

A PILGRIMAGE TO DEATH
A Reverend Cici Gurule Mystery
Book 1

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For Rebecca. Thank you for believing I had this story in me.

Chapter One

Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind. — Shakespeare

Cecilia Gurule was a reverend for God's sake. She dealt in souls—the broken, empty, seeking, and, yes, the dead.

Bodies? Not her wheelhouse.

At least they weren't until that Tuesday afternoon when *Domine Deus* decided to test both her faith and her life.

She came within a bullet of losing both.

Cecilia, who much preferred Cici, met Sam in the parking lot of the Aspen Vista Trail. She was late. Not really her fault, but typical, thanks to her parishioners' unwillingness to accept Tuesdays as her one day per week away from the church.

Wide and rocky, the trail snaked over eleven miles up the side of the mountain following an old forest service road. While the incline was never scramble steep, it rose at a consistent pace, switching back with views toward the city or up to the ski basin. A few narrow runnels of water—not big enough to be considered creeks—dribbled from the remaining snowpack.

Cici suggested it last week because both she and Sam had the weekday off, meaning fewer hikers on the bottom part of the trail, and they could spend the three-plus hours needed to reach the summit.

Unfortunately, Cici suggested the trail before she made plans to breakfast with the widowed Mrs. Sanchez, whose son worked out at the state penitentiary on NM-14.

“I don’t understand these kids.” Mrs. Sanchez wiped her mouth with her napkin, leaving a smear of bright red on the paper. Her lips were the same light bronze as her craggy skin, hints of the crimson lipstick settled into the faint lines bisecting her lower lip.

“Juanito has one more year at that fancy private school. He has a pretty girlfriend. Yet he cannot be happy? He causes his father such heartache, Reverend.” She picked up her coffee mug and shoved it toward Cici. “You talk to the boy for his father. Set him straight.”

“I’ll do what I can, Mrs. Sanchez.”

“Humph.” The woman set her mug down with a crack, her dark, deep-set eyes glaring from between folds of skin. Without the bright lipstick, her mouth seemed hidden under the wrinkles.

“I’m old, Reverend. I cannot control the boy. His father, Miguel, spent most of the last year picking up extra shifts for the tuition at St. Michaels. Juanito needs to respect the rules we set for him.”

“Which are?” Cici asked.

Mrs. Sanchez tossed her napkin onto her plate with the half-finished breakfast burrito. Cici picked up her own warm tortilla and bit into the wrap, enjoying the spicy flavors of green chile and sausage. One thing about Mrs. Sanchez: she was a fine cook.

“No seeing that girl past ten p.m. Good grades—all A’s so that he’s ready to go to Tech in a year. That’s what he needs—a good education, more choices. Not this . . . this mess with girls.”

“He did receive all A’s last year, and it’s summer break now. Shouldn’t Juan have the chance to focus on his job or maybe even spend time with Jaycee?”

“No more time with the girlfriend,” Mrs. Sanchez said with a sharp motion of her hand. “That’s how I’ll end up a great-grandmother. The boy needs more school. He is not yet eighteen.” Her face crumpled. “He is the age we lost his brother, Marco, Reverend. You know this. Juan is all the family has left.”

“Who was it this time?” Sam Chastain, Cici’s friend and hiking partner, asked. He pulled on a tattered ball cap—probably the one Cici’s twin sister, Anna Carmen, gave him years ago—and pulled on his backpack, settling it comfortably over his gray Red River T-shirt.

His short, dark ponytail stuck through the hole in the back like a bristle-brush. He slid on a pair of Ray-Bans to protect his gunmetal-blue eyes.

“Mrs. Sanchez. I got a great breakfast out of the deal.”

“She want you to have the talk with Juan?” Sam asked.

Sam was a detective with the Santa Fe Police department and fellow search-and-rescue teammate. The two had known each other for decades. Cici grabbed her water bottle and checked her sneakers.

“Got a hat?” Sam asked. “You know you’re going to burn if you don’t wear one.”

