

a Bonus Chapter for fans for Karin Slaughter's Grant County series...

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Read on for an exclusive epilogue ...

SIXTEEN YEARS EARLIER

Jeffrey Tolliver looked at his watch. The Tag had been a splurge to congratulate himself on getting the new job in Grant County. He'd bought it from a pawnshop run by a guy he'd arrested a few times for running numbers, and he was beginning to think that the asshole had gotten the last laugh. The watch kept time like Jeffrey's grandfather, a man who had managed to be late to his own funeral; the hearse had broken down. Twice.

You get what you pay for.

"I want you to meet Bill Burgess," the mayor said, indicating an old man making his way down the stadium bleachers. "Runs the dry cleaners across from the station. Gives a good rate to all the men in blue."

"That's nice," Jeffrey said, resisting the urge to check the time again. He had forgotten what it was like to be at a high school football game, and when Clem Waters, the mayor of Heartsdale, had proposed Jeffrey come to do a meet and greet, Jeffrey had accepted the invitation without really thinking it through. Most of his football games had been spent on the field running passes, not standing in the bleachers waiting for a two hundred year old man to shuffle his way down so Jeffrey could shake his hand.

"And there's Steve Mann," Clem said, indicating a tall looking guy wearing a flannel shirt and glasses. "Runs the hardware store. And of course you met Jeb, our pharmacist, the other day."

"Right," Jeffrey said. This time he did check his watch. There was a stewardess in Atlanta keeping some champagne on ice. He had promised her he'd be there in a few hours. The drive alone was three and a half, and that was with the lights and sirens on.

"We're just so glad to have you here," Clem said, not for the first time. He patted Jeffrey on the back like he was a prize chicken at the fair. The mayor was a short man who always seemed to be bouncing on the balls of his feet. He looked exactly like what he probably was: the type of guy who got the shit kicked out of him every day in high school, then grew up to run the whole town.

When Clem thought Jeffrey wasn't looking, he gave a suggestive wink to a woman with shockingly yellow hair sitting on the front row of the bleachers. Jeffrey had met her earlier—she ran the five and dime on Main Street—but for the life of him, he could not remember the woman's name. He did know that her husband must have been blind. It was obvious to anyone with eyes that she was banging the mayor.

"Bill!" Clem said. The old man had finally made it down to them. "I'd like you to meet the new chief of police."

"Never met him before!" Burgess exclaimed, thrusting a hand toward Jeffrey. "Bill Burgess. I run the dry cleaner's."

“Jeffrey Tolliver.”

Clem said, “Jeffrey’s the new chief of police.”

“Nice to meet you,” Burgess said, giving Jeffrey’s hand a firm shake. The man had hair growing out of every orifice possible. Even his shirt showed white hairs sticking up from the collar and cuffs.

Burgess said, “About time we got some good law and order in this town.” He clapped Jeffrey on the back, thankfully not giving any specifics about how Grant County should be run. Between the mayor and Kevin Blake, the dean at the college, Jeffrey had gotten an ear full already.

Clem told Jeffrey, “Sara Linton should be around here somewhere.” He looked around, searching the bleachers. “You can’t miss her, she’s—”

The crowd groaned in unison. Jeffrey turned to the field. Someone had been tackled. Unfortunately, it was the Grant Rebels’ quarterback. The kid had been getting sacked all night. As far as Jeffrey could see, most of the boys on the field didn’t understand that they had to get their uniforms dirty if they wanted to win.

“Tough one,” Clem said, but Jeffrey was looking at the woman jogging out onto the field.

She was tall, towering over most of the team. He noticed her dark auburn hair when she knelt down beside the fallen quarterback.

“Speak of the devil,” Clem said. “That’s Sara Linton.”

“The coroner?” Jeffrey asked. *That* name he’d remembered. She didn’t look like any coroner he’d ever seen, and Jeffrey was about to say this when he noticed the mayor’s smile.

“She graduated same year as me,” he said. “She’s a real sweetheart. Used to help me some with my math.”

“I’ll go introduce myself,” Jeffrey mumbled, leaving Clem with his memories and heading toward the field. By the time he reached the sidelines, the quarterback was being settled onto the bench with a bag of ice on his knee.

Sara was yelling at the kid, telling him, “Just throw the ball, Brad! Let somebody else get tackled for a change.”

She looked up at Jeffrey, then did a double-take.

He leaned his elbow on the fence and opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it.

“You’re not allowed on the field.”

He tried a smile. “I’m Jeffrey Tolliver.”

