


# SWEPT AWAY

TRACKING DANGER  BOOK TWO

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE DETECTIVES OF HAZEL HILL SERIES

# LIZ BRADFORD

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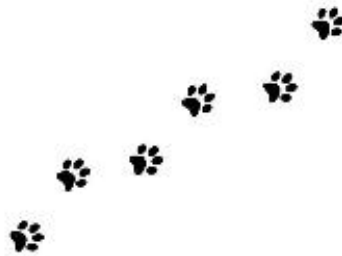
About the Author

# **SWEPT AWAY**

**TRACKING DANGER**

**🐾 BOOK TWO 🐾**

**A SEARCH AND RESCUE NOVEL**



**LIZ BRADFORD**

 **Stand on the Rock  
Publishing LLC**



*Psalm 124*

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—*

*let Israel now say—*

*if it had not been the LORD who was on our side*

*when people rose up against us,*

*then they would have swallowed us up alive,*

*when their anger was kindled against us;*

*then the flood would have swept us away,*

*the torrent would have gone over us;*

*then over us would have gone*

*the raging waters.*

*Blessed be the LORD,*

*who has not given us*

*as prey to their teeth!*

*We have escaped like a bird*

*from the snare of the fowlers;*

*the snare is broken,*

*and we have escaped!*

*Our help is in the name of the LORD,*

*who made heaven and earth.*

## CHAPTER ONE



“Come on, Chloe, where are you?” Josh glanced out the window beside the front door. The early March downpour pelting the house made it impossible to hear a car. She still wasn’t there.

This morning’s phone call from his search and rescue leader had derailed his plans of a leisurely Tuesday morning of reading over a cup of coffee. Josh didn’t have many details, but they were needed for the second wave of a search in Trudy Ridge, Virginia. It was already going to be a four-hour drive before they got there, and with every hour that passed, the likelihood of finding their missing person alive diminished. Especially in this weather.

For the third time, Josh ran through his search and rescue checklist. But he had all he needed and nothing more. He’d also packed a duffel bag to keep in the car should he need anything further while they were four hours from Knoxville.

As he waited at the door for Chloe, the mailman pulled up to his mailbox. Josh shrugged on his raincoat and ran out to get



the mail. The delivery man saw Josh coming and handed him the stack rather than putting it into the box.

“Here you go, Dr. Schneider.”

“Thanks, Fred. I’m headed out on a search; would you hold my packages for the next couple of days?”

“Can do. Be careful out there. I heard we should expect some flash flood warnings.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. Hopefully, it isn’t as bad where we’re headed in Virginia.”

“Praying it isn’t. See you at church on Sunday if not before.”

Josh ran back inside and flipped through the mostly junk mail until he spotted a handwritten envelope. Setting the remainder of the mail on the bookshelf by the door, he slid his finger into the envelope and ripped it open. He unfolded the letter that had been handwritten by a child of perhaps ten or twelve.

*Dear Dr. Schneider,*

*I wanted to write you a letter to say thank you. I was really scared about coming to see a doctor, but you made it easy. Thank you for listening to my mom and the things she was worried about. I just went back to the other doctor, and he said that I’m in remission. Cancer free. All because you caught it in time. Thank you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jason Heath*

Josh frowned. He didn't deserve the thanks of this kid. He was just doing his job and happened to catch the cancer. This time. Josh's throat closed. He couldn't swallow. Now was not the time to think about it. He knew Who really deserved the praise.

He swiped his eye with the heel of his hand.

*Thank you, God, for healing Jason. Keep his cancer away.*

Josh carried the letter to the kitchen in the back of the house and put it on the refrigerator. If only saving kids were so simple all the time. Why was it every time he got a reminder he'd helped save a child, all he could remember were the times he'd failed?

"Josh?" Chloe's voice echoed through the house.

"In the kitchen."

She came around the corner, wet hair plastered to her face.

Surprised by how completely soaked she was, he raised an eyebrow. "Hey."

"Poirot decided to chase a squirrel, and my hood flew off."

He squelched a laugh. "How does a disciplined dog like him end up chasing a squirrel?"

She crossed the room to him. "It was raining so hard he didn't hear my command. Plus, he's off the clock. Should have put the leash on, but we were just going to the car; everything was already loaded. And stop laughing."

He nudged a wet strand of hair from her face. “I can’t help myself.”

She scrunched up her nose, making her even cuter.

They had been dating officially for two and a half months but had been friends for years, having met when they were put on the same search and rescue team. They’d already been through some trying experiences and had come out stronger and more in love than ever.

He leaned in close to her face and pecked her cheek before spinning away. “We’ve got to hit the road. Need anything else before we leave?” He grabbed another water bottle from the pantry even though he already had plenty in his pack.

Chloe, with her hands on her hips, stood where he’d left her. She was never one to demand a kiss, but the stern look on her face spoke volumes about how she hated being left hanging.

He set the water bottle down and pulled her into his arms. “Do you know anything about who’s missing?”

“Way to change the subject. I think they said a town councilman.” She reached past him. “What’s this?” She took the letter off the fridge.

Instead of answering, he let her read it for herself.

“That’s so wonderful, Josh.” She hung it back up and cupped his cheek.

He shrugged.

“Why so down about it?”

“Let’s go.” He didn’t want to talk about it. “It’s past time to leave.”

She stared at him.

He was certain she was considering pressing him, but she didn’t. Instead, she drew his face to hers.

Her lips met his for a brief moment but long enough for the worries of the past to fade away.

When she ended the kiss, she glanced at her watch. “Ready to hit the road?”

“Absolutely.” Had he not been trying to get them out the door? “I’m sure Poirot would prefer we don’t leave him in the car much longer.”

She nodded and slid her hand into Josh’s.

He laced his fingers between hers, and they walked to the front door. They grabbed his gear and loaded it into Chloe’s SUV as the rain continued to pelt the ground.

When Josh climbed into the passenger’s seat, Poirot, a small chocolate lab, gave him a big slobbery kiss.

“Yeah, yeah, hi to you too.”

Chloe started the engine. “I sure hope it isn’t raining in Virginia.”

“You didn’t look at the radar, did you?”

“No. Don’t you go dashing my dreams. Maybe it’ll have stopped by the time we get there.” She pulled out of the driveway.

“If you had looked at the radar, you’d know this is just the beginning and this storm is the size of Texas.”

She grunted. “Dreams dashed. Thanks, love.”

“You have all your wet-weather gear?”

“Do pigs wallow in the miry mud?”

He leaned over the console and kissed her cheek. “Good, then you won’t melt.”



After a long, wet, four-hour drive, Chloe pulled into the little mountain town of Trudy Ridge, Virginia. Josh and Poirot were the perfect driving companions. A bit of talking—well, from Josh—very little barking from anyone, music, and part of an audiobook. Exactly what she liked on a road trip.

She’d been tempted to push Josh to tell her why a thank-you letter made him so negative but had decided against it for now since she didn’t want to come across as a nag. Maybe once they were back home, he’d be ready to talk about it.

The road through town was as winding as all the rest of the highways through the mountains had been. Along the west side of the road, a small river flowed north-northwest down the mountain. Houses lined the other side of the main stretch of road. All the buildings in the area seemed to be of two extremes—new or run-down.

The GPS directed them down another road—more houses, a couple of churches, a school, and a greater mix of nice older

buildings. Chloe's best guess was that the town had at some point experienced major flooding. It wasn't uncommon for these mountain towns with rivers flowing through them.

As the houses grew farther and farther apart, the GPS announced the destination. Another church. She pulled into the parking lot that was serving as the search and rescue command center and found a parking spot.

The rain had let up some. They jumped out of the SUV and went to the back. He grabbed his pack, and she helped Poirot into his harness and leash. No more squirrel chasing today. Besides, with his harness on, Poirot knew it was working time.

Josh helped Chloe slip her pack on, and they went over to where the command center tent was set up. The third member of their team, Lance Cattigan, was already under the canopy.

"Hey, guys." Lance shook Josh's hand and gave Poirot a quick pet. "I just got here too." Lance hadn't ridden with them since he had been visiting family in southern Kentucky.

They found their SAR leader, Garson Yardley. Only a small team from their organization, Hands and Feet Aid Ministry, had been sent out to join several other groups that were already searching.

Garson greeted them. "Thanks for coming, guys. I really think Poirot is going to be key in this search."

Chloe had expected dogs from other agencies as well. Poirot was rarely the only dog out on a missing person search. "Are there no other dogs out?"

“A few, but they’ve all already lost the scent. And we all know the detective’s nose is the best.”

Chloe’s heart warmed despite the chill in the air, not that she could really take any credit for the gift God had given this dog of hers. She was still proud of him.

“You’ve trained Poirot well, Miss Jacobs.”

“Thank you.” The warmth in her heart traveled to her cheeks. “We’re ready for details and to get searching.”

“Let’s sit.” He motioned to a picnic table that appeared to have been under the tent long enough to be semi-dry.

Chloe was thankful for that.

The four of them sat.

On the table, Garson set a picture of a middle-aged man with dark hair that was sprinkled with grays. “This is our missing fellow, Jedidiah Partlett. He is forty-four and a member of the town council, not that it matters, but you may see his picture around. Mr. Partlett has been missing for eighteen hours. He went for a walk yesterday evening, much as he always does. Teams started looking for him first thing this morning, but they’ve found zero leads. We’re hoping Poirot can sniff him out.”

“Me too.” Chloe scratched Poirot’s ear and stared at Mr. Partlett’s photograph. His eyes were kind and shined with a radiance that indicated he would be a good friend.

The team went through the rest of the details for the search and examined a map of the area.

Jed Partlett's house was next door to the church, and he'd begun his walk from home. His wife said that he normally walked down the road and along the river, headed north. There was no reason to believe he had done anything different this time.

Josh said, "I think we've got enough to get started. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll find him."

Chloe adored Josh's heart for finding lost people. The compassion that had led him to become a family doctor came through in their search and rescue missions too.

When they were ready to leave the tent, she grabbed the bagged shirt that Garson had placed on the table.

They all stood, and the four of them did the customary check of packs. There was always a chance that they'd end up in the woods and out for more than twenty-four hours, so they carried all the supplies they would need for meals, water, and sleeping. For Chloe, that included food and treats for Poirot too.

With the rain coming down continuously and without any indication on the radar that it would let up anytime soon, they all donned their rain gear too.

Once everything was set, Chloe opened the bag for Poirot. "Get a good whiff, boy."

Poirot stuffed his nose in the bag and shoved the shirt around. He removed his snout and, with a stupid grin, gave a little bark.



“Search.”

Poirot, still on leash because of the busy street, took off toward the road. He stopped along the edge of the street and wandered back and forth for a moment. He then tilted his head and gave a big bark. He'd found the scent.

Chloe's heart swelled. “Good boy; let's go.”

Poirot led them down the street, all but dragging Chloe behind him. He was used to forest searches, which he did entirely off leash, but she didn't want to risk a car whipping around a corner and him not being able to respond to a command quickly enough. He rotated his head and barked.

“Sorry, boy, I can't go any faster.”

Josh and Lance followed.

Before long, they stood at the highway that ran the length of town. After waiting for a few cars to pass, they crossed the road. Poirot led them north along the side of the river, where a footpath was worn down only about three feet from the water's edge.

It appeared to Chloe, based on the murky color of the water, that the river was much higher than normal. With all the rain, who could be surprised?

Since the path was farther from the road, she took off Poirot's leash. He settled his pace and trotted forward, his ears alert, his tail telling Chloe he was still on the scent of Mr. Partlett.

At least one of them wasn't bothered by the rain. To Poirot, the job was all that mattered. She wished she could turn off the discomfort of the cold dampness or at least make her nose stay warm. But Poirot was right—finding Mr. Partlett was all that mattered.



Thirty minutes into the search, Josh adjusted his pack on his shoulders and tightened the chest strap. That was better. Following Poirot north along the edge of the river, they'd passed under several bridges for roads and one that was solely a footpath.

The three humans of their team had been quiet, as was their norm at the start of a search. They focused completely on finding the person who had gone missing. But their apparent calm wasn't to be confused with a lack of urgency. If they got anxious about the search, they could miss something.

Josh always loved Chloe's tenacity. She was going to do whatever it took to help Poirot do his job to the best of his ability. Today was no different.

For seven years he'd been working search and rescue missions by her side. He still wasn't sure exactly why they had waited so long to admit that they cared about one another, but now that they had, he was certain they'd make it permanent. They'd talked *around* the idea of marriage, and when she'd caught the bouquet at her brother's wedding, there had been a spark between them that had him hoping marriage would not

be too far off. But they hadn't talked about it any further. And not anytime recently. Of course, it had only been two months.

As he followed Chloe and Poirot on the narrow path, Josh scanned the ground for any clues. Lance had gone uphill toward the road to do the same. If they were in a wider area, such as in the woods, they would flank out to the left and right as much as twenty to thirty feet. That way they could spot anything that Poirot's nose might not alert them to, such as footprints, food wrappers, or other evidence left behind.

But other teams had already been down this way earlier this morning. Anything Josh and Lance found here now could potentially be from the other teams and volunteers.

After ten more minutes of quiet, quick-paced searching, they'd clearly exited the main part of town. Very few homes or businesses lined the highway, and the path was less worn.

A large, wooden, covered bridge, missing a third of its side boards, stretched across the river ahead of them. The entrance to the bridge was overgrown with scraggly bushes which had yet to gain their spring buds.

Poirot bounded up the path that led to the bridge. At the top, he turned and barked at them.

Chloe said, "We're coming, boy. We only have two legs each."

Poirot didn't wait and headed toward the entrance to the bridge.

Josh spotted some broken boards; in fact, the whole bridge looked in disrepair. “Poirot. Stop.”

The dog stopped.

Chloe spun around and gave Josh a sharp glare.

He pointed at the bridge.

She nodded and told Poirot to stay.

They gathered at the entrance to the bridge where an old road sign read: *Keep off*. Poirot kept his nose pointed straight across the bridge, intensely staring straight ahead.

Josh took a step closer. “I’m not sure we should go across.”

Chloe tucked her thumbs into the straps of her backpack. “It does look a little rickety.”

“But we need to follow Poirot’s lead,” Josh said.

Chloe shrugged. “We could always find another way across and have him pick it back up on the other side.”

Lance added, “Unless the scent trail ends on the bridge.”

They all looked at one another. There was a possibility Mr. Partlett didn’t make it to the other side. And while the river wasn’t normally as deep or strong as other mountain rivers, it was moving at a pretty good clip, especially with the rising waters. If Jed Partlett fell into the river from the bridge, he could have been washed miles downstream and miles away from town.

Lance moved forward toward the bridge and cautiously felt out the first board. It appeared to be solid beneath his feet. “I

think as long as we're careful and don't rush across, we'll be fine."

Chloe pointed at the sign. "I bet that's there for a reason."

"Seems like Mr. Partlett thought the bridge was safe enough to walk across. And wouldn't he know?" From the top of the bridge, it looked safe enough.

Chloe didn't seem convinced.

Josh stepped toward her and squeezed her arm. "Hey, it'll be okay. We can hook up ropes between us to play it safe."

She nodded slowly. "So much for having overcome my fear of heights."

"This is a healthy reservation. And just because we deal with something once, doesn't mean it's gone forever."

"It's like the fear is sneaking poison tentacles back into my head," she said.

"The devil wants it that way."

"True. God's got us regardless of what happens." She scratched Poirot's head. "Is this the way we need to go?"

He barked.

"All right then."

"Ropes?"

She nodded. "Seems like the smart thing to do." She dropped her pack and pulled out a rope and carabiners and fastened one end to Poirot's harness.

“Want me to go after him? We can put you between Lance and me.” Josh wanted her to feel as safe as possible.

She smiled at him. “Sure.”

Once they were all hooked up, Chloe gave Poirot the command to go ahead across the bridge.

At the halfway point, Poirot stopped and sniffed around as if Mr. Partlett had stopped. But Poirot didn't sit to indicate he'd lost the trail.

“What is it, boy?” Chloe came up beside Josh.

He touched her arm, and she leaned into his subtle affection.

Poirot still didn't sit; he just stood there sniffing.

A board beneath them cracked.

## CHAPTER TWO



The floor beneath them gave way. They fell. Chloe's lungs and heart slammed into the top of her chest cavity. She screamed and grabbed for Josh.

They slammed to a stop. Her breath caught; the joints in her legs protested the sudden jolt.

They had only fallen about a foot before the joist beneath the floor stopped the board from giving out entirely. No plummeting into the river today. *Thank you, Jesus!*

They stepped out of the hole they'd created and back onto the solid area of the bridge.

Chloe's whole body shook. What if Jesus hadn't caught them with the beam? They could have died. Fallen. Washed downriver.

Lance came around them closer to Poirot. "You guys okay?" His voice was as tight as her lungs.

Josh said, "Yep. Chloe?"

She worked to steady her breathing. After a few deep breaths, she nodded. They hadn't fallen; they were alive. She slipped her hand into Josh's, looking to draw from his well of strength. "Poirot, search."

Poirot barked and continued to cross the bridge.

Once they were across and off the bridge and firmly planted on solid ground again, Chloe released Josh's hand. She called for Poirot to wait while they removed the ropes and repacked them. Her breathing had returned to normal with no signs of a panic attack looming. She was just as grateful for that as for them not plummeting to their deaths.

As she zipped her pack up, Josh knelt beside her and spoke softly. "Are you sure you are all right?"

She smiled at him and touched his cheek. "Thank you, but I really am. Four months ago, it would have been a different story."

"You've come a long way."

She tried but couldn't restrain the giggle that bubbled up. *Thank You, Lord. Thanks for keeping us safe and me calm.*

Josh offered his hand, and they both stood.

"Are you two done? Can we get back at it?" Lance had his thumbs looped into his pack straps and his head cocked to the side, but the smile he tried to suppress gave away his amusement at Josh and Chloe's relationship.

She swung her pack up. "Yes. Poirot, search."



With a quick bark, the dog bounded off in the direction his nose had been pointing while he'd been waiting. He went off the overgrown road and into the woods along what looked like a deer trail, not a human one. The incline grew sharply, and they all, even Poirot, found themselves struggling to make it up.

Chloe used the little trees along the side of the path as footholds to propel herself up the side of the mountain. Looking ahead, it appeared to level off some. She hoped it did, because at this point, if she fell she'd be in a lot of pain before hitting the bottom.

Wet leaves littered the ground, adding to the difficult climb.

Her right foot slid. She squealed and grabbed for a little tree.

Josh rushed over from his position to her left and placed his hand on her back.

She kind of loved the way he doted on her, but at the same time, they'd been doing these searches for years, and she was perfectly capable of climbing this. She said nothing and kept climbing.

Poirot reached the top and disappeared, but Chloe knew he wouldn't go too far, and even if he did, he always came back. He was an amazing dog. He appeared again at the top of the ridge and barked.

"We're coming, boy." After another minute, they arrived at the spot where Poirot waited. Chloe petted the dog and

snuggled his muzzle for a moment before encouraging him to continue.

Chloe stood. The old road that the bridge had been a part of must have wrapped around the side of the hill and continued here. Why on earth had Mr. Partlett come up here?

Lance reported their location back to base camp, and they followed Poirot.

Once again, the dog disappeared ahead of them, but he was only out of sight for about three minutes before he came bounding back at full speed. Had he found Mr. Partlett?

Chloe made sure her arm was clear of the Kong toy that hung from her side. Poirot was trained to come back and snatch the Kong from her side when he found what he was searching for. Otherwise he left it alone.

He ran straight for her but did not grab the toy.

Disappointment bit at her insides.

But Poirot was excited. He barked at her, then ran forward before he ran back toward her and away again.

“What is it?” Sometimes she really wished the dog could talk like a human.

The three picked up their pace in the direction Poirot ran.

What had he found?



Josh ran after Poirot. There was no mistaking from his alert demeanor that he had found something, even if it wasn't Mr. Partlett himself.

The trees thinned, and a clearing lay before Josh and the team. Poirot barked and pointed his nose at a navy object lying on the ground.

Josh sprinted over to it. A down-filled puffy vest, just like the one Mrs. Partlett had said her husband was wearing when he'd left for his walk last night. Josh's stomach tightened. Didn't a dropped article of clothing indicate foul play?

Chloe came close, and Josh raised his hand to stop her from coming too close.

He examined the area around the vest. With all the rain that had been falling, it was difficult to know which part of the depressed ground was from heavy showers and which from heavy feet. But having been an Eagle Scout, he knew what to look for. Some of the brush along the side of the road was squashed more than the area around it. He strode over to that area. There was a definite footprint at the end of an area of smooth mud, as if the person's foot had slid through the mud then stopped.

Josh squatted beside it. "Looks like there was a struggle here."

Lance was already calling it in and marking the spot on the GPS unit. He hung up and said, "They said to wait here until the sheriff arrives."

Josh had expected that. As much as they needed to keep on the search, especially if something more was going on than just a man getting lost in the woods, it was equally important that any evidence be undisturbed.

He stood and stepped away from the vest.

Chloe was distracting Poirot with a game of fetch.

The dichotomy between Poirot's excited play and the deepening pit in Josh's stomach made him uncomfortable. But he knew that Poirot didn't understand the implications behind finding the vest and the evidence of a struggle. He was a dog. He wasn't playing out different scenarios in his canine head. Was Mr. Partlett dead?

Josh pulled off his backpack and retrieved a protein bar. The rain had let up, but it was still cold and damp. It was the kind of chill that seeps in beneath your clothes and makes your bones hurt. Chloe came over, and once she'd given Poirot a treat and some water, she stood close with her own snack.

After Josh finished, he stuffed his wrapper back in his pack and put his arm around Chloe's shoulders.

"At least it stopped raining." She shoved her hands in her pockets and stepped in closer, snuggling into his embrace.

Lance laughed. "You know, while I'm so happy the two of you finally acknowledged the way you feel about one another, I kind of miss the days when we were all equally cold. Hey, Poirot, wanna snuggle?"

The dog barked, ran, and bopped Lance's leg with his nose. Poirot dropped low with his front paws, leaving his tail end up in the air.

They all laughed, and Chloe said, "Playing with him will keep you warm too."

Lance relented and played with Poirot while they waited.

The longer they waited, the deeper Josh's unease grew. He wanted to get back to the search, but he also didn't want to let go of Chloe.

About fifteen minutes later, a golden-brown SUV with lights on top approached from the opposite way. Proof the road did lead somewhere in that direction.

Chloe stepped out of Josh's arms—leaving him cold, but it was an appropriate, professional move. Although at least it meant they could get back to searching soon.

Two men exited the vehicle. "Howdy, folks. I'm Sheriff Darrin McBean, and this here is Deputy Mario Rixon."

Josh stepped forward and shook the sheriff's hand and introduced himself and the team.

Sheriff McBean adjusted his gun belt. "Y'all are the folks that came all the way from Knoxville?"

"We are. It's not unusual for teams like ours to get called this far away for searches. We've been to Kentucky, Georgia, and both Carolinas."

“We appreciate you coming all this way to help. I’ve known Jedidiah since we were boys.” Sheriff McBean poked the toe of his boot in the mud. “So you found Jed’s vest?”

“Yes, sir. Right over here. I’m not a forensic anything, but it really looks like there was a struggle over in this area.”

“Thank you, sir,” the sheriff said. “What’ll y’all do now that we’re here?”

“If you don’t need us, we’ll continue on. If Mr. Partlett didn’t get in a vehicle, Poirot will be able to continue following his scent trail.”

“Don’t let him hear you call him Mr. Partlett. That’s his dad’s name, may he rest in peace.”

Josh didn’t know how to end the conversation, but the deputy came over and started photographing the area, and that gave Josh the out he needed.

He gave the sheriff his contact information and joined Chloe and Lance. “Shall we?”

Chloe nodded. “Poirot, search.”

Josh threw his pack on as Poirot bounded off down the dirt road. Seeing Sheriff McBean’s somber expression when he mentioned that they’d been friends since childhood invigorated him to find the missing man.

## CHAPTER THREE



Chloe trudged along behind Poirot. They'd left the sheriff and deputy thirty minutes ago and followed the road. Ahead of them the road forked. One direction went back down the mountain, and the other went farther up and deeper into the woods. The second was so overgrown, it appeared as if very few ever drove that way.

She was curious to see which way Poirot would go. Who had Jed encountered last night? The fact that he hadn't come home after such a struggle had ominous implications.

Poirot barked and ran toward the darkened road that wound closer to the gray clouds that still loomed overhead. It had stopped raining, but it was sure to start again.

The road was barely wide enough for an ATV; none of the big trucks she'd seen driving around town would make it up the path without the branches scraping the sides of the vehicle.

Lance asked, "Where on earth was this guy going?"

"If we knew *that* answer—"

Lance's glare made her stop.

Josh wound around the trees to her left. "At least Poirot seems to still have a strong scent trail to follow."

Chloe stepped over a deep rut in the road, dug by water flowing at a fast clip. "What I can't figure out is, why did none of the other dogs that were out this morning pick up the trail? He's clearly got it. He hasn't gotten confused or backtracked at all."

"The bridge perhaps?" Lance offered.

Chloe said, "Yeah, if their handlers didn't let them cross ..."

Josh shook his head. "But then why not pick it up on the other side like you suggested? It's not like the road doesn't connect somewhere else on the other side."

Lance tapped his chin with his index finger. "Makes you wonder if there's something more sinister going on."

One thing Chloe had learned about Lance over the years of working with him: he always jumped to the worst-case scenario.

She said, "Why on earth would the dogs lose the scent then?"

He looked up into the trees and stuck out his lips, clearly deep in thought.

Josh laughed. "Chloe's the one who likes to read detective novels. I'd expect her to come up with some harebrained idea like a sinister killer lurking about."



She shot him a glower. “I resemble that remark.”

Josh’s shoulders quaked with his laugh.

Lance was still wrapped up in his fantastical scenario. “I got it. So there’s a werewolf in these woods. He’s the one that struggled with Jed back there and hauled him off. The other dogs sniffed it from the other side of the bridge and ran off like little-girl puppies with their tails tucked so far they touched their chins. But Poirot, now he’s a man’s dog—”

“Excuse me?” Chloe put her hand on her hip.

“Bear with me. This story is worth it. And come on, can you deny that Poirot would gladly head toward the danger if it meant solving the crime?”

She chuckled and shook her head.

“So now, Poirot is the kind of dog that’s not going to back down, werewolf or not. He’s got this. So at the top of this next ridge, we’re going to find a cave, and Jed will be there. He’ll still be alive because the werewolf won’t eat him until there’s a full moon shining, and by the look of those clouds, it’s not going to be tonight.”

Josh said, “Give the fantasy books a rest. Maybe you should read some crime novels instead. At least the theories Chloe comes up with are plausible.”

She was getting warm from the increasing incline up the mountain, so she unzipped her coat. “Really? Plausible? Okay, if you say so.” She’d come up with some really wacky ideas the other night when they’d heard a strange sound outside of

her house after they had finished watching a movie. But no werewolves.

The conversation lulled as they continued to trek after Poirot deeper and deeper into the woods and higher and higher up the mountain. After ten minutes of quiet hiking, the clouds finally decided to spit out the chilly liquid that almost seemed as if it should be frozen. Chloe zipped up her coat again and pulled her hood close around her face. The rain quickly went from a drizzle to a full deluge in less than a minute.

Poirot slowed his pace. Was he having trouble tracking through the rain? Normally rain intensified smells, making it easier for tracking dogs to follow the trail. But the rain was making it harder to hike up the mountain. The forest floor was turning into nothing but tiny, furious streams and mud—lots of mud.

For every step they took, they made only half as much progress because they slipped backward. Even Poirot's feet wouldn't hold.

Josh was glancing around, and his furrowed brow made Chloe think he was contemplating something. After a few minutes, she finally called him on it. "What are you thinking, Josh?"

He stopped walking. "I think we need to take shelter for a bit. This isn't working well. Maybe if we rest for a bit, the rain will let up, and we can keep going."

Lance stopped. "I agree. But it might be too dark by then. It's already getting dark."

Chloe stopped too and whistled for Poirot. She pulled back her sleeve to see her watch. How was it already nearly six o'clock?

He bounded back to her, his short fur matted and soaked. He barked. The wet and cold didn't bother him one bit.

