

An utterly gripping crime thriller with a nail-biting twist

M.M. CHOUINARD

ANGELS IN THE SNOW

DETECTIVE JO FOURNIER BOOK 8

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M.M. CHOUINARD

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For anyone who's ever been a protective factor.

NOVEMBER 24TH

CHAPTER ONE

Love is the most dangerous of human emotions. We all crave it, with a need that springs from our deepest core. When we have it, we feel whole. But when it's torn away from us—there's nothing that can destroy us more completely. And there's no limit to what we'll do to prevent that from happening.

That's why my emotions were so mixed as I stared down at my partner and my daughter, snuggled peacefully under the blue comforter like two bugs in a rug. On the one hand my heart soared—they were both so beautiful, my very own matching pair of angels. I longed to reach out and stroke their chestnut hair, to assure myself they were real and they were mine. On the other hand, I was terrified. I wasn't one of those lucky men who married their high-school sweethearts and lived happily ever after. I'd wanted to be, but that love had been ripped away from me, and I'd struggled ever since to find it again. I knew how easily it could disappear in the blink of an eye.

I gauged the room's temperature for comfort: warm, but not too warm. I double-checked there was water on the nightstand. I weighed the glow from the night light—not enough to disrupt their sleep, but plenty to ease my little angel's fears if she woke.

She stirred and shifted, cuddling deeper into her mother's chest. The blankets slid off her as she turned. Five was a little too old for her to be sleeping in the same bed with her mother, but it was only fair she have time to get used to the new house.

Change was difficult and scary, especially for children, and a little extra comfort would help her adjust. We'd gradually shift her into the big-girl princess bed waiting for her.

I reached over and gently tugged the covers back over her. It wouldn't do to have her catch a chill while she slept.

I closed my eyes and pictured our future: Joyful meals together around the table. Comfy evenings watching movies on the couch with cups of cocoa. And, only a few weeks away, our first Christmas together, the ultimate family event, filled with presents and games and cookies and carols. The first real Christmas I'd had since I was a teenager, before—

No. I wasn't going to allow the demons of my past to steal away my perfect present. My angels were real. They were here. And this time I'd do whatever was necessary to make it all work and protect them. Everything would be fine.

I turned away, tip-toeing to make sure my footsteps didn't wake them. But as I reached to close the door behind me, I realized I'd forgotten why I'd come to check on them in the first place. Chuckling inwardly at my forgetfulness, I retraced my footsteps, then lifted the edge of the covers. Directing the beam from my flashlight underneath, I made sure the shackles were snug around their wrists, and firmly secured to the wall.

CHAPTER TWO

“You weren’t kidding. Your family really does start Christmas the day after Thanksgiving, snow or shine.”

Josette Fournier glanced at Matt Soltero, her live-in boyfriend, weighing his sharper-than-usual tone. He was smiling, but the subtle web of wrinkles around his brown eyes weren’t as creased as they normally were, and his gloved hands clutched rather than held his coffee as he huddled against the scattered flakes gently falling over the Christmas tree lot.

A vague discomfort fluttered in her stomach; he normally enjoyed her family. Especially her nieces Emily and Isabelle, currently dashing from tree to tree in bright red coats that, against the evergreen of the pines and amid strings of multi-colored lights, made them look like they’d been plucked from a holiday card. He’d navigated the family drama of her sister Sophie’s near divorce with ease and empathy, and even got along with her mother well. Most of all, he’d put up with all of Jo’s insecurities and her demanding job, never giving one hint of bad attitude through nine months of trials and tribulations.

Maybe she was overthinking his reaction? Her instincts were normally dead-on, but still, until she knew for sure otherwise, she should probably assume the best.

“Hey, you got off lucky. If my mother hadn’t had to go to that charity lunch, we’d have been up at the crack of dawn in the frozen forest cutting down our own.” She bumped his shoulder with hers. “Just keep thinking about the

Thanksgiving-leftover grinders with eggnog waiting for us while we sing carols and decorate the tree.”

His smile increased slightly. “Turkey and cranberry sauce?”

“Whatever you want.” Jo linked her arm through his. “We put out the leftovers buffet style and you load up your roll. I personally put a thick layer of green-bean casserole over my turkey and drench everything with gravy.”

“That’s hitting below the belt.” He thrust his hand over his stomach. “I’m starving.”

“Then the sooner we get what we came for, the better.” Jo put a faux-stern look on her face. “Time to focus. Are you a Douglas fir or white spruce type of guy?”

His shook his head. “I’m an artificial-trees-don’t-make-a-mess type of guy.”

Sophie, who’d been evaluating the white spruce her husband David was holding for gaps and symmetry, gasped. “Did you just say you prefer artificial trees? Sacrilege.”

Jo’s mother raised her brows. “Now I know the reason my daughter came into your life, Matt. So we can show you the error of your ways.”

“What is that, seven feet?” Sophie asked about the tree.

David glanced up. “Closer to eight. It’ll be tight with the angel on top, but it’ll fit. I’ll have the guy cut a little extra off the trunk.”

As Emily danced an excited ring around the tree, Matt stepped over to help David carry it to the front. Jo’s mother’s phone rang, and she stepped away to answer it.

