

ADVANCED
PREVIEW EXCERPT



A MYSTERY IN MAINE

DEADLY TURN

SANDRA NEELY

In *Deadly Turn*, protagonist Patton Conover returns, along with her propensity to ask troublesome questions and show up where she's not welcome. Patton is hired by a research firm to collect dead birds and bats at Maine wind-power generation sites. When a turbine explodes, she stumbles over part of a corpse, unwittingly implicating both herself and her beloved dog Pock. Under a brutal autumn heat wave and the unblinking scrutiny of Game Warden Moz (another mystery in her life), she's drawn into a battle among wind-power developers, green-power activists, and locals. Adopted by a teenaged trapper who moves into her cabin with an illegal captive eagle, Patton is once again offered only outlaw solutions to fight for a disappearing world and clear her name.

PRAISE FOR Sandra's previous novel:

"... exceptional, jaw-dropping TALENT ..." —WOMEN'S FICTION WRITERS ASSOCIATION RISING STAR CONTEST

"... Neily's novel is getting rave reviews ... she's had a lifelong passion for our native wildlife ..." —THE MAINE SPORTSMAN REVIEW

"... brilliantly captures the battle to conserve Maine's mythical woods ..." —RON JOSEPH, WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST AND DOWN EAST MAGAZINE AUTHOR

"... an environmental murder mystery, where the stakes are high and a vanishing world inspires violence." —MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA

"... a rare talent in indie literary fiction ... reminiscent of good contemporary American authors such as Joy Williams, Joanna Scott, and Cheryl Strayed." —SPR



Sandra Neily's first novel, *Deadly Trespass*, was a finalist for the Maine Literary Awards, a Mystery Writers of America national award winner, and a national finalist in the Women's Fiction Writers Rising Star contest.

Sandra has been a licensed Maine Guide, a whitewater outfitter, director of a conservation school, and Maine Audubon's public policy director. She lives on Moosehead Lake with her husband and rescued Labrador Retriever, and enjoys fly fishing, skiing, and paddling, as well as writing riveting mysteries that help readers discover our disappearing world.

DEADLY TURN

Another Mystery in Maine

SANDRA NEILY

Advanced Preview Chapters I-III

This is a work of fiction. While some Maine place names are real locations, some are fictionalized. All characters, businesses, and incidents are products of the author's imagination and are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER 1

Alone on Eagle Ridge, I clutched a dying bat. Against all rabies advice, I pulled off my gloves to find the animal's heart and my bare thumb stroked a tiny throb. At the last limp spasm, the bat's eyes filmed over. My eyes blurred, too. Then I bent and smelled her, hoping she was female and we had something in common.

I liked to think I could smell leaves on animal sides, pond weeds on moose noses, and wind in bird feathers. It helped that I worked odd jobs for biologists who let me get close to wildlife that could no longer run from me. I liked to smell my way back into animals' lives. I wasn't sure about wind on the bat, but tiny insect bits crinkled against my nose when it touched her fur. They smelled like ancient parchment.

I closed my eyes and saw her. Almost as dark as the night around her, she turned toward a flying moth, chirping as she closed in on her meal. Cupping her tail into a shovel shape, she scooped the moth from the air, bent herself over, and shoved it up into her mouth. Before she could land and eat, she bent double again and fell, panting for breath, feebly beating her wings against bushes that held her.

I shifted the bat so it was cupped carefully in my hand. I thought the only thing we might have in common was not knowing what caused us to falter and fall.

Time to admit the obvious. Collecting dead bats and birds at Maine wind-power sites and getting paid essentially nothing for doing it

was a doubly depressing situation. I had yet to find a dead eagle, but if our weird September heat wave lasted and birds found thermal currents rising over the ridge, we'd find one. My boss had already warned me. "Eagles hunt with their heads down and don't see the blades. Dead on the ground, they look like an axe murderer celebrated something." If I got emotional over a dead bat, I couldn't imagine what a meat-cleaved eagle might do.

Holding the bat's tiny body in both hands, I used my thumbs to smooth its webbed wings and I tried to close its eyes. They were already dry, staring at a strange, bright world. I squinted down the long line of towers topped by spinning blades—all shimmering in heat that would make Miami proud. Thick transmission wires, strung between massive poles, commanded the treeless ridge, sending electricity south, way out of Maine. Hundreds of miles away, people in Boston were probably plugging in too many fans and air conditioners.

I bent my head back until every shoulder tendon screamed for help. Tower Sixteen loomed over me like an alien spaceship. At least forty stories over my hard hat, curved blades that looked like flower petals on steroids slowly whomp-whomped in the wind, but that was an optical illusion. Up where eagles hunted, the blades' manic speed shattered Daytona's speed records.

Up close, each tower looked as if it had crash-landed into a concrete landing pad, on a ridge sucked free of trees. A gear box about the size of my Subaru hung under the blades—enough machinery to land on earth and return to a faraway planet.

Even without morning sun, the L.L. Bean thermometer clipped to my pack read eighty five—a perfect day to lean against a cold wall with my shirt pulled up. Thin and very used, it wasn't much of a shirt, but it had

sleeves. After age fifty, when the gym failed to discipline the Silly-Putty skin under my arms, I'd sworn off sleeveless apparel. If I could have managed the heat wave working naked, I would have, but instead I sought out thrift store shirts and hacked off half of each sleeve.

I picked the nearest tower and, using my gate keys, slid inside, lifted my shirt with a free hand, and sagged against chilly metal. Machinery throbbed behind other doors I couldn't open. My teeth vibrated against each other while my chest cooled. I leaned my back into what I was sure was going to be the best moment of the day. The tower had a cold pulse, reminding me that I held a bat without one. My work day was on.

Slamming the door and looking for Pock, I saw where he'd lifted his leg to yellow the walls that had swallowed me up. His whole body wagging, he leaned up to sniff the bat, his muzzled nose nudging my fingers. I shoved stray hairs back into my pony tail. With one animal lifeless and one rubbing up against me, I thought about poor life choices. Pock often made poor choices about porcupines and skunks, but he had me to bail him out. The bat, hungry for insects teasing the darkness before her, had chosen a deadly route and paid for it.

