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◆ AN EVIE BLACKWELL GOLD CASE ◆

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# THREADS OF SUSPICION

DEE HENDERSON



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# ONE

## Evie Blackwell

As Governor Bliss came to the podium, Lieutenant Evie Blackwell dug her hands into her coat pockets, grateful the January cold would keep this press announcement on schedule and limited to twenty minutes. His inauguration just the day before had been sunnier and a few degrees warmer. She did her best to ignore the television cameras trained on the podium, knowing she and the other officers on the stage were now in their view frame, and that this clip would run on the local evening newscast.

The governor, at ease with the crowd, spoke without notes. “Thank you all for coming this afternoon. As one of my first acts as governor, I am pleased to announce the creation of the Missing Persons Task Force.

“Led by Lieutenant Noble of the Riverside Police Department,” he said, motioning toward her in the row behind him, “these detectives will take a fresh look at cold cases across the state of Illinois, where a loved one has gone missing, bringing new insights, questions, and ideas to the table. Working

with local police, they will endeavor to find answers and bring needed closure.

“I know when you are waiting for news, any wait is too long. My sister, Shannon, was missing for eleven years. I never stopped searching, I never gave up hope, and through God’s grace and Shannon’s courage, she is home again. We need more miracles that will get similar news to many families. And for those whose missing father, mother, daughter, or son will not be coming home again, so that they will be able to lay their loved one to rest. This is a first step, a good step, toward helping find answers.

“I would like now to introduce the man who leads the Illinois State Police, Commander Frank Foster, for a few brief remarks.”

It was official. For the next two years she would be time-sharing between her current job with the Illinois State Police’s Bureau of Investigations and the new Missing Persons Task Force. Evie caught the eye of her boyfriend, Rob Turney, in the audience behind the press corps and shared a smile. It had been nice of him to take a day off work, fly down to Springfield from Chicago, to be part of her day and this announcement.

The commander’s remarks concluded, Evie in turn shook hands with the governor, stood for photos with the other task-force members, and the event was completed.

Evie maneuvered through the crowd to join Rob. “Would you like to say hello to the governor? I can get us a minute with him before he slips away, if you like,” she offered, sliding her hand into his. Rob had met then-Governor-elect Bliss at the Christmas party of her friends, Ann and Paul Falcon, and had spoken about the encounter many times since. Ann had gotten Evie her job on the task force, as their friendship covered more than years.

Rob considered the crowd around the governor. “I appreci-

ate the thought, Evie, but there will be future occasions when your cases are successfully solved. This signature piece of his administration is going to have his considerable attention. I'll get to talk with him another time."

Her hand tightened on his as she smiled. "I love the optimism. Can you stay for a meal?"

He replied by leaning down, kissing her softly. "Thanks," he said, his voice full of regret, "but I need to be getting back for a late meeting. You'll be getting organized with the new group and I'd just be in the way. I'll catch a return flight with Ann and Paul. Call me tonight. Let me know where you're heading tomorrow. If it's anywhere north, we'll meet up for dinner this week."

She hugged him, and his arms held her close as she whispered, "Thank you." It conveyed a wealth of unspoken realities. Her present job took her back and forth across the state, and she'd just committed to twenty-four months of even more relentless travel.

"You'll do great work, Evie, and make us both proud."

She let him go. She had a marriage proposal from him waiting, an offer that he would make if and when she was ready to say yes. He wanted the permanence of being married to her, and she simply wasn't there yet. But she was thinking more and more about it. As she had scanned across the faces familiar to her at the event, she realized again that his presence mattered a great deal more than any of the others.

As Rob headed over to Paul and Ann Falcon, Evie looked around to see where her group was gathering. David Marshal was the only one not presently in conversation with someone from the press. She moved to join him—a solid guy, comfortable with the attention, and taking it all in stride more easily than she was. She was sure she was going to enjoy working with him,

as his reputation as a New York City cop preceded him. He had come back to his Chicago roots just for this new venture.

“Your guy?” David asked, nodding at Rob’s receding back.

“Yeah.”