As Elisabeth took her call, Jo held Sophie back and leaned in to whisper; David’s ex-mistress had given birth to his baby the month before, and she knew Sophie was struggling with the situation. “How’s everything going?”

Sophie shot a glance over to make sure David was out of earshot. “Surprisingly good. I was thinking he’d be gone visiting the baby all the time, and I was dreading that. But he

decided it should be a split-custody arrangement from the beginning, so he brings the baby to our house.”

Jo winced as she swallowed a hot sip of cider. “Still. That can’t be easy, dealing with a newborn baby.”

A shadow crossed her face. “David deals with most of it. And, as you rightfully pointed out to me, many people have to deal with stepchildren. I do want the girls to have a relationship with their half-brother, and they’ll pick up on it if I’m resentful. Besides, it’s not the baby’s fault he had the bad luck to be born into the situation.”

“My hat’s off to you. I’m not sure I could—”

Elisabeth’s voice rose dramatically, startling Jo from her train of thought. “Ma, is everything okay?”

Elisabeth turned, face tight, and stabbed the phone off. “I need someone to drive my car home. Jo and I need to go see Aunt Genevieve immediately.” She reached into her purse and pulled out her keys.

Jo’s heart stuttered. “What’s going on, Ma?”

“Your cousin Paxton and her daughter Alexia are missing.” Elisabeth gestured toward the parking lot without pointing. “I’m parked in the left-most row, back by the tree-netting machine.”

“What do you mean, *missing*?” Jo asked. Paxton was an adult, one with a complicated history that included leaving home the day after she graduated high school despite being two weeks shy of her eighteenth birthday.

Elisabeth strode forward toward the exit. “She took Alexia to the mall to do some shopping and see Santa Claus, but they were due to return two hours ago to help Genevieve prepare dinner and decorate the tree. And she’s not answering her phone.”

CHAPTER THREE

“I’m sure Paxton just lost track of time.” Jo shot a surreptitious glance at her mother while navigating the snow-flurried parking lot. Elisabeth’s jaw clenched and unclenched repeatedly, and her green eyes were wide. One arm gripped her tall, slim torso while the other tugged at the gray-and-brown shoulder-length hair poking out from her beige fisherman’s hat. Jo’s chest tightened—Elisabeth was of the combined class and generation that found such displays of emotion to be uncouth and self-indulgent.

“You don’t lose track of time to that degree when you have a five-year-old. They get tired and hungry and fussy. Especially in a mall.” Elisabeth’s tone implied Jo couldn’t possibly understand.

Jo did understand, but was trying to keep her mother calm by keeping her talking. “Aunt Ginnie is your youngest sibling, right? And Paxton’s her only daughter?”

Elisabeth glared at her. “Don’t handle me, Josette. You know all of this.”

Jo refused to let her veneer of calm drop. “I need to be sure I’m not misremembering anything, and that I have the timing of it all right. If I remember correctly, Paxton was barely out of diapers when I was graduating the academy. So that would make her somewhere around twenty, right?”

Elisabeth’s glare stayed strong. “Twenty-six. And Alexia’s five, before you ask. That you actually *don’t* know.”

Her mother was right, she didn't know much about Alexia. Paxton had always been partial to Jo, hanging around her during holidays and family gatherings, and Jo had enjoyed her company, too; Paxton had been an energetic, precocious child who'd gradually grown into an intelligent teenager. Always a straight-A student continually praised by her teachers, she was 'rebellious' with her parents for reasons everyone claimed to not understand. She'd been fascinated by Jo's profession; not only had she thought being a detective was 'cool,' she admired that Jo had chosen a blue-collar profession rather than the white-collar family paths of private business and investment. She actually told Jo on several occasions that Jo inspired her, and Jo told her to call if she ever decided to go to the academy. But after she 'ran away' from home, she hadn't kept in touch with anyone. When the family enlisted her to find Paxton and keep tabs on her, Jo refused—everyone had the right to privacy, and Paxton knew how to reach Jo if she needed anything, so other than intermittent basic checks to be sure she was still alive, Jo minded her own business. Nobody had known what was happening with Paxton until she resumed contact, and only then did her story gradually filter itself through the family. She'd transferred her high-school job at the local McDonald's to one in Boston and worked her way up to assistant manager there over the next few years. She shared an apartment with several other young working women, and through one of them met Patrick Sills. His circle of friends was a little too fond of having a good time, particularly when it involved meth and Oxy. Patrick burned through her savings, got Paxton pregnant and himself arrested for burglary, and was given the choice between rehab and jail. When he emerged from the rehab to discover he was about to be a father, he kept sober long enough to see Alexia be born, but quickly fell back into his old habits.

Jo sucked breath in through her teeth. "She could be my granddaughter."

Her mother's head whipped toward her. "Only if you'd gotten pregnant in high school, God forbid."

"Well. College, anyway."

Elisabeth's eyes ran up and down Jo's face as if searching for hidden code in her burgeoning wrinkles. "Right. I forget how fast you're approaching fifty."

Jo kept her wince internal and her eyes on the long dirt road, where cars and trucks laden with Christmas trees were backed up waiting to turn onto the main two-lane road. Her mother's disappointment in Jo's childless, career-driven life was nothing new. But for the last few months Elisabeth had seemed more accepting. Was Jo reading in criticism that wasn't there? Or had the stress of the current situation stripped away her mother's pretense of tolerance?