Soon after I'd quit my job, I found I couldn't rely on returnable beer cans to fill my gas tank even though nearby ATV trails offered up a generous supply of Bud Light refuse. I'd sworn to take any job that freed me from airless rooms—any job that put me near wild creatures. Maybe I should have looked for something that was outdoors and lucrative at the same time.

Pock whined and tried a back flip off my leg. "Of course not. No bat for you. It's family. Animal family. And save the betrayed face. You even look like a bat when you sleep. Ears out like wings. Snaggle tooth over your

lips.” I pulled a plastic bag from my pocket, slid the bat into it, and leashed Pock. “Let’s get to it.”

Last week on my first day collecting animal debris, Anita Stockdale had handed me a hard hat and pointed to the port-a-potty whose door said, Ladies. Unless There Aren’t Any. “Bring your own toilet paper though. Whatever I leave in there vanishes overnight.” Then she’d squinted at Pock. “You and I are hired to complete research that this company can take to regulators to make them happy. I’m thinking your dog might screw that up. If he’s like other Labs, a good romp with a carcass is too tempting.”

I’d strapped a wire muzzle over Pock’s nose and mouth and I held up his favorite toy. “This will work, Anita. He’ll just fry if I leave him in the car.”

Pocks’ teeth clanged on metal as he shoved the white, plastic mooring buoy around on the ground, unable to sink his teeth into it. “You made your point,” Anita said. “Premier Power & Energy doesn’t care what goes on here if I hand in a report that counts dead animals the way they tell us to count them, which is corporate-ass silly: searching a tight box of terrain when the blades throw out death in a wide zone. I know that game.”

When she reached down and rubbed Pock’s belly, he soft-growled his ecstasy. “A dog might find more carcasses. Just don’t let him chew on what he finds.”

Although it felt like sweaty summer, we were three weeks into September’s fall migration, when bats and birds were on the move, and Eagle Ridge’s towers offered them different kinds of death. To birds in the

air—and humans far away—the blades probably had a dreamy white quality—like slow-motion Ferris wheels. Up close they were navigation hazards taller than any Maine building. Blade-sliced birds looked like a food processor had run amok as it sliced tomatoes. Crumpled bats looked like limp dolls without stuffing.

Holding the bat with one hand, I watched Anita stop and park her truck in a dust cloud. Grunting as she swung her pack of bottles, baggies, and tools onto her back and marched away toward Tower Fifteen, she was so thin her load looked like it walked itself down the road. Her long, blond braid bounced over her pack and slapped her rear end on each stride.

She stopped and turned toward me in the road. “Still alright with fingers in critter muck?”

I straightened my hard hat and gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up, the way I would for something chocolate.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I kinda expect you to bail on me when you figure out what’s really going on. I mean, it’s healthy air up here miles from your old, stinky legislature job. Now that’s genuine mayhem. Money and how it gets spent is so messy. Here it’s simple. Death and decay. I can cash my paycheck knowing what I signed on to do and it’s still somehow about science and biology. I suspect you’re living low and rough because you have to, but from what I know of your past work, you’re not going to feel good being owned by these boys.” She waved her hand to take in the line of towers. “And on that subject, if you want to keep camping over here to save on the commute, remind me to lend you a tent that doesn’t leak.”

She shifted her pack. “I think you’ve got the hang of how I want the GPS location data. How about today you number and flag specimens uphill. I’ll head downhill. We’ll meet up and drive down to lower towers at

break time. Bring me some fresh ones. I need to complete some field necropsies.”

“Hang on,” I said, unleashing Pock, trotting after her and holding out the bat. “If a bat’s so sensitive it can find and snag mosquitos from air, why can’t it miss a chunk of metal?” I smoothed the bat down the length of my hand. “And I really don’t understand. It looks fine, but it’s dead.”

When Anita dropped her pack and felt around her pockets, I thought I could avoid another biology lecture by stepping up. “I don’t need a complete replay,” I said. “I get the echo thing—bats send sounds that echo off what they hunt so they can find dinner—but this makes no sense.”

“Echo location’s not involved here.” Frowning at my naked hands, she pulled gloves from her pocket and snapped them over her fingers. Then she lifted a scalpel from a case tucked into her shirt pocket. The cut bat slurped open like over-ripe fruit, its innards a bright red blood bomb.

“At two hundred miles an hour, rotating blades change air pressure,” Anita said. “The dropping pressure explodes blood vessels next to the bat’s lungs and the lungs fill with blood. Bats drown in their own blood. Kind of like scuba divers getting the bends when they don’t take time to equalize pressure as they surface. They say the pain is something else.” She pressed the bat’s chest back together, slipped it into a bag at her waist, sheathed her scalpel, and walked downhill.

We only collected and catalogued on days Premier Power & Energy decided were auspicious days. I guessed that gave coyotes, foxes, eagles, and other carnivores time to drag carcasses away and lower the body count. The limited schedule of collection days made Anita crave each daylight hour, so

it was going to be a long day, and because our side of the ridge had been mowed into a wide road, it was going to be a long day without shade.

From somewhere beyond roads and concrete, the aroma of decomposing leaves was like a rich casserole cooling on a faraway window. I thought I might move my tent even deeper into the woods at the end of my shift. I shoved the stick end of an orange flag into the bush where I'd found the bat, numbered it, and then searched a careful grid around Tower Sixteen. I didn't miss Pock until I needed him to sniff out thick brush beyond the road. Eagle Ridge's low growth had been sprayed with herbicides, but it grew back like thick, mutant landscaping. I counted on his wagging tail to advertise carcasses.

I yelled his favorite invitation—the one that signaled ice cream or burger grease on the grill. “Yip, Yip! Zip, Zip.” I called and waited. Waited and called. If I hadn't been facing uphill I might have missed his blurred shape speeding across the road above me. Of course my dog was up to no good up on Eagle Ridge. “Texas,” I panted. “Could use Texas right about now. Or Oklahoma.” On a flat plain, I could have dashed from tower to tower, maybe dodging cows, but in Maine's north woods we all have to go up, up, up.

I dropped my pack and hard hat, tightened the band holding my pony tail, and tried to jog up the road. Nothing had changed since the last time I'd asked my knees to challenge elevations. Since I'd turned fifty, they just complained.

