

ONE

On the anniversary of his wife's death, Sam Anderson visited her grave.

It was a crisp spring morning in Nevada, with dew on the grass and fog rolling through the cemetery. In one hand, Sam carried a bouquet of flowers. In the other, he gripped his son's hand. Ryan was eleven years old and strong-willed and introverted, like his mother. After her death, he had withdrawn, spending even more time alone, playing with LEGOs, reading, and generally avoiding life.

Counseling had yielded little help for Ryan. At home, Sam had searched for a way to get through to his only son, but he had to admit: he wasn't half the parent his wife had been. Most days, he felt like he was simply reacting to his children, making it up as he went, working on a mystery without any clues.

He hoped the visit to Sarah's grave this morning would be the start of turning that around.

Sam's daughter, Adeline, gripped Ryan's other hand. She was nineteen years old, and to all outward appearances seemed to have coped better with her mother's passing. But Sam wondered if Adeline was just a better actor than Ryan or himself. He worried about that too, about her bottling it all up and carrying the burden of unaddressed grief.

Last night, he had seen a glimpse of her hidden rage. Adeline was still furious with him over the evening's argument. So angry

she wouldn't even hold his hand or look at him. Hence, Ryan walking between them.

But she had agreed to be there that morning, and Sam was thankful for that.

They walked in silence through the cemetery much like they had floated through life since Sarah's death: hand-in-hand, trying to find their way through it all.

Fog drifted in front of the headstones like a curtain being drawn and opened. Across the cemetery, sprinkler heads rose and began deploying water. The cemetery likely cost a fortune to irrigate out in the Nevada desert, but of all the problems Absolom City had, money wasn't one.

At the edge of the grass, Sam thought he saw a figure watching them. He turned his head, and yes, there was a man there. He wore a dark uniform, though Sam couldn't make it out from this distance. Fog floated in front of the man, and when Sam looked again, he was gone.

Ryan must have felt his father slow down.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Nothing," he muttered, resuming their pace, tugging on his son's hand.

Near Sarah's grave, Sam spotted a man and a woman standing on the other side of the cemetery. They were also wearing dark uniforms. Sam's first instinct was that they were here for a burial service. But they didn't move deeper into the maze of graves. They stood there, staring at Sam and his family.

He set the flowers at the base of Sarah's headstone and tried to put the figures out of his mind.

Mentally, he had rehearsed the lines he wanted to say a hundred times. And as he spoke the first words into that foggy April morning, they sounded just like that to him: rehearsed and passionless.

"I'd like to say something."

Adeline's gaze shifted away from him. Ryan stared at his shoes.

Sam decided right then to drop the speech and say the first thing that came to his mind. That thing was a memory.

"I want to tell you what your mom said to me one of the last times I saw her."

Adeline's head turned quickly. Ryan looked up.

"She told me that it would make her very sad if she was what kept me from being happy after she was gone. I think she meant that for all of us. She was selfless like that—in life and even after."

Adeline closed her eyes and raised her fingers to her eyelids. A warm wind blew across the three of them. A tear leaked from the edge of Adeline's right eye and lingered there, soaking itself in mascara, and slowly began painting its way down her cheek as if an invisible hand was drawing warpaint on her face.

It was the first tear Sam had seen her shed in years.

"The second thing she told me is something I think about a lot: time heals all wounds. But it won't work if you don't give time a chance. That was her point: we just have to accept that sometimes things are going to be hard for a while. If we're strong enough—if we hold on long enough—things will get better. Every year, this hurt we feel is going to get a little better. I promise you."

He reached out and pulled Ryan into a hug, and Adeline closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around Sam, and buried her face in his shoulder. He felt the warmth of her tears soaking through his shirt.

A buzzing overhead caught his attention. It was a drone. Not one, but three of them.

A computerized voice called through the fog.

"Dr. Samuel Anderson, please step away from the others."

Sam glanced around the cemetery. What was happening here?

“Dr. Samuel Anderson, this is your second warning. Step away and put your hands on your head.”

“What?” Sam called out.

Adeline looked up. “Dad, what’s going on?”

The three drones were hovering above them now. The computerized voice called again.

“Adeline Anderson, step away and put your hands on your head.”

Sam realized the suited figures he had seen earlier were surrounding them now. There were seven in all, wearing Absalom City Police uniforms, standing with their hands on their belts within easy reach of the handcuffs and stun batons hanging there.

The drone called again.

“Dr. Samuel Anderson, this is your final warning. You have five seconds to separate yourself from the others and place your hands on your head.”

“Dad...” Adeline’s voice was ragged and panicked.

“It’s okay,” he whispered as he turned and scanned the police officers, searching for the person in charge to address.

“I’d like to talk to—”

The sharp pain in his neck was like a bee sting. He reached up and felt a circular piece of metal the size of a coin dug into his skin. He was trying to pry it loose when his vision blurred. His legs went weak, and he fell headfirst into the soft grass.

The last thing Sam saw before the darkness swallowed him was the engraved letters on his wife’s headstone.

TWO

When he came to, Sam was lying in a hospital bed. His arms and legs were strapped down. A machine to his left showed his vitals, the charts and numbers updating in real time.

Sensors were adhered to his chest and forehead. He felt a slight pinch on his right hand. He looked down and found an IV snaking away, a clear tube with a piece of tape over it.