The half-time whistle blew and she stood up. “Hi, Jeffrey Tolliver. You’re not allowed on the field.”

She ruffled the quarterback’s hair as she stepped over the bench. Jeffrey noticed she was wearing tennis shoes with no strings, a pair of jeans so faded that they were white in places and an ill-fitting Rebels jersey with two zeroes on the front.

She was perhaps one of the sexiest women he had ever seen in his life.

“You’re the team doctor?” he asked, following her as she crossed the running track that circled the field.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, and he took that as some encouragement, catching up with her as she opened the gate and walked into the stands.

She said, “I’m sure Clem’s given you my résumé.”

The mayor had, actually, but Jeffrey feigned ignorance. “He said coroner, not team doctor.” He added, “Sara, is it?”

She raised an eyebrow at him, as if she was trying to decide what to do. Jeffrey had met his number of Sara Lintons before. It was usually the reticent, brainy ones who were wild in bed. The trick was that you had to catch them when they were feeling a little adventurous or they would shut you down before you could even ask for their phone number.

“Sara Linton,” she said, holding out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” he said, liking the way her skin felt against his. She took back her hand and he was about to suggest a drink after the game when he remembered the stewardess. Then he remembered the closest place that served alcohol was half an hour away.

“Hey, Sara.” A short, strawberry blonde sidled up and wrapped her arm around Sara’s waist. “I’m thirsty, gimme some money.” She winked at Jeffrey. “And tell me how you managed to speak to the famous new chief of police before I did.”

Sara pulled a wad of money out of her pocket as she made the introductions. “Chief Tolliver, this is my sister Tessa Linton.”

“Charmed,” Tessa said, holding out her hand. He could tell from the sparkle in her eyes that she had spent plenty of nights feeling adventurous. “Tell me, Chief, how are you enjoying your first evening in Grant society?”

“Call me Jeffrey,” he told her. “And it’s starting to look a whole lot better.”

Tessa looked at the clump of singles in her sister’s hand. “What are you doing with all that money?”

Sara gave her a glare that made it clear she was the older sister, though what came out of her mouth was mildly shocking. “My pimp paid me today.”

Tessa pulled a couple of ones from the pile. “Looks like you owe him some change.”

Sara laughed. It wasn’t a little girl giggle or an “I don’t want to mess up my make-up” gasp—not that she was wearing make-up anyway—but an all-out guffaw at her own expense.

“Here.” Sara took back the cash with something like a sigh. “I’ll get it. What do you want?”

“Coke Icee.” Tessa smiled politely. Jeffrey didn’t sense competition between the sisters, more like the acceptance that this was the natural order of things. Tessa was petite and blonde with the kind of personality that meant she was never going to be home alone on a Saturday night unless she wanted to be. Sara was a tall drink of water, but she had probably spent most of her life with her nose buried in a book.

It was obvious who would get the new guy in town.

“Nice meeting you.” Sara started to walk away but, maybe remembering her manners, she turned back to Jeffrey. “Can I get you anything?”

“Uh,” Jeffrey began. He was seldom at a loss for words, but for some reason, his tongue felt tied. He had noticed a lot of things about Sara Linton, but not until now did he see that she had the prettiest green eyes he had ever seen. They were clear and penetrating, like a finely cut emerald. He felt caught in them, as if he was powerless over his body to do anything but stare.

“Frozen Coke?” she suggested. “Popcorn?”

“Uh...no...” He could feel one side of his mouth go up in a grin. “Why don’t I come with you?”

Sara was more surprised than he was. A beautiful blush worked its way up her neck, coloring her cheeks and blending in with her hair. Jeffrey found himself taken with the desire to see the rest of the blush, find the place where it started and smooth it out with the tips of his fingers.

Obviously his intentions were clear. It was Sara’s turn to lose her ability to speak. “I...well...”

Tessa saved her. “Get me some peanuts, too.” She gave Jeffrey a good-natured wink and left them alone.

Sara just stood there.

He nodded toward the tunnel, saying, “I think the concession stand is this way.”

She walked along side him with her arms crossed low on her waist. Jeffrey put his hand a few inches away from her back as she was jostled by the crowd. He saw her fingers resting in the fold of her elbow; long and delicate, clipped nails with no polish.

Football fans were streaming out of their seats, hoping to grab a hot dog or use the restroom before half-time ended. As the Rebels were currently losing by over thirty points, he doubted missing the second quarter punt would make much of a difference. Considering the band had won more state championships than the football team, they’d be better off staying for the show and going to the toilet during the game.