Stopping where Pock's dusty prints left the road for the trees, I held my breath and strained to hear real world sounds. Up over the last rise of ridge, machine noise grew loud and ugly. I didn't hear the familiar whomp, whomp swishing noise. What I heard sounded like a car commercial where inferior models get crushed into walls, and metal pieces fly off to clang

away on concrete floors.

Hands on knees, bending almost double to breathe, I hoped for some dog information. A bark. A howl. Partridges flushed from cover. Deer bounding away. Hopefully not a repeat of last spring's cowardly move when he'd brought me an angry mother moose, her nose inches from his fleeing butt. I'd climbed a tree. Pock had to run for it.

I heard only my hoarse rasp and the calls of chickadees hopping into the nearest tree. They were the forest's perky bird investigation squad, a winged gang that didn't feel threatened as they clustered toward activity that promised cheap entertainment. Even when the occasion was a remote dirt road, they always looked dressed up with black hats, throats like black bow ties, and tuxedo-grey coloring over their shoulders.

I heard Pock's muzzle scrape on gravel before I saw him. Wagging, he nudged a brown tree limb out onto the road. It flopped awkwardly from side to side, one narrow part attached to something that looked like a lump of trunk.

"Quit clowning around," I said standing up. "We're working here."

Yipping with delight, he shoved his find toward me. Too late I realized it was a limb, but not from a tree. Pock shoved toward me an arm attached to a shoulder—a chunk of shoulder wearing a tattered, bloody sweatshirt that did nothing to hide stringy tendons wound around splintered bone.

I fainted.

CHAPTER TWO

I came to with Pock whining and nudging my head into road gravel. Dirt packed my nose. I'd swallowed gritty motor oil and thrown up breakfast, leaving my right fingers in a pool of vomit. Pock wedged the tip of his tongue through his muzzle trying to lick up what he thought was yummy. What are good friends for? I wiggled toes and fingers, testing for pain before I tried to stand. Everything worked. Up the road the blades sounded like an accelerating road race where manic drivers grinded gears toward the finish line. Even the chickadees were gone.

I slowly pushed myself up onto my hands and knees, swaying from the effort.

"What the hell are you doing in the road? Yoga?" Anita yelled from below. "Get out of there. A blade's probably gone missing! Grab the dog. Come down! Patton? Patton! Move it! Now!"

I risked a glance at the severed limb. The sweatshirt marked it as human. Seeing someone dismembered was strange, and the bloody University of Maine logo was just plain surreal. It wasn't right to see a person that way—in pieces, like a large animal cut up for the freezer.

Blue and bruised, the upper arm was pruned up as though it had been too long in a bath. If a piece of human could ask a human question, the attached shoulder asked it. Clothed but bunched and hunched at an odd angle, it said what we all say with raised shoulders. What gives? What's the deal here? Someone going to explain this shit to me?

“Cassandra Patton Conover,” Anita called. “You hear me? Come down. I’m not coming up. Say something!”

The tower uphill shrieked as metal chewed metal. I lifted one arm and shoved a thumb into the air. All good, Anita. All good here. I pulled Pock under me and pushed myself off his body, wrapping my hand around the harness at his neck.

“Coming, coming. Don’t come up,” I panted. “We’re coming down.”

Uphill, something exploded and rained metal. We broke into a run. I could run downhill.

From the cab of Anita’s truck, with Pock tucked low between my knees and his tongue treating my scratched hands, I watched the Eagle Ridge Wind Project’s parking lot fill with vehicles. Anita’s satellite phone crackled and beeped, but she ignored it after she’d made one emergency call. How could it be that sixty miles deep into the Maine woods—sixty miles from the nearest house, the nearest fresh milk, and the nearest laundromat—someone’s body parts invited a big-boy vehicle convention?

Game warden trucks, a platoon of Premier Power & Energy bright green trucks, some loggers wearing hard hats and sweat stains from necks to groins, a state crime unit, state police, county sheriff, and the geeky curious who monitor scanners and show up where they’re not wanted. All of that spilled from the lot down the access road. My battered Subaru was the only gas-efficient car in sight. Ridge Dumais, Great Nations Forests’ crew boss, his red hat knocked sideways from peering in my parked Subaru windows, looked as though he hoped to find me.

“If you build it they will come,” said Anita. She swiped blond wisps

from her forehead, cobalt blue eyes lighting up her wind-chiseled face the way a lighthouse animates solid rock. Handing me slices of crystalized ginger and a can of juice, she said, “Blast a mountain smooth, scrape an interstate up it, and throw up towers that dwarf any building we’ve got. We just need a sign that explains how this is all good for us, and—oh, goody—there’s one of those bolted to the gate. Eat the ginger first. Settles the stomach if you’re done heaving.”

“You’re not big on PP&E,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t have to talk about anything. In the field Anita didn’t talk much. Like slicing the bat to explain its death, she preferred hands-on education. In the truck she was like talk radio. Just what I needed. Distraction from thought just about summed up talk radio anyway.

Anita kept going. “Actually, the company’s just doing what all the extraction folks do. Mine, log, dam, excavate, bulldoze, build. What rubs me rough is this. I’m hired by the New England Wildlife Consortium to conduct independent wildlife research, not help some corporation check a bureaucratic box so it can say it’s done something it really hasn’t done. I don’t like doing my work dirty so I can facilitate my employer’s questionable contract arrangements.”

I think I groaned, but Anita was wound up and didn’t hear it. I liked to lecture as much as the next pissed-off person, but I was trying to reform. “They’re making me use a search grid designed for smaller turbines. The new tall ones throw wings and bones the length of a football field. And no engineer with his ass in a chair should limit the seasons and days I can and can’t be here.”

She pulled the tab on my juice and lifted my arm and the can. “Drink this. Replace some fluids. You aren’t recording this, are you? I don’t think

I've chewed on the politics of this with you before. You don't say much, but you've got a reputation for setting people up so your fingers aren't on the trigger and people seem to shoot themselves. A reputation for being a very efficient spoiler."

Oh good. More reminders about why I was hibernating in the woods. I seem to have been a problem from birth, and even retiring to a cabin down a dirt road wasn't working. I looked at the parking lot and saw that I was trapped. I liked Anita, but I wasn't ready for therapy, even casual truck therapy. I mumbled something about being retired and moved my hand toward the door.

