

“Be careful what you open . . .”

Read on for an exclusive
excerpt of Julie Kramer’s next
Riley Spartz mystery,

DELIVERING DEATH.

CHAPTER 1

A guard checked a number against the ID bracelet on the man's wrist while marking his name off a clipboard as he stood in line.

Another chained the man's cuffs to his waist and shackled his feet together so he had to shuffle to board the prison bus behind other stumbling inmates in orange jumpsuits. He heard some snickering among the jailers about something called "diesel therapy." The term puzzled him, but amid the scuffling and stern faces, he had no time or nerve for questions.

His answer came thousands of miles later via a road trip through highway hell during which he had to constantly remind himself that he was Jack Clemens and he used to be rich.

After the first day, he had learned not to eat the bologna sandwiches offered for lunch. Not only did they taste like shit, but bathroom breaks were stretched hundreds of miles apart, and by the time the bus finally stopped for gas, he'd soiled his pants.

"Idiot. Asshole." The guy in the next seat swore at him, looking as tough as his talk with cornrows, tattoos, and scars.

"Sorry." Those who knew him on the outside would have been surprised by such a quick apology. Atonement had never come as naturally to him as blaming others.

During his court sentencing, he'd been given a chance to speak, but instead of expressing regret for his crimes—as his attorney had urged—he insisted that he'd been unfairly persecuted. All that blather did was piss off the judge and land him ten years in the slammer.

Now, seven hours into this excursion, the entire bus reeked.

This wasn't the deal Inmate 16780-59 had envisioned. After all, he wasn't a violent felon. Or a repeat offender. Maybe some of the outlaws on the bus deserved transport torture, but not him. Sure, he had tried to game the penal system and that arrogance had cost him his comfy bunk at a country club prison camp in northern Minnesota . . . but what did they expect? He was a white-collar criminal.

Until his crime made headlines, his wealth wasn't the kind that made Jack Clemens a household name. He didn't own a professional sports team, or appear in television commercials, or invent a product that changed the world. He simply moved money around various financial accounts, and thus could walk down the streets of Minneapolis without being recognized. With brown hair and blue eyes, medium height and weight, this middle-aged man was average in every way but income.

That night, after six hundred miles crammed in narrow plastic seats with stiffening legs and sore arms, the chained gang left the bus to be housed at another prison overnight. The inmates were given fresh uniforms and a chance to shower. But he was afraid of the showers and cleaned himself with water from the toilet.

He had no idea where he was, where he was going, or when the journey would end. He'd stopped trying to calculate what direction they were headed in, knowing only that he didn't belong on this bus with these animals. The guards ignored him when he tried explaining that a mistake had been made. He waited for the attorney to fix things, but days turned into nights and the wheels on the bus kept rolling.

CHAPTER 2

From the postmark date, I could tell that the letter had probably been sitting in my newsroom mail slot for a couple days. Unopened.

Most of the correspondence I care about comes by email or text. My paychecks are direct deposit. My bills are electronic. Checking snail mail isn't a high priority for me—even at work.

The first thing that caught my attention about the manila envelope was the lack of a return address. Sometimes sources send letters to journalists without wanting the contents traced back to them. They get deniability and anonymity: I get a scoop. I reveled in the possibilities for its contents as I carried the letter back to my office and shut the door.

The second thing I noticed was the package's bumpy texture. It made me suspect bubble wrap might be shielding something fragile—something important. Maybe a compact disc or thumb drive with valuable computer files. The prospect of ratings gold made me smile and take care opening the envelope.

The third oddity hit me as I immediately smelled a foul odor when I opened the envelope. Reluctantly, I looked inside.

Someone had mailed me a bunch of teeth.

The blood was dried; the stench fresh. Some of the roots were long and pointed. Some twisted. Others broken and jagged. I quickly shut the flap but the stink and the sight stayed with me.

I'm Riley Spartz, an investigative reporter for Channel 3 in Minneapolis. Why anyone would send me such a ghoulish package was a mystery within a mystery. More important: were the teeth animal or human?

CHAPTER 3

I stood at the waiting room counter while the receptionist double-checked her computer screen before insisting that I did *not* have an appointment. “Although I left you several messages over the last two months about coming in for a cleaning,” she snapped, sounding disapproving of both my dental hygiene and my manners.

