

THE HUNTER

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First Edition

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Table of Contents

<u>CHAPTER ONE</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWO</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>CHAPTER THREE</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOUR</u>	<u>35</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIVE.....</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIX.....</u>	<u>48</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVEN</u>	<u>52</u>
<u>CHAPTER EIGHT</u>	<u>57</u>
<u>CHAPTER NINE</u>	<u>67</u>
<u>CHAPTER TEN.....</u>	<u>72</u>
<u>CHAPTER ELEVEN</u>	<u>80</u>

<u>CHAPTER TWELVE.....</u>	<u>89</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....</u>	<u>95</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOURTEEN.....</u>	<u>111</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....</u>	<u>121</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIXTEEN</u>	<u>131</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....</u>	<u>136</u>
<u>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN</u>	<u>144</u>
<u>CHAPTER NINETEEN</u>	<u>150</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY</u>	<u>156</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE</u>	<u>161</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO.....</u>	<u>169</u>

<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.....</u>	<u>180</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.....</u>	<u>185</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE</u>	<u>193</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX</u>	<u>203</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN.....</u>	<u>215</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT</u>	<u>231</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE</u>	<u>236</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY.....</u>	<u>245</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE</u>	<u>250</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO.....</u>	<u>257</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE</u>	<u>261</u>

<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR</u>	<u>269</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE</u>	<u>272</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX.....</u>	<u>277</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN</u>	<u>284</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT</u>	<u>289</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE.....</u>	<u>298</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY</u>	<u>309</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-ONE</u>	<u>318</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-TWO.....</u>	<u>324</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-THREE.....</u>	<u>334</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR.....</u>	<u>338</u>

<u>CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE</u>	<u>350</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-SIX</u>	<u>359</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN</u>	<u>369</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT</u>	<u>374</u>
<u>CHAPTER FORTY-NINE</u>	<u>382</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTY</u>	<u>391</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE</u>	<u>398</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO</u>	<u>403</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE</u>	<u>409</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR</u>	<u>416</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE</u>	<u>425</u>

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX..... 430

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN 440

“Oz never gave nothing to
the Tin Man,
that he didn’t already
have.”

America, Dewey Bunnell, 1974

Chapter One

Dannie's phone rang with Susan Gray's ringtone, triggering an increased heartbeat. Her mentor was the president of the K9 search and rescue club. She would only call if a search and rescue operation were necessary. The prospect of another search awakened vivid memories of the successful search for a missing Alzheimer's patient just two weeks ago.

“Hi Susan, what's up?”

“Dannie, the Sheriff's Office called. They've got a lost six-year-old at Punderson Lake campground. My dog has a leg problem and can't trail. Are you and Forrest up for another search?”

“Yeah, you bet.” *A lost kid*. This is why she and her dog Forrest had trained for three years to earn the certifications as a K9 search team—a chance to save a life.

“Okay, we’ll meet at the campground. The Sheriff’s office is setting up a command center. We’ll have three or four civilian K9 teams and one from the sheriff’s office,” Susan replied.

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll be there as soon as I can.” She walked to the sliding glass door where the big bloodhound lay. “Hey Forrest, are you ready to work?” Forrest scrambled to his feet, ran to the door, and let out a howl of excitement.

A warm October weekend; it was 70 degrees at 4 PM. Dannie drove into the campground parking lot, an anxious Forrest whining in the back of the SUV. Next to the

large van that served as the Sheriff's Department command center, she noted the K9 search and rescue canopy, K9 SAR, in bold letters. Leashing Forrest, she walked to greet the other K9 teams. Bile rose in her throat while buzzards, not butterflies, raged in her gut. *Am I good enough for this search? Am I up to the task?* With one successful search behind her, she was still a rookie and the youngest member of the K9 search-and-rescue organization. *If I'm going to stay on this team, I can't screw this up.*

"Hey, Dannie," Susan Gray said as she tied her straw-yellow hair in a ponytail. "Glad you could make it."

Dannie exhaled some of her tension as she approached Susan. "Always happy to have a search," Dannie replied as Susan reached her arms up to hug Dannie.

“A six-year-old went missing between noon and one o’clock. Parents were napping in their camper, and he wandered off. They searched but could not find him, so they called the sheriff. We’ve one area search team that has gone east and one that has gone west. The sheriff’s K9 team is headed south out of the campground. There’s a trail to the north, and you can start Forrest there.”

“Good,” Dannie said. “Are you my support partner?”

“No. I have to stay by the command post.” Susan paused and put on a weak smile. “Ah, I’ve got you partnered with Spence Zalack.”

“Awesome,” Dannie said, rolling her eyes. “Have you trained with him? He’s so controlling. The new guy who knows everything.”

“He’s not that bad,” Susan said, pausing as if she expected a response from Dannie. “He’s our biggest donor. He mentioned a home in Michigan and a place in the Caribbean. He has a dog, and he shows up. Let the rich guy enjoy his hobby. You can do the real work.” Susan laughed.

“I just don’t like being told what to do.”

Susan stared at her.

“I mean, I don’t like *him* telling me what to do.”

Expressionless, Susan nodded.

Dannie shrugged. “Okay. I’ll do my best.”

Spencer Zalack came from behind the command center van. He waved a greeting and, approaching, said, “Hi Dannie. I guess I’m your support,” he said.

Dannie shook his hand. “Great,” thinking it wasn’t. His handshake was firm,

and he looked directly into her eyes. He was Dannie's height, and instead of the denim K9 SAR handler's vest that Dannie and Susan wore, he sported a leather bomber jacket with a blue turtleneck sweater. Zalack's tailored khakis were paired with black leather boots, his light brown hair slicked back.

"Spence, here's a topo map. Dannie, I know the information is sketchy, but see if Forrest picks up a scent near the trailhead." She handed Dannie a plastic bag. "Here's your scent article, a sock. Stay in touch. It's a late start. You have to be back by sundown, about 7:50. Hopefully, we'll find the boy. It's going to drop below 40 degrees tonight. Questions?"

"No, got it," Spence said.

Dannie nodded.

Three and a half hours. That's all she had to put up with him. Teeth clenched, a knot in her stomach.

"Let's go, Spence, not much light left." As they crossed the parking lot to the trail, Dannie resolved to make things work for the sake of the search. "So, Spence, I never asked you why you got involved with K9 search and rescue."

"I always liked dogs," he said. "Then I saw this documentary about K9 search and rescue dogs, and I thought, that's exactly what I want to do. When I looked into K9 search and rescue, it seemed that cadaver dog work was the most difficult and took the most training. I like the challenge. Since then, I realize that most searches are for living people. Tango and I still haven't had an actual cadaver search. Just practice searches. So, I do a lot of team support, like today," he paused, seeming to

reflect. “And I like helping people. You know, getting out there and doing something instead of work.”

“What kind of work?”

“Oh, insurance, real estate, investments. Boring.”

As he talked, she realized that she might have pre-judged him. He seemed more cordial, almost affable. “I appreciate that support she said. “Trailing with a bloodhound would be hard for one person.”

“How about you, Dannie? Susan was bragging about how smart you are. An associate’s degree while still in high school?”

“I did get an AS in Computer Science. It wasn’t that hard.”

“And I hear, scholarship to Case Western University. Don’t tell me that wasn’t hard.”

“I’m lucky, Spence.” The discomfort of talking about herself distracted her from the work set before them. *I have to end this.* “There’s the trail ahead. Let’s go find this kid.”

Chapter Two

At the trailhead, Dannie adjusted the search and rescue harness on Forrest. In the shade of the woodland, the temperature was already ten degrees cooler. She remembered him as a flop-eared puppy, a birthday gift from her mother and aunt when she turned fifteen. The dog stood motionless, riveted by three years of obedience and search and rescue training. She stroked the sleek red fur on his back.

“Okay, Forrest. You’re going to find the boy.” Opening a plastic bag, she put it to the dog’s nose so he could take in the scent of the missing boy from the sock inside. He pushed his nose deep into the bag. Inhaling and making a snuffing sound as he exhaled. The dog lunged forward, and

she followed, keeping a light tension on the leash. He dropped his head to the ground as she urged him forward on the path. He lifted his head, casting right and left, air-scenting. Forrest veered right, downwind from the path, and plunged through thick undergrowth. *Trust your dog, stay with him. He'll find the scent.*

The dog bayed and lunged, head high, tail up. He had an air scent. "Good dog, Forrest. Work." She called back to her support partner, "Spence, he has the scent. He's got the boy's scent."

Spence responded, "I'll call it in to Susan."

Forrest led them down the trail at a quick pace. Two miles in, Forrest took a turn off the trail and started down a shallow hill, then up to a forested crest. They descended the ridge, brush, and vines tearing at Dannie's clothes. They climbed

again, and the hillside steepened before them. Forrest was strong on the boy's trail. Confidence rose, swamping the feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. *We'll find the boy.* Her lips formed a slight smile. With squared shoulders, her bearing reflected the change in outlook. The filtered light of the setting sun gave the topmost branches of oak and alder a yellow hue as the temperature continued to drop. Forrest's quick pace had her panting. She pulled Forrest to a stop. "Easy, Forrest, easy." Kneeling next to the dog, stroking his sleek coat, she surveyed the woodland as it darkened into shades of gray. Forrest's heartbeat slowed. She stood, stepping out at a slower pace.

"Forrest, work." The heavy breathing of her search and rescue support partner, Spence Zalack, broke her concentration. He was no match for her conditioning as a

cross-country runner. He'd lagged on the last hill, but now he was on her heels.

He spoke up, "It's seven o'clock, we're three miles out of the campground. How could a six-year-old go this far?" He took a deep breath. "Dannie, we need to turn around. It'll be dark before we get back. We're supposed to be a team."

Dannie gave him a cold, impatient look.

"Is Forrest even on the boy's trail? We have rules. It's time to turn back. Susan said to be back by dark."

Rules. What good are rules if they keep us from finding the boy? She surveyed the slope ahead. *How could a six-year-old get this far?* Turning to Spence, she said, "I don't know how he got this far, but Forrest is still on the boy's scent, and the temperature must be down to sixty degrees." She hoped Spence would shut up

and stop his whining. It was her team. He was supposed to be a support. Now he was just a weight that held her back. Forrest pulled ahead. *Take charge.* Ignoring her partner's plea to turn around, Dannie turned down the next slope into the darkening Ohio woodland. Forrest held his head high, air scenting as the team topped a ravine. He paused, head turning side to side.

Spence caught up to her again, "All right, I'm calling it," he said, crossing his arms and blocking the path. "We need to turn around, now. We've been trailing this kid for almost four hours. We turn around now."

"Forrest still has the scent." Her eyes were fixed on the dog.

"Damnit, Dannie, this is not safe. And I'm not a cross-country runner like you."

Her earlier, softening feelings toward him hardened as he tried to exert his will. *He's not a cross-country runner.* He's a wealthy, 36-year-old businessman who can afford special K9 search training for himself and his cadaver dog. He doesn't even wear the K9 organization vest. He was sweating in his fancy leather jacket. *He must hate having to support an eighteen-year-old girl.*

"I get it, Spence. But we're here to find the boy. That's all that is important." She brushed past him and pushed on.

Dannie looked back and saw that his pace had slowed as though he was sulking like a petulant teenager. The search and rescue backpack holding their emergency supplies, water, and radio shouldn't be a burden to his lean, six-foot frame. "Just down here and up that next ridge," she said. "Then we'll call in. The boy can't be far."

“This is stupid. The next ridge, that’s it. We turn back. You’re a rookie. You don’t know what you are doing.”

The anger in Zalack’s voice was reflected in his face through clenched teeth, tightened jaw, and darkened eyes. His demeanor sapped her confidence. *What if we don’t find him? What’s the right thing to do?*

Forrest bayed and strained the lead, pulling her out of self-doubt and steeling her resolve. A lost kid isn’t cancer. She could save him.

“He’s on the boy’s trail,” she said. “The boy could die from exposure. No way we’re quitting now.” Forrest topped the ridge and started down a steep shale ledge. Sliding, slipping, and holding the dog back as best she could, she plunged down the hillside. Brush raked her hands and face, as she landed hard on her right hip. The

woodland now dark, she pulled a headlamp from her pack.

He lay his head against the girl's leg. All the familiar scents were there: her soap, shampoo, the cotton of her vest, the denim slacks, and the sweat of effort. He felt the pulse of her blood and the tension in her muscles. And another scent that spoke to him of her excitement and anxiety.

Putting his nose to the trail, the ground scent was gone. There was pine, sod, thistle, and rotting wood, along with the presence of locusts, grubs, and hoppers mixed with other scents. No smell of the boy, sweating and fearful. He breathed a thousand particles of dust, mold, moisture, and bacteria in the scent-laden air. The boy's scent was absent in the myriad odors flooding his brain. "Good dog, Forrest.

Work.” Her gentle urging melded with his hunting instinct, and he leaped forward.

A light breeze brushed the left side of his muzzle. He moved upwind, trotting through a grove of alder, warblers flitting in its emerald canopy. A pair of gray squirrels sprinted up an aging oak, chattering as they went. He crossed the trail of a raccoon and her young. He sought the boy among the scents, sounds, and sights of the woodland. Down a draw, across a creek, to a cutting ledge of shale – there it was – soap, cotton, and salty sweat wafting on the breath of a downhill draft. The boy was up, up the hill. He lunged into the wind, baying and straining the lead. Her voice broke into his canine consciousness. “Forrest. Easy. Good dog. Easy Forrest.”

One hundred ten pounds of muscle, sinew, and bone trembled as he relaxed

under her calming voice. He paused, and the girl knelt beside him, arm around him. He took in her scent, a balm to his quivering body. Inhaling again, he snorted and shook with excitement. Dannie's hand ran down his back, bringing a soothing, sensory presence. The smells of the boy, swirling ropes of color in his mind, enlivened all his senses. The command came, "Forrest, work." He drove forward nose high. The boy's scent grew stronger. He pulled down the slope and, pushing through some dense brush, he bayed. He'd found the boy.

Dannie turned to Zalack, now well behind her. "Spence, we've got him. We found him. Radio in." Gooseflesh prickled her arms as she sucked in a lungful of air. *We've got him.* Her headlamp illuminated the hillside, and the boy waved to Dannie,

and she waved back. She broke into a run. Forrest pulled her to the boy's side. "Hey Michael, how are you?" she asked, pulling a water bottle from her pack, twisting off the top, and handing it to him. A sense of lightness swept away the anxiety that had her body as tense as a bowstring. Tears of joy formed in her eyes, and she pressed her hand to her chest as if to keep her heart from leaping out. She pulled a towel from her backpack, wet it, and wiped dirt from Michael's face. Behind her, Zalack spoke into his radio.

"I got lost. Am I in trouble?" Michael asked, his dirty face streaked with tears.

"No, you're not in trouble. Your mom and dad are worried about you. We're going to get you back to them real soon." Her body shook as she held back a sob of joy.

Zalack spoke up. “Talked to the command center. I gave them our GPS coordinates.” The edge was gone from his voice. “They’re sending four-wheelers and an EMT team. They want us to wait here. They’ll take the kid out.” He paused and said, “That doesn’t change the fact that you broke the rules and you endangered us both.”

Forrest approached the boy and licked his face, as Dannie wrapped her arms around the big hound. Despite scrapes, scratches, and a bruised hip, she exhaled in relief as her tears wet Forrest’s fur. *The boy’s safe. That’s all that matters.*

Chapter Three

She examined her face in the mirror. The scratches from the search the week before had healed. But then there was her hair. “Damned hair.” Dannie swept her ebony hair over her shoulder, straining and tugging at her tangled curls, forcing each strand into a tight band and then again. She wove the bands together and pulled the long braid to one side, then to the other. Her Lebanese father had bequeathed her with the curly tangles she wrestled with. That and the thick eyebrows she worked regularly to, as she saw it, keep in their place. *Well, I might have inherited dad’s hair and height, but at least I got mom’s legs.* She let the braid fall over her left shoulder, reaching almost to her waist. Her

jumbled hair tamed, she moved to eye makeup, brushing on a light shadow and applying eyeliner. Next, a slow, careful, and artful application of lipstick. She stared into the mirror, turned right and left. The bloodhound lying at her feet lifted his head and gave her what she came to call a *bloodhound smile*. “What do you think, Forrest? Do I look good?” The bloodhound thumped his tail on the floor. “Thanks for a nod of the tail, old buddy.” She reached down and stroked the dog’s smooth back, her constant companion for nearly four years.

Friday night dinner and a movie with Bradley Peterson. That curly blond hair and those blue eyes. “Forrest,” she said, “you have to meet Bradley. He’s hot.” They became attracted to each other at school events. She attended his soccer matches, and he attended her cross-country meets.

Then lunched together every day. And now, a date with the captain of the school soccer team. She stood and examined the white mock turtleneck sweater, black slacks, and calf-length black boots. The heels were fine. Bradley was tall. She stepped over the big dog and walked to the kitchen, grabbing her jacket from the bed. “Hi, Mom,” she said.

Her mother, Laurie, glanced up from her laptop. The faintest of wrinkles at the corner of her eyes belied her 42 years. She brushed her shoulder-length blonde hair from her face, revealing an elegant neckline and a graceful chin. She smiled at Dannie, “You are beautiful.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I think you’re biased.”

Laurie laughed. “So, what’s the big plan for the night?”

“Dinner and a movie. A movie and dinner. Something like that.”

“Aha, and the movie?”

“Don’t know. Letting Bradley pick it out.”

“Oh, Dannie, you need date counseling. Never let the man pick out the movie unless you’re in love with The Rock.”

“Mom.” Dannie sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Where are you going to eat?”

“I dunno.”

“Child, I raised you better. You have to set standards. You’ll eat at the Royal Buffet. Create expectations, let him know you’re not a cheap date.”

“Heck, Mom, I am. I like the Royal Buffet.”

“Good lord, girl, you’re hopeless.”

Forrest wandered into the kitchen, leaned against Dannie, and slid to the floor. “Mom, I need a lint roller. I’m not taking this dog’s fur coat with me on a date.”

Laurie reached into a drawer and tossed her a roller. “Trust me, he’s not going to notice dog hair.”

Car lights flashed through the living room window. “Bradley’s here, got to go.”

She hopped down the front stairs. “Hey, Bradley.” Stepping into the cool evening breeze, she took in the musky smell of the decaying leaves covering the yard.

Bradley smiled and replied in kind, “Hey.” She embraced him and then pulled away, that tingling sensation dancing across her skin.

“Movie first, then something to eat?” he said.

“Sure.”

Bradley slipped into the driver’s side.

“You told me to pick a movie, so how about *The Light Between the Oceans*?”

“What’s it about?”

“I read the review. It’s a love story about a young couple in a remote lighthouse in Australia who find a baby and raise it as their own.”

“Love it, let’s go.” *Oh, Mom, you missed that one.*

Bradley backed out of the driveway.

“How’s that bloodhound of yours?”

“The same. Big, and goofy, and funny, and full of energy.”

“I heard how you two found that boy who got lost. He must be a great dog if you two work together in search and rescue.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I’m dating you because I want to be around your dog.”

She laughed. Dating. *Hadn't thought of it that way.* "Oh, I was wondering what your motive was. If you like him, you can help me with training."

"Sure," Bradley seemed to brighten. "I'd love to. What can I do?"

"I always need new victims." Dannie tilted her head, smiling, forefinger twirling the end of her braid.

"Victims?" Bradley's brow furrowed as he glanced at her.

"Sure, Forrest and I need to practice. A pretend victim leaves a trail, and I have to get Forrest to follow it. We do regular practice searches to keep up the skills we need. Carrie's been my victim sometimes. I even used my mom once."

"So, what do I do? Do I go with you and Forrest?"

“No. You have to lay a trail without the dog or me, and then later, I bring Forrest and have him follow the trail. Simple.”

“I see.” He paused a moment, then said, “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Great, we’ll do it on Little Mountain, okay?”

He nodded. “Sure, I know it. When?”

“I don’t want to push, but if you lay out the trail tomorrow morning, I could run Forrest on Sunday. But any time.” *Did I push too hard?* Should have asked him when it was convenient.

“Okay. Great. What time?”

“I mean, you don’t have to. You’re busy tomorrow, I’m sure.”

“Nope, just going to work out. A run on the mountain would be a good workout. Can I run?”

“You sure can.” She took his hand in hers. “Thanks, Bradley, that’s sweet of

you.” Bradley drove the rest of the way to the theater with one hand on the wheel.

Bradley chose Compadres Grill for dinner.

After they ordered, Bradley said, “So tell me, Dannie. Why search and rescue?”

She pursed her lips, took a breath. “So many reasons.” She tilted her head, images of the past four years playing through her mind. “Forrest, of course,” she said, smiling across the table at Bradley. He’s a natural. From the time he was a puppy, he had his nose to the ground.

“I like the challenge of a search. It’s exciting. You know how you feel before a big soccer match?”

“Yeah, I get all worked up. Excited, and there’s this anticipation. My head’s in the game before it starts.”

“Same with me, and Forrest gets it too. When I put his vest on, he gets anxious and excited, and he starts prancing around. And when he’s on a scent...” She leaned over the table. “...I can feel him through the tension in the leash. It’s like we’re connected.” His face brightened by a smile, Bradley leaned forward, eyes locked on Dannie’s. “I know when he picks up a scent and when he loses it. It’s an amazing feeling.”

Bradley reached and took her hand. “You are amazing.”

“Stop. No, don’t, flattery will take you a long way.” They laughed together.

For another hour, she spoke of school, her dad, and her mom. A waiter came and cleared their table. Dannie looked at her watch. “Oh my gosh, it’s 11:30. I’ve been talking and talking. I’m so sorry; I should have shut up.”

“No, I enjoyed it,” he said, squeezing her hand, as they slid from the booth. Bradley managed to open the restaurant and car doors with one hand, letting go as he closed her door. Both wiped their sweaty palms.

As they pulled into Dannie’s driveway, she said, “Meet me here at 8 AM, and I’ll show you how to lay a trail.”

“I’ll be there.” Stopping the truck, Bradley seemed unsure of what to do.

"Dannie squeezed his hand, the other gripping the truck door. Slowly, she leaned in, meeting him halfway across the cab, and pressed her lips to his. A flush of warmth wafted through her body, a sense of excitement and sensuality. Immersed in the sensations coursing through her, the tingling skin, racing heart, she didn't shy away as he pulled her closer. Her lips parted as she pulled in a breath, and then with a

rush, every part of her body ignited. As Bradley kissed her, lights flashed behind her closed eyelids, and giddy dizziness swept over her.

Breathless and flushed, she pulled away. Their eyes lingered on one another. Smiling nervously, she said, "Goodnight."

Dannie slid from the seat and walked back up to the house, glancing back at him as he drove away."

She stepped into the house, leaned against the door, pulled her phone from her purse, and texted Carrie.

"Hey, you up?"

"Did he kiss you?"

"I kissed him."

"Oh, you tramp."

"Whatever, girlfriend. I loved it."

"Tell me more," Carrie begged. "I want the 'deep' facts."

“You are so bad. He was great. Such a gentleman.”

“Cut with the gentleman crap, how’d he kiss?”

“Let’s just put it this way. I started it, he finished it. Wow.”

“Details, girl.”

“Forget you, Carrie. Call you tomorrow. I’m going to bed.” She clicked off, still tasting his kiss and the scent of his cologne, and wandered, smiling, to her bedroom.

Chapter Four

She sat, elbows resting on the kitchen counter, watching the clock tick by slowly. *Should leave mom a note.* She took a notepad from a drawer and scribbled a note. Five minutes after eight o'clock, Bradley pulled into the driveway. Dannie took a deep breath, her skin going all tingly again. Her heartbeat as if she were in his arms. "Whoa, girl," she said aloud, "get a grip. Breathe. Okay, this is weird. I'm weird. Get control. We're just going to train my dog. Just set a trail. It's just training. It's just for Forrest." At his name, Forrest turned to her. "Hey, thanks for your help. Good dog, Forrest." Another deep breath, and she grabbed her pack, heading out the door, her

mom still in her room. Forrest stood at the window and bayed.

Bradley jumped from the truck as Dannie came outside. They hugged, and he opened her door. “What’s in the backpack?”

“It’s all my search and rescue stuff. I have the bag with all the towel pieces for you. You set the trail today, and I’ll take Forrest tomorrow. I want him to work a day-old trail.”

“Okay, let’s do this. I’m feeling like a victim today.” Less than two miles down Little Mountain Road, Bradley pulled the truck to the shoulder, where there was a small trail. “So, this is where I get lost?” he asked as they exited the truck.

“Yep, this is it. You’re a little boy who slipped away from your parents, and off you’ve gone into the woods. Now it’s

up to Forrest to save your skinny butt from the mud and mosquitoes.”

At the trailhead, Dannie brought out the bag with the squares of cotton towel. She put on a plastic glove and extracted one of the cotton squares. “I need a scent article for Forrest.” Reaching up, she stroked his face with the cotton towel. Bradley grinned. She slid the cotton square to his chin and caressed his neck.

“I’ll give you an hour to cut that out.”

“Maybe later.” Laughing, she handed Bradley the bag of cotton squares. “Now you don’t have to use all these. Once every hundred yards or so to begin, and then every two hundred yards. Have you been here before?”

“No, but I heard about Little Mountain. Isn’t there an old house or something up there?”

“No, just an old foundation. The building burned down long ago. The trail is good, it’s not confusing. Keep going up.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Once you get to the top, there is a trail coming off to the east, just follow that downhill. Do you have a compass on your phone?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“So follow the trail east, and you will end up on Hermitage Road, near Girdled Road. It should take you an hour and a half.”

He handed her his truck keys.

“You be careful,” she said. “We’ll get something to eat when you get back. Remember, rub the cloth on your skin, spit in it, heck, pee in it, I don’t care.”

“Okay, I’ll smell up the whole mountain.” Dannie kissed his cheek, and he turned, jogging into the woods. *Nice butt,*

she thought, watching him until he was out of sight. She walked to the truck.

An hour and a half later, Bradley emerged from the woods on the opposite side of Little Mountain. He was panting and sweating, and his pants were mud-covered, but he was smiling. “Hey, great workout.”

“You’re a mess,” she said

“Thank you. I worked hard to look like this.”

“We need to clean you and feed you.”

“Okay, whatever you say, boss.”

Chapter Five

Dannie rolled out of bed. Sunday morning. She smiled as she went to the fridge for juice, Bradley on her mind. Sunday morning was her mother's sleep-in day. Dannie picked around the kitchen for breakfast, eating a banana and half a muffin. Forrest stretched on the bed. "Okay, big guy, time to go." He didn't move. She walked to the kitchen, grabbing her backpack and his working harness. Returning to the bedroom, she held them up. Forrest pawed his way from the bed, throwing covers behind him. She dashed ahead of him to the kitchen. He took some food, but his excitement apparently erased any sense of hunger or thirst.

Forrest sat in the back seat as she drove the short distance to the trailhead, where she would drop the SUV. Had she told her mom where she was going this morning? It wasn't a problem. She would be home soon.

Approaching a sharp curve on Little Mountain Road, she noticed a black sedan backed into a field, just beyond the shoulder. *Never noticed a car parked there before.* As she topped a slight rise, she could see the black sedan in her rear-view mirror. Then it dropped out of sight.

He watched her for a long time. She had matured, beautiful, and perfect. In tight jeans, she was sensuous; in shorts, she took his breath away. Her skin was unblemished and unspoiled.

His fantasies grew, and he focused on his plan. Nothing would happen spur of the moment. His strength of will and mind were superior.

He changed rental cars every week and parked just off the paved road at a gate marked *No Trespassing*, a mile and a half from the house. Once or twice a week, he used this spot and another just south of her house. When she didn't drive by, he contented himself with his fantasies, and he planned the hunt and the capture with precision. How many times was it now? Was it five or six? This one will be flawless as well.

She drove by, and he pulled out behind her.

Parked at the trailhead, she let an excited Forrest stretch and relieve himself.

She harnessed the dog and shook off a chill, the morning sun still behind the mountain. A slight downhill breeze moved the multi-color leaves of oak, elm, and alder. She slipped Bradley's scent article from her backpack. Forrest pranced in anticipation of the search.

Dannie held the bag to him, and he pushed his long snout in. "Forrest work." He leapt toward the trailhead. Nose to the ground, falling into his rhythm of cantering left to right, right to left. In seconds, he was on the trail. The dog's intensity telegraphed through the lead, catalyzing a visceral rush through Dannie's body. The hunt was on, and her focus matched the dog's focus. His tail swung high. Nose to the ground, Forrest moved into the woods. In one hundred yards, he stopped and sat. She moved to his side to see the white cotton cloth. Forrest looked up, tail wagging. "Good dog,

Forrest,” she said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out treats. He gobbled them down while she used a plastic bag to collect the cloth. “Good dog, Forrest, good dog.” Then, “Forrest work.”

In black clothing and a black knit cap, he slipped from his car at the shoulder of the road. He jogged to the trailhead, then past Dannie’s SUV. As Dannie and Forrest moved up the mountain, the man followed. He pushed through the brush just off the trail, staying low. It was exhilarating. His every sense was focused on the girl. He would get closer. The girl was ahead of him, but in his mind, he was on her, touching her, smelling her. He slipped through the morning mist, bent over as he dashed from cover to cover. The isolation of the woodland fueled his hunger until he

was obsessed with having her. Pulse pounding in his head, his vision narrowed to the girl and the dog. He wasn't stalking anymore; he was pursuing.

Dannie took Forrest through a half dozen scent articles. Forrest was spot on the trail. He reacted to each scent article, sitting and turning to her. As Dannie had instructed Bradley, the cloths were at 200-yard intervals. Reaching the fourth, she stopped to rest and poured Forrest some water. Swallowing the water, she calmed down from the hunt, becoming more aware of her surroundings. The trees here had thick trunks and broad crowns. The woodland floor was littered with old tree trunks in various states of decay. Between the fallen logs were tangles of honeysuckle,

witch hazel, and laurel, their leaves moving in the downslope breeze.

The silence was calming until a noise came from behind her. Forrest alerted and growled, head down. She turned and scanned the trail. Nothing. Still, she shuddered. “What do you hear, boy? Something out there?” Forrest sat staring down the trail. Heavy clouds obscured what little sun broke through the tree canopy, leaving the woodland thick and brooding. The silence of the forest, the absence of hikers, even of fresh footprints, sent a chill through her bones. Surveying the woodland again, she clenched her hands, rubbing palms against each other. It seemed like such a good idea; take Forrest two miles into an isolated woodland and two miles out. Now she wasn’t sure it was the best idea she had ever had. Should’ve had someone else set the trail and then have

Bradley come with her and Forrest. *Yeah.*
That made more sense. Forrest nudged her
hand, the touch relieving the feeling of
isolation. Forrest finished his water, she
packed his bowl, and commanded,
“Forrest, work.”

Chapter Six

As Forrest leapt forward, Dannie started to jog. Approaching the summit, her breath came in gasps. The path leveled, revealing the skeleton of the old house foundation. “Easy, Forrest, easy.” She pulled the dog in and slowed. The last white scent article lay on the old ruin at the top of the mountain. Forrest pulled her to it, sat, and turned. She dug out a handful of treats and dropped them on the ground near the scent article. “Good dog, Forrest. Good dog.” Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. Forrest was on the trail the whole time. She breathed out a long sigh. There was a sound, and someone put a hand on her shoulder. In an instant, she froze, caught

her breath, then whirled around to a familiar face.

“Bradley! You scared the hell out of me.”

The tall boy grinned. “I wanted to surprise you. Just got here. I came up from the east side trail. So, how did I do? Did I do a good job? I mean, I didn’t mess up the trail, did I? I came up a different way.”

“No, you just surprised me.” She punched his shoulder. His smile faded. She shook her head. “You moron.” She threw her arms around his broad shoulders.

Bradley breathed a sigh of relief. “Sorry, just wanted to give you some company walking out. I came from the Hermitage Road.”

She held him for a second. “Yeah, you did a good job setting the trail. Forrest was great. You both were great.” Bradley

held her tighter. “Okay, let’s get out of here. I feel creepy.”

Bradley knelt to Forrest and ran his hands down the dog’s smooth coat. “Good dog, Forrest. Thanks for taking care of Dannie.”

Dannie took Bradley’s arm, and Forrest led them down the east trail.

He shook, his skin heating, and watched from his concealment as Bradley embraced Dannie. His breath became labored as his mind reeled. Hanging his head, mouth open, his breath came in shallow gasps. He had her under his control, but now, she was gone. There will be another time, another opportunity for

her. And there were others. There were her friends...

Chapter Seven

Julie looked in the rearview mirror and swept a curl behind her ear. She turned her head right then left and, satisfied with what she saw, pressed the ignition. She shivered as the fan kicked in. The denim vest over a light sweater looked good, but wasn't quite suited for the near-freezing temperature. "C'mon, heat," she muttered, backing out of the driveway. Dannie would be at the Chardon theater at seven. Twenty minutes. No rush. Hopefully, they'd meet some guys there. Maybe Scott or Tyler. Who knows? The car's lights lit barren trees on either side of the road. She turned the radio up, singing along to Katie Perry's "Daisies." As she turned onto Route 44, a car pulled out behind her, its headlights

flashing in her mirror. Julie turned the radio up, concentrating on the song, trying to get all the words right. Through the dips and curves of the old road, she caught glimpses of the car lights behind her, now drifting further back.

She looked left toward the theater as she pulled up to the traffic signal at the town square. No Dannie. *I'm early. I'll drive around the square.*" With a green light, she turned right to circle the square. There was the Maple House, the center of the Maple Festival. Then the rotunda where she sang with the choir at the festival and for Christmas. Past the courthouse, she looped back toward the theater. Friday night, the parking on the square was full. She would park off First Street, behind the row of shops and restaurants that lined Main Street. Still no Dannie in sight.