Anita wasn't done. "I know you're supposed to be Maine's most visible green do-gooder. I know you spent two years lugging a briefcase of good intentions into the state house and fighting these corporate wind boys a while back. I know you lost that battle and they can build what they want, pretty much where they want." She reached between my legs and rubbed Pock's ears. "Unless you're doing your dog a favor by offering him a carcass-sniffing vacation, for the life of me I just don't know what the hell you're doing up here."

I put the entire slab of candied ginger into my mouth.

Anita nudged me. "Doesn't each dead bird and bat pour serious salt into your wounds?"

That made two of us who didn't know what I was doing up here. When I moved up to hibernate at my family's camp and embrace a stripped-down life, I'd made a solemn promise to take any and all jobs that put me close to woods and wildlife. I promised myself that I would not get picky, uppity, or weirded out by what I had to do. I bought a rugged wardrobe of men's pants and shirts at the Baptist Thrift Store so I could save my last two pairs of jeans

from anything nasty. I couldn't figure out how nasty had come looking for me, so I sipped the warm juice and wished I had ice to use on my throat, and then on my knee, and then for sure I'd toss the ice down my bra.

Bursting from an overgrown logging road near tower two, a muddy ATV bristling with military-looking searchlights and ground-eating tires skidded to a stop inches from our bumper. A lean man in a dark helmet, green game warden uniform, and muddy black boots got out, stretched, and adjusted the gun on his hip. Everyone else in the parking lot had sweat stains that reached from their pits to their crotch but not this man. He looked crisp and pressed.

"Robert Akins," I said. My heart lifted and sank at the same time. "It's Moz."

"Abanaki word for moose," Anita said. "He's called moose?"

"Not many white folks would know that," I said. "Penobscot. He's Penobscot Nation though."

"I know more American Indian animal terms than Latin names I'm supposed to know." She chuckled. "That's how I break the biologist mold," she said. "And if he's Indian trying to be a warden, I'll bet there's no mold at all for that combination."

Moz pulled off his helmet and slid straight black hair under a warden-green baseball cap. He squinted through Anita's windshield, found me through the dust and bugs and nodded. I could have used a hug. Alone, I thought I'd get it, but not with Anita staring and other wardens crowding into the lot. Watching Moz part the milling crowd like smooth, swift water scattering bits of aimless driftwood, I slumped in my seat as if someone had sucked out my blood.

Moz adjusted multiple leather-covered implements at his waist and

aimed for the dark-green Maine Department of Game and Wildlife truck. Official-looking Premier Power & Energy people in reflective vests and hard hats had a map spread on its hood. They'd already pulled the switch on the wind project. Above us in a line all the way up the ridge, blades hung silent and still, like giant white petals on giant stems.

"No law enforcement buzz cut for the handsome Robert Atkins moose man?" Anita asked.

"It's complicated. He saves an inch or two in back to braid. For ceremonies and fitting in."

"But not with other wardens," she said.

I reached for another piece of ginger candy and sucked the rough sugar granules off it. "Moz runs the search and rescue team and always get his man, woman, child, or lost dog. He earned that name navigating woods the way moose do—in a straight line, stopping for nothing no matter how tangled, wet, or vicious the terrain. His reputation pretty much obliterates personal hygiene chatter about hair."

"And you know him how?"

"He was Evan's best friend."

"Evan the ex-husband?"

I nodded.

"Moz is your friend now?"

"I think so," I said. "Sometimes it's complicated." I rolled up both pant legs to inspect scrapes and cuts that left dark stains on my jeans, dropping some tears down onto the dried blood. It was silly to mourn a pair of already patched pants, but then I lived a life where I dreaded price tags even on the dollar rack.

"Are you OK?" Anita asked. "I can drive you home if they'll let you leave."

“Thanks,” I said, “but I’ll see it through. We’re stuck anyway. What’s with the fire trucks?” Greenwood’s ambulance and two fire trucks showered the lot with dust as they braked by the gate.

“PP&E donated over a hundred thousand to the town’s emergency services. And as a real surprise, the town selectmen are probably going to support the company’s next expansion—twenty-six more turbines up the other side of the ridge.” She sighed, but one of her unearthly pale blue eyes winked at me. “This looks like a good time for the volunteers to show off new toys.”

Moz unfolded black body bags and divided the firemen and wardens into search teams. They spread out up the road and into the woods, searching a methodical grid the way Anita and I did when we looked for smaller bodies.

Pock thumped his tail and whined inside his muzzle as Moz came to lean in my window. He smelled like fresh wood. My dog likes to chew wood, and I’d left my old job to hibernate in the woods. It made sense that Moz smelled good to us.

Blacker than his hair, his eyes gleamed like wet stones in a clean river. They sparked with light and meaning, but he could flip a switch and shrivel them to a flat stare. I thought the gleaming eyes might be the Penobscot, and the flat eyes might be the warden.

He reached down and scratched Pock behind his muzzle and dropped his other hand down to my knee. “Better keep Pock low and out of sight for now,” he said, running his fingers over my knee, circling my dried wounds with a firm touch. Anita leaned closer to watch.

“Are you injured?” he asked.

“Nothing beyond Band-Aids,” I said, a bit awed that his fingers felt

strangely cool.

“And you, Anita?” he asked.

She nudged me.

Yes, he already knows your name, I thought.

“On what you found,” he said, “were there recognizable details that might help us identify the victim?”

“Recognizable details.” I said. “Outside of my urge to throw up?” I gripped the juice can and slid the last drops onto my tongue. Apparently it didn’t matter that for years I’d helped my father cut up and package his deer, because I was shivering and sweating at the same time. “Nothing . . . nothing could . . . could . . .”

Moz leaned into the truck. “It may not stay with you as long as you fear.” He squeezed and released my knee and then stepped back from the truck. “When my team discovers how your dog has rearranged the scene, they will want him for possibly contaminating what they hope to understand. I would retain the muzzle for now. We may need to prove bite marks are not domestic dog.”

“Bite marks?” I asked. “You’ve seen bite marks? Up there?”

Moz pulled off his ball cap and slicked his hair back under it. “Yes. I have seen.”

Anita turned in her seat to face Moz. “And what brings you into PP&E’s territory from the great woods beyond?” she asked. “Everyone else came from civilization.”