Beside him, a nurse sat on a metal chair, dressed in blue scrubs, reading a digital paper. He looked up and tapped a button on his chest.

“Timestamp. Subject is awake and appears alert.”

Sam felt like his mouth was full of sawdust. He fought through it, forcing the words out. “Where am I?”

“Post-arrest medical observation at Absolom City Police, Central Station.”

“Why?”

Before the nurse could answer, the door opened, and a man and a woman walked in, both dressed in suits, gold and silver police badges clipped at their waists.

“Dr. Anderson,” the woman said. “I’m Detective Billings. This is my partner, Detective Holloway. How do you feel?”

“Very confused. Not very happy.”

Billings made no reaction. “You were issued three requests to comply, which you refused. You were subsequently restrained in accordance with the standardized arrest protocol, which

protects law enforcement personnel and ensures all subjects of arrests are treated uniformly, regardless of—”

“Why am I here?”

“Dr. Anderson, you’re under arrest for the murder of Dr. Nora Thomas.”

Out of his peripheral vision, Sam saw his pulse number on the machine skyrocket. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

Billings held up her arm and tapped a smartwatch. A woman’s voice spoke loudly.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights that have just been read to you?”

Sam lay there, still in shock.

“Dr. Anderson?” Billings asked.

Nora was dead.

That was Sam’s first thought.

How? was his second thought.

She had been murdered.

It was impossible. Who would murder Nora? Someone protesting Absolom? If so, were the other Absolom scientists in danger? Company personnel? His family?

“Dr. Anderson?”

His gaze drifted back to the woman.

“Do you understand the rights that have been read to you?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

“You better believe I want to speak with you. I want some answers.”

“So do we, doctor. We’re just here to find the truth.”

“How...” Sam began, but his mind spun, unable to form

a question. A million of them fought a war in his brain, none emerging on top.

Billings reached inside her jacket and took out an e-ink tablet slightly bigger than her hand.

“Dr. Nora Thomas was found dead at her residence this morning at 7:13 a.m. after a friend she was scheduled to exercise with reported seeing blood and a motionless body inside her home.”

Sam shook his head, still in disbelief.

Billings pressed on. “Dr. Anderson, when was the last time you saw Dr. Thomas?”

Sam tried to force the words out, but it was as if his mind wouldn’t connect to his mouth.

Billings cut her eyes to her partner. The gray-haired man spoke slowly, his voice deep and calm, a sharp contrast to the tension in the room.

“We know you visited Dr. Thomas last night.”

Sam stared at the man. He felt his heart hammering in his chest.

Detective Holloway shrugged. “We have the city surveillance camera recordings.”

He paused, waiting, but Sam said nothing.

“We know you and your daughter, Adeline, arrived at Dr. Thomas’s home at 9:06 p.m. and left at approximately 9:43 p.m. We’re pretty sure Dr. Thomas was killed toward the end of that window.”

“Impossible...” Sam whispered.

Billings cleared her throat. “Dr. Anderson, were you engaged in a romantic relationship with Dr. Thomas?”

Sam’s heart beat even faster. This was wrong. A setup.

The nurse stared at the medical monitor, watching the numbers ticking up like a countdown to an explosion.

The two detectives glanced in Sam’s direction, but not

directly at him, as if he had three heads and they were looking at the ones beside him.

Sam swallowed and forced the word out. “Yes.”

“Is there anything you’d like to tell us about that?” Holloway asked.

Sam shook his head. The sedation drugs were wearing off. His head was finally starting to clear.

In the cemetery, the drones hadn’t just called out his name. They called out for Adeline as well.

“Where’s my daughter?”

Holloway held his hands up. “She’s in a post-arrest interview room. Don’t worry. She’s fine.”

“Why’d you arrest her?”

“The same reason we arrested you,” Billings said.

Sam sat up and tried to raise his arms, but the restraints caught. An alarm on the machine next to him blared.

Billings took a step closer. “Relax, Dr. Anderson.”

Before he could respond, the door flew open and Sam’s long-time friend and colleague, Elliott Lucas, barged in.

Close behind him was Tom Morris, the chief counsel for the company they co-founded, Absolom Sciences. Tom spoke over the sound of the alarm. “Don’t say another word, Sam.”

Elliott eyed the detectives. “Why is he strapped down?”

“Protocol.”

Tom pointed at Sam. “I want my client released from police custody right now.”

Billings shook her head. “That’s not possible.”

“Why?” Tom asked.

Billings didn’t flinch. “Dr. Anderson is being held on a murder charge—which is subject to Absolom. As I’m sure you know, pretrial bail is not allowed for Absolom-eligible crimes. The risk of flight and risk to the community is too great.”

A silence stretched out in the room.

Billings glanced at Elliott and Tom. “Gentlemen, I’m going to have to ask you to leave the room.”

Tom’s eyes bulged. “On the contrary, detective. I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I’m this man’s attorney, and he doesn’t have to speak to you. I want Dr. Anderson moved to a comfortable room where we can talk in private.”

Billings nodded to the nurse, who stepped closer to Sam and eyed him. “Dr. Anderson, do you feel you’re a danger to yourself or others?”

“No.”

The nurse pointed to the band around Sam’s right wrist. “You’re required to wear this medical monitor and locator device at all times. Tampering with it or trying to remove it is a felony. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

The nurse tapped the button on his shirt. “Timestamp. Subject is cleared to be held outside of medical observation.”