Parked in the alley off First Street, she checked her hair in the mirror. Too dark to see, she flipped on the overhead light. Touching up her lipstick, her purse over her shoulder, she slipped from the car and started toward First Street and the theater. Turning uphill on First Street, she shuddered at the cold. *It's only a hundred yards to the theater.*

“Julie, hey Julie.” A man’s voice. She sucked in a breath, pulled in her shoulders, and turned toward the voice. Her stomach clenched. She didn’t recognize the car. The passenger window was down. The man again, “Didn’t mean to scare you, Julie.” She let out a breath. The voice was a little familiar. Friendly, even warm. She walked back and looked in the car window. “You remember me? Meeting with your mom and dad at your house?”

Leaning down to get a better look, she said, “Yeah, I remember.” He had been at the house on business with her dad. Still a bit unsure of herself, she took a step back.

“I just left my office, and I saw you. I have these papers for your parents,” holding up a brown folder. “I was going to drop them off tomorrow. Do you think you can give them to your parents for me?”

Smiling, Julie said, “Sure, I’d be happy to.”

He smiled back, reached for the passenger door, and opened it. “It’s freezing out there, hop in while I write a quick note.”

“Okay,” she said, and slid in. “It is warmer.”

He set the folder behind her on the back seat. “So, are you headed to the theater tonight?” he asked, reaching for a plastic bag and removing a cloth.

“Yeah, meeting my girlfriend.”

With one quick move, he pinned her to the seat and covered her mouth and nose with the chloroform-soaked cloth. She let out a muffled scream, tearing at his arms and kicking. *Oh god, oh god.* Her eyes wide, she pummeled his hand with hers. With a whimper, she drifted into unconsciousness, her hands falling to her lap.

Placing the cloth back in the bag, he reclined her seat and tossed a blanket over her unconscious body.

He drove silently, the hunter with his prey.

Chapter Eight

Dannie awoke and tried to roll out of bed. Forrest lay against her side, pinning her against the wall. The puppy she was gifted on her fifteenth birthday was now 110 pounds of nose, legs, and muscle. And slobber. Dannie reached and scratched Forrest behind his ear. The bloodhound lifted his head and licked her hand. “Hey, big dog, we have to get going. I have track practice this morning.” Dannie rolled out of bed, Forrest jumping to the floor beside her. They strolled to a sunlit kitchen. “Good morning, Mom,” Dannie said.

Laurie turned from the stove with a smile, “Hello sunshine, welcome to the world. How was the movie last night?”

“Julie was supposed to meet me and didn’t show. I called and texted, but never heard from her. Must be sick. I’ll text her again.

Breakfast?” Laurie asked.

“Ah, no, special Saturday practice. Sprints. I don’t want to be throwing up on the track.” *No, I don’t want to throw up, and I don’t want to lose to Carrie or anyone.* “I’m just going to walk Forrest and head to practice.”

“You might want to check out the *News Press*.” Laurie pushed the bi-weekly newspaper across the counter. “Nice article about you and Forrest finding that lost six-year-old. There’s a picture of you and Forrest.”

“Really. Let’s see.” Dannie skimmed the story. “Mom, I look horrible—my hair. Oh, and my face is muddy. Look at Forrest, he looks like he just came from a dog spa.

And Zalack is photobombing us. Is that a scowl on his face?”

She scratched the dog behind his floppy ears. “Forrest, you are almost famous now. Looks like three hard years of training paid off.” Forrest looked at her and walked to the sliding door. “I guess you’re not impressed by fame, are you, dog?” Then, “Mom, I’m going to walk our famous dog, text Julie, and head to practice.” She slid the door open, and Forrest pulled onto the deck and then to the yard. As Forrest sniffed through the back yard, she sent a text to Julie.

“Hey, Blondi, where are you?”

No response.

Dannie bent, hands on her knees, her gasping relaxing into shallow pants. Finishing the third two-hundred-meter

sprint, her lungs ached. She hated Saturday practice. She hated sprints. Her calves were tight, and her thighs were burning. She took a deep breath and sighed, "I'll take a three-mile run over sprints any day."

Carrie punched her in her arm. "What's wrong, Miss Long Legs? Looks like you're sucking wind here."

"Shut up. You know I'm not a sprinter." Dannie looked down at Carrie's powerful sprinter legs. Those legs led her to captain the track team, while Dannie captained the cross-country team.

With her ever-present smile, Carrie slipped both hands behind her neck and flipped the long, black curls bunched there. "You mean you can't out-sprint me?" She gave a sassy grin.

Dannie wrapped her arm around Carrie's shoulder, her light skin contrasting with Carrie's soft, brown complexion.

Twins, they called each other, sharing curly, jet-black hair and brown eyes. She was her best friend and fiercest competitor on the track. “Just zip it up,” Dannie said. “Do my race and see who’s sucking wind after three miles.”

“Girl, I’ll kick your ass there too,” Carrie said, tugging on Dannie’s long braid.

“Hey, where’s Julie?” Coach Stiles asked. “It’s after nine o’clock. Has anybody seen Julie? Bauer, where’s your friend?”

“I don’t know,” Dannie responded, “She should be here.” She shrugged, turning to Carrie. “Julie was supposed to meet me at the show last night. She didn’t come by or return my text. I texted a couple more times and called, but she didn’t answer. I’ll call her again.”

“Call her after practice,” Coach Stiles said. “She’s the sparkplug that’s supposed

to anchor the four by one hundred meters. She needs to be here.”

Coach Stiles looked up from her clipboard. “Okay, back to the start. Last sprint.” The girls groaned in unison, slouching to the two-hundred-meter start line.

“Guess I have to kick your ass again,” Carrie teased.

Dannie pushed her aside and stepped to the inside lane, settling into a starting crouch. She would go out quickly, slow at the mid-point. *Let her catch me and then take it from there.* The whistle sounded. Dannie led as the dozen other runners strung back to a small pack. She pushed hard, hoping to wear down her pursuers. She stretched her stride, Carrie not in sight, and she slowed her pace out of the turn.

Save some for the final sprint. The others were on her. Four of them strung out

to her right; Carrie was on her shoulder. She waited for Carrie to make her move. The sprint was wearing on her legs, and her lungs were starting to burn. Glancing right, Carrie gave her a broad smile and then, head back, sprinted. Dannie whipped her legs in sprinting strides, her arms flailing as everything went into the last fifty yards. Her vision narrowed as her lungs ached, and stitches radiated from her right side. She lost by two steps, folding like a cheetah after a high-speed hunt.

Carrie took her hand and pulled her up, grinning. “Lost, Daddy Long Legs. Again.” Carrie grinned at Dannie.

“I hate you. Go away,” Dannie said.

“Oh, girl, you love me. You like to eat my dust,” tugging on Dannie’s braid.

“Three miles,” breathing hard through a smile, “three miles and we’ll see who eats dust.”

Carrie put her hands on Dannie's shoulder and leaned her forehead into Dannie's. "Yeah, maybe. Maybe my best friend could beat me at three miles."

As they walked from the track, Dannie's phone rang.

"Hello."

"Dannie Bauer, this is Deputy Brand Hinds."

Dannie held her breath. Had something happened to her mother?

"Yes."

"Ms. Bauer, you were to meet Julie French at the theater last night, right?"

"Yes sir, but she didn't show up." Her stomach tightened, and she looked to Carrie, biting her lip.

"Did she contact you?"

"No, I texted and called. But she never returned our messages."

“So, you were at the theater to meet Julie?”

“Yes, sir. What’s wrong?” The tightening in her stomach twisted into a knot, and she felt nauseous.

“Nothing for sure, her parents reported her missing. If you think of anything unusual, please give me a call.”

“Yes. Yes sir. I will.”

Carrie took Dannie by her arm. “What’s wrong? Who was that? They want to know about Julie? Her eyes pleaded with Dannie.

“It was the sheriff’s office. Her parents reported her missing.”

Dannie’s phone chimed, and she clicked on the call. Carrie did the same. On her iPhone screen, ‘Amber Alert.’ She opened the alert. “Female, age 16, blond hair, 5’2”, 107 pounds. Missing since Friday, 7:00 PM, Chardon, Ohio.”

With her chest tightening and tears forming, Dannie looked at the picture. “Oh my God. It’s Julie.”

Chapter Nine

Deputy Sheriff Brandt Hinds drove into the Chardon town square, passing the old brick courthouse on Water Street. He scanned the street lined with old maple trees, some of which predated the city's founding in 1812. Turn-of-the-century brick storefronts faced the central park and bandstand. Past the Chardon Theater, Brandt parked his cruiser behind a police car on First Street. Just off the Chardon town square, a row of shops gave way to a residential neighborhood of century-old homes graced by maple trees of the same age. It had been six hours since he had taken a missing person's report for sixteen-year-old Julie French, and police had located her car. He remembered the desperation in the parents' eyes. Their

voices cracked with emotion as they talked about their daughter. He carried some of their dread in his gut as he approached the scene.

Sergeant Detective Phil Grimes and K9 Deputy Mike Nichols greeted Brandt. Grimes, with a balding head, a paunch straining his belt, and a loose-fitting sports jacket, was the antithesis of Nichols. He had broad shoulders, a thick neck, and biceps straining his shirt sleeves. Nichols looked like a recruiting poster for the Geauga County Sheriff's Department. Brandt greeted him, "Hey Phil, Mike, how are things going here?"

"We're kind of at a standstill right now," Grimes said. "So, you took the missing person's report?"

"I did," Brandt said. "She's an honor student, athlete, and from a stable home. She was supposed to meet her friends at the

theater last night, but didn't show up. Didn't answer a call or texts. I talked to her parents and her sister. They found she had not slept in her bed. That's when they called. I just called and talked to her friend who was supposed to meet her at the theater. She texted and called her, but Julie never answered. I don't think she was a runaway. Mike, what did you and your dog Katie find?"

"Chardon police found the car. I went over the car and found nothing unusual. The car is locked. Katie caught a scent from the car that led to the sidewalk, but couldn't follow it. She's primarily a drug dog, not a trailing dog. Deputy Snow has Milly, a tracking dog, but he and Milly are in training this weekend."

"I thought any dog can follow a trail," Grimes said. "Look, Brandt doesn't think she's a runaway. My experience tells me

that if she is not, we have very little time before something bad happens to that girl. Can't you get a dog out here to track her?

Mike nodded, "It's not that simple. Some dogs are trained in tracking, following a scent on the ground. Some are trained in trailing, where they can follow a ground scent, an air scent, or a scent in water. I can call the local K9 search-and-rescue organization to augment our K9 work. Susan Gray is the president, and I can ask to have their trailing dogs out here."

"That's good," Grimes said. "Any lead we can get on a direction from the car is essential. Mike, you get the dogs, and I'm going to start my investigation with the parents. Let's move on this. Every hour a child is missing diminishes the chance we find her safe."

Mike knew exactly who to call:
Susan Gray, president of the local K9
search and rescue organization.

Chapter Ten

As Susan drove, Dannie pulled a photo from her pocket. She, Jill, and Carrie, arm in arm at a track meet, each sporting a ribbon. A head shorter than Dannie and well short of Carrie's height, Jill's arms stretched up to reach the shoulders of her teammates. With her blonde hair in a ponytail and her ever-present smile, Jill sparkled with energy.

Dannie took a deep breath as they circled the town square. The century-old square anchored the village of Chardon, Ohio. A courthouse at one end and a church at the other, the square was lined with eclectic restaurants, boutiques, and an occasional business office. They passed a sign proclaiming Maple Syrup Capital of

Ohio. At Main Street, a deputy hailed them and guided them past the theater. Her pulse quickened. She so wanted to be a part of finding Julie. Still, faced with the yellow police line tape, Sheriff's cruisers, Chardon police, and all the officers, she tensed. Fingers interlaced, she squeezed her hands until her knuckles whitened.

Should I be here? Three years of training in K9 search and rescue, but was she good enough to do this police search? And for Julie? A friend she had mentored in track and life. Dannie's jaw tightened as she clenched her hands harder. *Can I do this right? It's Julie we're looking for.*

"Hey, Dannie." Dannie blinked, and Susan came into focus. "You okay?"

"Yep. Great. I'm ready to go," Dannie said, hoping that confident words would hide the self-doubt that dogged her.

“Let’s get Forrest working,” Susan said. She jumped from the Jeep into the cool October sunshine and opened the back hatch. Forrest pawed at his kennel door. Dannie leashed him and crossed the parking lot with Susan.

Brandt waved them over. “This is Lieutenant Samms, on-site commander.”

“Thanks to y’all for helping out here,” the Lieutenant said, his accent revealing his Tennessee roots. He stood tall and lean with graying temples and small lines at the corners of his eyes. “Susan, Deputy Hinds tells me your dog is trained for trailing.”

“We’ve passed our FEMA National Incident Management System Training Program and trained in crime scene and victim management. Dannie’s a TECH 2 Handler,” Susan said.

Samms raised his hand, “Okay, I got you. It sounds like you’re up for this job. I’m going to let Deputy Hinds outline what we need.” Another Deputy joined the group, and Lieutenant Samms continued, “This here’s K9 Deputy Nichols. He’s going to work with you.”

Nichols crossed to Dannie, shook her hand, patted Forrest, and said, “Nice to meet you both. I understand that Forrest is an excellent trailing dog.”

Dannie noted Nichol’s powerful build. *Not bad looking. Nice smile.* She cleared her throat, “Ahem,” and said, “He has two successful searches.”

Brandt spoke up, “Earlier this morning, our K9 tracked a scent from the car in the alley down to the street, then up the sidewalk, but nothing after fifteen yards. We want your trailing dogs to see what else you can find.”

Deputy Nichols handed Dannie a plastic bag with Julie's underwear. "I'd like you to start from her car." Dannie took a deep breath, putting a hand on Forrest's back, ruffling his fur, and said, "Let's go, buddy." At the crime tape around the car, Dannie opened the scent bag.

Forrest sat at the curb. Dannie looked back at the trail Forrest had tracked. "Lieutenant Samms," she called out. "It looks like Julie walked up toward the theater on the sidewalk, then she came back here and walked to the curb."

Lieutenant Samms scratched his head. "So, up the sidewalk toward the theater where she was going, then down the sidewalk where she crossed the tree lawn to the curb. Then nothing." He finished jotting

in his notebook. “Thanks, y’all. This helps.”

“Do you think she got in a car?”

“Can’t say, Dannie. Maybe.”

“What else can we do? Can’t we do more?” she asked, her voice pleading, tears welling in her eyes.

“You and your dog have done enough. It’s up to us now.”

Dannie turned and walked to the Jeep, the steps to the search ricocheting through her head. Julie had not texted or called her. Her stomach tightened, and she swallowed hard. She pictured a smiling Julie Friench in the school halls, chatting incessantly with her friends. Vivacious, outgoing, and everyone’s friend. *Where are you, Julie?* She would never abandon her family and friends. No one would say it, but Dannie was sure someone had taken Julie.

Tears welled in her eyes as she choked out sobs.

He leaned against the cool bricks of the Main Street storefront, resting one hand on the yellow crime tape stretched across the street. Two teenagers and a family of four strung out across the tape, straining to see what was happening. A group of eight watched from the other side of the street. He pulled the bill of his cap over his sunglasses. Scanning the scene, he chuckled. Four Sheriff's cars, two Chardon police, and a fire truck. They were clueless. Law enforcement, trying to look important while doing nothing and knowing nothing.

He had hoped she would be involved with this search, and she was. Poised and professional, like always. As soon as she arrived, she went to work, her big dog

straining his leash. She was a head taller than her companion, and she moved with grace. Her black hair glistened in the sunlight. A tight vest amplified her figure, the back emblazoned with K9 SAR. His heart rate increased, and a pulse of warmth brought a soft sigh to his lips. She was perfect.

She talked to the deputies, then turned to walk to the car with her friend. She ducked under the yellow tape, feet away from him, so close he could hear her sobs. Perfect. She could be next.

Chapter Eleven

Dannie awakened, sleep fog giving way to light streaming through the window blinds, her dream lingering. Julie's okay. Julie was found. Everything was okay. She sat, taking deep breaths, and she checked her phone. No messages. Nothing changed—just a dream. The reality was a nightmare. Julie French was still missing. She was always eager to please when Dannie mentored her on the track team as a freshman. The mentorship evolved into a friendship as Julie joined Dannie and Carrie for weekend runs and then overnights. Always smiling, constantly chattering on about this boy or another. Never a mean word. For Julie, the world was a happy place filled with wonderful people. *Now she's missing.*

Dannie covered her face with her hands as nausea gripped her stomach.

Forrest stirred and slipped from the foot of the bed to lie his head on her breast. She rubbed the dog's head, his presence comforting, easing her tension. "Good dog, Forrest," she said, rolling out of bed.

Her hair was still braided. "Ugh, this is going to be awful," she pulled at the rubber bands that held her wild curls in place. Her brush snagged in the thick, ebony tresses as she pulled them over her shoulder, separating them into strands and weaving them into a tight braid again. She wrapped the braid over her right shoulder and checked it in the mirror. Satisfied with her grooming, she slipped on a robe and strolled to the kitchen.

"Good morning sunshine, or should I say afternoon?" Laurie said. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a clip; her skin had

a warm glow. “All right. I’ll stay with morning, although it’s almost afternoon.”

“Was there anything on the news this morning?” Dannie asked, head still on the countertop.

“Didn’t turn it on. We can use a break from the news. We’re going to eat, get ready, and we’re going shopping.”

Dannie looked up. She thought the gentle lines of her mother’s face radiated beauty. “I don’t want to go grocery shopping.”

“How about Dillard’s and Macy’s?”

Dannie lifted her head from the counter. “I could do that.”

“We’ll eat first.”

“Let’s go out to eat.”

Laurie turned to her daughter. “You know, now and then I think there’s hope here.”

They chose Bass Lake Lodge for breakfast and pulled into the parking lot at 11:45 AM.

As they walked through the restaurant, customers stared. The waitress placed menus on the table. "Coffee?"

"Yes," Laurie said.

"Tea please, Earl Grey," Dannie added.

"Coming." The waitress moved to the next table.

Dannie scanned the restaurant. Some people were still staring. She looked over the menu. "Party time, Eggs Benedict."

"Sounds good. Hmm. I think I'll splurge with my extravagant daughter. Eggs Benedict, it is."

“Don’t splurge here, Mom,” she said, smiling and tapping her mother’s purse. “We haven’t hit Macy’s yet.”

A heavyset man in a crisp white shirt with a starched collar approached the table. Dannie noted a flawless crease at each sleeve, ending in French cuffs with gold cufflinks. His pudgy hands sported manicured nails with a clear coat. As big as he was, his clothes were a perfect fit, right to his pant cuffs breaking at the mid-point of his polished loafers.

“Hi, Mrs. Bauer,” he stuck out his ample hand.

Laurie leaned back, “Oh, hi, Ed. Dannie, this is Ed Bennett, the Director of the Geauga County Service Club.”

Bennett turned to Dannie. “Well, young lady, we’re all proud of you. I saw the paper today.”

Dannie stared. “What?”

“People in this town appreciate a young person getting out there and finding a lost boy like you did with your dog. And then helping police search for that missing girl. Damn shame —a Chardon High girl gone missing, though. Not normal. I think the police will get to the bottom of this.”

“Julie French, you mean?” Laurie asked.

“Yeah, damned shame. I hope they find her. You all enjoy your breakfast. Mrs. Bauer, hope to see you at the next Club meeting. Dannie, the Service Club will want you to speak to them about that dog of yours.”

“Thanks, Ed,” Laurie replied as he walked away.

“How do you know him, Mom?” Dannie asked.

“Like I said, he’s the service club director. He knows everybody.”

Dannie became more aware of the stares and smiles in the restaurant. The waitress returned with their breakfast. “Do you have today’s paper?” Laurie asked.

“Sure, give me a moment,” she said as she headed to the hostess desk and returned with the newspaper.

Laurie spread the paper open as Dannie turned it to her. On the cover was a photo taken at the search site. It was Dannie and Forrest with a deputy in the background. The caption read, “Search for missing girl assisted by local K9 group.” *Why didn’t they say failed search?* Dannie stared at the picture. Forrest was leaping forward, ears flapping like wings. Dannie’s braid was caught in a wide arc to the side of her head. *A picture can’t hide the failure.* She looked up from the paper, people staring. As warmth spread through her face,

she put her hands up, hoping no one would see the color in her cheeks.

Laurie turned the paper back to her, scanning the article. “It says here, ‘police call the circumstances of her disappearance suspicious.’”

Dannie played the words in her mind, *suspicious circumstances*. She put her fork down and pushed the plate away. She waited as Laurie finished her breakfast. “Ready to go, Mom?”

“Sure, Dear.” Laurie gathered her purse and coat.

As they exited the parking lot, Dannie said, “Mom, can we do this another time?”

“If you want. Yes, we can go another day. Are you doing okay, dear? I know this has to be a hard time for you.”

“I can’t go shopping right now,” Dannie said. “I need to do something, so I don’t feel so helpless. Just give me some

time to figure out what it is.” They drove home, Julie French present in the silence. A knot of dread pressed on Dannie’s chest.

Chapter Twelve

Julie's picture was in the paper, on TV, and on posters distributed by friends. The Amber Alert was posted for three days. Due to the case's high profile, Brandt had been assigned to assist Sergeant Detective Grimes. He had a desk opposite Grimes' desk, against a wall with a large whiteboard. With the media following the case, Brandt took several calls an hour while Grimes interviewed family and friends.

Detective Grimes walked past Brandt's desk and dropped two dozen folders there. He strolled to his desk, sat down, put his hands behind his head, and frowned at Brandt.

"What are these?" Brandt asked.

“Twenty-five Ohio missing teenage girls from the past three years. None with a runaway history. None with a history of drugs or alcohol.”

Brandt stared at Grimes open-mouthed. “How did you get twenty-five missing girl reports?”

“Not like I haven’t done this before. Brandt, almost 8,000 girls went missing in Ohio last year. Ninety percent were found. That means about 800 were not found. French is not the first girl to go missing in our jurisdiction. I profiled Julie French and searched the Ohio missing persons database for matches. I searched for females, teens, rural areas, no criminal history, no runaway history, and more.”

“You found twenty-five in the last three years?” His voice trailed off. He picked up the top folder. Sandusky, Ohio. 2015. White female, 14 years old. Blonde

hair. 5'1" and 96 pounds. He turned the page to the photos. School picture. Soccer team. Little League. Family picture. Disappeared while walking home from school; never found.

He went to the following file, reading silently. *What a beautiful smile*. He looked from the photo to the stack of files. Twenty-five. Closing his eyes, his chin dropped to his chest. So much was lost, and so much happiness was crushed. He returned the file to the stack.

Grimes rolled his chair to Brandt's desk. "What now?" Brandt asked.

"We go over every case, every detail. You do. I do. We compare notes; we find anything connecting a case to ours."

Hinds frowned. "Like what?"

Grimes leaned across the desk in Brandt's face. "Anything." He sat back. "We start with ones already found."

“What? Found? These are all missing.” Brandt frowned, looking at Grimes, shaking his head.

“They found the bodies of some of the girls. These girls went missing, just like our girl. Cases where the bodies were found can give us more than cases where the girls are still missing.”

“How many?” Brandt asked.

“Five found, all dead.”

Five dead. The thought was like a weight on his shoulders. He turned to the task at hand, searching the folders of the missing girls. Mary Elizabeth Antonio. Port Clinton, Ottawa County. 2014. Age 15. Caucasian. Blonde hair. Brown eyes. 5’2”, 106 pounds.

He put the file aside and continued. Susan Croft, Sandusky, Erie County. He noted that Erie County bordered Ottawa County. He mapped Port Clinton to

Sandusky: 16 miles, 23 minutes. Someone else must have made this connection. One girl was found; one was not. He took the files and put them on the corner of Grimes' desk. "Check these two out." Grimes put down one file and took the two from Brandt.

With four of the twenty-five folders reviewed, Brandt leaned back in his chair and rubbed his temples. The pain the families must feel. The loss. The questions. He reexamined all of the found girls and put them on Grimes's desk with his notes. Grimes looked up. "I'm calling Ottawa and Erie. I think we'll take a drive out there. These two girls have a lot in common with our girl. I'll let you know what I get from the calls."

"Good," Brandt replied, his voice quiet and tired. "You know, Grimes, if

those girls are somehow related to our case,
Julie French might not be the last.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Dannie,” her mother called, “you’re late for school.”

She rolled to her side to see the clock. *Damn. Missed the bus.* Dannie rose and walked to the kitchen. “Mom, I’m late. I’m going to drive to school.”

“Sure, do you want breakfast?”

“No thanks. I need to get going.”

Dannie parked in the student lot, her stomach tight and queasy. Two deputies loitered near the school’s main entrance. As she approached the stairs, Carrie burst out of the doors and hurried to hug her.

“You okay?” Carrie asked.

“Yeah. Actually, no. I can’t believe she’s not here. It hurts.” Dannie said, looking down.

Carrie put her arm around Dannie's shoulder. "Kids are saying she was kidnapped."

"No one knows, Carrie." Dannie brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"Everyone is talking about it. Coach Stiles wants to have a team meeting. Right after the last period. But right now, we have the assembly."

"Assembly?" Dannie asked.

"They canceled first period; we have an assembly. They're going to talk about Julie."

"Oh," Dannie said. At the mention of an assembly, she caught her breath and tensed. *People know I searched for Julie and didn't find her. What are they going to think? What are they going to say?*

"How was the search? Did you learn anything? I mean, I don't know because my best friend didn't call me."

“I know. Sorry. I was so tired. And, I guess I didn’t feel good after the search. Forrest did well, great. He trailed Julie near the theater. I think someone Julie knew whoever picked her up. Took her. Just a strong feeling.” Carrie hugged tighter as they walked through the school doors.

They headed for the assembly. In the gym, Dannie greeted friends and teammates. Banners lined the walls above the bleachers, commemorating past championships. Spotlights highlighted the Chardon High School Hilltopper logo painted over the entrance. The stage at the opposite end of the gym was set with a podium in the middle. She and Carrie sat with the other track and cross-country team members in the wooden bleachers. Across the gym, she could see a few people with outstretched arms pointing to her. She shifted on the bench, squeezing her hands.

The boys' soccer team gathered behind them. Dannie glanced up, making eye contact with Bradley Peterson. He smiled and waved. She did the same. As the principal stepped to the microphone, she turned her attention to the podium.

“Good morning. I know you're all aware of a classmate who is missing, so, most importantly, we are coming together to support Julie French's family and lean on one another during this difficult time. Of course, we all hope to see Julie again. We have Sheriff John Dawson here, and he has a few things to say.”

A classmate missing? No, a friend was gone, taken from us. *She's gone.*

Sheriff Dawson took the microphone. He'd been sheriff as long as Dannie could remember. He had a quiet yet commanding demeanor as he surveyed the bleachers. “Thank you, Principal Snyder. First, I want

to give you information regarding what we know about Julie French's disappearance."

Dawson cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. "Friday night," Sheriff Dawson continued, "Julie left her house to meet a friend at the Downtown Theater." Dannie shrank down in the bleacher seat at the mention of "a friend." Did others know that Julie was to meet her at the theater?

"She didn't show up at the theater and didn't come home. If any of you have information or suspect you may have information, please get in touch with our office at the number displayed on the screen. It does not matter how trivial you think your information is; please get it to us, and we'll work with it. Thank you all."

Vice Principal Jenkins approached the microphone. "Thank you, Sheriff Dawson. We want to end this morning with some words of caution. First, buddy up.

Make sure to be with someone you know when you're out of the house or school. When you do go out, text your parents." There were widespread groans from the bleachers, "Text your parents and let them know where you are. If you change plans, let your family know. And let's find ways to be home early." More groans. "Your safety is paramount to your parents and us."

Jenkins stepped back as Principal Snyder stepped forward, "Good advice. We're twenty minutes short of the second period. We're going to dismiss you now. The cafeteria is open if you want to congregate there or in the gymnasium. We have counselors available if you want to speak to someone about how you're feeling. Okay, you are dismissed."

The gymnasium buzzed with talk while students and faculty mingled on the main floor or headed for the exits. As

Dannie stepped down from the bleachers, a hand touched her shoulder.

“Dannie, hi,” said a low voice behind her.

“Hi, Bradley,” she said, turning to look into Bradley Peterson’s blue eyes.

“If you need anyone, I’d love to walk with you. The vice-principal said so.” He smiled, accenting the dimple on his right cheek.

“Okay,” she said. “But I think I can get to the second period without any help,” gently jabbing his side with her elbow.

Bradley laughed. “Yeah, I bet you can.”

Dannie walked to the gymnasium door, Carrie shouldering her. “Just friends, huh?” Carrie said, grinning.

Shaking her head, Dannie smiled and said, “Enough, Carrie. Don’t you have a science class to go to?”

“Yeah, you know, studying the birds and bees,” shaking her hips. Carrie spun on her heel and, looking over her shoulder, gave her a big wink.

Dannie hurried to her math lab. The assembly did nothing to appease the ache in her gut.

She stared at the wall clock, following the second hand as it crawled to the last bell of the day. As she left the classroom, she kept her head down, avoiding eye contact. Relieved that classes were over, she stepped from the gym doorway into the cool September air. The assembly and her own somber thoughts throughout the day darkened her mood. Her head hanging, her mind far off, she startled as she walked into someone. She stepped back and looked up to see Dennis Von blocking the sidewalk. The crew cut

linebacker wore his letterman's jacket and a stupid grin. He stood, hulking, mouth open.

"Hey, Dannie. Hi," he choked out, staring at her.

"Um, hi Dennis. Sorry, I didn't see you there." *This is weird.*

"Ahh, my fault. I wanted to say hi."

"Yes, well, hi. Nice to see you." She stepped to the side; he stepped with her.

"I wanted to say hi, and ah, hey, you wanna' go out?"

Her eyes widened, jaw dropping. *He's the last person I would go out with.*
"Well, ah, no, Dennis. Thank you, but no, I'm busy."

"Not now, anytime. We could go out anytime." His grin was gone, replaced by a downturned mouth and pleading eyes.

"Sorry, Dennis, I'm really busy. Thanks, though." She sidestepped him

again, not looking back. *Where did that come from? I've barely ever spoken to him.* She walked to her car, the incident slipping from her mind.

September 19, one week since Julie went missing. Dannie tacked another missing person poster to a power pole. A cool rain began to fall, intensifying the aroma of the decaying oak and maple leaf bed along the roadside. Carrie crossed the street, saying, "I got that whole side of the street done. I need more posters."

Dannie looked at the posters left in her hands. MISSING in capital letters filled the top of the paper. Then, a black-and-white photo of Julie. Smiling Julie French followed by her description. She took a deep breath and exhaled. Every time she looked at the picture, the ache came back, a

dull pain in the middle of her chest. As she gazed at the photo, the ache dropped into a knot in her stomach. It was always the same. This, followed by a sense of sadness. “Dannie, hey Dannie,” Carrie said, a hand on her shoulder. “You okay? Should we quit for the day?”

Carrie’s face came into focus. “Sure, I’m okay, and I want to keep putting out the posters. It’s just that I feel so bad. So helpless. I want to do more. I want her to come home.”

Carrie wrapped her arms around her. “I know. So do I. We’ll do this. We’ll keep putting up the posters. We won’t let anyone forget. And we’ll believe that she will come home. And we have to remember the good times.

“Remember that multi-team cross country classic meet?” Carrie asked.

“You mean where those junior high guys were following Julie around like puppies? And she bats those blue eyes and gives them a big smile. I don’t think she did that consciously. She doesn’t have a clue as to how attractive she is to guys.”

Carrie laughed. “What I remember is you walking up to those boys, looking down on them, and growling, ‘You puppies looking for a place to pee? Cause it ain’t around here. Now get lost.’” Carrie laughed.

“I just always felt protective of her, like she was a little sister. She loves and trusts everyone. She is so naïve and innocent.” Dannie let out a long breath.

“Yeah, well, you left three junior high boys scarred for life. That’s what I love about you, Dannie. You can be this beautiful, funny, best friend to everyone,

and when you want to be, you can be one intimidating bitch.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Meant as a compliment.”

“I remember the good times. But I keep coming back to the fact that Julie is missing. That’s the hard part for me. Believing she’s safe.” Carrie dropped her arms, and Dannie looked her in her eyes. “Everything from the search tells me she’s not all right. Forrest followed her trail to the curb. It ended there. She had to have gotten into a car. But why would she do that? It had to be someone she knew.”

“Why does it have to be someone she knew?” Carrie asked.

“She wouldn’t go with a stranger. I’m sure of that. I researched stranger abduction. The odds of being kidnapped by a stranger are one in 720,000. It’s just rare.”

Carrie wrapped an arm around Dannie's shoulders. "Dannie, you can't obsess over this. You've done more than anyone. You searched with Forrest. Made the posters. You led the track team to put these up all over Geauga and Lake Counties. We all care, my friend. There's only so much we can do."

Carrie might be right. Maybe there was nothing else she could do. But that would not stop her from trying. "I guess. I'll try to let it go, but" she paused. "Let's put up the rest of these posters."

They finished the posters, and Dannie drove Carrie home. Light snow began to sprinkle the windshield. "So what's going on with you and Bradley?" Carrie asked.

Dannie exhaled. "Nothing new."

"Cut the crap. I'm your best friend."

“Yeah, well, I really like him. Carrie, he’s so kind. It’s like he’d do anything for me.”

“So, you have him wrapped around your little finger.

“No. Nothing like that. I’m just trying to say he’s so nice. So good to me.” She was quiet, then. “I guess, I mean, I love him. He looks at me, and I get goosebumps. I think about him all the time. I wait for him to call me, and if he doesn’t, I get, like, all tied up in knots. I like being with him...and, you know—all the rest.

