tonight anyway.”

Liz stopped walking and made a motion of locking her lips and throwing away the key.

Mac stopped and laughed. “You know, most of the private investigators I know *want* publicity. Why don’t you?” He wiped tears away from her cold cheeks with his ink-stained thumb.

A little surprised at the tender gesture, she ignored it. Irritated at not sensing anything from Mac’s touch, Liz shrugged, pulling the blanket tighter about her chilled body.

The reporter’s hand dropped to his side.

“I want my work to stand on its own merit. Not on how much publicity I get. Besides, I don’t know if I’ll be a private investigator for much longer. Dammit! I didn’t mean to say that.” Liz squinted up at Mac. “How are you getting information out of me?”

It was Mac’s turn to shrug. “It’s a gift. Why don’t you want to be a PI anymore?” he asked as they took the bypass behind the white adobe and limestone Arneson River Theatre stage with its well-known backdrop of three stone arches. The arches housed five iron bells, known as “The Hugman Bells,” named for the architect of the San Antonio River. Each bell represented one of the five historic San Antonio Missions, the most famous of which was the Alamo.

Liz fell quiet, biting her bottom lip as they walked, not answering his question until they returned to the sidewalk on the other side of the theater. “I’m...oh, I don’t know. I’m just thinking about making a change. Maybe. That last case...” Her voice trailed off. She knew he

didn't need her to elaborate further. Mac had been at the barn the night Regina Masterson's body had been found, with all the other reporters drawn by the lights, sirens, and calls for backup through their police scanners.

He nodded. "That was a rough one. But how does that affect your career? From what I saw, you did great. The police wouldn't have jumped on the case so quickly if you hadn't found her car the way you did." Mac's eyebrows wrinkled as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with one finger. "I've been meaning to ask you. How did you find her car so fast? It was abandoned in the middle of nowhere."

*A vision. Liz's eyes flew open wide. I didn't say that out loud, did I?*

Judging by Mac's calm exterior, she hadn't. Whew.

"I put the word out with some tow truck drivers I know. I asked them to let me know if they saw an abandoned vehicle matching the description of her car."

That was mostly true. In reality, Liz got a vision while at Regina's apartment when she touched the spare keys to her car. The vision showed the vehicle hidden behind a low billboard advertising the Natural Bridge Caverns. She described the sign to her tow truck driver contacts, and within a day, one of them called her when they spotted it.

Luckily, Mac accepted her lie readily. Nice and simple.

Pam listened to their exchange quietly.

Thankfully, this side of the River Walk was quieter, with fewer pedestrians, while the bars on the other side were overflowing. Music and laughter drifted on the chilly night air. They were making good time, not slowing down until they reached one of the many restaurants along the River Walk.



Liz led the way as they passed the umbrella-covered tables of Casa Rio, a long-standing fixture in San Antonio. Like many food-service businesses along the river, the restaurant had tables set along the river's edge, so their patrons could soak in the river's scenery and the city around and above them as they ate. Strings of lights brightened the exterior tables for nighttime eating and additional décor for the upcoming festival. Brightly colored umbrellas covered each table year-round, and Liz found they gave a festive feel to the River Walk. The only difference for this time of year was the addition of outdoor heaters. Tall, shiny, aluminum propane heaters were scattered among the tables to help keep brave customers comfortable in the cooler temperatures.

Several waitresses called out greetings to Liz and Pam, stopping short when they saw Liz wrapped in a blanket.

Liz returned a small wave, but the movement sent a corner of the blanket flapping. She caught it before it fell into a large bowl of salsa on the only occupied outdoor table.

"Sorry," she apologized to the couple sitting there. The man, who had short, dark hair with a smattering of gray, smiled at her. "It's all right." He resumed his conversation with the woman who was his dining companion. "Did I ever tell you about the time I hid from spies under *that* table? The one with the red umbrella." He pointed to a table at the edge of the river.

A musical laugh floated from the woman. "Oh, Davey! You tell the best stories. You really should be a writer!"

The man shrugged, popped a chip into his mouth, and winked at Liz.