She shook off the train of thought. "Paxton never got into any of the drugs, right?"

"No." The tendons in Elisabeth's neck stretched and flexed as she battled with her emotions. "She says so, anyway, and I believe it, considering she watched her father— Well, I believe it. And that's why there's never been much question of who'd have custody of Alexia, even though Patrick has been fighting for split custody since he came out of his second attempt at recovery." Elisabeth expelled a puff of angry air from her nose.

"Split custody? That's bold. Visitation rights aren't enough for him?"

Elisabeth flicked a hand dismissively. "He doesn't have visitation rights."

"No visitation rights?" Jo was surprised to hear it. "If he's been sober for any length of time, I'm surprised a judge wouldn't give him the benefit of the doubt."

Elisabeth glanced at her quickly, then back out the windshield. "He hit them. Both Paxton and Alexia. Paxton was smart enough to take pictures of the bruises and marks. But he says some other man did it."

Jo's brow creased. "She was seeing someone else?"

"He's a liar, Josette." Elisabeth's words were barbed. "He's trying to discredit her. She says she hasn't dated anybody since he went into rehab the second time, and really, between work

and single motherhood I can't see how she'd have time." She slid out her phone and tapped frantically into it.

Jo nodded as she waited impatiently for a pedestrian to cross the road—if Paxton did turn out to be missing, she'd need to talk to Patrick. "You said she's back living with Aunt Ginnie and Uncle Jim. When did that happen?"

"Just under a year ago. Ostensibly she's trying to pay off the debts she incurred when she was with Patrick. Once Alexia's in school full time, she wants to go back to school to get a business license and hopefully get her own McDonald's franchise." Her voice held an edge of scorn.

"A continuation of your sister's tragic descent," Jo said, almost managing to keep the sarcastic contempt for her mother's response out of her own.

Elisabeth had been born a Doucet, a line descended from a group of New World French who'd been expelled from Acadia when the British took over those lands in 1755. Most of the expelled French settled in Louisiana—Jo's father was a Cajun descendant—but a much smaller group settled in Massachusetts. They weren't wanted or welcomed, and were indentured or otherwise struggled to survive. Most ultimately petitioned to leave the colony to better support themselves, but the Doucets managed to carve out a place for themselves. Before long they were hobnobbing among the upper echelons of Massachusetts society, eventually with the likes of the Kennedys. But Aunt Genevieve had abandoned that legacy when she married James Reynault against her parents' wishes; while he'd managed to do reasonably well for his family financially, Uncle Jim's lack of entrepreneurialism meant he was never truly accepted into the family. The harder he tried, the worse they treated him, and he became angry and bitter. The marriage suffered, and Genevieve had spent decades struggling to put on appearances. Franchising a McDonald's would be seen as a further dent in the family's pride.

Elisabeth read the reproach in her daughter's voice and flashed her another glare. "Do we really have to wallow around in the family's shame at this particular moment?"

Jo deescalated her tone. “You said the reason Paxton came back was ‘ostensibly’ to pay off her bills. Was there another reason?”

Elisabeth’s fingers clenched the hem of her coat. “She came back shortly after Ginnie was diagnosed with breast cancer. But I don’t see why any of this is relevant.”

“Hopefully it isn’t,” Jo answered, keeping her tone low and steady in light of her mother’s quick-fire reactivity. A car braked in front of her, and she slowed her speed. “But it might be. She ran away once, and family dynamics don’t just suddenly become functional, even when people get sick. So I need to get a handle on what might have caused her to not show up when she promised she would.”

Elisabeth’s neck straightened. “You think she ran away again?”

“I have to consider it.” Jo’s mouth pulled back into a skeptical grimace. “But to leave with a five-year-old without notice? That doesn’t seem like a smart move. And Paxton’s always been smart, even if she got caught up with the wrong people.”

As Jo eased up the driveway to her aunt’s banana-yellow saltbox, she tried to remember the last time she’d been there. Two years ago for a birthday celebration? Aunt Genevieve and Uncle Jim didn’t host many family events. Partly because their house was the smallest of those owned by the siblings, and in the least desirable part of town; partly because Uncle Jim’s behavior was unpredictable.

“Just pull up in front of the garage,” Elisabeth directed, short-circuiting Jo’s attempt to pull off the gravel and leave the detached garage unblocked. “This late in the day, neither of them will be driving.”

Nodding grimly, Jo pulled up and parked. They strode to the door in silence; it opened without visible human help before they reached it, as though a ghost had pulled it inward.

As Jo crossed the threshold, Genevieve emerged from behind it, eyes wide, silver hair tucked tightly behind her ears.

“I’m *not* overreacting, Josette.” Genevieve’s shrill objection came before Jo could open her mouth, her tension clearly visible. “I know my daughter.”

Jo shot a look at her mother. Elisabeth looked away unapologetically.

Jo put a gentle hand on her aunt’s arm, trying to defuse the damage her mother had done via text. “Of course you do, Auntie. And you were right to call me. I just want to make sure we don’t panic, because if we panic we’ll forget something or make a mistake.” She steered Genevieve toward the living room. “Tell me what exactly happened.”