Chloe scratched his head. "I know, boy, but we humans need to let the rain die down." She looked at Josh. "Where?"

He said, "There really isn't a great spot. That's why I hesitated to say anything."

"How about up there?" Lance pointed ahead of them.

"Let's take a closer look." Chloe started toward what looked like a clearing farther up.

They hiked toward it, continuing to struggle to make headway on the muddy slope.

She wasn't sure if it was the clouds getting darker or the sun setting, but seeing in front of herself was increasingly difficult. Summertime searches were always easier. Not only did searchers not have to contend with winter gear, they also had ample daylight to search in. There was always a cost/benefit analysis that had to happen when nightfall came. Given the terrain and the weather they were in today, searching at night would be more hazardous than average. Thankfully, she wouldn't be the one to have to make that decision. She hated leaving someone out there who could potentially be in trouble, but the slick terrain seemed to become steeper the higher they went, and it made her nervous.

*Give us wisdom, Lord. Help us find Mr. Partlett. And keep us safe too.*



Josh crested the ridge. What seemed like a clearing from farther down was actually the highest point of the ridge they'd been climbing. He let out a gust of air. There wasn't much flat ground, but it was flatter than the side of the mountain for sure.

The trail they had followed up continued along the top of the ridge, winding around trees and jagged rocks. With all the rain, it was impossible to tell if someone had come through here recently. Any tracks had been washed away.

The storm completely hid the sunset, save a slightly less-dark western horizon. And the rain was going to make starting a fire complicated. Not impossible; just not easy. They all set to work quickly to set up camp. They hung a tarp set at an angle against the rain so they could get some shelter. Starting a fire in the rain took a bit more work than normal, but with the combination of lots of little sticks and their fire-starter kits, they had a good-size fire before long. The three of them crowded under the tarp on a second one they had laid on the ground.

Josh took off his boots and socks, setting them close to the fire. His boots were quality, but even they couldn't handle the rain today. He'd walked through plenty of creeks before

without getting his feet wet, but today had been too much, and if he didn't get his feet dry, they would just get colder.

He really hoped there was a warm front coming in behind the storm. Spring needed to stop playing coy and show up.

He slid a dry pair of wool socks on, grabbed a vacuum-sealed ready-to-eat meal, and settled next to Chloe on the tarp. Thankfully, it was staying fairly dry under the shelter. Their hammocks were hung and waiting, but no one was tired enough to sleep when it wasn't even seven o'clock.

Chloe scooted closer to him. Her boots were still on.

“Are your feet dry?”

“Yes, Gabe. I changed my socks already, but my shoes were dry enough.”

He chuckled at her calling him her brother's name. “You know Gabe would appreciate me checking on you.” Josh bumped her with his elbow.

“Of course. And I don't mind you checking on me either.”

Lance sat down near them. “Where's Poirot?”

At the sound of his name, Poirot lifted his head from the other side of the fire.

Chloe chuckled. “You silly dog! Come in under the tarp; it's a lot drier over here. And I don't want to sleep with a wet dog.”

He stood and gave a great big shake, sending water flying all over them.

“Dude!” Lance wiped his face.

Poirot trotted over and lay down between Chloe and Lance.

They all chatted while they ate and warmed up a little. The rain still fell steadily but had slowed to more of a drizzle.

After about an hour, Lance pulled out a little paperback from his pocket. “I’m going to read and sleep. Don’t stay up too late you two.”

Josh shook his head. “G’night.”

Lance disappeared into his hammock, and Chloe scooted even closer to Josh until they were touching.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, his mind harkening back to the time a little more than two months ago when they’d been forced to sleep curled up together to stay warm against the elements without proper gear. If only he could draw her close to his chest now without a coat on.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “May I ask a presumptuous question?”

All his nerves stood at attention. “I guess.”

She set her hand on his leg, just above his knee, her cold hand sending an icy bolt through him. “I mean, I know how you feel about the subject—at least, I think I do. At least, I did.”

“You’re talking around it, which is almost worse.”

She giggled. “Sorry.”

He took her hand in his and, rubbing it, brought it to his chest to warm it.

“Marriage.”

He stopped.

“Don’t want to talk about it?” She shrank back slightly but didn’t pull away from him entirely.

“That’s not it.”

“You seemed pretty certain about it when I caught that bouquet. Has something changed?”

“Not at all.” He let go of her hand and placed his fingers beneath her chin, drawing it up so she would look him in the eye.

She searched his soul.

“I love you, and I have no doubt about our future together. I just don’t want to rush things either.”

The fire danced in her eyes, and it wasn’t just the reflection of the flames before them. “We aren’t exactly young kids—”

“Speak for yourself.”

She dropped her head back and laughed. Being ten years older than her provided for plenty of jokes—mostly at his expense.

In between giggles, she said, “You should consider how old you will be when our children graduate from high school.”

“Eh, you keep me young.”

“Yet, my mom had three kids by the time she was my age.”

He tightened his arm around her and raked the other hand into her hair. “Do you think this summer would be too soon though?”

“To have a baby, yes.” Her eyes wrinkled with her giggle.

“To get married.”

She bit her bottom lip. “I kind of think that would be perfect. If we’re confident, I don’t want to wait. But I don’t want to push either. I just wanted to talk about it.”

He drew her forehead to his. “I am confident, and I see your logic. Do I need to ask before we start making plans?”

She wagged her eyebrows. “Yes.”

“Fair enough.” He leaned in and pecked her lips.

She giggled and grasped the side of his face, bringing his lips back to hers.

Warmth filled his body like a warm fuzzy blanket by the fire, but that blanket would start blazing if he wasn’t careful. He pulled back. “We should get some sleep.”

She sighed. “If we must.” She hopped to her feet but waited for him.

He stood and drew her into a hug. “I love you.” He kissed her forehead and walked toward his hammock.

“I love you too.” She snapped her fingers. “Come on, Poirot.”



Josh turned back and watched her climb into her hammock. She then wrapped a blanket around the dog and had Poirot join her. He chuckled at how awkward it was for the two to sleep in a hammock together, but Josh was glad that Poirot could help keep Chloe warm tonight.

He climbed into his hammock and closed his eyes. But sleep didn't come; it was still too early for his night-owl ways. The morning would break too soon, and they would need to get going at the first hint of daylight, but knowing that didn't make falling asleep easy.

For a reason he didn't know, his heart felt heavy. Shouldn't he feel elated after talking about marriage with Chloe? This was his dream, even if it had taken him years to realize it. Maybe it was because he nearly got married once, but that girlfriend hadn't been ready. It was for the better though; he couldn't imagine spending the rest of his life with anyone but Chloe.

The thought settled his heart around the strange feeling that plagued him. Maybe it had to do with Jed Partlett. Was he still alive? Other than that apparent struggle, there was nothing to indicate that he would be dead. Twenty-four hours wasn't too long, even for a man unfamiliar with the area and inexperienced in being outdoors. Except Jed *was* familiar with the area, and wasn't he knowledgeable enough to be able to find his way back home? That fact increased the likelihood that he was at least injured and unable to make it back on his own.

*God, what's going on? Help Mr. Partlett and help us find him. And be with Chloe and me as we move forward in our relationship.*

## CHAPTER FOUR



Chloe shifted in her hammock, uncertain as to what time it was. All she knew was she was still tired, cold, and cramped from sleeping in a hammock with a wiggly dog. Despite his wiggleness, he was warm and cozy, so she really didn't want to get up, but her bladder wasn't going to hold. Apparently she'd absorbed a great deal of that rain that had fallen yesterday. It was yesterday, right?

She looked at her Fitbit watch. Almost six in the morning. She wasn't sure if she should be annoyed that she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep or relieved that she could just stay up. As much as she'd like to go back to sleep, she really had gotten plenty, and sitting by a fire for thirty minutes would be better than in the cold hammock.

Unintentionally kicking Poirot, she pulled back the hammock and climbed out. He followed.

Thankfully, the rain seemed to have stopped, at least for now. She grabbed the roll of toilet paper she had in her pack,

along with a headlamp, and wandered into the woods, Poirot not too far away. He was always her faithful companion.

She took care of her business, and Poirot took care of his. He then started sniffing the air.

“Come, boy. Let’s go pack up and get the guys before you get back on the scent.”

He barked.

“Poirot.”

He barked again.

She clicked the headlamp back on.

He barked once more.

“Fine, what is it?”

She followed him deeper into the woods and slightly downhill.

He started barking incessantly.

“Poirot!” Yelling at him did no good though—he couldn’t hear her over himself. “What is going on?”

He ran back to her and grabbed her arm in his mouth.

“Poirot!”

He pulled her. Had he found Mr. Partlett? She didn’t have the Kong, so maybe he didn’t know what else to do.

“I’m coming, boy. Drop it.”

He released her, and they ran, darting around trees.

*God, please don't let me fall. Give us sure feet.*

She rounded a fat oak, and the beam of her headlamp fell on a form wearing blue, standing between two trees about ten yards away.

She squinted her eyes in hopes of seeing better. “Mr. Partlett?”

Three steps forward. The scent of iron assaulted her nose.

He wasn't standing, he was hanging. Upside down. And tied up by his feet.

She screamed.

Poirot bumped her hand. She dropped to her knees and hugged his neck.

She looked at the figure.

What appeared to be blood covered his neck and face. A bucket sat beneath him.

Her stomach churned and acid filled her throat. She flipped off her headlamp and covered her mouth with her hand, willing to keep the bile down, and she squeezed Poirot tighter with the other.

Footsteps thundered through the woods behind her.

She screamed.

“Chloe?”

Josh.

“Where are you, Chloe?”

Despite it being difficult, she swallowed. “Here.” She clicked the headlamp on.

She sensed Josh and Lance come up behind her.

Josh knelt beside her. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

She closed her eyes and looked in the direction of Mr. Partlett’s body.

Both men gasped.

“Is that ... ?” Josh’s words trailed off.

Lance answered, “I think so.” Based on the distance of his voice, he was moving toward the body.

But Chloe didn’t want to look again.

Josh rubbed her back. “Why don’t you go back to camp and pack us up?”

She nodded. “I’d much prefer that. How do our siblings deal with this stuff all the time?”

“I honestly don’t know.” He stood and offered her a hand.

She took it and let him pull her up, but instead of walking away, she leaned her head on his chest.

He held her tightly.

This wasn’t the first time they’d found a dead body. It wasn’t even the first time they’d found a murder victim, but that didn’t make it any less disturbing. Why did humanity have to be so awful?

She sucked in some of Josh's strength before stepping out of his embrace. "All right, I'll let you guys deal with this, and I'll take Poirot back to camp."

"You'll find it okay?"

"I hope so."

"Be careful."

"Of course." She ran her hand across his chest and turned and walked away. "Poirot, come."

He bounded behind her—as always, completely oblivious to the weight of the situation.



Josh watched Chloe and Poirot venture back into the woods. *Father, please help them to make it back to camp safely.* Once they were out of sight, he turned to Lance and the body.

Lance was pale. "It's definitely Mr. Partlett."

Lance's pallor was nothing compared to Jed's deathly discoloration. What blood hadn't run out from the wound in his neck and into the waiting container had settled in his face, making it a deep purple. He was fully clothed, and his feet were tied together, and then the rope was strung over a thick branch on a large tree and tied to another part of the tree. Someone strong would have had to do it. No young boy or average woman would have been able to lift Mr. Partlett's approximately two hundred pounds over a rough branch like that.

Josh's skin tightened across his neck and made it feel as if he were going to be sick. This was no missing hiker. Jed Partlett had been murdered.

As a doctor, Josh had spent enough time with cadavers and deceased patients that it didn't affect him the same way it did Chloe or Lance. Everything in him wanted to lower the body and cover it with something, but that was not what needed to happen right now. This was a police matter.

Lance turned from the body. "I'll call it in. Glad my phone was in my pocket already."

"Indeed." Josh had still been sleeping when he'd heard Chloe scream. The only reason he had his flashlight was that it had been in the pocket of the coat that he was still wearing.

Josh took another step closer to the body. Jed's hands were tied behind his back, and other than the wound in his neck, he had no other visible injuries. Josh knelt to get a closer look at the neck wound.

A large knife had made the incision—for lack of a better word—above the sternum. It would have killed Jed instantaneously.

Josh righted himself and walked a few steps away. Nothing else stood out to his medical eye. He wasn't a trained investigator like his little sister Amelia. Chloe's question echoed in his mind. How did his sister face stuff like this? He almost chuckled to himself. Amelia would be the first to remind him that she was not a homicide detective for a reason.



But as a special victim's detective, she saw an entirely different kind of evil every day.

If he had his phone with him, he would call her, even if it wasn't even seven o'clock in the morning. Amelia would willingly pray for his team and this town, as would her husband, Caleb.

That's really what Josh needed to do right now too.

He wandered a little farther away and lifted his thoughts to his heavenly Father. God would meet them in this, no matter how ugly it was. His peace could infiltrate even the most unsettling circumstances. Josh's faith wasn't always as strong as he wanted it to be, but wasn't a mustard seed all he needed?

*Bring the person who did this to justice, Lord. Help the sheriff and his team figure out who it is. Comfort Mrs. Partlett and the entire town as they grieve the loss of this man. I don't know him, and I don't know what people around here really think about him, but regardless, he was made in Your image.*

Josh ran out of words, his heart as heavy as a boulder. And into his heavy heart, fear crept. Someone had murdered this man in the last thirty-six hours. Was that person still traipsing around these woods? Had he really just sent Chloe back to camp? What had he been thinking? They should have stayed together.

He spun around and met Lance's eyes. "There's a murderer around here somewhere."

Lance pointed toward where they'd come from. "Go!" He patted his side where he kept his firearm.

Josh nodded and ran.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Chloe stuffed her tarp into her pack. A rustling in the woods made her pause. Her heart jumped. “Poirot.”

The dog’s head perked up from where he lay near the fire that Lance must have started back up while she was venturing off into the woods.

The rustling returned.

Poirot’s ears perked up, and he tilted his head. He sniffed the air before laying his head back down.

“Some kind of watchdog you are.”

“Chloe?” Josh’s voice bounced off the trees.

“What’s up?”

The rustling grew louder, and then Josh appeared from among the trees.

She stood and put a fist on her hip. “You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry.” He bent with his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

“Did you run all the way back here?”

He nodded and righted himself. “Didn’t figure it was a good idea for you to be alone in the woods with a killer around.”

She chuckled. “So all of us being in three different places is safer?”

His eyes narrowed.

Lance’s sleeping arrangements were already all packed up, so she took down their rain shield. Josh helped her fold it into a tiny square and stuffed it in her pack. She put the fire out while Josh packed up his stuff.

Ten minutes later they were ready to roll out and go back to the crime scene, but Chloe didn’t want to. Couldn’t they just head down the mountain and forget this ever happened?

At least it wasn’t raining right now—not that the sun had decided it should make an appearance. She could really use the sun this morning, but despite the fact that the sun was lighting the world now, the rays were being filtered by some rather thick clouds.

They strapped on their own packs, and Josh carried Lance’s too.

“Come on, Poirot.” She slipped on his leash since they were headed back toward the body. She wanted to be able to keep him back so he wouldn’t disturb evidence or get in the authorities’ way when they showed up.

Silently, they walked back toward the scene. When they were more than halfway, Chloe said, “Josh, I don’t know that I can face that again.”

“Stay back some. There’s no reason for you to be right there in the middle of it all. And anyway, as soon as they say they don’t need us, I plan on getting off this mountain.”

“I hope they don’t expect us to hang around too long. I’d still like to make it to Gabe and Aliza’s for dinner tomorrow.”

“Me too.”

When they reached the crime scene, Chloe stayed some distance away with Poirot. Josh went and gave Lance his pack and chatted with him.

It was nearly another hour before the sheriff, deputy, and medical examiner made it to them, since they had to trek up the last bit by foot. All three stood shocked at the sight of their friend brutally murdered.

Sheriff McBean said, “Please, let’s get him down from there.”

Chloe gripped the front of her jacket over her heart. These men weren’t just walking onto a gruesome scene. They knew this man. They knew the wife and children that they would have to go back and inform that the man they loved had been murdered.

Her stomach spun inside. What if something happened to Josh? She wasn’t sure she could ever recover. Grief was not new to her, and maybe that was part of what made her feel so

strongly for these people right now. She knew what it felt like. *Oh Jesus, please be with this town. With Mrs. Partlett and her family and friends.*

Once any possible evidence had been assessed, Josh and Lance helped the sheriff lower Mr. Partlett to the ground and place him in a body bag and then into the basket stretcher they had brought up to carry the body out.

Chloe turned away, feeling completely useless.

“Poirot, let’s walk.”

Maybe if they walked around the area, they might notice something out of place that could help. But as they walked, it became increasingly obvious that yesterday’s crazy hard rains had washed any evidence down the mountain. Deep crevices had been made in the dirt. Multiple times, she and Poirot slipped in the mud.

By the time they had made a complete circle around the crime scene, both of her knees were streaked in thick brown mud, and Poirot, while the mud was less obvious since it matched his coat, was also covered.

Josh looked at them and pulled his lips in as if he were trying to suppress a laugh. He came over.

She leaned close to him. “This is not an appropriate place for you to laugh.”

His face was serious. “I know. Let’s give them our statements.”

She nodded, and they walked to the sheriff.



Josh tossed his pack on the floor of the motel room he and Lance had for the next twenty hours. He took his coat off and chucked it across the room before face-planting on the bed closest to the door.

“Guess you’re taking that bed.”

“Yep.” His voice was muffled by the bedspread.

“Sure hope it’s clean.”

Josh moved his face and pulled his arms up beneath his head. “Smells like it.”

It had taken way longer to get down from the top of the mountain than Josh had expected. They had then debriefed at the SAR command center. After grabbing a bite to eat at a local diner, they had hoped to leave for home since their job was technically over, but the sheriff had requested that they stay for a while in case he needed anything further.

Saying he was frustrated wouldn’t do justice to the way he was feeling. What could they possibly help with beyond the statements they had already given?

They hadn’t seen or heard anything the night before, plus the ME had already established that the time of death was only about two hours after Jed had gone missing.

Lance said, “I’m going to take a shower.”

Josh gave Lance a thumbs-up.

Once the bathroom door had shut, Josh sat up and pulled out one of the chairs from the little table by the window. He called his sister.

She answered quickly. "Hey you. Still on the search?"

He filled her in.

"Josh, I'm so sorry. How's Chloe doing?"

"About as well as can be expected. She was quiet at brunch, but we all were."

"I'll be praying."

"Thanks. You guys all doing okay?"

"We are good. Carter and I started planning his birthday party for the end of the month. Do you think you and Chloe could come out for it?"

Josh asked, "How is he going to be six? I don't understand why he won't listen to me when I tell him to stop growing up."

Amelia laughed. "Can you come or not?"

"I think so. I'll have to check with Chloe, of course."

"Naturally. Love you, brother."

"Love you too."

They hung up. It was always good to talk to his sister. It would never get old seeing how God had worked in her life the last few years.

Once Lance was out of the shower, Josh found clean clothes and followed suit.



Thankfully, there was plenty of hot water, and letting the heat pour over him was exactly what Josh needed to soothe not only his stiff muscles but also his weary soul.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, he felt refreshed and ready to go out exploring for the afternoon. If they were going to be stuck in a Podunk town in Virginia, they might as well find the treasures it held.

He was still towel-drying his hair when he heard the TV. “What are you watching?”

“The news. Mr. Partlett’s murder is already on the Bristol news.”

“What? How slow is news in Bristol if a small-town murder made the news?”

“I have no idea, but the reporter is apparently already here in town, and she’s a looker.”

Josh tossed the towel on the counter and walked to where he could see the television. A classy blonde woman, who would make any big-city lawyer look shabby, graced the screen. His heart fell to the soles of his bare feet. “Oh, you have got to be kidding me.”

“Uh-oh, what’s behind that statement?”

“Let’s just say I’ve met Ashley before.”

“Not as nice as she is pretty?”

Josh laughed. “I haven’t talked to her in years, so who knows?”

A knock sounded on the door.

After he reined in a small flash of panic, Josh walked across the room. Hopefully, it was Chloe, whose room was right next to theirs. He opened the door.

The most beautiful smile he'd ever seen met him. But before he could do or say anything, his hand was covered in slobber. "Poirot."

Chloe laughed.

Josh stepped aside and let them both into the room.

Chloe sat cross-legged in the middle of his bed, and Poirot jumped up right next to her. "News coverage already?"

Josh closed the door and walked to the end of the bed. "Just turn it off, Lance."

He said, "But she might say our names."

Josh's whole body stiffened. Lance was right. There was a good chance Ashley had already learned their names and that they were the ones to find the body. Could he avoid her? Now he really wished they had been allowed to leave town. He did not want to talk to the press, least of all to Ashley.

The station cut to a commercial, so Lance clicked the power button on the remote. He shot Josh a care-to-explain? look.

He gave Lance a subtle shake of his head. Thankfully, Lance wasn't the kind of person to push, not in front of others at least, but he probably would ask later. Until then, Josh didn't want to think about it.

He leaned back against the dresser the TV was sitting on.  
“So any ideas where we should venture to first?”

## CHAPTER SIX



The rain was coming down in torrents again when Chloe, Poirot, and the guys left the motel room. Chloe was parked just outside their rooms, but even so they were bound to be soaked. Streams of water flowed through the parking lot.

They all stepped out of the room and waited under the overhang while Lance locked the motel room.

“Well, I’ll be. If it ain’t Josh Schneider.” The swinging southern voice of a woman echoed above the pounding rain.

Josh groaned.

Before finding the source of the voice, Chloe shot Josh a quizzical look.

He didn’t have time to respond before a woman wrapped her arms around him.

Chloe’s insides felt like someone were giving them a good old-fashioned Indian burn.

Josh stepped back. “Ashley.”

The woman was beautiful. Even in the humidity of the pouring rain, her hair looked perfect—blonde with not a single strand out of place. Her clothes looked like she'd stepped out of a designer store.

Chloe shrank back, but Josh grabbed her hand.

Ashley said, "Imagine my surprise when I came all the way out here to cover a story and found out it was none other than the one that got away who found the body of the lost council member."

"Actually, Ashley—"

She cut him off. "Oh, don't go being all modest. Finding the guy is a big deal."

He put his free hand up to stop her. "I'm not trying to be modest; I'm trying to be honest. My girlfriend, Chloe, and her K-9, Poirot, found Mr. Partlett."

"Girlfriend?" Ashley stiffened and for the first time looked at Chloe. "You?"

Josh introduced them all. "Ashley Dupont—It is still Dupont?"

"Yes."

"Chloe Jacobs—my girlfriend, Poirot, and Lance Cattigan."

Ashley shook Lance's hand. "Nice to meet you." She eyed Poirot and then Chloe and raised an eyebrow. "Girlfriend?"

Mexican jumping beans on a rampage infested Chloe's stomach. "It's nice to meet you, Ashley. And yes, *girlfriend*."

Josh and I have been dating for a couple of months now, even though we've been friends for a long time. How do you know each other?"

"Josh has never mentioned me?" Ashley's voice pitched slightly higher than it had been.

"Should he have?" Chloe squeezed Josh's hand and looked at him.

He was pale.

Ashley let out a humph. "We nearly got married, but that was eight years ago."

Chloe did the math in her head. Eight years ago was before she even met Josh, but not long before.

Josh cleared his throat. "Anyway, we're headed out. Bye, Ashley."

"Don't leave so fast. I want an interview with the one who found the body of poor Mr. Partlett."

"Not right now." Josh cut between the two women.

Chloe went with him and clicked the button to unlock her SUV, happy to be away from this pushy woman who seemed to not like her just because she was with Josh.

She slipped her hand from Josh's and made a sprint for the driver's door. Poirot jumped in the back with Lance.

Once they were all in, Chloe started the car.

Ashley stood under the overhang with her hands on her hips.

Lance released a roaring laugh. “She is not happy you just shoved her aside. What on earth happened between the two of you?”

“Not now.”

If Ashley hadn’t still been standing there, Chloe would have refused to drive away until Josh spilled it. But she didn’t want to be stared at any longer, so she pulled out of the parking lot and down the street toward a little nearby bookstore Josh had found during brunch.

After driving through town, Chloe turned and drove out of the valley and past the church where the command center had been set up. People still milled about, but for the most part the searchers had dispersed.

Another mile and they found the little bookstore. It was in a barn next to someone’s house.

Chloe was about to burst with excitement, all concerns about Ashley fading to the background. The listing Josh had found on the Internet suggested that the store had a wide variety of used books too.

Poirot curled up in the back of the SUV, and the three book nerds made a mad dash to the glass French doors that were where the large barn door had once been.

A loud bell clanged at their entrance. From a wingback chair behind an antique teacher’s desk, an old woman with stark white hair looked over a paperback at them. She considered them for a second.

Chloe smiled.

The woman returned the expression. “Fellow bibliophiles. Welcome.”

“What a lovely shop you have.”

“Thank you. What can I say? I love books, and the only way my husband will let me have this many is if I sell them, even if it is only a few a week.”

Lance said, “We’ll be your few this week. Actually, with the way the three of us love books, you’ll probably be set for the month.”

“Well then, you young folks let me know if you need anything at all. Feel free to hang up your coats—my old bones like to keep it warm in here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chloe bit her lip and glanced down the rows and rows of bookshelves. She didn’t know where to start.

The three of them hung their coats on a sturdy coat stand. Both guys took off into the books, but Chloe approached slowly. Different sections were labeled. Nonfiction, Poetry, Classic Literature. Getting closer to her loves. Mystery/Suspense. Yes.

Her steps became more certain as she walked to her favorite section. Her most favorite author’s books were the first she spotted. Oodles of Agatha Christie paperbacks beckoned to her from the shelf, but then she spotted an old hardback. She reached for it and drew it off the shelf with tender care. It was very old, not eighties old, but eighty years old.



She eased the front cover open. The friendly scent of old paper met her senses. It didn't matter how much it cost or that she'd read this book at least five times, she'd buy it. Glancing at the copyright page, she gasped. It was not only a first edition, but it was also a first printing. She'd hit the jackpot.

A squeal escaped her lips.

Josh poked his head around a bookcase. "You okay?"

Words wouldn't come. She held up the book, certain the expression on her face had to be comical to the point of absurdity. She hugged the book to her chest.

Josh's smile stretched wide. He came down the aisle and kissed her forehead before asking, "What treasure did you find?"

She showed him the book.

"That's amazing. Keep looking, maybe there are more."

He turned and looked at the opposite shelf, while Chloe continued to search through the Agatha Christie books. She found a few more treasures, not quite the piece of gold like the first edition, but nonetheless some beautiful copies to add to her collection.

When she was satisfied that she'd mined all the riches of that section, she turned to Josh, who was still nearby.

Ever since their encounter with Ashley, Chloe's mind kept coming back to the woman. "Can I ask you about Ashley? If she's as tenacious a reporter as she came across, she's going to

find us again. It might help if I have a little background. But I don't want to pry."

Josh sighed heavily. "Of course you can ask."

She was surprised he didn't come closer to her as he normally did when they talked.

"We dated ages ago. Honestly, it's kind of a blur because it's been so long."

"Really? I can't imagine. If you two talked about marriage, seems like the breakup would have been a big deal. And who forgets that?"

"I didn't say I forgot."

The sorrow in his eyes ignited a burning in her chest. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You ever have a time in your life where so much was happening that, when looking back, it's difficult to remember the order of the events? You remember them all vividly—that's not the blurry part—but the time line if you will?"

"I guess so."

"Well, that's what I mean."

"Who broke it off?"

He stared off to the side. "I think it was mutual, but she might tell a different story. Some difficult stuff had happened at work. Honestly, I don't even know. It was messy though,

not one of those fading-away breakups.” He turned and looked at the books again.

Her lungs felt heavy as she tried to bring air in and out. Apparently he didn’t want to talk about it anymore—kind of like yesterday morning and the letter from that patient. What was she supposed to say? Wouldn’t he tell her if it were important? Ugh. Why did relationships have to be so complicated? Could they keep moving forward in their relationship if he kept closing her out?

She wandered away, but it took a few minutes to get her mind back into book-browsing. She loved Josh and didn’t want to lose him, but she was at a total loss as to how to get him to talk about these hard things, especially in a random town in the middle of nowhere with Lance always nearby.