“Nice. I’m glad he was here to see this.”

Evie smiled. “You have a girl?”

David returned the smile and said easily, “I do. We’ve been dating a number of years now. She’s still in New York, but is moving back to Chicago soon.” He nodded an acknowledgment to a person in the crowd. “I hear you’re hosting tonight.”

“I hope you like your chili hot and your jambalaya spicy,” she replied with a smile. She was the only one in the group who actually lived in the Illinois capital of Springfield. She had volunteered her home and a meal for their first gathering as a team.

“It sounds perfect for a cold day.”

The others joined them as they got clear of the press. She would have the honor of working alongside some of the best detectives in the state. Sharon Noble in charge, Theodore Lincoln out of Chicago, Taylor Aims from St. Louis, David Marshal back from New York. She hoped to keep up, to pull her weight, to do solid, effective work representing the Illinois State Police.

“How about directions, Evie, and we’ll reassemble at your place?” Sharon suggested. “Besides a nice meal, we’re going to be able to get some actual work done today. This is exciting,” she said, rubbing her cold hands together. They all laughed at her enthusiasm.

Evie gave directions, then added, “The dogs are Apollo and Zeus and love nothing more than to have a rumble with guys. You want to make a friend for life, toss a tennis ball and watch them smash into snowdrifts for the catch. Neighbors on both sides are in Florida for the season, so park wherever the snow-

plows have cut a path.” She glanced at her new boss. “Sharon, why don’t you bring John? Since your Riverside PD will be doing task-force paperwork, shouldn’t he be in on the opening round of decisions? There’s plenty of food.”

“He’s got to meet up with Commander Foster first, but I’ll suggest he come by after that,” Sharon agreed. John Graham, deputy chief of the Riverside PD, would be involved even if not formally. Sharon presently wore John’s ring, and wedding plans were in the works. Evie was hoping to have a few minutes to ask John for wedding-shower gift ideas.

Plans settled, the group dispersed toward the parking lot.

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“Evie, I think your dogs are stalking me.”

She set down the pitcher of iced tea and turned, saw that David was right. The German shepherds were about four feet behind him, both in a hunting stance, intently creeping up on him. She grinned. They’d attack his shoelaces if they could get close enough. “They get bored during the winter.” She walked over and interrupted their hunt, leaned down and scratched behind their ears. “Relax, guys. He’s too big for a decent quarry. Go play with your rope or find your ducks.”

David laughed as they reluctantly headed out of the kitchen. “You’ve got to give them credit for working together.” He dipped himself another bowl of chili, added grated cheese and crackers. “It’s great chili, by the way.”

“Thanks—my grandmother’s recipe. Throw it in a crock-pot, it’s ready any time.”

She dipped out a bowl of the jambalaya and carried it with her iced tea over to the table, glancing at Sharon, who gave a nod to her questioning look.

“I vote we head to the most heartbreaking counties first,”

Evie said, responding to the question at hand. “Douglas County has three missing seven-year-olds, plus a school principal and a grandmother.”

“That county needs to be on our short list,” Theo agreed, writing it on the large whiteboard she’d brought in for their convenience. They had already determined to work county by county, taking a fresh look at cold cases five to fifteen years old. Evie had done a test run of the strategy in Carin County over her vacation last November, and it had worked well. Which county to head to first was the question on the table.

“We will have extra media interest in the initial months,” Taylor said. “We can use that to get the public’s help with certain cases. Those missing in Briar County, for example, cover the gamut,” he added, reviewing a summary sheet. “A wife and two daughters. A college student. A businessman in his fifties. A teenage boy. A private investigator. That’s a lot of human interest in one place, helping keep appeals for information prominent in the news.”

“Not to be too political, but do we want to factor in the likelihood of *solving* the cases into our decision?” David asked, setting down the second bowl of chili and pulling out a chair beside Evie. “Some cases have already had more media exposure, more manpower hours, than others. Clark County has two missing women, both with a history of prostitution. The reality is they likely wouldn’t have been worked as aggressively as the missing seven-year-olds. And if we could solve those two cases, we likely would be able to do the same in adjacent counties, since those kinds of missing persons tend to be part of a larger pattern.”

