

Excerpt Two

Power outage.

Awesome.

And all she had was the small flashlight.

She continued to scan where her beam reached. The dispatcher who'd taken Mark's call had encouraged Piper to ignore it, said the old man had a reputation for his "elevator not reaching the top floor," suggested she instead send one of the deputies on shift. Piper'd had a slow week and figured she could use a little distraction. This certainly was distracting. A tidy sum maybe stolen and conspiracies involving Democrats—not very likely. She didn't see a soul in the park.

What the hell am I doing here? Looking for spies? The more she thought about it, the more it became likely that Mark the Shark was missing a few of the fries from his Happy Meal. And how many fries was she short for staying out here?

Another sweep with the flashlight.

There was a break in the clouds near the bluff, the full moon poking through. She slogged toward the edge, around a clump of birch trees, intending to stare down at the river, take a brief sodden stroll before getting the interior of her department vehicle all wet. Make sure no one else was in the park. Harry Bosch could wait until tomorrow night.

Harry Bosch would never get a case like this one.

The river was a shiny black ribbon and reflected a piece of the moon. Normally she could hear it, perched even this high above, the sound of it sloshing against the bank, a comforting susurrus. But all she heard now was the angry tat-a-tat-a-tat of the rain.

As a teenager, Piper had loved the stretch along the river, picnicked on the bank with friends—the place called Lincoln Landing to commemorate the spot where Abraham Lincoln set off on a flatboat. This park above was known as Rockport City Bluff. She used to climb these rocks, watch the boats go by; great entertainment for a sparsely-populated county at the southern end of the state. The bluff and the landing below because there wasn't a single movie theater or shopping mall.

What the hell am I doing here?

She'd passed the Plainfield Sheriff's Academy fifteen days ago, meaning she could retain her office. She knew her chief deputy had hoped she'd fail. Had she, he would have been appointed to fill the vacancy. Piper had expected him to retire when she nailed a near-perfect score. Maybe he would retire...but he hadn't yet. And she wasn't ready to push him out. Oren's experience with the department, and with the Rockport police before that, was yin to her inexperienced yang.

But maybe she should have sent him to deal with Mark the Shark. To schlep around here and—

The lightning played erratically high above the river, nature's fireworks. In spaces between the growls of thunder, and accompanying the constant staccato rain, she heard the cry of some night bird, probably complaining about all the water the county had been blessed with. Farther away a horn honked repeatedly.

April showers indeed.

Conspiracies, Democrats, and spies, oh my.

It was a notch more interesting than the steady thread of DUIs—Spencer County's number one ticketed offense. Dealing with drunks and sifting through applications for a vacant deputy position had not stirred her imagination.

She'd delve into Mr. Thresher's complaint, see if there was truth to it or get him to realize his bookkeeping was off. She'd drive out to see him, get the name of his bank, and go there with him to iron everything out. Symbiotic-like. Not much else pressing in the office at the moment, she could help the old man.

Piper whipped around, deciding to call it a night and go home. A dozen steps to the minimal shelter of the birch clump and the toe of her Nikes connected with an exposed root. She flailed forward, lost her balance and her flashlight, and splatted stomach-first, her chin bouncing against the soggy ground.

"Shit," she sputtered, pushing herself up on her knees, spitting a gob of mud out of her mouth. *And two is four and four is eight*, she added. Piper felt the mud soak all the way through her clothes and to her skin. Her right shoe had been pulled off by the root, her sock soaked. The chill was no longer invigorating. It was awful.

Shit. Shit. Shit. She grabbed the narrowest trunk with both hands, pulled, and stood, stomped in frustration and brushed at the muck that was a frosting-like coating on the front of her pants and jacket. The department vehicle wasn't just going to get wet; it was going to get filthy. Too dark to see the roots and her absent shoe, but she saw her flashlight and went for it, snatched it up—that took two attempts because the handle was slick.

"Shit," she repeated turning and aiming the light toward the trunk and spotting the Nike, the toe wedged under a white birch root. Piper retrieved it and froze. It wasn't a root; it was a bone she'd tripped on. She'd seen enough bodies, pieces of bodies, skeletons from her time in Iraq. She was pretty sure it was human. "Holy shit."

She held the beam close, just to be sure, and then panned it back and forth around the trunks. All the rains—and before that the winter's record snow—had turned parts of the park into a slurry-like mix that had eroded. A good measure that had lacked grass cover had slipped away, revealing the roots and the bone.

And on closer inspection the top of a skull.

Piper had been looking for a distraction. But this wasn't what she'd had in mind.