If only Josh could shake the heaviness that had settled on his shoulders. As if discovering a murdered man wasn’t enough, seeing Ashley had tipped the weight to well past uncomfortable. And then Chloe asking him about it ... He wanted her to ask. He wanted to be able tell her anything, but he didn’t want to talk about it either.

He considered the five books he had in his arms. Satisfied with them, he wandered to the children’s section; he should get something for Amelia’s kids. They all loved books too.

Chloe had ended up there as well, no doubt looking for her nieces and nephews. She was sitting on the floor reading

through a picture book, her stack of hardbacks close at hand.

He sat beside her and intentionally bumped her leg with his knee. "I'm sorry."

She put her finger on the words she was reading and glanced up. "For what?"

"For cutting the conversation short."

"I know it's not easy to talk about this stuff, and it's not like this is the most appropriate time and place for such a conversation. I just want you to talk to me though."

He nodded.

"And not just about Ashley." She swallowed. "You did it yesterday morning too." She looked away and fiddled with the corner of the book in her lap.

"I did?"

She reminded him of the letter. "I didn't really ask, but it seemed like there was more to say other than you were just doing your job."

Another few pounds were added to his shoulders. "You're right."

"There you two are." Lance came around the corner.

Josh nodded at Lance and squeezed Chloe's elbow. "We will talk about it later. I don't want to keep things from you."

Her fair cheeks took on some color. "Good." She looked past him to Lance. "You ready to go?"

Lance shrugged. "I'm getting hungry. And the sign said she closes at five."

Josh glanced at his phone. Twenty minutes until five. How had they been in the store for hours already? "I still need to find books for my niece and nephews."

Chloe helped him find a few, and they went to the front with their finds.

The owner was delighted with their selections, especially the one he'd picked for Amelia's youngest, Jonathan. "I loved reading this one to my grandchildren when they were little. The youngest is five now though."

Josh said, "They grow up way too fast, don't they?"

She nodded.

Josh asked, "How many grandchildren do you have?"

"Fifteen. I had five children of my own and all but one of them has given me grandkids so far."

"How wonderful," Chloe said. "I'm one of five."

The older woman leaned toward Chloe with the most genuine interest one could imagine. "Where do you fall in the lineup?"

"Straight smack in the middle. I have an older sister, then a brother, then two younger brothers."

"Very similar to our family, but my second daughter was born after two brothers. And they all live close-ish. What about you gentlemen?"

Josh answered, "I'm the middle, older brother, younger sister." How he was missing his grandmother while talking to this woman. She'd died not long after he and Ashley broke up.

Lance said, "I'm the youngest of three boys."

They continued to chat with the elderly shopkeeper while she rang them out. Josh felt bad that they still didn't know her name and was about to ask when the bell on the door clanged.

Sheriff McBean walked in.

*What's he doing here?*

His question was answered quickly when the sheriff said, "Hey, Ma. I'm surprised you're still open."

"Just checking these fine people out. Look at the treasures they found."

The sheriff smiled and waved to them. "Hey, y'all. Thanks for coming and shopping."

Chloe put her hand on her chest. "Trust me, the pleasure is all mine. This is your mom?"

Mrs. McBean answered for her son. "This is my second born, Darrin, but it seems as if y'all are already familiar."

Josh nodded. "We were out searching for Mr. Partlett."

"Bless his soul. It's such a tragedy." She grasped her son's arm. "How's Pauline doing?"

"Shaken." The sheriff looked at Josh. "Pauline is my wife. She's been serving on the town council with Jed for a couple of years now."

“I can’t imagine how hard this is for everyone.” Chloe took her bag off the desk and stepped aside so Lance could pay for his books.

“God will see us through. He always does.” Mrs. McBean’s faith radiated straight out of her soul. “We may not understand why things happen, but we can always trust that they are never out of God’s control. May God be glorified even in this horrible tragedy.”

“Amen,” Josh said.

Sheriff McBean asked, “Do y’all have plans for dinner?”

Josh shrugged. “Not really, but we have plans to avoid the press.”

McBean laughed. “Smart. That lady that’s poking her nose around is a bit pushy.”

“You have no idea.” Josh kept his voice low, and only Chloe seemed to catch it. She chuckled softly.

“Would you all like a home-cooked meal? Pauline doesn’t know how to do anything but cook and bake when she’s nervous or upset, so she’s been in the kitchen all day. Please come eat some of it”—he patted his slightly round belly—“because my midsection would appreciate it.”

Josh glanced at his companions. With their silent affirmation, Josh said, “We’d be delighted.”

Chloe raised her index finger. “Although, would it be any trouble if my dog, Poirot, joined us? Poor guy has been cooped up in the car while we’ve been in here.”

“That would be wonderful. We’ve got three dogs of our own, and they’d love a playmate.”

The three went out to Chloe’s SUV while the sheriff helped his mom close up shop. Josh didn’t want to say anything out loud, but he kind of hoped that dinner with the sheriff would shed some light on what had happened to Mr. Partlett. Beyond knowing Ashley was in town, something wasn’t sitting right in his gut. There was after all, a murderer lurking about in Trudy Ridge.



## CHAPTER SEVEN



Josh followed Darrin out to the barn. After they'd arrived at the sheriff's home and he'd introduced the team to his family, he'd invited Josh to join him in feeding the animals. Lance had quickly been roped into a game of chess with Darrin's oldest son, and Chloe had offered to help in the kitchen.

Darrin picked up a pail of feed and walked toward the pen of five goats. "Tell me, Josh, I know you aren't out searching for people every day, so what does your normal life look like?"

Josh told him about being a family practice doctor and how he and his good friend from med school had started their own practice in Knoxville.

Josh asked, "Have you always lived in this area?"

"Born and raised. Pauline moved here in high school. It's a great little town. We've had a few tragedies over the years, but the town always rallies and overcomes."

“My parents and sister live in a smaller city, and it’s the same there.”

Darrin spread some feed for a pen of chickens. “This may be a bit presumptuous of me to ask this. But are you and Chloe more than friends?”

Josh’s face warmed. “Yes, sir. We’ve been dating for a couple of months now.”

“So not very long.”

“No, but sometimes it doesn’t take long to know if you’re a good fit.”

“That’s what I’ve heard. Wasn’t that way for Pauline and me though. We met in high school, right after she moved to town. We hit it off pretty quick and started dating. Dated off and on all through high school and college, then got married after we both graduated.”

“Wow, high school sweethearts then?”

“Yep. It’s been great growing up together. I can’t imagine it any other way.”

“I can’t imagine marrying the person I dated in high school.” Josh swiped his hand across his forehead. “I dodged a bullet on that one.”

Both men laughed.

“You volunteer for the Christian search and rescue organization that was here?”

“We do.”

“Then you’re a believer?”

“Born and raised. Made my personal decision at eight years old.”

Darrin smiled. “Then let me say this as a brother in Christ—take it or leave it. God knows what He has planned for each of us. And who is a good fit. Just be sure not to rush things. I’d imagine it’s tempting to do so when you aren’t getting married at twenty.”

“Neither of us are terribly young anymore.”

“Is there a significant age difference between you two?”

“Ten years.”

“Well, if she’s God’s choice for you, maybe that’s why you’ve had to wait.” Darrin smiled.

“I like that perspective.”

Darrin was done feeding the animals, so they opened the barn door.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Pauline stuck her head out. “Dinner’s ready.”

As if on cue, Josh’s stomach growled.



Josh wiped his mouth and folded his napkin before setting it beside his empty plate. “That was delicious, Pauline.”

He’d made the mistake of calling the sheriff’s wife Mrs. McBean when they first arrived, for which he was scolded and

told that Mrs. McBean was Darrin's mom. Plus he was probably a year older than Pauline anyway. They'd had a delightful dinner learning about one another. And while they didn't have the same denominational affiliation, they could all agree on Jesus, and that was all they needed.

As soon as everyone was finished eating, Pauline and Darrin's five kids all jumped from the table. The oldest three, who were probably between ten and sixteen, cleaned up dinner and then took the seven-year-old and five-year-old to the other room, leaving the adults to themselves at the long kitchen table made of reclaimed wood.

Josh leaned back in his chair and draped his arm across the back of Chloe's. He'd avoided asking about Mr. Partlett all through dinner with the children being present. But now that they were out of the room, the temptation increased. "Darrin, if I'm out of line in asking, shut me down, but I'm curious about what you've learned about Mr. Partlett's case."

"I appreciate you not asking in front of the children."

"Absolutely."

Pauline said, "I've been wanting to ask too. Any leads?"

"Unfortunately, no. To put it succinctly, he was killed like someone would slaughter a pig. The ME believes he was unconscious at the time of death as there was an extremely high level of CO<sub>2</sub> in his system."

"Who on earth would do something like that?" Pauline asked.

Darrin shrugged.

“And why?” A shudder shook Chloe’s body. She leaned into Josh’s shoulder.

“The very question we all want an answer to.” Darrin twisted his napkin in his hands. “It doesn’t make any sense. Jed was an upstanding citizen. Always ready to give a helping hand to anyone in the community. I can’t think of why anyone would want to kill him.”

“Are you thinking it’s a random murder then?” Josh asked.

“That almost scares me more.” Darrin ran his hand through his hair. “You think a lot like a cop for a family doctor, ya know?”

Josh released a soft chuckle. “My sister’s a detective. Early in her career she loved calling me and talking through cases, in legal ways of course. Does where he was found give you any leads?”

“None.”

One of the McBeans’ dogs, the friendliest Doberman Josh had ever met, got up from his sprawled position on the kitchen floor and wandered to the back door. His ears stood up straighter.

The other three—Poirot, a husky, and an Airedale—all jumped to their feet.

The sound of crunching gravel mixed with the continual clatter of rain against the house.

All four dogs barked.

“Poirot.” Chloe snapped her fingers at the dog.

Darrin stood and hushed his dogs. He went to the door to look out. “It’s the Ford sisters.”

“Oh, good.” Pauline stood, went to the refrigerator, and pulled out two large aluminum pans.

Darrin opened the door, and two women, perhaps in their fifties with one being closer to sixty, rushed in from the rain. “Vivian, Ingrid, hello.”

The older of the two, white hair cut short, said, “Thank you, Darrin. And, Pauline, thank you.”

Pauline set the pans on the corner of the counter and embraced the older woman. “Oh, Ingrid. How is Georgette?”

“Beside herself, of course. Her boys are home now, and I think that helps a bit.” Ingrid then noticed Josh and his friends.

He waved.

Darrin noticed and introduced them. “Ladies, these are the three who found Jed. Josh, Chloe, and Lance. Ingrid and Vivian Ford, the sisters to Georgette Partlett, Jed’s wife.”

Josh’s heart ached. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Vivian came around the table and sat in the chair on Chloe’s other side, one that one of the kids had occupied at dinner. “I can’t thank you all enough for finding him so quickly. As horrible as it was to receive that news, the waiting was even

worse. Our baby sister is a wreck over losing her husband of twenty years. We really appreciate you folks.”

Chloe squeezed the woman’s shoulder but didn’t say a word. None of them did for a few minutes. What could be said?



A few hours later, Chloe drove her SUV into the motel parking lot. The whole way over, she’d been bracing herself for the possibility of Ashley sitting outside their rooms. How aggressive would this woman be to get the story or to get to the “one who got away”?

Chloe wasn’t one to dislike people upon first meeting, but there was something to be said for first impressions, and Ashley had not given a good one.

From the back seat, Lance said, “Welp, doesn’t look like we have to fend off the paparazzi tonight.”

“Just because you don’t see her doesn’t mean she isn’t there.” Josh’s dry laugh lacked all humor.

It was also possible that Ashley wasn’t the only one watching them.

Despite the heat blasting in the SUV, a shiver jostled Chloe’s body. But why on earth would the murderer care about them? Sure, they had found Mr. Partlett’s body, but it wasn’t like it was well hidden. Except it really was out in the middle of nowhere. What if they weren’t supposed to find it, and the killer took issue with that?

*Stop it.* She gave her head a little shake, hoping to dislodge the dark thoughts that had invaded her mind, and pulled into the parking spot.

Lance was the first out. “Night, you two.”

Chloe turned off the ignition and unlatched her seat belt, keeping her movements slow since she wasn’t sure if Josh would want to sit out here and talk. Part of her wanted to—perhaps even curl up and snuggle, but the other half wanted to run into her room. She was tired beyond just the physical and was already feeling stupid about things she had said earlier. Did she have the right to push him to talk about these things? He’d talk if he needed to. Shouldn’t she just live in the present and move forward from where they were?

Josh opened his door, so she followed suit, and they both exited the vehicle. She opened the back door and let Poirot out.

They met under the awning in front of their motel room doors. Josh smiled at her with a longing in his eyes she hadn’t expected to see. She closed the gap between them and wrapped her arms around his waist. His strong arms enveloped her and squeezed her close to his chest.

As tempted as she was to ask him a zillion questions, she couldn’t get her voice to work, so she simply held on.

After a few moments, he kissed the top of her head. “I love you.”

She lifted her head. “I know. I love you too.”



“Get some sleep. I’m next door if you need me.”

“I know. I’ll be fine.”

“It still stands that we’ll talk later.”

Chloe asked, “Are you going to tell me something I don’t know?”

“You’re braver than you think.”

“You’ve told me that before. And while I always appreciate a literary nod, I feel like you’re wanting to tell me something else, but I don’t know what.”

The serious look on his face made her pull back slightly.

“Josh?”

“I don’t know. Just feeling off, I guess. Maybe I’m just tired.”

“Off about what?”

“I don’t want to scare you, but I wish we weren’t still here. I’m not sure how safe it is.”

She tightened her arms around him. Having him nervous about it all too, scared the emotional socks off her. He was always the strong one, reminding her that God had it all under control. “What do you always tell me in moments like this?”

He laughed. “I do trust Him. But that doesn’t mean He’s not giving me a nudge that something’s wrong.”

“True.”

“Mind if I check your room real quick?”

Warmth filled her face. Hopefully, she hadn't just tossed her unmentionables on the floor ... No, she hadn't. Not with Poirot sharing her room. "Not at all."

She unlocked the room and swung the door open. Darkness greeted them. Hadn't she left the bathroom light on?

Poirot pushed past her. She reached for the light switch, and the sconces across from the beds illuminated.

Poirot jumped on one of the beds and circled like five times before finally lying down.

"Apparently, he isn't concerned." Chloe met Josh's gaze.

"So it would seem." He walked into the room and all the way back to the bathroom where he checked inside. "All clear. Thanks for entertaining my paranoia."

"Gabe would appreciate it."

"I've promised him I'd look out for you. Gotta keep my word." He winked at her then closed the distance. Intensity simmered in his eyes.

Slowly, he raked his fingers into her hair and drew her face up. Their lips met.

The tension that had been building in her muscles released. She gripped the front of his jacket and eased up onto her toes. She loved this man with everything she had. His desire to protect her, to keep his word, to help others. All of him.

The kiss deepened as their passion was ignited.

Josh stepped back.

Her breathing was heavy.

“Sorry.” His smile indicated he was not sorry.

“Sure you are, but you probably should go. Not that I want you to.”

“I predict a short engagement.” He kissed her cheek.

“Please.” She bit her lip.

He laughed. “Good night.”

“Night.”

He left with a final glance over his shoulder before he closed the door.

She locked it behind him and made quick order of getting ready for bed. When she climbed into the bed farthest from the door, Poirot jumped from the other bed onto hers and curled up next to her legs. She reached down and scratched his head then punched the pillow into submission.

But sleep didn't come instantly. Everything from today circled in her mind, boosting her anxiety into the stratosphere.

Her stomach churned around her heart.

*God, help. Give me peace. I feel like I said stupid things today, as always. But I don't even know if my mind is just playing tricks on me or if I really was out of line. And what about the Partlett family? I bet they can't sleep at all tonight. Why do I think I can just go to sleep?*

She continued praying until sleep finally overcame her. But it wasn't peaceful in the least.

Haunting dreams plagued her until a banging woke her up.

She bolted upright in bed. Poirot stood and barked.

The banging continued. “Chloe!” Josh shouted from the other side.

She patted Poirot. “It’s Josh. It’s okay, boy.”

Poirot jumped from the bed and bounded to the door.

She grabbed a zip-up hoodie and wrapped it around herself before going to the door. She checked out the peephole.

Josh’s face was ashen. He banged on the door and called for her again.

She opened the door, keeping her hand on the doorknob. “What’s wrong?”

“I was going to ask you that. Are you okay?”

She took assessment of herself. “Yes, other than the fact that I should be sleeping. Not that sleep was happening very well.”

“I’d say not. You were screaming.”

She leaned against the end of the door. “I was?”

“Yeah, woke me up on the other side of the wall.”

“Sorry. I don’t even remember ...” Flashes of her dreams came back to her mind. Along with the heart-pounding fear, which had no doubt been the source of her screams.

“You remember?”

“Just tiny bits. I guess I was scared.” She tugged the sweatshirt tighter around her body.

Josh stepped into the room, took the door from her, and shut it. Stroking her upper arm, he asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “There’s nothing to say—I couldn’t tell you what they were about. I guess my brain is processing what I saw this morning. Right, Doc?”

He smiled, one side of his mouth going higher than the other. “Most likely. How do you feel now?”

Every hair from the tip of her head to her ankles felt like it was standing on end. She shrugged.

He reached for her, but his phone rang. He retrieved it from the middle pocket of his hoodie. “It’s Garson.” He answered it and listened.

Why was their team leader calling? Chloe glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand between the beds. The red numbers read five thirty-seven.

Under his breath he asked, “You’re kidding? Yes, sir. I’ll get the team. See you in twenty, give or take.” He slid his phone back in his pocket.

“What’s going on?”

“Looks like it’s a good thing we’re still in town. Another council member has gone missing.”

“Not Pauline!”

“No, not Pauline. Another man named Conroy Glasby.”

“Guess dream therapy is over. I’ll be ready in ten.”

Josh squeezed her upper arm and disappeared out the door.

She locked it behind him and got ready as fast as she could. What happened to this council member? The same thing? Maybe they just had a car accident. Surely it was just a coincidence. Too bad she didn't believe in coincidences.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Once they arrived at the command center that wasn't even set up yet, Josh jumped out of the SUV. The three of them grabbed their packs, and Poirot jumped out once Chloe had put his harness on. The team walked to where the command van was. This time they were setting up in the police station parking lot.

They were halfway across the parking lot when a news van pulled in.

"Pick up the pace," Josh said through his teeth. But he didn't break into the full run he was tempted to.

The van pulled up beside them, and Ashley jumped out. "Josh! Hey. Give me a moment of your time."

"I can't do that, Ashley. We have more pressing matters."

"Come on, Josh."

A guy with a camera came around the other side of the van.

Ashley said, “Thirty seconds isn’t going to hurt anything. This is my camera guy, Toby Halley. Record, Toby.” She pushed her hair behind one ear. “Ashley Dupont here in Trudy Ridge, Virginia, with the heroes that found the body of a missing town council member just yesterday morning. Dr. Josh Schneider, what can you tell us about today’s search and rescue mission?”

“No comment.” Josh kept walking, but Ashley and Toby met the team’s pace.

“Who found Mr. Partlett’s body? Was that you, Chloe, right?”

Chloe kept walking without looking back. She whistled for Poirot, and he bounded along beside her.

Ashley grabbed Josh’s arm and pulled him to a stop. Keeping her voice just loud enough for the two of them to hear, she said, “Come on, Josh. You of all people know how important doing your job is. Let me do mine. Give me anything, just a sound bite.”

He turned to her and stepped close until his nose was less than six inches from hers. “That’s low, Ashley, even from you. I’m not at liberty to talk about it, and I sure as heck ain’t going to talk to you about it now. I have a job to do today. The families don’t need you spreading their pain across the region so you can further your career. Get lost.”

He spun around and marched off, not letting her have even a second to respond.



One of the other organization leaders walked toward Josh and passed him. Soon Josh heard him tell Ashley and Toby that they needed to leave the parking lot and that they were welcome to be at the road, but not in the middle of command unless they wanted to trade their dress shoes for boots and actually get out there and help look for the missing man.

Josh snickered. That'd be a sight. Not that Ashley hated the outdoors. When they'd been dating, she'd had a nice pair of top-brand hiking shoes and everything North Face, and he was pretty sure she didn't hate all the hikes they'd gone on. But it wasn't her favorite thing by far.

He met Lance, Chloe, and Poirot beside the ministry's trailer. Garson stepped out.

"Thanks, guys. I guess it worked out that you didn't leave town."

Josh nodded. "What do we know?"

"Conroy Glasby was last seen yesterday evening by his wife. She said he got a phone call from a friend asking for help with a flat tire. She went to bed because it was getting late, but when she woke up to feed the animals this morning, he wasn't there. His car was still gone too."

"Any word on the car? Or what friend asked for help?"

"Nope, nothing. Sheriff McBean is looking into the phone call. Our duty is to search."

"Yes, sir."

Chloe said, “If he got in a car, it’s going to be hard to search for him. Once inside a car, a human’s scent is trapped inside, and Poirot won’t be able to follow because there’s no scent trail.”

Garson nodded. “I know, but I’m hoping we find his car soon, and that’ll give us direction. We’ll get you guys out as soon as possible, but do you mind helping around here until then?”

All three of them agreed, and Poirot barked as if he understood as well.

Josh reached down and rubbed the dog’s head. They all jumped into action, helping set up the tents and tables for checking in volunteers. He was happy to help any way he could, as long as Ashley stayed out of his space.



Chloe laid out sign-in sheets attached to clipboards on a folding table. Base camp was set up and ready for volunteers, not that many had been called yet since Conroy Glasby had only been missing for ten hours.

Poirot was asleep under the edge of the trailer where Garson had put down a blanket for him.

A car drove up and parked near the tent, and a woman in her mid-fifties got out. She fumbled with her purse, coffee, and keys. The latter hit the ground.

Chloe rounded the table and went to her. “May I help?”

“No, I’ve got it. If I can just get my hands to work.” The woman’s eyes were red, and the bags beneath them were heavy.

“I’m Chloe Jacobs.”

“Wilma Glasby.”

“Conroy’s wife?”

“Yes, dear.”

Chloe motioned to the command area. “Come with me.” She led Mrs. Glasby to where Garson was. When he looked up, she introduced them to each other.

“Please, it’s Wilma.” She reached into her oversized purse and produced a large ziplock bag. “I was told to bring something that Conroy had worn recently. He wore this T-shirt yesterday.”

Garson pointed to Chloe. “Chloe is our K-9 handler.”

She took the baggie. “Thank you. Poirot is a great scent tracker. He just needs to know what to sniff for.”

Wilma looked to where Poirot was lying. “Is that your dog?”

“Yes, ma’am. He’s a master at finding people.”

“He’s beautiful.”

He must have known she was talking about him, because Poirot got up and trotted over to them.

Wilma stretched out her hand, and he came up under it and let her pet him.

Chloe smiled at them. “He’ll do the best he can to find your husband.”

Garson asked, “What can you tell us about when your husband left last night?”

Wilma stroked Poirot’s head. “Like I told the sheriff, our friend Amos called because he had a flat tire, but I don’t know where. The ground was too muddy for a regular jack. So Conroy went out to help him. I was tired so I told him I was going to head to bed. He said not to wait up. So I didn’t.”

“When did you realize he didn’t come home?”

“This morning. I was surprised he wasn’t in bed when I got up, but I thought he was out with the animals, but he wasn’t. And his car wasn’t there, so I tried his cell, but he didn’t answer. I have no idea where he’d be.”

Garson said, “We’ll contact Amos, and see if he knows anything. Once we have a direction to search, Poirot can do his thing.”

“Thank you.” Wilma squatted and hugged Poirot.

He was a great support dog, even if he could be moody at times.

Garson motioned to the trailer. “Wilma, would you like a fresh cup of coffee?”

She stood. “That would be nice.” She gave Poirot a final pat and went with Garson.

Chloe went to where Josh was talking to one of the volunteers from the community.

The slightly older man, who was in a clean pair of dark-wash jeans and tucked-in button-up shirt beneath a North Face coat, was speaking. “It’s just so crazy that another council member has gone missing. I’ve worked with these men for years.” He shook his head.

Josh said, “We don’t know that this is related. Maybe his car is just stuck in the mud.” He looked at Chloe. “Chloe, this is Gary Russel. He’s also a town council member.”

She shook his hand. “Hopefully, we’ll find him shortly, and everything is just fine.” Something inside her said that wasn’t the case, but she couldn’t base the feeling on anything tangible. It was just her gut being weird. Maybe she needed a protein bar.

They continued chatting, and about ten minutes later, Sheriff Darrin McBean came out of the station and joined them. “I think we have a lead.”

Another vehicle, a muddy pickup truck, pulled up. A man in his thirties wearing overalls stepped out and came around.

Darrin motioned for the man to join them. Tension so thick you’d need a chainsaw to cut through it passed between Gary and the man in overalls. Darrin introduced him to Josh and Chloe. “This is Amos Watling.”

“Nice to meet y’all.”

The sheriff asked, “Amos, you were the one who had the flat last night?”

“Yes, sir. Conroy came right out and helped me last night. The mud was so bad up on Hickory Hollow that I couldn’t get the truck up on the jack.”

“What happened?” The sheriff motioned for him to tell him the whole story.

“He came out with his truck. He hauled me to more solid ground, and we changed the flat. Nothing more. I drove off; he drove off. I went home. Nothing more.”

Chloe shifted on her feet. Did they even belong in the middle of this conversation?

“Was he planning on going straight home?” Darrin asked.

“Actually, he mentioned that he was concerned about his cabin up that way. The creeks are swelling and have no respect for their boundaries.”

“Thanks, Amos.”

“Sure thing. Let me know if there’s anything I can do. And careful driving out there; the mud is getting real thick.” Amos turned and left.

Gary clapped his hands. “Sounds like you have a great place to start. I’m going to go get on the list, so I can get out there and help as soon as they have a search grid laid out.”

Darrin turned to Josh and Chloe. “Would y’all’s team head up there with me in case we find his car abandoned and need

to search?”

Josh met Chloe’s eyes, and wordlessly they asked each other. She nodded.

Josh said, “Absolutely. Let us grab Lance and Poirot.”

Chloe turned with Josh. Hope rose in her. Maybe he just got stuck in the mud and his cell phone died or didn’t have reception. It wasn’t unusual up the mountains to lose coverage for a bit.

She gave Josh a playful slap on the arm. “Let’s go get him.” And she bounded away toward Poirot.



Josh rode with Darrin up the mountain to the south of town. As they had crossed the river that wound through the valley the town was in, Josh couldn’t help but notice that the water level had risen significantly since yesterday afternoon. Darrin said that it was still within the normal bounds for when it rained this hard. Major floods hit the area every decade or so.

He also told Josh about a flood that had happened twenty years earlier and had destroyed many of the buildings along the river. Because of that flood, floodgates had been installed and as a result of them, the town hadn’t seen near the destruction it had in the past. He wasn’t worried.

Josh on the other hand was a little concerned after checking the forecast on his phone. The rain was expected to continue and get heavier. The reprieve they had at the moment wasn’t

going to last much longer. The clouds in the west were thickening and growing darker by the moment.

Darrin turned down another road and left the pavement. The road sign said, "Hickory Hollow."

They passed by a spot where deep crevices in the mud indicated where Amos's truck must have gotten the flat.

Josh said, "What we didn't ask Amos was why he was out this way in the first place."

Darrin waved his hand. "That's not really a question worth asking." He pointed up a driveway. "His sister lives up there. Her husband is deployed, and they have three little kids. It's no surprise that he'd be out here helping her out, especially with the storm and all."

"Fair enough."

"Conroy's cabin is another five miles down this road and up another."

"So it really does make sense for him to go check his cabin while out this far."

"I would have if I were him."

Josh checked in the side mirror to see how Chloe was doing following them. She appeared to be doing fine, bouncing along the gravel and mud.

They turned a corner, and ahead of them on the road, Josh spotted a small bridge with a swollen creek running beneath



and over the bridge. A large pickup truck was on the other side.

“Is that Conroy’s?” Josh asked.

“Sure is. Guess that explains why he didn’t make it home last night.” Darrin stopped the sheriff’s SUV short of the bridge. “That is not the normal angle for that bridge.”