“Working those could lead to a major arrest,” Sharon said. “Add that county to the short list, Theo. I like the idea of going where there is the suggestion of a larger pattern. What’s the

consensus? Do we want to try for a home run our first time at bat? Or do we play softball while we jell as a group?”

“Attempting a home run first time at bat, you mostly hit air,” Theo cautioned.

“What’s the mood of the locals?” Taylor asked. “Some of these counties’ law enforcement will want our help, while others will be less than welcoming. We’re going to need homegrown assistance. They know the area, the people, and we need that kind of knowledge to run down leads. I’d say we go first where we know we’re wanted.”

Murmurs of agreement came from around the table.

“All three of these counties would welcome our involvement,” Sharon told them. “David, you’ve traveled the farthest to join the task force, so I’ll make this your choice. Which county do we work first? And which case there do you want?”

“Let’s head to Briar County. For full disclosure, I still need to get settled house-wise, and that’s close to where I’ll be buying. And I like the idea of looking for that missing PI. It suggests some interesting work.”

Sharon nodded and continued around the table. “Evie, which case would you like?”

Evie scanned the summary sheet, and it was an easy choice. “The college student.”

“Theo?”

“The teenage boy.”

“Taylor?”

“The businessman.”

She wrote their selections down. “Okay, I’ll take the missing wife and two daughters. Good. We’ve got our opening salvo. We’ll work them both individually and as a group. As we solve one, we’ll double up on the others.” She sorted maps in her briefcase and pulled out Briar County, unfolded it on the table.

The locations where the individuals had gone missing were already circled. “We’re going to be spread out across this county. Evie and David, why don’t you base in Ellis, help each other out? Theo and I will head to Park Heights. Taylor’s in Juno. Let’s plan to meet as a group in Juno on—” she pulled out her calendar—“Wednesday, the twenty-eighth of January, to talk through our progress.”

“Drive or fly?” David asked, glancing at Evie.

“I’d rather have my own car than a rental,” she said. “Roads are snowy, but we could make it there by, say, one a.m. if you want to go up tonight, travel in tandem.”

“I’m for getting there, sleeping in,” he agreed.

Sharon folded the map. “The travel budget is going to accommodate what we need, along with decent hotels. I plan to fly north with John and Theo in the morning. It’s faster to make your own reservations and put in for reimbursement, or you can let the State Police travel staff make your bookings—the number is in your packets. It’s taking about ninety days to get repaid right now.”

“Some things never change,” Taylor remarked with a shrug. “I’ll plan to drive up tomorrow.”

“Good. With the exception of David, we’ve all got current jobs that are going to demand attention too. You get called away, be sure to leave your notes. David, can you handle covering interviews if someone needs to step out?”

“Not a problem.”

Evie rose to cut the pies—she’d bought apple, cherry, and lemon meringue. “The case files, Sharon,” she said over her shoulder, “should we call tonight to get evidence boxes pulled?”

“Briar County is one of a handful that has already retrieved their case files from the archives. The boxes will be with the officers who most recently worked the cases, waiting for pickup.

I'll make some calls tonight and locate workspace for us at these various locations—probably a conference room at the local PD or empty office space. I'll text you specifics as I get them. I don't want us having to work a case out of our hotel room unless that's your choice." Sharon looked around the table.

"What else am I forgetting?"

"You'll handle the press?"

"Only if I can't get a volunteer."

"We unanimously vote that one's yours," Theo replied for the group with a smile.

"I was afraid of that. What else?"

"We're good. Come have pie," Evie suggested after a moment, getting plates out. "We'll celebrate the start of the task force in style."

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## Sharon Noble

Sharon looked around the room at the cops eating pie, getting better acquainted with each other, and felt a deep satisfaction. The Illinois Missing Persons Task Force would do good work over the next two years. In her opinion, the depth of talent in the room was unrivaled. This was her team now, and for the next two years, professionals all. They would get it done.