I mumbled something about being busy lately, then explained again, “I’d like to see Dr. Mendes anyway, on a professional matter.”

“He’s with a patient.”

I offered to wait. “It will only take a minute. I have to show him something.”

I texted Malik to bring his camera inside. He used the time we lingered in my dentist’s office to complain about having to shoot the teeth. Malik fancied himself an artist as well as a news photographer, and to him the fangs seemed more crass than creative. At this point, without any obvious news value, he would rather have been assigned to shoot weather video of interesting clouds over urban sprawl.

I had gotten his initial cooperation by reminding him that vampires were hot these days and perhaps the teeth might lead to a story about real-life urban bloodsuckers that might lead to a movie deal. It was quite a stretch,

I had to admit, but the pitch hooked him. Still, he remained grouchy.

“This may not be as bad as the time I had to video that puppy mill,” he said, “but it ranks right up there.”

“We need to document each step.” I tried to hush him by motioning toward a patient sitting on the other side of the room. She was pretending to read a magazine but I could tell our conversation, and the Channel 3 camera on the floor, interested her more than diet tips or fashion advice.

I wasn’t about to confess that I carried a purse full of extracted teeth, but did confirm that yes, she might have seen me on the news when Dr. Charles Mendes stuck his head through the door.

“Riley Spartz. About time you showed up. You’re overdue.” He waved me in, and I whispered for Malik to wait behind for a few minutes to give me time to land the interview.

Dr. Mendes directed me toward the chair in one of the exam rooms. Obediently I sat down and he leaned it backward. “Open wide.” He flipped on an overhead light. “Now, what is it you want to show me?”

“Not my mouth.” I pulled out the envelope from my black bag. “This.”

The smell didn’t seem to unnerve him when he peeked inside. He gave an appreciative whistle and raised an eyebrow. “Where did you get all these?” He pushed the dental instruments to one side and dumped the teeth out over a piece of paper on the tray. Under this light, and up close, I could see that the roots looked more yellow than the crown. Two-tone teeth.

“Are they human?” I asked.

He used a sharp probe to roll them around. “Most definitely.” He pointed out several fillings. “But I see that you still have your pearly whites intact, so who are these from? The tooth fairy?”

I explained all I knew, which wasn’t much. “I was hoping you might be able to give me some clues.”

“Well, I can tell you that these are not senior citizen

teeth. They did not fall out from natural causes. They put up a fight.”

Dr. Mendes put on plastic gloves to examine the teeth and estimated the age of the owner to be between twenty and thirty years old. Then he indicated scratch marks on the enamel where they had been gripped prior to being yanked. “I would also venture this person was a smoker.” He noted places where one tooth had a silver filling and another had signs of early decay. “But certainly not to the degree they needed to be removed.”

“Male or female?” I asked.

“That, I can’t tell you. You’d need a forensic dentist to determine the subject’s sex. But DNA can be found in tooth pulp tissue and that should reveal the answer.”

He looked inside the envelope once again and counted the teeth out loud until he reached the number twenty-eight. “Are you sure that’s all? We seem to be missing a few.”

“What do you mean?”

“The human mouth has thirty-two adult teeth. You have twenty-seven. Of course, some might have been removed earlier for cosmetic or dental purposes.”

By then Malik was standing in the hallway, holding his camera and listening to the details unfold about molars, incisors, and bicuspid. He seemed more interested in the assignment upon learning that every tooth has a story. Especially the rotten ones.

“Would you mind talking about this on camera, Dr. Mendes?” I asked. “Just in case I end up needing it? I’m not sure where I’m going with this.”

“Maybe you should go to the police,” he said. “I can’t think of any good reason why these teeth shouldn’t still be in someone’s mouth instead of the mail.”

I had been wondering the same thing ever since he declared the teeth human. But journalists like covering news, not making it. And I could imagine the headlines after some cop leaked my report to the other media. The newspapers would have fun playing with lines about me sinking my teeth into the investigation, taking a bite out of crime, and of course, my own big mouth.

“I need to discuss my next move with my boss first, but in the meantime, how about that interview?”

“Certainly, Riley.” My dentist glanced down at a file folder, apparently containing my dental chart. “As long as you make an appointment to come in next week for a cleaning and bite wing X-rays. You’re overdue.”