Sam studied her features, his gaze resting on her high cheekbones that always burned thanks to the pale skin Cici and her sister inherited from their mother, along with the oval shape of her face and the long-lashed hazel eyes.

“Yep,” Cici said, settling the cap on her head and pulling her long, jet-black pony tail through the hole in the back.

Sam offered her a radio, which she took, clipping it to her thick, brown leather belt.

“Why are we carrying these?”

Sam shrugged. “Boss man wants everyone on the trails wearing ’em. Maybe because of the helicopter extraction earlier this year?”

They started up the trail, moving in tandem as if they’d been hiking together for years.

“She’s recovered,” Cici said. “I called the woman who fell off Big Tesuque and talked to her. Her ankle’s out of the cast.”

“Lot of ruckus for a broken ankle and some bruises,” Sam replied.

“She slid four hundred feet into that ravine, Sam. Cut the woman some slack.”

“Stupid to hike alone, and you know it. We wouldn’t have had to waste so many resources on her if she’d been smarter.”

Cici did, but her job was to see others’ points of view, to help them grow, both in their humanity and spirituality. Refusing to get pulled further into an argument with Sam, she continued to hike.

They matched pace for a while in companionable silence. Cici began to feel . . . not sad. She hadn't been happy since Anna Carmen's death. But in this moment, with the sun shining and the aspens whispering overhead, Cici's lips lifted at the corners.

The call came over the radio clipped to her belt. The same message squawked from Sam's radio. He stopped, his chest expanding with each hard breath. They'd hiked the steepest part of the Aspen Trail. Sam wiped the sweat off his brow and pulled in a deep breath. He unlatched his walkie-talkie and pressed the button on the side.

"Repeat that, please."

"Missing hiker. Wife called it in when she got off the mountain."

"She left him out here by himself?" Cici asked, already wrinkling her nose in disgust. People continued to disappoint her.

Sam shook his head. "Not now, Cici. What's the trail?"

"Aspen Vista," the voice said over the bits of static.

"We're on it. Name, age, any other stats?"

"I know." The voice crackled but the exasperation was clear even through the bad connection. "Donald . . . fifty . . . complain . . . heart."

"Uh oh," Cici murmured.

"Last known whereabouts?" Sam asked.

"The summit."

“Why’d the wife leave him there?” Cici muttered. “If he was in distress when she left him, he might not have survived while she strolled down the mountain.”

“Later,” Sam replied. He pressed the “Talk” button. “We’re a quarter mile from that location. Cici and I will start the sweep.”

“Roger . . . full crew coming in.”

“Great. From what you said, we’ll probably need it. Over and out.” Sam clipped the thick black radio to his belt again. He turned back to look at Cici, who’d crossed her arms and scowled down into the valley below.

“None of that, Cee. Not all people are your parents.”

“No, shit, detective,” she grunted.

“Hey,” Sam said, bumping her shoulder with his in a gentle gesture she’d come to expect from him over the last few years.

While they’d spent time together before her twin’s death, Cici made a point to seek him out more often after Anna Carmen’s funeral—especially once she’d made the decision to quit as the associate reverend from the large, wealthy church outside Boston—and move back home. He’d reciprocated by always being available, even during the difficult transition when he left the promising position on a joint task force in Denver. He’d been so excited to participate in that work because only the best people from the region were chosen, and Sam was one of the youngest. But, after explaining the situation to his boss, Agent Klein helped Sam move back in the detective bureau in Santa Fe.

“Priests aren’t supposed to use that kind of language,” he said.

Cici bumped him back, harder. Five male cousins within three years of her own age taught her a few important details—like how to fight dirty. “I’m not a priest. And not just because of my reproductive organs. I’m a reverend.”

“With a predilection for curse words and a willingness to abuse your fellow man,” Sam said over his shoulder as he moved back into point position on the trail. He made a tsking sound. “C’mon, Rev. Let’s go rescue our guy. Maybe you’ll make the front page of the paper. Again.” He turned to wink, his lips lifting when Cici rolled his eyes.

“Ugh. One time, Sam.”

