

Excerpt: Hidden by Laura Griffin

“Area’s closed, ma’am.”

She turned around to see a bulky young cop striding toward her. He had ruddy cheeks and acne, and Bailey didn’t recognize him.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Trail’s closed off.” He stopped beside her and wiped his brow with the back of his arm. His dark uniform was soaked from what looked like a combination of rain and sweat.

“I’m with the *Herald*.” She unzipped her jacket and held up the press pass on a lanyard around her neck. “We got word about a possible shooting here?”

He frowned and shook his head. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Leave?”

He gestured toward the sign. “This is a restricted area. You’re going to have to step back.”

“But—”

“Step back, ma’am.”

“Okay, but do you know what this is about?” She took her time moving toward the barricade.

“No, ma’am.”

What a liar. “Can you confirm it was a shooting?” she asked.

“You’ll need to talk to our public information officer.”

He corralled her toward the barrier. She sidestepped it and turned around, and the cop was watching her suspiciously, as though she might sprint right past him if he turned his back.

At last, he did. He proceeded up the trail, tapping the radio attached to his shoulder and murmuring something as he went. Probably giving people a heads up that the media had arrived on the scene—whatever the scene was.

The cop reached the yellow swag of tape blocking the path. He walked around a tree and darted a look of warning at her before disappearing into the woods.

Bailey dialed her editor. Max picked up on the first ring.

“I’m here at the hike-and-bike trail,” she told him. “Something’s definitely up.”

“Who’s there?”

“I’ve only seen one cop, but they’ve got the trail barricaded, and there’s a scene taped off.”

“*One* cop?” Max sounded skeptical.

“So far, yeah.” Bailey walked away from the barrier, looking for any other sign of law enforcement. The nearest parking lot on this side of the lake would be behind the juice bar. Maybe the cops had parked there.

“What about a crime scene unit?” Max asked. “Or the ME’s van?”

“Haven’t seen either,” she said, scanning the area as she walked. She spied several cars parked along the street, but no police vehicles.

“Keep asking around,” Max said. “The scanner’s been quiet, so maybe this isn’t out yet.”

Bailey would definitely ask around, but she didn’t see anyone to ask.

“Where are you exactly?”

“The trailhead near the nature center,” she said, “but it’s pretty deserted.”

The rain started again. It streamed down her neck and into her shirt, and Bailey moved faster. Up the street that paralleled the lake was Jay's Juice Bar. She spotted a patrol car in the parking lot. *Bingo*.

As she hurried closer, she saw not just one but *four* police cars in the lot behind the place, along with an unmarked unit with a spotlight mounted on the windshield—probably a detective's car. How had this stayed off the scanner? Someone must be trying to keep a lid on the story.

Bailey surveyed the juice bar. Typically, Jay's had a line of sweaty customers at the window waiting to order smoothies. But today the window was closed. A guy in a green apron stood beside the door, talking to a tall man with a badge clipped to his belt.

"Rhoads? You there?"

"I see a detective," she told Max. "Let me go talk to him."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. I'll call you back."

"Do it soon. I need to know if this is going to blow up the front page."

Bailey tucked her phone into her pocket and watched the detective interview the juice bar guy, who clearly was agitated. He kept wiping his brow with his hand and gesturing toward the trail. Was the man a witness? Had he heard the gunshot? The detective towered over him, watching intently as the man talked and shook his head.

Bailey started to pull out her notebook, but then thought better of it. The detective dug a business card from his pocket and handed it to the man. Perfect timing. They were wrapping up the interview.

Bailey crossed the street, and the detective glanced at her. His gaze narrowed when he spotted the press pass around her neck. Bailey felt his guard go up as she strode toward him. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

She was about to get stonewalled.

#

Jacob watched her coming up the sidewalk. Bailey Rhoads. *Austin Herald*, metro desk. The reporter wore faded jeans and a soaked blue rain jacket that swallowed her. She stepped under the overhang to get out of the drizzle.

“I’m Bailey Rhoads with the *Herald*.” She swiped a dark curl out of her eyes. “And you’re Detective...?”

He didn’t answer, and she pretended not to notice as she pulled a notebook from her pocket. Jacob glanced at her feet. The cuffs her jeans were wet, and she wore purple flip-flops.

“We understand there was a possible shooting at this location,” she said. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“No.”

Her eyebrows arched. “No?”

“We have no official comment at this time.”

“What about unofficial?”

“No.”

She huffed out a breath and glanced behind him, and Jacob was relieved to see the witness he’d been interviewing had disappeared into his shop. He’d cautioned the man about talking to the media, but Jacob didn’t want to take any chances, so he moved away from the door and led the reporter around the side of the building, where he stepped under another overhang.

The woman looked up at him, clearly annoyed. Her skin was wet, and her makeup was smudged. She had dark corkscrew curls, and her eyes were the same pale gray color as the T-shirt under her jacket.

“Detective...?”

“Merritt.”

“Could you brief me on what happened, Detective Merritt?”

“You can talk to our public information officer.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Can’t you give me a break here? We’ll find out anyway. If you could just sketch out the basics.”

“Sorry.”

Jacob wasn’t ready to tell a reporter what was going on. He didn’t even know himself. It was an odd crime scene, which made him antsy. And more guarded than usual.

The reporter blew out a sigh. “Look, Detective....” She trailed off and checked her watch. “I’m on deadline here, and I’ve got to get *something* to my editor in the next half hour.”

“That’s not my problem.”

She gave him a strained smile. “You’re right, it’s not. But could you help me, anyway? Please?”

It was the *please* that did it. And the pleading look in those cool gray eyes. He got the feeling she didn’t usually plead for things. He glanced at her feet again, noting her blue nail polish and silver toe ring.

Jacob shifted his attention across the parking lot to the line of trees. The scene had already been cordoned off, and now they were just waiting for the ME's team. And she was right. News would get out. He wasn't sure how she'd gotten wind of this, but it was only a matter of time before the rest of the media picked up the scent.

"Was it a shooting?" she persisted.

"No."

She looked surprised by his answer and took out a pen.

"About five-fifty, one of our units responded to a call about an unresponsive female near the hike-and-bike trail," Jacob said. "The officers—"

"Wait, 'unresponsive'?" She glanced up from her pad.

"The officers confirmed that the woman was dead."

"Does it look like she was shot, or—"

"That's all I have at this time."

"Okay." She kept scribbling. "And when did *you* get the call?"

"About six-twenty." Thunder rumbled overhead, and Jacob looked up. "You know, we're losing daylight and the sky's about to unleash again."

"Just one more question. Does it appear to be a homicide?"

"You need to direct your queries to our public information officer."

Jacob sounded like a prick, and he knew it, but he really didn't want to get into it with a reporter right now—especially one with a reputation for being sneaky and pushy as hell.

A white van pulled into the parking lot and slid into a space beside Jacob's unmarked unit. A pair of ME's assistants got out, and Bailey glanced over her shoulder to watch.

"I need to get to work," he said.

“But—”

“Contact our press office.”

“Wait. Here.” She flipped over her notebook and tugged a business card from a stack she had clipped there. “Call me if there’s anything else you can share tonight.”

Jacob took the card, even though he knew he wouldn’t use it.

“I’ll be up,” she said. “Even if it’s late.”