They got out, as did Chloe, Lance, and Poirot.

The bridge, made mostly of wood, was completely askew at an angle a vehicle had no hope of crossing, but it looked like it was stable enough for people to walk over.

Darrin put his foot on the bridge and pushed. “Seems stable enough. I’m going to check his truck, but I’m guessing he’d go back to his cabin if he couldn’t get across last night.”

Josh nodded. As Darrin crossed the bridge, Josh pulled out his cell phone. No signal.

Lance’s coverage was on a different network. Josh held up his phone and asked, “Lance, do you have reception?”

Lance looked. “Nope.”

Josh pulled out the satellite phone he carried for times when their cells weren’t sufficient and called the base to report that they had found Conroy’s truck. After conferring with Garson and the team, they agreed that going to the cabin would be the next best line for searching.

The team donned their packs and went to the bridge to join Darrin. Lance crossed first.

Josh went next. The water was flowing over the top of the bridge in the center. By the looks of it, the creek was normally only about two feet wide and perhaps up to a foot deep, but you wouldn't know that now. It was well over six feet wide with the appearance of being about five feet deep. It may have been even deeper last night for the bridge to have been knocked off its foundation.

Once on the other side, Josh turned and called for Poirot, who stood at attention on the other side. "Come on, boy."

"Go, Poirot. Go to Josh."

Poirot barked but didn't move.

"Oh for Pete's sake, dog. Go." Chloe patted his back end.

He grunted and finally trotted across the bridge. Chloe followed.

She exchanged a confused look with Josh. It wasn't like Poirot to hesitate to cross a bridge or water or anything like that.

Josh went to Darrin, who was looking inside Conroy's truck. "Anything?"

Darrin looked up and shook his head.

Josh said, "We were thinking it would be wise to go to the cabin. Perhaps he decided to camp out there until someone came to find him."

Darrin nodded. "That makes sense to me."

"You know where it is exactly?" Josh asked.

“Sure do. I’ve come out here hunting with Conroy a few times over the years.”

The four plus Poirot set off down the muddy road. As they walked, the rain began again. Josh pulled up the hood to his coat. At first it was only a few little sprinkles, but half a mile down the road the tiny, spitting drops turned into giant pellets of water that slammed into them one after another.

## CHAPTER NINE



Chloe moved to the edge of the road as they hiked toward the cabin. With the giant raindrops falling, the already muddy road was turning into a swamp.

Poirot had taken the center of the road that was slightly less muddy and claimed it as his own. He strutted along like he was in charge. She wondered if they should have given him a hit of the scent bag she had in her pack, but they knew where to go look first. If Conroy was there, it wouldn't matter. And if he wasn't, she guessed that would be as good a time as any to give Poirot the chance to do his thing.

Thunder clapped in the distance.

Chloe spotted a flash of lightning and counted. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. But she stopped once she reached ten Mississippis. The thunder took its time to catch up, letting Chloe know that the storm was still quite far off.

Everyone chatted on and off as they walked, but Chloe mostly kept quiet and just listened to their chit-chat.

They turned the corner in the road, and a small log cabin, probably only two rooms total, sat back against an exposed rock face on the mountain. The place looked run-down and dilapidated, but at the same time kind of cozy. A small waterfall fell from the rock face behind the cabin, landing in a swollen stream that flowed close to the building. The setting was beautiful. She could imagine spending hours sitting out front reading in the summertime.

Darrin sprinted ahead and knocked on the door. “Conroy, are you in there?”

There was no answer. If he wasn’t here, where could he be?

Chloe’s stomach sank, just like her boots were doing in the mud.

Darrin knocked again, and when he didn’t get an answer, he found the spare key on the underside of the rocking chair that sat on the little covered porch. He unlocked the door and entered the cabin.

Josh followed him.

Chloe came to the door and stepped in, dropping the hood from her head. The room was cold, maybe even colder than outside. No fire had been roaring in that fireplace in the last twelve hours. The room was furnished with a couch and a tattered armchair. A little table with two chairs sat beside the miniature kitchen. Darrin disappeared into one of the doors that sat to the left. Josh opened the other.

Josh said, “The bathroom is empty.”

Darrin came out of the second room and shook his head.

Conroy wasn't here, and he wasn't with his truck.

Josh voiced her thoughts. "Where else could he be?"

Something creaked above them.

Chloe jumped.

Lightning flashed outside briefly, filling the cabin with what felt like five million lumens.

Thunder followed less than a second later. The storm had arrived in all its intensity.

The creaking sound echoed again through the cabin.

"What was that?"

Lance leaned his hand against the mantle above the fireplace and said, "Probably just a tree rubbing up against another because of the wind."

More lightning danced outside, and giant cracks of thunder shook the walls of the tiny cabin.

"Maybe we should hunker down in here until the worst of this passes." Darrin came over near Chloe and shut the front door.

Poirot put his paws on the windowsill and looked around as if he were looking for someone or something.

Again thunder crashed at the same instant the sky lit up.

Poirot jumped away from the window with a whine.

"It's okay, you scaredy-cat."

He came to Chloe and pressed himself up against her leg.

She met Josh's eyes from where he stood across the cabin, and they exchanged smiles. She started to move toward him, but an eerie silence filled the room.

*Crash!*

The ceiling caved in.

Chloe screamed and grabbed Poirot as she dropped to the ground and covered her head with her other arm. Her heart pounded as everything crashed around her.

A beam that stretched across the room slammed down behind her. The ceiling was on the ground in front of her with a large tree cutting the cabin in half.

Rain pelted the top of her head through the nonexistent roof.

She grabbed her hood and pulled it over the top of her head to shield it from the steady flow of water. She needed to move, but there was nowhere to go except up.

"Chloe!" Josh's voice held desperation.

Was he hurt? "Josh?"

"Are you okay? Is everyone all right?" Josh was always the caretaker.

"Poirot and I are fine."

No other voices answered. "Lance?" Josh called.

"Darrin?" She looked around. The light that came in from the hole in the room cast shadows to the areas where the other

two men had been standing. Darrin had only been a few feet from her. “Darrin!”

A groan came from the other side of the beam. “I’m fine.” The debris moved.

Chloe reached across the downed beam and helped move shingles from Darrin’s head.

“Thanks.”

She gave him a hand, and he stood and climbed over the beam to her.

Spinning on her heels, she looked for Lance.

Josh was climbing over the tree toward the fireplace. “Come on, Lance, answer me.”

Poirot jumped up on the tree and bounded toward Josh. Darrin and Chloe followed.

Josh slid off the tree and started tossing debris to the side.

A gasp.

Josh said, “Help me get this off of him.”

Another ceiling beam had fallen on Lance.

Chloe and Darrin rushed to them, and the three of them grabbed hold of the beam.

Darrin said, “On three. Lance, if you can, slide out when we lift. One. Two. Three.”

They all lifted, and Lance slid himself free.



After they set the beam back down, Chloe asked, “Are you okay?”

Lance took Josh’s offered hand and stood. “Yeah, just got the wind knocked out of me, so I couldn’t answer.”

Chloe let out a rush of air. “Maybe we shouldn’t stay here.”



Josh looked around at the cabin. It was a disaster. It was a miracle none of them were seriously injured. “You’re right, Chloe. We should get back to searching for Conroy anyway. He isn’t here. He isn’t with his truck. But he has to be somewhere.”

Lance climbed over the beam that had just been on top of him. “Unless he was abducted.”

Chloe bit her lip then said, “By aliens?”

Josh shook his head. “Don’t go sounding like Amelia’s partner.”

“Isn’t she the one with the nickname Scully?”

“Given to her by her partner, but that’s not the point. Even if he was abducted”—Josh gave Chloe a sideways look—“aliens or not, he’d still be somewhere, and our job is to find him.”

“Then let’s get to it.” Chloe turned toward the door.

That woman had as much spunk as his sister, and he wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. But at least they got along well.

Once out on the covered porch, Chloe pulled out the scent sample and gave Poirot the opportunity to sniff in the bag.

He stuck his nose in, and after he stepped away, he barked.

“Search.” Chloe’s command was loud and strong.

Josh took the bag from Chloe, resealed it, and stuffed it back down in her pack for her.

Poirot sniffed around, went back to the doorway then away again. He stopped at the step off the porch and barked.

They all waited to follow his lead.

He ran to the end of the porch and bounded off. He went along the side of the house.

Josh and Chloe followed, with Lance and Darrin not too far behind.

They circled the entire structure and ended up back at the front.

Poirot trotted to the road and sat.

Josh stopped and released a breath. He’d worked with Poirot long enough to know what sitting in the middle of a search meant.

The scent trail stopped.

Josh rewound the path Poirot had taken. If Conroy had come down here and checked his cabin, he probably would have gone inside then walked the perimeter before getting back into his truck and driving away.

He turned to the others. “Guess he didn’t come back here at all.”

Chloe nodded. “Or he got in a vehicle with someone else. If he came back after the bridge was out, he might have joined someone else. Darrin, is there another way out or other homes or cabins back here that someone could have driven him to?”

“This is the end of this drive. There aren’t any other houses or cabins between here and the bridge.” Darrin shoved his hands in his pockets. His brows were getting tighter.

Josh was sure they were all thinking the same thing, but no one wanted to admit out loud that this was looking more and more suspect.

Was it really possible that someone out there had Conroy hostage and perhaps had even already murdered him? Surely not.

They needed to find him now.

But how? Poirot didn’t have a scent trail to follow.

Chloe said, “I think we should go back to the truck. If he was here and then got back into his truck and drove to the bridge, maybe he went a different way. Perhaps he went to someone else’s home like Amos’s sister’s.”

Darrin nodded. “It’s worth a shot.”

“Poirot will be able to find his trail. And hopefully, we’ll find answers.”

Josh adjusted his pack. “Makes the most sense to me.” He took a good look at the cabin before they walked away. He felt horrible that it was completely destroyed, but he was eternally grateful that none of them had been injured.

He matched Chloe’s pace as they walked back down the road. The road had turned into its own creek. The worn paths where tires had tread were now flowing with water down toward the creek where the bridge had washed out. Would they even be able to cross it on foot again, or were they going to be stuck on this side?



Chloe was glad to have Josh by her side. This was all getting a little too creepy for her liking. She enjoyed a good mystery or suspense story, but especially after what happened to them a few months ago, she would much rather leave that kind of excitement to the authors. Curled up on the couch under a blanket with a mug full of something hot was definitely her preferred method of trying to solve crimes. Her brother was the police officer—not her—for a reason.

Why couldn’t this have been a simple “go out and search the woods for a missing person, find him, and everyone is happy” experience?

She tried to take a deep breath, but it wasn’t working. Her lungs were too tight.

“Chloe?” Josh bumped her arm.

She wanted to say she was fine, but the words didn't come out.

“Breathe.” He kept his voice soft so only she could hear. “Do we need to stop?”

She shook her head. She worked harder to get her lungs to open up.

She wished for just a moment that Josh could read her thoughts so that she wouldn't have to speak the words.

“Overwhelmed by the circumstances?”

Air filled her lungs fully. “Yeah.”

“Remember Who's in charge of it all. He's got us.”

“He does.” *God, help me to remember that You are always in control even when everything around is total chaos. I know this truth. Keep bringing my mind back to You.*

She breathed a little easier with God's peace settling her heart. It didn't take away the danger, but it gave her the confidence she needed to keep moving, to keep breathing.

Josh squeezed her arm, and they continued trudging through the mud and rain.

Conroy's truck came into sight first, then the bridge, which was even more underwater now. Hopefully, it would still be crossable.

They all gathered back by Conroy's truck. Chloe shrugged off her pack and retrieved the scent sample.

Josh put his hand on her arm. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

Darrin stepped up beside Josh. “You see something?”

“Yeah, look at the bridge from over here. Based on the water washing over it, we just assumed the flooding did this, but look at that side over there. Is that a chain?”

The guys walked closer to the stream.

“I’ll be. I think you’re right, Josh,” Darrin said.

Chloe’s lungs threatened to tighten again. *God, what happened here?*

Josh turned; his eyes were wider than normal, and his brow furrowed. He nodded.

She opened the bag and offered it to Poirot.

He took a good whiff and barked.

“Search.”

He barked again and started sniffing the air. First, he trotted to the truck and then to the river. He looked back at Chloe and barked before bounding across the bridge, the water nearly licking his belly.

She looked at Josh. “Maybe that’s why he didn’t want to cross earlier?”

“That dog is smarter than we give him credit for sometimes.”

“Apparently.” She followed Poirot. But there was no way to cross the bridge without getting her feet wet this time. She went as far as she could before the water lapped over the top of her boots. They were waterproof to some extent, but if the

water went over the top of her ankle, her socks would get wet, and it was too cold today to deal with that.

“Wait up, Poirot,” she said.

She considered the bridge. If she jumped from here, could she land without falling? Either way, she was taking a risk.

“Can you make it?” Josh came up behind her.

“I think so. But if I fall, it’ll be worse than having wet feet.”

“But at least we’re here at the car, and you could change.”

“But my boots will be really wet if I fall. Maybe I should just walk through it and have wet feet.”

Josh shrugged. “Let me go first and you can jump to me. Maybe we can avoid getting too wet.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Yep.” He jumped across the deepest part of the water and landed with a splash and a slight teeter. He turned back toward her. “I’ll catch you.”

The sincerity and love in his eyes gave her all the confidence she needed.

She jumped. Her right foot landed first and slid on the wet wood, but her left foot found a better grasp.

Josh’s hands wrapped around her arms, and she grabbed handfuls of his red coat.

“Gotcha.” Josh pulled her up, and they both found solid ground off the bridge.

Lance and Darrin came over without much trouble either. One of Lance's feet got a little wet.

While Lance changed his sock, Josh asked Darrin, "Do you want to go with us or head back? You don't exactly have the gear needed."

"If there's a killer out, I can't rightly let y'all go without backup." Darrin opened the back of his sheriff's SUV and pulled out a backpack. "I've got a few things. I'll be fine." He pulled out a shotgun and strapped it across his back before closing the hatch. "Which way?"

Chloe turned to Poirot. "Search."

He barked and ran up the hill away from the vehicles.

The four humans followed. Josh and Lance took up their normal positions to her right and left, and Darrin walked somewhere between her and Josh.

Josh asked Darrin, "What's up this way? Any reason you can think that Conroy would head up here?"

"There isn't much of anything. He would have been better off walking down the road until he reached Amos's sister's house."

Lance walked close to the river. "Hey, looks like there are some tire tracks over here, but they're pretty well washed out. They look about the size of ATV tires." He took photos and called it in.

Chloe groaned. This was looking too much like someone took Conroy. Had Mr. Partlett and Conroy each been carried



away on an ATV? That would explain why Poirot had been able to follow their scent. The trail they had followed yesterday was too small for a truck, and the hill they climbed now would be impossible for a vehicle bigger than an ATV to traverse. The trees grew close to one another, and the incline was becoming steeper with every step.

What were they headed into? Anxiety started to rise again. Pray. *Heavenly Father, please help us.*

The ground beneath her feet was loose and sloshy.

The trees around her had an odd tilt.

Both were warning signs of a mudslide.

“Poirot, run.” He was close to her, so she smacked his flank.

He ran, and so did she, but the ground shifted beneath her, making her steps unproductive.

A thunderous clamor filled the forest.

The ground collapsed beneath Chloe’s feet, dragging her down the hillside.

“Josh!”

## CHAPTER TEN



Josh whipped around. The side of the hill was breaking loose, taking trees, mud, and Chloe down to the valley.

“Chloe!”

She caught a large oak tree that had yet to break loose.

“Hold on.” He took a step farther away from the edge of the mudslide and took his pack off. He dug out a rope.

Poirot ran to the edge and barked.

“Josh.” Lance held out his hand.

They each wrapped an end of the rope around themselves and tied it around their waists.

If only they had time to run it through rappelling gear, that would make this easier. But that wasn’t an option. He had to get to Chloe now. The chances of the tree she was holding joining the mudslide were too great. Thankfully, the roots ran deeper than the surface that was being dragged down.

And they were close to the top. But how much more of the hillside was ready to join?

He eased down into the loose earth.

Darrin joined Lance and helped control the rope.

Josh struggled to keep his feet under him. He waded through the mud that was past his ankles. If they had been any lower down the mountain, it would be waist deep and impossible to move through.

The tree Chloe was hanging on to creaked and shifted. Chloe screamed.

“Chloe. I’m coming. Focus on me.”

She met his eyes and held his gaze.

He moved as fast as he could while trying to be cautious. He reached for her. Not close enough.

The tree creaked again, shifting farther. It was almost done.

Josh was nearly there, but not close enough to grab her yet. But there wasn’t time. “Chloe. Jump to me.”

Fear radiated from her eyes.

“You can do it. I’ll catch you. Just like crossing the creek.”

She nodded.

The tree gave more.

“Now!”

She shoved off the tree and launched herself toward him. She slammed into his body, and they wrapped their arms

around one another.

Josh's feet slipped from beneath him. The weight of the two of them must have been slightly more than Lance was ready for.

Josh was tempted to make Chloe drop her pack, but that would require loosening their grip on one another, and it wasn't worth the risk.

"Sorry." Lance tugged on the rope.

Josh and Chloe gained their footing. He slid his arm around her waist, under her pack, and they worked their way to the edge of the mudslide.

Lance and Darrin helped pull them through the mud and to steady ground.

Josh and Chloe collapsed to the ground, panting for breath.

Poirot ran to Chloe and licked her face.

She wrapped her muddy arms around the wet dog.

Josh glanced downhill. The mudslide had decimated the trees. If Chloe hadn't grabbed that tree, she most likely wouldn't be alive. His heart hurt at the idea and at the same time swelled with gratitude. *Thank you, Lord.*

Lance handed them each a handkerchief, and they wiped the mud from their hands and faces.

Chloe missed a spot on her cheek, so Josh reached over and wiped the spot away.

Her lower lip trembled.

He slid his hand to the back of her neck and nudged their faces close to one another until their foreheads touched. “You’re okay.”

“Why does it feel like nature is out to get us right now?”

“I wish I knew the answer to that. But so far God has protected us.”

“Praise the Lord. Guess we keep trusting that He will. But good golly, can nature stop trying to kill us today?”

He chuckled at the humor in her voice. But he didn’t feel it. Between a murderer being out there somewhere and the deathly weather, he was less than confident that they’d all make it out of this unscathed.



Chloe tried not to shiver as they continued following Poirot as he sniffed out the trail. They hadn’t rested very long, not wanting to stay on the unstable mountainside, and had been back at it for about thirty minutes, slow minutes of carefully maneuvering around trees and across loose ground. Driving an ATV through this area would have been challenging. Whoever was driving had to have been skilled with lots of experience.

The mud caked all over her pants was making them stiff, even though it wasn’t drying because of the constant rain. Instead the wet was just seeping through her pants and to her skin, making her colder by the minute. Apparently weather-proof didn’t apply to mud.

She didn't want to tell the guys how uncomfortable she was because it was just that—discomfort. Although it could turn into something worse if she ignored it for too long. The temperature was hovering right around forty-five degrees and didn't seem to be rising at all as the day progressed. They needed the sun for more than one reason.

When they reached a point where the mountain leveled out a bit, Darrin called out. "I've got more tire tracks over here."

Chloe whistled for Poirot. He trotted back to her, and they all congregated near to where Darrin pointed to the tracks.

While Lance reported the finding back to base, Josh asked, "Darrin, any idea where we are—who owns this land or anything like that?"

Darrin looked around.

Chloe followed his line of sight. It was difficult to see any landmarks as the trees around them were thick, even as bare as they were.

Darrin used his hand to point and trace back where they'd come. She could see in his eyes how he calculated how far they'd come along the ridge.

"It's hard to tell, but I'd guess we're close to Amos Watling's land, but not on it. I'm not sure who owns this part. He owns land in the valley and up the side of the mountain, but not this high."

Why did Amos's name keep coming up?

Darrin stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. “I sure hope we don’t find Conroy murdered near Amos’s property. That man has seen enough tragedy in his days. And poor Stacy, his wife—she doesn’t need to see anything like what we saw yesterday morning.”

“What happened?” Chloe asked.

“They lost their boy about a year ago. You know that bridge y’all said you crossed yesterday? No one is supposed to be on it. It just needs to be torn down at this point.”

Josh nodded. “We almost fell through the bottom of it.”

Darrin continued. “Amos and Stacy’s son, Randy, was hanging out with some friends. They were being kids and goofing around on the bridge. Well, it broke, despite repairs that had been made, and Randy fell into the water. Spring rains had it flowing aggressively down the mountain. His friends called for help right away, but it took us two days to find his body miles downriver.”

Chloe pressed her hand to her chest. “How horrible.”

“It was a tough loss for the community. Randy was one of those kids that every parent wanted their kids to be friends with. Kind, considerate, polite. Teachers adored him.”

“I’m sorry he’s gone,” Josh said. He stared off into the distance. “It’s always hard when a kid dies unnecessarily.”

Chloe wondered why that comment came out with such heaviness. As a doctor, Josh no doubt dealt with losing

children to disease and accidents, but the statement seemed to hold more grief than she would have anticipated.

The quietness that fell among them was as thick as the clouds above, so Chloe took the lead. “Poirot.”

He perked up his head from where he had lain at her feet.

“Search.”

He sprang to his feet and barked before taking off trotting in the direction he’d been headed earlier.

Chloe followed him as did Lance. She checked over her shoulder. It took Josh and Darrin both a few more seconds to start moving to continue the search.

*Lord, help us all. This is all so heavy. Be with the family who lost their son. I can't imagine that ever gets easier. Help Josh with whatever is burdening his heart. Help us find Conroy.*



Ashley leaned back in the passenger seat of the news van and scrolled through the Google hits on her phone. Josh Schneider had made a good name for himself in Knoxville over the last ten years. His practice had received a few commendations, and another article talked about how he had been part of the team that had found the dead body of a woman along a river during a search for a missing person last June.

Then she did the thing she’d been avoiding, telling herself that she shouldn’t do. She clicked on the link to his Facebook page.



As the page loaded, she was pretty sure her insides were going to grind themselves up into a pulverized slop that matched the consistency of the smoothie she'd had for breakfast.

His profile picture was the image of a book. No surprise there. In fact, she was pretty sure it had been his profile picture for more than a decade.

She clicked on his info. Blank except for one thing. It said he was in a relationship with Chloe Jacobs. Ashley clicked on her name. Not much on Chloe's profile was public either. Just a few pictures, mostly of her and Josh. How on earth did they have so many pictures together if they'd only been dating for a couple of months? Was she one of those picture-compulsive millennials?

Was she going to be any better for Josh than Ashley?

Something deep inside her ached. She missed Josh. Had for years. Not that she thought of him too often, but when she did think back to their relationship, she wondered where it all went wrong. They'd been good together, and she hadn't found anyone since.

"Earth to Ashley." Toby smacked her elbow. "The mayor is talking to people."

She grabbed her mic and umbrella and jumped out of the van.

Umbrella held high above her head, she nudged her way past people to get closer to where Mayor Irving Glasby, brother of

the missing, was addressing a group of townspeople and reporters. Not that there were many reporters.

“My brother is still missing, but I have hope he will be found. I heard that they found his truck, so he probably just went to someone’s house to find shelter.”

“Why hasn’t he called you then?” Ashley asked, pointing the mic in her hand closer to Mayor Glasby.

“Cell service is a little spotty out where he was.”

“But if he found shelter, wouldn’t he have called, at least his wife to let her know he was safe from the storm?” Ashley was certain there had to be more to this story than just a random missing man the day after another man in the town had been murdered.

“No more questions. I’ll let you all know when we know more information.” He turned and walked back to the search and rescue command center.

She spun and put on a smile for the camera. “We just heard from the Mayor of Trudy Ridge. There still has been no word regarding the whereabouts of the second member of the town council to go missing in two days. Stay tuned. I will find answers.” She smiled for another moment until Toby lowered the camera.

He stepped closer to her. “I think you pushed too much.”

“How are we going to get answers if we don’t ask the questions? They were perfectly legit questions.”

“Would you think that if it were your brother that was missing?”

“I only have a sister.”

“You’re missing the point, Ashley.”

“Shut it, Toby. Something weird is going on here. I just know it. What if the brother is in on it? Any one of these people could be the murderer.”

Toby shook his head. “Except that little old lady.”

She followed the point of his finger. “She’s not that old. Probably only my parents’ age.”

“Still don’t think she did it.”

Ashley shook her head at Toby with a slight eyeroll. “Let’s talk to her and find out.”

Toby groaned.

“No camera, unless she wants to say something specific for the news.” Ashley strolled over to the woman. “Excuse me, ma’am? Could I chat with you for a moment?”

“I suppose. Are you that reporter that keeps poking her nose in everyone’s business?”

“I’m just looking for answers, ma’am.”

“Aren’t we all, missy?”

“I suppose we are. My name is Ashley Dupont. What’s yours?”

“Ingrid Ford.”

Ashley asked Ingrid questions about her life in Trudy Ridge. She'd lived there all her life and lived with her sister Vivian in the house they'd grown up in, moving back in after their father passed away more than a decade ago. The woman was sweet and spunky all at the same time, and she joked about how she and her sister were turning into old spinsters but Vivian was the crazy cat lady.

But then the woman's eyes grew haunted. "But now Georgette ... " Her voice trailed off.

"What about Georgette? Who is she?"

"Our other sister, the only one of us to get married"—she met Ashley's eyes—"but Jedidiah is gone now. And so horrifically."

Ashley took in a sharp breath. "I didn't realize. The man who was killed yesterday."

"Yes. So you can see, we all want answers."

"Yes, ma'am. Do you know who would want to kill your brother-in-law?"

"Ain't got a clue. Everybody loved him. Well, maybe not everybody, but no one hated him enough to kill him as far as I know."

*But someone did kill him.* Ashley, not normally one to run out of words, didn't know what else to say.

Ingrid reached out and gripped Ashley's arm. "I've decided I like you more than I thought I could. Sorry I judged. Keep

looking. Maybe there are answers to be found, but I wouldn't know where to look."

"I will. I don't mean to poke my nose where it doesn't belong, but your sister deserves answers, and if I can help find them, I will."

Ingrid gave Ashley a quick hug and walked away.

When the woman left, Ashley felt as if there were a hole. She couldn't explain it, but maybe it was more of a weight. She needed to find these answers.

Her phone dinged. Tucking the mic beneath her arm, she retrieved her phone.

A text message from a number that she didn't recognize.

She unlocked her phone and opened the message.

*London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down.*

*Trudy Ridge bridges falling down.*

*Those responsible have to pay.*

Ashley nearly dropped her phone.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



As they worked their way down the opposite side of the ridge, Josh tried to ignore the distracting thoughts, but they kept bombarding his brain. He'd been the reason one little boy was no longer with his family. Josh had been the doctor who should have been held responsible, but for whatever reason the parents didn't blame him. But he blamed himself. He should have done more tests. He should not have jumped on the first diagnosis that seemed to fit. He should never have assumed it would be that simple.

But nine-year-old Eric Jefferson had died because the illness he actually had went undiagnosed for too long. Josh had been too quick in his diagnosis.

Poirot barked and ran out of sight around an outcropping of rocks. As fast as he had disappeared, he reappeared, running full speed, and yanked the Kong from Chloe's side.

He'd found Conroy.

“Good boy, Poirot. Show me.” The excitement in Chloe’s voice was matched with her running with Poirot.

However, Josh didn’t feel it. Instead, a wave of dread washed into his spirit. But maybe he was just being a downer. Thoughts about Eric often did that. Josh rounded the bend.

Conroy’s body hung upside down, just like Jed Partlett’s had. They were too late.

Darrin gasped. “No!” He dropped to his knees, sinking into the mud.

Josh closed the gap between them and put his hand on Darrin’s back. Every word that came to his mind sounded hollow at this point, so he kept his mouth shut.

“How can this be happening here in Trudy Ridge? I don’t understand. Conroy was a good man.”

“I don’t know.” Josh glanced in Chloe’s direction. She’d positioned herself on the opposite side of a tree, facing away from Conroy’s body, and was hugging Poirot.

Lance had pulled out his phone.

The scene was exactly the same as the one they’d found yesterday morning. Bucket, full of water and blood, beneath the body that hung by his feet with hands tied behind his back.

Josh swallowed, trying not to get sick to his stomach.