“I think I get it,” Carrie said, grinning at her. “I wish I had all that with a guy.”

“You’re too picky. I think guys are afraid of you. As in, you’re too beautiful. But wait, you get to university, and the guys won’t be so shy. You’ll need self-defense courses to hold them off.”

“That will be the day, Dannie. Maybe.”

As she pulled into Carrie’s driveway, a black truck passed by. “Okay, girl. See you tomorrow.”

“Right, Dannie, unless Bradley calls,” she poked Dannie’s arm and got out of the car.

Well, I guess she’s right about that.

Backing out of the driveway, the snowfall increased. She turned on her lights and the wipers. Two miles down the road, she tapped the switch for the rear window wiper. As the snow and dirt cleared, she saw a black pickup truck in the rearview mirror.

Chapter Fourteen

Brandt and Grimes made the two-hour drive to Sandusky, meeting Detective Sergeant Lyle Smith at the front desk of the sheriff's office on Columbus Street. Smith, a big fellow, bowling ball bald, greeted them with a smile and a firm handshake. "Come on back to my office, and let's see what I can do for you gentlemen." They followed Smith to a small room with a metal desk and folding chairs. The décor consisted of a large map of Erie County.

Grimes began. "We've got a missing 16-year-old, and we're at a dead end. You've got two similar cases here in Erie County, and we want to go over those with you."

“Don’t mind at all, ready for you, got the files right here,” he said, pointing to two large folding files on his desk. “And I read the information you sent me on the French girl. Not a lot to compare here. What’d you see other than the obvious age and gender?”

“Similarities in the families—both parents in the home, stable economically, no drugs, no alcohol, not even traffic tickets. Kids doing well in school, in sports, well-liked.” Grimes paused. “Do you see anything else?”

Smith ran his fingers over the files. “The Croft girl was from a suburban home, and the Antonio girl was from a rural one. Your girl?”

“Rural. Parents work in town, but the home is in farm country. How far from her home was the Antonio girl’s body?”

“Seven miles. All the details are here in these files. Maps and photos. One thing

stood out. When they found the Antonio girl's body, she was in different clothes than when she disappeared."

"What's your sense of this, Sergeant Smith? If there's a deeper pattern, I'm not seeing it. Are we missing something?"

Smith shrugged. "I don't know. There have been no other deaths like this since Susan Croft in 2015. So, yes, the demographics are similar. What else do you need?"

Grimes said, "Just a place to go through the files and a couple of copies."

"No problem. I'll put you in the conference room. Sandy, at the front desk, can get you copies. How about coffee with those files?"

"Yes, please," Brandt said as he and Grimes took the files and headed for the conference room. They combed through the files. Brandt read aloud, "A K9 unit

followed a scent from the bus site where the girl was dropped off. The dog tracked a scent on the roadside for less than fifty yards. The dog lost the scent, or the trail ended. K9 units conducted an extensive search from the bus drop-off site to the girl's home, but the dogs found nothing."

Both were silent, as Grimes read the file. "There you are, Brandt. There's a link between our case and this one. Both walk from their bus or car and vanish before reaching their destination. It's not much, but it's a start. I'll get back with Lyle on this, but we aren't going to release any information or publicly link the two cases right now."

"Well, we have something," Brandt said. *It was a lead. Just not enough.*

Dannie sat at the kitchen counter, watching falling leaves through the glass doors to the deck. Memories of her childhood streamed through her mind. Her mom was her rock, but her dad made her soar like an eagle. Then cancer took him. Gone with him went joy, exuberance, passion, and faith. The sense of losing control of her life swept from the past in the memory of his passing. That day was indelibly fixed in her mind. Laurie stepped into the kitchen.

“Hey Dannie, you’re deep in thought. Sad thought.” She sat on the barstool next to Dannie and took her hand.

“No. Just thinking of how you have always been a rock in my life. Always there. I know I can always depend on you being there.”

“That makes me feel good, Dannie,” a smile lighting Laurie’s face. “And, you

know, this has been a heavy week. Hard on everyone, especially you. Let's not sit around this house today. Come on. There's an outdoor Christmas Market in the square. Let's go."

Dannie nodded, slipping from her reverie to the present. "Okay, let's do it.

As Laurie pulled the car from the driveway, Dannie said, "Mom, why'd you hold me back a year in school after Dad died? I'm the only 18-year-old girl in my graduating class."

"You withdrew so much and seemed overwhelmed by the loss. I held you back to be sure you had time to heal and reconnect with school and friends."

Dannie looked at her hands. "Do you think it worked?" she asked.

"Yes, you needed that time to heal."

"Do you think we're healed? You and me? I mean, with Dad gone."

“I don’t think we’ll get over losing your dad, but yes, I think we’ve come a long way.”

“Yes. Still, dad is gone, now Julie, and I didn’t find anything in searching for her. And it all seems so dark.”

“You can’t dwell on all the difficulties in your life. There is so much more. Look at all the good things. You rescued a six-year-old boy and an Alzheimer’s patient; there’s Bradley, he’s a wonderful young man; you have Aunt Peg; and don’t forget that big dog lying there at your feet.” Forrest lifted his head at the word *dog*. “Don’t let loss define your life.”

Dannie reached her other hand to her Mom’s. “You’re right, Mom. This is what I mean. You’re my rock. Love you, Mom.”

Lauri parked in the library lot, and they walked to the Chardon Town Square. Tents and canopies lined the park's circumference, with food trucks at either end. A bright October sun took the edge off the chill. They walked among the vendors displaying Santa dolls, ornaments, wreaths, Christmas trees, and a wide range of handcrafted gifts. Laurie lingered at the shop, where scented soaps and oils were displayed. Dannie stopped to admire a display of goat milk soap, scented deer tallow skin creams, and decorative loofa sponges. *Well, it's Chardon. You won't find Gucci and Versace here.* She turned to find Laurie and stood face-to-face with Dennis Von. *Shit. Him again.*

She took a deep breath, but before she could speak, Dennis said, "Hey Dannie. I saw you here. I wanted to say hi." The

hulking linebacker was stoop-shouldered, eyes like a puppy begging for attention.

“Hi Dennis. I’m looking for my mother. Excuse me.” She stepped to the left, and Dennis blocked her way.

“I just want to talk. You know, like we’re friends.”

“Sorry, Dennis, like I said, I need to go.” He blocked her way again, his bulk filling the space between shops.

“You don’t have to go. I want to talk.” He reached out a hand. Dannie pushed it away. Her pulse quickened, her muscles tensed, and heat flushed through her face.

“Don’t put your hands on me, Dennis. Ever.” She tried to pass him as he pushed against her. “I told you,” she shouted, slamming her fist into his chest, “stay away from me!” He fell back, jaw dropping, his mouth open in stunned

silence. Heads turned, people stared. She brushed past him. Seeing Laurie several booths away, she hurried to meet her, her anger ebbing as she relaxed her breathing. *Damn. I should not have let him get to me.* She glanced behind her to see Dennis, red-faced, standing and staring.

Chapter Fifteen

Ed Bennett was insistent. The Lake Geauga Service Club wanted to hear from Dannie. They wanted her to make a presentation at their meeting. He said there was significant interest in search-and-rescue dogs.

“Mom, I should’ve never let you talk me into this.” She pulled off her third outfit. “This is dumb. I don’t have anything to wear.”

“White top, black slacks, low heels. It’s standard business attire. They’ll all want to hire you.”

“I don’t want a job. I want to get out of this.”

“You’re in it.”

“Why are you so cheerful? This is a tragedy. I don’t have any clothes.”

Laurie peered into the bedroom. “White top, black slacks, and low heels. And Forrest in his search and rescue harness.”

“He’ll think he’s supposed to work. How will I settle him down?” She slipped a white turtleneck over her head. These people don’t understand dogs. The harness means he’s going to work. It’s not for show. Why can’t people understand this?” She slipped on low, black flats. “I’ll bring the harness, but I won’t put it on him,” she called out.

“Yes, dear,” her mother responded as she tore through her closet for the right outfit, pulling on a black-and-white sheath dress.

“Mom, are you ready? Forrest wants to go.”

Laurie walked into the kitchen, a small silver bag slung over one shoulder. “Damn, Mom, you’re looking terrific.”

“You look beautiful, Dannie. They’ll never notice your dog.”

“They wouldn’t if I looked like you, Mom.”

“Load up; I’m never late.”

“Forrest, come,” Dannie called, and the dog charged into the kitchen, sliding to her feet. She leashed his collar, and the trio headed through the garage for the BMW. Seeing his harness in Dannie’s hand, Forrest pranced to the car.

The Lake Geauga Service Club met at the Holiday Inn Express. The two unloaded Forrest and walked to the reception area. Dannie was four inches taller than her mom, but her mom wore

heels, so they matched in height. With her father's olive skin and raven hair in a tight, long braid looping around her neck and falling to the front of her left shoulder, Dannie was a winter in every way. With blue eyes and layered blonde hair touching her flushed cheeks and then flowing to her shoulders, Laurie was a summer.

They entered the ballroom, its wallpapered yellow walls bisected by folding doors. In front of a small stage, there were rows of stiff-backed chairs, the seat covers a yellow as awful as the walls.

Ed Bennet greeted them from across the room. "Hey, you two, come on in."

Dannie looked Bennet over. He was of imposing size. His hair was impeccable. A toupee? His tailored jacket hung perfectly, covering a starched, well-fitting shirt.

"Hi, Mr. Bennett," Dannie said.

Laurie followed with, “Nice to see you.”

“Aren’t you ladies lovely. And hey there, doggie.”

“His name is Forrest.”

“Okay, young lady, you’re going to be here,” he said, pointing to a podium. “Let’s show you the microphone.” He put his hand on her waist, guiding her to the podium. She tensed at his touch, moving away. Forrest was quiet, tail down, sniffing, disinterested. They adjusted the microphone; Ed was again too close. Dannie moved away. As the room filled, she sat at the front, Forrest lying at her feet. A few people came forward to meet Forrest and to greet Dannie.

The meeting got underway, and Bennett introduced Dannie. “We have a special speaker with us today, Dannie Baurer, and her K9 search and rescue dog,

Forrest. Dannie is a senior at Chardon High and a scholar-athlete who has already earned an associate's degree in computer science. Most of you are aware that she and her dog have successfully found a missing boy and also searched for a missing teenager here in Chardon. But I'll let her tell you about that.

She took a deep breath. "Good morning. I'm Dannie Bauer, and this is Forrest," her voice cracked. She pulled his lead, and the big dog stood. Applause. "Forrest is a bloodhound. He's four years old, and a trailing search-and-rescue dog. Forrest has two successful searches." She gained confidence as she spoke, continuing to describe the bloodhound's olfactory senses. "Bloodhounds can follow a trail that is hours, even days old. In one 1954 report, bloodhounds successfully found a family 330 hours after they went missing. While

bloodhounds do bark, they are better known for their distinctive ‘bay.’ The bloodhound bay is a deep, almost musical howl. Forrest is 110 pounds and twenty-six inches at his withers.”

She described their search for an Alzheimer’s patient and the search for the six-year-old boy, how the sheriff’s office called upon her and her team. She ended with questions from the group. The questions took her aback. How old are you? What will you do now that you have graduated? What made you interested in K9 search and rescue? Are you interested in being a K9 police officer? Dannie blushed as she talked about herself. The questions continued. Do you play any sports? Do you have a boyfriend?

Wasn’t this supposed to be about search and rescue? She needed to end this.

“Thanks for having me.” She stepped away from the podium to polite applause.

Ed Bennett stood, “Now, Dannie, tell me how we can help your search and rescue club? What do you need to be able to find more people?”

“The bigger search and rescue clubs use GPS collars on their dogs.”

“GPS what? Some kind of collar?” Ed asked, smiling at the group.

“Yes, with a GPS collar, global positioning satellite, on an area search dog or cadaver dog, you know where they are all the time. And you can tell by how you track them on a computer tablet, whether they’re on to a victim or not. They help prevent a dog from getting lost or getting hurt. And they assist in locating victims.”

“Great, GPS dog collars. What will they think of next?”

Someone in the audience responded, “How about one for Ed?” As laughter erupted, Dannie stepped away.

Others gathered to meet Forrest, and Ed Bennett moved close to Dannie, putting his arm around her shoulders. Dannie’s skin crawled, and she tried to pull away.

“We’re sure proud of this girl. She’s a real credit to our community.”

Turning from him, she reached for Forrest’s harness and handed it to an admirer. As she did, she stepped away from the unwanted embrace.

Laurie came through the doorway, talking to a gentleman who listened intently. She looked at Dannie and excused herself. The three hurried out to the car.

“You were wonderful, Dear. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom. I don’t like public speaking.”

“You keep on being good at what you do, and you’ll have to get used to this kind of thing.”

Dannie sighed. Her mother’s encouragement didn’t alleviate the sense of anxiety clinging to her like a chill mantle.

Chapter Sixteen

October had turned to its typical cold and rainy climate. In the two days since the trip to Erie County, no new information regarding Julie French's case had become available. Grimes now ran the case, and Brandt was back on patrol full-time.

He was finalizing his shift report at his desk when his phone rang. "Deputy Hinds here."

"Hey, Deputy, this is Chief Skolls, Burton Police. I wanted to let you know that a couple of hunters found human remains down here today. Not right here, over at Ladue Reservoir."

Brandt was quiet, hair-raising on his arms, the muscles in his shoulders tensing.

Ladue, ten to twelve miles away. “Any identification?”

“Female clothing...small body. My officer called the coroner’s office. Come on down. We’re off Ravenna, just south of Ladue Reservoir. The body’s at the end of a dirt road. In a ditch there.”

“He let out a long breath. “We’ll be down,” Brandt said. He called Grimes to fill him in. He met Grimes, and they headed down Ravenna. Eleven miles from their office, a Burton officer stood by the turn to a dirt track and waved them in. A mile into the dirt road, they crossed a bridge to an area where the vegetation closed in on the track. They parked and walked toward the trail. Chief Skolls approached the pair. “How ya doin’?”

“We’ll see,” said Brandt. “Anything new?”

“No, coroner’s on the site. The body’s been there a while.”

“How long?”

“About two weeks.”

Brandt hesitated mid-step. His chest swelled, as if exploding in a mix of excitement, fear, and dread. The area near the body was taped off at fifty yards. A grass and thistle field sloped away from the trail. Skolls led them under the tape to where the slope dipped into a shallow ravine. There were two people inside, a second band of yellow police tape. The trio stopped about twenty feet from the site of the body and waited.

One of the pair stood and placed a few things in plastic bags. The other person continued on her knees, bagging items. The man walked to the deputies.

He removed his rubber gloves. “I guess you folks want to know if it’s your girl.”

Grimes nodded.

“It’s a young female. Some clothing, but it might help you. We found piercings—post earrings, rhinestone studs. About 5 feet, 2 inches. Blonde hair. Evidence of strangulation. We’ll be able to say more later. The body’s intact but desiccated. Dental identification should be easy. That’s what I have for now. We’ll need a few days with this.”

Brandt sucked in a sharp breath. It had to be Julie French, with pierced ears, silver rhinestone studs, and blonde hair. “Thanks, as soon as you can get us anything on the clothing, please let us know.”

“Bed clothes, I’d guess. A kind of negligee. That I can tell you.”

He let his breath out, gooseflesh prickling his arms. “Eleven miles, not seven. Your estimate was close, Grimes,” he said.

Grimes looked at the ground. “Not close enough.” They thanked the chief and returned to their car. Brandt called Sheriff Dawson, and a planning meeting was scheduled. When word got out, people would want to know if it was Julie French.

Brandt joined Grimes to read the coroner’s preliminary report two days later. It was Julie French. The cause of death was strangulation. She was partially clothed. So much matched the report on Susan Croft from Sandusky. The notion of a serial killer slithered into Brandt’s consciousness.

Chapter Seventeen

Dannie lay on the couch, looking out the window at a world enfolded in gray skies and rain showers. When she learned that Julie's body had been found, some of her own life drained away. Any remembrance of Julie was masked by the shroud of her death. Her mind conjured dark images of Julie in a ravine. Who could do such a terrible thing? None of it made sense. She could let it rest if she could grasp a small understanding of this loss.

In the third week of October, Dannie and Laurie attended Julie's memorial service. The hollow feeling that strained her chest pressed in on her.

As the service began, Julie's dad spoke, and then her mother told of her

vibrant life and the people she touched. Julie's mother was stoic, her head held high, and her voice never faltering. She dwelt on the beautiful memories and the joy her daughter brought to the family. Dannie sensed the hurt, anguish, and grief in those words. Her tears flowed. Time seemed to slow, and she lost focus.

Carrie shook her arm. "We have to go." Dannie looked up to see the rows half empty. Carrie held her as they left the sanctuary. In the foyer, she and Carrie greeted classmates, hugging them and sharing tears. Carrie held Dannie's hand. "Hey, I'm leaving the day after tomorrow to visit my aunt and uncle with my mom and dad. When I get back, let's get together."

"Yeah, definitely. How about a week from Friday, the 30th? We can go out for a pizza and hang out at my house."

“Sounds good, Dannie. Let’s do it.”

Dannie squeezed Carrie’s hand.
“You are the best friend anyone ever had.
Thanks for being there for me. All the
time.”

“Don’t be silly, sister. Twins. We’re
always there for each other.”

“Yeah. Have a good trip. Love you,
girlfriend,” Dannie said. Carrie hugged
Dannie and turned to her waiting parents.
Dannie closed her eyes. *Thank God for a
friend like Carrie.*

At home, Forrest greeted Dannie at
the door. The dog licked her, pranced, and
whined with excitement. “Okay. Let’s go
for a walk, Forrest.” She leashed him,
sliding open the door to the deck. She let
him have all of the lead as she strolled
toward the small barn at the back of the

property. The trees were shedding red and yellow leaves. Wet ground yielded beneath her feet with each step. Forrest foraged about nose to the ground as Dannie walked—so many questions from her friends today. Answering questions about Julie and the search kept her on the verge of tears, her throat constricting as she replied.

Forrest ambled ahead of her, lost in his olfactory world. As she neared the barn, Forrest pulled her forward, seeming to capture the wonderful scents at the edge of the old building. Her dad taught her so much here. Eyes closed, she could see the young girl perched on a stool. Her dad showed her how to make an exact cut on a board or smooth a rough edge with just the proper sanding. Dad with his gentle hands, encouraging words, and patient smile. She pushed the sliding door aside a couple of feet. The old smells were still there—or did

she imagine them? The pine boards, fresh cut, the burn of the saw on thick oak, and the balmy scent of cedar. She drifted back six years, the scene vivid in her mind...

Light filtered through the bedroom blinds, blending with the yellow of the small lamp beside his bed. An air filter and humidifier hissed at different pitches. Dannie watched as the hospice nurse checked her father's blood pressure and pulse. The nurse adjusted the drip, then motioned Dannie's mother and her Aunt Peg to the hallway outside the bedroom. Dannie wiped his forehead again.

She listened as the nurse spoke to her mother and aunt. "He's very close now. His blood pressure is down, and his pulse is slowing. Organs are shutting down." They returned to the bedside, and her mother

rubbed her husband's hand, tears on her cheeks. Peg stood at the foot of his bed, her hand resting on the blanket covering her brother's feet.

Dannie pressed the cool cloth against her father's forehead. He didn't talk now, his consciousness in the grip of the cancer that had claimed his body. His face was pale. His hands were bony, with loose paper-thin skin. Not the strong, rough hands that taught her how to cast a fly or to hold a pistol with the proper grip. For twelve years, he was always there for her, firm, steady, and smiling. She closed her eyes, seeing him, tall and strong, alongside the river, casting with grace and skill.

"All right, Dannie, let's see you cast to the middle. See that riffle out there? Bet there's a steelhead right below it." She stripped the line from the reel and, with a

strong back cast, sent the line in a tight curl, the fly dropping just above the riffle.

She opened her eyes, “Here’s some ice, Daddy.” Dannie spooned a few chips to his mouth, but he didn’t respond. His skin sagged from sunken cheeks, and his eyes were deep-set. Still, he was somehow present. “Can I read you a story? What page were we on?” *Did he smile?* She took the book from the bedside stand and, reclining on the bed, slipped the bookmark from the pages. She opened the book and began to read.

“Jack London, *Call of the Wild*, chapter six. ‘When John Thornton froze his feet in the previous December, his partners had made him comfortable and left him to get well, going on themselves up the river to get out a raft of saw-logs for Dawson.’ ” She read slowly with a dramatic pitch,

mimicking the way her father read this book to her so many times.

“ ‘He was still limping slightly at the time he rescued Buck, but with the continued warm weather, even the slight limp left him.’ ”

Her father’s lips parted. His breath slowed. Hers increased as she read. Her mother took his hand, kissing him on his forehead. Silence. His hand was still and soft. The book slipped from her hand as she reached to touch his pallid cheek. No breath. No life. Gone.

She clutched him tight in her arms as if she could hold on to life – hold it there in his body. But life slipped away—the unconditional love of a father replaced by a sense of complete helplessness.

Chapter Eighteen

Dannie leaned back in her chair, stretching her arms over her head to relieve the muscle tension from a week of focusing on her online course in differential equations. The course would give her a jump-start on earning her degree in three years. *Friday, time for a break. Dinner with Carrie.* She dressed and drove to Spiro's Pizza. As she drove through the parking lot, a truck pulled out, and she eased the BMW into the space. A blast of scent-laden air greeted her as she entered the restaurant: tomato sauce, oregano, sausage, and peppers. She pushed through the waiting area, filled with Friday-night diners. No Carrie. Slipping into the dining room, she scanned for Carrie, then settled in the foyer. *No problem. Carrie's*

not always on time. Her phone buzzed in her coat pocket. She answered, "Hello."

"Hi Dannie. It's Anne Howard, Carrie's mom."

"Yeah, hi, Mrs. Howard."

Anne asked, "Have you seen Carrie today?" Dannie discerned an uneasiness in Anne's voice.

"No. Not yet. I'm at Spiro's Pizza waiting for her."

"Did you go for a run with her today?" Anne's voice cracked a bit.

"No, just meeting for pizza. Why?"

"She went for a run at one earlier and hasn't been home. Mark has been driving around trying to find her."

Dannie's heart pounded against her ribs.

"Are you there?" Anne asked.

"Yes. Yes. I just... she should be here. We talked yesterday."

“Her car’s here. Mark called the sheriff. I hoped that maybe you knew where she was.”

Dannie held her breath. “Should I come over? Can I look for her?” Her stomach muscles tightened, and her legs and knees weakened.

“No, Dannie. Go home. I’ll let you know when she shows up.”

“Okay.” As Dannie walked to her car, she felt off balance. Images of Carrie flashed through her mind. *She’s okay. Carrie has to be okay.* After Julie, she couldn’t convince herself it was true.

Brandt relaxed into his Saturday shift. Sipping black coffee, he took his first radio call: a drunken man in the parking lot of the Hambone Bar and Restaurant. Arriving at the bar, he found the man

stumbling among the parked cars. He guided him to the cruiser, took his name, and ran his driver's license. He got a phone number from the man and called the man's daughter to come pick him up. Fifteen minutes later, a blonde woman in her thirties came to the car. She expressed her gratefulness for the deputies' mercy and her displeasure with her father. She hauled the man by the collar to her truck.

Brandt handled two traffic incidents and then bought a second coffee at 9 P.M. *I can't seem to get Julie French out of my head.* It had been more than three weeks since she disappeared, ten days since her body was found. He could still see her mother's face tight with fear; her father's eyes lost, unbelieving. He went over the French girl's case in his mind. Kidnapped, assaulted, and strangled. She and Susan Croft were so similar. And the Port Clinton

girl, although she was never found. There had to be something else he was missing, some invisible link tying them together, that would lead back to the culprit so they could stop this from happening again.

A bulletin showed on his computer:

Chardon Police Advisory: Missing
Persons

Carrie Howard

18-year-old female

African American

Black hair, brown eyes

5'10", 128 pounds

Pierced ears.

Wearing black Nike shorts and tights,
with a black jacket. Missing, failed to
return home at 2:00 PM. Last seen
leaving her house at 1:00 PM.

His gut tightening, he stared at the screen, reached for his cell phone, and dialed Grimes. Grimes answered, “Brandt, what do you need this time of night?”

“An eighteen-year-old female just went missing,” he responded. “It’s happening again.”

Chapter Nineteen

Driving Dannie's SUV, Laurie turned into the Geauga County Fairgrounds. A young man in a yellow vest directed her to a parking area. Dannie, Laurie, and Aunt Peg got out of the car and followed green "volunteer" signs.

24 hours since Carrie's disappearance, and no new information. In the crisp fall air, Dannie surveyed the grounds where the Geauga County Sheriff's Office was organizing an area search. East under a large canopy, a sign noted *volunteer sign-in*. Just to the right, Dannie saw the K9 search-and-rescue canopy. "Mom," she said, "You and Aunt Peg can sign in at the volunteer tent. I'm going to meet Susan and see what she wants

Forrest and me to do.” She headed toward the canopy, her senses alternating between numbness and a painful ache in her chest.

A propane heater sent a burst of warm air into the K9 search-and-rescue canopy. Susan sat behind a table covered with maps and radios. She was flanked by Carol, an area search dog handler, and Spencer Zalack, accompanied by his German Shepherd cadaver dog. Two other handlers were providing water to dogs in kennels at the back of the canopy.

“Hi, Susan,” Dannie said.

Susan looked up as Carol and Spencer greeted her, then came around the table, hugging Dannie. “You know you don’t have to be here, Dannie.”

“She’s my best friend. Of course, I have to be here. I’m okay.” Dannie turned to Spencer and said, “How are you and Tango, Spence?”

“I’m so sorry your friend is missing.” He reached out a hand and grasped Dannie’s. She shivered, remembering his behavior in the last search.

“What’s the plan?” Dannie asked as two more handlers entered the canopy.

“The Sheriff wants us to put our trailing dogs in an area from the house to three miles in every direction where there is a road or trail,” Susan said, looking over the maps. “The Sheriff’s K9s are already tracking in that area. He wants our area search dogs to range within a three-mile radius of the house. I want you out no more than three hours, then back here for lunch and a short rest. Then back out for three more hours or sunset.”

As the van dropped off the K9 teams, Dannie’s stomach churned. She focused on

controlling her breathing, her arms folded tightly against her body, expressing the raw emotions that possessed her. First Julie, now Carrie. How could it be? Carrie has to be okay. *Carrie, I need you.*

With Forrest leashed and a scent article in hand, she started down the road. Forrest's tail rose, signaling that he had a scent. They trailed along the shoulder for three-quarters of a mile. He crossed the road and turned onto the Headwaters Park Trail. After half a mile, the trail led to a parking lot. Fifty feet from the trail, Forrest stopped in the parking lot. He turned and traced the trail back twenty feet, then turned again, retracing his steps. The trail ended in the parking lot. Dannie radioed to Susan. Susan sent Carol and Lucy. They followed the same trail to the parking lot. Dannie stood slumped-shouldered, head down.

Susan took her arm. “C’mon, Dannie, we’re going back to base.”

After three days, the search was called off.

As Dannie lay across her bed, Forrest pushed his long nose against her neck. She was barely aware of the dog pressing against her. Her face was streaked with tears, her throat raw, aching. She pulled herself off the bed and walked to the kitchen for water. *Missing. How can Carrie be missing? What do I do without her?* Her hand shook, her breathing quickened, and there was pressure on her chest. The room spun. She couldn’t breathe. The water glass slipped from her hand, shattering on the tile floor. Gasping, everything dimmed. *Have to get control.* Perspiration dripped into her eyes. *Can’t breathe.* With a gasp, she fell against the counter, holding herself up. *I can’t lose control.*

Chapter Twenty

He drove, staring at the road ahead, his eyes trance-like, fixed on the road, his gloved hands gripping the steering wheel like a vise. The LED headlights pierced the total darkness of a moonless night, revealing dense stands of trees bordering the road. His sense of power grew. He was in charge. He would change nothing. He was without peer, untouchable.

The narrow road dipped and veered in a broad, downhill turn, lights sweeping the underbrush encroaching on the pavement. The road crossed a small creek. He slowed and turned left on a dirt track that became two ruts as it branched away from the creek and started uphill. The big

vehicle crawled along the narrow, rutted track that ended in dense brush.

He turned off the engine. The headlamps penetrated the darkness, revealing an opening in the undergrowth. He stared for a long time, sensing his strength and power, a rising pleasure.

This part was almost as good as the hunt. In both, he was superior to any adversary, to any prey. The hunt was good, though, creating the perfect strategy and executing it with tactical perfection. Five times now, and no one could touch him. No one came close to his abilities. Picking the target was satisfying. Finding the right one to study and to fantasize with each one took time. Then he would choose her, the best of his fantasies. The longer the time to get to know her patterns and her weaknesses, the more time there was for his fantasies, the more she would satisfy him. It was too easy.

The headlights clicked off. He leaned back, eyes open to the blackness, and visualized her running at the side of the road. The pickup was good, and it was always so smooth. She was so innocent and trusting, happy to lend a hand. He just pulled alongside and told her he wanted to get these papers to her parents. She recognized him and walked right to the vehicle. He invited her in while he wrote a note on the envelope. Then he reached behind the seat, opened the plastic bag, and pulled out the chloroform-laden cloth. She struggled, eyes wide, hands flailing, and then she was out.

She was his. Bound, helpless, he wanted her to beg. The others begged and pleaded, but this one wouldn't. She fought; she called him names like his sister did. Like his disgusting, slut sister, she wouldn't give in. Strangling this one was the only

thing that gave him satisfaction. When her body went limp, he groaned in a wave of sexual pleasure as he triumphed in her final submission.

Emerging from his reverie, he opened his eyes to the lightless night. Remembering her was good. But now he must finish—one last step.

He chose a site that duplicated the other sites. This was one of his signatures, like the makeup and the clothing. It would take them a while to find the body, but the police would come to know it was the same person. He opened the door, clicked on the headlamps, and slid from the car. Walking to the back of the vehicle, and opening the door, he took the light bundle and put it on his shoulder. Trekking to the front of the vehicle into the harsh light, he pushed into the brush. The headlamps penetrated more than thirty feet. Branches snagged at his

burden, pulling the blanket away, revealing a naked arm. He broke through thick vegetation to where the land sloped to the mud of a small hollow. He threw the bundle off his shoulder, unrolled it from the blanket, and pushed it over the slope. Her half-clothed body settled onto the bottom of the trough.

He walked toward the lights of the vehicle. Pulling himself into the driver's seat, he started the engine. No one could touch him.

Chapter Twenty-one

Brandt flipped through the pages of Carrie Howard's missing person file. Three days after the original report, the file sent by the Chardon police was already half an inch thick. He turned to the photos. A shy smile with a kind of innocence. She was a merit scholar, track star, soccer player, and more, much like Julie French and Susan Croft. Mrs. French was in touch with Mrs. Howard, and they supported each other.

Grimes came to Brandt's desk.

"The FBI's Child Abduction Rapid Response Team will be here this afternoon.

The sheriff said they would set up in our office temporarily.”

“That’s good news. I hope they can help.”

“Right now, the Sheriff wants us to get the task force room set up. We’ve got the Ohio State Patrol, Erie County, Sandusky County, Mentor, and Chardon Police coming in for a task force meeting.”

At 4 PM, Brandt entered the conference room, filled with task force members. Sheriff Dawson stepped to the microphone.

“I’m Geauga County Sheriff John Dawson. I want to give you an overview of our ongoing and expanded investigation into the death of Julie French and the disappearance of Carrie Howard. In addition, we include coordinated investigations into the disappearance of

Susan Croft of Sandusky, Erie County, Ohio, and the abduction and death of Mary Elizabeth Antonio of Port Clinton, Ottawa County, Ohio.

“Now I want to introduce FBI Special Agent Harold Blake. Agent Blake will provide you with background on this case.”

Blake stepped up to the podium. “My colleagues and I represent the FBI Child Abduction Rapid Response Team of the Child Abduction and Serial Killer Unit. Our role is to provide fast, professional assistance and to assist local resources in child abduction and serial killer cases. Today, we’re here because we believe we’re dealing with both.

“The demographic details of the victims are similar for all four girls and their families. Consistent with this, the abduction sites are similar. Second, the body disposal sites of two victims, Antonio

and French, are similar. These are concealed disposal sites. Currently, there is minimal forensic evidence available, but the investigation continues. We'll take questions now."

Brandt walked from the room, the gravity of the case weighing on his shoulders. Two local girls were gone, one dead, one missing, and they had made little progress. Something had to change, or other girls would go missing. He returned to the office, looked at the map, and then at the four files, each of which was growing by the day. He started with Carrie Howard and began to re-read the file from the initial report. What were they missing? What did they not see in the files on these girls? There were interviews with family, neighbors, and close friends. They interviewed the track coach, high school vice principal, and school counselors. Who

else was familiar to all these girls? He began to list the possibilities. Teachers, coaches, employers, sports teammates, store clerks, gas station attendants, home servicemen, bus drivers, law enforcement officers, doctors, dentists, and driving instructors. As he worked, the girl's faces floated in before him. Innocent children. He shook off the images as he laid out a plan and a series of questions.

Neither family used a gardening service. Howards used a pest service, and the French did not. They used different air conditioning companies, dry cleaners, post offices, gas stations, and auto repair shops. They used different grocery stores, hardware stores, doctors, and dentists. Where was the common thread?

“Hey Hinds, how's it going?” Grimes stepped through the doorway. “Any progress?”

“I’ve spent hours comparing any person or company that could have had contact with both families. I come up empty,” Brandt said.

“I was just thinking. Both girls, French and Howard. They were going to meet with Dannie when they went missing.”

“What do you mean? What do you think that means?”

“Nothing, maybe. Just a thought.”