“That’s all it took for me to be able to tease you about it for the rest of your life.” He started to chuckle. “Whatever happened to the chicken?”

Cici glared while Sam struggled to keep a straight face.

“I don’t know.” She huffed. “Hopefully, it’s living a long, chicken-y life.”

She rolled her eyes again and began to climb; Sam fell into step to the left and a half-foot in front of her.

Sam’s foot shifted as loose slag slid out from under his thick-soled hiking boot. He slowed his pace, taking more care with where he stepped. No point in getting hurt on the way up—that would just make more work for the SAR crew already on its way.

“I can’t believe that little girl asked you to bless a chicken at the Pet Parade.”

“This is Santa Fe. Home of animal lovers and weirdness.”

And murder.

Even though the sun beat down in thick, hot rays, Cici shivered. Something about this entire situation felt . . . well, off. She picked up the thread of their conversation to give herself something to do besides watch where she placed her feet and worry about what they'd find.

"Anyway, Yale wasn't big on the cussing. Manhattan and Boston are where I picked up some choice words."

"You were supposed to show those sinners how to rise above coarse language, sin, and all that shit."

Cici shrugged. Not new ground here. She and Sam had bickered for years. That wasn't saying much, really. She'd known most of the people in Santa Fe for years.

The aspen leaves rippled in the wind—a soft, fluttering roll of vegetation that sounded like a gentle, low tide—a strange phenomenon common here, high up in the Santa Fe National Forest where blue sky and slender white tree trunks seemed to merge. Typically, the sound soothed her.

Not now that she'd thought about her sister. The ache left by Anna Carmen's death seemed to grow and weep, just as it always did when thoughts of her twin blindsided her.

Cici lifted her leg high to take her up to the next rock as sweat trickled down the middle of her back and her thighs began to ache with the deliciousness of hard use.

Cici cleared her head and organized her thoughts on these weekly hikes. Spending time outdoors with Sam became a weekly ritual more than six

months ago. She looked forward to these hours-long jaunts because they helped her prepare a better sermon.

They turned the last sharp curve and Sam's feet planted firmly into the path, blocking her view. He cursed—worse than her words. Cici's heart hammered and the dread in her stomach shifted, heaving, as Cici edged around him.

“Wait, Cee. You don't want to see this.”

Too late—and not as if she would have listened. Her throat tightened as she stared into the sightless eyes of Donald Johnson, one of the founding members of the church she'd taken over earlier this year.

A gust of wind slammed against her overheated skin and the soft rustling of the aspens built into the crash of waves. Or maybe it was her ears, thrumming with the rush of blood to her head.

She barely heard Sam call in their location.

Rigor mortis had already come and left his body before she and Sam found him, toppled off the large boulder, his stainless-steel canteen overturned and empty at his feet. The water stained the ground and his right hiking boot, making the leather darker, near black. Near as black as the blood on the rock and stuck to his Lobos T-shirt, trailing down onto his designer jeans.

Sam's hand came down on her shoulder and she flinched, hard, but she didn't look away from Donald. Two narrow gashes showed pink and a trickle of blood. His hands—large and hairy—nicked from the blade. A longer, deeper gash split open the meaty part of his hand almost as if he'd grappled with the blade.

But Cici focused on the large wolf logo. The UNM mascot seemed to have opened its mouth right above a wound in his back, ready to devour him.

Or maybe Cici, with memories of another murder. That wound . . .

Chapter Two

Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. —

Shakespeare

Not again. But before she could stop it, Cici slid back to the evening of the call. She hadn't been in the state, but she'd already been at the airport, trying to buy her way on to a flight—any flight—because that place inside Cici where Anna Carmen lived had gone silent.

Cici and Anna Carmen had figured out the connection as toddlers, maybe earlier. They didn't need to be in the same room to check in with each other, and as they matured, they didn't need to be in the same building or even the same state. Their connection wasn't exactly an unspoken communication—more that the girls were so in tune with each other's thoughts and emotions.