Liz smiled sleepily and turned away, wondering if the man was telling the truth. If her abilities were working, she'd shake his hand in a heartbeat to satisfy her curiosity and see if he

was telling the truth. If her psychometry returned, she planned on sitting at the table he mentioned.

A teenage server, wearing black slacks, a bright white blouse, and a black server apron tied around her slim waist, an order pad in hand, stopped next to Liz. “Hey, are you okay, Liz? Pam?”

Liz smiled sleepily, rubbing her aching cheek with the blanket. “I’m fine, thanks. Tell the others that I’m okay, please.” As more restaurant staff looked her way, she smothered a yawn.

“She’s in shock, but she’s not hurt,” Pam explained gently.

Mac picked a few business cards from the outside pocket of his leather bag. “It’ll be in the paper tomorrow. You can follow the link from my blog.” He smiled charmingly, his blue eyes sparkling. “Ladies, shall we?” He gestured to the stairs on the other side of the restaurant.

Mac and Pam followed Liz as they came up onto Commerce Street. After a few minutes, Mac looked at the tall building to their left. “Hey, Liz, I thought I was walking you home. Do you need to go into the police station?”

The concrete and steel structure that was the downtown substation of the San Antonio Police Department, and a parking structure loomed high above the restaurants nestled on each side.

A yawn escaped as Liz shook her head, wiping her eyes with the corner of the blanket. She gestured across the street, the blanket flapping in the breeze. “I live over there.”

Mac looked across the street and saw a liquor store, its entire storefront nothing but green-framed windows, a dancing neon sign spelled out “Open” repeatedly. Next to it was an open passageway with reddish-brown ironwork filling the top portion of the short breezeway and a popular club with high-arching windows that reached the second story above the double doors.

A serious-looking muscular bouncer stood next to the open doors with a short line of hopeful customers waiting to get inside behind a bright red velvet rope.

“Where?”

Liz put her hand under his scruffy chin to make him look higher. “Up there.”

Sure enough, above the breezeway, there was a door blocked by a short wrought-iron railing, bordered by two tall, thin windows and a bright blue-and-white awning. A large picture window and matching awning filled the space above the door.

“Really? I didn’t know there were any residential spaces in this building.”

Liz grinned. “There weren’t. The building owner was a client when I first started out as an investigator. He made an exception after I helped him out with a problem.” Another yawn escaped. “Excuse me!”

Not caring in her current state of exhaustion, Liz jaywalked across the quiet street to the passageway.

Pam rushed to catch up with her.

The reporter, more cautious, looked both ways before following. Mac trailed behind them through the short walkway. They were greeted by loud music, clinking glasses, and people dancing among the tables, umbrellas, and tall outdoor heaters on an elevated patio just above his head.

Liz turned left at the end of the passageway, oblivious to the bar’s noise, and stopped at the bottom of the open wrought-iron stairs that ran up the wall to her left. “This is me.”

Mac rubbed the back of his head, glancing around them. “Liz, you took me to your office.” He looked around, his eyebrows drawing together. A simple painted, wooden sign adorned the wall next to the gate. It said “Pond Investigations LLC” and included her phone

number. Below that, a doorbell and speaker were mounted onto the stone wall. A tall wrought-iron gate blocked access to the stairway.

Liz gestured up the stairs with her blanket-wrapped hand. “My apartment is behind my office.”

“No way!” Mac looked up. A small balcony and a blue door were at the top of the stairs. A large, brightly painted ceramic sun hung on the wall above the entrance. “I’ve never noticed a second door before.”

Liz fished her keys out of her pocket and unlocked the gate. “Thanks for walking us home, Mac. I really appreciate it.” She held her hand out to him.

He wrapped Liz’s icy hand in his, shaking it and rubbing it tenderly. “Are you sure you’re okay?” He turned to Pam. “Is she okay?”

Pam shrugged, shaking her head.

Liz nodded, extracting her hand. “Nothing that a hot shower and a good night’s sleep won’t cure.”

The ladies stepped through the gate, closing it behind them. Liz still had to look up to see his face from her position on the first step. “Really. Good night, Mac, and thanks again for getting us home.”