Brandt headed home, stopping by Heinen’s grocery store for dinner. As he looked over the deli foods, someone tapped his shoulder. Dannie’s mother, Laurie, greeted him, “Hi, Deputy Hinds.” Brandt stared. The mother was very different from the daughter—delicate, poised, with blue eyes that took you in.

“Hello, Mrs. Bauer, nice to see you.”

“And you, too, Deputy.”

“Please, it’s Brandt.”

“Yes, Brandt. And it’s Laurie. I have been worried about Dannie with her friend Carrie being taken. It’s so close. Anything new in the case?”

“Nothing conclusive. We’re just following every lead we can.”

“The loss is so sad. I saw Mr. French at last month’s Lake Geauga Service Club meeting.”

“Oh?” Lake Geauga Service Club. The Howards could be in the Lake Geauga Service Club. He would have to investigate it.

“He was very quiet. It has to be so hard, so difficult,” Laurie said.

“I’m sure it is.”

“I don’t want to keep you. Have a good night, and I’ll tell Dannie I saw you.”

“Be sure to tell her hello. And Peg— Aunt Peg,” he stumbled. “Hello, too.”

“I’ll do that,” she said.

Brandt left the store without dinner and drove to the Sheriff’s office. At his desk, he searched for the Lake Geauga Service Club. Scrolling through the member list, he found Mr. French and his business. Just below that entry, Mr. Grant Howard. Both parents belonged to the same service club.

He looked up the Chamber of Commerce. Both were members. He had a connection. Heart pounding, he called Grimes.

Chapter Twenty-two

Dannie opened the front door.

“Auntie Peg,” She threw her arms around her Aunt Peg and hugged her. “Wow, didn’t know you were coming.”

Her dad’s younger sister, Peg, shared Dannie’s wild, curly black hair, stature, and natural beauty. From the time she was a little girl, she and Aunt Peg spent hours combing and styling each other’s hair—if what Dannie did to Peg’s hair was styling. Aunt Peg was a great friend and confidant. Most importantly, she was a link to her father. The family had spent many weekends together at Peg’s lake house. A house she designed, and Dannie’s father had built.

“I have the weekend free and just wanted to see my two best girlfriends,” Peg replied. “Are you up for it?” Forrest bounded into the room, hitting the throw rug at the door, sliding, and body-slammng Peg. “I forgot. I have another friend here.” She fended off the big dog’s affection and drool.

Dannie said, “Yeah, I’m ready for girl time.” She turned toward the kitchen and said, “Mom, Aunt Peg’s here.”

Coming into the entryway, Laurie hugged her sister-in-law.

“I have fresh coffee. Let’s go into the kitchen.”

The three gathered at the counter, where Forrest pawed at each for attention and affection. Peg quizzed Dannie on school, cross-country, and search-and-rescue.

“So, you’ve completed an associate’s degree in high school and now, Case Western Reserve University? When do you start,’ Peg asked.

Dannie grimaced. “January 12th. Going to live here and commute.”

“Smartest one in the family. You’re going to do great.”

Laurie said, “I don’t think you asked your niece about boys.”

“Boys, what boys? Dannie, what boys?”

“Aunt Peg, it’s nothing. Just a nice guy from school.”

‘You have a boyfriend, and your Aunt Peg doesn’t know about it?’ Peg rolled her eyes, then dropped her chin to her chest.

“It’s nothing. They talk on the phone for an hour a day,” Laurie said.

“I want details here. Drag him over here, I want to grill him.”

“Stop, Aunt Peg. He’s just a friend.”

Laurie said, “You ladies enjoy your little discussion. I have a meeting with all of my agents I have to get to, but let’s schedule a girls’ weekend at your lake house, Peg.”

“Sounds good to me,” Peg said. “Dannie, we haven’t been shooting in a while. How about an afternoon at the shooting range and a long discussion about this boy?”

“I’d love to. I don’t feel too confident in my shooting these days. I’ll get my guns.” Dannie went to a cabinet in the dining room and opened the bottom door, putting her forefinger on the fingerprint lock of the gun safe. She took out her dad’s old 40 caliber, pulling the pistol from its holster to check the chamber for any rounds

and to clear the clip. She did the same with her .22 caliber Ruger.

“Okay, good to go,” Dannie said.
“Have to get ammunition.”

Dannie and Peg drove to the Painesville Gun Range. “Aunt Peg, how’s business?” Dannie asked.

“Good. Really good. Working on drawings for a couple of private residences and a business office in Cleveland,” Peg said.

“Why did you want to be an architect? I never asked.”

“Your dad influenced me. Being in the construction business, he saw a real need for good design. He got me an internship with a firm one summer. I loved it and went from there.”

“Well, you’re great at it. Of course, the lake house is my favorite.”

“Mine too,” she said. “That’s kind of a favorite of mine. Here we are.” She turned into the parking lot of the Painesville Gun Range.

Once on the range, Peg brought out a 9mm Glock and a .357 Magnum.

“Oh, Aunt Peg, you brought your cannon.”

“Yep, want to fire it?”

“No, thank you, I like my 40 caliber.”

“You got it, girl.”

Peg hung a bull’s-eye target and pulled it to thirty feet. She placed an upper-body silhouette at twenty feet in the next row. Each took their shooter’s cubicle and loaded. Peg put all of the Glock 9mm clips into the silhouette. As Dannie waited for her turn to shoot, she imagined the silhouette to be the killer. Her breathing

quickened. *If only I could kill him.* She let out her breath and fired. Seven rounds ripped into the silhouette's torso, one in its head. She closed her eyes, revolver still extended in front of her. *If only it were him.* The fantasy didn't assuage the loss; Julie was dead, Carrie was missing. Her throat constricted, and she swallowed hard.

Aunt Peg called, "Hey Dannie, come here a minute."

Dannie walked to Peg's booth. Peg handed her a smooth plastic case. "Here, this is for you."

Dannie arched her eyebrows and took the box, unfastening each latch. She opened the case to reveal a 9 mm Px4 Storm Beretta revolver.

"Oh, Aunt Peg. It's beautiful."

"You're eighteen," Aunt Peg said, "you can get your concealed carry permit. Bad things are happening around you,

Dannie. You lost a friend, and Carrie is missing. We don't know what's out there, but you have to be ready. So, you load and lock there, Annie Oakley. Let's see how you handle this piece."

Dannie loaded the clip and stepped to the line with a twenty-foot silhouette target. She looked over her shoulder. "Dual safety, perfect, Aunt Peg." She pointed the gun at the target and fired, emptying the clip. The silhouette swung; fifteen perforations scattered from shoulder to forehead.

"It's incredible, Aunt Peg."

"Glad you like it. Let's shoot some more." They changed targets, and each continued to shoot two more clips. The door to the range banged shut behind her. Dannie set down the revolver and saw a smiling Brandt Hinds holding a gun bag.

"Deputy." She stepped to Hinds and put out her hand.

Shaking her hand, Brandt looked over her shoulder at the target. “Nice shooting. What have you got there, Dannie?”

“Oh, it’s a new Beretta. My Aunt Peg bought it for me. Just got it.”

Peg stepped back from her shooting platform, looking surprised. “Dannie, are you going to introduce your aunt or ignore her presence here?”

“Oh, Aunt Peg, this is Deputy Hinds. I told you about him.”

“Yes, you may have mentioned him—briefly,” Peg responded.

“Oh, I did. We’re the best law enforcement and civilian search team ever.”

Brandt laughed. “Well, Miss Bauer, I don’t remember you mentioning you have a lovely aunt. There’s an omission that is not forgivable.”

Brandt reached out his hand. “Brandt Hinds, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Aunt Peg.” Dannie watched as he held Peg’s eyes, a broad smile covering his face.

“It’s Peg, please. I’m not that old.” She returned the smile.

“Yes, ma’am, Peg.”

As the two stared at each other, Dannie said, “Hello. I’m here. It’s Dannie,” exaggerating a frown.

Without acknowledging Dannie, Brandt said, “Nice to see you ladies out here on the range. What do you shoot, Aunt Peg?”

“Aunt Peg shoots a 9mm Glock. Peg fires a .357 Magnum.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Nobody is shooting anything here while we stand and talk,” Dannie interrupted. “Can we get back to practicing shooting bad guys?”

“Sure, kid,”

“Okay, Dannie, let’s load and shoot.
Very nice to meet you, Deputy Hinds.”

“If it’s Peg, then I’m Brandt.” He
flashed another smile.

“Okay, Brandt.” She pulled on her
earmuffs and turned to the weapons.
Dannie smiled at Brandt, glanced at Aunt
Peg, and wagged her shoulders and hips.
Brandt shook his head and moved to his
shooter’s booth to load his FNX revolver.

Peg and Dannie finished off two
boxes of ammunition each. They cleared
their brass, waved to Brandt, and left.

Chapter Twenty-

three

Dannie curled her feet under her as she reclined on the couch. Forrest lay at her feet. She closed her computer on the last session of her differential equations course. She stretched and yawned. *I need a break from this.*

She clicked on the television and scrolled through the Netflix menu until a title caught her attention: *The Ted Bundy Tapes*. Watching the documentary series for four hours, the story of a serial killer who took the lives of more than thirty young women transfixed her. The women were not much different from the friends

she had lost. Could a serial killer have taken them?

Opening her laptop, she began to search. For the next two hours, she slipped into the abysmal world of serial killers.

She pulled a cover under her neck, shivering. The FBI profile described how meticulous, careful, and exact many serial killers are. They think in terms of perfection, living a life in which they control things and make them perfect. *Would he be perfect?* What would he be like? His clothes would be spotless, starched, and pressed. She looked at the ceiling. Perfect creases. Perfect shoes.

Visualizing Brandt's spit-shined shoes and flawless uniform. Images of his military-like, impeccable uniform ran through her mind. *Nah, not Brandt.*

Forrest stirred then rolled over. He lifted his head, his dark brown eyes holding

her gaze. She reached out to touch his head. He didn't move, his eyes penetrating her fear.

“Hey, Forrest, what are you doing?” She relaxed and took a deep breath. A chill swept through her body—Ed Bennett. Ed Bennett with his perfect shirts. His polished shoes. With his creepy hands on her. Ed Bennett. Forrest stepped forward, flopping down again, his head on her shoulder.

She pulled away from the dog and opened the laptop, searching, re-reading, cutting out paragraphs of information, and pasting them into one document. The more she read, the more convinced she was. Ed Bennett. He always made her uncomfortable. Brandt said the profile was of an organized killer. Shuddering, she read that organized serial killers could be narcissistic and could suffer from an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

Bennett fit the profile, but who would believe her? She needed to find evidence that pointed to Bennett. She found Bennett's address. In Google Maps, she located the home. There was a big house with a detached garage at the end of a long driveway and, across a field, a barn. The barn was four hundred feet from the house. Looking at a broader picture, she noted that Bennett's farm abutted a large, wooded area. The name of the wooded area came into view: Hell Hollow Wilderness Area. *Great, "Hell Hollow."*

Zooming in and out, she traced the roads and houses around Hell Hollow. To the south, there was a power line corridor. Parking near the power line, she could enter and walk through the woodland north to the back of Bennet's property.

On Saturday, she would go on a reconnaissance trip to the park to find out

how to reach his property. *I could find something—some evidence.* She would get in and get out without anyone knowing she was there. The Hell Hollow Wilderness Area website said it was a popular bird-watching spot. It also mentioned that the hollow's name came from its steep, rugged slopes, which made it difficult to access and leave. She went to the garage and retrieved her father's old field binoculars. She had her excuse to get close to Bennett's place; she was going bird-watching at Hell's Hollow.

Chapter Twenty-four

When she reached the power lines, Dannie pulled off Taylor Road, where the corridor ran east and west through Hell Hollow. She backed the SUV near the edge of the cut path. In the back of the BMW, Forrest told her he was there with a low howl. She reached into her backpack and pulled out a plastic bag. After the search for Julie French, she forgot to return the scent article. It was cloudy as she stepped from the car; binoculars hung around her neck. Opening the hatch of the BMW, she let Forrest out of his kennel, harnessing him to the lead. Forrest wagged his tail and looked at her.

“Good dog, Forrest. Let’s go, boy.”

High-tension wires buzzed overhead as Dannie started down the open corridor. On either side, the woods were oak, beech, maple and ash. As she approached a marshy area, the woodland changed to cottonwood and willow. Blackberry and serviceberry tangles made entering the woods challenging. As the sun lowered, she walked in shadow.

Following the power lines another two hundred yards, she searched the woodland edge for an opening. A fallen elm made a break in the tangle, and she worked her way into the darkened timber. Forrest pulled ahead, nose to the ground. There was the faint twittering of birds; crickets chirped and buzzed.

*Forrest took in an array of sounds.
From a distant creek, the flow of water, a*

light breeze in the treetops, the movements of a squirrel, Blue jays, and insects. Beyond this, the dog experienced the verdant smells of the woodland: mosses, molds, worms, decaying leaves, mushrooms, and a thousand other scents wove in colors of green and brown, sienna, blue, and shades of orange and red in his canine perception. And there was her heartbeat, her tense movements, and the sweet smell of anxiety. Her persona became his. He alerted, the tension becoming his own. With nose, eyes, and ears, he searched for danger. Behind them, the woodland swept to an oddly distant, rippling stream. Before them, he recognized the smell of a house, cars, and humans. Where was the danger?

The carpet of old leaves was soft, and she made no sound except for stepping on

downed branches. She moved eighty to one hundred yards north and then turned west toward his house, keeping concealed in the woods. After three minutes, the outline of a building appeared through the trees. She paused at the sight of the building. The confidence she had while sitting in bed planning evaporated as she was confronted with the reality of sneaking up on Ed Bennett's house. She closed her eyes. *Should I be doing this?* That knot in her stomach returned.

A light rain started to fall, darkening the woodland even more. With the rain, the crickets increased their rhythmic buzz. Forrest pressed his body against her leg. She looked down and touched his head, taking a deep breath. "Okay, buddy. Let's do this," she said.

She moved back into the woodland, ensuring she was concealed, and then

moved north to position the barn between her and the house. There was no movement, no vehicles.

“Bennett should be at work for another couple of hours,” she said out loud, talking to Forrest. *Why not investigate?*

There were fifty feet of open ground between her and the barn. She took a deep breath, pulled Forrest in close, and dashed to the side of the barn. She moved to the back of the barn, still out of view of the house. There was a wide sliding door. Locked. She came around the side again and crept toward the front, each beat of her heart pulsing in her ears. Leaning against the dark wood siding, she breathed in, eyes closed. The rain increased, and she pulled the hood of her jacket over her head. She took a deep breath. She trembled but was compelled to keep exploring, hoping for

some clue or proof she could take to the police.

She slipped the plastic scent bag from her pocket. Her pulse quickened again. Forrest looked at her and squirmed with anticipation. “Okay, Forrest, here we go. Time to work.” She opened the plastic bag, and Forrest pressed his nose inside.

She placed a hand on the dog’s back.

“Forrest work.” She walked to the door, Forrest at her side, his nose to the ground. She looked toward the house, reached out, and turned the doorknob. The door creaked open. Stepping into the darkened barn, she closed the door behind her, letting out a long breath. Forrest held his head high, taking in the barn’s myriad smells. There were two windows on each side, one of which was covered by garden equipment. Forrest dropped his head, taking in the odors from the floor. For

Dannie, the smells were familiar: hay, cedar, and motor oil from the small tractor. There was an old truck behind the tractor. On the right, there were six horse stalls. All were empty. The rain reverberated off the metal roof.

She walked Forrest across the sawdust-covered concrete floor to the window and looked toward the house. Nothing changed, so she returned to examine the barn. The horse stalls were clean.

Forrest pulled her into the stalls. He pushed his head tight to the edges of the stall, moving along each wall. Forrest looked at Dannie, then put his nose back to the floor. He led her to the back of the barn, around an old truck, and back to the middle of the barn. His behavior told her there was no trace of the girl in the barn.

Forrest led her to a workbench built into the far wall. Shelves above the bench were cluttered with insecticides, herbicides, and paint cans. The benchtop was littered with tools. There was a wide drawer at the center of the bench. Pulling it open, she held her breath. Inside were duct tape, nylon rope, a blue tarp, scissors, and small tools. It wasn't definitive proof, maybe, but it felt like something, and her dark thoughts were consumed with all the things Bennett could do with the contents of that drawer. She pulled out her phone and took a picture of the open drawer. As she examined the contents, Forrest's head snapped up. She froze, then moved to the window, peering out as a car pulled in front of the garage.

Chapter Twenty-five

He shouldn't come to the barn. Rain continued to drum on the metal roof. Forrest looked at her, whining as if he shared her tension. Dannie reached down and put her hand around his neck to reassure and hold him closer. She took deep breaths, hoping to still her rapid heartbeat. After five minutes, a man came from the front of the garage, walking toward the barn. She held her breath. A hood covered the man's head from the rain, but from his size, it was Ed Bennett. He turned from the barn and walked to the cultivated field between the garage and the barn. Stopping at the edge of the freshly dug earth, he looked down, surveying the furrowed ground. He turned to the barn again.

There was no way out. Bennett was halfway to the barn. She moved to the horse stalls, stepped into the second stall, and closed the door, her heart pounding. Kneeling, she pushed Forrest into a sitting position. His tail thumped the floor; she reached back and held the vibrating appendage. The barn door opened, and she placed her second hand on Forrest's snout. Forrest looked at her and started to move, wriggling from her grasp. She held him close, caressing his head with her cheek as she did. *I should never have done this.*

Bennett entered the barn, no sound or clue as to what he was doing, what he saw, or what he might do. Now footsteps. *Did I leave wet footprints on the floor?* Were there paw prints? Her legs ached as she knelt, motionless. The footsteps stopped. Silence except for the beat of her heart pounding in her chest and the rain on the

roof. He moved again, this time to the opposite side of the barn, to the workbench. There was the grating noise of the drawer in the workbench opening, then some rattling sounds as if he was moving the contents about. *What is he doing?* Quiet again. Then, he was walking across the floor toward the stalls. She tensed, ready to bolt. Forrest began to shake, trying to move his front paws. She held him closer. The footsteps moved to the door. The door closed with a metallic click as if a bolt slid or a lock closed. Trembling, she released Forrest, putting a hand to his snout to stifle a howl or baying. She stood, with a long exhale as the flood of adrenaline ebbed. Weak-kneed, she walked to the door and tried the handle. Locked. Where was he? Was he somewhere inside? Was he waiting outside?

As she ran to the window at the back of the barn, a knot formed under her breastbone, a lump in her throat, and her skin was cool and prickly. The rain continued pounding on the roof, drowning out other sounds but her breathing. There was a latch at the bottom of the window. She pried it out and pushed on the frame—it swung out. Leaning forward, pushing through the window, she landed on her shoulder and rolled to her side. Panting, she pushed back into the window. Forrest was already on his rear legs, front paws on the windowsill.

“Okay, Forrest, quiet. Now, up.” She wrapped her arms around him and heaved him through the opening. Forrest scrambled with his hind legs, and as he cleared the window, she fell back, Forrest on top of her. Her hood down, rain-soaked her hair, her face muddied. Should she walk to the end

of the barn? *No. Run.* She sprinted fifty feet to the edge of the woods. Into the underbrush, she stumbled but was up and running again into the driving rain and the murky haze of the darkened woodland.

Slowing, she looked back. Nothing. How far had she come? Should she turn south or keep going? She stopped, trying to get her bearings. The dark woods gave no clue. There was a noise behind her. Was it the wind, a branch falling from a tree? Forrest turned to the sound with a growl. She ran, heart pounding again. She dodged right, then left, around big trees, over rotting logs, and through snaring wild grapevines. The ground sloped downhill ahead. Forrest loped alongside her. She turned, and through the rain and the closing darkness, a man's shape loomed in the haze. Was he chasing her? *What did Julie and Carrie see? Did they see someone*

coming? She ran. She ran down the slope, slipping, sliding, and jumping over fallen branches.

He moved closer to his girl, now brushing her leg with each step. The girl's demeanor changed from tense, jerky movement to lunging, leaping, and running through the woods. Her heartbeat rapid, powerful pulses, her breathing ragged but deep. He alerted to danger, head high, ears forward, now loping in long strides to stay with Dannie. The rain on the leafy canopy blended with the faint woodland sounds of birds and insects.

The ground sloped away. A sound behind him, a breaking branch, and human movement caused him to slow, turn, and issue a deep-throated growl. Dannie ran again. He ran with her, the sound of

rustling water below, ahead, treetops, open air; he pulled hard to the right, the entire length of the leash. The leash jerked tight, jolting his body halfway around, where he dug in his feet and pushed against the strain of the leash with powerful legs.

She felt Forrest snap the leash backwards right as she stepped into empty air. She kicked her feet, fighting for purchase as she slipped over the edge of the shale cliff, momentarily hanging straight down. Forrest slid to a halt just on the other side of a small tree. Dannie continued to slip, and then the leash whipped taut. Clinging to the leash, her legs dangled over the precipice, one hundred feet above the creek below. She pumped her feet for footing, but there was just air. Pulling hard on the leash, Forrest was jerked against the

tree. Sliding further over the precipice, she dug her left hand into the ground. Gripping the leash and digging her fingers into the loose shale, she pulled herself up, away from the cliff. Forrest strained against the leash. Driving his powerful rear legs into the ground, the leash tightened.

She couldn't get enough air, and her world began to spin. Lifting one leg and then the other, she pulled herself to her knees, clinging to the leash and clawing at the slope. Her left hand was raw and bleeding. She reached out to Forrest, both arms around his neck. The big dog stood firm, as she pulled herself up, leaning on his strength. *Which way to go? Parallel to the cliff?* She ran again. The rain eased as the darkness deepened. Ahead, the understory thickened. *Was he behind her? Was he coming?* Stumbling and falling, she rolled into the open power line corridor. She rose

and sprinted toward the car. Forrest ran beside her, head high. Past the house next to the power line, she slowed and paced the next hundred yards to her SUV. She pulled the door open and pushed Forrest up to the front seat.

Starting the engine, she pulled onto Taylor Road, hands shaking, her heart still in overdrive. She looked down at her throbbing left hand. It was dirt-covered. Four fingertips were raw from clawing at the shale, and her palm was cut; her nails were dirt-encrusted. Forrest moved to Dannie and tried to lick her hand. She pulled it back, saying, "Good dog, good dog, Forrest." As she drove off, she passed the driveway entrance to Bennett's farm. No lights, no movement. She had the picture she took in the barn, but nothing else. Fatigue set in as the adrenaline rush

faded. She shook it off, pressed the accelerator, and sped on.

Chapter Twenty-six

Brandt called and interviewed a half dozen members of the Chamber. Now, he and the sheriff would interview Ed Bennett, President of the Lake Geauga County Service Club.

Pulling the cruiser into the Service Club office parking lot, he and the sheriff walked to the building. Brandt said, “You wanted to talk to Bennett in person.”

“Lake Geauga County Service Club Director. I’ve known Ed for a couple of years. Good guy. He’ll know Howard and French for sure. He knows everyone.”

They entered the office, and Ed greeted them.

“Hey, John, how the hell are you? And hi there, deputy. Come on in. Coffee?”

Water?” he said, not giving either a chance to return his greeting. “Now, let’s get to this, John,” he addressed the Sheriff. “You said you’re interviewing all the Service Club members, right?”

“Yep. With your members in real estate, law, and tax, your folks are best suited to identify new individuals in town. It’s just routine, Ed. We need to cover every base with two local girls dead.”

“Hell, yes, John. You make sure you get to everyone.”

Brandt began with a question, “Does anything or anyone come to mind when you think back a month or two? Someone new or that stands out?”

Bennett paused for seconds. “No, no, just no one stands out. Not many folks moved in. Are you all checking with the post office for new folks?”

“Yes, Ed, the detective has covered that.” Sheriff Dawson said.

Brandt continued, “Mr. Bennett, you know both Mr. French and Mr. Howard, right?”

“Sure, good men, good families.”

“You say, families – you know them?” Brandt asked.

“Not personally, but I’ve seen them around. Fine kids, both of them. Tragedy. Real tragedy losing those kids.”

“Oh, yes, it is,” Brandt said. “Can you tell us anything about those kids to help us?”

“No, just great kids, fine families.” Bennett stared at Brandt.

“Thanks, Mr. Bennett, you know we’re just seeking help. People like yourself notice things.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Ed, this has been good. It’s helpful. You know, we have to check every little thing we can,” Dawson said.

“I get it,” Bennett replied.

“Hey, by the way, how was the vacation?” Sheriff Dawson asked.

“Not bad. Have you ever been to Put-In-Bay?”

“Sure, good fishing out there.”

“I don’t fish, but I try to get out there once a year. There or Kelly’s Island. Relaxing. You can walk to all the bars and restaurants downtown.”

Brandt held his breath. Put-In-Bay. Near Sandusky.

Sheriff Dawson said, “Ed, thanks again. If you think of anything, please give us a call.”

“Yeah, Ed, and give a call and let’s catch up. Haven’t talked to you much. Busy with this case, you know.”

“Right, John, I’ll do it. We’ll catch up.”

As the Sheriff drove from the parking lot, Brandt asked, “Do you know when he was gone? When he was on Kelly’s Island?”

Sheriff Dawson was quiet as Brandt pulled into the street and accelerated south. Dawson said, “No. I’ll nail it down. I’ll get the dates.”

Brandt shook the rain from his jacket as he entered Grimes’s office. “Wet out there,” he said. “Almost cold enough to snow. Have you heard back from the FBI yet?”

“Yes,” Grimes said. “The FBI agrees Bennett is a ‘person of interest,’ not a suspect. The Sheriff doesn’t want to release that to the media. We’re hoping to gather

more information about him. He's been in this area for six years; he lives on a farm out toward Thompson."

"When can we get to this farm?"

Grimes cleared his throat. "There's something I need to talk to you about." He looked down at his desk.

"Sounds ominous, should I get us some coffee?"

"No, have a seat." Grimes, arms on his desk, leaned forward. "I was there—the other day. To check it out. Nothing official."

"Really, without a warrant?"

"I just walked the outskirts of his property."

"Damn. What did you see there?"

"He's got a big place. Big garage and huge barn. He has acreage and plenty of room to hide someone. There are no houses

close by. It's secluded. I wanted to get a look at the barn and the garage.

"I could hear a car. When I got closer, I saw a big guy in a hood by the driveway behind the house."

"It was Bennett? Brandt asked.

"I don't know. The guy in the driveway was big like Bennett. He was walking toward the woods when I lost sight of him. I stayed back; it was dark and raining like hell. I skirted the barn and got around back. Then I saw someone running through the woods. I followed, assuming it was Bennett.

"They were running. I tried to follow, but it was dark, and I lost them. Damn near went over a cliff."

"So it was Bennett? Running? Running where?"

“No, Brandt. That’s what I’m getting to. The person running...had a dog. A big dog.”

Brandt stared at Grimes. “You think it was Dannie Bauer.”

Grimes shook his head, “Yep.”

“Gentlemen.” They turned to Sheriff Dawson, who stood in the doorway. “I guess I have good news and bad news. I pulled up the schedules and meeting minutes from the Chamber and the Service Club. I checked the dates when the Croft and Antonio girls went missing.”

Grimes and Brandt looked at each other and then back at the Sheriff.

“Bennett wasn’t there when each girl went missing. I checked his vacation schedule. He was in Orlando when Julie went missing. Rabbit trail, gentlemen. Bennett’s not our guy.”

The receptionist showed Dannie to a conference room and said, “Deputy Hinds will be here in a moment.” Dannie took a deep breath and cracked her knuckles. Maybe they had more information about Julie. That would be good.

Brandt entered, nodded, and said, “Thanks for coming in, Dannie.”

“No problem, Deputy Hinds. What’s up?”

“I’d like to know what you were doing at Bennett’s farm two days ago.”

His question hit her like a punch. Her gut tightened as she clenched her hands. She felt the warmth of crimson flood her face. Her mouth dried, and she tried to swallow.

“Dannie. I know you were there. Why?”

She took a deep breath, exhaled, and said, “I, ah, I just wanted to look around.”

“That’s not an answer. Why?”

Nausea swept from the pit of her stomach to her throat. She tasted bile. “I... just thought that, maybe he knew something about the girls. The missing girls.”

“You just thought.” He leaned over the table. “You trespassed on private property. You interfered with an ongoing criminal investigation.”

“Then you must think he has something to do with it too.”

Brandt slammed his fist on the table. Dannie jumped, tears forming. “This is police business,” his voice rising. “You interfered in a police matter. Not only that, you could have put yourself in danger.” He leaned back, grim-faced. “What were you thinking?”

She stared, frozen in her chair.

Brandt leaned an elbow on the table, hand to his forehead. “Dannie, you can’t do this sort of thing,” his voice softened. I understand that you have lost two close friends. That is tragic. It’s heartbreaking, but it does not give you a license to push into this investigation. We are looking for a dangerous criminal.” He shook his head, let out a breath. “You will not interfere with this investigation. You will not talk to anyone involved. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You stick to your schoolwork and your search activities. That’s it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“This ends here. I’ll not take this any further. You will drop it completely. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Brand stood and left. Her hands shook; the nausea persisted. Trembling, she

stood and walked to the door. *I feel like crap. What did I do? Damn. I'll never live this down.* She walked to the exit, feeling as if there were eyes on her, judging her. *I want to help. That's all.*

Chapter Twenty-

seven

With Brandt's admonition still ringing in her head, she picked up her laptop and leaned back on a pillow. *I won't interfere, but I have to know. I have to know what happened to Julie and Carrie.* There had to be more to learn. She probed his Facebook page. There were pictures of his vehicles at auto shows. One picture caught her attention. It showed Bennett standing next to a '36 Ford Coupe. He held a large red ribbon in his hands. Behind him, there was a large banner. In large letters, it said, *Classic Cars Orlando. October 11 to 17.* The Facebook page was dated October 14th, 6:02 PM. Bennett was in Florida when Julie

went missing. Dead end. *Damn.* The realization that Bennett was not involved served to increase her sense of shame, doing something stupid, getting caught, and learning nothing. Deputy Hinds was right. It was time to move on.

She flexed her fingers and wrist. In the two days since her foray into Bennett's barn, her hand had healed nicely. She'd been wrong about Bennett. But someone, someone Julie knew, which means someone local, had taken Julie and killed her. The thought of who it could be occupied her mind daily. Now Bradley had asked her out. *I need a break. I need to focus on something else.* She looked in the mirror to finalize her braid. *Pheasant hunting with Bradley. Let me focus on this for a while.*

She had only hunted with her dad and Aunt Peg. She didn't have to look good then. Today was different. She headed to the kitchen, wrapping herself in a new coat. The dark October morning was cold and bleak, but the kitchen was warm with light and the smell of fresh coffee.

"Mom, how's this jacket? Can you see my figure? Does it make me look fat?" Dannie entered the kitchen, twirling and waiting for her mother's affirmation. "Well?" she said, putting her hands, model-like, on her hips.

"It's a hunting coat, dear, not a Chanel accessory."

"Mom, Chanel doesn't do camouflage. This coat is the best Cabalas has. It has to be stylish. Wait, let me cinch the waist." Laurie smiled as Dannie opened the jacket and tightened the internal strap.

“You want to be able to breathe out there. I wouldn’t worry about having a waistline in camouflage.”

“Mom, I have to look good.” Dannie buttoned the front. “There, is this better?”

She posed in black leather boots to her knees and gray camo slacks. A pale gray turtleneck sweater fluffed to her chin, the green camouflage coat open at the neck. Dannie managed to cinch the coat into a tight fit about her waist. Laurie shook her head, smiling.

“Mom, are you laughing at me? What?”

“No, no, dear. You’re lovely. The boy will never shoot a bird; he’ll be too distracted.” Laurie, still in her robe, lifted her coffee to smiling lips.

“But is it okay? I should never have agreed to go hunting with Bradley. I look like a farmer.”

“You look like a farmer’s daughter, and that’s good. He wants to go hunting, not to the opera. He didn’t ask you to go hunting for style. He already saw style in the girl he asked to go pheasant hunting.”

“Really. Are you sure?”

“Um-hmm.” Laurie sipped her coffee.

Forrest stood beside Dannie, tail flopping against the kitchen’s center island.

“Sorry, big dog, you have to sit this out. Hunting pheasant is not your specialty.” Forrest pawed at her leg, and Dannie stroked his head. “We’ll go for a long walk when I return.” As a vehicle pulled into the driveway, Forrest looked to the front of the house then trotted to the front window.

“You don’t need anything to eat?” Laurie inquired.

“Nope, Bradley said to just dress warm, and he’d take care of everything else.” She took the orange knit cap from the counter. “Okay, Mom, wish us luck. Pheasant for Sunday dinner.” She went to the gun cabinet in the family room and extracted the 16-gauge Weatherby shotgun that her father had bequeathed her.

Bradley backed the Ram pickup around in the driveway. Dannie skipped to the passenger side of the truck. She put a hand on the door and stopped. A golden dog barked from the cab. Bradley reached across the seat and pulled the dog to the center console.

“Hop in,” he said. Still surprised, Dannie opened the door and slid in.

The golden retriever wiggled free and was on her in an instant. She laughed out loud. Bradley called the dog, “Silver,

Silver, get off her. Relax, get in back, you thug of a retriever.”

She helped push the excited retriever into the back. “You never told me you had a dog,” she said.

“He’s my dad’s. Silver’s a bird dog. She flushes and retrieves.”

“She’s beautiful. Hey Silver, kiss me.” Dannie leaned back to the excited retriever, and Silver gave a good lick. “Good dog, Silver. And, hey, good boy Bradley.”

He leaned over the steering wheel, snickering. “Let’s get this hunting expedition on the road. A friend of my dad’s got a place south of Burton. Should be pheasant there.” He smiled at Dannie and put the truck in gear.

