

## CHAPTER 1

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IN MY LINE OF WORK, I have seen people die, but I've never seen one put to death. My first thought as I stare at the redbrick entrance of the Mountain View Unit in Gatesville, Texas, is that I don't want to start now.

The Mountain View Unit is infamous for housing female death row inmates. No one is executed here, however. For that, the prisoner will be transferred the afternoon of their date with death to the Huntsville Unit, which is even more infamous for being the most active execution chamber in the United States.

These are disquieting facts for a woman who's been up all night on a Greyhound bus. I look terrible and I smell like it, too, which I'm trying very hard to ignore as I'm anxious and unsettled enough already.

In my line of work—which isn't exactly a real job if you consider I have no training and receive no pay—I normally choose my cases. I can't always explain why this missing person cold case versus that one. Given there are hundreds of thousands of missing

people at any given time, and even more grieving loved ones desperate for answers, I'm always contemplating a tragically long list. I gravitate mostly to underserved minorities, the kind of people who were overlooked in life and garner little to no consideration after they vanish.

None of that completely explains why I'm here now, with bruised eyes and lanky hair, answering an urgent summons by some lawyer who clearly has excellent investigative skills, because I'm not the kind of woman who's easy to track down. I have no mailing address, no property or utilities in my name, and don't even own a real phone. I do, from time to time, use an internet café to post on a message board that focuses on missing persons. That's where I got the note. Short. Desperate. Mysterious.

I've never been good at ignoring mysteries.

I'd left my entire life's possessions—a single roll-aboard suitcase—in a locker at the bus station in Waco. Given that visiting hours in any kind of penitentiary are subject to change, I called the lawyer upon arrival to confirm my appointment. Victoria Twanow sounded almost as tight and anxious as I felt, which didn't help my nerves. She notified me that I was allowed to bring in a single clear bag with up to twenty dollars in change for the vending machines. Why twenty dollars? Can you even spend twenty dollars in a vending machine? Given how much my stomach was growling, I figured I might come close, but then I wondered if the vending machine money was meant for me or for my death row hostess.

It was all too much for my sleep-deprived brain, so I gave up on clear plastic bags filled with loose change and settled for buying a Snickers and a bottle of water while waiting for yet another bus, this one to take me from Waco to Gatesville.

And now, here I am. A fortyish woman in worn jeans, dusty sneakers, and a frayed olive-green army jacket.

My name is Frankie Elkin, and finding missing people is what I do. When the police have given up, when the public no longer remembers, when the media has never bothered to care, I start looking. For no money, no recognition, and, most of the time, with no help.

But I still have no idea what a condemned murderer would want with me.

THE LAWYER, VICTORIA Twanow, meets me at the front entrance. She guides me through the various security gates till I arrive on the other side, blinking under the yellowish glare of fluorescent lights.

“I’ve arranged for a room,” she starts without preamble, already striding forward.

I’d gotten this from her messages. Victoria Twanow doesn’t mess around. She’s a woman on a mission, with a client scheduled for lethal injection in a matter of weeks. In person, she’s younger than I would’ve expected. Mid-thirties, with long, dark hair she has clipped into a low ponytail. She’s wearing a crisp gray skirt and blazer with the requisite white collared shirt. Her concession to fashion seems to be a chunky silver necklace, etched with exotic symbols. Mayan would be my guess. A tribute to her Belize heritage (I’ve Google-stalked her just as much as she’s apparently Google-stalked me), or just a piece that caught her eye? There’s no time to ask, as she sweeps us down a corridor, heading straight for a stern-faced correctional officer.

His expression immediately softens as she approaches. “Victoria.” He nods warmly.

My lawyer escort flashes him a bright smile. They are friends of a sort, I realize. It makes sense. Twanow probably visits this

place on a regular basis. Of course she's come to know the guards, form some relationships.