Why on earth would someone murder these men? Was it a coincidence that they were both on the town council, or were

the remaining members the next targets? Was everyone in the town at risk?

Furthermore, why would God allow this?

With all that he was, Josh believed that God was completely sovereign. He knew that God was good above all things. And he understood that evil was just part of living on this fallen planet.

But it didn't make it any easier to swallow.

Just like with Eric. The boy shouldn't have had to die. And since God was sovereign, didn't that mean that it was Eric's time?

Josh's stomach churned. But he was just a kid, and the stupid disease would have been treatable if Josh had identified it when he was first exhibiting symptoms.

Maybe he just needed to forgive himself.

He knew God had. The family had. So why couldn't he forgive himself?

Darrin gripped his elbow. "What was that?"

"What?" Josh followed where Darrin pointed.

A figure moved in the distance. It was too far away to distinguish, but the orange coat gave it away as human.

Was it the murderer looking for another body to drain?

If not, perhaps the person had seen something that would be helpful. Maybe they'd seen the killer or someone leaving the area and would be able to identify them.



Darrin bolted to his feet and ran down the hill.

Josh followed.

Darrin turned. "You can't."

"You need backup. I'm coming too."

"Fine, but stay behind me."

The two men ran as fast as the sloshy forest floor would allow them. Half decomposed leaves from last fall had turned into a surface so slick it could rival a frozen pond, making running extra laborious. With each footfall, Josh had to compensate for the slide.

They skirted trees and downed logs, jumping smaller ones as necessary.

Josh tried to keep an eye on the orange coat but looked down regularly to be mindful of his steps.

The orange coat disappeared as if he had fallen straight down.

As Josh approached the spot where the person in the orange coat had vanished, he slowed and slid to a stop at the edge of a steep embankment that led into a gorge.

There was no sign of the orange coat.

Darrin stopped beside him. "Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. He's just gone."

Darrin pointed. "Look. That's how he did it."

There was a rope hanging from a tree. “And look at that.” There was a line of mud in the brush and dead leaves, as if someone had slid down. The little path was exactly the angle one would expect if a person had gone down holding on to the rope tied to the tree.

“I’ll give him points for a creative getaway.”

“The murderer?”

“Not at that stature. No kid is hauling Conroy over a tree limb.”

“Think he saw something?” Josh asked.

Darrin shrugged. “No way to know. He at least saw the body.”

“Did you recognize the coat?”

Darrin shook his head. “It was awfully clean for a day like today. May be new.”

“Should we try to follow?”

Darrin shook his head. “We’ll find him later. Let’s deal with Conroy.”

Josh nodded, and after a final sweep of the gorge, the men turned and headed back to where they’d left Chloe, Lance, and Poirot.

Josh’s legs wanted to protest. The running had taken more than his tired legs wanted to deal with, but he pushed through. Still so many questions, so few answers. They might be done searching for Conroy, but something told Josh that his work

wasn't over and wouldn't be anytime soon. He'd hoped they could just leave. He wanted to take Chloe home away from this town where a lunatic was running free, slaughtering humans as if they were pigs.



A few minutes before five thirty that evening, Chloe—with her hand in Josh's—slipped into the back of the high school gymnasium where a town-hall meeting had been called.

Josh and Darrin, who was at the front of the room, exchanged a nod. Along with Lance, they found seats on the bleachers near their team leader, Garson, and his wife, Loren. Chloe sat beside Loren.

The woman wrapped her arm across Chloe's shoulders. "How are you doing?"

Chloe shrugged. She hadn't let herself process. Not that she'd had much time to herself yet. After being at the crime scene for hours, where they didn't learn anything new other than that an ATV had been there, they had finally been able to get a ride back to her SUV, which had barely missed being wiped out by the mudslide that had almost killed her.

If she were to be honest, she didn't want to process any of it. She wanted to stuff it down and ignore that all this had happened in such a short time.

Lance could have died.

She could have died.

Conroy and Jed did die.

“I’m okay. Ready to go home.”

“I’d imagine. Soon enough.” Loren patted Chloe’s back before removing her arm.

Chloe wanted to laugh. Soon enough would have been not coming here at all. “When are you guys leaving?”

“We’re leaving right after this. You?”

“Not until the morning.” She leaned into Josh ever so slightly.

He scooted closer without any words, but it spoke abundantly to her. He was there and would continue to be a rock for her.

She was so grateful that her true Rock had given her a man that could represent Him here on earth.

Darrin stepped up to a microphone attached to a podium. “Good evening, folks. Thanks for gathering. If everyone could find a seat, we’ll get started.” He waited while about twenty more people found places to sit.

Chloe didn’t envy the job Darrin had at the moment. With the mayor’s brother having been one of the victims, Darrin stood at the front without the mayor. The other two council members, Gary Russel and Pauline, stood with him.

Darrin addressed the audience and said a lot for not saying much. He had told the team earlier that he didn’t want to

release all the details; no one needed to have those images in their minds.

Chloe had read enough detective novels to know there were other reasons not to reveal details to the general public too.

Darrin tried to reassure the townspeople that they were doing everything they could to find who was responsible and to keep everyone else safe. He urged everyone to be attentive and wise about their activities, like by not going out alone after dark.

A woman near the front raised her hand. “Are they targeting our council members? What are you doing to keep these two safe?” She gestured to Pauline and Gary.

“We can’t know. Both men were out by themselves late in the evening, so there’s still a chance it’s random. But we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Including calling in the state police.”

“Uh-oh.” Josh’s voice was more of a mutter.

“What?” Chloe slid her hand around his elbow.

He pointed with his head.

Ashley stood at the side of the room with her cameraman by her side.

As soon as Darrin took a breath, Ashley raised her hand and stepped forward. “But how were they murdered? You’ve said a lot without giving any indication about that. Are we keeping an eye out for someone with a gun? A knife?”

“I am not going to discuss that at this time.”

“Could this be connected to a falling bridge?”

Darrin stepped back as if he'd been hit by a wave in the ocean, and a murmur swept through the gathered crowd.

Within the murmur, Chloe heard Amos's and his son's names mentioned.

It took a moment, but once Darrin gathered himself, he raised his hands to hush the people. “I don't know what that could possibly have to do with anything. And who let the press in here? I think we're done.”

About fifty people tried to ask questions at the same time. The place was losing containment, and the air in the room was highly charged.

One voice was finally heard over the rumble. “I heard something about the murders being a slaughter. Is Amos Watling responsible? If anyone knows how to slaughter something, it'd be Amos.”

“And what purpose would Amos have in killing these friends of his? Stop speculating, people. I'll keep you all informed. For now, go home and lock your doors and keep an eye out *for* one another. Don't assume one of your friends is a killer. This meeting is over.”

Darrin turned around, wrapped his arm around his wife, and ushered her out the closest door.

Chloe and her team stayed seated as the crowd around them got to their feet and muttered to one another. Several heated arguments began.

She hugged herself, anxiety rising. She hoped they didn't find themselves in the middle of any fights.

The sheriff's deputies urged the people to vacate the building.

Garson looked around his wife at Josh. "What was that all about?"

Josh said, "Darrin told us about a boy who was killed last year falling from a bridge. It was Amos's son."

"Why on earth would Ashley ask about the bridge? Do you think she was referencing Amos's son?" Chloe asked.

"I have no idea. It was an accident." Josh looked across the room, and a shadow crossed Josh's face.

Her lungs constricted. "Josh?"

"I see something. I'll be right back." He stood and ran down the bleachers.

"Josh?" What did he see? Where was he going? Why wasn't he talking to her again?

## CHAPTER TWELVE



Josh dodged people and chairs and more people and ran after the orange coat he'd seen leave the gymnasium through the side door.

He pushed through the door and found himself in a hallway lined with lockers. Quite a few people filled the hallway, and they seemed to corner one man in particular whose back was to Josh, so he wasn't sure if he had met the man. The orange coat stood near him.

Josh came up behind the individual in the coat and grabbed his shoulder. Before even looking in the person's face he knew it was a child. But what he didn't expect was that it was a girl. He let go of her.

Wild blue eyes stared up at him. She was scared.

"It was you, wasn't it? In the woods today?"

The terror in her eyes broke him.

Josh made every effort to keep his voice low and soft. "Talk to me. It's okay. Did you see anything?"



She stared right at him. “I ... I saw him.”

“Saw whom?”

“Mr. Glasby.” The girl’s gaze dropped to the floor. “It was so awful.”

“I know. Did you see anyone else?”

She shook her head.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. Do you have someone you can talk to about it?”

“Uncle Amos, but those people! They’re trying to say he had something to do with it. He didn’t, couldn’t’ve.”

“I don’t know what would make people think that.” But Josh did know that anyone who could confide in their uncle wouldn’t think them capable of such evil. But a child believing something didn’t make it true.

“My name’s Josh. What’s your name?”

“Brooklyn.”

“That’s a lovely name. I’m guessing you’re about twelve?”

She nodded.

He’d never been able to guess if he didn’t see kids her age on a regular basis.

He gently put his hand on her shoulder. “You’ll need to talk about what you saw. Processing it will help. And so you know, I’m going to have to tell Sheriff McBean that you were the one we were chasing in the woods, okay?”

She sighed with defeat but nodded. "If you have to."

Amos, finally able to break free of the people questioning him, walked over. "What's going on?"

Josh extended his hand. "Josh Schneider. We met briefly this morning."

Amos did not shake his hand. "Oh yeah. Why you talking to my niece?" His voice held a bit of irritation.

Josh looked to Brooklyn to tell him.

"I was in the woods today. I know I wasn't supposed to go out there, but I was bored, and I don't care about getting wet ... but I saw ... the dead guy."

"Oh, Brooklyn." He put his arm around the girl, despite the disdain that radiated from his words. "Let's get home." He ushered her away.

Josh attempted to stop him. "She needs to talk to the sheriff."

"Ain't gonna happen right now." Amos led Brooklyn away.

Josh pivoted and darted back into the gymnasium. He joined Chloe and the others.

Chloe asked, "Was it the person you saw?"

He nodded. "A twelve-year-old girl. Amos Watling's niece. I need to find Darrin and tell him. Have y'all seen him?"

They all shook their heads, and Lance answered, "Not since he bolted out the back with his wife."

"I guess I'll have to call him."

“You have his number?” Chloe asked.

“He gave it to me earlier today.”

Since the building was less crowded now, they decided it was clear enough to leave. But they didn't take into account how full the parking lot would still be. Despite being scared, the town was riled up enough that they congregated in a large clump in the parking lot.

The deputies were still walking around trying to push people to go home. Josh felt bad for them. A scared, angry mob was a riot brewing. Hopefully, the deputies could get the people dispersed before anything tragic happened.

Josh, Chloe, and Lance said goodbye to Garson and Loren before getting into Chloe's SUV. But they couldn't get out of the parking lot the shortest way possible, so Chloe drove around the school building looking for another way out. Ashley's news van was parked around the back side of the school.

Josh groaned. “Shoot.”

Lance chuckled. “I don't think that'd be legal.”

They passed the van.

“Bigger shoot,” Chloe said. “The drive up ahead is flooded. We have to go back.”

Chloe turned the SUV around. As they approached where Ashley's van was, she and the cameraman exited the building.

Ashley looked at them and waved them down, running to Josh's window. "Roll down your window." Her voice was muffled by the glass.

"Keep going, Chloe," Josh said.

Chloe kept the car rolling, but Ashley grabbed ahold of the mirror.

"Seriously!"

"Josh?" Chloe shot him a what-do-I-do? look.

Josh clenched his jaw. "Fine."

Chloe stopped, and he rolled down his window. "I'm not interested in giving you some sound bite."

Ashley sighed. "I know, and that's not why I stopped you. I need y'all's help."

The desperation in her eyes was not what Josh expected to see.

"Help with what?" Josh asked.

Ashley gripped the door. "Is there somewhere private we could talk, out of the rain?"

Josh said, "Not until I know what we're going to talk about."

With a huff, she pulled her phone out of her pocket. She slid open the screen and thumbed around before turning the phone to Josh. "I got this text this morning. I feel bad that my question this evening set people off, but I was just looking for answers."

Josh took her phone and read the message. His stomach lurched. Was this about Amos's son?

“Did you research about the bridge yet?” Josh asked.

She nodded. “I didn't have much time, but I couldn't find anything about a bridge collapsing.”

Josh said, “It didn't collapse completely. Amos Watling's son died falling from a bridge that was in disrepair.”

Ashley's hand went to her chest. “Oh dear. So my question was super insensitive.”

Chloe touched Josh's arm. “Let's all go back to the hotel and talk.”

Josh nodded. “That's a good idea. Ashley?”

“We're staying at the same place.” She sprinted to her van.

Josh rolled up his window. “We have to be careful not to spill too many details to her. She is a reporter who—as much as she wants answers—wants a story too.”

He wasn't sure how much to trust Ashley, but that text sent specifically to Ashley meant something far deeper than a random serial killer lurking around the town.



Chloe opened her room with Josh by her side. Poirot bounded to the door, and after a solitary bark, he shoved his nose against Chloe. His entire body wagged with his tail.

“Missed me, huh?”

Once Poirot would let them, they walked into the room. Lance went into his and Josh's room with the plan to come to hers in a minute. Ashley and Toby were stopping by their rooms first too.

Josh set the bag of Chinese food on the little table with strict orders to Poirot to leave it.

Chloe tossed her coat toward the hangers and turned to Josh.

He hung his coat on the back of a chair and tugged her into his arms.

She laid her head on his chest and forced herself to breathe—in and out—in and out. But it was shaky at best. She was pretty sure she hadn't stopped shaking since yesterday morning when they'd found Jed Partlett. At least not on the inside.

But as Josh rubbed her back, her breathing settled, along with her soul.

She lifted her head and met Josh's eyes. "Are you sure you're okay with Ashley being around? It seems a little tense between the two of you. Are you sure your breakup was amicable?"

"Mutual does not mean amicable."

"Pardon me. But seriously, are you okay?"

He nodded. "I'll be fine. Are you okay with this?"

Chloe searched her heart and mind. Was she? "I think so. I mean, it's weird. But it would be naive of me to think you've

never loved anyone other than me. You did love her, didn't you?"

"I did. We dated for like six months or something. I wanted to get married. But she said I was rushing it, especially with all that had just happened."

"What had happened?"

He told her about his premature diagnosis of a boy named Eric. The distance she'd seen in his eyes at multiple points in the last few days returned. Eric. That was the name that explained it all. She hated that Josh blamed himself. But it wasn't his fault the boy got sick or that it was a rare, complicated disease that masked itself as something else. But she didn't know what to say. Instead, she prayed for him as he unloaded his heart.

"I was devastated when I learned that Eric had died, and it fed into the rest of my life. Ashley took the brunt of it."

Chloe didn't understand why Ashley couldn't have been there for Josh the way Josh helped Chloe work through her past. But maybe that was because they weren't meant to be. Whatever the case, Chloe was glad Josh and Ashley hadn't worked out, since that meant she and Josh had a chance at a future.

"You're being quiet." Josh brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"I can't be jealous, just so you know. I have you, and I'm not going anywhere. We can work through anything together.

We've already proven that. I'm here for you."

He smiled. "I'm not sure how you got to the jealousy thing. But I appreciate it. And you know the being-there-for-you is mutual."

"Better than I think I'd like to."

They both laughed.

She reached up and cupped the sides of Josh's scratchy face. "And don't let anyone cause you to question how 'fast' we're moving. It's simply not true. We've known each other for a long time, and when you know, you know. And I know I love you." She rose on her toes and brought her lips to his.

He tightened his arms around her and deepened the kiss.

The chill that had taken up residence in her bones from being out in the cold rain for so long vanished as the passion of Josh's love filled her heart.

A knock sounded on the door.

They broke the kiss, and both groaned.

"I guess it's time to get back to business." Josh turned to the door.

"If we have to."

Ashley and Toby stood on the other side. She asked, "We're meeting in here?"

Josh nodded, and before he could close the door behind them, Lance came from their room.

Poirot greeted everyone with a sloppy kiss.



Ashley grimaced but scratched behind his ear as if she was comfortable with dogs.

They all scooped out Chinese food and settled around the room. Toby and Ashley sat in the two chairs at the little table, and Lance perched on the dresser. Chloe and Josh sat close on Poirot's bed with Poirot lying right behind them, ready to snatch any food they might drop or be willing to share.

They ate in silence for a while before Lance finally broke it. "I didn't see this text. Can y'all fill me in?"

Ashley looked at Josh. He nodded to tell her to take the lead. She explained how she had received it this morning after talking to Ingrid Ford, and then she read it aloud.

*London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down.*

*Trudy Ridge bridges falling down.*

*Those responsible have to pay.*

Ashley set her phone on the table. "Is it just me or does it make it seem like the murders are connected to an incident involving a falling bridge?"

A chill worked through Chloe's body. So much for the warmth of Josh's kiss. "It's not just you. But how did they get your phone number? What number did it come from?"

"Good questions. My number is easy to find online. It's my work phone. On my business cards, the ones I give people to be able to communicate any information about stories I'm

working on. I tried calling the number, but the voicemail hasn't been set up. Toby tried to track down the number."

Toby nodded. "Looks like it's a burner."

"Why haven't you talked to the police about it?" Josh asked.

"Who's to say I didn't?" Ashley stared Josh down with a slight tilt to her head.

"It may have been years, but I'm doubting you've changed that much."

Ashley shrugged and sat back in her chair. "Your sister was the only cop I ever liked."

"Sheriff McBean needs to know, Ashley. And he actually has the jurisdiction to look for the number legally." Josh put a forkful of chow mein in his mouth.

Ashley relented. "I know. But I want more to bring him. He's got enough going on with the fact that his wife is a member of the town council."

Chloe dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "Then what else do we need to find out before we call him?"

Josh glared at her.

Apparently, he didn't like her joining forces with Ashley. It took everything in Chloe to not burst out laughing, but the weight of the matter at hand tamped her amusement. "No, seriously. We can do a little digging too."

Ashley's eyebrows rose. "Really? You'll help?"

“I guess so,” Josh said. “We aren’t leaving until morning. Lance?”

“I’m in. I’ve got nothing better to do, and if it helps Darrin find who did this, all the better.”

Ashley jumped to her feet. “I have a couple of laptops in the van. I’ll be right back.”

Josh nodded to Lance, who hopped off the dresser and volunteered to go with her.

What just happened might have been lost on Ashley, but not Chloe. Lance carried his pistol concealed wherever he went, and with a murderer wandering around, they all wanted to take Darrin’s advice to not go anywhere alone.

Less than five minutes later, Ashley and Lance returned. She handed Josh and Chloe a laptop, and Lance said he would use his phone.

Josh turned the laptop on and used the credentials Ashley gave him to log into the laptop and onto her hotspot.

The first thing Josh typed in the search engine was “Randy Watling death.”

They read his obituary and several articles recounting his death, but it was clear that it had been an accident. A board had broken when he leaned against the side of the covered bridge. His friends weren’t standing close enough to grab him. It was a random event. No one was “responsible” for his death as far as these articles indicated.

Chloe asked, “So how do Jed Partlett and Conroy Glasby connect to the bridge?”

He searched their names in relation to Randy Watling’s death. Nothing came up.

Josh said, “I don’t know what else to search, Ashley. These guys don’t connect to the bridge and Randy’s accident at all.”

Ashley looked up from her laptop. “What about Amos Watling? Why did someone at the meeting suggest that he could have done it? You won’t even have to tell me the details about the murder, but you know. The word ‘slaughter’ came up. What does that have to do with anything? Rhetorical question, I know you aren’t at liberty to say, so don’t. Even though I want to know so bad.” She clenched her fist in front of herself.

Josh met Chloe’s eyes. They both knew exactly why the word “slaughter” had been used.

Josh typed Amos Watling’s name along with the town’s name into the search engine. The first three hits were clearly the Amos Watling they had met today. His Facebook page, his business’s website, and his business’s Facebook page.

Josh clicked on the website.

Amos Watling was a pig farmer.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Josh closed his eyes. Was this a smoking gun? No. It could simply be a coincidence. It didn't make sense. Why would Amos or anyone else hold these men responsible for Randy's death? "I can't hold Darrin out of this conversation any longer."

Ashley raised her eyebrows. "You talk about the sheriff like he's your personal friend."

"What can I say? We connected when we had dinner at their house yesterday, and then he went on the search with us this morning. It may have been less than three days since we met him, but he's a kindred spirit."

"How do you know he's not the killer?"

"Trust me; that one I know." Josh grabbed his cell phone and dialed Darrin's number. When he answered, Josh said, "I've got a few things you should know."

"Why don't y'all come over? I think Pauline would be glad to have more people here. She's been baking again."

“We’ve added two to our cohort though. The reporter Ashley Dupont and her cameraman, Toby.”

“Really?” Darrin’s voice tightened. “Why would you be talking to her?”

“It’s complicated, but she’s part of why I need to talk to you. She received a text that we can only speculate is from the murderer.”

“Oh. Then if she joins us, she’s gonna have to follow my rules. I can’t have her publishing a story that stirs up the public any worse than they already are. Can I trust her?”

“I think so. I do.”

“That’s enough for me. Come on over. Brownies are coming out of the oven.”

“Be there shortly.”

They hung up, and Josh met Ashley’s gaze. “I gave him my vote of confidence in you. Please don’t make me regret it.”

A smug look came over her face. “Come on, Josh. You know me.”

“Exactly. You want the story and will do whatever necessary to get it. But please don’t share anything without Darrin’s consent. You don’t want to make it more difficult for him than it already is.”

Her demeanor softened. “You’re right. I can sit on information until it’s solved. But I *will* tell the story.”

“Sure.”

“And believe it or not, I’m a little scared.”

For Ashley Dupont to admit in the open that she was “a little scared” probably meant she was terrified. “We’ll watch each other’s backs. It’ll be okay.” He hoped he was right, but he had an inkling it wasn’t over yet.

They cleaned up their dinner and prepared to leave. Josh was putting the leftovers in the mini fridge when his phone rang.

It was Garson. Josh didn’t want to answer it. Could they end up spending another night out in the cold rain? Would they have to find yet another slaughtered body?

He finally answered it before it could go to voicemail. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to let you guys know there’s no way out of town at this point. There was another mudslide, and it covered 460 South. And to the north, there’s a bridge out due to flooding. We’re going to try for the back roads, but y’all might as well sleep in and not try to rush home in the morning. I’ll let you know if we find a way around.”

“Thanks, Garson.” Josh hung up and groaned. So much for going home. He relayed the information to Lance and Chloe.

They piled into Chloe’s SUV with Poirot in the far back and headed to Darrin and Pauline’s house. The three guys crammed in the back to let Ashley sit in the front with Chloe. The windshield wipers kept a steady beat echoing louder than Josh’s thoughts. If the rain kept falling, they were going to have more trouble than just washed-out highways.

The entire area was already saturated. Every lower area in parking lots and the road, every ditch and gully, were filled with water. There wasn't anywhere for it to go. The river was at the top of its banks, so much so that the path they'd walked along two days ago was underwater now. Still the rain didn't let up.

Chloe pulled into the McBeans' driveway, and the tires spun in the mud. Josh was afraid they were going to be stuck, but thankfully, the tires caught and pulled them the rest of the way up the gravel driveway.

Darrin appeared in the door by the kitchen. They hopped out and dashed to the door to avoid getting wetter than necessary.

The scent of homemade bread and fresh brownies greeted them inside. Josh's mouth watered. "Pauline. It smells amazing in here." It was like walking into Chloe's mom's kitchen.

She looked up from the dough she was kneading and attempted to smile at him, but her lips barely twitched.

Josh's heart hurt for her. He gestured at the newest members of their posse. "This is Ashley and Toby."

Ashley tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She must be nervous. He'd seen that gesture before. She glanced back and forth from Darrin to Pauline. "I'm sorry about my insensitive question at the town meeting. I truly didn't know enough, but Josh told me. I think you'll understand why I asked though—after you see this." She pulled out her phone and handed it to Darrin.



As he read the text, his face fell, and he handed the phone to his wife.

Pauline's hand flew to her chest, and she gasped. "We should sit." She motioned to the table, and everyone took a seat.

Darrin asked, "Someone is blaming the town council for Randy's death, is that the conclusion we are jumping to?"

Josh shrugged. "Not with both feet."

"It's not a leap." Pauline dropped her head into her hands.

Darrin ran his hand along his wife's back. "Why on earth? It was an accident."

"It was, but it was avoidable." Pauline lifted her head and met her husband's gaze. "The state of that bridge had been brought before the council. We rushed through approval for a repair job, but it wasn't enough. The guy we hired did a shoddy job. So I can fathom someone blaming us. I've made as much peace with it as possible, and Stacy has been most forgiving. I talked to her not long after it happened."

Darrin slumped against the table. "But you couldn't have known how bad a job the guy you hired would do."

"But we could have done something more and not rushed to remove the caution signs and rope."

Josh shook his head. "My experience with boys that age is that they wouldn't have listened to signs and barriers anyway."

Darrin nodded. "Josh is right. This isn't anyone's fault."

Pauline hugged herself. “I know. But I have a feeling someone out there thinks it was our fault.”

Josh leaned back in his chair. “But the question is: who?”



Chloe sat on the couch with Darrin and Pauline’s five-year-old, reading the little girl a book. They’d all sat at the table for a while, but the kids in the next room were getting restless, aware of the tension filling the space, so Chloe and Lance went to help distract them.

Lance was playing a board game with the older kids, minus the oldest one, who hadn’t emerged from his room since they arrived.

“Belle, what time do you all normally go to bed?” Chloe asked the second oldest.

“Nine o’clock.”

Chloe checked her watch. It was already fifteen minutes past. “Why don’t you all get ready for bed as soon as your game is done? Help your mom out.”

With a few groans, they agreed.

Chloe took the little one and helped her find pajamas and brush her teeth. Then they went to the living room and read a few more books.

The older kids got ready for bed when told and came back out and gathered around Chloe and the book she was reading aloud.

Pauline came in a few minutes later. Her eyes were puffy, and the tip of her nose resembled Rudolph's. When she saw the kids in their pajamas, she smiled. She mouthed a "thank you" to Chloe.

As soon as she read the last word, Chloe closed the book. "I think it's time to get in bed, kids."

They all scurried down the hall with their mother right behind them.

Lance sat in the armchair a few feet away with his hands folded across his stomach and his head resting against the back of the chair, eyes closed.

Chloe glanced into the kitchen. She could only see Josh and Ashley sitting at the table. They were talking with their heads close to one another.

A burning sensation ignited in Chloe's stomach and chest. Hadn't she just told Josh she couldn't be jealous of Ashley? She had no reason to be, right? After all they'd been through ...

But still she couldn't help the weird feeling that sprang up within her.

She hated it though.

Josh and Ashley had shared in each other's lives. But that was years ago.

There really wasn't any logic to jealousy.

But that never stopped it from coming. How many times had the monster reared its green-eyed head in her life? Every time her sister walked into their parent's house with her gaggle of children. But at least that one made sense. Growing up, Chloe had been the one to want to be a mom, but until she and Josh got serious, it appeared that it would never happen for Chloe, not after losing her one and only boyfriend in high school. But she and Josh had something solid. She didn't need to feel like her stomach was turning into a boulder.

Gah. But it wouldn't go away.

Chloe stood and roamed into the kitchen.

Ashley jumped back from Josh.

He turned and looked up at Chloe. Extending his arm, he invited her close.

She stepped into his embrace, draping her arm across his shoulders.

He rested his hand on her opposite hip.

The jealous burning was squelched.

"How's it going?" She wished she had a more intelligent question to ask, but she really didn't know what they had told Ashley in the last hour.

Ashley crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Josh here is jumping to conclusions, as always."

The muscles in Josh's arm twitched. "That's not fair." His voice was tight but flat.

“Isn’t it?” Ashley glared at Josh for a moment before looking at Chloe. “If he hasn’t told you yet, you should know that he is one to make rash decisions, every time. Patients, relationships alike. When we were dating, he was way too quick to decide we should get married. And then, he was way too quick to decide we needed to break up. Don’t fight with him if you want your relationship to continue; he’ll decide it’s not worth fighting for.”