Genevieve’s voice rose still higher. “Paxton went to the mall this morning to take Alexia to see Santa and to do some Christmas shopping for me. She was supposed to be home two hours ago to help me with dinner. We were going to decorate the tree and sing carols after and Alexia has been looking forward to it all week, so I just don’t believe there’s any way Paxton would be five minutes late, let alone two hours. And she’s not answering her phone.”

Uncle Jim’s voice boomed out as they entered the room. “She ran off again, Ginnie. I told you she would. She’s been an ungrateful brat since the day she was born.” Slouched into the brown leather couch, he raised the tumbler in his right hand and tossed back the two fingers of caramel-colored liquid inside. Then he stood, crossed to the bar, and poured in three fingers from the bottle of Sazerac.

Elisabeth shot Jo a pointed look; she nodded acknowledgment.

“Paxton just wants attention.” Jim’s head swiveled toward Jo. “I told her not to call you. Thought she learned her damned lesson the first time, but her ego’s still writing checks her body can’t cash.”

Jo shrugged off the bad mobster-movie talk and gestured to the naked Douglas fir and the boxes marked *Christmas*

ornaments in the corner of the room. “Is there a reason why she would have left right now, Uncle Jim? It seems strange she’d choose a day when her daughter was excited about putting up the tree.”

He pushed out his lips and waved a dismissive hand. “Never cared about anybody but herself.”

“If she chose today to run, something must have prompted it,” Jo tried again. “Has she had any problems recently? Any trouble with anybody?”

Aunt Genevieve shot an accusing glare at Elisabeth. “You didn’t tell her about Patrick?”

“Of course I did—” Elisabeth started.

Jo interrupted them both. “I’d like to get the details from you, Auntie, since you know more.”

Genevieve recapped the same essential ground Elisabeth had.

“So no other conflicts happening in her life? Problem with friends or her job?” Jo asked.

Aunt Genevieve blinked at her, and her voice rose again. “No. Why are you wasting time? Obviously this is Patrick’s doing—go find him.”

“For fuck’s sake, Ginnie, she’s just doing her job.” Jim tossed back half the contents of his tumbler and sauntered over to his armchair.

Genevieve rounded on him. “I understand you don’t give a damn about your daughter, but I’d think you’d care about your *granddaughter*. So you just sit there”—she gestured toward his glass—“and I’ll handle this, like I do everything.”

Jim grimaced a malicious smile. “By taking a second Valium? Or would this be the third?”

“My doctor prescribed me these for anxiety with my cancer,” Genevieve hissed.

“Why did he prescribe them the twenty years before that?”

Feeling her mother stiffen beside her, Jo jumped in. “I agree we need to look into Patrick. Do you have a recent picture of him?” Once her aunt nodded and picked up her phone, Jo continued. “But when a disgruntled parent snatches a child, they don’t usually kidnap the other parent as well. It’s strange that both Alexia *and* Paxton would go missing.” She paused to allow that to sink in. “So while I’ll talk to him, I want my team to check out any other possible leads too. I need a complete picture so I know what I’m looking at.”

Blinking back tears, her aunt nodded. “Of course. Let me think.” She lit her cigarette and inhaled deeply. “When she moved back here she cut ties with the people she knew back in Boston, since they know Patrick, too. Between work and Alexia she doesn’t have much time for a social life. I can’t think of any problem at work other than supply-chain shortages. Nothing that would make someone want to hurt her or Alexia.”

“So she hasn’t been dating anybody?” Jo asked.

Genevieve shook her head as she strode to the window and back. “She’s been careful since Alexia was born.”

Jim gave an odd sound, halfway between a scoff and a hiccup. “When has she told us the truth about anything in her life?”

Genevieve shot him a withering glare. “For the past year. Well, *me*, at least.”

Despite witnessing hundreds, maybe thousands, of stress-fueled fights between interviewees, watching her aunt and uncle’s raw emotions on full display was like fire ants crawling up Jo’s legs. She turned toward her uncle. “What about your accounting work? Any enemies or disgruntled clients?”

“No.” He looked away.

Genevieve gave an icy laugh. “You’re hemorrhaging clients since you screwed up the Burnett account.”

Jo inhaled deeply. “I’m going to head to the mall to look for Paxton and Alexia. I’m assuming she only has one car

registered in her name.” Jo turned to her mother. “I’d like you to stay here with Genevieve while I go look for Paxton. If you all think of anything I should know, text me immediately.”

Panic flashed in her mother’s eyes at the suggestion. “Shouldn’t I come with you? I can help you look.”

“Aunt Ginnie and Uncle Jim are too upset to drive.” Jo held her mother’s eyes, telegraphing her subtext. “And they may need something. I’ll text you as soon as I know anything.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The snow stopped falling as Jo made her way to the mall, a small but significant piece of good news. Snowdrifts left over from the previous week's snowstorm lined the streets; if Paxton'd slid into one and was struggling to get out, the last thing she needed was more snow falling on her and her trapped daughter. As it was, the brief cloud burst had dropped a thin layer of velvet on the landscape, but nothing more.