She had been working missing-persons cases for the last eight years with the Riverside PD and loved the job. She was an optimist—missing persons could be found, or at least closure could be had. Being asked by the governor to lead this task force was a gift, one she was going to enjoy.

John Graham, the deputy chief of police for the Riverside Police Department, and the man whose ring sparkled on her left

hand, had arrived and was in earnest conversation with Theo. She'd be juggling wedding plans with her task-force work, but she'd handled more difficult complications in the past. John had encouraged her to take this on. Everything needed for success was here. Now they just had to deliver on the promise, find some people.

"Sharon, when's the wedding?" Evie asked, coming over to join her.

"We've decided on the twenty-seventh of April."

"A spring wedding. Nice."

"John wants three weeks away for a honeymoon, and I'm considering that idea. I'd rather have two and spend a week of that getting settled into his home. Travel isn't my thing, and for every day away, the piles on both our desks just grow that much higher."

Evie laughed. "A minor negotiation between the romantic and a pragmatic."

"Governor Bliss asked me to pass on his thanks again for your willingness to serve on the team. I don't need to tell you how personal our success is for him."

"I know. I'm going to like the work."

"So am I. The idea of solving what has happened to a mother and two daughters has me itching to get those files open," Sharon admitted with a smile. "Ann said to get in touch with her if you need anything. She's now officially on the FBI payroll as a retired homicide cop consultant, so we can draw her in on whatever investigative work we want while the task force gets established."

"Good. For starters, I plan to ask if she wants to walk around a college campus with me."

"She'll be useful to all of us. Your dogs will be okay with your extended absence?"

Evie turned and saw the two German shepherds watching her guests from a perch on the stairwell landing. “Recently retired military guys on this block take care of them while I’m traveling—basically wear them out with an army version of daily PT. I’m the mom who babies them when I’m home. My dogs get the best of all worlds when I travel.” She’d given them a bath the day before, and for tonight they looked like gentlemen. “I’m clearing out perishables since I don’t know when I’ll be home next. You want oranges, bagels to take to the hotel for the morning?”

“Sure.”

“How about a piece or two of pie?”

Sharon looked over to see what John had chosen. “He’s favoring the cherry if there’s extra of it. He’ll view it as fruit and have it for breakfast.” They laughed, and Evie went to box it up.

*An hour to wrap up here, Sharon thought, mentally listing immediate tasks, let Evie and David get on the road, make calls to find workspaces, and then a quick text to the governor—keep him in the loop as requested.* John glanced over, shared a smile with her. He was her biggest supporter in this new endeavor. *God, you really favored me with a good man,* she mentioned to Him in gratitude.

Balancing work and a personal life when you were a cop took unusual wisdom, and Sharon knew Evie was in the process of sorting it all out for her own life. A young, gifted detective, destined to be Ann’s replacement on sensitive matters for the governor. One of the reasons Evie was on the task force was so Sharon could help get her ready for that role; she was going to enjoy that mentoring role. Teaming Evie with David had been the first step toward that end. David was a great guy. He’d been in a solid relationship for a while, and the dynamics of juggling

the job and dating would be another point of common ground and possibly helpful discussions.

Theo was single, but older than the others here. He dated interesting women but had no plans to settle down to married life in the immediate future. A solid cop with a calm demeanor, he'd spent his career focusing on cold cases, and she was fortunate to have him. She thought he would become the natural linchpin of their group, and others would key off him when their cases were stuck. She knew she would.

Taylor, married with two sons in college, didn't fit any particular law-enforcement pattern, had loved patrol, worked undercover, served in administration, become a detective. Everywhere he went, the departments improved—better morale, quicker response times, fewer citizen complaints, falling crime stats. Sharon had realized after meeting him a few times that he was praying for people around him—simply part of how he operated, doing it with such consistency that he left peace and justice in his wake.

Sharon smiled as she realized they all loved this work. Solving real-life puzzles mattered, and they weren't the kind of cops to give up easily when a case hit a brick wall. They brought a wealth of experience to finding answers. It was going to be a good two years.