“I’m spending the night,” Pam told him. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Liz looked at her friend in surprise. “But you have to work in the morning!”

“I’ll be fine! It’s not like I have far to go for work.” She gestured to the Alamo Bells Yoga Studio next door up a short flight of steps only a dozen feet away from where they stood. Pam pressed her lips together and stared at Liz, unwavering.

Mac grinned at their exchange. “Night, Liz, Pam. Hey, I’ve got to stop by the police department before I go home and write my story. Do you want me to return the blanket for you?”

Liz hesitated before removing the blanket from her shoulders and dropping it to Mac over the railing. The cold cut through her thin jacket like a hundred razors. “Thanks. Tell the desk sergeant it belongs to Officer Marcus Sanders, okay?”

“I will. Night!”

Liz and Pam jogged up the stairs to the safety of Liz’s sanctuary.

## Chapter Four

*Nervous sweat poured down Liz's back as she ran toward the dilapidated barn in the overgrown field. Her focus stayed fixed on the structure. Her heart pounded as her feet struggled to find a footing on the uneven ground, slick with late-night frost. Frozen weeds crunched underfoot. Her gloved right hand moved to the gun holster at her hip to prevent it from bouncing as she ran. Without looking, she knew that Detective-Investigator A. J. Sowell kept pace with her on the run from his police vehicle. The SUV sat far behind them on the other side of an old barbed-wire fence surrounding the untended field. The nearly full moon high overhead lit their path as they ran.*

*They'd only been running for a couple of minutes, but fear made it seem much longer. Fear for the young woman they'd come to rescue. At least Liz hoped they were here to save her, and not—a shiver ran down her spine at the thought.*

*She slowed to a walk. Her breath escaped in white puffs of vapor as they reached the large, open door. Pitch darkness greeted them as A. J. stepped to the right of the oversized opening. He gestured for Liz to go left.*

*Liz nodded and dodged to the side of the doorway. She struggled to slow her breathing, to reduce the visible sign of her location, a trick she'd learned as a private investigator. They still didn't know who else might be here.*

*Fiddling with her right glove as she waited, she pulled back the fastener on her gloved trigger finger to expose her fingertip, freeing it to handle her weapon more safely. She took the gun from its brown leather holster and held her firearm in both hands, safety off, right index finger resting along the cold, dark steel frame of the gun. Just like she did at the shooting range. Ready and waiting. Tonight, its weight in her hands quieted her nerves.*

*Liz and A. J. shared a look across the gaping darkness. Neither knew what they were about to find. They entered the abandoned structure after a final breath of biting, frosty night air, and a nod of agreement.*

*Liz slipped around the doorframe and moved to the left, crouching low. A. J. stayed high and moved to the right, hugging the wall. Liz kept the detective in her peripheral vision as they crept through the dank building. A musty, mildewy smell wafted from the stacks of old straw bales leaning precariously against one wall. Moonlight fell through the open doorway, glinting off the neglected farm equipment around them.*

*The soft hooting of an owl echoed among the rafters. Ahead, lights flickered beyond a row of double-stacked, round hay bales forming a dividing wall.*

*A. J. touched Liz's arm, and she flinched, her nerves on edge.*

*He showed the direction he wanted them to take with a quick jerk of his head. Liz fell into step next to him, wishing they didn't have to go further.*

*This place was quiet. Too quiet. A weight formed in Liz's chest, but she didn't know if it resulted from a concern for herself and A. J. or the young woman they came to find.*

*Liz cinched the zipper higher around her neck, grateful for her warm coat. The chilly December air made each exhalation come out in a puff of soft white cloud, while each inhalation sent a chill through her body.*

*She forced herself to take a few calming, deep breaths. She felt her heart rate slow. Liz didn't want to let A. J. down, knowing she was his only backup. He'd called the station for support when they were still in the SUV, but neither of them believed waiting was an option.*

*The flickering lights grew closer, brighter. The deafening silence was nerve-racking.*

*They hesitated only a moment before they stepped around the stack of bales into the light.*

*“Police! Freeze!”*

*Liz’s shoulders jerked as the command roared from A. J.’s mouth, his voice deeper than usual. Nothing. No movement.*