But that afternoon, Anna Carmen had seemed to fade from Cici's consciousness. Not a gentle easing—more of a great gasp of despair and regret.

And then, nothing.

Cici had been with her boyfriend the moment of Anna Carmen's stabbing, working on the location in Central America they wanted to explore for Cici and Lyndon's first field work trip together. A recent Harvard graduate, who'd finished his post-doctoral work in archaeology, Lyndon had asked Cici if she'd go with him if he got the funding. She hadn't been too sure if she should.

He'd proven to be unrelenting in his arguments, just as he was in most other areas of his life. When Lyndon discussed the forest's health and how it impacted the natives' way of life, Cici's desire to remove herself from his all-consuming focus turned to interest.

Lyndon knew Cici wanted to study the forests in Peru, assess their health and the balance with the natives living in the high region of the area. Cici's master's degree shared a dual focus in divinity and environmental studies. She'd interned as an associate reverend outside Boston, and the church hired her as an associate pastor as soon as she'd graduated. For the last year and a half of her internship, she hadn't been able to focus on her environmental science degree, but she had met Lyndon at a group on spirituality and environmentalism she moderated the year before, and he'd opened the door for her to focus on both of her passions.

After many conversations with her sister, she'd accepted the opportunity. Lyndon had been ecstatic, coming up with potential scenarios for their work—and living arrangements. Many of which pushed Cici even further outside her comfort zone.

But, by then, she'd agreed, and the situation had already snowballed.

At the time, Cici had been much more excited about an adventure in Peru, even if she had to put up with Lyndon's intensity, than taking over the church back in her hometown. Though, both her sister and many of her lifelong friends lobbied hard for her to return home.

But Cici hadn't wanted to return to the place where her mother lost not just her marriage and dignity, but also her battle with cancer.

Then, when the connection to her sister had popped, Cici collapsed, passed out still hearing her name cried in a soft, broken voice, her twin's name leaking past her stiff lips. She'd woken on the small couch in her apartment, shivering, aching, as if she had the flu.

But it was worse than an illness. A portion of Cici ripped from her soul and she'd never recovered. Never *could* recover.

Anna Carmen, Aci . . . Cici slid back into the pet name she'd created for her sister when they were quite young and Cici couldn't say "Carmen." *Don't leave me.*

How many times had she said that aloud and deep within her soul? Too many. And her sister never heard or never listened because the place Anna Carmen had always nourished remained black, blank, silent no matter how many times Cici struggled to reconnect.

In desperation and against Lyndon's loud objections, Cici had stood, then struggled to right herself, right the world. She left the apartment as fast as she could.

As her sister's closest relative, the only one alive to care that she was gone, Cici had received *the call* before Anna Carmen's boyfriend had. She'd cried from the moment she'd heard the words, where a ticket agent, also tearing up, managed to find her a seat on the next available flight. She'd wept through the

entire flight to Albuquerque, not that it changed the new reality she'd have to live with.

That she *still* lived with.

Thank goodness by the time she'd landed, Evan—Anna Carmen's boyfriend—and a few other close friends had taken care of the preliminary issues. Sam had met her at the airport and pulled her into a long, tight hug that signaled a shift in their relationship.

Cici leaned on that shift so heavily right now.

"I'm sorry, Cici." Sam's voice bit through her haze, reconnecting her with the here, the now. Up on top of Aspen Vista Trail, on a sunny late May morning.

"I know this has to bring it all back up," he said, his voice mournful.

Oh, it did. For Sam, too. Sam and her sister had been the best of friends long before Sam and Cici were. In fact, Sam and Cici were friends now by default. That's what losing the most important person in your life did—it created unbreakable bonds between people who'd never been particularly close before.

Well . . . not for Cici and her sister's boyfriend, Evan. But that was a different story, a different relationship.

A different set of regrets and what-ifs.

Sam turned her toward his chest, but Cici's eyes remained on Donald's body.

"He was stabbed," Cici said.

"Multiple times," Sam said, his eyes that of a clinician—so cold and detached from what had been a living, breathing person.

