

Death Offerings
(The Northland Crime Chronicles, Book 2)

The girl had likely been killed last night. Two brothers, six-year-old Tyler and eight-year-old Brendan, had found her when their mother brought them to the playground this morning. Tony and Lane had questioned the woman and sent her home. Neither she nor her boys had any information that would help. They hadn't seen anyone around. No one, that is, except for the still unidentified young murder victim.

Frustration settled in Lane's gut, followed by rage and helplessness. The victim had been discarded...like she didn't matter. That was almost as bad as the murder itself.

"She looks to be...what...sixteen or so?" Tony's voice sounded strained. "She's just about Paxton's age." His face had gone pale, his features tight and drawn. Paxton was Tony's fifteen-year old daughter. He was divorced and his kids, Paxton and her younger brother, Cadence, were spending the summer with Tony while their mother went on her honeymoon.

Lane didn't have kids, so he couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose one...especially losing one like this. Judging from the look on Tony's face, he could imagine it all too well.

The park had gone eerily quiet. Normally, on a nice spring day like this—sun shining, birds singing, flowers blooming—the place would be overrun with people and the sounds of laughter and children shouting. That's the way it had been when he and Tony arrived, but not anymore. His team had cordoned off a large section surrounding the playground, and the people who remained hovered on the other side of the crime scene tape, gawking curiously.

Lane made another circle around the slide. He'd already been over the entire area, but would keep going over it until he found something important—or until he was damned sure there was nothing to find.

"The others were left in wooded areas," Lane mused aloud. "It appears our guy wanted this girl found quickly."

Tony glanced around the park, peeling rubber gloves off his hands. “He had to know the odds were good that little kids would find her. Is he trying to send a message or just being a full on douche bag?”

Lane started to answer, but a figure in the crowd beyond the police tape caught his attention. Her dark hair lifted in the breeze, and she brought a hand up to push it out of her face.

Monroe.

Just the sight of her made it difficult to breathe. He grinned, knowing he must look like a besotted fool, but unable to help himself. She gave him a finger wave, and her full lips pulled into a brief smile.

A popping sound caught his attention, and he turned to find Tony snapping his fingers in his face. “Focus, dude. Dead girl, remember?”

Lane scowled. “I remember.”

Tony snorted a laugh. A touch of his typical carefree cockiness came back into his expression. “Go say hi to your woman. We’re still waiting on Keaton anyway.”

“She’s not my woman. Not really.”

Lane had started divorce proceedings, but Monroe wouldn’t take their relationship to the next level until he was actually divorced. Nor would he press the matter. She’d been hurt badly by cheaters and refused to become one. Lane knew exactly how she felt.

“For God’s sake. Go talk to her. Then maybe you can pull your head out of her ass long enough to work the scene.”

Lane hesitated, but because he couldn’t stay away from her, even if he’d wanted to, he acquiesced, heading to where Monroe stood. The closer he drew, the more airy and light his chest felt. He could smell her scent just before he reached her—that special fragrance that was hers alone, the scent of summer rain and fresh cut grass—fresh and intoxicating.

“Hi there,” she said.

Her brown eyes glowed almost golden in the sunlight, but they held a hint of worry. He wanted to reach out and touch her...run his hand along her soft cheek, reassure her that everything would be okay. But too many people were around for him to give in to the temptation. Besides, everything would *not* be okay. A young girl had lost her life to some sick son of a bitch, and no matter how happy just looking at Monroe made him, right now he had a crime scene to work.

“Hi,” he replied softly, trying to keep from drawing the attention of the others in the crowd. But it was useless. Half a dozen reporters migrated to the area where he stood, microphones thrust out like fencing swords.

“Detective, can we get a statement?”

“Who’s the victim? You have an ID yet?”

“Is this a homicide?”

“Who found the body? Can we speak with them?”

Lane pushed out a heavy breath and winked at Monroe. “We’ll talk later.”

She nodded, her smile gone, her expression solemn. Her change of mood matched his. It was difficult to remain cheerful at the scene of a murder.