Chloe felt her insides start to smolder again, but it wasn’t out of jealousy at all. “You’re wrong about him on that front. He apparently learned his lesson, if what you say is true, because he waited seven years to ask me out. Trust me, nothing rash about that.”

Chloe squeezed his shoulder.

Josh cleared his throat. “I’m sorry you feel I was like that in our relationship, Ashley. But regarding Amos Watling, I don’t think I’m jumping to any conclusions. Just taking all the information I have and pointing out what I see. I’m not saying he did it; I’m just saying he needs to be considered.”

Chloe asked Ashley, “Why do you think he didn’t do it?”

“I didn’t say that he didn’t, but I believe in the justice system—ininnocent until *proven* guilty.”

“Are there any other leads?” Chloe ran a finger along the seam on Josh’s shoulder.

They both shook their heads. Ashley raised her index finger. “But that’s my mission. I’m going to dig and see what

knowledge was available to the public. If we can discover the killer knows information the public didn't, that might help. And I'm going to dig for anyone else connected too."

"But you're keeping a lid on the story?" Chloe was nervous for the families and everyone involved if this story was out before it was appropriate.

Ashley's eyes softened, and she leaned forward on the table. "I am. My producer isn't going to be happy, but I'll just tell him I've been gagged temporarily. The story will be better as a bigger piece anyway."

Chloe almost wanted to laugh. It was as if Ashley was trying to convince herself more than Chloe.

She pulled out the chair in front of her and sat. "One more question, how can we help keep Pauline safe? Is there anything we can do?"

Josh moved his arm to the back of the chair Chloe sat in. "There has to be something. I'll talk to Darrin when he comes back in and see what he thinks. The other council member should be addressed too. If this is related to Randy Watling's death, Pauline isn't the only one the killer could be coming after."

Chloe nodded. "Might be easier to keep them safe if they were in the same location."

Ashley spun her phone on the table. "Perhaps, or make it twice as hard."

Chloe tilted her head. "Not an optimist, I take it?"

“A realist.” She stopped her phone. “What if this isn’t about the Watling kid and someone is just trying to throw us off or stir up trouble in the town by sending me that text?”

“That’s an awful thought. But really, it’s an awful thing either way.”

The sense of jealousy she’d had earlier seemed completely foolish now. There was something much worse lurking around out in the rain that pounded on the roof of the McBeans’ house.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Josh slid out of the back of Darrin’s sheriff’s SUV at Amos Watling’s house. Darrin had asked Chloe, Josh, and Poirot to come and see if the dog could sniff anything out. They’d also picked up Deputy Mario Rixon on the way to the Watling farm.

Josh and Chloe hung back with Poirot at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the wrap-around porch of the older farmhouse, and Darrin and Mario went to the front door.

On the way over, Mario had made an interesting observation that didn’t do Amos any favors. Apparently both murders took place close to, but not on, his property. One to the north, one to the south.

Darrin knocked on the door. “Amos? It’s Darrin. We need to chat.”

Nothing.

There were several lights on inside, and Amos’s truck sat in the driveway. Someone was home.



Darrin knocked a little harder. “Amos?”

The door opened. “Darrin, it’s ten o’clock at night.”

“I’m sorry to come by so late. But we need to talk.”

Amos’s eyebrows were furrowed, and when he glanced at Josh, his scowl deepened. “What are you doing here?”

Darrin said, “We just have a few questions. Where would you like us to talk?”

After a slight growl, he said, “Come on inside. The dog is fine too—even the animals deserve to be out of the rain tonight.”

They all went into a living room furnished with two old couches and an older armchair arranged around a wood-burning stove. The fire made the room warm and inviting.

Poirot immediately lay down by the stove before any of the humans could find seats.

Josh and Chloe hung back as Amos took a seat in the armchair, and the sheriff and deputy took the closest couch. They then sat on the far couch.

They were out of place. They didn’t belong in the middle of a police investigation; Poirot wasn’t even a police dog. Chloe had confided in Josh before they left Darrin’s house that she doubted Poirot could be of any help in this situation. But he reminded her how Poirot had been the one to find her hat on the ATV a couple of months ago. Maybe there would be a repeat of that here.

Not that he thought there would be, but he couldn't help but think of the positive and say it—even if he didn't believe it.

Darrin cleared his throat. “I don't really know how to start. I guess I'll just ask, but first, Amos, please understand I'm just doing my job and following any lead that I have.”

Amos shook his head. “This isn't a good start, Darrin. Just ask the stupid questions. We all know where this is going.”

“Where did you go after Conroy helped you out of the mud last night?”

“I came home.” He turned. “Stacy?”

A slightly round woman wearing a pair of yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt came into the room. Her lips pulled tight together. She nodded at Darrin.

“What time did Amos get home from his sister's last night?” Darrin asked.

She rested her hands on the back of Amos's chair. “Probably around ten thirty.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket and opened an app. When she found what she was looking for, she handed the phone to Darrin. “There. Ten forty-two.”

Darrin held it in a way that all of them could see the screen. It was doorbell-cam footage of their front door and driveway of Amos pulling up with a muddy truck and spare tire and then entering the house.

She took the phone back and pointed out that the next video was of Amos the next morning. He disappeared toward the barn. The truck stayed in sight. He was only gone for twenty

minutes, and the next clip showed him driving away about fifteen minutes before he arrived at the police station and told them about seeing Conroy the night before.

Josh didn't say anything, but he knew this house would have a back door and that an ATV was used to transport Conroy to the location where he was killed, which according to Mario wasn't far from here.

"Thank you, Stacy," Darrin said. "What about when Jed was murdered?"

Stacy put her hands on her hips. "You can't seriously think Amos had anything to do with this."

"We have to ask the questions. Someone indicated that these men deserve what is happening because of what happened to Randy. And not too many people are skilled at exsanguinating a body."

Stacy gasped, and Amos flinched. They didn't know that detail. Josh's doubts about Amos melted. Either he was an expert poker player, or he hadn't known. And if he hadn't known, he didn't murder those men.

Amos sat forward in his chair. "I didn't do it."

"Did you know about the repair job that was done to the bridge?"

"That it was rushed through by the town council and that the man hired was a swindler? I knew all that. But I don't hold them responsible for Randy's death. The boy had been told not to play on that bridge a hundred times. It's been hit with

floodwaters too often without adequate repairs. It was an accident.”

Stacy sniffed and wiped her face. “I can’t tell you how many times we told him to stay off it.”

“Nonetheless, may we let Poirot sniff around? Has Conroy been around here recently?”

“Nah, maybe a month ago.”

Darrin looked at Chloe.

She said, “That is long enough ago not to affect Poirot.”

He perked his head.

They all went outside, and Chloe had Poirot sniff Conroy’s scent again. With her command to search, Poirot darted around the driveway and ran around the yard, stopping to sniff every few yards.

Amos asked Josh, “Is he picking something up?”

“No, he’s still searching to find even a hint of it. There’s a distinct difference in his demeanor, especially noticeable in his ears, when he hits on something.”

Chloe opened the door to the smaller of two barns. Poirot barked and darted in.

Josh and Darrin followed, with Amos and the others not far behind.

This was an equipment barn with different pieces of machinery that Josh couldn’t identify, but an ATV sat in the corner.

Poirot trotted around, smelling everything.

Josh held his breath when Poirot got to the ATV. Would he hit on it?

Poirot sniffed every inch of the ATV and then darted away.

Chloe caught Josh's eye and shook her head. If Conroy had been on that ATV in the last forty-eight hours, Poirot would have indicated.

Amos was looking more and more innocent. But if he didn't murder those men because of their part in the death of his son, who did?



While Josh and Chloe had been off with Darrin interviewing Amos Watling, Ashley and Pauline had settled at the kitchen table with a pot of tea and way too many pastries. Lance and Toby, armed with Darrin's shotgun, stood guard. The women searched for any information that would either point them to or away from Amos. And Ashley hoped that if the evidence pointed away from Amos, it would point *to* someone else. But she didn't just hope; she prayed. Something she'd forgotten to do too much as of late.

So far she'd read the minutes of all the meetings that addressed the bridge up until the accident. No one seemed to say anything that set her investigator bells a-ringing.

Around midnight, the four who had been with Amos came in through the kitchen door.

Ashley turned to them. “Well, did he do it?”

Josh shook his head.

Darrin said, “There is nothing more than the circumstantial pointing to him.”

“Poirot didn’t hit on anything,” Chloe added.

Pauline touched her cheek. “But if he didn’t ...”

Darrin shrugged. “I was hoping y’all found something.”

Pauline said, “No.”

Ashley lifted her index finger. “Not yet. Y’all get some sleep, and I’ll keep looking.”

She dove back into her research, only vaguely aware of the conversation behind her. Her ears only perked up when Darrin asked Pauline if she had talked to Gary Russel.

She said, “He didn’t answer his phone, so I left a message.”

“I’m sending Mario over to check on him. He may have refused protection earlier, but I’m not taking any more chances.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Ashley reengaged with her research, and after telling her good night, Darrin and Pauline left the room. They had already invited everyone to stay. Their second oldest had been relegated to a sibling’s room to give Chloe and Ashley a place to crash, and air mattresses had been set up for the guys in the living room. But while everyone else got some shut-eye,

Ashley kept reading the minutes and anything else she could get her hands on that might point them in the right direction.

Her eyelids were getting heavy as she read yet another set of minutes from a town council meeting. Minutes were definitely not exciting reading on any level but especially not at one o'clock in the morning. This particular set was from the meeting immediately following the death of Randy Watling.

Gary Russel had brought the bridge repairs up but had been shut down by Jedidiah Partlett, who said it was too soon and the pain of the loss was too fresh.

Ashley fought to stay awake, but she reached the point where she had to lay her head down, and she lost the battle.

Something wet against her pant leg woke her up.

She lifted her head and investigated. A brown lab nosed her again. She rubbed behind his ears. "Hey, Poirot. You think I should keep working, huh?"

Glancing at the microwave, she noted the time. Five o'clock. How had she slept at the table for four hours?

She woke her laptop back up, glad she had plugged it in, and read the minutes of the next two meetings, all while petting Poirot's head.

When she made it to a third meeting, Poirot went and lay down by the oven.

About halfway through the meeting, Gary Russel had once again brought up the bridge. She wished she could hear the

way he said it. So she searched to see if there was a video recording of the meeting.

After a few moments, she found what she was looking for on YouTube.

On the video, Gary's demeanor was agitated before he had the opportunity to speak. He wiped his forehead before he began. "We need to address the bridge."

Jed said, "Bringing that up again? We've put signs back up, and I'm looking for a reputable company to tear it down, but it's just not in the budget right now."

"It's not enough. Maybe we should take it out of our own salaries and get it taken care of."

Pauline replied, "We will, but not today. We have to address the issue of the school board's request first. Everyone in town understands that they must stay off that bridge." Pauline changed the topic.

But Gary wasn't satisfied. He muttered something, but his mic had been switched off, so the camera didn't pick it up.

Ashley had always been good at reading lips, but the video was too small to do it this time. She needed to zoom in and isolate him.

It took her nearly twenty minutes, but she did it. Using some software, she was able to focus in on Gary's lips.

She was about to hit play when Poirot jumped from the ground and ran to the doorway, where Chloe stood rubbing her face.



Chloe said, “Did you ever sleep?”

“For a little bit until Poirot woke me up.”

“Sorry about that.” Chloe pulled out a chair.

“No worries. The table wasn’t exactly comfortable. But don’t sit there, come look at this with me.”

Chloe walked around the table and took the chair next to Ashley, and she explained what she’d found and done. “Can you read lips?”

“Sorta. My mom and I try to communicate that way when we don’t want dad or the brothers to catch what we’re saying.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“One older, two younger. And an older sister too.”

“Nice.” Before Chloe could ask about her family, Ashley clicked *play*. “He’s definitely saying something here, but *what* is the question?”

They watched it five times and both agreed that he was saying, “We will pay for this—one way or another.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Chloe couldn't believe her eyes. Was that really what he said? Did anyone in that room hear him? Was it just a spooky premonition or could it be that one of the council members was the killer? If so, Pauline would definitely be Gary's next target.

"Was there anything in the minutes that would indicate that he wouldn't hold Pauline responsible too?"

Ashley shook her head. "Nope, she was the one that shut him down right before this."

Chloe sat back in her chair. "I wonder why he didn't try and grab her last night then."

"Maybe he's waiting for her to let her guard down. We're all here, and she hasn't gone anywhere. As soon as they called for no one to leave their homes alone, he may have had to think of a different strategy."

Chloe nodded. "Right. She told me she would normally have been at a women's event at the church last night, but that was

canceled. So he has to rethink his plan.”

“That makes sense to me. Now what?”

“You show Darrin what you found.”

“Is it really enough though?”

“Might be enough to talk to him.” Chloe fixed her ponytail.  
“What else do we know about the killer that would need to be true of Gary if he’s the guy?”

“How to slaughter a pig.” Ashley turned and searched Gary Russel’s name.

Chloe watched in amazement. Ashley knew exactly how to dig for information in ways Chloe would never have thought of.

Darrin and Pauline both wandered into the kitchen about ten minutes later, looking exhausted.

Ashley said, “You two might want to sit down for this information.”

They sat across from Ashley and Chloe.

Ashley filled them in about the meeting minutes, showed them the video of Gary’s mutterings, and then revealed the most recent information she’d found. “His dad was a pig farmer. There’s a good chance he had experience slaughtering pigs too.”

Darrin wrapped his arm around his wife, who buried her head against his shoulder. He said, “I had no idea. He moved

here about twenty years ago. But where on earth would he have gotten the CO<sub>2</sub> needed to knock them out?”

“This.” Ashley turned the computer toward herself again and pulled up a Facebook post with a picture of Gary Russel. The post bragged about his latest beer-brewing success, especially with how well the carbonation turned out, and in the background were several CO<sub>2</sub> tanks. “Clearly, he has access.”

Darrin sighed. “I guess it’s likely to be someone I know, isn’t it?”

Chloe nodded. “Unfortunately, the chances of that are high in a town where you know everyone.”

“But I had hoped it was some outsider.”

Ashley said, “We don’t know it’s him, but he’s a good person to question.”

Pauline lifted her head. “Glad I didn’t agree to meet him last night.”

Chloe’s lungs seized. “I’d say. He wanted to meet with you?”

“After the meeting, when we were on our way out of the gymnasium, he asked if we could get together and discuss what we should do. I was too overwhelmed about it all and told him we could talk tomorrow—well, I guess now today.”

Darrin turned toward his wife. “Steer clear of him just in case. Mario has been sitting outside Gary’s house since around midnight. When he got there, the car was in the carport and the lights were out. Gary didn’t answer the door, but Mario

assumed he just didn't hear the knocking. The bell doesn't work. He said he'd call as soon as he saw life."

Pauline's cell phone rang, and she answered. She stood and walked out of the room. A moment later, Darrin's phone rang.

"Sheriff McBean." He paused and listened. "Where?" Another pause while the person on the other end spoke. "Got it. Keep me informed. Let's start knocking on doors."

He hung up and looked at Chloe and Ashley. "River's rising rapidly. Y'all might want to go to the hotel and retrieve your belongings. Come back here, we're far enough up the mountain to be safe as long as the waters don't rise like they did in Noah's day."

Chloe jumped to her feet and went to Josh and woke the guys up. Lance decided to stay behind to help keep Pauline safe while Josh grabbed all his stuff and car.

Pauline appeared from the hallway. "Sounds like waters are rising; we need to make sure people are evacuating."

Chloe told her what Darrin had said.

"Good. I'll make phone calls while you guys are gone and get as many people as possible moving to higher ground. If you all are willing, I know some people down by the river that could probably use assistance."

Chloe nodded. "For sure. We'd love to help."

Toby, Ashley, Chloe, and Josh headed out, leaving Lance with Pauline. Darrin also left to help with evacuations. He still

hadn't heard from Mario, but as soon as Darrin did, he planned to go talk to Gary Russel.



Josh grabbed all of his belongings and threw them in Chloe's SUV. By the time he came back out with Lance's stuff and put it in his car, she had already put her gear in her vehicle.

Josh found Chloe down by Ashley's room. "You ladies ready?"

Ashley said, "Yep, just waiting on Toby."

He emerged from his room with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "Ready."

The four of them checked out of the motel and then headed back to the McBeans' place.

Josh had to go around a few puddles that Chloe and Toby were able to maneuver in their larger vehicles; Lance's little coupe couldn't handle any standing water.

The river was significantly deeper now than it had been last night. It was spilling into the neighboring road and licking the bottoms of the bridges.

The biggest problem was that the rain was still falling. Everyone near the river needed to get to higher ground immediately.

But how many of them were still afraid that the murderer was lurking outside their door looking for his next victim?

Most of the town didn't know the connection to the bridge and maybe feared they were at risk.

As quickly as the team could manage the roads that were turning into side rivers and then navigate the McBeans' muddy driveway, they arrived. They dashed inside to find Pauline decked out in a raincoat and galoshes.

"Oh good. The kids are all set and will be fine here alone. Who wants to help? Anyone who doesn't want to is more than welcome to stay here, but I'm not." She walked right past them and out the door.

Josh tossed Chloe a what-on-earth? look. "Shouldn't she stay here? Lance or I could stay with her."

Chloe chuckled. "A homeschooling mom of five who's on the city council. Yeah, she's not going to be one to sit around and do nothing when something needs doing."

"Obviously!" Josh followed Pauline.

All six of them plus Poirot, who refused to be left behind, climbed in Pauline's Suburban. Toby, with his news camera, and Ashley took the third row, while Josh, Chloe, and Poirot took the center, and Lance sat shotgun.

In ten minutes, they were driving along the side of the river, which was already higher than it had been the last time they passed this way. About ten houses sat along the east side of the road opposite the river. The mountain towered almost straight up behind the houses, so if the river reached their doorsteps, the people would have nowhere to go.

Pauline parked along the curb. “Let’s split up and knock on these houses and make sure everyone is out. We’ll leapfrog to the next house until we get to the end. If they don’t know where to go, tell them they can go to my mother-in-law’s. She’s got coffee and biscuits waiting.”

Josh, Chloe, and Poirot went to the second house in the row, while Pauline and Lance took the first.

Ashley and Toby were going to grab some footage of the flood and then knock on a few doors too.

At Josh’s knock, a teenage boy answered the door. The boy was in a pair of pajama pants and T-shirt and had bedhead to rival Einstein. “We don’t want any. Thanks.” He went to close the door, but Josh stuck his foot inside.

“We aren’t selling anything. We’re here to tell you that you need to evacuate. The river is rising.”

The boy went from groggy to fully awake in a fraction of a millisecond. He looked past Josh and Chloe, eyes growing wider. Spinning around, he yelled, “Mom! Wake up. We have to leave.”

“Is it just the two of you here?”

Back to Josh he said, “Yep. Thank you.”

“Y’all have a vehicle and a place to go?”

“Yep. Thanks.” The boy zoomed into the living room and grabbed a case holding a folded flag off the shelf.



Josh's heart swelled, and he wished he could ask about the flag, but instead he turned. They went down the steps and along the road to the fourth house. No one answered, but he kept knocking. "The river is rising. If there's anyone here, you need to evacuate." He waited, but no response came.

Chloe said, "Maybe we should check around the side."

He agreed, so they went around the side of the house and knocked on the side door as well. No one.

She pointed. "There's no car in the carport. Perhaps they already left."

On to the next house. The sixth house in the row.

Lance and Pauline had made it to the fifth and were helping a young mom load her kids into the car, along with a box of diapers and other important items.

Josh rang the video doorbell and waited.

The light indicating someone was watching lit up. "Who's there?" The digitized voice of an old man came from the indistinguishable camera.

"My name's Josh. I'm with Hands and Feet Aid Ministries. There's an evacuation order. The river is getting higher by the minute. You aren't safe here."

"If it's my time to go, so be it. I ain't leaving."

"Sir, we can help you get out if that's an issue. But you need to get to safety."

"I'm fine. Get lost."

“Sir, it’s important that you leave now.”

The light turned off.

Josh groaned, but a slight thumping sound came from the other side of the door.

Chloe turned to leave, but Josh caught her arm. “Wait.”

The door opened, revealing an elderly man with a walker—the wheels on the tile floor must have made the thumping noise.

Josh smiled at the man whose wrinkles revealed a man accustomed to scowling.

He grunted. “I told ya, I ain’t leaving. This is my house, and the captain goes down with his ship.”

Josh spied a few pictures on the wall behind the man. Old black-and-white photos of men in Navy uniforms hung beside color pictures of little children. “Your grandchildren—and are those great-grandchildren?—they’d want you to be somewhere safe right now.”

“That may be. But I can’t leave, even if I wanted to. So, I don’t want to.”

Josh opened the screen door and narrowed the space between them. “If that’s the issue, sir, we can absolutely help you.”

At that point, a minivan whipped into the man’s driveway. The man’s lips curled upward.

“Who’s that?” Josh asked.

“My granddaughter.”

The woman of not-quite-thirty jumped out of the vehicle and ran to the door. “Grandpa, we have to get you out of here.”

He took Josh’s arm. “Now I guess I can’t argue with *her*. She has twin boys, you know. Anyone who knows what’s best for themselves will listen to her.”

“Is there anything we can help you grab?”

The man turned and looked at the wall. “The pictures. And my wife.”

“Yes, sir. Where is she?” Panic shot through Josh. He’d had no idea there was another person in the house.

“On the mantle.” The man pointed a crooked finger into the living room.

An ornate urn sat upon the shelf above the fireplace.

“I will get her.”

Chloe placed her hand briefly on Josh’s back. “I’ll get the pictures.” She turned to the granddaughter. “Go ahead and get him in the van, and we’ll grab the important stuff.”

She nodded.

Josh gently lifted the urn and cradled it. In the kitchen, he found a few towels to wrap it in. He carried it out to the man who was now sitting in the front seat of the van. “Here she is.”

“Thank you, son.” He pointed at Chloe. “She’s more than a colleague?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t wait. Life is over before you know it.”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely.” Josh squeezed the man’s arm and turned back to the house.

Chloe was coming out with a box full of pictures, and the man’s granddaughter had a box of medications.

Pauline and Lance had ended up two more houses down from them. The farther down the road, the closer to the street the houses sat.

A truck drove into the driveway of the house where Pauline and Lance were.

The door of the pickup made a creak as it opened.

Josh couldn’t see the driver. But as soon as Pauline came out the front door and he saw the look on her face, he ran.

She stood frozen, and a man approached her. Josh couldn’t hear him but quickly recognized the man approaching Pauline as Gary Russel.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Josh ran across the front yards and hurdled a low shrub and slowed to a walk when he reached the house where Pauline was.

Pauline had pulled out her phone. “Did you do it, Gary?”

“Do what? What are you talking about? I just heard you were down here. We need to go help Mrs. Abernathy evacuate. I’d go myself, but you know how she is. If you aren’t there, she won’t listen to me.” Gary moved closer to Pauline.

Pauline put her phone to her ear. “Darrin, I found Gary.”

His eyes widened slightly. “What on earth? Pauline, you know me. I didn’t do anything.”

Josh could sense Gary growing desperate. His eyes darted around and then made contact with Josh.

Gary took three quick steps to Pauline and grabbed her arm. “I said come with me.” He yanked her toward his truck.

Josh closed the gap and slammed into Gary and shoved him away. “She isn’t coming with you.”

“Who do you think you are?” Gary pushed him. “We have city council business to attend to. You’re just some stupid outsider who has no place interfering.”

Gary swung a punch at Josh, but he ducked out of the way.

“Let’s just wait until Darrin gets here, and we can talk.”

“I’m done talking. Pauline, I need you to come with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you right now. Sorry, Gary. There are people here that need to get out of their homes too. The water is rising too fast.”

Josh glanced at the river; it was now covering the first lane of the four-lane road. They needed to get out now.

Pauline continued, “So either help or get lost. Better yet, go lock yourself in a jail cell until Darrin can deal with you.”

Cars pulled out of the last two driveways where Ashley and Toby went to warn the residents.

Toby had his camera up in front of him, clearly filming, and approached the situation.

Josh wished Toby had caught Gary’s attempted attack on camera.

Poirot ran up beside Josh and growled at Gary. Hopefully, Poirot’s presence meant Chloe was close, but Josh didn’t want to risk taking his eyes off Gary.

He darted his gaze back and forth among those surrounding Pauline and snarled.

If only Josh were confident that they could do a citizen's arrest, but what did they have to restrain this man? Gary had already made it clear that he wouldn't go without a fight.

Chloe screamed, "Oh no!" She was farther away than Josh had expected.

He whipped around. She stood on the top of the garden wall in front of the house behind him. She pointed upstream.

The river was swelling even faster than it had been before. A wall of water rushed downstream and was headed toward them.

By the time Josh turned around, Gary was in his pickup and driving away.

The team all ran to Pauline's Suburban and climbed in as the water licked the tires. As soon as everyone was in, she punched the gas pedal before they even had time to close the doors.

"Everyone was out, right?" Josh asked.

"I believe so." Chloe squeezed his knee.

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. Poirot laid his paws and head on Chloe's lap and whimpered. Josh understood how the dog felt right now. Hopefully, they'd make it out too and wouldn't get swept away in the floodwaters.



Chloe petted Poirot's head and leaned into Josh. A wave of water hit the back side of the Suburban. The SUV rocked. They needed higher ground now.

Pauline sped down the road, trying to outrun the flood, but between the wet pavement and the bends in the road because of the mountains, she couldn't go fast enough. They approached the main intersection—the road they needed to go up the mountain.

The parking lot of the courthouse and a bank to the east was underwater. Chloe watched helplessly as the water level against the old buildings rose higher.

Something slammed into the back of the vehicle. Chloe jerked around. A tree, roots and all, barreled past.

With one tire up on the sidewalk, Pauline kept the SUV moving forward.

Chloe's heart raced, no longer confident that they would actually make it out of this.

Lance smacked the dash. "Wateredge Drive is flooded, with a tree in the middle."

"Shoot." Pauline's voice shook as much as Chloe's insides. "Hang on, everyone. I'm going to aim for getting us up the ramp to the community center."

A parking garage topped with the building butted up against the mountain. Hopefully, that would be high enough, and if not, they could huff it up the side of the mountain. Although the open rock face made Chloe question how climbable it



would be where the trees covered. But anything was better than getting dragged downriver.

Pauline gunned it, barely missing a lamppost on one side and an evergreen on the other. She met some resistance getting through the mud before getting to the ramp that led to the top, but once her tires hit the asphalt, the vehicle sped up to relatively dry ground.

At the top of the ramp, she pulled the vehicle right up next to the building and stopped.

They all got out and walked to the walled edge of the parking structure.

The flood was increasing faster than Chloe could fathom. If they had been down there for another minute, they'd have been washed away. The water was filled with all sorts of debris, no longer just trees that had been washed away but now parts of houses and lawn equipment. A child's slide swirled around and smacked into the concrete building.

She was certain she'd seen that very slide on the front porch of the family that Pauline and Lance had helped get out of their house. At least the people had gotten out. But their lives would never be the same. How bad were those houses now? Would they be able to recover anything or was everything going the way of the slide?

The water crashed into the side and spilled into the second level of the parking garage now.

Josh gripped Chloe's elbow. "We should go to higher ground."

Chloe eyed the side of the hill on the other side of the ramp. There was no way they would be able to climb it. Water coursed through the valley that dipped between two rises. And the kudzu, while not quite full of its spring foliage yet, was thick and tangled and would be impassable without a machete.

"But where?" she asked.

Pauline said, "There's a ladder to the roof on the back side of the building. Praying that's high enough."

They didn't have any choice.

Sloshing through giant puddles, the seven of them ran to the back of the building. They found the ladder behind the dumpsters. But the ladder had a giant metal covering, presumably to prevent people from getting to the roof unnecessarily.

Chloe stopped. "Now what?"

"We climb around it." Lance looked at her. "I forget your background. You never would have learned to sneak around these things. Here, Pauline." Lance laced his hands together as a step for her.

Pauline used it.

Toby made another step by pressing his wrists together and bracing his forearms on his chest.

Pauline was up. Ashley went next.

Chloe gripped Josh's arm. "How are we going to get Poirot up there?"

"We've got ropes in our packs." He kissed her forehead and darted back to the Suburban.

But the water was splashing above the top level of the garage now.

"Chloe," Lance said, "you're up."

