

Chapter 28: The worst thing on planet Earth

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So the investigation began. Chief Deputy Ted Jefferson knew what to do. He may have been a newcomer to Santa Fe but he knew law enforcement and he was ambitious. If he could solve this crime, keep the election on track, end the rumors and speculation, and quickly arrest the culprit, his name would be all over the newspapers and his face on all the TV news reports. It was a sure ticket to the election in two years. Sheriff? County commissioner? Maybe even Congress? Anything was possible. After all, only 60 miles to the south in Albuquerque, another cop was running for Congress. This was a law-and-order state. He was better looking than that guy, more articulate, knew more about politics. Why shouldn't he be next? Jefferson drove up the ski basin road to the hairpin curve where the girl had died, the same curve that almost killed the independent guy running for governor, what was his name, Cox. Yeah, Cox. And the girl had worked for Cox. And a lot of people didn't much like Cox, or at least didn't like the fact he was running for governor, screwing up the neat little game the Republicans and Democrats played with each other. The site was easy to spot. Brush and small trees were smashed. The ground was torn up. But there were no footprints. It had rained a few hours ago. Unusual for this time of year. Unfortunate. Valuable evidence was surely washed away. But there was always evidence. Jefferson had done enough investigations to know that all evidence never disappeared. It might be as small and uninteresting as a match or as obvious as a fingerprint. It might be a piece of clothing, or just something that didn't belong, that was out of place, that didn't make sense: the awkward position of a body, lights left on, a door ajar. No, the problem was not finding evidence; it was making sense of it. Often, there was too much evidence, too many fingerprints, too much DNA, too many clues that led nowhere, obscuring the few real clues that told you something you wanted to know. The young woman's body was still in the car, wedged in behind the wheel. She hadn't been wearing a seatbelt. Airbags hadn't deployed. The driver's window was open, the driver's door gaped wide. The body was still lying on the ground next to the car where the impact or the twisting and turning of the upside-down vehicle had thrown her. The cause of death was obvious: her neck was broken. The guy who had spotted the wreck had called 911. When the EMTs found her dead, they called the sheriff. Since they couldn't do anything for the girl, he told them to leave the body there and he'd get someone up there right away. He was as good as his word. Thompson arrived within an hour. In a few minutes the technicians arrived to take fingerprints, examine the body, work up DNA samples, make sketches of the scene. But even without them, Thompson had formed a clear picture in his mind of what had happened. They had been sloppy. His next stop would be a visit to Venus. Memories are the best and worst thing we have, Sen. Fred Cox mused morosely after news of the death reached him, a death that reached him in more than one way. Without memory there'd be no civilization; but without memory there'd be no pain, at least of the lasting psychic variety. Certainly memory can be the worst, the absolutely worst thing, on planet Earth, because it won't die, not until you do, not by an act of will. Pain can be diffused, sadness suffused, but memory lives on, immemorial, as day after day puts one foot in front of the next one. He couldn't forget the young Hispanic girl who had worked for him for only a few weeks before she died. Her memory would stalk him, as inescapable as his own shadow. Like his shadow, it might seem to dissolve in the darkness of oblivion, but then, he knew, it would return when the light was right, or wrong. What could he do about it? Memory is not a curable disease. But maybe it was treatable. The only antidote was knowledge. What had happened to her? Cox stared at the uniformed deputy sitting in front of him. He had never met Thompson, and didn't want to meet him now. Cox disliked the big red-faced officer on sight. He was the kind of cop Cox instinctively distrusted, the kind who wore ambition and toughness on his sleeve. His smile said, "I'm going to whack the bad guys. You better not be one of them." "I have a few questions for you, Senator," Thompson began. "And I have some information for you that you might not know." "I have some information for you, too, deputy." Neither the deputy or the senator was in control, but each had staked out his territory. Now the negotiations got under way in earnest.