I could have warned her not to spar with Moz, but I was stuck on bite marks.

Moz answered, but his eyes were all over the parking lot. “I was investigating camp burglaries at a lake below this site. Old logging roads

are faster.”

She pulled her truck keys from the ignition and tossed them up on the dash. “It used to be only moose could navigate woods up here. Now anyone can. Anyone with initiative can drive an ATV through here and now there’s sixteen miles of new roads at their disposal. That should narrow your suspect list. Someone or something must have chopped up someone else.”

“Excuse me, folks,” I said, twisting back and forth between them. “Excuse me—but bite marks?”

When Moz pulled his thick brows together his forehead looked like a bank of black clouds pushed before a storm. He smoothed his face into a careful, granite mask. “I found what you found and examined it closely. There is further evidence we will find more of the victim near the road.”

Of course he’d also seen my vomit and the outlines of my struggle in the dust. No mention of how I’d contaminated the scene. And no mention of what bits and pieces might have been “further evidence.”

Sounds of shouting at the gate snapped our heads toward the parking lot. Two cows trotted up the tower access road, followed by a state trooper waving his arms. Several sheep gathered in a bleating cluster in front of Anita’s truck. Someone had spray painted “Wind Weasels” on the shorn side of one sheep. The entire side of a large cow read, “Stupids! It’s a Wind Factory, Not a Farm.”

Moz sighed and peeled away toward the front gate where a crowd gathered around a media truck, its satellite dish rotating for signals.

“Damn,” said Anita. “We should have escaped when we had the chance. Now the entire circus has come to town, and it never comes unless it’s expecting someone’s bad behavior to make their day. We’d better settle in.” She reached for her briefcase and thumped scientific

papers on her lap. “I’d better read up. The feds are listing some bats as endangered species because there’s a fungus killing millions.” She dropped papers on my lap. “Here’s something for that column you write. The one on the outdoors and money.”

I glanced down. Somehow bats were worth twenty-two billion dollars to American farmers because they killed pests and pollinated crops. Somehow, it also seemed that tequila would vanish if bats didn’t pollinate Agave plants. The words appeared to be melting off the page, so I pressed both hands over the top sheet. Anita gently pulled the pages away and opened a yellow highlighter, pointing it at the parking lot. “Your warden doesn’t talk like a warden or an Indian.”

I sighed. Moz didn’t really belong to anyone. Not me. Not the warden service. Not even the Penobscot Nation he was born into. “He’s probably better educated than both of us put together, and we’ve got two master’s degrees and one PhD between us.” I rolled my bloody jeans back over my shins. “I can’t just sit here and marinate in your truck.”

“You’re going out there?” she said. “Someone’s going to stick a microphone in your face. They’ll ask you what you found, and because they already think someone’s been executed by this company’s screw-up, they’ll ask you about wind power. They’ve stuck microphones in your face lots before.” She popped a CD into the truck’s dash. “OK. Your show. But I’d rather listen to Springsteen chew his words in that sexy way he has. Any day.”

I needed to escape Anita as much as I needed fresh air. She sounded like what I used to be. A cow with a banner secured to its neck and belly deposited manure outside my door. The banner’s message heaved in and out with each cow breath: “Mountains. Not Renewable.”

“OK if I leave Pock here?” I asked. “Not a good time for him to learn

about livestock. He's already got half his head squished out the window. Some good smell must be calling his name."

Anita was studying a photo spread of diseased bats that looked as though they'd been dipped in confectionary sugar, with their noses, mouths, and even their wings powdery white next to the rest of their brown bodies. "Good god," she said, reaching back to scratch the part of Pock's head she could reach. I opened the door and jumped a pile of cow poop.

I heard a familiar soft chuck-chuck call and saw Ken Douglas bobbing his head absurdly as he leaned on his green state truck outside the gate. The scene was so charged with activity that no one noticed his partridge imitation, but out in the field, that's how he'd called me when he wanted me. Ken hadn't fired me, and I don't think the Maine Department of Game and Wildlife had either. It just didn't rehire me when hunting season arrived. Somehow I'd become a liability. Only Moz and I knew about my problem history with wolves. Ken's bosses just guessed.

"Of course you'd be here in the middle of some outdoor mess," he said. "I can't say you didn't warn me when you said the wind thing might turn ugly." When he wrapped me in a tight hug, his head barely touched my chin and his bushy eyebrows landed somewhere low between my breasts. I squeezed back and tried to think about his biologist expertise, not his sweat sticking to my shirt or his gender. It wasn't hard. His sparse hair looked like the coyote-digested rabbit he'd once shown me—bits of gray, white, and tan woven into a tight mat. I hoped he wasn't inspecting me in some equally awkward way.

Ken leaned away but held onto my arms. "Didn't expect to see you working here for Anita Stockdale and the corporate folks, unless you're still having trouble affording dog food. Don't get me wrong. She's a top-flight

biologist who's probably making gobs more money than I am, but you don't really buy the garbage her bosses signed off on. Do you?

Ken was good at giving me a gift of simple chat when I was obviously sinking into something very unpleasant. He'd done that for me before.

"What are we talking about, Ken?" I asked.

"You know. Anita's employers? The New England Wildlife Consortium? It dropped its bat lawsuit when PP&E agreed to reduce operations during bat migrations to save some of them." He waved his arms in large circles and chuckled. "Course it's a bit weird they settled on just trying to save bats and ignored the birds."

"Everyone bought the argument that tall buildings kill more birds than this stuff does," I said.

More game wardens talking on more radios arrived in the parking lot. They grabbed more body bags, but Ken plowed on, raising his voice to cover up the whine of ATVs headed back into the woods.

"Well, maybe big city buildings can kill, but not here. Imagine a giant letter S that starts up north in Canada and shoves its wide curving belly right through Maine's north woods before it drops into the ocean. Spring and fall, along that curve millions and millions of birds are flying. From the Arctic. Canada. Maine. We got a feathered freeway here. Spinning metal stuck up in the birds' road during rush hour is a giant traffic accident."

Ken would have been a far better spokesman for the woods than I'd been, or perhaps could ever could be. "You are a backwoods poet," I said. "Let me hide out with you for awhile." We climbed into the open bed of his truck and settled into two lawn chairs welded to the floor. When I'd worked for him, we'd dropped a camouflage colored net over our elevated perch and turned his truck into an observation blind so we could watch

animals go about their business.

