

WHERE THE
REEDGRASS
GROWS

A novel

Blake Talton

The bell rang twice as Rachel entered. The gas station smelled of cigarettes and kettle corn. On the counter, an antique popcorn machine sizzled. On the far wall, an antique soda machine hummed with an obnoxiously high-pitched whirr. Even the cash register was retro, all nobs and white-painted levers. It was nostalgic. But it wasn't the sort of high-tech, modern gas station Rachel wanted—one with cameras and a central security system.

The attendant finished scooping the last kernels into brown paper bags. He slid one across the counter. “This one's free, mind the burnt spots.”

“Oh!” She somehow wasn't surprised that this backstreet gas station popcorn was arguably the best she'd ever had. “This is good. Really good.”

“Pappy's recipe. Though it's not much. Just oil, keep the kernels from burning, scrub the rust once a month, all that. Used to be better.”

“This place have security cameras?”

The kid squinted. He backed towards the far counter.

“You lookin' to rob it?”

“No”—Rachel flashed her badge—“And I'm off duty, don't worry. Listen, there was a fire across the street, two nights ago, did you hear about it?”

He nodded.

“Well, I have a problem. Friend of mine’s gone missing. Good friend of mine. And I need to see the cameras from that night.”

“You got a warrant?”

Rachel frowned. “Look, the case got moved to DCI, they’ll be in paperwork for weeks, I just want to know—”

“Come back with a warrant.”

Rachel tried not to stare. The kid wouldn’t budge. He kept taking small bites of popcorn. His hands shook. And he wasn’t relaxed or unconcerned like most other gas station attendants. He was afraid.

She changed tactics. “Pappy tell you to say that?”

“Yeah.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

The kid softened. He leaned forward, put his elbows on the counter. He laced oil-covered fingers and sighed. “He was the best.”

“Was?”

“Died last month. Left my Pa the place, but Pa was too busy and couldn’t take it up, so he got me to

work, said a little front-end business might do some good, said that...”

Rachel lowered her voice. “He helped people, didn’t he? People like your Pa, people like you. Wanted you to do good.”

The kid nodded.

“My friend’s in danger. You wouldn’t be doing anything wrong, and you might save his life. Do some good.”

She could see him mull it over. He wiped damp from his eyes with his sleeve, then tried to pass it off as oil. He paced the floor.

“We have a hidden camera on the pump and driveway. It might give you what you want.” He pointed to a storage closet. “In there. It’s open. Mind the cat.”

Rachel wasted little time. The black tabby rested on a stack of boxes. It stretched to twice its length as she entered. She reached down to scratch it. It hissed, swiped, and darted behind the boxes that formed a small computer nook.

She drew a pen and notepad from her purse. The camera didn’t show the other side of the street. But it was clear enough to show every car that passed the driveway and—more importantly—every license plate.

She rewound footage until an orange glow started in the corner of the screen. The fire. She hoped to see Ben or the other paramedics. She dreamed. She prayed. It was a lost cause. When the footage failed to deliver, she went back to pulling plates.

If the plates registered, she could run them. And if she could run them, she could backtrack to find dashboard cameras. Surely, if she dug deep enough, someone would have footage of Ben.