While driving, Jo made a series of hands-free calls to check if Paxton's car had been involved in any sort of accident, or if she and Alexia had shown up at any of the area hospitals. When nothing turned up, mixed emotions flooded her; it was good they weren't confirmed injured or dead, but the remaining options weren't much better.

The Oakhurst Mall property was shaped like an L, ringed on all sides by a parking lot. In the front area, the portion closest to the two main cross streets, the parking lot extended out in several sections, bordered with an outer rim of restaurants and office space. Behind the 'back' side of the mall, the parking lot ended against a tall wall that created an impenetrable separation between the residential neighborhood on the other side.

Jo considered her approach. Inside, the mall had two main levels and a subterranean food court that totaled nearly a hundred stores; in addition it was Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year. If she went inside and walked the mall looking for Paxton and Alexia, she was almost guaranteed to miss them. The more sensible approach was to

start with the parking lot, scanning for Paxton's car while also keeping an eye out for the pair. She glanced up at the sky; thankfully, the snow hadn't started up again.

Proceeding systematically, she crawled up each aisle checking for a dark-blue 2009 Kia Sorento. The rapidly fading light made colors and models harder to differentiate, and holiday shoppers in a frenetic rush continually swung around her, annoyed at her pace and honking their horns. Despite checking every woman walking with a child and scanning each car carefully, Jo still hadn't found either her cousins or their car by the time she reached the northmost end of the mall. She circled around to the side, then the back, heel bouncing against her car mat.

About halfway down the back rows, Jo spotted it. A dark Kia Sorento with the right license plate number. Both the passenger rear door and the trunk were partially ajar.

"Damn," Jo said aloud. She forced back the desperation and fear clutching her chest as she slammed on her brakes and threw the car into park.

Her breath snaked out in white puffs as she stepped from the car, then popped her trunk and pulled on a bare-bones set of protective gear. The light dusting of late-afternoon snow carpeted the ground around the car, a frustrating double-edged sword. Snow was excellent for showing footprints or anything else that came after it, but was also excellent at covering evidence laid down before it. Anything spilled or dropped, from fibers to cigarette butts, wouldn't be immediately visible.

After turning on the flashlight feature of her phone and hitting the record button, she cautiously approached the vehicle, scanning for any marks in the residual snow as she went. The parking spot to the passenger side of the car was vacant, making movement easier and approach safer. After scanning the tarmac, she angled the light toward the pavement under the car.

A flash of red caught her attention. She crouched for a better look, and her heart froze. Under the car, just an inch or

so out of sight, a worn teddy bear with a Christmas-red bow lay on its side.

Jo snapped several pictures of the bear, then stood again and pointed the light into the back seat of the car, and then up into the front seat. Nobody inside. She lowered the beam again and slowly rounded the front of the car, then sent the light down the pavement between the Kia and the silver Honda next to the driver's side. The shadows shifted, but revealed nothing more.

With a leaden dread, she approached the trunk, praying Paxton and Alexia weren't shoved inside. It had been disengaged, but wasn't gaping open; the lip of the lid only sat several inches above fully closed. She pulled on a nitrile glove and lifted it.

Empty.

Her lungs emptied, bringing the prick of relieved tears to the back of her eyes.

She stopped the recording and tapped at her phone. She explained the situation and requested backup, including local officers to help secure the scene and canvas the area, and a CSI team. Then she put a call through to her partner, Bob Arnett.

"I'm sorry to pull you away from family time. I wouldn't risk Laura's wrath if it wasn't important," she said when he picked up. Arnett's wife was territorial about the time they spent together, ever since they'd almost divorced several years back. She'd had an affair as a cry for attention since he was rarely home and even more rarely emotionally available; after much marriage counseling, Arnett had agreed to set aside time for their marriage. A holiday weekend when their girls were home from university was sacrosanct.

"I know you wouldn't. What's up?" He sounded concerned.

"My cousin and her daughter have gone missing. I just found her car in the lot at Oakhurst Mall, open and empty. I've called it all in, and a team is on their way. I'm happy to work it

alone so you can stay with your family, but I figured you'd want to make the choice yourself."

"If it's your family, Laura won't want me to sit it out. I'm on my way."

CHAPTER FIVE

While Jo waited in her car for the team to arrive, she called her mother and explained that she'd found Paxton's car. She texted a picture of the teddy bear for Genevieve to identify.

"That's Ralphie Bear. She's never without it." Aunt Ginnie's voice shook. "She sleeps with it, eats with it, she even sits it on a chair in the bathroom when she takes her bath. I told Paxton she needed to get a restraining order against that hoodlum, but she didn't listen—"

Jo cut in. "I put out an Amber alert and a BOLO for Patrick Sills. Do you happen to have an address for him?"

"Last I know he was living with his mother and her new husband. Susan and Jerry Krepila."

Jo jotted down the information. "I also need to know the names and contact information for everybody who has contact with Alexia. Her school, childcare, what have you."

"She's not in school yet, and I'm her childcare. I watch her when Paxton's at work."

That stopped Jo. "She's five. Isn't she in kindergarten?"

"She just turned five in October, past the cut-off for this year. She won't start kindergarten until next year."