It leaves me feeling even more awkward, like the new kid at school. My shoulders round self-consciously. I don't like this place, with the glaring lights and overly antiseptic smell. The sounds are too loud and all at once, doors buzzing open, chains clanking, and so many people talking, talking, talking with a nearly rhythmic punctuation of sharp, angry exclamation. I've worked bars in rough neighborhoods filled with loud, drunken patrons one sip away from exploding into a brawl, and it still felt less stimulating than this.

Twanow touches my arm, offers a bolstering smile. "It's okay. Focus on the people, not the place. Believe me, it helps."

Given I'm about to meet a woman nicknamed the Beautiful Butcher for dismembering eighteen men and feeding them to her pigs, I'm not sure how.

The correction officer holds open the door. Twanow breezes through. I follow much more hesitantly.

The room is small and barren. A single table, three molded plastic chairs. I was expecting more of the classic visitor setup: you know, a nice piece of solid glass between me and the convicted killer. This looks more like the basic interrogation room from every police station I've ever visited. Given I haven't always been sitting on the law enforcement side of the table, I shudder slightly.

"This room is for attorney visits," Twanow explains, setting down her briefcase. "If anyone asks, you're now part of Keahi's legal team."

"Kayahee? I thought her name was Kaylee—"

"Focus. Here she is."

A door to the right opens, and a woman with her wrists shackled at her waist appears. Having studied her picture before

coming, I thought I was prepared, but I'm not. Even in shapeless prison whites, Kaylee Pierson is stunning. Rich black hair. High, sculpted cheekbones. Dark, slanted eyes set in lightly bronzed skin that speak to her Hawaiian heritage. She moves with a cat-like grace as she enters the room, powered by a sinewy, muscular presence she makes no effort to diminish. I can absolutely see this gorgeous woman leading men home from bars. And I can also imagine her bulging arms wielding a saw over their dead bodies hours later. A beautiful butcher, indeed.

She pauses just inside the door, studies me from head to toe, then breaks into a grin.

There's no warmth in her expression. It's all cold calculation. If I wasn't spooked before, I am now.

"Hello, Frankie," she says in a low, throaty voice. "Welcome to my world."

"DO YOU MIND?" Kaylee turns toward her accompanying guard. She raises her wrists slightly, and he unlocks her shackles. She winks. He steps back, his expression wary. Based on his response, I'm guessing that prisoners aren't usually shackled for movement around the prison—which makes me wonder what Kaylee Pierson has done to receive such an honor.

"We're all set," Twanow addresses the corrections officer crisply, clearly eager to get to work.

The CO retreats out the door. I take a deep breath and have a seat. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"Did you really ride the bus here?" Kaylee is asking. "We'd have been happy to provide airfare."

"Miss Pierson—"

“Call me Keahi. It’s the name my mother wanted to give me, but my father refused. He had no use for her people or culture. Keahi means fire. A strong name for a baby girl my mother already knew would need to be tough to survive. I went through life with my father’s name. I will go to death with mine.”

I’m not sure how to respond to such sweeping statements, so I go with the highly obvious: “Your mother was Hawaiian.”

“She met my father when he was stationed in Honolulu. Married herself a fine sailor boy and returned with him to Texas. Stupid woman.”

“Your father was abusive.”

“My father was a monster. But I think we can all agree, I’m the bigger monster now.” She grins again, a movement of her lips that doesn’t match the darkness in her eyes. According to everything I read, Kaylee, or Keahi, Pierson, has never apologized for her crimes. Nor has she sought reprieve from the death penalty. Others, like her determined lawyer Victoria Twanow, have filed appeals on her behalf. But Keahi has made no bones about her willingness to be put to death. She killed, and now she will be killed.

I’m so far out of my league here. “What do you want?” I strive to keep my tone as flat as hers and am pleasantly surprised when my question ends with only the tiniest quiver.

“Victoria says you find missing people.” Beside me, Twanow nods. She has a legal pad out and looks like she’s taking notes. Keahi continues, “People no one else is looking for.”

“I specialize in working missing persons cold cases.”