“What’s covered up?” I asked, reaching for a tarp covering a boxy shape.

Ken grabbed my arm. “Don’t rile her up. She’s thinks it’s night time.”

“She?”

“I have permission from the Maine Wildlife Park to release a female golden eagle they’ve rehabilitated. I was scouting locations when the radio kind of exploded and I heard you might be part of the fireworks.”

I nodded and slid lower in my chair.

Ken looked uphill. “I’ll keep looking. Nuts to release her anywhere near here. Since they blasted the top off the ridge and cut away the trees, any furry thing that’s edible has to dash across lots of open terrain. We might as well put up bill boards advertising cheap, easy, dangerous dinners for eagles and hawks. I’ve kind of fallen a bit in love with her. She’s a beauty, but she’s getting very pissed off. It’s time.”

About fifteen protestors were trying to shove livestock through the gate, argue with wardens, or swarm reporters. Moz was on his knees, looking sideways at a long-haired protester chained to the underside of a bulldozer.

“OK, let’s get to it,” Ken said. “How are you holding up?”

I shrugged.

“It was all over our radios you found human parts. That’s gotta be rough.” He nudged me. “Prob’ly nothing I handed off to you tops that.”

Last year I’d helped Ken’s biologist crew investigate wildlife mysteries and crimes. My job involved labeling duct-taped garbage bags filled with animal evidence or mysteries Ken wanted to pursue. I also had the care and feeding of ancient refrigerators cranked up to arctic temperatures to freeze it all. But Ken was right. Nothing I’d seen came close to the shoulder in the road.

He nudged me again. “You can tell me. Maybe if you tell someone, you’d look better. Right now you look whiter than snow and I didn’t think any Mainer alive could do that.”

I put my feet up on the railing and bent forward into my knees. “Ken. I still can’t take a shower alone in a motel room decades after watching the movie *Psycho*. Now this. I know you’re curious, but I’m not sure sharing all this will fix me. It was more than rearranged roadkill. It was human. Who knew that only a part of a person was still so human? It even asked me a question.”

“No shit,” said Ken. He unwrapped a chocolate bar, split it into two, and slipped half under my hands. He knew about chocolate. “Lotts a blood?”

I didn’t mind his question. It sounded like conversations we’d already had. I slouched low in my seat, letting chocolate melt in my fingers. “No, but Moz says there’s bite marks.”

Ken kind of bounced in his seat. “I’d like to get a good look at those. Not much opportunity to examine human mortality that involves critters. Maine’s just too safe. No rattlesnakes, cougars, grizzlies. They’ll probably put some forensic flunkies on it.”

I sat up and turned toward him. “Could you tell a dog bite from some other canine bite?”

“You think it was dogs?”

“Don’t know. But I don’t want the wardens thinking it was my dog.”

“You using the muzzle I gave you?”

“On the job? All the time.”

“Well, they can use DNA to exclude your guy. Might mean some quarantine time, though.”

“That’s not going to go down well with Pock,” I said, but there was more. I didn’t want anyone official finding what I didn’t want found. Pock had been on my bed for two years, each night turning at least three circles so he could land on my feet and interrupt circulation. He was the warmth in my life. Pretty much the only warmth in my life. But I couldn’t prove he was legally mine if I had to.

Two Premier Power & Energy officials crossed to Anita’s truck carrying clipboards and files, their blue hard hats tipped into jaunty, useless attitudes. One had dirty L.L.Bean boots, while the other wore black loafers that looked as if they’d been shined with dust repellent.

Ken rocked left and right in his chair, untucking his shirt and trying to wipe his belly without calling attention to it. I thought I’d smelled every odor he could accumulate, but maybe not. I reached for a rag on the floor and wiped the melted candy into its wrinkles. It was even too hot for chocolate. “What are you up to, Ken? I can’t place that smell.”

He beamed, showing unusually white teeth for someone our age. I’d seen him loosen rope knots with them, bragging that his dental sins worked better than floss. “Oh you like that?” he crowed. “Special carnivore bits from the Maine Wildlife Park. Even I don’t want to know what critters they’ve fed this eagle, but she’s healthy and ready to go.”

The hard hats turned away from Anita and aimed for us.

Ken tucked in his shirt. “Not looking for me,” he said.

CHAPTER THREE

The black-shoes man pointed and raised his clipboard to wave me out of the back of the truck.

“Attorney. Or muckety-muck management.,” whispered Ken. “If the shoes don’t give it away, there’s always the first thing they do to remind you you’re not much but they are. Watch out for this crew. It’s slippery. Come to dinner when you get a chance so Millie and I can make up for whatever he might do to you.”

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek—first to accept his invitation and then to annoy black-shoes man who expected me to hop to attention. Ken climbed down and then ceremoniously reached up to lift me to the ground.

“Ms. Conover,” Black Shoes said. “I sincerely hope you were not discussing any aspect of this situation with anyone at this time.” He scowled at Ken, handed me a file, and waved his clipboard at a cow that wandered toward us. Where was cow poop when you really needed it?

“And this is?” I asked.

“The confidentiality agreement you signed when you agreed to work for us.”

I took a deep breath— a breath I used for bureaucrats of all types and stripes. A breath that was supposed to allow my calmer self time to choose diplomatic words, but that might have been in my former life. “That’s it?” I asked, leaning forward to read his name tag. “That’s it, Matt Pruitt? You’ve got someone ripped apart up there. Someone who has a family or people

who expect him . . . or her . . . home tonight, and you're trotting around down here with paper you expect me to care about?"

He pointed to the file I was slapping on my thigh. "Please review the agreement you signed when you agreed to work for us."

"I work for the New England Wildlife Consortium," I said.

"And they work for us. A copy of your contract is in the file."

I lifted a sheet from the folder just long enough to see that it was attorney-speak. "What are we keeping confidential?"

The L.L.Bean-boot man shuffled his feet and looked away. Black Shoes lifted his chin and barked at me. "Anything that happens on this property."

"Anything?"

"Anything. I will be present if and when you are interviewed by law enforcement officers. If I direct you not to reply, you are directed not to reply."