Jo thanked her and promised to call back soon, then did a search on Patrick Sills. Aunt Genevieve wasn't wrong; Jo found five addresses for him in the last eighteen-month period, including a rehab and a sober-living facility in the Berkshires. The most recent address was the one Aunt Genevieve had

given her, and it turned out to be Patrick's parents' residence in Phelpston. She couldn't find a car registered in his name, and his license was suspended due to impaired-driving charges; she jotted down the plate for his parents' 2011 Chevy Blazer. She updated the Amber alert with the new information.

Uniformed officers from Oakhurst PD arrived first. As one pair secured a perimeter around Paxton's car, Jo sent off a second in search of Patrick Sills, and a third into the mall to arrange for security footage and to begin canvassing. Shortly after, Arnett pulled into a parking spot two rows away and strode over with a large coffee in each gloved hand.

"You're a god." Jo took the coffee and gulped down the warmth, jealously scanning Arnett's thick black coat and the black tuque covering most of his salt-and-pepper hair. Her red cargo jacket had worked perfectly for the relatively short trip to the Christmas tree lot, but not an extended stay in post-sundown sub-freezing temperatures.

"Tell it to my wife." He tonelessly churned out his long-standing response. "Catch me up."

Jo began to recount, but a white woman in a pink ski parka, trailed by two children, interrupted.

"Hey, what the hell?" she yelled at Officer Rodriguez, who was guarding the perimeter. "This is my car! Get away from it!"

"Ma'am, I need you to back away. This car is part of a crime scene," Rodriguez answered.

The woman leaned forward, trying to get a complete look at the scene. "Bullshit. It's the car next to mine you're looking at, not mine. Do you know who I am?"

The combination of words and tone pushed a deep button in Jo. She stepped over, placing herself physically between the woman and Rodriguez. "Please tell us. Who exactly are you?"

The woman's eyes flashed to Jo. "I'm Gina *Foscarelli*. My husband is on the *city council*. Who the hell are *you*?"

"Detective Jo Fournier, of the Oakhurst County State Police Detective Unit." She pulled out her phone. "I'll call

your husband directly and explain the situation. Or should I have District Attorney Barbieri contact him?”

Gina physically shrank back from the words. “Oh. There’s no need to bother him. But I need to get home. Do I have to sign something to get my car?”

“As you pointed out, your car is parked next to the primary vehicle involved in the crime scene. Because of that, the perpetrator likely came in contact with it, so we’ll need to process it for prints or other physical evidence. Best-case scenario that will take several hours, so I suggest you wait at home. I can have a patrol take you, but we won’t have one free for some time.”

Gina’s mouth tightened; Jo could almost hear her playing out a conversation with her husband about why she’d diverted resources from a crime scene. “I’ll just call an Uber.”

“That’s a great help. Please leave your contact information with Officer Rodriguez.” Jo turned and strode toward the CSI van that had just pulled up. Janet Marzillo, head of the lab, was changing into PPE next to Hakeem Petersen, a rising star in the lab.

“Janet. I didn’t realize you were on call the day after Thanksgiving.” Jo stepped up next to her, careful to stay out of contamination range.

“Three techs have Covid, so I had to cover. How did you end up out here when you’re not on the board?”

Jo gave her and Hakeem a quick recap while they finished kitting up. “I left everything as I found it, although I did swing the rear passenger door open slightly to see in more completely. I took a recording so you’ll know exactly how far ajar it was before I touched it. I’ve already uploaded it for you. The PPE I wore is in those evidence bags next to Rodriguez.”

“Got it,” Marzillo said, eyes searching Jo’s face. “And glad I’m here to help.”

Jo acknowledged the gesture with a subtle nod. “The partial footprints you see are all mine. The snow was

untouched when I got here. The flurry started at four-thirty, so whatever happened here took place before then.”

Marzillo glanced at her watch. “Six forty-five now.”

“So the clock has been ticking for nearly three hours. My aunt said Paxton left for the mall around ten this morning and was due home at four to help prepare dinner. Paxton would have to leave no later than three-thirty to get home in time, so she likely went missing before three-thirty. That means if they were kidnapped, the perp has as much as nine hours’ head start. We need to act quickly.”

“Right,” Marzillo said. “We’ll get started processing the cars.”

“Thanks. We’ll send some officers to search the lot of any other relevant evidence, and we already have a team canvassing the mall. Bob and I are going to check the security footage. Text if you need anything.”

Jo scanned the shifting shadows under the intermittent lampposts as she and Arnett strode toward the mall. “Just enough of a dusting on everything to muddy up visibility. But we should still be able to spot anything large.”

“Like the wadded-up diapers tossed on the ground?” Arnett gestured to a white lump. “The hell is wrong with people?”

Jo shook her head, and cast around for the nearest security camera. Despite signs that proclaimed ‘Smile, you’re on camera!’ she was only able to spot one, far in the distance. “Not many cameras out here, unless they have some hidden ones. Let’s hope for wide lenses, at least.”

Arnett cleared his throat. “I hate to bring this up, but... Hayes is going to be pissed if we don’t call her about this. And she’s gonna have an issue with you being on a case involving a family member.”

Lieutenant Hayes, a recent transplant from upstate New York, had taken an instant and intense dislike to Jo. Baffled at first, Jo sussed out over time that Hayes was either threatened

by Jo's previous stint as lieutenant, or had decided the only reason Jo would leave the position was incompetence.