“So, you’re going to Case Western University? That’s impressive.” He smiled. “I don’t think my grades would get me in there.”

“Yeah, well, you’re going to Kent on a soccer scholarship. Division 1 scholarship.”

“I heard you have an academic scholarship and a track scholarship to Case.” He looked directly at her for emphasis.

“A Division 3 school. You have a Division 1 scholarship.”

“Yeah, I guess. In any case, it’s only a few hours from Case to Kent.” At that, Bradley pulled off the road at a harvested cornfield. “This is the place. The farmer left some corn in the field. There should be lots of birds here.”

Pinning her hunting license to her jacket, she adjusted the orange knit cap over

her black hair. "Let's see if Silver will hustle us a few birds," she said. She cradled the Weatherby pump-action while Bradley slung his twelve-gauge Browning semi-automatic over his shoulder. Frenetic, Silver danced at the end of her leash. They climbed the two-wire fence and started into the field.

Bradley gestured to the field. "You go ahead and take the first bird."

"No, ladies first. Silver jumps a bird, and we both go. Let's see what you can do."

He chuckled. "Okay, I guess you're the boss." Slipping the cinch from Silver's collar, he commanded, "Go get 'em, girl."

The dog bounded forward and cut a sharp left for thirty feet, then diagonally cut right, moving with bounding grace, her golden fur flowing through the brown corn stalks. Bradley moved to Dannie's left, and both held their shotguns ready. Silver cut

hard left, then turned straight ahead, disappearing into the withered corn. There was a burst of sound, and three birds flushed with thrumming wings as Dannie and Bradley swung their guns.

“No. Hens. No shot,” Bradley said. The three hen pheasants fluttered away another fifty yards, disappearing into the field. Bradley lowered his gun and exhaled. “You’ve got great reflexes.”

“Great reflexes?” she mocked.

“Yeah, you were right on it.”

“So I have great reflexes? What else?” Dannie cradled the gun, eyes searching the gray sky.

“Ah, a lot.”

The hook was set, and she wasn’t letting him off. “A lot of what?”

Bradley was quiet for a few steps, scanning the field ahead for birds.

“You’ve got great reflexes, and you’re beautiful, and you’re smart... and tall.” He stuttered and paused. Then rapidly, “And, and you’re beautiful, and you’re funny, and you’re strong. And, ah, athletic. Did I mention you’re really beautiful?” He stopped, studying her. She turned to face him, “And when I look at you, it’s difficult to look away. And when I am not looking at you, I think about you. And, you ruin my brain.”

“I ruin your brain?” She stared open-mouthed.

Bradley looked at his feet. “I don’t know how else to say it.”

Dannie lowered the shotgun to the ground and stepped to Bradley. She took the Browning from his hands and set it on the ground behind her. Turning, she took his face in her hands. His eyes glistened, a beautiful blue. She pulled his face to hers,

pressing her lips to his, the field and sky fading from consciousness.

There was a sudden burst of sound, and four pheasants leaped into the air twenty yards away, Silver barking.

“Shit,” she said.

“Damn,” Bradley added, and as they reached for their shotguns, the birds fluttered into the distance. They stood, guns in hand, staring into the vacant field, hearing Silver bound through the corn, then turned to each other and burst out laughing. Again, they laid the shotguns aside as Bradley wrapped his arms around her, and they laughed until they were out of breath.

“Okay, great white hunter,” Dannie said, “looks like we’re having a hard time bringing dinner home.”

Bradley rocked her back and forth in his arms. “We have to focus.”

Dannie replied, "Isn't focusing what we were doing?"

"No, on the birds. The birds."

"This bird is thinking about love, not shooting."

"Yeah, I was thinking too. Ah, I should think longer before I talk."

"No." Her finger brushed his lips. "I like you the way you are."

Silver appeared through the corn, running to Bradley and Dannie, tail wagging.

"I think we've just about ruined this field. Let's walk out and down the road, then come in from the other side. The birds landed over there." Bradley pointed. They walked arm in arm, Silver linked to Bradley's wrist, sniffed her way to the road. Her arm entwined in his, his easy gait calming, a sense of contentment swept over her. Beyond the field, leafless woodland

rolled into a dark hill, darker under the gray winter sky. In all the brown of frozen earth, decaying corn stalks, and foreboding skies, there was joy.

“Hey, what are you smiling about?”

Bradley looked down at her.

“Ah, nothing.”

“What’s so funny?”

“The way you messed up the last covey of birds.”

“Me, not me, it was you.”

She squeezed his arm tighter.

They stepped through the wire at the south end of the field. Bradley unclipped Silver and sent her into the corn. Walking for no more than thirty feet, Silver flushed four birds. They swung in unison, firing one after another, and two roosters dropped into the field.

“Fetch, Silver, fetch.” They reloaded their guns as Silver dashed from the corn, a multi-colored cock pheasant in her mouth. She dropped it at Bradley’s feet. “Good dog, Silver, now fetch.” The dog bounded back into the corn, and she returned with another bird in less than a minute. “Good job, Silver.”

Dannie went to Silver, petted her, and hugged her. “Good dog, great job.”

Bradley put the pheasant in his hunting pouch. They pressed forward into the corn, Silver in the lead, coursing through the field. She flushed more birds, more misses, and then they each brought down another cock pheasant. With their bag limit, Bradley called Silver in, and they walked to the edge of the field. A large, felled cottonwood tree made a nice bench for the couple. Bradley pulled a tablecloth out of his backpack. Then he laid out cheese

and crackers, along with a thermos of hot chocolate. Dannie shook her head, her eyes wide with amazement at this handsome man's picnic fare. Silver nosed around, returning for pieces of crackers and bits of cheese.

As they finished lunch, Dannie quieted, staring into the distance.

Bradley said, "Hey, you okay?"

"I'm fine, except I can't get Carrie out of my mind, even on this wonderful day with you. It's like she's always there—the loss. So many things remind me of her. And I wish I could do something. I want her to be safe." I don't know what else I can do. Dannie lay her head on Bradley's shoulder. Silver pressed herself into Dannie's lap, a tear dropping to her golden muzzle.

Chapter Twenty-

eight

In eager anticipation, the Labrador pranced on the front seat as Tom Edwards turned onto the dirt road.

“Hey, dog, settle down. Riley, you’re a crazy dog. Now, you have to stay out of the water. Those steelhead are skittish. I should have left you at home.” The dog, panting at the prospect of the water and the woods, turned to his owner and gave him a dog smile. Tom drove, slowing to check the water in the creek paralleling the dirt road. The water looked good, clear from the past cold days, but still running well. It was October, and early for a good run of steelhead.

He pulled over to where the road became a rutted track, turning away from the creek.

“Okay, Riley, let’s find some steelhead,” he said, ruffling the eager dog’s ears. Riley followed him out the driver’s door, hitting the ground with his nose down and heading for a stump to pee. Tom pulled on chest waders, saying, “I don’t think I’ll be in water this deep, but they’ll keep me warm.” The cool morning air created a downhill draft, and the breeze chilled him. Riley sniffed around as Tom put on his vest and took his fly rod from the back of the truck. He called Riley and snapped a lead to keep him from the cold, clear water—and from spooking the fish. The two started along the creek. There was a pool just under an old bridge piling a quarter mile upstream, a good place to start.

Riley got anxious as he walked toward the creek. The dog turned and looked back toward the truck, whining.

“What’s up, Riley? Are you cold already? You’re tougher than that.” He pulled Riley along. The dog resisted, pulling toward the track behind the truck. More tugs, and the dog trotted toward the pool, Tom hoped, held his steelhead.

The creekside was pebbled in red and gold, with ice diamonds edging the water. Stripping the line from the reel and making a graceful cast, he lay his floating line at the head of the pool, letting it drift. His pole bent, and he lifted both arms, tightening the line. The steelhead broke the surface, sparkling droplets glistening in the early sunlight. He held his breath, the line tight, the fish splashing as it struck the surface, then running upstream, Riley barking at the water. Tom worked the silvery fish to the

bank. He slipped a finger in the gills and scooped the eight-pound steelhead out of the water.

This is what he came to catch. He started downstream, Riley running ahead. The dog was in and out of the water, then nose down along the bank. Riley stopped and lifted his head, turning it toward the downhill breeze. Then he took off.

“Riley, Riley, come, get back here.” The retriever bounded past the truck and onto the track opposite where they parked. “Hey, dog, get back here.” He dropped his gear at the truck and, still in waders, jogged after Riley, who was disappearing, uphill into the underbrush. “Riley, come here.”

Riley barked.

“Riley, come, Riley, come,” he commanded. He pushed through the brush, finding Riley just over a small embankment. The dog gave him no

attention. Tom stepped to the edge of the bank and below, fifteen feet down the slope, the crumpled form of a young girl. Her curly black hair was plastered to her face, her mouth open in a death gasp. “Christ,” he said. His stomach clinched. Riley’s barking seemed muffled as a sense of paralysis swept him. His head spun so that he couldn’t focus. He found his voice and called to Riley, “Come here, boy, good dog.” The dog ran to him, and Tom knelt to put his arm around the wet retriever. “Good dog,” he repeated, and reaching for his mobile phone, he dialed 911.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Brandt ended the phone call and hung his head, taking deep breaths. It was the phone call he dreaded. He called Grimes.

“Phil, I got a call from Detective Barnes in Mentor. They think they found the Howard girl’s body.”

“When?”

“This morning, a fisherman with a dog. The body was dumped off Seeley Road near Paine Creek in Indian Point Park. Same MO.”

“How far? Ten miles?”

“More like twelve. In any case, Mentor is open to us going there. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’ll be at the station in twenty minutes.”

Brandt met Grimes in the Sheriff's office parking lot on Merritt. "So is the FBI already on this?" Grimes asked.

"Yes," Brandt replied.

"Yeah, let's get out there and see what they have."

They drove the dirt road to the end, where a small fleet of law enforcement vehicles was parked. Showing their credentials, they walked the path away from Paine Creek. Detective Barnes was with a group of uniformed and plainclothed officers at the edge of the dense underbrush. He greeted Grimes and Brandt as they approached.

"Looks like the pattern you worked out is right on. The body is about thirty

yards in here, just off this trail and down an embankment. It appears that the body is well-preserved. The coroner and FBI forensics are there now.”

“What do you know? Any details on her condition?” Hinds asked.

“Partially clothed is all I know. But the coroner says they’ll get a lot from this one. Guess we got lucky. A guy’s dog led him here from the creek.”

Brandt inhaled. Lucky. She wasn’t lucky. It was predictable that the body would be within ten miles or so at the end of the dirt road. There should have been an area search two weeks ago.

Grimes pointed to the road. “I guess there were no tire tracks of any kind?”

“Nothing. Our guys went over this road before we opened it.”

“Busy as things are, I guess we’ll just wait for the reports back at the task force center,” Brandt said.

“Okay, gentlemen, I’ll be there later today. Guess we’ll have a briefing on the preliminary findings.”

“See you then,” Brandt said.

As they drove back down the dirt track to Seeley Road, Grimes asked, “So what do you think, Brandt?”

“Think? I have a hard time thinking about anything right now. What monster would do this to young girls, children? It grabs my gut every time I think about one of these girls. I’m angry. Pissed. And frustrated. I want to find the bastard.” Grimes nodded, and they drove in silence.

Sheriff Dawson looked from Grimes to Brandt. “All right, gentlemen,” he said,

“now the hard part. We tell the family. Brandt, I’d like you to come with me to the Howards’.”

“Fine, Sir,” Brandt said. He stared at the floor. “Sheriff, I think we should visit Dannie Bauer. Carrie Howard was her best friend.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll talk to the Howards; you can tell Dannie. Damn. I wish we didn’t have to do this. This is not the way I wanted to start my Monday.”

“I’ll bring the cruiser around,” Brandt said—the heaviness of the task centered in his chest like an ache in the heart.

The Howards were stoic. Their hopes had dwindled over two weeks, but the ache of losing Carrie still pierced every day. Hat in hand, Brandt took a deep breath and exhaled, as he pressed the doorbell at

Dannie's home. Dannie opened the door, smiling. The smile dropped from her face, her mouth frozen, half open.

"Dannie," Brandt said, "I'm sorry to bring you this news." Dannie began to shake. Laurie came up behind Dannie, her demeanor going through the same transformation as Dannie's. "I'm sorry, Dannie, but Carrie's body was found this morning." Dannie's face paled, and her shoulders slumped. Laurie wrapped her arms around her as Dannie stumbled. Brandt stepped forward to give a hand, Sheriff Dawson behind him.

"Please, come in," Laurie said. She took Dannie's hand, one arm around her, turning to the living room. Dannie stumbled and let out a whimper, then a wail. Laurie helped her to the couch, where she broke out in sobs.

“She can’t be gone. She can’t be gone.” Dannie choked out the words between sobs.

Brandt looked to Sheriff Dawson, who seemed as helpless as Brandt. He wiped a tear forming in the corner of his eye. “Mrs. Bauer,” Brandt said, “Again, we’re sorry to bring this news, but we thought it best you heard it from the Sheriff and me.”

“So sorry, Mrs. Bauer. If there is anything we can do...” Dawson added.

“Thank you both,” she said, holding a sobbing Dannie. “I think Dannie needs some time.”

“Yes, we understand.” Brandt stood, the Sheriff with him. “Again, anything we can do, please call.” As they left, Sheriff Dawson put his arm around Brandt’s shoulders, and they walked to their car.

For two days, Dannie swept from hours of crying to a stultifying daze. She awoke on Wednesday, eyes stinging, throat burning, and an ache that pressed on her chest. She put a hand on Forrest's head and choked back a sob, rolling out of bed. "Oh, Carrie, I miss you." *What do I do?* She walked to the kitchen, where her mom was.

"Good morning, dear," Laurie said. "I'm not going to ask you how you are. I think I know." She squeezed Dannie's hand.

"Thanks, Mom." She poured a cup of tea and sat at the counter. "Do you think we can see the Howards today?"

Nodding, Laurie said, "I'll give them a call."

They sipped their coffee in silence. "I'm angry," Dannie said.

“Angry?”

“I’m just saying, I’m angry. I want to find the person who did this to Carrie. I want to kill him.”

“Dannie, no. That’s not like you.”

“It’s how I feel. When I think of what he did, it’s like a fire inside me, and I want to scream. And I want that monster dead.”

“I understand that you’re angry. It’s natural. It’s just that it concerns me when you talk like that.”

“It’s how I feel. I can’t change that. I don’t want to change it. I want to hold on to the hate. That’s the only thing that keeps me going. The hate.”

Chapter Thirty

At 4 PM, Brandt and Grimes walked into the briefing room. The Lake County Coroner, the FBI, and Mentor Police were to summarize initial findings.

The coroner began. “We have a teenage female body identified as Carrie Howard. The preliminary finding is death by strangulation. There are ligature marks, and the girl was redressed in nightwear. The clothes she was wearing when she disappeared have not been found. Here’s the FBI.”

Agent Miller stepped forward. “Special Agent Darlene Miller, Forensics. There’s little to add to the coroner’s preliminary report. The dumpsite and the condition of the body, clothing, and

apparent strangulation all match Julie French and what we do know of Mary Elizabeth Antonio. This evidence suggests the same perpetrator or perpetrators. The partial clothing on the victim does suggest a sexual motive. We need to get the final autopsy results to know if there was sexual assault.”

For the next few days, the media were relentless. They were at the Sheriff’s office, on the road to Paine Creek, at the site where Julie French was found, and then at the site where Mary Elizabeth Antonio was found. They broadcast from outside Chardon High School, and the Chardon Town Square—a small town terrorized by a serial killer, they said. One TV station did a special on serial killers. Local radio posted warnings about traveling alone or being out late.

Brandt sat next to Grimes in the back row of the briefing room. The coroner and FBI spent two days on their forensic investigation and were ready to report on Carrie Howard.

The coroner began, “The cause of death for Carrie Howard is death due to strangulation. She was sexually assaulted. No DNA was found. As with the victim Julie French, it appears the victim was bound by the hands and by the ankles before death. We estimate she died within 48 hours of her abduction. Agent Miller, can you review the forensics, please?”

“No surprises there,” Grimes said to Brandt.

Agent Miller stepped to the podium. “The forensic examination found that Howard was wearing lipstick that did not match hers. She wore eyeliner when found, but was not known to wear it regularly. The

top she was wearing was a type of lingerie or bedclothes. The FBI laboratory matched the eyeliner on Carrie Howard to traces found on Julie French. Both girls were redressed and made up before being murdered. Now here's Agent Pearsall with behavior analysis."

Brandt shook his head, trying to comprehend what all this meant. Sexually assaulted, strangled. The terror she must have experienced. What horrors did that girl face? He exhaled deeply. Grimes looked at him with an almost imperceptible nod, as if to acknowledge his unspoken torment.

Pearsall came forward and began, "While we can't be sure each of these victims was targeted and killed by the same person or persons, the similarities suggest this. This is a power control killer exercising dominance and control over the

victim. The victim is a symbolic representation of someone for the killer. The fact that the two girls were redressed and had makeup applied supports this. This killer is very organized. A general portrayal of this type of murderer rapist is a male, single or married, 20 to 50 years old. Most likely white. They are narcissistic and hedonistic. In planning the rape, the power-assertive type selects and watches a female victim. He often chooses a casual acquaintance, neighbor, or stranger.” Pearsall closed her notebook.

Chapter Thirty-one

Friday night at 9:00, Dannie got a call from Susan. “Dannie, we have a search.”

Another search. I didn’t find Julie. I didn’t find Carrie. Can I do another search? She ran her hand through her hair. “When?” Dannie responded.

“Not until tomorrow. We just got news of a missing boater on Mosquito Lake Reservoir. The Sheriff’s Office is out with boats tonight, and their dogs are searching the shore. They want us to be ready with cadaver dogs tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, so you don’t need Forrest? You don’t need me to search?” Dannie replied, exhaling relief in not having to make a decision.

“No, I need you as a support person for one of the cadaver teams.”

“Oh, okay,” Dannie said. “I’ll be ready. When do you want us out?”

“You won’t like this. We should be at the reservoir before sunrise. If searchers don’t find the missing man, we want to get you in the search at about 7 AM. I’ll email you directions to the command center. I’m going down tonight to get things ready. If they find anything, I’ll call before you get on the road.”

“Okay, I’ll GPS it and be there at 6:30.” She went to get her search-and-rescue backpack.

Dannie pulled into the parking lot of Mosquito Lake Park at 6:20 AM, Forrest sleeping in the back of the SUV. It was dark except for the waxing moon. The tempo of

her heart increased. Searches used to be exciting, even exhilarating. Since searching for Julie and Carrie, there was just a sense of dread.

As the headlights swept the gravel parking lot, they illuminated Susan's Jeep and Spence Zalack's car. She sighed, shoulders slumping. If it had to be, it had to be. *I can do this. I can search with him, but I don't have to like it.*

Parked alongside the Lexus, she readied her pack. Putting her mobile phone on the top of the pack, she silenced it and slipped from the SUV into the damp morning.

Spence hailed her. "Good morning. Welcome to mosquito haven."

Dannie forced a smile and waved in greeting. What bothered her about him? She had to put on her best face. All that was important was the search.

Tango strained at his lead to reach Dannie. As he did, she knelt and hugged the German Shepherd. “Hey Tango, how are you, girl? Are you ready to work?” The dog wagged her tail and rear end as if to say she was ready to go. Dannie stood and greeted Spence, “Am I your support, porter, caddy, backup, radio gal, and snack provider?”

Spence laughed. “I guess you’re stuck with Tango and me. Not sure where the others are. Susan’s at the tent. Where’s Forrest?”

“He’s sleeping in the back of the car right now. I’ll get him soon. So, has Tango done a water search for a cadaver before?” Dannie asked.

“No. Lots of training searches on water, but this is the first actual search.”

Susan greeted them, “Good morning.”

“Aren’t you dead tired, Susan?”
Dannie asked. “How are you so cheerful
when you didn’t sleep?”

“Just doing my thing.”

“What do you have here?” Dannie
asked, surveying the table with GPS units
and dog collars.

“We just got these yesterday. The
Geauga County Service Club donated four
K9 GPS tracking collars with tablets. Ed
Bennett said they liked your presentation
with Forrest. So, nice going, Dannie.”

“Looks like some high-tech stuff
here, Susan,” Spence put in.

“Right, but we’ve got our tech girl
here,” Susan said. “Dannie, can you take
some time and look at the software?
There’s an instruction packet on every
tablet. I studied it yesterday, and we can go
over the operation together. I’d like you to
carry the tablet, and Spence, you get a collar

for your dog. We can track Tango to within 15 feet. Looks like you'll be searching from a boat. The Sheriff's office found the guy's boat about a mile north, in the middle of the reservoir. It's a half mile from shore."

Spence cut in. "So, they're pretty sure he's in the water?"

"Yes, the Sheriff's dogs worked the shoreline late last night and found nothing. You two get ready; I'll call the Sheriff. The boat is at the launch. It's a couple of hundred yards from here. I expect Carey to be here with Tipper, and I'll work with her once she arrives. Between us, we can locate his body."

The words struck Dannie like a punch in the chest. *His body*. They were looking for a man who, yesterday, was a vibrant husband, father, and brother. Another family is in mourning—no hope, as in searching for a living person. Just recover a

body. She tried to shake off the chill that rippled through her. She lifted her head, resolved to do her best.

Chapter Thirty-two

Dannie watched as Spence adjusted Tango's collar. She turned the tablet on and opened the GPS software. The GPS map display showed a clear signal. A map with the dog's position was displayed. Another screen gave a compass bearing on the dog, and another showed the track the animal followed.

After unloading Forrest and his crate from the canopy, Dannie and Spence walked toward the water. Dannie, head down, worked the tablet's displays.

Spence spoke up. "So, great work in finding that Alzheimer's patient."

"Thanks," she said. "Forrest did really well."

“Susan,” she radioed, “can I get the GPS code for Tipper? I’ll track both dogs.”

Susan radioed the code to Dannie.

“Spence, with this tracking map, we can see what areas we covered, look.” Dannie showed him the screen.

“That’s good,” Spence said. “It will save us from duplicating our route. Very nice. I like this system. And I have the best software assistant on the team.” Dannie forced a smile and returned to the tablet.

Their boat was a 27-foot Boston Whaler Outrage. A deputy held the boat to the dock and greeted them as they approached. “Deputy Fred Browning. Welcome aboard.” Tango jumped into the boat, and Spence stepped in after him. The deputy took Dannie’s arm to help her in. He said, “This is Captain Jim Drake; it’s his boat. Jim’s a fishing guide here. Knows the lake well.”

Dannie waved to the captain. She noted that the bow was a perfect place for the dog and handler. The ring of seats would allow Tango to hang over the side where he scanned the water with his nose. Dannie and Spence settled into the bow seats as the boat pulled from the dock. 7:05 AM, and the sun crested the horizon, bringing a pink hue to scattered cumulus clouds. The captain accelerated toward the middle of the lake, bringing cold spray and a chill wind. Dannie zipped her jacket. Tango smiled into the wind, mouth open.

Ahead, a police boat bobbed in gentle swells. Dannie pulled out the tablet to check the location and confirm the collar's signal was working. There was a trail on the screen from the tent to the lake. She zoomed in closer to the dot on the screen. When they pulled alongside the police boat, the officer on board briefed them on the

location of the overturned boat. The wind came from the southwest and was light all night. The captain went to Spence and asked him what he needed. He suggested they move a few hundred yards downwind, then move north-northeast. The captain brought the Boston Whaler around and settled it into an idle heading north-northeast. Tango hung over the side, nose to the water.

Dannie put in the code for Tipper and received a signal near the boat dock. They were not on the water yet. The boat drifted east, Tango hanging over the edge of the gunwale, tail down and still. Dannie moved to the cabin, and the captain asked for her tablet. Dannie showed Captain Drake their track. He matched it to his Garmin GPS above the console.

Chapter Thirty-three

Minutes slipped to an hour. She noted Tipper was on a boat and headed to the middle of the lake. The track showed they moved two and a quarter miles. Dannie took the display to Spence and showed it to him.

“Tango hasn’t shown anything,” Spence said. “Let’s have the captain track back, but take us further east of the track we just came on.”

Dannie acknowledged and went to the captain. He put the boat into a slow turn, checking his GPS to put them east of the outgoing track. The second boat settled into the middle of the lake and moved more to the west of their line. Dannie followed the track on her screen.

After ten minutes, Spence stood and motioned for the captain to slow the boat. Drake went to neutral, and the boat drifted. Tango's tail went up. She wasn't sure how he signaled Spence, but it was a good sign. Tango stayed on the water, and Spence held his back. The dog raised his head from the water, looking at Spence. Spence said something to the dog, and Tango put his nose to the water. Spence motioned to her, and she moved from the center console to the bow.

"Tango may have something. Have the captain retrace this route, and then we'll circle again if she finds something."

Dannie relayed the information to the captain, and he brought the boat about. After two minutes, Tango keyed into something again. Spence signaled to cut the engine. The deputy and the captain came forward.

“I think she has a scent here. This is good. We’ll call in the other dog to verify. In the meantime, let’s do a slow circle. Dannie, can you mark the place on your screen where Tango responded?”

“Yes. I have it on the screen.”

Captain Drake responded, “I’ll mark the spot on my GPS with the coordinates. Let me put those in. The coordinates were marked, and they began a slow circle. The deputy contacted the other boat, and moments later, the craft sprinted toward their location. The second boat took a track across the path of the Boston Whaler. After a few minutes, Susan waved to Dannie. Tipper signaled. The two boats circled for another 20 minutes, both dogs indicating a find. The captain dropped a marker, and divers were called out.

The search’s success swept away Dannie’s tension and misgivings about

Spence. She, the deputy, and Captain Drake all praised Tango. Tango took it all in, tail flopping on the boat's deck. She watched as Spence ruffled Tango's ears and praised him. His love for his dog was genuine. Maybe she misjudged him.

"Nice job, Mr. Zalack," she said.

Spence laughed. "Thank you, navigator, porter, computer girl. Nice support from you."

"Computer woman," she replied. They settled back in the bow seats as the Whaler approached the dock.

Two TV crews, equipped with cameras and satellite antennas, waited at the dock. She held back as Spence and Tango stepped toward them. The deputy followed. Tango wagged his tail into the crowd, and Spence kept him close as he took questions. The second boat came in, and she waited until Carey and Tipper made

their way to the media people and onlookers. She walked to Susan.

“This GPS tracking worked great,” Dannie said.

“Thanks to our girl getting in front of the Service Club. We’ll have to thank Ed Bennett.”

“Sure,” Dannie said, “his place is on the way home. I’ll stop and tell him.”

The two skirted the crowd and walked to the K9 canopy. She put her pack on the table with the computer tablet, went to Forrest’s kennel, and let him out. Then, she and Susan turned to watch the media show.

“This is good for the organization,” Susan said.

Dannie nodded. It was a good day, but not for the man’s family.

Carey and Spence came into the tent to and received accolades from Dannie and Susan.

“You three did a great job today,” Susan said.

Dannie got down with the dogs, taking licks and hugging them as they basked in the attention.

Spence said, “Hey, now things are settling down. Is there a men’s room around here?”

Susan pointed to a building on the opposite side of the parking lot. “There it is.”

“Great. Hey, Dannie, will you watch Tango for me?”

“You bet. Come here, Tango.”

“She wouldn’t mind finding her own ladies’ room.”

“Okay, we have it covered.” She strolled toward an open area beyond the boat dock.

As Spence walked away, he looked back. “Hey, Susan, I want to borrow the collar and tablet, okay? I need to get as good as Dannie.”

“Sure, Spence, you have it.”

She returned Tango to Spence. “The GPS collars worked well. I’m going to stop by Bennett’s house to thank him and let him know they worked for us.

“Good idea, Dannie,” Spence said, “See you later.” Grabbing her backpack, she headed for her car. She loaded Forrest and pulled out of the parking lot, headed for Bennett’s house. *He’s creepy, but he did get us the GPS collars.* She turned south onto the highway, noting it was just noon—lots of time. Hell’s Hollow isn’t too far out of the way. She headed north on Route 45.

Chapter Thirty-four

Dannie turned on Route 6 toward Hell Hollow and Bennett's house. She pulled into Bennett's driveway and drove just past the house. As she parked, she could see dark clouds to the west. The tops of oaks swayed as the wind picked up. She turned to Forrest and said, "You're staying here for now. I'll be a minute." The entrance to the house faced the yard, away from the road. She knocked and waited. She peered through the door but couldn't see past the foyer. She checked a window. The blinds were down. Knocking again without response. *Maybe he's in the barn.*

She went to the car and leashed Forrest. Her heart's rhythm increased. The barn door banged closed, then slowly

swung open. *He must be in the barn.* As she walked to the barn, she dropped her pack off one shoulder and reached the top to find her mobile phone. She fumbled, grabbed something hard, and pulled it from the pack. She held the GPS dog collar in her hand, and a small green light on the side showed against her palm.

“What the hell? How did the collar get here?” *This isn’t right. I gave the collar back to Susan.* She reached back in her pack but found no phone. Dropping the collar into the backpack, she headed to the barn, Forrest leading.

As she approached the barn, the door swung again in the wind. She pulled the door open, stepped in, and pulled the dog behind her before closing it. She surveyed the dimly lit barn. “Mr. Bennett, are you here?” she said. Forrest nuzzled her hand. She stroked the dog’s back. The horse

stalls, the tractor, and the old pickup truck were at the back. She made her way to the back of the barn, approaching the old truck, *Power Wagon* in chrome letters on the hood. “Hello, Mr. Bennett,” she said. The truck sat high on twenty-two-inch wheels with oversized tires. Forrest pressed his nose to the fresh mud and dirt on the tires. Behind the truck, she looked out a window to see if Bennett might be out back.

Chapter Thirty-five

The door to the barn opened. Dannie sensed movement and changes in the light as if someone were moving through the door. She poised on the balls of her feet, out of sight of the door forty feet away. The door closed, dimming the light again. “Mr. Bennett? Hi, it’s Dannie Bauer.” There was a scuffing noise. Forrest alerted and strained against her hold, but didn’t whine or bark. Again, a faint noise like wood on wood. She stepped from behind the truck.

“Hello, Dannie.”

She caught her breath. Forrest stood and growled, but she held him close. That wasn’t Bennett. She moved to the left to peer around the truck. Light from the barn

windows outlined the silhouette of a man.

“Spence? Spence? Is that you?”

“No one else.”

Dannie stepped from behind the truck with a long exhale. Spence was twenty feet away in the middle of the cluttered floor. He held a tablet in his right hand, the screen showing an eerie pale light on his face. His left hand held an ax handle.

He shouldn't be here. Something's not right. Her body tensed reflexively. “What are you doing here?” There was something in his demeanor. His shoulders were hunched, his head leaning forward, his eyes staring.

“Isn't it better a question for you, Dannie? Where's Bennett? He's not here.” His voice was flat, emotionless.

She swallowed hard. “How did you find me here?” she said, taking two steps forward.

“Check your backpack.”

The collar. Dannie dropped the pack strap from one shoulder and reached the top of the backpack, taking out the GPS collar, its green light blinking.

“You followed me. You tracked me.”

She held the collar out. Forrest sat at her side, head lowered, a low growl rumbling in his throat. Fear clutched her stomach. *What’s going on? Why am I so scared right now?*

“You might say that,” Spence replied, smiling with a deadened voice. “Why don’t you put the collar on? I think you’d look good in a collar.”

She looked at his eyes. His pupils were dilated so that they appeared black. His mouth twisted like a gnarled root. He was different. “What are you talking about? What are you saying? This is weird. You’re weird.”

“It’s all part of the game, Dannie. The hunt, the find, the kill.”

“What’s wrong with you?” She scanned him head to toe – perfect creased khakis, perfect fit mock turtleneck, perfect hair, even his nails. *Oh shit. Oh, it’s him. It’s Spence.*

Spence pulled a plastic bag from his pocket. “Make it easy, Dannie. Be a good girl and put the collar on.”

She threw the collar at his feet.

Forrest sensed the changes in his girl. Her heartbeat increased, and her breathing became shallow. He stared, seeing her shoulders tense, her left hand clenched. Now, a change in her perspiration. There was danger. He turned to Spence, lowered his head, and let out a deep

growl. One step forward, left paw raised, tail down, he strained the lead in his girl's defense.

Chapter Thirty-six

Brandt scrolled through his list. Last name. It would be a relief to finish this and get with Grimes, as he followed up in Sandusky. Spence Zalack. Zalack Insurance Group. He called the number and got a voicemail service.

In the pile of paper at the far edge of the desk was the list of the Chamber of Commerce members. He scanned the page. *Zalack Insurance Group*. Chamber member and Lake Geauga Service Club member. He reached for his phone, thumbed through his contacts, and searched for French. He held the phone for a long time, then pressed dial.

“Hello, Mrs. French, this is Deputy Hinds.”

“Hi, Deputy. Do you have some new information?”

“We’re still investigating. Detective Grimes is in Sandusky doing a follow-up. I’m doing interviews here.” He paused, then, “Listen, I am just following up on various contacts, and I am wondering if you have insurance with a company called Zalack Insurance Group?”

“Yes, we have a policy with them. A couple of policies,” she said.

He paused, sifting through the information. “Okay, the insurance agent was Spencer Zalack. Great. Thanks, Mrs. French. Sorry to bother you. I’ll get in touch if I learn anything.”

Brandt leaned back in his chair, still gripping his phone. Chamber of Commerce member, Lake Geauga Service Club member, and agent for the French family. Why didn’t he think of insurance before?

Checked every other damned service. He put his head in his hands and then shook off the gloom. Back to his phone, he found the number for the Howards. He dialed, his heart rate increasing.

“Hello, Mrs. Howard, this is Deputy Hinds of the Geauga County Sheriff’s office.”