Cici panted. “That one. In the back.”

Sam’s hand squeezed her fingers tighter, steadying her. “Yeah.”

“It’s like . . . The placement. It’s like Anna Carmen.”

“Yeah.”

Normally, Cici didn’t mind Sam’s minimal use of language, but now—right now—she needed more.

“Through the kidney,” she said, her voice sharpening.

“Looks like,” Sam replied as he began to rock her back and forth, back and forth. The soft sway calmed her somewhat.

Much as she wanted to pound Sam with her fists, she couldn’t look away from Donald’s glazed eyes. An ant crawled over the pale skin of Donald’s nose. She shuddered, still unable to look away even as the ant settled on Donald’s sclera. Cici shuddered, breaking the strange spell.

She stared up into Sam’s face. “What does that *mean?*”

Sam dropped his hands from her back and sighed. He motioned Cici away from the rock where Donald sprawled. When she didn’t move, he nudged her, much like a sheep dog, to herd her away from the body, onto the trail, keeping them away from much of the area surrounding the boulder and Donald.

Cici wrapped her arms tight around her waist as she struggled to keep her breakfast burrito in her stomach.

“Good thing you left your dogs home today. They’d mess up the area.”

Cici stiffened. “I couldn’t take them to the Sanchez’s house—she would have beat me with her broom after she cursed at the dogs for shedding. And you know Rodolfo and Mona are well behaved.”

“Never said they weren’t. Just that the forensic team is more likely to find something if we don’t disturb the area. And the dogs would’ve been all over this guy, messing with evidence.”

“Like the ants.”

Sam grimaced, turning to face her.

Cici huddled against the rock outcropping where she and Sam leaned, willing her body to ward off the chill of memory. Not even the intensity of May sun at nearly ten thousand feet managed to do so. She shivered and her teeth began to chatter.

“Sam, what does that stab wound mean?” Cici asked again.

“I’m not sure,” he said, his voice hesitant.

“But if you had to guess?”

“They fought. You can see that in his defensive wounds on his hands.”

Cici shuddered.

“I can’t tell you for sure right now Cici,” Sam muttered.

“The wound in his back. It’s the same as Anna Carmen’s.”

Sam took off his ball cap and ran his palm over the back of his head, smoothing the wisps of dark hair back into his stubby pony tail just below his crown. The bottom half of his hair was close-cropped. Conservative. Much like his dress slacks and the ties he now wore to work. Those long-sleeve button

downs hid his half-sleeve tattoo that slipped in and out of visibility under his sweat-soaked T-shirt.

He'd become as much of an enigma as she had, hiding too many of his feelings and thoughts deep behind those gunmetal eyes and the unusual hair style.

Sam drew in a deep breath, his face as ashen as hers must be. In this, they understood each other.

"I don't know if that was intentional," Sam said.

Cici waited, sensing he had more to say.

"Some murderers have signatures and perhaps this is one. If so . . . if it's like Anna Carmen's . . . we could find out more about the killer."

Bring him to justice.

Sam didn't say it, but both he and Cici thought it.

"How would you know? If it's the same."

Sam bit into the cuticle on the side of his left thumb—a sure sign of his increasing agitation. She hadn't seen him do that in a long time. Not since . . . not since he'd driven her to Anna Carmen's house the night of her murder.

"Forensic evidence."

Cici was sure there was more but Sam clamped his lips tight.

"You're sure?" she asked. "I mean, that there's a possibility to catch her killer?"

Sam blew out a breath. "I don't want you to get your hopes up, Cee."

Cici clenched her jaw to keep the hysterical laughter from bubbling up and over.

“A man I know is dead just there.” She pointed. “I don’t think my hopes are going to rise any time soon.”

“Fine. Based on my preliminary review of the scene.” Sam emphasized the word *preliminary*. “Yes, I’d say it’s like Anna Carmen’s.”

“You’re sure?”

He ran his hands down his cheeks and turned so he couldn’t meet her gaze. “I sometimes look at her file. To remember why I’m here.”