"Thanks for the reminder." Jo extracted her phone from her jacket pocket, then put through a call. She tapped speakerphone and waited.

"Fournier? What's up?" D.A. Barbieri's voice came over the line.

"I need to apprise you of a situation," she said. "I'm at Oakhurst Mall, where a young woman and her daughter have gone missing. We found her car, but the vehicle next to it belongs to Gina Foscarelli, the wife of an Oakhurst city council member. She wasn't happy about not being able to access her vehicle, and you may be getting an angry call from her husband."

"Foscarelli knows better than to call me about something like that," Barbieri said.

"I figured, but didn't want you to get an ugly surprise," Jo said. "Now I need to call Hayes. The missing woman is my cousin, so she'll most likely want to put someone else on the investigation. The sooner we get that sorted out, the better."

Barbieri paused. "Is Arnett there with you?"

"Yes. I called him along with the forensics team and the local PD."

"Is the woman his cousin too?"

Jo smiled. "No, sir."

"Then I don't see the problem. He can head the investigation with your assistance. If I recall correctly, Hayes had you do the same for Arnett during the Ossokov case a while back, so if Hayes has any issues with that, she can take it up with me."

"Will do."

As Barbieri hung up, Jo typed out a text to Hayes, reading aloud as she tapped:

My cousin and her daughter have disappeared from Oakhurst Mall. Found her abandoned car next to city councilman's wife's vehicle. She threatened to have her husband call Barbieri, so I gave Barbieri a heads-up about it.

As she finished, she caught sight of Arnett's raised eyebrows. "What?" she asked.

"Impressive. And more than a little frightening."

Jo's eyes widened innocently. "No idea what you're talking about."

"Hayes's head is gonna explode."

"That's unfortunate." Jo shook her head dolefully. "Sure hope she doesn't hold it against me."

He smiled wryly and pulled open the mall door. "You know where security holes up in here?"

"Yes, I called while I was waiting. Right here, tucked next to the entrance door."

"Lead the way."

CHAPTER SIX

Paxton woke slowly, feeling like her brain was underwater. She stared up at the ceiling, waiting to recognize her surroundings. Since Alexia was born, she'd learned to snatch sleep wherever she could, sometimes even in the McDonald's storeroom, and was used to waking up in a strange limbo of disorientation as she puzzled out when and where she was. Normally recognition came in a few seconds, with a welcome whoosh of relief.

But this time, the recognition didn't come. She didn't know this ceiling.

Low and gray, with neither the high beams of her parents' living room ceiling or the industrially checked McDonald's tiles. With glowing stars sprayed across it, like a child's bedroom.

She glanced down, to her right. The room was strangely dim, as if lit by a child's night light. She made out a bureau—one she was sure she'd never seen before.

Adrenaline cleared her brain and she bolted upright—her head screamed in pain. She reached for it automatically, but a clanking something weighed her hand down. A manacle—attached to a heavy chain—draping over the edge of the unfamiliar bed. She followed it back to where it attached to a huge loop bolted into the wall.

The sight brought her memory rushing back: the stranger well-bundled against the cold, with only their eyes peeking out

between hat and scarf. The ancient car that had stalled in the middle of the parking lot and needed a jump.

She squeezed her eyes shut—how had she been so stupid? She'd spent enough time in the rough parts of Boston to fall for such a transparent ruse. But she'd been in similar situations herself more than once, and after years of relying on public transportation she was lucky to have the beat-up fifth-hand piece of crap car that broke down almost as often as it started. So of course she had jumper cables, and it was Christmas time—how could she not help someone stranded in the cold and snow? So she'd set Alexia into her car seat to keep her safe before going back over to the trunk—

“Alexia!” She whipped around, heart slamming the wall of her chest. Her daughter was there, next to her on the bed. But lying completely still, eyes closed and mouth wide open.

“Alexia!” As Paxton reached for her, the chain clanked and her hand jerked awkwardly. She yanked harder, then gave Alexia's shoulder a gentle shake. Her eyes didn't open.

“No, no, no, oh God, no. Alexia!” Paxton shook her again, slightly harder. When she still didn't move, Paxton shoved her free hand under Alexia's nose.

A soft, reassuring puff of air hit her skin. Alexia was still breathing.

Tears flowed down Paxton's face, and she pulled Alexia into her arms—she was alive, that was the most important thing. She must be drugged, they both must be, that's why Paxton's head was thrumming. But—she pushed Alexia slightly away and went over every inch of her body, head to toe. No blood, no bruises, every bit of her clothing in place, except her coat and shoes. She hadn't been harmed.

Paxton squeezed her eyes shut and thought back. After she set Alexia into the car seat, she bent over to open the trunk so she could get the jumper cables. She remembered a searing jolt—had she been tased?—then her head had exploded in pain and the world had gone black.

They'd been kidnapped.