"But Poirot."

"Get up there so you can pull him up. You know he'll go up better if you're already there."

She nodded and used the guys' steps. She reached the top bit of the ladder and pulled herself up. Poirot barked for her. His paws were now underwater.

Josh ran back and tied the rope to Poirot's harness. Josh made a step like Lance had. "You go up and help lift him."

Lance nodded, took the end of the rope from Josh, and used the step to boost himself up to the rungs.

Chloe leaned over the edge of the roof, praying Poirot would cooperate. Josh picked up the dog.

As soon as Lance was at the top, he pulled Poirot.

Chloe whistled for him. "You got this, boy. We've got you. Come on up."

He let the guys lift him without wiggling or fighting it at all. Once he was in reach, she grabbed him and pulled him to

herself. He wrapped his front legs around Chloe's neck, and she pulled him onto the roof.

Once she'd set Poirot down, she redirected her attention to Josh. He gave Toby a boost.

But how was Josh going to get up? Lance should have been last—he knew how to get past these things, plus he was taller.

Josh said, "Toss me the rope." The water was up to his knees.

She untied the rope from Poirot's harness and tossed it to Josh while Lance held the other end. Both men wrapped the rope around their waists and tied it off. Normally they had more equipment for climbing, but that was still in the Suburban, about to be swept away downriver.

The thought of all her equipment needing to be replaced hurt. It wasn't cheap. But better stuff than human life being lost.

She watched Josh scale the wall until he could grip the ladder.

He climbed one rung after another. The water followed him up the building, slamming into the structure with wild, muddy waves. Just a few more.

Panic rose in Chloe's chest. She wanted to yell at Josh to hurry, but it wouldn't help.

Finally at the top, he wrapped his arms around her in a quick hug. "Higher." He pointed to the next level up on the building.

They were only on a five-foot-wide lip that went around the side of the structure. There had to be another ladder.

Josh and Lance untied the rope, and Chloe quickly tied it back to Poirot's harness. Another ladder meant he'd need to be pulled up again.

They all ran around the side of the building toward the front. The water started to lap over the overhang the covered the entrance below.

Pauline turned the corner and shouted back, "I found it!"

Lance said, "Praise the Lord."

A wave smacked against the side of the building and dowsed Chloe's leg. Good thing there was another ladder, because they needed it.

The other women reached the ladder first and climbed. Toby followed.

Chloe's ankles were underwater, boots filled with more water than a fish tank. She gripped Poirot's rope with all her might. He didn't weigh much and would easily be swept downriver before any of the rest of them.

The rungs of this ladder were rounded and straight up and down. There was no way Poirot was going to be able to climb this one either.

Lance took the other end of the rope, slung it over his shoulder and climbed the ladder, pulling up Poirot behind him.

Chloe climbed with Poirot. Josh right behind her. They were almost to safety—if the river stopped engulfing the valley.

Poirot scrambled over the three-foot-high lip on the building and onto the roof. Chloe was right behind him.

She turned back to Josh, but he wasn't coming over. She leaned over the edge. "Josh!"

He was hanging onto the ladder a couple of feet below the top. The water was at his waist. "My leg! Something's got me. Pulling me."

Lance joined her and whipped his knife out of his pocket and slapped it into Josh's hand.

Wrapping one arm around the ladder, Josh flipped the knife open and slashed at whatever was holding onto his leg beneath the water.

Chloe couldn't see anything. What could be pulling him in? *God, please help!* Desperation filled her.

The water rose to Josh's neck. He gripped the knife between his teeth and tried to pull himself higher on the ladder.

She and Lance reached for him.

Josh stretched for them. Lance gripped his arm, and Josh let go of the ladder and grabbed for Chloe.

Their wet hands slipped. He reached again. Their hands clasped, but the waters pulled him away, and his fingers slid from hers. "Josh!"

Lance pulled Josh, but whatever had Josh's leg had the tighter hold.

Chloe watched helplessly as Josh slipped from Lance's grasp too.

Poirot barked and bounded down toward the end of the building.

Chloe ran after him. "Poirot, stop!" She couldn't lose both of them. She grabbed his collar before he could jump in the water after Josh.

The rope was still tied to Poirot's harness. She gripped the end and tossed it to Josh, who was fighting against the water to get back to them.

He grabbed the rope, but just like their hands, it slipped through his fingers, and the waters carried him away.

She jumped up, ready to go after Josh.

Lance grabbed her shirt then wrapped his arms around her waist, keeping her from diving in.

"No!" Chloe collapsed against Lance.

The waves washed Josh away.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Josh tried to grab the rope again, but whatever was around his leg pulled him too fast. He needed to stop fighting to get back and fight to live. As an Eagle Scout he had learned how to survive this type of situation. He turned to his back and let the water send him downstream. Next, he needed to free his leg before whatever it was sucked him deeper into the water.

Now that he wasn't fighting it, he was able to untwist his leg and break free. He still had no idea what had ensnared him, but it felt like plastic netting or fencing.

The water was moving too fast for him to be able to direct himself well, and there wasn't a good spot to aim for either. He didn't want to crash into a rock face, but the other side of the river was too far away now.

He kept his feet out in front of himself in case he ran into anything such as street signs. He barely missed a stoplight. Maybe grabbing something like that would work. But they were barely at water level. What he needed was shore, so that he could climb to the top of a hill.



He aimed his body toward the side, but a strong current whipped him around and back toward the center.

His coat was now completely waterlogged and weighing him down. He unzipped it and pulled his arms out. The coat raced away from him with his cell phone in the pocket. It would be useless now. No matter how water-resistant it was, it wasn't going to work anymore.

The icy water sucked every ounce of heat from his body, and he started to shiver. If he didn't get out of the water soon, he could go into shock, making breathing difficult. And if he was in it too long, hypothermia would become a risk. The water was probably only fifty degrees.

Josh spotted power lines drifting in the top of the water. He wasn't going to be able to avoid them—they went across where the road was much beneath him. At least he didn't have to worry about getting electrocuted with the power out. But that didn't mean he couldn't get entangled.

Despite trying to go over them, his foot snagged the end of a wire. It whipped him around, and he lost his stride in floating down the river.

He went under. The current dragged him down, but his foot was stuck.

His lungs ached for more air. *Jesus, help.*

He swam upward and managed to get a gulp of air before the current plunged him deeper again.

His foot broke free from the wire, but the current disoriented him.

Which way was up? He needed the surface. He needed air. He needed a rescue.



Chloe's throat hurt from screaming for Josh. Watching him float down the flooded river was the worst moment of her entire life. She wanted to plunge into the water after him. If he was going to be ripped from her, she wanted to go too.

But Lance had held her tight and pulled her against his chest.

She collapsed to the ground in grief. There was nothing she could do. There was no way off this rooftop. No way to save the man she was supposed to marry. This couldn't be happening, not again.

She leaned her back against the wall.

Pauline came and sat beside her, wordlessly putting her arm around Chloe.

She rested her head on Pauline's shoulder and sobbed.

They sat there for a long time, growing wetter and colder by the moment. If only the rain would stop, then the water would have a chance of going down.

But it did finally stop. The water didn't reach the top of the roof where they sat. Lance reported that the water had even begun to recede from the building, revealing the top of the roof and then the parking area in front of the main entrance.

The sound of a motor brought Chloe out of her grief. She and Pauline stood and looked over the edge.

Darrin and Mario were in a motorboat. The water was now the height of the top of the second story of the parking garage.

Darrin shouted to them, “Are y’all okay?”

“Josh.” Chloe pointed downstream.

Darrin’s shoulders dropped. “No. Let’s get you all to safety, and we’ll find him.”

Chloe wanted to argue. They just needed to go find him, but the others needed to get someplace warm and dry.

They descended the ladder, Lance carrying Poirot, and they all climbed into the small motorboat.

Mario handed each of them a space blanket from a container that held a dozen more.

Chloe could only imagine how many people had been caught unaware in that flash flood. They’d warned nine households, but that was all. The water was rushing down the valley toward lower elevation at a remarkable speed. How many people had died?

Was Josh dead? She had to assume he was. There was no way he could have survived that. Was there? She wanted to hope that he was still alive, but she knew grief. She knew the horrible agony of hanging on to hope just to have it stripped away. No, she’d just assume the worst. That’s all she could do if she was going to survive.

She sank to the bench beside Pauline. Poirot laid his head on Chloe's lap.

Once everyone was settled, Mario drove the boat down the road they had been intending to drive up. In the boat, he was able to traverse the downed tree and deliver them to a church that was up the hill from where the water had crested.

Chloe didn't move from the boat.

Pauline turned around when she realized Chloe hadn't followed. "Come on, Chloe, let's get warm and dry."

"I have to help look for Josh. I'll be fine." Her own voice sounded like it was someone else speaking.

Mario clapped Darrin's back. "You two go look for Josh. I'll get another boat and get out there too."

Lance stepped up beside Mario. "I'll go with you." Lance then met Chloe's gaze. "Find him."

Chloe nodded. She spotted Ashley, who was wiping her face. "I'll find him."

Ashley looked up. "I have complete confidence you will, because I'm praying. Go."

Poirot barked.

Chloe petted his head. "Find Josh, Poirot. Search."

He barked again, and Darrin drove the boat back toward where they'd lost Josh off the side of the building and followed the flow of the current.

When they reached the end of the building, Poirot pointed his nose in the air at the front of the boat and barked. He'd found Josh's scent.

“Good boy. Find Josh.” She still didn't want to hope he was alive, but she did hope they found his body. Not knowing would kill her.



Josh fought his way to the surface. Three times now, he'd been dragged down by the current, but every time he'd managed to find his way back to the surface for air just before he couldn't hold his breath any longer.

Time was lost on him. He had no idea how long he'd been in the water, nor did he have any concept of how far downstream the floodwaters had taken him. He could be miles away from Chloe now.

He emerged at the surface and gasped for breath. Once again, he was able to turn himself over and point his feet downstream, but his body was too cold and tired. He wasn't going to be able to maintain his position well. Floating didn't take near the energy swimming did, but he was about out.

The current slowed, and the water level was receding.

A group of trees poked up in the center of the flood. They were closer than land, so if he could just get to them, he could at least rest for a moment and maybe someone would come through looking for survivors.

He approached a tree, but the current picked up again and swirled him around. He reached for the tree and grabbed a branch, but it snapped.

Someone shouted from the shore.

Josh redirected himself to the side, where a figure stood on the hill to the left.

Ahead, Josh spotted the roof of the covered bridge. The one where Randy Watling had lost his life. How was it still standing?

The figure ran through the trees along the side of the hill, and when Josh floated near, tossed a rope.

He grabbed the rope and wrapped it around his arm before his feet slammed into the side of the covered bridge. The wood gave, but Josh's grip on the rope remained.

The water clamored against the bridge. The sound of wood snapping and breaking was muffled by the water.

The man at the other end of the rope pulled Josh in.

He moved his feet down, searching for solid ground beneath the water. They finally found their target near the water's edge. He scrambled to the shore and out of the water.

The man reached out his hand, Josh took it, and the man helped him up the hill a bit.

Not until he let go did he look up and meet the man's eyes. Gary Russel.

Josh's lungs froze up on him.

“You.”

Josh forced his lungs to function properly. “I was thinking the same.”

“Sorry I tried to slug you earlier. I just needed to talk to Pauline.”

“I’m not sure talking was all you wanted to do.”

“She’s a married woman. I would never.”

Josh narrowed his eyes. Was this guy serious? Maybe he hadn’t caught on that they suspected him of killing the other two council members. “Do you have a phone or radio? I need to let my friends know I’m safe. And tell Darrin where they are.”

“Where are they?”

Josh considered the question. He didn’t want to tell Gary and have him run off and take Pauline. “Phone? Radio?”

“Sure, this way.” Gary turned and trekked up the mountainside.

Josh followed. He wished he had another choice, but at this point he had no other options.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



**D**espite the space blanket wrapped around her shoulders, Chloe shivered. She was cold all the way to her bone marrow. Darrin wasn't driving the boat fast, but the speed still created enough of a breeze to whip under the blanket and chill her wet clothes.

She scanned the water and the sides of the bank, looking for Josh or for any evidence that he might be there. Psalm 23 echoed in her mind. *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Darrin didn't take a straight path down the flooded river and road. First, he drove down the right bank, then across the center, and finally the left. Back across the center and repeat.

Where was Josh? How far down could he have been taken?

Every time they reached the center of where the road should be beneath them, Poirot barked.



The third time, Chloe perked up. “Do you have Josh’s scent, boy?”

He barked again.

Chloe turned to Darrin who sat by the motor directing the boat where to go. “Let’s follow Poirot’s nose. Maybe we’ll find him faster.”

“I didn’t know he was trained for water rescue, but you know what Poirot is capable of more than I do.”

“While it’s not his thing, we have done some training on water. He also almost jumped in after Josh.”

Darrin gave her a rueful smile. “I bet he wasn’t the only one.”

Chloe sank back and turned her focus back to looking for Josh, trying desperately to ignore the dread building up inside. *God, please. I don’t know what words to pray. I don’t want false hope that he could be alive, so I don’t want to even pray that.*

Poirot barked, and Darrin shifted the direction of the boat to follow the way Poirot pointed his nose.

As Darrin neared the edge of the water on the left side, Poirot’s tail started to wag, and his feet tapped up and down as if he wanted to start running.

Hope rose in Chloe without her permission. “Josh?”

Poirot barked again.

Chloe scanned beneath the tree limbs that dipped into the water.

“There.”

Chloe turned to see where Darrin was pointing. She followed the invisible line. A bright red coat. Josh!

Poirot barked and jumped out of the boat.

“Poirot, no.” But she couldn’t stop him.

He swam under the branches and grabbed the sleeve and dragged it back to the boat. But it was only Josh’s coat. No Josh.

Her heart sank to the bottom of the river, heavier than any anchor ever made. She pulled the coat into the boat, and Darrin helped Poirot get back in.

Chloe searched her memory. “Josh’s coat was zipped when he was swept away, so if he died while wearing his coat, he would still be in it. Right?”

“Your logic is sound.”

“Where’s Josh, Poirot? Search.”

He barked and put his front paws up on the front tip of the boat. He sniffed the air for a moment then barked.

Darrin started the boat back up and followed the tip of Poirot’s nose.

Could Josh be alive? Why had he taken his coat off? It was saturated, so perhaps it had become too heavy. The mix of hope and dread in her gut made her sick to her stomach. In her

mind, she chucked it all to the foot of the cross. *Father, help Josh, help me, help us all.*



Josh hiked up the familiar deer trail behind Gary. He hated following the man they suspected was the killer, but as long as Gary was with Josh, he wasn't trying to kill Pauline. Maybe he could get Gary to talk and possibly even confess to the murders.

“Gary, what happened on that bridge back there? I've heard parts of the story but am curious about your take on it.”

Gary grunted. “It was needless. The boy died because we said the bridge was safe. If we had just torn it down or actually had it repaired properly, Randy wouldn't have died.”

“It wasn't like the council didn't address the issue at all.”

“But we didn't do enough.”

“Randy's parents said he wasn't supposed to be on that bridge. He disobeyed his parents by being there. That's not your responsibility. It was an accident.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but something that could have been prevented isn't an accident.”

“That's not how that works. And even if there was something that could have been done, what happened happened, and you need to forgive yourself.” The image of Eric's face flashed in Josh's mind. His own words smacked him right in the chest.

Forgive. Himself.

A large cracking sound made both men turn. The rushing floodwaters took hold of the bridge and ripped it from its foundation.

God took care of the issue of the bridge once and for all.

They slogged up the muddy hillside, and Josh wrestled with forgiveness in his heart. He knew God forgave him for his negligence, and so had the family. To them, the guilt had been washed away, just like that bridge. *God, help me forgive myself.*

The path widened, so Josh came up beside Gary. “I get it. I really do.” He told him about Eric and the misdiagnosis that cost the boy’s life. “I’ve beat myself up for years, but the truth of the matter is any doctor in my shoes would likely have made the same diagnosis. That doesn’t make it right, but it was easy to miss. I’ve missed truly celebrating with other patients because every time they find healing, all I can think about is Eric. We can’t let the sorrows in life negate the joys.”

They arrived at the top of the embankment they were climbing and came out onto a road.

Gary was quiet. Too quiet.

His truck was parked near the area where they’d found Jed’s vest.

Josh’s insides twisted. He should probably run the other direction and risk getting lost and succumbing to the cold, but

he came back to the fact that the longer he was with Gary, the longer it would be before Gary found Pauline.

And as far as Josh figured, Gary had no motive to kill him.

They reached Gary's truck, and he opened the driver's side door and grabbed for something in the door's pocket.

While doing so, Gary said, "So that kid, what'd you say his name was, Eric?"

Josh nodded.

"Eric would still be alive if you had diagnosed him properly?"

"Potentially, but that's the thing—while there was a treatment for what he actually had, it's only sixty percent effective."

"But he had a chance, and you took that away from him."

Josh backed away from Gary. "You're missing the point. What happened is already done, and I can't change that by beating myself up about it. I can't bring him back, just like you can't bring Randy back by killing the members of the town council."

"You need to read your Bible, son. It's pretty clear that anyone who takes a life must lose their life as well."

"But you aren't judge and jury. It is not your place to decide who lives and dies."

Gary stepped out from behind the truck door, a large knife in his hand.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Chloe's hand ached from holding the side of the boat, her jaw ached from clenching it, and her toes ached from being so wet. With all that she was, she needed to find Josh. The physical pains were nothing to how her heart hurt.

The water level was dropping, making it more difficult to maneuver from the river to the flooded road.

They approached a set of trees that divided the river from the road, and Poirot barked.

“Was Josh here?”

Poirot barked again.

Darrin asked, “Is that a yes?”

Chloe shrugged. “As best I can tell.”

Poirot reached up and grabbed a branch that was hanging down and ripped it off the tree. He gave it to Chloe and barked, tail wagging.

She took the branch and rubbed Poirot's head. "Good job, buddy. Where's Josh? Search."

Once again, Poirot stuck his nose forward.

Ahead of them, the covered bridge was torn into pieces, only the end on the far shore stood a little. The rest had been ripped away, and pieces were scattered along the bank.

Chloe gasped and lifted her fingers to her mouth.

Darrin muttered, "Finally."

That bridge had caused so much heartache for this community over the last year. But now it was gone. Perhaps that was a blessing.

Poirot pointed toward the shore and started barking incessantly.

Chloe petted his head. "We got it, buddy."

Darrin directed the boat and tied it to a tree that stuck out of the water close to the shore.

Her memory of this area told her that, depending on how fast the water receded and how long it took them to find Josh, the boat could be hanging from this tree or at least sitting on the road beneath.

Poirot jumped out and ran a few feet before he turned and looked at Chloe. If he could speak words, she was certain he'd say, "Hurry up, humans."

She and Darrin jumped out of the boat and hiked up the embankment, following Poirot.

Chloe heard a sound in the distance. She shot her hand out and stopped Darrin.

“Did you hear that?”

“I did, but I’m not sure what I heard.”

“Me neither.”

They listened but didn’t hear the noise again. Whatever it was, the noise set Chloe further on edge. The three of them increased their speed up the hill.



Josh, pinned to the truck, shoved Gary off, careful to avoid the knife in Gary’s right hand. It was a blur how they got to this point, but Josh was determined to end it. He just needed to get the knife out of Gary’s grip.

Josh shoved Gary backward and grabbed Gary’s knife-wielding arm at the wrist, bending the arm back until Gary’s reflexes demanded he open his hand. The knife fell to the ground.

Josh charged forward, pushing Gary until his feet slid out from under him. They slammed to the ground—Josh on top of Gary.

Josh lifted himself, pulled his arm back, and punched the man in the face. Pain shot through his knuckles and up his arm.

Gary slammed a fist into Josh’s kidney. One, two, three times.



With the shock of the pain, Josh lost his brief control over the situation, and Gary shoved him to the side.

Josh slid in the mud and managed not to fall on his back. He pushed off the ground and aimed for Gary, who was scrambling to the knife.

With his full force, Josh crashed into Gary again.

On the ground, Gary grunted. “You deserve to die. Life for a life.” He pushed himself up, but he leaned heavy on his arms.

Josh jumped to his feet and stepped on the knife, sinking it into the mud.

“Then what Gary? What good does that do? What makes you think you have a place in that? Aren’t you just as guilty of the things you’re accusing me and your fellow council members of?”

Gary sat back. “Don’t you get it? You’re the one missing what’s happening here. I do deserve it too. But I’m the only one willing to admit where we went wrong. I don’t get off scot-free on this one. I don’t get out of this either. Just like you now. Once you and Pauline have paid for your sins, then I will pay for mine too.”

His words hit as hard as his punch. He was going to end his own life at the end of this too. Josh heaved a heavy breath in. Gary had mentioned the Bible; where did his faith stand?

“But Gary, our sins have already been paid for. Christ did it once and for all on the cross. Listen to me; there is forgiveness. There is a cleansing from the guilt that we carry

regarding Eric's or Randy's deaths. Sure we could have done something different to help prevent those tragedies, but there is always forgiveness at the foot of the cross."

A crazy look came into Gary's eyes. He wasn't hearing what Josh had to say. "No." He jumped to his feet and came for Josh.

Just when Gary got to him, Josh dropped to the ground and grabbed the knife. The handle was slick in his hand because of the mud.

Gary tripped over him and slammed into the side of the truck.

Josh stood and pointed the knife at Gary.

He regained his footing and considered Josh, as if calculating how he could get the knife away.

Josh took two steps to the right.

A bark echoed through the trees. Poirot? How could it be? Weren't they stranded on top of that building still?

Gary took off to the back of the truck.

Shoot. What was this guy thinking?

Josh ran after him.

The tailgate opened with a metallic thunk. Josh turned the corner, and a shotgun was pointed at his chest.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



**D**espite Chloe's numb toes, she pushed forward and up the hill. They'd heard the sound again. This time they felt like they could identify it as something thumping against metal.

Poirot's tail wagged. He must be getting closer to Josh. Maybe he was fine since he'd been able to climb, but why had he? Wouldn't it make sense to stay closer to where someone could spot him rather than go deeper into the woods? Coming up this path to where they'd found Jed didn't make any sense.

Everything in her wanted to call out to him, but something stopped her. Was it the Holy Spirit? But why?

She had nothing but questions.

Darrin grabbed Chloe's arm. He whispered, "Call Poirot back."

"Why?" She met his volume.

He pointed.

Through the trees she could see a truck. Gary Russel's truck. "No." She released a low whistle.

Poirot halted and looked at her. She only used that whistle when she wanted Poirot to come.

His ears came forward, and he snarled.

"Come." She didn't say it loudly, but she was confident he heard her.

He trotted back to her and Darrin.

As quietly as they could, they crept closer. Where was Josh? Was Gary here too? After Josh and Gary's interaction over Pauline, Chloe doubted Josh was safe if he was with Gary.

Poirot moved forward, but Chloe grabbed the handle on his collar. "Stay with me."

Darrin tapped her arm. "I'm going to go around that way. Stay hidden, just in case."

She nodded, but she wanted to help, not hide behind the trees.

He left her and Poirot, topped the ridge, dashed across the dirt road and into the tree line on the other side.

Darrin had told her to stay hidden, not to stay still. So she moved forward as well. She needed to see if Josh was up there.

As she crept along, the embankment grew steeper and steeper, making it increasingly difficult to stay deep inside the tree line.

Just before she could go no farther, the end of the truck came into view. Josh. He was alive! Her heart flew skyward. She wanted to jump up and run to him.

But Gary was holding a shotgun pointed at Josh's chest.

Her heart plummeted back to earth. What was she to do? She couldn't think of anything. How could they be in this situation again? Josh's life on the line, but this time there was nothing Chloe could do to help.



Josh tightened his grip on the knife and stared at the shotgun. His mind ran in circles, not coming to any conclusions about how he could regain the upper hand. Should he have just stabbed Gary when he'd had the chance?

As a doctor, he took his vow of "do no harm" seriously, but this was self-defense.

"Drop the knife, Josh."

"What? Shooting me too easy? You'd rather bleed me?"

"We act like pigs, we get treated like pigs."

"You've got a really sick sense of justice, you know."

Gary pressed the shotgun into Josh's sternum. "Drop the knife."

Josh tossed it to the side. Now he had no recourse. Maybe he needed to take Lance and his brother-in-law's advice and start concealed carrying. Of course if he'd had a gun on his hip, this

could have ended a lot sooner. But that's not how this was playing out.

Poirot barked. He was closer than he had been the last time Josh had heard him. Was Chloe here too? As much as Josh wanted—needed to see her, he hoped she was far away from this danger.

Moving faster than Josh could react, Gary whipped the shotgun around and smacked Josh on the side of the head.

His head snapped to the side. His ears rang. The force knocked him over. He slammed into the cold, wet ground.

But the knife was only three feet away.

He fought to keep his eyes open and scrambled across the mud.

Gary picked up the knife first and ran.

Josh tried to push himself up. He needed to pursue. If Chloe was nearby, he had to protect her from Gary.

Poirot barked, but he sounded like he was at the other end of a long tunnel.

Chloe's voice joined Poirot's in the tunnel. "Josh! Josh, look at me."

He turned his head. Chloe was at his side, but she was blurry for a moment. The movement sloshed the acid in his stomach.

Yep, he had a concussion. He reached for his head but redirected to Chloe's face. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, silly. Are you okay?"

“Nope. But—”

She was yanked away from him.

She screamed.

He reached for her, but Gary held her arm and put the knife to her throat.

Ignoring the dizziness and wooziness that wanted to consume his body, Josh struggled and hauled himself to his feet. Managed to stand and whisper, “Let her go, Gary. This has nothing to do with her. She’s never hurt anyone.”

“Ain’t gonna happen. This has two ways to play out. You take the jump from that cliff over there, and I’ll let her walk away before I join you, or I kill her in your place.”

“How does that work? You said I needed to pay for my actions. How is killing her paying for my sins?”

“What was that the pastor called it? Substitutionary atonement. She’ll just take your place.”

Josh fought to keep himself upright. “But, Gary, that’s what Jesus already did. Chloe can’t die for me, and she doesn’t need to.”

Darrin came around the front of the truck with the shotgun aimed at Gary until he saw Gary had Chloe, then Darrin trained it on the ground. “Let go of her, Gary.”

Gary laughed. “The shotgun’s empty, you fool. Otherwise I’d have shot the good doctor.”

Josh wavered. *God, give me the strength I need right now. Please protect Chloe.*

Darrin checked the shotgun and chucked it on the ground.

Only Josh knew how good a weapon an empty shotgun could still be.

Gary pointed the knife at Darrin. “Don’t even think about it.” He moved the knife back to Chloe’s neck.

Darrin raised his hands to the air, away from his sidearm that he must have been reaching for.

Josh’s head was pounding, making it impossible to think through any course of action. If only Chloe could have acted fast enough when Gary moved the knife away from her, but it hadn’t been long enough for anyone to think of anything.

Gary’s eyes darted back and forth from Josh to Darrin and back again. This was not Gary’s plan, so he was improvising now.

Josh didn’t know the man enough to know how he’d think through this situation. But Gary had a death wish.

And where was Poirot? Josh was sure he’d heard him, but he hadn’t seen him yet.



Chloe kept her breaths shallow to keep herself from moving too much. The blade was so close to her neck that the cold chill of the blade tickled her skin. She tried to think through what she could do.



If she could just get the knife far enough away, she could use some of the self-defense moves her brothers had inadvertently taught her when they were little.

Gary pinned her body and left arm against his chest. But her right hand was free.

Before he could realize what she was doing, she slid it up under his arm and gripped Gary's wrist. She thrust against his arm, giving her throat the space she needed.

She whistled.

A growl came from near her feet.

Gary screeched and shoved Chloe away as he whipped around.

She stumbled forward toward Josh. He caught her and kept her from falling into the mud. After righting herself, she turned and spotted Poirot under the truck, jaw clenched on Gary's ankle.

*Good boy!*

Gary tried to shake Poirot free, but the lab wouldn't let go. Gary raised the knife to strike at Poirot.

"No!" Chloe screamed.

Josh lunged forward and slammed Gary into the side of the truck. The two wrestled and grappled for the knife, all while Poirot held tightly to Gary's ankle.