Somehow, those words triggered the latte Cici had indulged in earlier this morning. She turned, palm flat on the smooth, white bark of the aspen as her breakfast flowed upward. She wiped her lips with the bandana she kept in her back pocket.

“Shit, Sam.”

After a brief attempt to regulate her breathing, Cici grabbed her water bottle and slugged back some of the cool liquid. Her stomach gurgled rebelliously. She ignored it just as she ignored the pain squeezing at her heart. She stared at Donald, but she saw her sister’s small body there on those blood-stained stones.

“I mean . . .” Cici hauled in some air. “Thank you. For caring. But, dammit, give me a chance to prepare for that kind of devotion.”

She tipped her head back and squinted up through the leaves.

Sam's eyes remained dark but his tone turned rueful. "I hear the team coming up the trail. They don't need to hear your potty mouth, Reverend Gurule."

Cici bit her lip as she stepped back, flush against the rock wall. The granite poked into her back even as the stone warmed her. Cici shut her eyes. Still light, tinged golden with the perfect summer sun, filtered through her lids. She squeezed them tighter, trying to block out the images of her dead sister's eyes.

No use.

Anna Carmen's bright hazel eyes, Cici's eyes, melded with Donald's darker ones. Different shape but both seemed to beseech her. Their stories intertwined. Death took them in brutal fashion. Too soon.

Much too soon.

Cici's lids fluttered open, and she peered into the canopy of acid-green leaves rustling in a soft, sweet wave. Splashes of bright blue and wisps of white clouds completed the pattern.

For the first time in one year, two months and nine days, Cici felt Anna Carmen next to her. Just as Anna Carmen had nestled in close at her funeral, buoying Cici in that time of need, but not the full-throttle Anna Carmen Cici remembered.

Until now. When her sister lit up her brain and set every cell in Cici's body on fire.

"Anna Carmen," Cici whispered.

She shifted, turning her head, unsurprised to find her twin standing there next to her.

The silence lengthened as her sister regarded her, eyes urgent. Cici reached out, needing to touch her twin, but Anna Carmen shook her head, moving backward. She dipped her head toward Donald even as she began to fade.

Through the soft rustle of the leaves in the trees, Anna Carmen's voice whispered back, "You need to help Sam. You need to fix what I broke."

"What's wrong, Cee?" Sam asked, crouching next to her, where she'd slid down the rock face.

"Come back," Cici murmured, continuing to stare at the location just next to the thick white trunk where her sister had been.

"Cici?" Sam's voice became more urgent. "Look at me. Are you in shock?"

With great effort, she wrenched her gaze from the now-empty spot and met Sam's concerned eyes.

"No."

"You sure? You look like . . . well, you like you saw a ghost."

Cici stood, her legs wobbly but able to hold her weight. She glanced back at the area where her sister had stood.

"I did," she murmured. "But that's not the worst of it."

Probably for the best one of the SAR volunteers called Sam's name before she spoke again. His attention shifted to the lanky fifty-something retiree from Nevada.

Anna Carmen wanted Cici to find her killer. Donald's killer, too.

Because Anna Carmen's emotions pointed to one clear realization: if Cici failed, more deaths would follow.

Chapter Three

*So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt. — Shakespeare*

Death stalks.

Not a realization anyone should need to make. Death sucked, too. But, now, eighteen hours after finding Donald, Cici had had to talk about finding him, about her sister, and everything related to leaving this mortal coil to pretty much everyone in the Santa Fe Police Department and Search and Rescue—plus a few others who came up the trail just for kicks.

Cici never wanted to discuss wounds or death or dying again. Kind of a problem for a reverend.

She laid her head on her paper-strewn wooden desk and closed her gritty eyes. They popped back open immediately as her stomach heaved.

Thankfully, it settled again before she had to bolt from her small second room at the back of her house into the equally small bathroom off the narrow hall.

Eyes. Donald's and Anna Carmen's.

Not even Rodolfo's and Mona's warm bodies and doggie breaths alleviated the terror and grief of reliving those moments after Cici learned her twin sister was dead.