*She squinted as her vision adjusted to the light. There were candles on paper plates, hundreds of them all around the open space. Some were on the floor, and others rested precariously on bales. There were even some in the bucket of an old rusted red tractor. What in the world is going on here? Liz thought.*

*Her eyes followed the candles briefly until something else caught her attention. In the center of the room, a chair laid on its side.*

*“A. J.,” Liz whispered hoarsely, her throat dry.*

*A. J. turned to face her after checking behind them, his weapon gripped firmly in his hands.*

*She nodded to the chair. They crept forward together, and A. J. took the lead. The wooden armchair would have been more at home at the head of a dining room table. It was dark brown and polished to a high sheen.*

*While A. J. stepped around to the other side of the chair, Liz turned her head, checking their surroundings, trying to avoid tunnel vision. She sidestepped closer to A. J. and looked around the open space, not knowing if anyone was in the barn watching them.*

*She turned back toward the detective. Her gaze started to drop.*

*“Liz, don’t.” A. J.’s voice cut through her focus.*

*Suddenly, he was right next to her, trying to stop her from looking down, but it was too late. Her gaze was already low enough, and she saw the worst thing imaginable for any police officer or investigator.*



*Regina Masterson, the young lady they'd come to rescue. The young lady they'd spent two weeks trying to find laid dead on the ground by their feet.*

*Her wrists were tied to the arms of the chair with rough rope. From the raw scrapes covering her wrists, she had struggled. A lot. Her clothes were torn at the arms, legs, and chest. Blood stained each rent of the fabric. Had she been tortured? Her eyes were wide open, just below the gaping wound in her forehead, the result of a single gunshot. Dark red blood pooled below her head. A single, dark blood line ran down from the wound to the floor. A scream caught in Liz's throat and...*

*Beep, beep, beep!*

Liz sat up in a cold sweat, her mouth open in a silent scream. Her alarm continued to ring as she caught her breath, her hand rested on her heaving chest. Her breath came out in heavy pants. That was the first time in weeks that she'd dreamed so completely about the conclusion of the Masterson case the month before. Obviously, finding Brittany Cabot's body the night before had triggered the memory she had been trying so hard to move past. Her friend's words came back to her. Nightmares are the brain's way of dealing with trauma. *Well, deal with it already.* Liz thought crankily.

Slapping off the alarm, she stretched, knocking her pillows to the floor. The extra blankets she had piled on her bed the night before now felt too hot and heavy. A crocheted blanket and light lavender satin sheets were tangled around her legs. She swore under her breath as she disentangled herself from her bedding.

Sighing, she twisted until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. A yawn escaped her as another stretch forced her to stand. She would crawl back under the covers if she didn't get up.

Groaning audibly, Liz dragged herself to the bathroom. The sky blue and white bathroom décor was soothing to Liz's tired eyes. A note was taped to her oval bathroom mirror. *L-, I've left to get ready for work. Call if you need to talk. Later. -P.*

Leaving the note where it was, Liz got ready for her day.

Before long, Liz was standing on her soft yoga mat in her home studio, dressed in black leggings and a fitted black t-shirt. Barefoot, Liz eased through a few yoga poses to warm up her muscles before her morning run. After she finished, she pulled on thick socks, put on a thin, blue, hooded jacket, and zipped it up. While light, it effectively blocked the cool morning breeze and offered a thin layer of insulation for warmth. She pulled a colorful granny square hat, her mother's handiwork, over her brown hair, tucking unruly strands under the crocheted fabric as she walked over to the shoes abandoned next to the door the night before.

Stepping onto the small balcony, Liz locked the door behind her. Pausing, she propped each foot on the arm of the wrought-iron chair on the balcony and adjusted the laces on her shoes.

The club next door, The No Name Bar, using the humorous slogan "Where no one knows your name," showed no sign of the crowd from the night before. Tables were clean, stools flipped over, resting upside down on the tables, umbrellas closed, and the floor swept. They kept a tidy business.