“Good afternoon, deputy,” she replied.

“The reason I am calling is just routine. Remember how you and your husband listed all the people you use for services like lawn care, car repair, and home repair? Do you use a particular insurance company?”

“Let me check with John.”

He waited, his foot tapping the floor. She returned to the phone, and as she spoke, Brandt wrote, *Zalack Insurance Group.*

“So this agent handles all your insurance?”

“Yes, he’s a nice man, Lake Geauga Service Club member, and all with John. Oh, and he has a search dog like that lovely Bauer girl.”

He thanked her and clicked off the phone. He owned a search dog! *He knows Dannie.*

He dialed Detective Grimes. “Grimes here.”

“It’s Brandt. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, I’d be happy to talk to anyone but a hotel clerk.”

“I want to go over something with you on the case. Help me out and see what you think.”

“Okay. I’ve got Lyle here with me. I’ll go to the speaker.”

“Sure, go ahead. Hi, Lyle.”

“I found another connection, a relationship between the two families. It’s a guy named Spencer Zalack. He owns an insurance company. He’s in the Chamber and belongs to the Lake Geauga Service Club. He sold a life insurance policy on Julie French to her family.”

He paused; Grimes and Smith were quiet.

“I called the Howards. Zalack handles all their insurance.”

“What else? How long has he been around? What about Put-In-Bay and Sandusky?” Grimes asked.

“I have nothing. I just called you. Should you be searching for Zalack? Jesus, Grimes. Zalack has been right under our noses. Damn.”

Lyle spoke. “Just a minute here. Let me bring up a site on my computer. Could you repeat the name? Spell it.”

Brandt spelled out Zalack's full name.

"What are you doing, Lyle?" Grimes asked. Brandt could hear the clicking of computer keys.

"Here it is. Here it is." Smith's voice rose. "We have it here in the Erie County land records. Spencer Zalack. Lakeside, Marblehead, Ohio. He owns a condominium here. Bought it four years ago."

All three were quiet for a while. "Oh, I forgot, Phil. Mrs. Howard mentioned he owned a search-and-rescue dog."

"We need to get this to the FBI," Grimes said.

"I have to call Susan. Susan Gray. She'll know this guy." Susan would know him, and he knew Dannie. His heart sank. "I've got to go; I've got to call Susan." His

pulse rising, he clicked off and fumbled the phone, searching for Susan's number.

Chapter Thirty-seven

“Susan, it’s Brandt Hinds.”

“Hello, Brandt. How are you?”

“Listen, Susan, do you know a search and rescue guy named Spencer Zalack?”

“Sure, Spence is in our organization. Why?”

“He’s in your search and rescue program?”

“Yes, he has a cadaver dog, Tango. We were out this morning. Did you hear about him on the news?”

“News, what news?”

“He was on the news, I think. They interviewed him this morning after the search.”

“What search? I haven’t seen the news.” Brandt was close to shouting.

“We searched at Mosquito Lake Reservoir for a missing fisherman. Spence’s dog found a scent. They’re sending divers.”

“Let me clarify. You were on a search with Spencer Zalack this morning, and his dog found a man’s body, and he was on television news?”

“No. He searched with Dannie as his support person, not me. Then the news people did an interview.”

Brandt ignored her question. “You said he was with Dannie?”

“Yes, Brandt, that’s what I said. *Twice.*” Her voice now rising.

“Okay, I understand. Zalack was with Dannie on a search.”

“Right. Dannie left and Spence right after her,” she said.

“You mean they left from Mosquito Lake?”

“Haven’t you listened to me? What’s going on?”

Dannie’s best friend was killed. A schoolmate was killed. Zalack knew every one of the families of the dead girls. Everything was conjecture, but his whole being now said Dannie was in danger.

“Deputy, are you there?” Her voice rose, edged with the high pitch of anxiety.

Brandt responded with measured words: “Susan, I just... I need to know where Dannie is.”

Susan’s voice cracked. “Home, I guess. Or, she said she was going to thank Ed Bennett for donating the GPS equipment we used today. Why are you asking? What’s wrong? Something’s wrong.”

Regaining his composure, he said, “I just want to question this Zalack guy. Can

you call Dannie and find out where she is right now?"

"Okay. She was on her way to Bennett's place to thank him for the GPS outfits the Club gave us. Why do you want to talk to Spence?"

"We think he knows someone connected to the case," he lied.

"Really, who?"

"You know I can't reveal who. Just call Dannie and find out where she is, and I'll follow up on Mr. Zalack. It's simple. Thanks, I appreciate your help." He clicked off.

He sorted through the information that Susan had provided. *If Zalack is involved, he knows where Dannie is.* Brandt's phone rang. "Hinds here."

Susan's voice was strained, high-pitched. "Dannie isn't answering. I called

Laurie and left a message. I'm going to her house, and you tell me what is happening."

"Susan, settle down. It's okay. I just wanted to make sure Dannie was fine."

"What does this have to do with Spence?"

"Susan, I'm sorry I alarmed you. I didn't mean to. It was just a question." He rolled the words off his tongue, his anxiety growing. "Tell you what. I'll meet you at Dannie's house."

"I'm calling Dannie again," she said.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Brandt clicked off his phone as Susan drove up the driveway to Dannie's house. Susan parked, got out of her Jeep, and as she approached Brandt, he put his phone away. "There's no one home."

"I called again; it goes to voicemail. What's this about Brandt?"

"Okay, I need your confidentiality."

"You have it."

"I have to be very careful because I have nothing but circumstantial information. Spencer Zalack knew the French family and the Howard family. He sold insurance to both of them. He owns a condominium near Port Clinton and Sandusky."

“So, he lived near where the other girls disappeared?” she asked.

“Susan, remember, there’s nothing sure here. I want to be careful, and we need to get more information.”

“I’ve known him for more than a year.” She paused. “He left the parking lot after Dannie.”

“At the lake,” Brandt said.

“Yes. It was about noon. She was going to stop at Bennett’s to thank him for the GPS units. It’s after 1:30 PM; she should be home now. We have to find her.”

Brandt’s phone rang. “Deputy Hinds.”

“Brandt, Lyle here. The Croft family remembers an insurance agent. They don’t recall the name exactly, but it was something like Spencer Zalack. We’re on our way there, and they’re checking for the old policy.”

“Okay, Lyle, great work. That’s important. Thanks so much. Tell Grimes to update me as soon as he can.” Closing his phone, he said, “The Croft family in Sandusky remembers an insurance agent. Could be Spencer Zalack.”

“What about Dannie?”

“I have enough. Was Dannie driving the BMW?”

“Yes.”

“Must be in her mother’s name. I’ll get the tags and ask for a bulletin. Let me call the Sheriff.” He walked to the edge of the driveway, dialing. “Hello, Sheriff Dawson. Brandt Hinds, we have a situation here.”

Brandt tried calling Laurie again, leaving a message, struggling to sound cheery, and saying he was trying to contact Dannie.

“You said Dannie should be home by now. But she could still be at Bennetts.”

“That or she left there and went to her boyfriend’s house. Bradley Peterson.”

“Okay, I’ll call Jan Crawford and get her looking for him. Right now, I want to know where Zalack is. Let’s go to his office.” He and Susan took the cruiser, Ringo in the back seat. He accelerated toward Mentor.

“What can you tell me about Zalack?”

“He’s nice. Keeps to himself some. He has a substantial amount of money and generously supports our search-and-rescue organization. He attended all the club training. It included evidence preservation, search techniques, map reading, navigation, and all dog training. He has a cadaver dog.” She was silent for a moment, then continued, “I was in his Lexus once. It was

immaculate. I asked him if it was new, and he said it was two years old. It looked like it just came from the showroom.”

“What else, anything you remember about him, his behavior?”

“He has been very consistent but missed a couple of trainings last month.”

“When?”

“I’m not sure. I think it was the first and second weeks of April. Yes, because he returned to training on the third Tuesday in April.”

Brandt dialed the sheriff. “Sheriff, we need to get the details on Zalack’s Lexus and put out a bulletin to locate the vehicle and detain the driver.”

“Okay, Brandt, consider it done.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.” Brandt hung up and pulled into the parking lot of the Zalack Insurance Group. The office was closed,

and the door was locked. He returned to the cruiser and got behind the wheel.

Susan said, “Damn. The GPS—he asked to use a GPS collar and a tablet to practice. I gave it to him.”

“What are you talking about, Susan?”

“The dog collars for GPS tracking our dogs. Spence took one with him after the search this morning.”

“So?”

“Get me to my car. If he left it on, we could track him with the GPS.”

Brandt started the car and turned on the lights and siren. He accelerated, the car fishtailing into the street. The bulletin requesting Zalack’s apprehension came over the radio.

Brandt cut the lights and siren as they reached Dannie’s Street. He wheeled the

car into the driveway, skidding to a halt behind Susan's Jeep. She jumped out, Ringo barking in the back seat, and ran to her car for the GPS tracking tablet. He backed the vehicle around, and Susan jumped in as he straightened it out. "I need to plug this in. I don't know if it's charged." She held out a cord. He plugged the end into a USB port on the cruiser's dashboard.

"Okay, where to?"

"It's opening. Just wait." She keyed some data in and said, "I still have the code for the collar." She stared at the screen, then clicked on another, then another. "I have to find the right range."

"What direction? How do you get the range?"

"Wait, I'm checking." She clicked on another page and read. Outside of eight miles, there should be an arrow to give

directions to the GPS collar. Wait, I have it. Northeast. Northeast.”

Brandt accelerated along Route 44 with lights and sirens. He skirted Chardon, heading east.

“He’s on the screen north-northeast. It’s inside eight miles. I can get a map view.” She clicked through two screens and said, “Stay on this road to Painesville-Warren Road and go north.”

“Location, do you have the location?”

“It’s four miles. I think we have to turn right.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, I don’t know these roads.”

Brandt hit the brakes, skidding to a stop. “Let me see it.”

Susan said, handing him the tablet. “It’s Hell Hollow.”

“Hell Hollow Wilderness Area. A park. I know it.” He put the car in gear, returned the tablet, and said, “Keep the GPS map where I can see it.” As he accelerated, he radioed his location to dispatch, requesting backup to Hell Hollow and giving a potential location for Spencer Zalack. Turning right on a narrow road, they were 3.5 miles from the GPS beacon.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Spence spoke, “You think you’re smart. You think you’re better than everyone. Now who’s smart, Dannie?”

“Stay away from me!” She spat the words out. Forrest took another step forward, growling.

“What’s the matter, Dannie? Are you scared? Are you starting to panic like Julie did? You think you’re going to fight like Carrie did?”

Dannie took a step back, heart pounding, not breathing. The realization that he had killed Julie and Carrie crept over her like a funeral shroud, threatening to engulf her until she erupted in rage. She dropped Forrest’s lead. Forrest leapt at Zalack, growling. Zalack dropped the tablet

and swung the ax handle, smashing it into Forrest's head. The dog dropped to the ground as Dannie reached Zalack, ripping the ax handle from his hand, she grabbed him by the throat.

She screamed as they tumbled to the floor, rolling, arms and legs intertwined. She smashed his face with her forehead as he punched her right cheek with a devastating blow. In a blinding red flash, her head whipped to the side, her grip slipping from his neck. A second blow to her head sent her spinning to the right as Zalack rose with a maniacal screech, throwing her off. He was on her in an instant, teeth bared, spittle hurling from his mouth. Dazed yet powered by rage, she threw a forearm into the side of his head, knocking him sideways. Her hands freed, she grabbed his hair with one hand and pummeled his face with the other. He

punched up with both hands, striking her solar plexus, drawing a pained gasp. Her lungs paralyzed, he threw her off and rolled on top of her. He grabbed her around the throat with two hands. She gasped, then he pressed in, and she could not get a breath. She flailed his head with her hands to no effect. A wave of dizziness swept through her. Her chest heaved and heaved again, no air. An overwhelming sense of dread came over her. She was dying. She dropped her hands, and her body relaxed. He pressed harder. Reaching up with her left arm, she grabbed his hair and jerked his head back. With her right hand, she jammed her thumb into his eye.

Zalack screamed, released his grip, and reached for his face. Dannie gasped for a lungful of air. She swung at him again, knocking his head sideways. He let out a growl, raising both hands as if to pummel

her. She reached into her pant leg again just as he smashed both hands down on her chest. The blow knocked the air from her lungs. Lights flashed behind her eyes. Zalack loomed over her, a silhouette. As he raised his arm, Dannie threw her right fist into his face. Zalack grunted and fell back. She rolled and threw her knee into his groin and spun away. Rolling away from him, she pulled the Barretta from her ankle holster.

There was a siren in the distance. Spence put a hand to his face as blood covered his mouth and chin. She raised the gun. No fear, no remorse, no compassion. Her grip tightened on the Beretta. She took a deep breath, lifting her head high, looking into Zalack's darkened eyes, and aimed the gun at his face. The siren sounded again, closer.

Zalack wiped the blood from his face and smiled. "You're not going to shoot,

Dannie. You're not the hunter you think you are. You're the prey. Like your friends Julie and Carrie."

"I'll shoot you. I will." Shaking, she took a step back.

Zalack stood and took two steps back. "No, it's not in you, Dannie. You don't have what it takes." He turned and walked to the door. Dannie held the gun on him, her hands shaking. Zalack stopped and said, "See you again, Dannie." He slipped out the door and was gone, the sirens growing closer

Dannie's knees gave out, and she dropped to the floor, trembling. *Zalack. He did it. He killed Julie and Carrie.* She let out a tortured groan. Her head spun, the barn out of focus. She moved to Forrest, and he lifted his head. She took the dog in her arms and, legs shaking, picked him up.

The cruiser skidded to a halt behind Zalack's Lexus as Dannie walked from the barn. Brandt radioed his position to the dispatcher. Jumping from the cruiser, he ran toward Dannie.

"She's here," he called to Susan.

"Where? Is she okay?"

They ran past the garage, slowing as Dannie stepped forward and faltered, blood dripping from her nose, a cut on her forehead bleeding into her right eye. Susan reached out and took Forrest from her arms.

"I'm okay. Forrest, he hit Forrest on the head." Susan lowered Forrest to the ground. A second sheriff's vehicle pulled in behind Brandt's car, lights flashing.

"Where's Zalack?" Hinds asked.

“He ran. He’s gone. He did it. He killed Julie and Carrie. He told me. And he was going to kill me.”

Brandt waved to the approaching Deputy to follow him. The two jogged to the barn, guns drawn, and Brandt opened the door as the deputy went behind the barn.

Brandt’s radio sounded with the sheriff’s voice. “Hinds, what is your status?”

“We’re at Ed Bennett’s house. Dannie’s okay. Zalack’s gone. He’s the one. He killed the girls and attacked Dannie. We’ll need backup here and EMTs to check Dannie. We should get Johanson out with his dog. Zalack’s gone into the woods. Hell Hollow.”

“Good Brandt. Good work. We’ll get him. I’ll get a warrant for his house and office. I’m on my way; I have your location. How’s the kid?”

“I think she’s okay. A little shaken.”

The EMS van arrived as Brandt called Grimes and brought him up to date. Grimes swore, then cheered. “Damn it, Brandt, couldn’t you have waited for me? Damn, man.”

She sat in the back of the EMT van as a deputy took her statement. Relating how he attacked her, she began to shake. Susan put an arm around her shoulder. Dannie took a few deep breaths and finished her statement.

“You go with Susan,” Brandt said. “Get Forrest to the vet. We’re going after Zalack.

Dannie sat on the sofa, an ice pack on the right side of her swollen face, Peg leaned against the arm at the other end. Laurie sat across from her in a high-backed chair. “Dannie,” Laurie said, “you really

can't put yourself in these situations. You knew there was someone out there harming young women. And yet you go off on your own. This has to stop."

"I was just trying to do the right thing, Mom."

"That's fine," Peg added, "you just can't be going off doing the right thing on your own. We're lucky to have you here today."

The sheriff's car and another cruiser pulled into the driveway. Dannie went to the door to welcome Brandt, Sheriff Dawson, and Deputy Poleski. Peg and Laurie stood and greeted the sheriff's team. Brandt asked, "How's Forrest?"

Dannie shook her head. "He has a bad concussion. The vet said he may not be able to work again."

"Sorry, Dannie. He's a great dog."

As they sat, Sheriff Dawson began. "It's sure now. We have our man. The search warrant for his house gives us everything we need. He kept things from the girls. Clothing, jewelry, stuff. It may be that there were more victims, based on his trophies. They found the makeup he used on the victims. With a search of his place near Sandusky, we'll put him away forever."

"I'm so glad to hear that, Sheriff," Laurie said.

"Well, this thing is just about finished. Just got to find this guy and convict him. We will find him." The Sheriff stood and walked to the door.

As they stepped outside, Brandt turned to Peg. "It still seems as if your niece needs looking after."

"You can be sure."

“Do you think she can stay out of trouble?”

Touching her lips with her fingertips, she shook her head from side to side.

Chapter Forty

Zalack sat back on the park bench in Indian Point, the park still in the shadow of the early morning sun. The parking lot was surrounded by tall beech, maple, and oak trees dressed in thick underbrush. His hands shook with exhaustion. His legs and feet were wrapped in flaming pain from the soles of his feet through his thighs. He shivered in the early morning cold, his jeans torn and muddy.

For fifteen hours, he ran and scrambled and stumbled his way to the park. From the barn, he had sprinted through the woodland until he reached the cliffs of Hell Hollow. He followed the cliff line until it became a steep slope. Starting down, he tripped and slid forty feet in the

shale, grabbing a sapling to break his fall. He sat and scooted another twenty feet down the steep shale hill. Paine Creek glistened below him. Up again, he stumbled near the base, where he fell and rolled to the edge of the creek.

Three miles to Indian Point Park – all three miles without a road or trail. He followed the rocky creek bed, the underbrush on either side of the creek too thick to penetrate. He walked, slipped, fell, got up, and walked again. As darkness enveloped the gorge, his progress slowed. Slippery rocks, snags, and rapid water threatened his every step. It took him an hour to work his way past Paine Falls. In another mile and a half, Interstate 90 crossed high above the creek. He looked at the bridge, one hundred feet above, and knew he could not climb out in his exhausted condition. Right after the

Interstate, a trail wound from the creek up a short hill. In another mile, he stumbled into Indian Point Park and collapsed on the park bench.

He had screwed up. He followed her with no plan. *It was stupid, acting on impulse*, he told himself. She was still out there, and he was exposed, on the run.

Wiping a bloody hand on the bench, his head dropped to his chest, his mind blind with the throbbing pain. As he nodded off, the pain seemed to fade. He startled awake to the sound of a vehicle. A Ford F-150 pickup truck pulled into the parking lot. Zalack did his best to sit up. A man got out of the truck, a bit stooped-shouldered and moving slowly. He opened the back of the truck and withdrew a pair of waders. He worked his way into the waders, then took a small tackle box and a spinning rod from the truck bed. He turned and waved at

Zalack. The man looked to be in his sixties or seventies. He walked to the trailhead that led to the Grand River.

It was the best opportunity he would have. Zalack pushed himself up from the bench, his feet and knees on fire. He started with short steps, then moved to longer, quicker ones. As he moved, the thought of the truck and a way out energized him. At the edge of the parking lot, he picked up a rock and followed the old man toward the Grand River. He approached him quietly, slowing his pace and following the man until he neared the river and the underbrush encroached on the trail. In two brisk steps, he was on the man, pounding his head with the rock. The man dropped, and Zalack pulled him to the side of the trail, checking for other people. Dragging the man over a beech log, he tugged and pulled him deeper into the brush. He rifled through the man's

pockets and found the keys to the truck and the man's wallet and limped back to the truck.

There was a credit card and sixty dollars in the wallet. He took a baseball cap from the dashboard, pulled it low over his eyes, and started the truck.

Driving to I-70, he headed west toward Sandusky. As he drove, his sense of power grew and with it, anger. He couldn't know she would have a gun. The next time, he would be ready. He would have a plan—a perfect plan to take her down and make her beg. The next time, there would be no mistakes.

He stopped for gas, drinks, and a sandwich on his way. Near Sandusky, Zalack brought the truck to a stop across from a cemetery. He sat motionless for twenty minutes observing the neighborhood. Most of the homes were

dark. A few showed the blue glow of a television screen. From the truck, he hopped the low wall surrounding the cemetery. He searched the stones until he found *Georgiana Pike, 1902 to 1961*. On his knees, he pried at the headstone. Once loose, he moved to the side and turned the stone on its long edge. He pulled at a black plastic sheet and, under it, pried out a plastic bag. Replacing the plastic sheet, he lowered the stone and adjusted the grass around its edges.

Checking into a motel on Route 4 with cash, he put the bag in the room and then drove the truck to an old farm road. He pulled the truck off the road into the underbrush. The ground was wet with fresh rain, and the night was darkened by heavy cloud cover as he walked back to his hotel. It suited him. He was used to the darkness and preferred it.

In his room, he opened a box from the plastic bag, placing cash, a safe deposit box key, and an envelope on the table. He had what he needed to get to the Cayman Islands, where he had a home. There he'd recover and plan his revenge. Lying back on the bed, eyes closed, he fantasized about capturing Dannie, about her sense of fear swallowing her sense of self, about her despair, not his. He was back in control now.

Rested, he went to Walmart and bought clothes, a Dell laptop, and a small suitcase. He packed the carry-on, then headed to the bus terminal to board a bus to Miami. On the bus, he connected to Wi-Fi and searched Craigslist for used cars. He found a 2002 Chevy Caviler for \$1,500 and arranged to meet the owner. Next, he checked for cruise ships stopping in Key West, taking down a list. In Miami, he

purchased the car and drove to Key West, checking into a room on Simonton Street and paying a week in advance. Two cruise ships would be in port the next day. He checked the bars on Duval, looking for one frequented by gay men. Once satisfied, he returned to his room and rested.

As the tourists disembarked, he searched for men of the right age and size. As the crowd thinned, he followed his mark to Duval Street and into a bar. The man was about forty, with blond-dyed hair, Zalack's height and weight. He moved in, taking a seat at the bar next to the man. Zalack removed his Panama hat, turned, and smiled. "It's warm out there, don't you think?"

The man regarded him and smiled back. "Warm, hot, what's the difference?" They laughed together.

The cruise ship was scheduled to leave at 5 PM. Zalack rinsed the last of the dye from his hair. The man lay, half-naked, face down on the bed. Zalack grabbed his carry-on, pulled the Panama brim over his sunglasses, and, stepping from the room, hung a “Do Not Disturb” card on the doorknob, wiping the doorknob clean. Zalack, now Kevin Beals, walked to the ship, identification swinging from his neck, passport in his jacket pocket. Next stop, Georgetown, Grand Cayman.

Chapter Forty-one

Dannie pulled into a visitor's parking spot at the sheriff's office. Her face, swollen on the right side, had started to bruise around her eye. Getting out of the SUV was an effort, her back and shoulders aching. She wore a turtleneck sweater to hide the red marks on her neck. If Brandt would listen, if he would let her be involved, she might be able to track Zalack.

The receptionist passed Dannie through to Brandt's office. She knocked on the doorjamb, "Good morning, Deputy Hinds."

Brandt looked up from his desk. "Well, come in, Dannie. You, ah, well, you look terrible."

“It just looks bad. I’m fine. Forrest is making a fast recovery. He was his old self this morning. Deputy Hinds, I had an idea. I know I’m not involved in the investigation, but I thought I would mention it.” She clasped her hands, forcing a smile to hide her nervousness.

“Okay, Dannie, I think you earned the right to share your idea.”

“If we went to Bennett’s place, I think I could scent Forrest to Zalack’s smell.”

“What do you mean? And have a seat. Dannie sat, leaning forward.

Zalack and I were on the floor of that barn. His scent has to be all over the floor. I think I can scent Forrest there. I understand that the sheriff’s office lost him at Hell Hollow, on Paine Creek.”

“That’s right. Could not track him.”

“I know Paine Creek really well. My dad and I fished there often. We fished from Indian Point up the creek to the falls. It’s a steep valley most of the way from Hell Hollow to Indian Point Park. I think Zalack would have to stay in that creek valley and work his way down the creek to Indian Point if Forrest can get a good scent. We could go to Indian Point and see if that’s where he came out.”

Brandt leaned back in his chair, hands tented in front of him. He held Dannie’s gaze for what seemed like a very long time. “I think that’s worth a try. But I might have something better to scent Forrest.”

“What is it?”

“We have his car impounded out back. Would that work with your dog?”

“Perfect, absolutely.”

“Okay, let me chat with Grimes and the Sheriff. I’ll get back to you. Thanks, Dannie.”

“Sure thing.” The tension that tightened all her muscles as she entered Hinds’ office released the instant she walked out the door. A warm wave of relief washed over her, and she relaxed into a smile as she walked to her car.

Brandt pulled the police Explorer into a space next to the trail at Indian Point Park. He and Grimes got out and opened the door for Dannie. She, in turn, took Forrest from his kennel. He had been scented in Zalack’s SUV. “Forrest work,” Dannie said, and the dog put his nose to the ground. “I’m going to take him to the other end of the parking lot and crisscross back. Brandt nodded, leaning against the Explorer. Forrest kept his nose to the ground, and as they

approached a bench at the edge of the parking lot, he raised his head. He pulled Dannie to the bench, put his front paws up, and sniffed deeply. He then sat and looked up at Dannie. "Good dog," she said, handing him a treat. Turning to the deputies, she shouted, "He has a scent, here on the bench." As Brandt and Grimes approached her, Dannie put Forrest to work. He trailed to the edge of the parking lot and then followed along the edge until he reached the trail to the Grand River.

Brandt caught up to her. "What's he got? Can you be sure it's Zalack?"

"He's strong on a trail. It has to be more than ninety percent sure that it's Zalack." At that, she said, "Forrest work." Head down, tail up, Forrest pulled Dannie down the trail toward the river. After a quarter mile, Forrest turned onto a grassy trail that ran parallel to the river. He walked

slowly for fifteen feet, then raised his head, air scenting. Dannie looked to Brandt and Grimes. “That doesn’t make sense,” she said, “he shouldn’t be air scenting.” At that, Forrest pulled her off the trail, across an old elm log and a dozen steps into the brush. She froze. Pulling the leash, she drew Forrest back.

“What is it, Dannie?” Brandt asked.

She turned, mouth open, swallowed hard, and said, “It’s a body.”

Chapter Forty-two

Bradley pulled the pickup truck to a stop in the parking lot for the Highland Trail. Forrest woofed from the back seat, eager to get out. “Quiet, hound dog. You’ll get your walk,” Dannie said.

“He’s really eager to get out there, isn’t he?” Bradley turned and ruffled the big dog’s ears.”

Dannie stepped from the truck, leashed Forrest, and pulled on her backpack. She pulled on gloves as Bradley approached from the front of the truck. The sky was dark blue, and the October woodland displayed the last of the fall colors. A light wind heightened the chill in the air.

“So, we walk the trail to Stillwell Road, by Old State Road? How far is that?” Bradley asked.

“Three miles,” Dannie said. “You up for a six-mile round trip?”

“Yup. Let’s get this bloodhound moving.”

Dannie looked at Bradley in a fleece-lined denim jacket and Tractor Supply ball cap. *Damn, he’s good-looking.* She checked her knee-length boots and long Peacoat. “I shouldn’t have worn this wool coat, this dog will have his fur all over it.”

“Then it will be a ‘fur’ coat,” he grinned.

“I forbid any further puns on this walk.” She took Bradley’s hand, Forrest leashed to the other, and stared for the trail.” With her arm pressed against his, there was comfort in the touch. She glanced at his face —his blue eyes, that wisp of

blond hair under the cap, his strong jawline. A sweet tingling ran down her spine. She gripped his hand tighter.

“So, you start at Case Western in January, and I finish out my senior year. That means I’ll be dating a college coed while I’m still in high school.” He laughed and nudged her shoulder.

“That’s just because you’re a stud,” she replied, shouldering him, warmth sweeping her despite the chill air.

“Why don’t you take time off, start in the summer or the fall semester?”

“Cause I want to finish in three years. Two degrees.”

“So what’s a smart, beautiful coed like you doing with a country bumkin like me?”

“Country bumkin, huh? Well, I guess I’m just a sucker for tall, handsome, strong country bumkins. Anyway, isn’t this

bumpkin going to study engineering?” That drew a smile from Bradley. “I’ll be living at home, we’ll have a lot of time together,” she said. Forrest pulled her to a stop, examined a fence post, and lifted his leg. Farmland stretched from the trail through furrowed hills dotted with rolls of hay.

Bradley was quiet for a long time. She saw creases of worry in his forehead, no smile on his face.

“What are you thinking? She asked.

He looked up at the blue sky, a small white cloud scuttling by. “I worry about you. I mean, with that Zalack fellow escaping. A killer. And you and Forrest found that fisherman dead. Dannie, you have to be careful. I know you carry that Beretta, but still. He’s a killer. And he knows where you live.”

“The sheriff’s office has extra patrols. I work there part-time. I know all

the deputies. They look after me. And I have you.”

“Still, I worry. I want you to be safe.” He stopped and put his arms around her. He held her for a long time. She felt a kind of hitch in his breathing. He released her and kissed her gently.

Forrest jumped up, his paws almost to Dannie’s shoulder, and pushed between them. “Damn dog, she said.

“Good dog, Forrest. You keep taking care of her.” He kissed her again, a pleasurable tingling flushing her face.

Dannie parked in front of the Victorian-style house off Mentor Avenue. The sign on the building read *Bauer and Brown Architects, PA*. Below that, it read *Residential, Industrial, and Infrastructure Architecture*. The covered porch was edged with a carved border of vines and flowers.

She bounded up the stairs, opening the cut-glass door, and called, "Aunt Peg, your favorite niece is here."

From another room, Dannie's aunt called out. "We're back here in the kitchen." Dannie looked over the period reproduction of the foyer, then strolled through the living room and dining room, each with three drafting tables. She greeted the draftsmen, who were hunched over their work. "Hey, how are you guys?" Each looked up with smiles and a wave, "Good Dannie, how are you?"

Down a hall lined with reproductions of the architectural jobs the firm had completed, she found Aunt Peg and her partner, Lucia Brown, in the kitchen. "Hi, Mrs. Brown. How's the baby?" Dannie said. Lucia Brown walked around the counter and hugged Dannie.

“She’s fine, Dannie. Growing every day and sleeping through the night. Good to see you. You two talk, I’m going to take some sandwiches to the team out there.”

“Welcome to Bauer and Brown, Dannie, “Aunt Peg said, “Grab a sandwich and let’s chat in my office.”

Settling into a chair opposite Aunt Peg, Dannie said, “Aunt Peg, I love your office. This old building is beautiful.”

“I love it too, but we may grow out of it soon. For large projects, we typically add a few draftspersons and an associate architect or two. So, you wonder why I asked you down here today?”

“I assumed you just missed being around your fabulous niece,” Dannie said.

“Of course, there’s that, but before we get down to business, what is this I hear about Forrest finding a body?”

“That. Yes, he did. We had him at Indian Point, where we thought Zalack might have passed through. Forrest found a body. Brandt told me this morning that it was a missing 72-year-old man. They think Zalack killed him and stole his truck.”

“Girl, you have got to stay safe. This is really scary. But that’s not why you’re here. Your mom, your dad, and I have all contributed to your college trust fund. Your mom wanted me to talk to you about that.”

“Really, what about it?” Dannie asked.

“Since you’ve managed a full scholarship to Case Western, you won’t need that fund. Your mom and I talked it over, and we’re going to transfer the fund to you,” Peg said. “You’ve been responsible enough to get academic and athletic scholarships, and we think you’re

responsible enough to manage that fund by yourself.”

“Wow. Thanks, Aunt Peg. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll be available to advise you, but the money is yours, and you get to decide how to use it.”

“Okay. Aunt Peg, we’ll have to talk. I’ll need a lot of advice.”

“We can go to the bank and take care of the transfer next week. It’s a little over \$100,000. Most of it is in annuities and certificates of deposit with some cash.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing to say, Dannie. You earned it with all your work and scholarship. Now let’s have these sandwiches.”

As she drove home, she said, “What am I going to do with that money?” With

\$100,000, she should be overjoyed, and she was grateful, but Carrie's murder and now the dead man dominated her thinking. Would she ever get over losing her best friend?

Chapter Forty-three

Zalack stepped down the ramp from the cruise ship into the warm Cayman wind. He held his Panama hat brim low over his face, nodding to milling passengers. He pulled his carry-on with him as he hailed a cab. “The Cayman National Bank on Cricket Square.”

“Yes, sir, I know it. You must know the island.”

“Yes, yes, I do. I lived here for two years, some time ago.” He leaned back and watched familiar sights as the cabbie twisted his way to the bank. The irony of his living in his hated stepfather’s Cayman home made him smile. His stepfather got what he deserved; all his stepfather’s assets were now his own.

Carry-on bag in hand, he entered the Cayman National Bank. He carried Kevin Beal's passport and the safe deposit key he had retrieved from his stash. Flashing the passport in front of the concierge, he dropped the key at the concierge's feet. "Oh, sorry," Zalack said.

"No problem," the concierge replied as he bent to retrieve the key.

"Can I be escorted to my safe deposit box, please?"

The concierge demurred, asked him to sign a form, and led him into the safe. Inserting the keys, he withdrew the large box and carried it to a cubicle, leaving Zalack in private.

Zalack lifted the brown envelope from the box, extracting David Kincaid's birth certificate, passport, social security card, driver's license, and high school diploma. He leafed through a checking and

savings account book and fingered through a stack of bonds. Then, he extracted four bundles of bills. Placing three bundles of bills back in the box, he pocketed the savings book and cash and put the envelope in his carry-on. He pressed a button to call the concierge. The man returned and locked away the box, handing the key to Zalack.