Chloe wanted to jump in and help, but unsure what to do, she hung back. Darrin seemed to be waiting for a clear

opportunity to help as well.

Josh tried to throw Gary to the ground, but he kept his footing, the knife still in his hand. He swung it at Josh and nicked his shoulder.

*Josh!* She took a step forward, but an invisible force held her back.

Josh stepped back, stunned and gripping the wound on his shoulder.

Gary shook Poirot free and kicked him.

The dog yelped but jumped to his feet and growled at Gary.

It was all she could do to hold herself back from attacking Gary herself.

Gary stepped toward Josh and raised the knife.

During the struggle, Darrin had drawn his pistol and come closer. He now pointed his firearm at Gary. “Drop the knife, Gary.”

Without turning toward Darrin, only glancing over his shoulder, Gary said, “What are you going to do? Shoot me? Your backdrop isn’t clear. You shoot me, you risk shooting Josh.” He stepped to his right. “Or Chloe.”

Gary moved toward Josh again. “Did you tell Chloe the evil you did, why you deserve to die as much as I do?”

Josh took half a step away. “She knows. I have no secrets from her. And she told me the same thing I told you.”

Chloe glanced at Darrin. He was ready to fire as soon as he had a clear shot.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Josh took a step back as Gary approached. While Josh's concussion symptoms seemed to be improving, the throbbing in his head hadn't let up enough for his mind to process what he should do in this moment, so he slowly backed up as Gary came closer.

Holding his hands out in front of himself, Josh said, "Stop, Gary. There's no purpose in this anymore. Drop the knife, and let Darrin take you in."

"Take me in? Just so they can lock me up. Don't you get it? I don't want to have to think about Randy Watling any longer. He's in a better place, and I'm ready to go there too."

"That's not how that works, Gary, and I think you know that."

"Stop talking your stupid religious talk, Doc. It ain't gonna work on me. I'm too far gone at this point."

He plunged the knife into his own abdomen.

"No!" Josh lunged forward.

But before he could stop Gary, he pulled the knife out, turned toward Chloe and charged her.

Darrin, who had shifted angles so that no one was behind Gary in the line of fire, fired two shots, and Gary hit the ground right at Chloe's feet.

Her hands covered her face.

Josh dropped to his knees beside Gary, pulled the knife from his hand, and tossed it a couple of yards away. Next, Josh checked his pulse. Gary was dead.

Josh sat back on his heels and breathed deeply. It was over.

He stood, walked around Gary's body, and pulled Chloe against his chest.

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "I thought I'd lost you."

"It was touch and go for a moment. The current tried to drag me under multiple times."

"I'm glad you kept fighting." She lifted her head and stroked the side of his face then felt the spot on his head where he'd been hit.

He winced.

"You've got a nasty bump." She pulled her hand away. Her fingertips were red. "And a gash to go with it. You need medical attention."

"It had to be me to get hurt. I can't exactly take care of my own head." He poked at the wound on his shoulder. "I can

probably stitch this up myself.”

“It’s not bleeding too bad; you’ll be fine waiting for an ER doctor.”

“Who’s going to be swamped with more pressing matters. I may have survived getting washed downriver just fine, but I bet others weren’t so lucky. I need to get patched up so we can help with the search.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Agreed.”

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds, and a ray of light seemed to shine right on them.

Chloe shielded her eyes with her hand and looked skyward. “Hello, old friend. Nice of you to finally join us.”

Josh kissed the side of her head then looked for Darrin.

He sat against the front tire of Gary’s truck with his gun lying in the mud beside him.

Poirot walked over, nudged Darrin’s shoulder, and rested his head on Darrin’s arm. For all the times the dog was oblivious to the emotional state of those around him, especially when he’d found the missing person they were looking for, he could be very in tune with how his friends were feeling in heavy moments.

Darrin petted the dog, wrapping an arm around him.

Chloe nodded toward Darrin.

Josh squeezed her arm and strolled to Darrin and Poirot. “You all right?”

Darrin shrugged. “I can’t wrap my mind around the fact that Gary actually murdered our friends. And that I just shot him.”

Josh squatted beside him and picked up a small stick off the ground and picked at it, not sure what else to say. He hated that Darrin had been the one to end Gary’s life.

They sat there in silence. Josh let Darrin process but was there if he needed to do so out loud.

After about five minutes, Darrin sucked in a large breath and released it as if cleansing his thoughts and soul. “We should get moving. You need a doctor, and the community needs all of us to come help—assuming y’all aren’t leaving immediately.”

“Not yet.” Josh stood and offered Darrin a hand.

The men grasped forearms, and Josh pulled him up.

At a volume only Darrin could hear, Josh said, “Although I don’t plan to stick around too long. I have to ask that woman to marry me.”

Darrin perked up. “It’s about time.”

Josh laughed. “You’ve known us for all of three days. And weren’t you the one who suggested we not ‘rush into anything’?”

It was Darrin’s turn to laugh. “Clearly I didn’t know you very well when I said any such thing.”

Chloe wandered over with an inquisitive look on her face.

Josh shook his head, to which she rolled her eyes. He lifted his arm and welcomed her to his side. As much as Josh wanted to stay around and help his new friends, he equally wanted to get out of town and away from this crazy.



As they sped down the river in the motorboat, Chloe held the space blanket to Josh's shoulder that had started bleeding more. He'd moved too much.

After wrapping Gary's body in a tarp they had found in his truck, they placed the body in the bed of the pickup. They had tried to take the road back to town, but it was completely washed out, so they ended up leaving the truck along with Gary's body at the top of the hill where it had all gone down.

Chloe was a little concerned about Josh's head, but he seemed to be thinking clearly, and according to his own diagnosis, he only had a mild concussion since he hadn't lost consciousness.

She trusted his medical opinion, even if she wasn't confident someone could diagnose themselves with complete accuracy. At least he wasn't being disagreeable about seeing someone in town.

They passed the building where they had taken refuge, where Josh had been ripped from her grasp. She leaned a little more into him.



He reached across his body and cupped her head for a moment. He must have been feeling the same way.

The floodwaters had receded more, but every low area was still filled with water, and the river still met the road. But since the road was a bit higher, it was no longer more than a foot underwater.

Darrin tied the boat to a tree that had withstood the torrent on the edge of the river.

The three of them climbed out and slogged their way across the highway and up to the church that was set up as a clinic for emergency aid.

They strolled into the fellowship hall, which was bustling with activity.

Pauline spotted them first. She gasped with her hands to her mouth and then ran to her husband.

A hush seemed to come across the whole room. Ashley and Lance looked up from where they were handing a family Styrofoam cups of hot liquid and rushed over to Josh and Chloe.

While both Ashley and Lance looked like they wanted to hug Josh, at the sight of his blood-soaked shirt, they held off.

Josh asked, “Is there a doctor or someone that can stitch me up?”

They led him across the room to a man who was wrapping up a young boy’s arm. The nervous mother was standing

nearby. She must have noticed the blood on Josh's shirt since her eyes widened.

Ashley disappeared and ran back with blankets for Josh and Chloe. She opened one and wrapped it across Chloe's shoulders. "I'm so glad you guys are okay. I've been praying."

"Thank you."

Ashley tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I wish I wasn't so surprised that you found Josh alive. I wish my faith had been stronger."

Chloe turned to Ashley and gripped her hand. "Trust me, you aren't alone in that. I didn't believe I'd find him at all. But God is good. Maybe now we'll both be able to trust that God's got us."

Ashley lowered her voice. "But Chloe, not everyone is going to make it out of this with their friends and family okay. People died; I'm certain of that. Too many people are still missing."

"True. Even if Josh had died, we could have faith that God would work it all out for our good and His glory. Even in the most tragic moments, God will work in the lives of His children. That I know from experience."

"I like you, Chloe. I hope we can be friends despite my past with Josh."

"Me too."

The doctor finished with the boy, and Josh sat down. The doctor made Josh take his shirt off, even with everyone

standing there, so that he could get a good look at the wound.

Despite how hesitant Josh acted, Chloe was certain it felt good to take off his cold, wet shirt.

Chloe sat beside him and wrapped the blanket across his other shoulder. He took Chloe's hand, weaving his icicle fingers between hers. His skin was cold to the touch; he needed to get warm.

She said to the doctor, "He's got a concussion too."

Josh grunted.

Chloe shook her head. "Why is it doctors are sometimes the worst patients?"

Josh and the doctor both laughed.

Pauline and Darrin came over, and while the doctor patched Josh up, they recounted to their friends all that had happened, including Gary's admittance of his motivation and his death.

Chloe said, "What I don't understand is why did he help you out of the water?"

"Why he was there is the part I don't get," Josh said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Darrin. But I think he truly was someone who wanted to help others. He wasn't one of those truly evil people who murder for the sport of it. But instead, he was misguided and had a very skewed view of guilt and justice."

Darrin nodded. "I think you're spot on. I would never have guessed he was even capable of murder."

Pauline hugged her husband's waist. "Thank you, Ashley, for digging up that video and shining the light on him. If you hadn't, I probably would have gone with him earlier. You saved my life. And Josh, to answer your question about why Gary was at the bridge, I think I understand. Clearly, he was obsessed with what happened to Randy. We'll never know if there was more to it, but I'd bet he was at the bridge because of his obsession."

Josh nodded and winced.

"Your head still hurts?" Chloe asked.

"You try getting bashed upside the head and tell me how you feel an hour later." He winked at her.

The doctor addressed Chloe. "I believe the concussion is mild like he said, since the symptoms are mostly gone, but y'all need to keep an eye on him. If he starts acting strangely, take him to the emergency room right away. I'd like to get a scan, but we don't have that equipment here in town, and even if we did, power is limited to generators for the time being, so that would be low priority."

"I'm not leaving his side anytime soon, so I got him."

The doctor added, "Both of you get into some dry clothes and warm up."

"Yes, sir." She stood, and Josh joined her.

Darrin handed her a set of keys. "Use my SUV."

"Thank you." She and Josh left hand in hand.



Once they had both changed and relayed Darrin and Pauline's safety to the kids, Josh drove Darrin's SUV, and Chloe drove hers back to the church.

Josh handed Darrin his keys.

Darrin said, "Are you sure you should be driving?"

"I'm fine. The headache is even fading." He didn't want to tell Darrin it still hurt like he'd been hit upside the head—*oh wait*—but he was feeling better. Josh chuckled at himself. "How can we help?"

"Could you guys go check on the Ford sisters? No one has heard from them. Jed would normally check in with them ..."

"I understand."

Darrin gave them the address and told them the best way to get there, given the flooding.

It took some maneuvering around mudslides and downed trees, but ten minutes later, they arrived at the Ford sisters' house.

Chloe pulled into the driveway. "Oh, Josh."

The lower level of the house was still half underwater. With how high the water got where they had taken refuge, there was a chance the sisters hadn't made it through the flood safely.

Instead of driving down to the house and into the water, Chloe drove her SUV off the driveway and around the side of

the house. The second story was relatively close to a hill. Perhaps if they found some planks of wood long enough, they could create a bridge to get inside.

Josh, Chloe, and Poirot jumped out of the vehicle, and Josh called for the sisters. “Vivian! Ingrid! Are you ladies here?”

He hoped they’d gotten out, but the restlessness in his spirit led him to believe they were still inside.

Poirot stood at the edge of the water, as if he were suddenly a pointer and not a retriever.

Chloe asked, “Are there people inside, Poirot?”

He barked.

Josh told Chloe his idea, and they ran to the pole barn to search for anything to help them get to the house. If needed, Josh wouldn’t hesitate to go through the floodwaters to get inside the house, but he knew that was a bad idea.

They found three planks of wood that were twelve inches wide and eight feet long. Hopefully, they would be long enough and strong enough to support his weight. He also grabbed a hammer he found and slid it through a belt loop on his pants.

They hauled the boards out and to the house. One board at a time, they stacked them on top of one another, one end resting on the windowsill, the other sunk into the muddy hillside.

Josh put one foot on it to test it. “Seems stable enough.”

“Let me go.”

He shook his head. “If they need medical attention—”

“You’ll have to bring them out.”

“Exactly. You’re a strong woman, but I can still lift more than you.”

She looked upward, scrunched her lips, and wobbled her head side to side. “Fine. But be careful.”

He walked out onto their makeshift bridge. It wobbled a bit under his weight, but slowly he made it to the other side. He called for the sisters again. This time he heard something. He couldn’t identify what, but someone was inside.

He knocked on the window, and he heard the sound again. But nothing more.

The window was locked, and he couldn’t get it to budge. He grabbed the hammer and broke the windowpane. The old glass shattered.

He reached in, unlatched the window, and shoved it open. It was a small window, but not too small. With a little effort, he slid in feet first and landed in a bedroom.

“Ingrid? Vivian? It’s Josh Schneider, Darrin’s friend. Are you here?”

He heard a muffled voice and a tapping on the ceiling above him. They must have taken refuge in the attic, but why hadn’t they come down?

“I’m coming.”

In the hallway, he found the reason they hadn't come back down. The slide-out ladder to the attic had broken off below the door.

The floor was covered in a layer of silt. It was going to be a bear to clean it all up.

He stood under the opening to the attic and called up to them.

Vivian appeared. "Josh?"

"Yes, ma'am. Can I help you ladies out of here? Get you somewhere warm and dry?"

"Please, but Ingrid twisted her ankle when the ladder broke beneath her."

"How about I try and get up there and check it out before I help you down?"

Georgette, the sister he hadn't met, appeared. "Please. But how?"

"Hopefully, I'm stronger than I look." He winked at them. "I'm going to tell my partner I found you first."

He moved to the bedroom he'd come from and was greeted by Poirot. Chloe was right behind him. "Really?"

She shrugged. "Can't let you have all the fun." In a low voice and behind her hand, she added, "Plus these women might get ideas about their hero that came to rescue them. I have to make it clear where we stand."



He laughed. “You have nothing to worry about.” He glanced around. “Can you find a ladder, step stool, or chair?”

“Sure.”

He went into a different room than Chloe, looked in, and found nothing. Chloe came out with a wooden chair.

He stood on that, and it gave him enough height to climb part of the ladder, but he still had to pull himself up. The cut on his shoulder strained at the movement, but he ignored the pain and raised himself into the attic.

Once in the attic, he greeted the ladies. “Are you all doing okay?”

Vivian said, “Just cold mostly. Didn’t think to grab anything warm. We found a few blankets in a trunk, but the trunk wasn’t sealed well, so they were a little damp.”

Noting their wet clothing, he asked, “How high did the water come?”

Georgette stood and indicated to her waist. “It was nuts. I thought for sure we were gonna drown, but we prayed and just as quickly as it rose, it went back down again.”

“Glad it didn’t fill the attic completely,” Josh said. “Next time, and I pray there never is a next time, know that the attic is not the safest place unless there is a way out”—he glanced around—“which there isn’t.”

Ingrid said, “I knew it was a bad idea, but I didn’t know what else to do. I’m thinking we should keep an ax up here.”

“That could work too.” He examined Ingrid’s ankle, which appeared to be sprained. He found some cloth that wasn’t too wet and wrapped it with a promise to find a more suitable wrap once they were out of the attic.

Once her ankle was stabilized, it was time to figure out how to get everyone down from the attic and out of the house. One by one, Josh helped the women climb down the small bit of ladder that was there until they had to hang. Chloe then helped them to the chair and down from there.

Ingrid went last, and while her sisters held the chair, Chloe stood on it and helped ease Ingrid down.

At last, Josh joined the ladies.

Chloe gripped his elbow. “Didn’t know you could do pull-ups like that.”

“Me neither.” He touched the wound on his shoulder.

“You tore it open, didn’t you?” Chloe asked.

“Maybe. It just hurts some. But it can wait.”

Poirot barked.

Josh turned to him. “Yep, let’s get out of here.”

Josh put his arm around Ingrid and helped her to the window.

Poirot went first across the boards, and Chloe followed right behind him on her hands and knees.

Josh asked Ingrid, “Think you can crawl across like Chloe did? She’ll help you on the other end.”

Ingrid nodded and started out across the board.

Once she was completely out of the window, Josh reached out and held the boards in place. They weren't the newest pieces of wood, probably long forgotten for a project that never happened.

A cracking sound stopped Ingrid halfway across. "What was that?"

"Don't worry about it. Just keep going."

She made it, and Chloe helped her up to the top of the hill.

Georgette went across next without issue, and then Vivian said, "Would it be quicker to walk across it?"

"Only if you're comfortable with that. I'm going to walk." He also wasn't sure how secure the boards were now that so much weight had gone across. He didn't want to tell her that he planned to run because he didn't think the boards could handle much more.

She climbed out the window and stood up.

Ingrid yelled, "What are you doing?"

"You know my knee can't handle crawling."

But halfway across, Vivian's balance betrayed her and she wobbled.

Josh said, "Lower your center of gravity."

Vivian lowered her hands to the makeshift bridge and bear-crawled the rest of the way.

Josh shook his head. Whatever worked.

It was his turn. He had to really hold the wood for the last two ladies, but no one could hold it for him. That in addition to the cracking. He wasn't sure he'd be able to make it across. But he refused to go back into that floodwater. He was half tempted to send Chloe away with the Ford sisters and have her come back for him when the waters receded more, but Chloe would never go along with that.

“Come on, Josh,” she called.

“I'm coming.” He took a deep breath. *God, please let it hold and give me wisdom. Slow and steady, or quick and confident?*

He climbed out of the window.

The board cracked. Quick and confident!

He ran, trusting his balance and footing. Two feet from the end, the boards gave out from under his feet. He jumped, launching himself onto the muddy hillside.

He landed with a splat but grateful he wasn't in the floodwaters below. Pushing himself off the ground, he surveyed the mess that was the front of his clothes. It was the last clean pair of pants he had. Oh well.

Poirot trotted over and licked Josh's face.

“It's gonna need a little more than that, buddy.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The next morning at the McBeans' kitchen table, Chloe cradled a hot cup of coffee. The day before had been grueling. After so little sleep the night before it, then losing Josh, then fighting off a murderer, then saving the Ford sisters, and finally helping with more rescues, Chloe was ready to be home. But at the same time, she didn't want to leave her new friends.

The town had a long road of cleanup and healing ahead, but at least no one had lost their lives in the flood.

Ashley's story about the murders and the flooding had aired last night, and Gary's name had never been mentioned. She and Toby had left for Bristol late last night, but Lance had stuck around with Josh and Chloe.

All three of them had been able to recover their packs from Pauline's flooded Suburban, and they had only lost a bit of gear; most of it would dry out just fine.

Pauline slid another set of cinnamon rolls onto the table.

Josh laughed. “Darrin, how do you stay fit with this?” He pointed at the rolls.

“Self-control, my friend.”

Josh took another roll. “Well, I don’t have enough of that. Pauline, do *not* give this recipe to Chloe.”

“That’s fine,” Pauline said. “Y’all will just have to come visit if you want any. I like that plan better anyway.”

Chloe chuckled. “You wouldn’t want me to make them anyway. I did *not* get my mother’s ability to bake. She’s tried to teach me a thousand times, but it never works out.”

Josh bopped her with his elbow. “You have to take your nose out of the book when the timer goes off.”

“That’s exactly what my mom said. But if I’m in a good story, I can’t be bothered by such things. And it’s not just burning. No matter if I do everything exactly like Mom, side by side, her bread will rise beautiful, but not mine.”

They all laughed.

When the laughter settled, Darrin leaned forward on the table. “I can’t thank you all enough for all your help the last few days, and even more than that, for the friendship you’ve given us. Know that y’all are welcome here anytime. Just don’t bring any murderers or floods with you.”

Josh nodded. “I’ve had enough of those for a lifetime.” He slid his arm across the back of Chloe’s chair. “I wish we could stay longer and help clean up more.”

Darrin shook his head. “No need for that. You’ve done enough. Go home and see your families.”

Chloe glanced at the clock. It was just about the time they had said they planned on leaving. “We probably should hit the road.”

They stood and packed up their things.

Ten minutes later, they all stood in the driveway exchanging hugs.

Pauline hugged Chloe and whispered in her ear, “You’re gonna say yes to that man, right?”

Chloe giggled. “All he has to do is ask.”

“Good. I expect to hear all the details when he does.”

“Of course. I hope you all can come to Knoxville for the wedding, whenever that happens.”

“We’ll be there.”

Chloe pulled Pauline close again.

Everyone else exchanged hugs and goodbyes.

Once they drove away, Josh turned to Chloe. “I have a question for you.”

“Yes?” He’d better not ask her to marry him in such an informal way.

“Would you be opposed to a trip to Hazel Hill instead of going straight home?”

She really wanted to hug her family, but Josh had almost died, and he needed to see his parents and sister even more. “That would be wonderful.” She pointed to her phone mounted on the dash. “Put it in the GPS.”

“I know it’s a really long way out of the way.”

“It’s fine, Josh. You need to see your family. I just hope they’re up for surprise guests.”

“Amelia’s used to it from me.”

“But you aren’t exactly the most spontaneous person.”

“No, but I love sending my sister for a loop.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Brothers are all the same, aren’t they?”

Josh laughed. “Absolutely.”

She reached over and squeezed Josh’s hand. She loved this man, even if he did treat his sister the same way Gabe treated her.



About four hours later, Josh took Chloe’s hand as they walked up the sidewalk to his sister Amelia’s front door.

“Do you even know if she’s home?” Chloe asked.

“Eh. Taking a risk for the best surprise.”

Chloe pulled on his hand and pointed to the dining-room window. A young boy, eyes wide with growing excitement, stood on the other side of the glass.



Josh put his finger to his lips.

Carter, his five-year-old nephew, matched his stance.

Josh and Chloe walked up the steps, and he rang the doorbell.

“You do realize you still look like a mess?”

He shrugged. “It’ll add to the suspense.” He leaned close to Chloe’s ear. “I can hear Amelia now, ‘What happened to you?’”

Chloe chuckled. “Here it comes.”

The door opened. Amelia’s husband, Caleb, shook his head. “I was not expecting you guys.”

Keeping his voice soft, Josh said, “Surprise. Where’s Amelia?”

Carter ran over and gave him a giant hug.

Caleb called, “Amelia, you’ve got company.”

“Really, right now? Who on earth?”

Josh laughed. Knowing his sister, she probably thought she said it in her head.

Caleb motioned for them to come in.

They stepped into the entryway, and Amelia came around the corner and squealed. “What are you doing here?”

“If you’re going to be like that, I’ll go see Mom and Dad first.”

“No, get in here.” She came to Josh but stopped shy when she saw the state of his clothes. “What happened to you?”

Josh and Chloe both laughed. He said, “Long story. But if you’re too busy to hear it, we’ll just leave.”

She swatted his arm. “Would you stop. Of course I have time for y’all. Come on in and tell me all about it and why you’re here. Weren’t you in southwestern Virginia?”

“Let’s sit, and I’ll tell you all about it. But first, despite the disaster I am, I need a hug from my little sis.”

“Of course.” She threw her arms around him, and he held her tight.

He’d been so afraid he’d never see her again.

She pulled back from the hug. Deep creases etched in her forehead. “What happened?”

“Sit?”

She nodded and led them to the living room.

Josh still hadn’t heard his nine-year-old niece. “Where’s Molly?”

“At Callie’s house.”

“Of course.” Callie was Caleb’s brother’s daughter and Molly’s best friend.

They all sat, and Josh and Chloe took turns recounting the events of the week.

When Josh told them about how he’d been swept away by the waters, Amelia’s face held the same horrified look that

Chloe's had when he'd lost his grip on her hand.

“But I'm okay. No worse for the wear, praise the Lord. I have no doubt that God is the only reason I'm still here. I don't understand why He saw fit to keep me alive through all that, but either way I will always be grateful.”

After telling them the rest of the story and making a call to Josh and Amelia's parents to invite them for dinner, Josh and Caleb left to get food and make another special stop as well.

When they arrived back at Amelia and Caleb's, Josh's parents had already arrived and his mom was doting on Chloe. A few minutes later, Caleb's brother Jared dropped Molly off.

The girl gave Josh the biggest hug a nine-year-old could muster.

He was certain the tiny box in his pocket stuck out for the world to see, but no one seemed to notice.

The rest of the evening was filled with fun and laughter, the heaviness of the week washed away. It was exactly what Josh needed. But there was one thing left that needed to be taken care of, and he couldn't wait any longer.

He excused himself and Chloe from the dining room table where everyone lingered. He grabbed their now clean and dry coats, thanks to Amelia's washer and dryer, and led Chloe to the back deck.

The stars lit the sky with the tiniest sliver of a moon peeking out. He'd never been happier to see zero clouds in the sky.

He wrapped his arm across Chloe's shoulder. She stepped into his embrace and circled his waist with her arms.

His heart raced much like those waters he'd been in yesterday, out of control and wild. But instead of the fury and anger of the flood, his heart raced with excitement and anticipation, with love and delight.

“We've been through so much together. And the One Who holds the stars has held us through it all. Even though it feels like I can't figure out how fast to move with things in life and I'm always too quick or too slow, He's always right on time.”

“And if He's sovereign, doesn't that mean you actually aren't too late or too fast?”

“Shh, I'm going somewhere with this.”

She leaned her head back and laughed, the most delightful sound he could imagine.

“As I was saying, I wish I had not hesitated so long to seek out a relationship with you beyond friendship, but now that we've fallen in love, I don't want to wait any longer to make you my wife, especially after all that happened yesterday.”

Chloe nodded and bit her lip.

“I love you.” He stepped away from her and turned her toward himself. “I don't want to live in the regret of not saying what should have been said. I don't want to miss a single opportunity with you.” He knelt on one knee and drew the little box from his pocket. “Chloe Elizabeth Jacobs, will you

marry me?” He popped the box open, revealing a simple but elegant diamond ring.

The stars sparkled in the moisture pooling in her eyes. “Yes.”

He slid the ring on her finger and stood. He wrapped his arms around her waist, while hers went around his neck. He lifted her off the ground, and their lips met.

The chill that had been in his bones since yesterday, vanished completely as the joy of love filled his entire being. This woman, whom he loved and adored, would be his wife. No longer did he need to live in fear of moving too fast or too slow in a relationship. God had them, and it was just right.

He deepened the kiss as the world around faded. In need of air, he set her on the ground and pulled out of the kiss. “I love you.”

She touched her forehead to his. “I love you too. I’m glad you didn’t wait any longer to ask.”

He laughed and lifted her hand to inspect the ring on her finger. It was perfect. “Me too. I called your dad and Gabe while we were out and asked permission.”

She laughed. “Of course you did. I’m hoping they gave their blessing.”

“They did. Gabe’s exact words were: ‘It’s about time.’ Your dad put me on speaker phone, and your mom squealed loud enough I was afraid you heard.”

“I was wondering what that sound was. When should we get married?”

Josh considered the question. “How about before the next catastrophe hits?”

“I like that idea. But even better, how about no more catastrophes?”

“Ah, where would be the fun in that?”

They laughed and hugged one another.

Chloe said, “Either way, I love you and am with you until the end.”

“Absolutely.”

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Danger Collection)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Liz didn't always know she a writer, but she was. Before she even knew it, God was plotting out this path for her. From her earliest days, stories were a natural part of her imagination. In high school, she toyed around with writing, but it was nothing more than a secret hobby. But one day, when her middle daughter was a little over a year old, a story idea crept in her mind and wouldn't leave her alone. So, she started writing. She would stay up late after everyone else was in bed and frantically write the words that brought her characters to life.

That first novel lives buried deep in her hard drive, and maybe one day it will see the light of day, but that would take a LOT of editing. About the time she couldn't figure out where that first book would end, another idea persisted in her mind. That was Becca and Jared's story, book one in *The Detectives of Hazel Hill* series. Before she knew it, what started as a single novel turned into a trilogy... but wait, there's more. In that series, she now has six stories published

(including the prequel novella) and many more percolating. She also has several more ideas for the characters of Hazel Hill, North Carolina. The *Knoxville FBI* series has one more story to go before it is complete. Her *Tracking Danger* series will have more books too. Liz also has numerous other series forming in her mind!

Liz is a member of Faith, Hope, & Love Christian Writers, American Christian Fiction Writers, and ACFW Louisville Chapter. Her heart longs to live in North Carolina (where she was born) or Tennessee and that is why she set her stories there. But, for now, she and her husband live in Southern Indiana where she homeschools their three daughters.