Liz let herself out of the gate at the bottom of the stairs. Walking up a short flight of metal and tile stairs, she stopped in front of the Alamo Bells Yoga Studio. The darkened windows told Liz her mom and Pam weren't there yet.

Initially, Liz's mom's business partner was Susan, Pam's mom. After she died, her husband, Tom, became a silent partner. Pam worked there throughout high school and later, while receiving her certifications to teach yoga and meditation classes. A few years ago, Tom transferred his share of the business to Pam so she could become a full, active partner.

Liz headed down the green metal staircase to the river level. Zigzagging around tables and chairs in the open space used by various restaurants and shops, she took deep breaths as she crossed the red-tiled common area.

"Morning, María!" Liz called out to the convenience shop owner.

María looked up from the bundle of newspapers in her arms. "Morning, Liz! Did you hear about the body they found in the river during the draining?" The faintest hint of a Hispanic accent in her voice.

"Yes," she replied, jogging in place. Liz bit her tongue. She didn't want to get caught in a whirlwind of questions. Especially when she didn't know if the police had identified the body yet.

María shook her head sadly. "What is this world coming to?" The middle-aged Hispanic woman shifted the bundle of newspapers in her arms, shaking her head of short salt-and-pepper hair. "Well, have a good run, *mija!*"

"I will. Bye!" Liz jogged over and tapped the copper-colored sign pole for the ice cream shop, advertising Texas's favorite ice cream brand, Blue Bell, which she counted as the official start of her route.

She slowly jogged alongside the thoroughly drained San Antonio River. Soggy trash and leaves were scattered among the puddles and mud, but after last night's gruesome discovery, Liz avoided looking too closely. The stone staircase to the street level loomed next to her. She

walked up quickly and continued her slow jog along the bricked sidewalk of the Crockett Street truss bridge. Low, heavy, iron fences protected her on each side, one from traffic, the other from falling into the empty riverbed below.

Gradually increasing her speed, she passed more restaurants and a favorite entertainment location, The Magician's Agency, before turning right onto Alamo Street. Across the plaza sat the most famous mission in Texas, the Alamo. Typically swarming with tourists and the occasional historian, Liz welcomed the quiet sidewalks that running in the early morning hours gave her. The only people she saw at this time of day were employees of restaurants and shops opening for business.

Liz hit her stride before she was through the plaza. Cool air struck her face as her speed increased. The rubber soles of her shoes silently hit the concrete sidewalk. The route she used for jogging was so ingrained, she didn't have to pay attention to street signs or turns anymore. Her feet automatically navigated for her. Even though she didn't look at the surrounding buildings, she knew every location she ran past. Some were historical sites, like the Alamo and the Menger Hotel. Others were restaurants, ice cream parlors, and the Shops at Rivercenter, which was the mall at the head of this section of the San Antonio River. The shortest part of her route finished swiftly, so it wasn't long before she ran down a second staircase and was on the opposite side of the river from her apartment. She could have jogged over the footbridge that allowed pedestrians access to both sides of the river, but there was something about running through the plaza that appealed to Liz's sense of history.

Two staffers carried a table across her path. "Morning, Liz!" they said in unison as they lugged the heavy table.

Liz ran in place as she waited. "Morning, Sarah. Ben."

Typically, Liz chatted with a riverboat captain or maintenance men cleaning trash from the water, but no river meant no boats. Liz's thoughts wandered as she passed yet another restaurant. The scent of bacon, pancakes, and coffee wafted to Liz's eager nose. She fought off the urge to abandon the rest of her run for breakfast. She waved to the hostess, Isabella, at the restaurant door, waiting to greet the hungry, early morning breakfast crowd.

As her run carried her along the River Walk, she wondered if A. J. had confirmed their suspicion about the body's identity. Matching a single set of fingerprints would give him an answer relatively quickly. Identification would take longer if it wasn't the missing girl. However, there was no doubt in Liz's mind that she had found Brittany Cabot last night, but it was only proper that A. J. confirmed it. *At least Brittany's friends and family will have closure.*

And just like that, the roommate came to mind. Rosemary Travers. *Why did she take off like that last night? And who was the man walking with her?* When other people were walking toward the crime scene, Liz found it odd that Rosemary was practically running away from it.