The crowd slowed, and they stood side by side waiting to get through the tunnel.

She said, “I’m sorry I was rude before.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

She gave a smile that said she knew better. “A lot of the parents were coming onto the field, trying to coach from the sidelines. We had to ban them last year.”

Jeffrey considered the game so far. “From what I’ve seen, it looks like they could use all the advice they can get.”

She laughed, nodding her agreement. He was about to tell her about his glory days on the football field, how he’d played for Auburn University, but something told him Sara Linton wasn’t the kind of woman who’d be impressed by that, so he kept his mouth shut.

The crowd moved at a shuffle, an awkward silence building.

She broke it, asking, “You’re from Birmingham?”

“By way of Sylacauga.”

She laughed at the name. “Where’s that?”

“Trust me, nowhere you’ll ever want to go.” He saw a pay phone over by the men’s restrooms and remembered his stewardess. She could wait a few hours for him. Maybe he’d pick up some flowers for her once he got outside of town to help grease the welcoming. Not that she ever minded when he was late.

The people around them started to move again and Jeffrey told Sara, “I need to make a quick phone call. Why don’t you go ahead and get in line? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Sure.” Her tone of voice made it seem like she knew exactly what he was up to.

“I need to check on something,” he said, realizing that the mark of a bad liar was they didn’t know when to shut up. Still, he couldn’t stop talking. “I’ll be there in just a minute.”

She shrugged, and he could not for the life of him tell what she was thinking when she said, “No problem.”

He watched her walk toward the long line snaking out from the snack counter. The pharmacist—whatever the hell his name was—waved her over, and she shook her head, not wanting to cut in line. She got at the end of the queue and ended up being joined by the guy who ran the hardware store. Mike? Skip? Whoever, the jerk was, he was hanging around Sara like a puppy dog. Jeffrey felt something like jealousy, which was something he hadn't felt about anybody since he had quarterbacked for the Sylacauga Aggies.

Jeffrey took a dime out of his pocket for the phone but didn't get much farther than that. He wondered what the hell he was doing, why he was thinking about postponing what would be an extremely warm welcome in Atlanta.

First off, Sara Linton was not his type of woman. She wore her hair in a ponytail, but not as part of any naughty Catholic schoolgirl theme. Her blue jeans were low around her waist because they were baggy, not because she was showing off her flat stomach. The hem of her jeans had dragged so much that the heel of her shoe had torn it open. The football jersey was about ten sizes too big for her narrow frame. And speaking of her frame, she was boyishly thin, not curvaceous like every other woman who had been in and out of his life for the last fifteen years. Like the little stewardess with the large breasts and the nice, round ass who was waiting for him in Atlanta. Or the stripper waiting back in Birmingham.

He dropped the dime in the phone and dialed the number.

And another thing—Jeffrey needed to remember he wasn't living in a big city any more. He was stuck in a small town again. Not as small as Sylacauga but just as bad. Everybody was in your business here, and they were happy as pigs in shit to share what they knew with anyone who would listen—and *everyone* listened. You didn't skip church unless somebody died, you didn't drink at home unless the curtains were closed and you sure as hell didn't run around with one of the town's upstanding citizens unless you were ready to make an honest woman out of her. Otherwise, you were blacklisted from every church picnic and social gathering for the rest of your life.

The operator came on and told him to add another dollar in change for the call. He dug around in his pocket, thinking the last and biggest problem with Sara Linton was painfully obvious: she would be a lot of work. Not just work, but damn hard work. He had dated smart women before, but she was different; maybe too smart for her own good. Flowers wouldn't ever smooth anything out—she'd probably throw them back in his face. She wouldn't back off when his temper flared and she sure as hell wouldn't buy any of his usual excuses. In short, she wasn't the kind of woman you fucked around with. She was the kind of woman you married and had babies with.

Jeffrey dropped the rest of the change into the phone and waited for the call to connect. The stewardess picked up on the first ring.

"Hey," he said. "About tonight..." He turned around, trying to catch a glimpse of Sara. Jesus, she was beautiful. She was also talking to that panty-sniffer from the hardware store. The guy was standing too close to her, hanging on her every word. Jeffrey wanted to punch him in the face.

He looked back at the phone, caught his reflection warping in the polished chrome.

The stewardess gave a husky laugh. "You still there, big boy?"

"I can't make it," he finally told her, his mind blanking of his usual good excuses. In the end, he settled on the truth, telling her, "I've got some work to do."