Sam had offered to stay with her, but Cici's casita was definitely *ita*. As in tiny—and having Sam stay the night to comfort her felt weird. Because she wanted him to. Desperately. So, Cici sent him home.

Which meant Cici slept little last night. And today, she paid for that decision with a pounding head and raw eyelids.

She glanced at the clock, relieved she needed to head over to the church. Hopefully, Sam would call her as soon as he had more information about Donald's death . . . and what it meant for her sister's murder investigation.

"You got a minute?" Carole, the church secretary, asked.

Cici smiled as Carole's gray head poked into her doorway. The older woman wore green cat-eye glasses. The beaded chain that wrapped around the delicate silver eye pieces jangled.

Cici had been pleased to hire the older woman, whose daughter, Regina, was a couple of years behind Cici in school. The young woman had died years earlier from breast cancer. She'd been so young—her loss a terrible tragedy for the community. Just months later, Carole's husband had drowned in a hot tub. The rumors that swirled out to Cici claimed he'd been high at the time of his death.

Cici never asked, and Carole never discussed her family.

Cici smiled at her friend and closest work companion. "Of course."

Carole closed the door and leaned against the wooden panel. “Susan Johnson is here,” Carole said in a dramatic whisper. “She wants to talk to you.”

Cici’s eyes widened and something in her expression must have alerted Carole, because the older woman slammed her hands onto the old wooden desk with a vicious *whomp* and leaned in close.

“Breathe, Reverend,” she demanded.

Cici nodded and managed to suck much-needed air through her nose. After two more breaths, the black spots in front of Cici’s eyes dissipated.

“Does she know I was there yesterday?” Cici managed to ask. “That I found . . . Donald?”

Carole cocked her head. Her eyes narrowed. “How could she possibly know that? *I* didn’t know that.”

The unsaid words surrounded by Carole’s irritation reverberated around the room: *I should have known*. That’s because Carole ferreted out information from pretty much everyone, which made her a fantastic church secretary—as well as a few words Cici preferred not to use.

Cici stood, clenching her teeth as her legs shook. But she needed a moment to walk around her office to clear her head.

“This is Santa Fe. Everyone talks. And I just told you now.”

“Susan would have to be asking specific questions to know you found Donald yesterday,” Carole said, her voice stiff. She did not like Cici knowing details before her. “Where did you find him, anyway?”

Cici shook out her arms and wiggled her head on her neck. “Oh. Aspen Vista Trail. Sam and I were already hiking it when the call came in. And good point. As always. So. You’ll send her in, and we’ll see what she knows.”

“I’ll bring you a latte, too.”

“Thanks,” Cici said, trying to control her shaking hands. “I need the caffeine.”

“Rough night?”

Cici barely heard the words, instead drawn back into the strange feeling she got—and missed so desperately—when Anna Carmen was close. She sent out a feeler, but Anna Carmen refused to answer. Or maybe Cici was fixated on the idea of her sister’s image appearing to her yesterday, but it never actually happened. Sam had assumed Cici fell into shock. Maybe he’d been right.

Cici rubbed her palms down her face, wishing for some level of certainty about what happened yesterday. She had none. Not even her daily prayer time this morning eased her riotous emotions.

Carole made a sound of disapproval as she walked over to the door, opened it, and walked down the short office hallway to the reception area.

Cici heard her say, “Reverend Gurule is finishing her call. You can head on back.”

What? Oh, right! Donald’s wife was coming into her office.

Cici dived toward her office phone, picked it up, and pressed it hard—too hard—to her ear. She dropped her gaze to her desk but peeked up from under

her lashes as she made noncommittal noises into the phone. The dial tone caused her headache to pound harder.

Susan entered the room, her eyes puffy and her nose red and raw. The woman's posture was bent inward.

Carole waved to get Cici's attention as she pretended to get off the phone.

"We can discuss those stoles more later. Thanks for the call."

Cici hung up, trying to overcome her grimace. Stoles? Really? Already, she'd failed at this cloak-and-dagger crap.