Liz ran along the sidewalk at the bottom of the outdoor theater's semi-circular concrete and grass seats. Unable to fight morbid curiosity, she slowed to a walk when she approached the Navarro Street bridge. Her gaze drifted across the empty riverbed. She saw litter, rocks, the occasional crushed beer can, even a metal chair, scattered among the mud and muck in the concrete basin below. She couldn't stop looking at where the body had been weighted down. Thankfully, the grisly discovery was long gone, taken away by the city's morgue officials the night before. The only sign that anything untoward had happened was the bright yellow police tape tied between two trees on the other side.

An officer stood nearby, sipping coffee from a disposable cup displaying the name of a popular local coffee shop. A. J. must have ordered a watch to protect the crime scene's integrity.

Probably hoping they would find more evidence in the light of day. It was a slim chance. Nevertheless, it was police procedure, and Detective A. J. Sowell was all about following procedure.

Tearing her gaze away, Liz resumed her run to the footbridge past St. Mary's Street, where she crossed over to the other side of the river. She slowed to a walk as she approached the expansive San Antonio River Suites Hotel. The hotel towered fifteen stories overhead, filling an entire city block. Benches sat empty under the shade of tall cypress trees.

Memories of Rosemary Travers stopping Liz at this same spot a month earlier collided with the present, as Rosemary approached, her tear-stained face told Liz all she needed to know. The police had confirmed the identity of the body. It was official. Brittany Cabot had been found.

## Chapter Five

Dressed in a light pink dress with a black server apron tied around her waist, Rosemary Travers threw her arms around Liz. The embrace surprised her, as it was the first time Rosemary had ever hugged her. They'd stopped and talked loads of times, too many to count, and visited over coffee, but their budding friendship never went beyond those chats.

Liz staggered a bit, stunned, both by the force of the embrace and by something else.

She felt a sudden and intense weight in her chest and a brief wave of sadness came from Rosemary.

Just as quickly, the weight was gone. A single tear rolled down Liz's cheek from the fleeting rush of empathic ability.

Liz struggled to keep her euphoria in check at the sudden, albeit brief, resurgence of at least *one* of her psychic abilities. *They aren't gone. They're just waiting*, Liz thought. She forced her mind back to the moment at hand.

Leading a crying Rosemary to a nearby pair of benches, they sat facing each other.

The other woman's distress pushed Liz's concerns into the background. She waited, allowing Rosemary time to collect herself. Liz reached out and placed her hand on Rosemary's arm in support, and to be honest, out of curiosity. Nothing. *Oh well.*

She studied the young woman sitting opposite her. Rosemary's black hair was pulled into a thick braid that hung like a rope down her back. Her mascara ran in dark rivulets over her olive cheeks. She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue she pulled from her apron pocket.

"Liz, do you remember my roommate, Brittany?" Rosemary sniffed loudly. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly while waiting for Liz to respond.

Liz nodded. "Of course."

Rosemary took a deep breath and let it out in a loud, audible rush. Her shoulders dropped, and her bottom lip quivered. “She’s dead. The police just called me.”

Liz didn’t bother trying to fake surprise, but the young woman beside her didn’t notice.

Rosemary leaned toward her. She looked around, but no one was within earshot. “They said she was murdered!” she whispered.

Liz nodded, patting her arm. “I know.”

Rosemary’s gaze flew to Liz’s face. She moved away from Liz, sitting back in the highly polished wooden bench. “You know? How do you know? I just found out a few minutes ago!”

Liz half-smiled at the reaction. “Rosemary.” Liz reached for the young woman’s hand, holding it lightly. “I know because I found her, uh, body last night. I’m the one who called the police.”

Rosemary’s jaw dropped at that bit of news. She pulled her hand away from Liz and grabbed a fresh tissue from her pocket. She wiped her eyes and dried her cheeks. “I don’t understand. Were you looking for her? You told me you couldn’t take the case when I came to you. How?” Rosemary bent toward Liz.