Ken squeezed my elbow, but I shook him off. "I'm confused. Didn't I originally sign up to conduct research that will be part of the public record some day? You know, reports of animal mortality associated with your operation?"

"The research we acquire is proprietary. It's ours. Our leases secure this land, our project, and our information. "

Ken coughed and cracked his knuckles. That crisp come-to-attention sound made up for his small height. "Ah, yes," said Ken. "It might be your information unless you interfere with a listed species. Could be listed threatened, or it could be listed endangered."

"And you are?" said Black Shoes.

"Your friendly regional wildlife biologist," Ken said. He unbuttoned a shirt pocket and removed a wrinkled card.

Black Shoes lifted a gleaming pen from his shirt pocket and clicked it

open. “And your supervisor is? You answer to . . . ?”

Ken winked at me and turned to walk away. “I like to think I answer to each wild animal in Maine, but today you can find the right boss-man at the Maine Department of Game and Wildlife. If he isn’t fishing.”

I didn’t notice the group surrounding Anita’s truck until it was too late. Two state troopers, legs wide apart, hands over their holsters, were deployed at the front and rear of the truck. Moz stood in front of the truck’s side door, blocking a round, gesturing man who brandished a long pole with a loop hanging at its far end. In frustration the man with the pole raised his ball cap and thumped it down backwards so the front and logo faced me. *Animal Control.*

Over my dead body.

As I ran toward the truck yelling his name, Pock squeezed himself out the rear window, scraping the muzzle off his mouth so it hung at a crazy angle and bounced off his chest. Moz lunged for him and missed. The Animal Control officer whipped the pole’s noose in Pock’s direction, but caught only air. The troopers spread their arms trying to corner him between Anita’s truck and the crime scene van, but he crawled under it and ran for the woods. I saw the tip of his brown tail thrash late-blooming flowers, and then he was gone.

The flower petals hadn’t settled on the ground before I was surrounded by angry men. I couldn’t understand their words. They came at me like waves. My stomach felt sea sick.

“Oh, here we go; here’s the tears,” one state trooper said.

I felt Moz against my back. Yes, he smelled like wood, but when everyone stopped talking and stepped back, I knew Moz really did have my back. The tears were a surprise. I swiped a sleeve at my lids. The folks

wearing crime scene T-shirts winced.

“Please nod if I have anticipated your requests,” Moz said. To the techs carrying what looked like tackle boxes he said, “You want to process her and her clothes for scene evidence.” They nodded. To the state police he said, “You want a statement.” They didn’t nod, but they didn’t say anything either. To his search team he said, “You want to know exactly where she went and what she did there.” The youngest one gave Moz a thumbs up. Moz nodded. And to the PP&E hard hats he said, “You want what you cannot have right now. Please wait outside the gate.”

Black Shoes started to protest but Moz said, “Mr. Pruitt, you may wait inside the gate if you wish, but I expect you to be within two feet of it when I return to you.” He put one hand on my shoulder. “Unlike what has already taken place at this scene, I am unwilling to cut Ms. Conover into pieces and feed her to you, so you will wait until I have assessed her readiness to cooperate. Each of you might try and recall the last time you fell within inches of a severed human shoulder and then behave accordingly.”

The men fell back and walked away, all except the animal control officer, who thumped his pole angrily in the dirt. “For Christ’s sake, Atkins,” he said, “the dog’s already wearing a muzzle. What’s that tell you?”

“Jerry,” Moz said, “I know you want to collect the dog and process it for evidence. We will try and find him before he has altered evidence he may carry. I will radio if we locate him.”

After Jerry stomped away, Moz bent toward me, small glittering lights in his coal-black eyes. “Of course we do know Pock will not be in an altered state when we find him.”

I sat in the dirt because my legs melted and I couldn’t imagine my next

move.

Moz crouched beside me. “Unfortunately, if I am to assist you, we must keep moving.”

“Where?” I asked.

“To the crime scene van to change from your clothes to something—something more comfortable.”

“I’m some kind of suspect?”

“No.” He lifted his head toward the top of the ridge. “But you may help us. Pock may help us. You both interacted with possible evidence. He touched it. You fell near it.”

As if I believed that line. That was Robert Atkins the warden. My friend Moz wouldn’t look away when someone wanted truth.

Snap. There it was. The snap that came when my brain stepped outside my body and slapped myself on the head. People do not just go lopping themselves in half. Of course the assembled posse suspected murder. “There’s privacy there?” I asked, pushing myself up off the dirt.

“I will clear the lot around you and stand guard,” Moz said. He called over his shoulder, “Anita, Patton will need her pack.”

Anita jumped from her truck. My pack looked lumpier than usual.

“I stuffed it with water and snacks,” she said, “just in case. I’ll stay here until they’re done with you no matter how long it takes.” She started to hug me, but Moz raised his arm to stop contact. I felt like I might be the start of a pandemic.

“They’re going to comb me for evidence,” I said. “My phone’s in there, too?”

She stepped back. “If you call that thing a phone,” she said. “It’s in there.”

As we walked to the van, I developed a limp. Looking helpless seemed

like a good idea since everyone was watching me. Moz noticed, frowned and said nothing. “If they take me somewhere—if the troopers take me somewhere, what about my car?” I asked.

“My team will drive it to your camp,” Moz said. “If you cooperate, we should be able to return you home tonight.”

The van smelled like corn chips and disinfectant. One of the techs placed a massive garbage bag on the floor, opened it, and explained that I was to stand inside its folds and drop my clothes into it. “All of them, if you please,” she said. “And your pack unopened. I left you a pair of hospital scrubs on the counter. When you’re done, wave out the door and I’ll come in to do the hair and DNA stuff. Then we’ll see what’s bothering your leg. OK?”

“I won’t do this until folks back off,” I said.

She jumped from the van and helped Moz herd people toward the gate. I sat and leaned against a side window trying to suck in fresh air as I looked around for anything helpful. Everything looked either helpful or useless except the iced coffee. I gulped the last drops and, holding my breath against what my surprised flesh might do, dumped the ice cubes down my bra. They melted so fast, rivulets of water reached my knees in seconds. Munching loose chips left on a seat, I stuffed duct tape and tweezers into my pack. When I found Pock, I expected there’d be grooming. Duct tape yanked hard or tweezers against his hide should cover most of the nasty possibilities.