"I'll get that coffee, Cee. Susan, you want anything?" Carole asked, her hand cupping Susan's shoulder with solicitude.

Susan shook her head.

"Never mind on the coffee, then," Cici said, dropping the phone back into its cradle. She stood and rounded the desk. "Susan. I was deeply sorrowed to hear of Donald's untimely death."

Susan fell into Cici's arms in a fit of tears.

Carole raised her eyebrows even higher as Susan began to bawl, sputtering incomprehensible words in between sobs.

"What was that?" Cici asked, running her hand up and down Susan's back in a soothing gesture.

Susan reared back, her eyes fierce. "Donald was having a blasted affair."

"Er. That's not what I expected." At Carole's rolled eyes, Cici took Susan's hands and led her to the small seating area opposite the desk. "Let's sit here and you can tell me."

Once Susan sat, so did Cici. Carole hovered by the door.

“I was down in Albuquerque this weekend for a conference,” Susan began on a sigh.

Easy enough to confirm. Sam would already be looking into it, Cici was sure.

“The call . . . I was *shocked*. Donald doesn’t hike. He has a heart condition.”

That was news. “Really?”

“Taking a stroll down our street has been the extent of our physical activity for the past year. So for him to be at the top of a trail . . . no, nope. Something happened. Or *someone*.”

Susan dabbed at her eye with an already-soaked tissue.

“I knew I should have found his lack of interest in me more worrisome, but with menopause . . .”

Cici shot Carole a panicked look. This interview took a side turn into a place Cici never anticipated.

“Such a challenging time in a marriage,” Cici murmured.

Carole smirked, probably because Cici managed to sound normal.

“And to find out some woman posed to be *me* on that phone call. Dammit.”

Susan slammed her palm down on the arm of the chair, causing Cici to jump.

“If Donald had to go and get himself killed, the least the rat bastard could do was have the thoughtfulness and dignity to die doing something seemly.”

“You have no idea who this woman is?” Cici asked.

Not only did Cici want to know, Sam needed to find the connection to solve Donald's case—and for a chance to solve Anna Carmen's, which remained a painful mystery not just to the two of them, but for the community at large. Anna Carmen Gurule was voted teacher of the year and had many hopeful parents at Capitol High School hoping their child would be taught by the young, enthusiastic woman.

Her death left a huge hole in the community—one Cici desperately sought to fill.

You could help me out here, you know, Cici yelled mentally at her silent twin, her disposition souring.

Nope. Anna Carmen proved her same stubborn self even in death. Anna Carmen made a point to pop in on the mountain yesterday basically in Technicolor, but now refused to come back—even when Cici begged her.

“No idea. How stupid does that make me that I had *no idea* he was cheating?”

Susan's eyes filled with tears once more and she put her face in her hands as she sobbed.

“Thirty-one years together, and it's all over. Not just our life together, but the life I *thought* we had for all those years. All I have to show for it is a shih tzu I can't stand.”

And a fat bank account, thanks to Donald's thirty-plus years with one of the most prestigious law firms in the region.

Cici leaned forward and pressed her palms to Susan's, wishing she had more to offer the older woman. A fresh bout of sobs burst out of Susan's trembling mouth. Carole offered a tissue, and Susan used it plus two more before she calmed enough to continue.

"We'll need to have a funeral," Susan muttered.

"Absolutely. If that's what you want, we can do that."

Susan raised her head, eyes burning with hate, but also filled with a deep-seated despair that worried Cici.

"Just don't say anything about Don being a good man. He's obviously a lying, cheating SOB in addition to being a blood-thirsty attorney. He *deserved* what he got up there. Since he's stabbed me straight through the heart."

"Perhaps there is a misunderstanding in here, Susan. Donald seemed to care for you, very much."

Susan stared down at her lap, shredding another tissue. She picked at a sculpted nail and pursed her lips. Then, much to Cici's shock, she leaned forward and held Cici's gaze with a flinty one of her own.

"He seemed to care for his work, too, but after a trip down to Madrid last week, he *quit*."