Dr. Mendes packed up the teeth after our interview, handing over the envelope and giving Malik and me each a new toothbrush and floss. On the way out, I observed the woman from the waiting room leaning back in a chair in another examination room with a dental hygienist looming over her mouth. Still, she noticed us leaving and interrupted her polishing procedure to ask what day this story would be on TV.

CHAPTER 4

Technically, I'd done my dental research over lunch. That's where I had told Ozzie, the assignment editor, Malik and I were going, and I even bought him a Reuben sandwich to go at Cecil's Deli on the way back to the station to keep our story straight.

Minneapolis–St. Paul is the fifteenth largest television market in the United States. More people watch local news here than almost anywhere else in the country, which leads to intense competition between stations. Channel 3 was typically battling for the number two spot against Channel 8, having seemingly given up the fight for number one.

Commotion was coming from inside the production studio. When I ducked my head inside, I saw a crowd of my colleagues assembled around news director Bryce Griffin.

The room was the size of a school gymnasium, formerly used for filming television commercials for automobiles or vacation getaways. I waited in the back. Bryce and the general manager had just commanded the staff join in a noisy team-building countdown: 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . the chant grew until reaching the apparently magic number of 3.

"That's right," Bryce shouted. "Let's hear it for Channel 3!"

Amid some lackluster applause, a spatter of blue confetti fell from the ceiling like an underfunded political rally or overproduced prom. I didn't know how to react to the scene and apparently neither did the other employees. So we remained quiet, rather than risk saying the wrong thing and being admonished for not being team players.

"In these difficult economic times," Bryce said, "television stations need to move forward. To stay static is to stay behind. So, in the name of progress, Channel 3 is getting a new studio set."

He pointed to his boss, the general manager, who dramatically yanked a piece of cloth from an easel, unveiling a framed sketch that resembled something from a science fiction movie, perhaps the deck of a spaceship.

"This is the future of Channel 3," the G.M. said. "This is what the viewers will see when they tune in to watch our talent bring them the news."

"Are there any questions?" Bryce asked.

I had plenty of questions, like why not put money into covering actual stories or hiring more street reporters rather than a superficial gesture like changing the look of the anchors' desk and chairs? Our travel budget had been slashed. Overtime was virtually nil. Yet news executives always seem to feel cosmetic changes like a revamped set or flashy on-air jackets with station logos will create buzz and attract viewers.

But I stayed silent because Bryce and I were going through a phase where we weren't speaking to each other.

The new boss didn't like me. I didn't like him. We each had ample reason to distrust the other. I considered him a lecher and he regarded me as an extortionist. We each had valid reasons for our opinions.

True, I had played a role in blackmailing him. Shortly after arriving on the job, Bryce had used his power, private office, and lewd texts to sexually harass Nicole Wilson, a rookie reporter. I'd taught her the mechanics of

hidden cameras to document his misbehavior. While I had urged her to go public with a lawsuit, Nicole had worried that exposing Bryce exposing himself might mean the end of her TV news career if she were branded a troublemaker. She decided to handle the situation more discreetly and put him on notice that we were watching—in effect, putting our boss on probationary status.

Rather than blame himself for the tawdry situation, Bryce blamed me. So we confined our conversations to the news huddle, where the day's story coverage was discussed and debated among managers and staff. As some point, our feud would have to end, but for now I figured I could outlast this young hotshot. The average tenure for a television news director is only eighteen months, and he'd already been here four.

The producer for the late news—our showcase newscast—broke the dead air to ask a critical question about when the new set would be completed. “Will it ready be in time for the February sweeps?”

“That’s when we’ll debut it ,” Bryce replied. “But we’ll promote it ahead of time to build suspense.”

The station had recently hired a new anchor, Scott Ramus, and he beamed enthusiastically at the announcement. “I just want to say how thrilled I am to be the first anchor who’ll deliver the news from the new set, and how proud I am to be part of the Channel 3 family.”

I understood his eagerness. After all, much of his workday would be spent sitting there, on his throne, smiling into the camera while his subjects watched from their living rooms. But personal experience told me that no TV ratings month was ever won on the back of a new set. Anchor desks did not build viewer loyalty. Viewers might click in once to see what all the fuss was about, but exclusive stories and great reporting are what keeps them from switching channels. Not fancy chairs or slick big-screen wall designs, but news content they can’t get anywhere else.