I found an open topographical map with search coordinates drawn on it and stuffed it into my pocket. I picked up a compass and almost tossed it away. I was a licensed Maine Guide but that didn’t mean anything. I usually navigated by rivers that ran downhill and mountains that climbed

up. I put it in my pocket. The emergency flares were too tempting, so I took three and wrapped them in Anita's jacket. I grabbed wire cutters, raised a window that faced the woods, and slashed mesh and screen out of the way. I dropped two large bottles of disinfectant out the window, tossed my pack into the woods, and stared at the window.

Slow or fast?

I am generally a fast person. I raised arms over my head, clamped my palms together, closed my eyes, thought about swimming, and dove through the window. A mound of leaves broke my fall, but I had to spit dirt that tasted like old mushrooms. I wiggled into my pack, double-tied my hiking boots, grabbed the disinfectant, and slid into the trees behind the van. It took less than a minute to saturate the woods around the van with something that smelled like bleach.

I felt a twinge for the wardens' tracking dogs. Most of them were Labradors like Pock. I kicked leaves over what I'd spilled; I didn't want to blind them. Sorry, fellas, under normal circumstances I'd never do you wrong, but today, all bets are off. Your noses will be back by tomorrow."

Of course there was no limp. I could run if I had to. Arthritis paired with extra pounds isn't a terminal disease. I was in the move-it-or-lose-it time of life, when butts grow into soft cushions that fit couches, so it felt good to have an excuse to run. I aimed for where I'd seen Pock take flight and found a grove of birch thinned by fire. I jumped black stumps and twisted around white trunks. My passing lifted sheets of loose bark that waved like a scattered cheering section.

It was no accident that Moz put me into a vehicle shielded by trees, called for my pack, and arranged crowd control. I was sure he'd helped me escape. I had no idea why I ran, except it felt right. Maybe it was a gut

reaction to Black Shoes and his wind empire. I certainly needed to find my dog before PP&E's crew did. I didn't trust them with Pock's safety or the safety of any wild thing that lived on or near the ridge. I felt a small, grim smile grow between gulps of air. I didn't trust them with anything I cared about.

I'd been working for folks who could find an animal by hairs left on twigs, but Pock was my messy best friend so that promised a trail. Water slurped from his bowl became rivers on the camp floor. He regularly overturned his dinner so he could chase kibble on linoleum. He rolled on surfaces that promised odor or endless joy. I slowed and studied the ground, wiping away sweat that poured into my eyes whenever I looked down.

A hastily scratched pile of leaves didn't really cover the remnants of his breakfast. Bits of orange carrot in bits of feces were my dog's outdoor signature.

I wished I could smell what he smelled to know his traveling direction, but we humans are centuries away from that ability. In what direction had he strained his head out of Anita's window? Raised his nose into the wind? The line of wind turbines ran south to north along the ridge. Pock had strained toward something at right angles to the project.

West. It might work. I pulled the compass from my pocket and saw its arrow leap toward north as I aimed west. As I walked I ripped flagging tape off trees. I always eliminate every effort to survey wild places. Force of habit. It helped to think of flagging tape as an invasive species crowding out the rightful plants and animals that belonged.

Torn leaves and dirt cut by sharp hooves told me a deer had been too surprised to melt into the trees as Pock approached. He wasn't a deer chaser, so I continued west. Filtered sunlight caught spider webs he'd

ripped apart on the run. I found a stream where he'd rolled in mud, leaving paw prints and mud splattered ferns. He'd stopped to sample turkey scat, nosing aside dried older bits for something fresh.

Because it was fall and leaves and pine needles were fresh on the forest floor, Pock's trail was nearly invisible. A leaf with a turned-up edge that didn't look like its mates. Pine needles pressed flat instead of their usual haphazard resting places. Nothing would be invisible to any wardens who followed us, but all I had to do was find Pock before they found either of us. I held my breath to listen. No fast-moving boots on dry crispy leaves. I had time.

Dizzy from panting and then holding my breath, I stopped by a bog ringed with wet plants and dropped to my knees. Leaning back on my heels, cool leaves pressed to my face, I heard a woodpecker dap-dapping insects out of a tree. A lone tree frog scratched out a gritty one-note song. Over my head chickadees hopped from limb to limb, twittering my presence to interested parties.

Someone else was interested.

Claws scratched bark in my direction, and inches from my face, a small brown face popped up over a log. The pine marten and I were eye to eye. Stuffed and displayed in a store window, it would have been the cute toy—rounded erect ears, shining eyes, a milky-yellow fur patch below its chin. Its coat rippled like melting chocolate. No wonder Russian women were desperate to drape marten on their bodies. It sniffed and showed me sharp weasel teeth, scolding me with barks that sounded like quick, wet kisses.

Up close with wildlife of all sizes and attitudes, I liked to create conversations that took me some place I needed to go. Sometimes the effort saved me from trouble. Sometimes it got me into trouble. I smiled at the

marten. *Seen a black dog pass by here?*

It snarled back at me. *What's a dog?*

Like a coyote but not smart. He had something shiny flopping around his neck.

A trap? Was it a trap? Are you a killer?

Killer? No. He's . . . he's . . . family. I wouldn't hurt him.

The pine marten cocked its head and rose on its hind legs, huffing angry air at me. You're all killers. He wiggled into a hole in the log and slid out of sight. As if to punctuate the flick of his disappearing tail, above me on the ridge chain saws buzzed into life. Tree trunks cracked as if split with lightning. Each crack was followed by a hoarse whoosh as hundreds of limbs slammed the ground.

The marten growled at me from an overhead branch. *Your kind is killing big spruce and fir where I must hunt, hide, and live.*

I'm not happy about that either.

He turned away into thick balsam branches. *The animal you hunt follows a smell I teach my kits to fear. Not all children listen. Not all live.*

I pushed myself up and used the compass to find a west direction again, but it meant a steep uphill climb. I walked large circles looking to pick up Pock's trail. The effort seemed useless. The logging operation had probably spooked him. My dog hates explosive sounds. Thunder. Gunshots. Fireworks. They all send him howling under cars or tables.

When Pock's terrified howl cut through the chickadees and the chain saws, I aimed for it.