He checked into a small bed and breakfast where he was sure he would have few questions. In the envelope retrieved from the bank, he located a small notebook. Leafing through the book, he found his real estate manager's number. Dialing, he waited.

“Bayside Realty, Jacobson speaking.”

“Mr. Jacobson, it’s David Kincaid calling. I’m wondering if my rental unit is occupied.”

“Mr. Kincaid, it’s been a long time. Yes, it’s available; the current rental ends this week. Then there is a booking for next month.” Listening, Zalack jotted a date in his notebook. “Very good. I’ll take the residence at the end of this week, then. As for the renter for next month, refund them in full, find another place, and pay for it from my rental account. Offer my apologies for any inconvenience.”

Chapter Forty-four

A soft Cayman breeze blew from the north, ruffling the curtains at the open doors. It carried the surf's drone into the room: peaceful, lulling, constant. Zalack lay with his hands behind his head. This girl was good. He turned and looked at the lifeless body on the bed next to him, hands tied to the headboard, mouth agape. She was trashy, but she did beg. That was the best when they begged, not like his sister. That bitch wouldn't beg. The memory came like a dark cloud, how she had destroyed his life. He was eleven, and she was fifteen.

Night after night, she came into his room and climbed onto the bed, dark eyeliner framing her eyes. He could smell her perfume and her fresh, red lipstick.

He lay in bed, waiting for her next nighttime taunts. His bedroom door opened. He held his breath as she climbed onto the bed. On her hands and knees, she hovered over him, exposing her breasts. She teased him, slapped him, and teased him again, whispering, “Wasn’t that good? Wasn’t that fun?” Then she was gone.

Desire seized him—her lips, her breasts, her swaying hips. He walked from his room to her bedroom door. Turning the handle, he entered the darkened room, closing the door behind him. He stood at her bedside, his breath coming in shallow gasps, his excitement rising. Leaning forward, he reached a hand into her open nightgown, touching the velvety skin of her breast.

She jumped to her knees. “You pervert. You little creep.” He stood back, voiceless, helpless, trapped by his lack of

self-control. She screamed, “Dad, dad!” Then, “You worm!” She spat the word. “Now you’re going to pay!” She pulled her nightgown down, exposing one breast.

His stepfather burst into the room, followed by his mother. His mother gasped, “My god, what have you done?”

Defenseless, he stared at his stepfather.

“He grabbed me, he grabbed me, the little pervert,” the girl whined. His stepfather took him by his shirt, pulling him from the room while his mother ran to comfort his stepsister. Thrown against a wall, he stumbled before his stepfather. He took a blow from an open hand to the left side of his head, then to the right side of his face. Then another and another, wetting himself as he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Awakening, he found himself in the cellar of the old estate home. Blackness. He forced back a sob, straining to hold back tears. He needed to stop shaking. He clenched his fists and straightened his body, arms at his sides, rigid. After a time, the darkness that enveloped him comforted him.

He closed his eyes, reliving the experience with the dead girl lying next to him; hovering over her, swaying on his hands and knees, his mouth inches from her terrified face, her begging, his hands closing around her throat.

The remembering made him light-headed and gave him satisfaction. He took a drink; the single malt scotch soothing his throat. He dressed, untied her, and wrapped her in the sheets, binding them with the ropes that held her to the bed. Slinging her over his shoulder, he walked through the

open door to the veranda and then to the dock. He dropped her body, her head thumping on the boat's wooden deck. Aboard, he wired a cement block to her neck and another to her ankles. He started the engine and idled the thirty-foot cruiser in an eastward arc to the mouth of the bay. Passing a small cay, he powered the boat to thirty knots, heading east. After six miles, he slowed the boat. Placing the cement block wired to her ankles on the boat's gunwale, he lifted her body and rolled her into the sea.

Returning home, he poured more scotch and leaned back in a lounge on the patio. The satisfaction he experienced from killing the girl didn't last. Instead, his mind drifted back to that night when it all started.

He remembered the night he got even. Stealing chloroform from the school science lab, sneaking out from his dorm

room, and making his way to his parents' house by bus. She would be alone, while her parents were on a cruise.

At the house, he stepped through an open door into the family room. It was littered with bottles, cans, and cups. There were cigarette butts, and the sweet aroma of pot. She had a party while the parents were gone. He stepped into the kitchen, a mess of dishes and trash. He moved to the dining room and into the foyer. Turning to the broad staircase, he started up, measuring each step. The door to her room was ajar. He smiled; it was happening. He was going to have her.

The lamp on the nightstand shed a yellow glow, revealing a form on the bed. She was sprawled across the bed, print shift pulled to her waist. He walked to the bedside. Slipping the backpack from his shoulders, he took out the bottle and a

handkerchief. Soaking the kerchief, he knelt on the bed.

“Darlene. Darlene, wake up.”

She stirred and rolled toward him. Her eyes opened. She gazed at him and then, startled, tried to jerk away. He slammed the cloth over her mouth and nose. With muffled screams, arms thrashing, she tried to roll away, then she lay still.

He took a rope from his pack, bound her wrists, and stretched her arms over her head, tying her to the bars of the headboard. Taking off his jacket, he straddled her, his face over hers. For long minutes, he swayed over her still body. Her eyes opened. She stared, trying to shift her legs, but she was pinned to the bed. She strained at the ropes, let out a gasp, and as awareness returned, she choked out, “You, you, you little maggot.” He slapped her face. He slapped

her again. “Bastard!” He hit her again, then another. She sobbed.

“Isn’t this good, Darlene? Isn’t this just fun?”

She spat at him.

He slapped her.

“Pig! My father will kill you.”

“Say it. Say it’s good. Say it’s fun.”

“Bastard, get off me!” She kicked.
“You weasel! You wimp, you limp, little worthless wimp!”

Veins in his neck strained against his skin. A wave of heat swept him; his hands shook, his pulse pounding. Lights flashed in his eyes. “No. No. You have to beg.”

Grabbing her neck, he squeezed. She managed a choking noise, and then her eyes widened. Her body convulsed as she tried to throw him off. Her face turned white; her eyes rolled back in her head. She stopped kicking. Squeezing tighter, thumbs at her

throat, unrelenting, he began to pant. Releasing her neck, his panting turned to deep breaths. It was as if he were out of his body, watching. He did it. He did it.

Throwing his head back, he said, “I did it. I showed the bitch who was in charge.”

He relaxed from his murderous reverie. The pale, contorted face stared up at him. Leaving the bed and sitting in a chair staring at his stepsister, reality began to sweep away his victory. She didn’t beg. She didn’t cower. She fought him. She defied him. She died calling him a wimp, a limp wimp.

There was no exhilaration, release, or euphoric sensations. It didn’t free him, and it didn’t smother his humiliation. He began to sweat. They would come and lock him in the basement. Reaching for the bottle of chloroform, he capped it and left. He

walked through the empty house, empty of emotion, out the back, through the gate, and into the night.

He awoke at 10 AM, soaked in sweat. He did it. But where was the peace? Clicking on the television, the screen filled with a street view of the estate. The commentator spoke about a young girl found dead in the home. She went on to say there was a teen party there the night before, and there was evidence of drugs and alcohol. Police, she said, estimated twenty to thirty people attended the party. He stared at the screen. Twenty to thirty people. Twenty to thirty suspects. "Timing. Perfect timing."

Zalack handed his passport to the immigration officer.

“Welcome to Miami, Mr. Kincaid.
Have a nice trip.”

Zalack tipped his hat, passing through with his carry-on. He rented a car, changed vehicles in Atlanta, and, the following day, checked into a hotel in Louisville. He spent the morning at the Louisville Gun Show, choosing his weapons. In Columbus, he took delivery of the Chevrolet Tahoe that he had purchased online. Three hours later, he pulled into the garage of his furnished condominium in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, which he had rented for six months.

Zalack settled into a chair with a glass of wine and opened his laptop to Facebook. He typed in DANNIE BAUER. He scanned through her pictures, so many of them with the dog and others from someplace she called The Lake House. Seventy-five friends. He scrolled to Laurie Bauer,

copying her name and real estate business website into a file. Then, Bradley Peterson was followed by Peggy Bauer. He searched background check software for the next hour, locating addresses and telephone numbers. So many opportunities, he mused. So many opportunities to make her suffer.

Chapter Forty-five

Dannie loaded the new email anti-virus software and finished a cleanup on four laptops. It was five o'clock, and her shift was over. Sheriff Dawson had offered her a part-time internship in the information technology department. The position fit perfectly with her upcoming university schedule.

The office was still busy with a shift change as people took off for the weekend. Bradley had been on her mind all day. He's incredible, so thoughtful. His eyes, that one dimple...

A knock at the door brought her back to the present. "Hey Dannie, I hear we have a new rookie on the team," Deputy Dora

Griggs said, standing in her doorway. A compact five foot five inches, some might call her stout. Her short, docked hair had blonde streaks. As deputies went, she was one of Dannie's favorites.

"Yeah," Dannie replied, "Can you believe it?"

"Scuttlebutt has it you're not just the K9 queen, you're a computer genius," Doris said.

"Oh, not a genius. Just managed to get an associate's degree in computer science from Lakeland Community College."

"That calls for a celebration. A few of us are going to Hambone for dinner and a beer. You want to come?"

"I'm 18."

"No problem, just sit at a table. As long as you're not at the bar, you're fine. Come on. See you down there about six."

“Okay, six.” A night out with the deputies. *Hanging out with Geauga County’s finest.* She loaded her backpack and headed home to clean up.

Pulling into the gravel lot of the Hambone, she caught the odor of burgers and the Friday fish fry. In the bar, several bikers occupied the booth nearest the door. Men and women in business attire sat at the bar while families populated the benches at the center of the room. Dora waved from the pool table to get her attention.

“Hey, Dannie, come here,” Dora called. I want you to meet my wife, Maureen.” Dannie reached out to a smiling blonde woman. She was in her thirties and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

“Nice to meet you. Dora says you’re quite the computer gal.”

“It’s something I like.”

Deputy Poleski hailed Dannie.

Dora said, “Grab a seat. I will beat this woman at the pool, and we’ll be right over.”

Poleski hugged Dannie and introduced Jim Greene, deputy. Music pounded, and a couple danced. She chatted with her friends, telling Forrest stories. As a table cleared across the room, she could see a booth. The woman there looked familiar. Dannie excused herself and walked toward the restroom on the opposite side of the dining area to get a better view of the woman talking to someone across from her. Dannie approached the booth and stopped just a few feet away. “Aunt Peg? Aunt Peg, what are you doing here?”

Peg looked up, smiled, looked across the booth at the person on the other side, and said, “Are you going to stand there?”

Dannie walked to the booth. Turning to the other occupant, her mouth dropped. “Deputy Hinds?” Brandt laughed, and Peg laughed with him.

Dannie looked at Peg, then at Brandt. “Wait a minute.” A smile spread over her surprised face, and she slid into the booth next to Brandt. “Okay, Aunt Peg, you need to give some explanations. You’re dating, and I don’t know?”

“Hush, child, there are things you just don’t need to know.”

“Oh, I do. I need to know if my aunt is dating. Okay, how long? Come on, get it out here. I want facts; I want details.”

“Girl, you don’t need any details,” Peg said.

“Peg and I have been seeing each other for a couple of weeks.” Brandt looked across the table at Peg. She held his gaze and smiled.

“Oh my God.”

“Now, why don’t you go play pool with your friends?”

She looked again at Peg. “I don’t know. I have to keep a closer eye on you.”

Shaking her head, Peg said, “Go, before I have one of your deputy friends arrest you for trespassing.”

Dannie looked at them, shrugged, and walked to her table. Dora was on her cell phone; Maureen stood next to her, a hand on her shoulder, biting her lip. Poleski sat at the table, bent forward, phone to his ear. Deputy Greene leaned back in his chair, phone in hand. Puzzled, she approached Dora. “What’s up?”

“Dora put down her phone, a confused expression on her face. “Zalack is back on the radar. He’s in Ohio.”

Dannie received a text Friday night to report to a staff meeting at 9 AM on Saturday, December 6th. She entered the briefing room, waving to Dora Griggs and Jan Crawford, both uniformed. There were thirty people in the room. The buzz of conversation was subdued; there was none of the normal jocularity. She approached Dora and Jan. "Pretty serious in here, huh?"

Dora shook her head, "Serious. Especially for you, if no one else will say."

Dannie didn't reply.

"We're looking out for you, kid. You're family here," Jan said. The Sheriff entered with Lt. Samms, and the room quieted.

Sheriff Dawson began, "Good morning; sorry to bring you all in here this morning, but I think you understand. Spencer Zalack is now known to be in Ohio.

You all know this department,” he glanced from Brandt to Dannie, “identified him as a serial killer. Right now, I can’t say exactly where Zalack is. The FBI believes he is using an alias, David Kincaid. That is all they have given us so far. The FBI and the U.S. Marshals Service are involved in pursuing him. Beginning today, as a precaution, we’re all going to be doing extra duty. I’m asking each of you to be very cautious and vigilant out there. We want to see this guy behind bars before he does more damage.

Samms went over roster changes. There would be extra patrols in the area around the Bauer home and additional security at headquarters. He took questions and dismissed the room.

Dannie left with Dora and Jan. “I hope that extra patrols for my home and

neighborhood won't be a burden." Jan put an arm around her shoulder.

"Hey, head up, kid, you're not the problem. You were the solution. Zalack is the problem, and we're going to do what we have to do because of him. This is not because of anything you did."

"That's right, Bauer. Just how it is," Dora said. "I mean, you're just an ordinary pain in the ass, nothing special."

Dannie smiled.

"You still have your concealed carry. You be packing, girl. And you be careful. Got it?"

"Yes, Deputy Griggs, I've got it."

Dora patted her shoulder. "That's good. Now, let's see you at the gym this afternoon for judo class."

Chapter Forty-six

Dannie pulled the BMW into the parking lot at the start of the Headwaters Trail and slipped her phone under the seat. The cool October day, was perfect for a mid-morning long run. At the trailhead, she stretched her arms and back. She focused ten yards ahead and started her run. Settling into eight-minute miles, blood rushed through her heart to match her effort. She slipped from her focus on technique into a sense of wholeness, mind and body in sync. Her vision expanded, taking in the cedar fence framing the trail and the white cumulus clouds against an azure sky. Second-growth maple, oak, and beech stood out, followed by willows and swampy growth, with Jack-in-the-Pulpit and skunk cabbage

flourishing in vivid colors. Two miles in, the trees closed onto the trail, and the forest canopy created a hall-like passageway.

The sound of a motor broke the sylvan silence. Strange. No motorized vehicles were allowed on the dirt trail. *What the hell?* The engine noise grew louder, uncomfortably louder. Dannie looked over her shoulder as a dirt bike rounded a corner and came into view. As it did, she could hear the bike speed up. *Damn, a moron.* She felt the hair on her arms and the nape of her neck lifting. She looked right, then left, for a way off the trail. She moved to the right edge of the trail, her shoulder brushing branches. The bike was on her. Her muscles tightened. A sense of dread threatened to overwhelm her, then adrenaline ignited in her bloodstream.

The engine revved as the rider sped up to her side on a black dirt bike. In a black

helmet, a dark visor covered his face. He turned to her, then moved left, pulling ahead, blocking her way. Her throat constricted, her chest tightened. She took a step back. Gut-aching fear mixed with anger. *Was this what Julie experienced? Or Carrie?* Her breath quick and shallow, her mind raced. *Run, fight, hide, attack. Can't get a coherent thought.* With a single deep breath, she returned to her regular breathing. *Remember your judo training; discipline yourself, relax, adapt, detach.*

As the rider stepped off his dirt bike, she could see he was her height but heavier. Dropping the bike, he reached for his helmet as Dannie stepped back, feet widespread in a defensive stance. He lifted his visor.

“Dennis. Dennis Von? What the hell, you moron. What are you doing?

“I just want to talk, Dannie. I like you. You won’t talk to me.” The big linebacker’s voice was high-pitched, whiny. He pulled the helmet off. “I just don’t know why you won’t listen to me. I want you to know how much I like you. Dannie?”

His whining voice and pleading face lifted the threat; her shoulders relaxed. Heat rose in her face; her hands clenched and unclenched. She took two steps toward him and jabbed a finger in his face. Her blood pounded in her ears; she ground her teeth.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” her voice boomed. “What is wrong with you? Stop following me, stay the hell away from me.”

His face darkened, his eyes narrowed, and she thought his lips quivered. “You want to be with me. I want to be with you. You know it,” his voice now hardened.

“You’re pitiful. If you come near me again...” She planted her left foot behind his right and, with both hands, punched him in the chest. He fell back, hitting his head on the bike. He stood, shaking, and reached for her, face red, teeth bared.

Dannie grabbed his arm, pulled it forward, and kicked his right leg from under him. Using his momentum as he fell to throw him over her left hip. He thudded on the ground, head snapping back on the trail floor. She bent over him, shaking with tension, and said, “Never, never come near me again.”

Her body trembled, rage bubbling to the surface. From a red haze, her world slowly came into focus. A broken tree branch lie beside the trail. She picked it up and jammed it into the spokes of the bike’s rear wheel. Again, in the front wheel,

snapping spokes, then smashing the headlamp.

Panting, she stopped, looked at Dennis, as he tried to lift himself from the ground and threw the branch away. She turned and started walking back down the trail. She shook her arms and hands to relieve the tightness there, then reached back to massage her neck. *He's sick. He's nuts.* She started into a slow run. After a hundred yards, she slowed, then stopped. "Shit. I shouldn't have done that." Hands on her hips, she bent forward, trying to sort through the thoughts and emotions jumbled in her mind. "I shouldn't have hit him. Should've reasoned with him." She walked, her shoulders slumped, a lump forming in her throat. *He wasn't dangerous; he was pitiful.*

"God, that was dumb." She looked over her shoulder, but he was out of sight.

It could have been Zalack. No regrets, Dannie. You did what you had to. She broke into a run, head high.

Back in the parking lot, Dannie climbed into the SUV. She hung her head, the adrenaline long past; fatigue set in, and a need to see Bradley. *I'll be fine. I just want to lean into his arms.* She called, a fluttering in her stomach, then a tingling sensation.

Bradley answered, saying, “Hey, beautiful, how are you doing?”

“Actually, I’m having a bad day. I’d love to see you.” A sense of release flowed through her at the sound of his voice.

“Really? Sorry, it’s a bad day. I’d love to see you, too.”

“What are you doing?”

“Silver and I are out chasing turkeys and going to spend more time out here. It’s

a beautiful, bright blue sky, old cornstalks, and a hill in the distance. Wish you were here.”

“Are you busy tonight? Can you come over? Would love to talk. Would love to see you.”

“Hey, try and stop me. I’ll be there. How about I come early, at five? Pizza and a movie on the couch?”

“Terrific. Just right. Love you. See you.”

“Love you, too, girl. Bye.”

Bradley dropped the phone back into a pocket and took out a treat for Silver. “Here you go, girl. Good dog, now let’s see if you find another bird.” He slung his shotgun over his shoulder and started parallel to the field’s fence. He was about to send Silver out when another hunter

crossed the wire into the field. “Silver, come here. Heel. Good girl.” The hunter continued toward Bradley, his shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm.

The hunter approached, the bill of his hat low, shading his sunglasses. “Hi there. Any luck today?”

“Just one. I’m going to give it a little more time.”

“Beautiful dog, what’s her name?”

“Silver. Okay, Silver, go say hello.” The dog loped over to the hunter, tail wagging. The hunter rubbed Silver’s ears, continuing to walk to Bradley. “How about you? Any luck?”

“Luck?” The man looked at Bradley. “This is my lucky day.”

Bradley said, “You look familiar.”

“Really. You don’t remember me? This should help.” He leveled his shotgun at Bradley’s chest and pulled the trigger.

Bradley rocked backward, blood spraying from his mouth and spurting from the hole in his chest. He hit the ground, and Silver barked, running to him and licking his face. Zalack turned the gun on the dog and fired again. With a yelping cry, the dog fell beside Bradley, her legs kicking as if she were running in a dream.

“Now, do you remember?” Zalack smirked. He turned and walked from the field.

Chapter Forty-seven

It was 5:30 PM. No Bradley. She called. No answer.

At 6 PM, Dannie grabbed Forrest's harness and headed for the door. "Come on, big guy, let's find Bradley." She traveled south to the farm where the two had hunted pheasants. Blue sky, he said, cornstalks. Bradley would be there. But where was Zalack? Somewhere near? Was he watching? She reached down and touched the Beretta in its boot holster. Cold fear crept through her bones like a winter storm. *No phone call. He doesn't answer, and he didn't show up.* Carrie didn't show up. Julie didn't show up. Dread's cold fingers tightened their grip on her.

The sun was below the horizon as Dannie turned onto the dirt road leading to the cornfield where they had hunted in early October. Ahead, she saw Bradley's truck. The woodland bordering the field was dark and foreboding. She took a flashlight from the console and stepped into the chill air. Bradley's truck was empty. A deep ache opened in her stomach, fear for Bradley engulfing her like a shroud, chilling her soul.

"Bradley, Brad," she called. *It's too dark. He would never hunt this late.* She knelt next to Forrest and wrapped her arm around the dog. "Forrest," her voice broke, "Forrest, find Bradley. Find Bradley. Work. Forrest work." She shuddered, bile at the back of her throat.

The dog looked into her eyes and dropped his head to the ground. He walked to the truck and started toward the darkened

field. They negotiated the fence, and Forrest took Dannie in a wide arc on the trail. Dannie's mind swirled with fear and hope. The bright field where she and Bradley had laughed and held hands as they walked was now cloaked in shadow, black and foreboding.

They worked through the field, then returned to the fence. Forrest took her fifty yards, then back into the field. He circled and moved diagonally back toward the fence. Forrest lunged, then bayed and strained the lead. Dannie broke into a run with the big dog. There was something ahead. She slowed, panic drowning her comprehension. In the darkness, two shapes lay on the ground, barely discernible. *It can't be. It can't be Bradley.* Pressure in her chest brought her breath in labored gasps as Forrest pulled her forward, and she tried to hold him back. He whined, straining the

leash. Then they were upon them. Bradley. Silver. Still. Cold. The field swept away, the darkened sky morphing to emptiness. She knelt and, with a shaking hand, touched his cold face, and the horror, the hell, the death came rushing over her. She fell on him, weeping. *Gone. Gone, all gone.* Her body shook, each breath choked out in a moan, and a shudder swept through her body. She screamed, “Why? Why?”

Her body shook. She let out a guttural moan. “Oh God, no.” Forrest sat, then lay, his head pressed tight against her.

She managed to call Brandt. There were sirens. Lights. Harsh, flashing lights revealed Bradley’s cold face. A cruiser came through the fence, bouncing over the cornrows, then another. More sirens. The cruiser’s glaring lights outlined Dannie, sitting on the cold ground, knees hugged to her chest, the dog lying beside her. Brandt

stepped from the first cruiser, Laurie from the same car. Jan Crawford came from the second cruiser. Hinds approached her, bent to his knees, and touched her shoulder.

“Dannie, Dannie, are you okay?” Unmoving, she stared into the darkness.

Laurie stepped forward and fell to her knees. “No, oh Dannie.” She put her hands to her face, shaking. Crawford came from behind her and knelt, encircling her with her arms.

Dannie’s shoulders began to shake, and she sobbed. Laurie moved to her as she wept and held her. Sheriff Dawson approached the scene. He stood next to the silent deputies and removed his hat.

Chapter Forty-eight

“It’s me. It’s my fault.” Dannie rocked back and forth, her arms tight around her. “If it weren’t for me, he would be alive.” She sobbed. “I can’t go to the funeral. “How can I face his parents?”

Laurie reached across the couch to take Dannie’s hand.

“Dannie, you’re not responsible for Bradley. He did it. Zalack. He alone.”

“No, it’s my fault. If I had never met Zalack, if I had never looked for the killer, Bradley would be alive. He did it to get back at me.”

“How many others would be dead? Dannie, he killed a half dozen people. If you and I and everyone don’t stand against evil people, then more people die. What

about the police? What about the people who let him escape? It's not you, Dannie. Not you."

Tears continued to flow. Dannie sat, hands clasped, head bowed.

"Please, Dannie, please don't do this to yourself." Laurie crossed the room and wrapped her arms around her.

"I just want him back. I want him back." Laurie rocked her. "I'd forgotten what love was since Dad died. Bradley loved me like my dad. No judgment. Just love. He gave me that. He filled me with love, and it was so good. How does something so good hurt so much? How can someone so good be gone? I don't understand. How does God let that happen?"

"God didn't let him die. Or Julie or the others. An evil man took their lives. Bad people do bad things. Bradley's dead, and

it's unfair, it's wrong, it's undeserved, but don't blame God. He doesn't prevent or end pain, but He's there as your strength. He's there to carry you through the loss and pain. Don't let an evil man make you doubt God's goodness. Nothing you do now changes what happened. You don't need to think about why he's gone. You need to care for yourself and heal your pain and your loss."

Slumped forward, Dannie stared without focus. "You said that if we don't stand against evil, more people will die." She looked into Laurie's eyes. "You're right."

Laurie helped her get ready for the funeral. She brushed her hair and shaped her braid. Laurie came into the room.

“Ready?” Dannie nodded. No one spoke as they drove. At the church, a small group of people had gathered at the door. Heads turned, a girl pointed, her mother pulled her hand down.

They know. They know it was my fault. It should have been me. The group parted as they walked into the church. Laurie led them to a middle pew. Dannie stumbled at the sight of the casket. Laurie took her arm and half-carried her to her seat. The family sat in the front row, the casket before them. Together yet separate, never whole again. Never the same. Lost. She closed her eyes to blot out the painful scene before her.

Laurie nudged her. Bradley’s soccer teammates bore the casket down the aisle. His family stood and filed after. Each pew emptied in turn, mourner falling in behind mourner, all in slow motion. There was no

healing in the service. Now, there was nothing. All lost. All out of control. They took their turn, Laurie supporting her as they walked from the church to the bright sun. The hearse had left, and the family was gone with it.

If I had shot him? If I killed him, Bradley would be alive. She wept.

Dannie ruffled Forrest's ears. "Let's go for a walk." Snapping on Forrest's lead, Dannie stepped out the front door into a cold winter morning. Forrest nosed to the swale that bordered the street. She tugged him to the mailbox. Opening the weather-beaten box, she extracted a jumble of papers. Bed Bath & Beyond 20% Off, Kohl's Summer Sale, real estate ads, coupons, and a small blue envelope with neatly printed letters addressed to Dannie

Bauer. Postmark Miami. She slid a nail under the flap and extracted a single folded page:

Dear Dannie,
Sorry about your
boyfriend. You should
have seen the look on his
face just before I pulled
the trigger. Priceless.
Ah, how I miss you. I miss
you, but I can imagine
you: your soft skin, your
long legs, your supple
breasts. Sometimes, when
I'm with the others, when I
subdue them, I pretend
they are you. And you beg,
and you plead like they do.
I can't wait, Dannie, until
we are together again.

Z

Her hands shook as her eyes moistened, unfocused. Her heart pounded as if it were to explode in her chest. Her face heated, teeth clenched. Rage shook her body.

She sank, uncontrolled, into the abyss of rage, out of body, looking down at a pale, cold Bradley. Then Zalack was before her, collar in hand, a cruel smile, and blank eyes. If she had killed him then, Bradley would be alive. She dropped to her knees, clutching the obscene paper in her hands, and sobbed, "I'll kill him. I'll kill him."

Her face was twisted and reddened, unlike anything he had ever seen. His senses filled with a frightening mix of her beating heart, gasping breath, and shaking

body, along with a scent he had never experienced in her – the scent of raw anger. She gave out a guttural sound deep from within her. Forrest trembled, then dropped to his belly and cowed before the rage he sensed in her.

Chapter Forty-nine

As she awoke, the rage of Zalack's letter swept through her, subsiding into an aching burn in her heart. Three of her best friends were dead, and Zalack was free. Free to kill again. Free to attack her. *I need to find him before he finds me.* In a haze, she dressed and drove to the sheriff's office, where she signed in for her IT shift with her system administrator credentials. Her hand trembled, as she uploaded stolen car information into deputies' laptops for the next shift. Finishing the last computer, she turned to the array of databases she had access to through the Sheriff's office server.

She found a criminal record on Zalack in the FBI National Crime

Information Center. He was born in Flint, Michigan, on April 17, 1980. The National Instant Criminal Background Check System and the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System didn't reveal any new information. What made him a serial killer? What drove him to do these things? She shook off the questions. Need to check driver's license databases countrywide.

In April 1996, he registered for his first driver's license in Michigan under the name Spencer Zalack, with no middle name. There were two addresses for him in Michigan, spanning eight years. He moved to Ohio when he was 26, registering with the Ohio Department of Motor Vehicles in June 2008 with an address in Sandusky, Ohio. No traffic violations. Now, where to look? Social media? She searched. No LinkedIn profile; no Facebook or Twitter.

“Who are you, Spencer Zalack?” She checked voting records. The records indicate that he voted in Michigan from the ages of 18 to 24. His next voter registration is in Sandusky County, Ohio, at age 28. Okay, how about court records? She ran through six databases. There were no marriages, no bankruptcies.

She leaned back in her chair, eyes closed. Where next? Where to look? *His addresses.* His first address was a dorm at Coffey College, a small fine arts school in central Michigan. She found him listed as an alumnus in 2002. Where did he live before college? Why is there no driver’s license record before age 18? Where is the Zalack Family? Why did he not vote for two years?

She searched birth records for Michigan. There it was, Spencer Zalack, born April 17, 1980, in Flint, Michigan.

Parents, Christine and Harold Zalack. It was the first information she found on him before his 18th birthday. Now she had his birth certificate, parents, and their address in Flint, Michigan. She searched the background check database and entered Spencer Zalack on April 17, 1980. Scrolling down the screen, she stopped, mouth agape, not breathing. Death certificate, Spencer Zalack: died July 30, 1982, at age two. Dead. Spencer Zalack was dead.

Pushing out of a fog, she searched for his parents. Deceased. Both died within 15 years of Spencer Zalack's death. Spencer Zalack died at age two, then enrolled at Coffey College at age 18, with a driver's license and a voter registration card. There were no other birth records or registrations with the name Spencer Zalack. Hands locked behind her head, she looked at the

ceiling. Two things are certain. Spencer Zalack is a serial killer, and Spencer Zalack is not Spencer Zalack.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, laptop balanced on her knees, considering the five-hour drive from Chardon to Coffey College, where Spencer Zalack spent four years. They would not release information, except for transcripts, to other schools or prospective employers. She would have to go there. She would be Dannie Bauer, reporter for the News Press, following up on a story about Spencer Zalack.

Five hours later, Dannie pulled the vehicle into a parking space beside a red brick building trimmed with brown sandstone. November snow dusted the trees and hedges. Henley College of Business was embossed in brass next to double doors. She reasoned that he had taken

business classes, so she started with Professor Sandra Brown's business law and ethics class.

Professor Brown's office was on the first floor. She was not in. Dannie wandered the halls, finding a bench near her door. After an hour, a petite, gray-haired woman approached the office and unlocked the door. Dannie followed, entering behind her.

"Professor Brown?" Dannie inquired.

The woman looked up from her desk. "Oh, sorry, young lady, I don't take student meetings until four."

"Yes, ma'am, I am not a student. Can I ask you a question?"

"Are you planning to attend here? You need an appointment."

"I'm sorry to bother you. I work for the News Press in Geauga County, Ohio. I am researching the background of Spencer Zalack."

Professor Brown's eyes widened.
"Yes. I knew Spencer. Hard to believe what has become of him. All I can tell you is he was a good student."

"Do you remember what school he came from? His high school?"

"Oh yes, quite exclusive. Excelsior. It's outside of Flint. Boarding school."

"Thank you, Professor Brown. That's helpful. Anything else you can tell me about him?"

"I'm sorry, but student information is confidential. He was a student here. That's all I can say."

At 2:30 PM, she drove onto the grounds of Excelsior School. At the administration building, Dannie talked her way past reception and was ushered into the Dean of Students' office.

“Welcome, I’m Dean Craighurst. How may I help you?” Balding, with gray hair wings on either side of his head, his manner was pleasant.

I am trying to locate a family member we’ve lost touch with. “I have a picture of him from his college years. He attended here from 1994 to 1998.” She handed the Dean the yearbook photo.

“Oh yes, David. David Kincaid.” She waited, not breathing, while Dean Craighurst examined the picture. “A nice boy. Quiet. Very sad that his parents died. I think his sister too. He was left alone. There was a man who took charge of his affairs. The man was a lawyer. He was in charge of the boy’s estate.

“His estate?”

“Oh, yes, of course. His family was very wealthy. The lawyer managed his trust fund.”

“Do you know the name of the lawyer?”

“Oh no. A long time ago. Try probate records. There were issues with his stepfather’s will.”

“His stepfather? Where did they live?”

“Somewhere around Ann Arbor, I think. I can’t give you anything from our records. Confidentiality, you understand.”

“Yes, I understand. This has been very helpful. David Kincaid, Ann Arbor, Michigan.” The Dean nodded.

“Thank you,” she said. “I won’t take more of your time.” With another revelation in hand, Dannie walked to the car.

Chapter Fifty

Dannie sat in her IT office chair, turned to her screens, and switched on the Mac server. She searched the archive database for births in Michigan: David Kincaid, born July 5, 1979, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mother, Celeste Greene-Kincaid; Father, James Kincaid. She had him and his parents. She went to the marriage records, then the death records. She leaned over the keyboard. Back to the newspaper archives, she found two dozen stories.

“Holy crap,” she said. *Could this be?* Back to death records, she had a hit, another hit. She became faint, holding her breath. Inhaling, she searched newspapers again. Another one. Another one, and dead. She took a breath and dove into the criminal

databases. Then, back to obituaries. She put her face in her hands, the names and dates swimming in her head. She started back on the keyboard.