“But you’re not a private investigator?”

“No.”

“Are you a computer hacker, someone who can discover a speck of sand in the desert just by following its purchase patterns on the internet?”

“Don’t even own a smart phone.”

Keahi frowns. “Then what are you?”

“A person with a really obsessive hobby.”

Her frown deepens. “Victoria says you’ve found everyone you’ve ever searched for. How?”

“I ask questions. Lots of questions. Sometimes, it’s as simple as people being willing to talk so many years later. And sometimes, it’s that I’m not the police, making neighbors in certain communities more willing to disclose the truth.” I shrug. “Once someone starts to talk, I make sure I listen. Not enough people do that anymore.”

“How many cases have you solved?”

“Nearly twenty.”

“You brought people home to their families?”

“I brought closure to their families.”

Keahi’s lips quirk. She isn’t fooled by my answer. Neither am I.

“You don’t take money.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not about the money.”

“What’s it about?”

“What do you care?”

She grins at my burst of temper. I make my first realization about my new serial killer friend. She likes anger, feels comfortable with rage. Kindness, on the other hand, is probably incredibly threatening to her. And someone like me, who helps people for no other reason than I want to, must seem like a foreign species.

Finally, we’re on equal footing—both of us are alien to each other.

“They will kill me in three weeks,” she says now, clearly seeking another reaction.

“Do the crime, serve the time.”

Keahi actually laughs. Beside me, however, Twanow has stiffened in distress. Apparently, she cares more about her client’s upcoming execution than her client does.

“We still have options,” Victoria starts now.

Keahi is already waving away her lawyer’s words. “I’m not looking to delay the inevitable. I don’t repent killing those men. Let me out of here tomorrow, and I’ll start right back up again. I’m an animal. Animals get put down.”

Twanow blinks her eyes rapidly, her gaze now locked on her yellow legal pad, covered in scrawled notes. She’s young and idealistic, I think. Maybe that committed to a client she’s had years to come to know, or maybe just that determined about defeating the death penalty. There’s one more element, however, that no one is mentioning: earnest lawyer Victoria and her stone-cold killer client are roughly the same age. In fact, Keahi is probably the younger, scheduled to be executed at the ripe old age of thirty-two. She doesn’t look fresh-faced and dewy-eyed, though. Her beauty comes with a hard edge, lips that might be full but never happy, eyes that are deep, dark pools, but mostly of homicidal intent.

“Why?” I speak up now. I can’t help myself; I’m genuinely curious. “Why did you kill those men?”

“They lied to me. I asked them to never leave, and they did. After that...”

“You picked up strange men in bars and expected them to stay?”

“Bad strategy?”

“Big lie. You knew they’d leave. That’s an excuse for what you did, but not your motive. You wanted something, needed something way more personal than that to butcher eighteen strangers.”



Keahi stills. She tilts her head to the side, studies me all over again. And for just a moment, her beautifully sculpted face loses its cold veneer. Her eyes remain dark pools, but they're no longer sheened in ice. Her mask slips, and behind it...

I have to look away. Her pain is less an emotion than a primal scream. It slices to the bone, too awful to behold. I have seen grief in many forms, but I've never encountered anguish as terrible as this.

"I am empty," she states softly. "When I am standing behind them, holding my knife, knowing their lives now belong to me, I feel less empty. The pulse on a man's neck, racing beneath my fingertips. The feel of his blood, pouring hot and thick down my arms. The last choking sound he makes before crumpling at my feet...I need it. Without it, I would have nothing at all."

Twanow's pen punches through the legal pad.

I decide never to ask a serial killer about her motivation ever again.

"You've lost someone." I've heard enough to fill in the pieces. "You want me to find them."

"My baby sister. You must locate her. I need to know that she's safe and sound. This is my dying wish. You have three weeks to get it done."

She smiles again, triumphant and arrogant, and filled with quiet menace.

I go with the obvious answer. "No." Then I sit back with some triumph and arrogance of my own.