Liz took Rosemary’s hand gently. “Shhh. I wasn’t looking for her, but I found her. The police didn’t tell you where she was found?” Liz’s eyebrows knitted together. *How odd*, she thought.

Rosemary sniffed and shook her head. She wiped away the tears that continued to flow, reaching for a fresh tissue in her apron pocket.

Liz stood and walked away from the benches. Rosemary followed, dropping the massive wad of damp, mascara-stained tissues into a trash can as she passed.



“I found her over there.” Liz pointed down the river toward the bridge just beyond the hotel.

Rosemary’s gaze followed Liz’s pointing finger. There, in the distance, past the trees and curving staircase to the street level, stood a police officer, and more lines of police tape than were there when Liz passed by earlier. Now, most of the sidewalk was blocked.

Rosemary’s jaw hung open. “I walked by here last night. That’s what—?” She shook her head. “I don’t understand. How could she have been there?”

*Rosemary didn’t mention the man she was walking with. Interesting.* Liz turned back to Rosemary and placed a hand on each shoulder. The heavy weight in Liz’s chest returned. It spread quickly to her limbs as the young woman’s sadness, mixed with confusion, flowed through Liz. “The police didn’t tell you anything?”

Rosemary shook her head, pulling out another tissue. “Only that she was found, and they suspect murder. That’s it.” Rosemary stepped closer to Liz. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “What happened?”

Liz took a deep breath, preparing to filter out at least the worst parts of what she saw the night before. They returned to the benches and sat down, next to each other this time.

Clearing her throat, Liz struggled to find the right words. “My friend and I were walking along the River Walk last night while the draining was happening. And—” she paused, gathering her inner strength, “—I noticed something in the water. When I looked closer, it wasn’t a thing. It was Brittany. Brittany’s body. At least, I suspected it was her. The police detective-investigator who came to the scene thought so too. That’s how they identified her so quickly.”

Rosemary shook her head. “I can’t believe it. Do you know how long she’s been there? Do the police know, do you think? How did she get there?” The pretty server seemed incapable

of only asking one question at a time. “Wait. Why did *you* suspect it was Brittany? I’ve watched all the crime shows. I know a body in water doesn’t look great if it’s been there for a while.

Identifying her face couldn’t have been easy.” Rosemary made a gagging expression.

Hating to add to Rosemary’s distress, Liz felt she needed to tell her. “I thought it was her because...” Liz paused, looking around. No one was paying them any attention. The only staff nearby were huddled in a corner, a low hum extended from them as they were all talking animatedly. A busboy walked past, and a server reached out and pulled him into the cluster. There was no doubt in Liz’s mind—the news was spreading.

Liz returned her focus to Rosemary. “I thought it was her because she was wearing her uniform.” Liz nodded at the matching outfit the young woman was currently wearing.

“What?” Rosemary looked down at her uniform.

She looked back at Liz, her eyes huge. She took a sharp breath. “But that means...” Rosemary’s distress turned to barely controlled panic. “Liz. Brittany *always* changed out of her uniform before leaving the hotel. Always! If she was wearing it when you found her, that means she was wearing it when she died.”

The dots lined up for both Rosemary and Liz simultaneously.

“Which means...” Rosemary started as they turned in unison to look at the hotel.

“...she was killed here,” Liz finished for her, her voice dropping to a whisper. Suddenly, the hotel she jogged past every day didn’t seem so inviting.

Rosemary’s eyes were wide when she turned to meet Liz’s face. “But why? And who?”

Liz shook her head, maintaining eye contact. She knew where this conversation was going. “I don’t know.”

“Liz, please. I understand why you couldn’t take the case before...but can you now?”

Rosemary grasped Liz’s hand, her eyes pleading.

“I don’t...” Liz started to decline, but she knew she couldn’t turn her down, not again. She had to know. Would Brittany Cabot still be alive if she’d taken the case? Or was it already too late by the time Rosemary approached her? Liz knew the answers would either make her feel better, or tragically worse, if she discovered that Brittany’s untimely death could have been prevented.

Liz pushed her questions and concerns aside, tamping down her internal doubts about her investigative abilities. She looked Rosemary squarely in the eye and set her jaw. “I’ll take the case.”