She downloaded each piece of information into a folder on her Mac Pro and copied the files to an external drive. *Time to get this information to Brandt.* This time, she would do the right thing for the right reason.

Dannie searched the duty room for Brandt Hinds. She crossed the room and greeted him, “Can I talk to you? Please?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

She set her laptop on his desk. “I need to show you something.”

Brandt rolled his chair back, giving her room. He reached behind and rolled a chair to Dannie.

Dannie said, “I’ve been doing research.” Brandt frowned. “It’s all public.

It's all legal. Been doing it on my own time."

Dannie struck a few keys and turned the laptop to Brandt. "This is a birth certificate. The screen showed the certificate: Spencer Zalack, born April 17, 1980, in Flint, Michigan. Parents: Christine and Harold Zalack. "Got it?"

Brandt sat up in his chair. "Yes."

"This is a death certificate; Spencer Zalack died July 30, 1982."

Brandt stared at the screen for a long time.

"What are you saying? What are you suggesting?"

"Spencer Zalack died at age two. Then, 16 years later, Spencer Zalack got his driver's license, registered to vote, and started college."

Brandt chewed his lip.

“There’s more.” She opened a screen with a photo. “This is Spencer Zalack in his college yearbook.” She changed the screen to another image. “Is this familiar?”

“Zalack, younger,” Brandt said.

“High school picture. Read the name.”

Brandt read, “David Kincaid.”

“Spencer Zalack died when he was two years old. There is no Spencer Zalack, only David Kincaid. There’s more.”

Brandt said, “Go ahead, what else?”

“Here’s his birth certificate.” David Kincaid was born on July 5, 1979, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mother, Celeste Greene-Kincaid; father, James Kincaid. Next, she opened a marriage certificate. Married June 1974, Dearborn, Michigan. “Are you following this so far?”

“I think so. Kincaid was born in ‘79 to parents married in ‘74.”

“Right, now check this.” She displayed a death certificate: James Kincaid, deceased, May 1982. Dannie indicated the newspaper article reporting that the auto executive died of cancer, survived by his wife and son. “This is a marriage certificate, Dr. Celeste Greene-Kincaid and Robert Burroughs, Esq; Married April 1989.”

“So, David Kincaid’s mother remarried in 1989?”

“Yes, now, get ready for this.” She showed him a death certificate: Dr. Celeste Greene-Burroughs died in 1995.

“Brandt, now it goes crazy. Here we go.”

She scrolled through the newspaper archives: *Society Couple in Suicide Pact; Murder-Suicide; Wealthy Couple Found Dead.*

Brandt's eyes widened. "Are you sure about this?"

"All public records. There are about eighteen articles about their death."

On a new screen, she displayed a newspaper clipping where she highlighted, *The wealthy couple was found dead in their bed of an apparent murder-suicide. The husband had shot his wife and then himself. The couple was reported to be separating after the death of their 18-year-old daughter, Darlene Kincaid.*

"He had a sister? She died? How?"

"Step-sister. Murdered, tied to her bed, and strangled." She waited while Brandt took it in. "There's more information. More details. He had a lawyer who managed his inheritance until he came of age. I have everything on this disk." She handed him the external drive.

“I have to call the Sheriff. You can’t go anywhere. I need to get Grimes in here. Why the hell doesn’t the FBI know this?” Brandt stood, running both hands through his hair. “Call your mother. You’re going to be here a while.”

“I’m eighteen years old.”

Brandt grimaced. “I know, Ace, we all know. Now let your mother know you’ll be late.” He headed for the sheriff’s office.

Chapter Fifty-one

Dannie spent half an hour briefing the Sheriff on the information she found on Zalack. Detective Grimes and Lieutenant Samms sat in, along with Hinds. The Sheriff listened, asking an occasional question. “Dannie, this is good work. Excellent work. From here, we need the FBI to run with this information. They and the US Marshal’s Service need to be advised. Samms, you get this information to the Bureau right away.” Samms nodded. “Dannie, thanks for this work. You can go now. And Dannie...you’ve done a good job, we’ve got it from here.”

She stood and took her leave, now out of any further investigation and police work. *They’re done with me, but I’m not*

done. At her desk, she went over the files on Zalack Kincaid. The Dean at Kincaid's school said there was a lawyer who managed the estate when the parents died. The probate record documented the Minor Guardianship of David Kincaid. The court appointed Taylor Stephenson as guardian. Taylor Stephenson, Esq., was a Doyle, Harpe, and Stephenson law firm partner. The website showed he was now retired. In two minutes, she found his address and phone number.

She dialed. "Mr. Stephenson?"

"Yes, this is Taylor Stephenson," he replied.

"I'm calling with an unusual request. I am sorry to bother you, but I have no one else to go to. Let me explain. My mom died; she was a single parent. I didn't know my father. After my mom died, I found information leading to the man who was my

father. I believe you represented him, and I'm asking if you can help me out with some information." Dannie waited, her heart beating faster.

"I am not sure. Who is this?"

"My name is Dannie Bauer, and I'm looking for David Kincaid," she replied.

"Hmm. Yes. I knew him. And you say you think you are his daughter?"

"Yes."

He replied, "Tell me what you know about David Kincaid."

"Very little. I found his name in my mom's papers. It was an envelope, but it was empty. The envelope had a postmark from Ann Arbor. I researched and found a birth certificate for David Kincaid in Ann Arbor. He would be about the same age as my mom, both about eighteen when they were together. My mom was nineteen when

I was born. I found his mother, father, and, I think, a stepfather.

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen, sir.”

“What do you intend to do if you find this man? Why do you want to find him?”

“My mom is gone. I don’t want anything from him. My mom didn’t want anything from him. I want to know who he is. I want to know his side of the family.”

“I can’t tell you much. I served as David’s guardian until he was eighteen. My firm managed the estate until then. After he turned eighteen, he took over his estate, and we forwarded all the details of his estate to his lawyer in the Cayman Islands. The estate was substantial.”

“So, you think he lives in the Cayman Islands?”

“I don’t know. His stepfather, Robert Burroughs, was my law partner when we

started practicing decades ago. He decided to go out on his own, but we remained friends. We used to go to Burroughs' home in the Caymans. That's all I can tell you."

She sat, the pieces of the puzzle shuffling through her head. "I'm grateful, Mr. Stephenson. Thank you for taking the time with me."

"Sorry for the loss of your mother."

"Thank you. I appreciate your help."

She hung up.

Chapter Fifty-two

On Monday morning, Brandt and Grimes reviewed the information that Dannie found on Zalack-Kincaid. Grimes shook his head, “You’ve got to admit, Brandt, the kid may be a pain in the ass, but she is damned smart. Makes you wonder what they have there at the FBI when this kid comes up with so much.” His phone rang. “Grimes here.” He listened and responded, “Okay, deputy, let me put you on speaker. I’m with my partner, Deputy Hinds.” Then to Brandt, “It’s the U.S. Marshal’s office.”

Grimes clicked on the speakerphone.

“We have a break here,” the marshal said. “Using the information you sent, we found that our guy just applied for a driver’s license in Columbus, Ohio. Give me your

email, and I'll send his license and photo.” Grimes gave the deputy marshal his address. “He got his license this afternoon. He used his real name, David Kincaid. We’re tracking airports, bus stations, and car rentals to locate him. We think he’s headed to your area to find the young woman he was stalking.

Grimes, “But why his real name? Why didn’t he use a false ID?”

“Not sure, but he may think we don’t know his real identity. This could be our break. They always make a mistake.”

“What’s next? What do you need from us?” Hinds asked.

“We think you need to be ready. He could have already driven to your area. You need to protect anyone he might go after.”

“Okay, we’ll get on that. I see the email here now. The picture is of him. Hair

is different. We're going to get a bulletin out. Thanks, Marshal."

Grimes said, "Brandt, you call the Sheriff. I'm going to put the bulletin together, and we're going to get it out to our units and state police."

Brandt left the room and walked to the Sheriff's office. He was not in. Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed Sheriff Dawson as he walked to the IT office.

A Sheriff's cruiser pulled in behind her as Dannie drove into her driveway. Deputy Jan Crawford stepped from the cruiser, and another deputy from the passenger side.

"Dannie, where's your phone? And where have you been?"

She looked at Jan open-mouthed. The deputy approached her. “You didn’t answer your phone.”

“The battery’s dead.”

“Dannie, Zalack’s in the area. Half the force has been looking for you.”

“Zalack, are you sure?”

“He was in Columbus this morning and maybe here now.”

“I didn’t know. I...”

Jan interrupted. “Okay, it’s okay. Just charge your phone. We’re going to be in the neighborhood. You have to let Deputy Hinds know where you are. Got it?”

“Yes, sure.” Dannie was still processing the fact that Zalack was in the area.

“Okay, Jan. I’ll contact him.” The deputies returned to the cruiser and pulled out of the drive. Dannie walked to the house to a baying, whining Forrest.

Deputy Marshal Garcia approached Grimes and Hinds. “We think we’ve got something here. We want to go over it with you.” The three returned to the Marshal’s desk. He motioned to the two remaining FBI agents. They approached.

“We know that Spencer Zalack’s real name is David Kincaid. Based on the information you gave us, we found that Kincaid should have inherited a fortune. The problem is that the probate records of his parents’ estates are missing. It means a fortune is missing. We found real estate assets liquidated in 2006. We can’t track them except for one possibility. The stepfather had holdings in the Cayman Islands.

“We’ve notified Cayman authorities; they’re searching for him. We don’t know

what name he's using. There's a chance he's using the name of Beals."

"Beals?" Grimes asked.

"A week ago, Kevin Beals was found dead in a Key West hotel. He was on a cruise that stopped in Key West for the day. His body had no identification, but his cruise ID was used to re-board the ship. The next stop was the Cayman Islands. We're trying to get security video from the cruise ship. We're tracking that now, but we need someone on the ground. Our people will follow up with the Cayman authorities. We'll find something."

Brandt exhaled, "Four different names. He's always a step ahead."

"Like I said, deputy, they always make a mistake. Always," Marshal Hall said.

Chapter Fifty-three

A tea kettle whistled on the stove, steam condensing on the subway tile behind the stove. Laurie lifted the kettle to a trivet on the kitchen counter. "It's pour your own, ladies," she said as she passed tea bags to Dannie and Aunt Peg. "Thanks for coming, Peg," Laurie said.

"Not a problem. Someone has to look after my troublesome niece."

"Oh, Aunt Peg, you know I'm no trouble, you just want to spend time with your wonderful niece."

"Dannie," Laurie said, "I want you to take this seriously. You could have been hurt, or worse, on that trail run you did. You cannot be out by yourself. That's why I want you and Peg to stay at the Lake House

while I'm gone. I don't want to leave, but this is the most important meeting for independent real estate brokers this year."

"You haven't been to the lake house in a while, Dannie," Peg said.

"My meetings run Monday through Thursday. I'll be home Friday," Laurie said.

"I don't know," Dannie rubbed her eyes with her hands. "So much going on, so much has happened. I feel overwhelmed."

"That's another reason to go to the lake house," Laurie said. "It's safe, and you two could do some fishing and some target practice up there."

"Okay," Dannie said, forcing a smile to conceal the unease that wrapped all her thoughts.

Dannie turned onto the gravel road marked by a small sign embossed with *The Lake House*. She drove the three-quarters of a mile to the house, branches and brush occasionally brushing the sides of the car. “We’ll have to get out here and cut some of this brush back,” Peg said. She pulled out her phone. “Still no mobile phone service here. They keep saying they’re going to get it. Not yet,” Peg said. At that, they pulled into the open driveway and parking area for the house. A stone fireplace rose on the side of the house. The same stone formed the base and pillars of the covered porch that stretched on two sides of the building. Built with rough-hewn timbers, the rustic home was topped with a modern, metal roof.

“You sure designed a beautiful home, Aunt Peg.”

“I do like it. And your dad did such a great job building it. Lots of great memories here.”

Aunt Peg isn't wrong. She experienced a pang of longing as family trips flashed through her mind. There were great memories here. All the times with her dad and mom. With a whole family. Fishing, canoeing, playing board games, and s'mores on an open fire. “The best times of my life,” Dannie said in a whisper.

Peg put a hand on Dannie's. “There's more to come, Dannie. A lot more good times. For now, we have to lie low for a while. Let's get unloaded.”

With groceries put away and bags unpacked, Dannie walked through the dining room, admiring the cedar ceiling and trim. Her father's Remington 45-70 rifle hung above the highboy across from the dining table. A bear's head flanked the rifle

on one side and an elk on the other. She took the rifle down, pulled the lever action, and opened the breech to make sure it was clear. It was her father's favorite. She pointed the rifle out the window, peering through the nine-power scope.

"Hey, what are you doing with your dad's big gun?" Peg said.

"Just admiring it. It was his favorite. One of these days I'd like to shoot it."

"Sure, we can take it to the range. I'm going to get some dinner going."

"Great," Dannie said, as she hung the rifle back above the highboy. "I'll cut some firewood." She took an ax from the toolshed and walked to a pile of cut beech. Setting a round on the chopping block, she split it once, then twice.

Zalack's out there. Somewhere. The thought ignited a burst of adrenaline. She swung the ax. Then again. He took her love.

He took her best friend. The ax sliced through another round, the splintered halves flying off the block. *I should have shot him.* She pounded through the logs until the pile was split, her forearms aching, with blisters on one hand. Sweat dripping from her face, she stacked the wood against the back of the house. The effort cleared her mind of painful reflections.

Showered and refreshed, Dannie found Peg in the kitchen. “Aunt Peg, I’m going down to the lake to see if I can land a couple trout.”

“That’s good—trout for breakfast. I’ll have dinner in about an hour,” Peg said. Dannie leashed Forrest and retrieved a spinning rod and a small tackle box, then hiked the two hundred yards to the dock. The sun was blocked by billowing white clouds in the west, and a breeze rippled the lake’s surface. As Forrest settled in, Dannie

tied a Mepps spinner onto her line and started casting. Nearly an hour passed without a bite on her spinner. Forrest stirred and looked toward the house. "What do you hear, Forrest? Is Aunt Peg coming down?" The dog stood, nose toward the house, then he lay down again. "We'll go up pretty soon, Forrest, and get some dinner."

Chapter Fifty-four

As Dannie walked to the house, a breeze came out of the west, stirring treetops. At the far end of the lake, large white clouds continue to grow against the horizon. Forrest pulled ahead, and Dannie reined him in. “Whoa there, Forrest. No hurry. Dinners waiting.” She put her gear away and entered the dining room. There was a rich aroma of oregano, tomato sauce, and green peppers. “Hey, Aunt Peg, that smells good.” Forrest sniffed his way to the kitchen, and Dannie followed. The sauce she smelled was in a bowl on the table, the pasta in a colander next to it.

“Hey, Aunt Peg,” Dannie called out. The downstairs bathroom door was open, the bathroom empty. The same with the

dining room and living room. She dashed up the steps, “Hello, Aunt Peg. Where the heck are you?” No response. Her stomach tightened. “Aunt Peg?” She dashed down the stairs to the front porch and shouted, “Aunt Peg!” The only sound was the wind in the treetops. She peered into the darkening forest, but nothing moved. “Aunt Peg,” she said again, the ache in her stomach tightened to a knot, and her pulse pounded.

As she walked back into the house, Aunt Peg’s mobile phone buzzed on the dining room table. She picked it up, pressing the button on the side, and caught her breath. She stiffened in anger. “You bastard,” she said as she looked at the screen with Aunt Peg, bound and gagged in the trunk of a car. The trunk closed, and a voice said, “Let’s play hide and go seek.”

Zalack.

“I will find him and kill him,” she said. The prospect of confronting Zalack sparked resolve rather than fear. She moved with determination to the highboy in the dining room. She took out her Beretta and tucked it into her belt. *Eight rounds in the clip. No time to reload.* Lifting the Remington 45-70 from the wall rack, she found cartridges in the top drawer. She loaded six rounds in the magazine, cocked the rifle to put one in the chamber, and loaded a seventh round. Forrest pranced around her, pawing her, then running to the door. “Forrest, you’re staying here,” she said.

Dannie took out her phone and looked at the picture again. There was grass, withered and brown, covering the bumper of the car. There were only a few places where the grass was that thick and

deep at this time of year. They were within a mile and a half.

Through the kitchen, she picked up the keys to the four-wheel Ranger. She slung the rifle, started the ranger, and accelerated out of the driveway onto the gravel road. There were three dirt roads off the gravel drive; logging roads from decades ago, now overgrown with grass. She stopped the Ranger at the first side road. The grass was untouched. Turning off the Ranger, she unslung the rifle and started down the road as the first raindrops pelted the gravel.

Lightning flashed in the west, illuminating the second side road. The grass was flattened with tire tracks. Dannie pushed her way into the dark woodland and walked parallel to the old road. The rain brought cooler air, and she shivered in her wet clothes. After a hundred yards, she

could make out the silhouette of a car. Creeping closer, she knelt and waited, listening. The rain diminished, and the wind calmed. The woodland was silent. Moving as noiselessly as she could, Dannie crept to the edge of the road, staying concealed in the trees and underbrush. That familiar knot formed in her stomach. It always followed by the rush of adrenaline that energized her senses.

She froze as Zalack stepped from behind the car, pulling her aunt by her hair. Peg's hands were tied behind her, a gag in her mouth. Zalack forced her ahead, putting her between him and Dannie.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Zalack said. A smirk on his face, he jerked Peg's head back and held a pistol to her head. "Dannie, want to see what your aunt looks like with a bullet in her face?" he

pressed the muzzle of the gun to Peg's cheek.

Dannie's gut clenched. She gripped the Remington in both hands.

"Now," Zalack shouted, "or this bitch dies."

She exhaled and held a hand to her forehead. *No options. I have to create one.* She stepped into the open, thirty feet from Zalack.

"Hold the rifle in one hand, over your head, and walk to me," Zalack said.

She lifted the rifle and walked to him. *Find a weakness. There has to be a way.*

"Now, drop the rifle and put both hands behind your head."

She laid the rifle down and did as he said. Her gut was so tight she felt nausea, then bile in her throat.

“On your knees.” He jerked Peg’s head again, pressing the barrel of the gun to her forehead.

Dannie obeyed. Zalack kicked Peg in the back of the knee, knocking her to the ground. He put a foot on her neck, “You wait right here, sweetheart.” With the pistol pointed at Dannie, he walked to her and pushed her face down. “Let’s see where that little gun of yours is. He grabbed her ankle, reached up, and withdrew the Beretta. Pulling her hands behind her back, he strung a zip tie around her wrists and pulled it tight, eliciting an “Ahh” from Dannie.

“Looks like we have a family reunion. How sweet,” Zalack said. With a swift motion, he cracked the butt of the gun on the back of Dannie’s head.

A flash of red, then darkness.

Dannie woke, choking, the gag having dried her mouth. Her hands still bound behind her back. She was face down in the grass. Looking to her left, Aunt Peg was kneeling, gagged. “Well, well, look what we have here,” Zalack said. He grabbed Dannie by the hair and pulled her to her knees. Her head pounded as she swayed from dizziness.

The rifle lay against the car’s trunk. Hair matted from the rain, his black hoodie and black pants were soaked, his eyes appeared as black as his clothing.

“What am I going to do with you ladies? Any ideas?” Aunt Peg let out a muffled f-you through her gag.

“Oh, you have something to say?” He pulled her gag off and slapped her. Peg let out a yelp. “Now I think you should apologize.” Dannie let out a muted scream. Zalack looked at her, his teeth biting his

upper lip, his mouth in a twisted grimace. He turned back to Peg. As Zalack focused on Aunt Peg, Dannie leaned back until she reached the ankle sheath. She maneuvered the knife from the sheath. Zalack slapped Peg again, then punched her in the face. Blood spurted from her nose. As she fell forward, he kicked her in the side, and she let out a groan. He kicked her again. Dannie's stifled breath came in gasps behind the gag. Blood pounded in her ears as adrenaline rushed through her body. She stiffened, her rage strengthening her.

Chapter Fifty-five

“Well,” Zalack turned to Dannie, “I can’t ignore *you*, can I?” She held her breath, straightening up, the knife now clutched against her back, her wrists free from the zip tie. The Beretta in his left hand, he grabbed Dannie by the chin and jerked her head up. As he did, she swung the blade around and jammed it into his wrist. Screaming, he dropped the Beretta, falling back a step, grabbing his bleeding wrist. Knife in hand, Dannie struggled to get up, her knees weak and non-responsive. Zalack let go of his wrist, lunging at Dannie, catching her weak-kneed and off balance.

He knocked her on her back and was on top of her in an instant, one hand on her wrist and the other on her throat. She

punched and clawed with her left hand, then grabbed his neck. He held her knife hand to the ground, squeezing her neck as he did. Dannie looked up at his face, twisted, almost demon-like in his rage. She pushed against his chest, but his grip only grew tighter. She dropped her arms as the room seemed to swirl around her, and Zalack's face went out of focus. *God, I'm going to die.* A rush of adrenaline ignited her body. She felt a surge of power, and with all the strength she had left, she reached across and took the knife from her right hand and swung it in a roundhouse, smashing the butt of the knife against his head. He dropped on top of her. She stuck him with the butt of the knife again and pushed him off.

Crawling to Aunt Peg, she pulled her own gag off, then Aunt Peg's. "Aunt Peg, are you all right?" She lifted Peg in her arms. "Please, wake up. Please."

Peg's eyes opened. Blood from her nose was drying on her lips and chin, her right eye swollen. She drew a breath and rolled her head toward Dannie. "Ahhh. Ahhh," she said. "Oh, I don't feel good."

"I've got you, Aunt Peg. You're okay. We're okay." She rolled Peg to her side, Peg letting out a moan as she did. Cutting the rope from her wrists, Dannie said, "Can you walk?"

"I don't know. My side. I think he broke my ribs."

"I'm going to help you up," Dannie said. "Put your arm around my neck. Peg grasped Dannie's neck, and Dannie lifted her from the ground.

"Oh, that hurts." Peg held her side with one hand. "Okay, where's Zalack. What happened?" Dannie turned her so she could see Zalack's prostrate body. "Is he dead?" She asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s go. I have the Ranger out at the road.” Dannie picked up the Remington and slung it over her shoulder. They set off as the rain returned and lightning flashed toward the lake.

Aunt Peg hung on with one arm around Dannie. “Dannie, how did you get him? He had your gun.”

“I had a knife in an ankle sheath. I got it out while he was hitting you.”

“Glad I could help,” Peg said, a smile on her bloody lips. “That’s humor, Dannie.”

“Right, Aunt Peg, very funny.” The rain increased in tempo as they reached the gravel road. “The Ranger’s just down here a hundred yards, Dannie said.

“He snuck up on me, Dannie. He had a gun. I was in the kitchen. He told me to turn around. I did, and he grabbed me and used chloroform to knock me out.”

“It’s okay, Aunt Peg. He can’t hurt us now.” Dannie helped Peg to the seat in the Ranger, then jumped in the driver’s side and turned it toward the house.

Chapter Fifty-six

Dannie stopped the Ranger in the driveway.

“Give me a minute,” Peg said. “I feel faint. My side.”

Dannie walked to Peg’s side of the Ranger. “Let me know when you’re ready.” After several minutes, Peg nodded. Dannie lifted Peg from the seat and, with an arm around her, started for the house. Inside, Forrest barked and howled. Lighting flashed over the lake as footsteps sounded behind her. She turned her head as Zalack came out of the night and smashed her to the ground. Peg screamed in pain as she hit the gravel driveway.

Stunned, Dannie took a deep breath. *I’ll never let him take me.* She pushed to her knees, Zalack on top of her, breathing hard.

He swung his hand to her face, the Beretta inches from her chin. Dannie grabbed his pistol hand and rolled right, dumping Zalack. He hit the ground grunting. She grabbed his wrist and, with her hand wrapped around his and the pistol, she jerked his hand back until she heard a snap. The Beretta rattled across the gravel. Zalack shouted, "Bitch. I'll kill you." He kicked at her, catching her leg just below the knee. Lights flashed from the direction of the gravel road. Dannie rolled away from Zalack, trying to reach the Remington rifle. Car lights streamed over the scene. Zalack stood, grabbed the Beretta, and ran for the woods. As he did, he turned and fired twice.

The bullets pinged off the gravel next to Dannie's leg. She grabbed the rifle, held it to her shoulder, and fired one round, the recoil rocking her back as Zalack disappeared into the woods.

“Dannie, Peg,” Brandt Hinds called out as he ran to Peg’s side.

“Brandt, what are you doing here?” Peg rolled to her side, and Brandt lifted her in his arms.

“I called. You never answered. I called Laurie, and she said you were here. I just had a feeling, and I came.”

“Aunt Peg, are you okay? Dannie said. “I’m going after him.”

“Zalack? Zalack did this?” Brandt asked.

“He tried to kill us. Both of us,” Peg said.

“You take care of Aunt Peg,” Dannie said. She turned and ran after Zalack, Remington 45-70 in her hands.

“Dammit, Dannie, come back,” Brandt said again.

“Go help her, Brandt.”

“No, I can’t leave you. Let me get you inside.”

“Wait. Give me a minute. I think I have broken ribs.” Peg was breathing heavily, holding her side.

“Okay,” Brandt said, “Tell me when you can move.”

Peg closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. “Let’s try to get me up.” Brandt pulled Peg to her feet and half-walked, half-carried her to the house. As he opened the door, Forrest leaped out to the porch. He darted to the driveway, nose down, and with a howling bay headed into the woods.

Dannie ran, her wrists raw, her knees bruised, the pain obscured by her single-minded focus. *I am going to find him.* The rain continued to pound the forest floor. A sense of calm settled over her. Lightning flashed, revealing a silhouette fifty yards up the hill. She stopped and fired, the recoil of

the rifle knocking her back a step. Now she ran again, charging up the hill, branches tearing at her clothes. She stopped, held her breath, and listened. A branch snapped ahead and to her left. There was a raspy sound of breathing. No more than thirty yards. She ran again. Lighting flashed, and she caught a glimpse of him moving left. She sprinted just as a shot rang out, then another. She put the rifle to her shoulder and fired at the flashes. He fired twice again, and she felt a punch in her side. She dropped to her knees and held a hand to her side, pressing against a burning sting. Blood colored her shirt.

She wiped her bloody hand on her thigh and stood, searching the dark, rain-soaked woodland. Nothing. No sound but the rain. She started again, walking, then moving into a jog, heading left to where he fired from. As she topped the hill, she saw

Zalack stumbling down the other side. She ran after him, slipping and sliding down the hill. She was no more than twenty yards from him. "Stop, Zalack," she shouted, "or I'll kill you."

He fired two rounds and slipped into the darkness. Dannie jogged to the point she last saw him, at the top of a rise. A flash of lightning revealed nothing. She started downhill, slowly now, straining to see in the night, rain dripping from her forehead into her eyes. At the sound of footsteps behind her, she spun around just as Zalack hit her with the full force of his body weight. Zalack landed on top of Dannie, pounding the breath from her. Stunned, she released her grip on the rifle. Zalack knocked it away, then hit her in the face. Dannie punched up with both hands, knocking Zalack back. She kicked Zalack in the groin, and he fell to his left. Dannie

jumped up, raising her fists. Zalack rolled over and pointed the Beretta at Dannie's chest.

"You lose, Dannie. You lose just like your friends." He stepped to his feet; the gun trained on Dannie. "Too bad it has to end like this, Dannie. I thought we were going to be friends."

Dannie focused on the revolver in his hand. She was coldly calm. No fear. She stood, one hand on the wound in her side, and took a step toward him.

"Stop right there, Dannie." He raised the pistol, leveling it at her chest. "It's time to end this." The pistol clicked.

Dannie flinched.

With a loud growl, Forrest hit Zalack, knocking him to the ground. Forrest grabbed his wrist, shaking it violently, the Beretta thrown six feet away. Zalack screamed, covering his face with his arms

to fend off the attacking dog. Dannie took Forrest by his collar and pulled him back. The Remington lay to her right, the Beretta six feet from Zalack.

Zalack stood, holding his bleeding wrist, an ugly grin on his face. He looked at the rifle and started to rise. Dannie took two steps and grabbed the Remington. She swung the rifle up as Zalack stood, frozen. Dannie fired, and he spun, falling to the ground with a grunt. He groaned as Dannie approached. His right arm was covered with blood from Forrest's attack. His left arm hung limply, blood spurting. As she closed on him, she could see that the 300-grain bullet had nearly severed his left arm. Forrest, at her side, growled. She reached down and rubbed the dog's head.

“Good dog, Forrest. Sit. Stay.”

Zalack lay on his back, groaning. A flash of lightning illuminated his ashen face.

“Why? Why did you have to kill?” she said.

He stared up at her from dark eyes, panting. “I need help. I’m bleeding. You have to help me, Dannie.”

“Why did you kill Julie? Why did you kill Carrie? Bradley? Tell me why.”

“You can’t understand. I had to do it. Please, help me, I’ll tell you.” He groaned, laying his head back. “I didn’t kill them.” He paused, breathing heavily. “I killed Darlene. I killed my sister, Darlene. I had to. She ruined everything. I killed her. Over and over.”

His breathing slowed, his head rolled side to side. She thought of all the power he had over people. All the fear he caused. All the pain and suffering. Now he was reduced

to a pitiful, repulsive, bleeding carcass. Less blood was flowing from the savage wound in his arm.

She shook her head, shouldered the Remington, and took two steps. She turned and looked at him.

“You have to help me, Dannie. You have—” his voice faded. She didn’t wait to see the light leave his eyes.

The rain continued to fall.

Chapter Fifty-seven

Dannie sat on the floor ruffling Forrest's ears and petting his sleek coat. Laurie measured coffee grounds into a brewing cup and added water.

"What, exactly, did Brandt say?" she asked Peg.

Peg paused from setting coffee cups on the counter. "The sheriff's office has a debriefing with the FBI at noon. He said he'd come by at 2 pm and let us know what he learns." She reached and touched the dark blue bruise under her left eye.

Forrest bolted for the front door. Dannie stood, straining as she pressed a hand to the bandage on her side. "That must be Deputy Hinds now." She went to

the front door. Peg followed, checking her hair in the mirror over the mantel.

Dannie opened the door and stepped out, greeting Brandt with a hug. “Thanks for coming deputy.”

“Glad to see you are up and doing fine.” He looked to Peg with smiling eyes. “Glad to see you’re doing fine as well.”

“Come on in,” she said, and, hugging him, held him for a long time. “Let’s go in the kitchen, Laurie’s made coffee.”

Coffee poured, they sat around the kitchen counter. Brandt sipped his coffee. “The FBI says they will finalize the case by next week, meaning they’ll turn their findings over to state and federal judicial authorities for any legal action they deem necessary. They’ve documented that he took the lives of six young women, and they

have some evidence that he killed his step-sister as well as his mother and step-father.” Laurie shook her head side to side. Dannie stared at her own hands.

“How do they know he killed the girls? Laurie asked.

“He kept trophies from each girl. Jewelry,” he paused, “underwear. They’ve matched the jewelry to the girls, and there was DNA on the underwear that proved to be from the girls he killed.”

Dannie began to shake, hands clasped, head down. Peg stepped to her side, an arm around her shoulders. She leaned her head against Dannie’s while tears formed in Laurie’s eyes.

Brandt sipped his coffee, waited, and then said, “The bureau found that he has a substantial estate, mostly inherited from his mother and step-father. It looks like some of the families of the girls he killed will

seek compensation from his estate. It will probably take years.

They had something else to say.” He reached into his pocket, took out a card, and handed it to Dannie. “Special Agent Pearsall would like you to stay in touch. She was impressed with the research you did. Called it ‘brilliant work.’ She said you should call her.” Brandt laughed.

Peg asked, “What’s funny?”

“The sheriff said, “You‘all stay away from Dannie. She’s our girl. I’ve got my eye on her.” Dannie pursed her lips and picked at some imaginary lint on her slacks.

“Yep, we’ll be keeping an eye on you, Dannie.” He swallowed hard and looked to each of them at the counter, stopping with Dannie. “I know this for sure. You stopped him, Dannie. He’ll never hurt anyone again because of you.” He stood, smiling, and said, “I don’t know anyone

stronger, smarter, or braver than Dannie Bauer.”

With that Peg walked him to the front door. She returned to the kitchen, where Dannie and Laurie had stepped out onto the deck. Peg stood with them. A few yellowed leaves clung to oak and maple branches.

Laurie took Dannie’s hand. “You haven’t said much, dear. You have so much wrapped up inside you. What are you feeling?”

Dannie was quiet for a long time, staring into the distance. “Sometimes, I’m sad. It hurts. Bradley, Carrie, Julie. I miss them.” Images flashed before her. Carrie laughing, pulling Dannie’s braid; Julie, smiling, chattering away about boys; Bradley, holding her, hearts beating together.

“Sometimes I feel bad. That they died; that I didn’t; and maybe it could have

been different if I did the right things.” She paused again, head down.

“Sometimes, I wake up angry. Angry that it all couldn’t be stopped. That I couldn’t stop it. I made mistakes. I didn’t see the obvious. I should have known.”

“Dannie.” Peg raised her voice, “Dannie.”

She looked at Peg.

“You did stop it. You stopped him. Not the sheriff. Not the FBI. You did it.”

Dannie nodded, her face tear-streaked.

“You haven’t said anything, Mom.” She took her mother’s hand.

“I don’t need to say anything, Dannie. I know my daughter. I’ve watched you overcome grief and adversity before. And I know you will overcome all of this. I love you for all that you are and all you will become.”

Dannie watched the last maple leaves clinging to their perch, refusing to give in to the wind.

“Sometimes,” she wiped a tear, “I know how much I’m loved and how much I love. And I know that with that love, all that has happened will make me stronger.”

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