That's my job. Stories that make a difference.

As Bryce was praising Scott and explaining some of the logistics of the new set, I kept my mouth shut and my head down as I slipped out the door to the newsroom. The area was empty except for Ozzie, still manning the assignment desk in case a big story broke. He was engaged in an animated conversation on the telephone with an irate viewer, upset that the snow we'd forecasted hadn't materialized.

He held the phone up toward me so I could hear the yelling on the other end. "First, your station botched Christmas and now your meteorologist ruined our ski vacation!" I tuned them out, as Ozzie encouraged the caller to "take it up with Mother Nature." I was thankful that he handled most of the cranks.

Then I remembered I still had the tainted teeth. Rather than taking a risk and showing them off to the entire newsroom, I decided to bring the envelope upstairs to Channel 3's attorney and get his advice.

Pulling the package from my purse, I shook the envelope. "You have the right to remain silent." Even though I knew it was childish, I teased the teeth in a dramatic cop actor voice. "Anything you say can and will be held against you." Just then, I turned around a blind hallway corner and crashed into Bryce.

"I'll talk if I want to talk," he said, "because I'm the boss. Your job description includes listening to me, following orders, and not threatening me to keep silent. That's a slam dunk for insubordination."

I tried explaining that I wasn't actually speaking to him, but he gestured around the empty hallway. "Then who?"

"These." I gestured to the envelope, and tried to keep my tone neutral. "I was looking for you, Bryce. I have something to show you."

He seemed suspicious, then curious, then excited. Bryce had an expressive face that made it easy to discern his emotional state. "Will we be able to air them if we

blur body parts or add black boxes?” I realized he was hoping the envelope contained compromising photos of a state politician or some other local celebrity.

I was frustrated that our first face-to-face conversation in weeks had turned to smut within thirty seconds. “No, it’s nothing like that.” Not wanting to be alone with him in the dim corridor, I suggested we move to his office. The glass windows of his headquarters looked out on the rest of the newsroom, so I felt comfortable knowing that witnesses could observe our meeting but not hear our actual words. The transparent/no walls look was part of the terms Nicole and I had settled with Bryce.

Once the door was shut, I dumped the teeth on the center of his desk calendar. The stench caught him off guard and he glared at me before wheeling his leather chair backward to escape a pearly white ricocheting toward him.

“They’re teeth.”

Forgetting they might be evidence, I quickly reached out the palm of my hand to block the enamel runaway from falling off the desk. The roots didn’t freak me out so much anymore now that my dentist had explained that they’d had a mysterious life, cut short. I had empathy for their demise, besides curiosity, and wanted to tell their story.

“Oh. Just teeth?” That seemed to calm my boss, but he couldn’t hide the disappointment in his tone.

“Not *just* teeth. *Human* teeth.”

“Why do *you* have human teeth?”

I rolled my eyes. “No matter what you’d like to think, Bryce, I’m not a news robot. I am human.”

“You know what I mean, Riley. We’re not talking about your on-air smile, although you might consider some whitening work right here.” He tapped his finger against his front teeth, but I ignored the put-down, figuring it was his way of trying to remind me who was in charge.

“So where did you get these?” he asked.

“Someone mailed them to me here at the station. Anonymously.”

I pushed the envelope toward him. The postmark was from across the Mississippi River in St. Paul. My name—RILEY SPARTZ—was carefully penciled in block letters.

He wrinkled his nose, but began to perk up. The smell of a ratings spike overrode the odor of decay. I knew the scent of money was also on his mind because Bryce held a degree in business rather than journalism and appreciated stories that were cheap to produce. Under his watch, decreased costs were just as good as increased ratings. No worries about that here. These teeth were definitely past the point of needing root canals or other pricey dental treatments.

Boldly, Bryce reached for a tooth, but I slapped his hand back. “No touching.”

“Fine,” he said. “But what do you think? Are they a threat, or a tip? What’s their message?”

“Sorry, boss. They’re not talking.”

But if they could, they might have warned us of what lay ahead. Then I would have thrown them in the trash instead of going to the police—story be damned.