The realization sliced through the tiny thread of calm holding her together. She yanked the chain, reeling it in until she reached the end, then yanked harder, but the loop in the wall didn't move—didn't even vibrate. She yanked still harder, praying for the super-human strength women supposedly got when lifting cars off their babies. But it didn't come and when she felt her arm pop she realized it would break long before the chain. She screamed for help, knowing it must be futile, until her throat turned raw and the screams turned to sobs. Then she clenched Alexia close again and collapsed around her daughter's little body, gasping for breath while the bed shook beneath her panicked sobs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Within minutes Jo and Arnett settled into a small, dingy, predominantly gray room in front of a monitor showing eight split screens. Mike Sciuto, the white, sixty-something head of security whose barrel chest matched his belly, had the footage lined up and waiting. He explained the keyboard controls and indicated where each view was located on the mall map.

“You said you needed to start with the parking lot footage. What time and area are we looking at?” Sciuto asked.

“Let’s start at four-thirty and work backward.” Jo pointed to the map. “The car’s here, in this back section.”

“Outside camera seven.” Sciuto leaned over her to navigate the mouse. A single view replaced the eight-way split, completely black except for the time clock ticking along the bottom.

“Huh. That’s not right.” Sciuto clicked out of the window, re-navigated, and reopened. The same black square appeared, ticking up the current time. “Hey, Marty. Pull up camera seven. What do you get?”

Several clacks drifted in from the outer room. “Camera must be out.”

Jo shot Arnett a look, then addressed Sciuto. “Is that common?”

He shook his head. “Equipment breaks, but we fix it asap. We do a daily check first thing before the mall opens, so the camera went out sometime today.”

“Signal’s coming through fine,” Marty called. “Must be a hardware issue. Want me to go check it out?”

Jo preempted Sciuto’s response. “We’ll call one of our officers to accompany you. We’ll need to process it for evidence.” She slid out her phone and sent a series of texts. “While you do that, let’s back this up and see exactly when the camera cut out.”

Sciuto nodded grimly, and bent over the mouse. The black square remained, but the clock at the bottom whizzed backward through the minutes. All three hunched toward it, focused and silent. When the black was suddenly replaced by a view of the parking lot, the light hit Jo’s retinas like a lightning strike.

“Two-forty.” She jotted the time down on her pad. “Can you replay what happened right before the camera cuts out, but in slow motion?”

Sciuto did as she asked, then replayed it again twice more. Nobody appeared; the image only shook for the briefest second before going black.

“Looks like something knocked it out from the side,” Arnett said.

Jo nodded and pointed at the now-paused image of the scene just before the feed ended. “There’s Paxton’s car. You can’t really tell if the trunk is all the way closed, but I’m pretty sure the passenger rear isn’t ajar. So either our perpetrator was incredibly lucky and just happened to pick an area where the camera was out—”

“Or they made their own luck,” Arnett finished. “My money’s on option B.”

“Since we know the incident happened before four-thirty, we now have a fairly specific window of time we’re working with.” Jo leaned forward toward the video, then toward the map. “That’s odd.”

“What?” Arnett asked.

“If you look at the angle of the camera and the placement versus the two nearest exit doors”—she pointed to the relevant

locations as she spoke—“there’s no way the perpetrator could have been following Paxton.”

“What do you mean?” Sciuto asked.

“Let’s say Paxton’s ex spotted her, or she caught the eye of some guy looking to abduct someone. They’d follow her until they could find an opportunity to snatch her. Then, presumably, when she turned up the aisle toward her car, that’s when he’d know which camera to take out. But, if that’s what happened, we’d be able to see Paxton on the camera before it went blank. She never appears.”

“You think he preemptively knocked out the camera,” Arnett concluded. “If so, this wasn’t spur of the moment. That fits better with the ex being our perp since he’d’ve known what car she drove. Or, if it’s a rando, he’d’ve had to spot her earlier in the day.”

“Exactly,” Jo agreed. “If it was a random attack, we should see something suspicious on the footage. Either someone loitering outside or following her around inside. I’ll send a text out to the officers canvassing to ask about that.”

“Does Paxton come to this mall often?” Arnett asked. “Could be some employee who knows her. Maybe followed her before today and found out what kind of car she drives. Then once he saw her in the mall, found it and took out the camera.”

“Good call. We also need to keep an eye out for anyone who seems to be watching her.” She finished with her text and raked her teeth over her lip. “Still, either way, I’m struggling to make it all line up.”

“How so?” Arnett asked.

She shook her head. “Young women get abducted. Little girls get abducted. But how often does a little girl and her mother get snatched together?”

Arnett scratched his chin. “Maybe someone thought they could snatch Alexia, but Paxton put up more of a fight than anticipated. If they drove up in a car, it might be easier to just

push her in and ditch her later. Or vice versa if they wanted Paxton but didn't realize she came as a package deal."

"But that doesn't work if they were watching her ahead of time, which they must have been." Jo pointed to the monitor and shook her head in frustration. "Anyway. Next step is to kick the external footage into reverse to determine exactly when she arrived and which entrance she went into." She sent the footage speeding into reverse. "We'll need someone to take down the license plates and descriptions of everyone who goes past her car."

"That's gonna be a shit job," Arnett said. "The traffic's nearly continual. And since everyone's going slow looking for parking spots, it'll be nearly impossible to pick out someone prowling for a victim." He shook his head. "I thought shopping malls were dying out."

"Not on Black Friday they ain't," Sciuto said.

Jo raised her brows in acknowledgment, still focused on the cars whizzing backwards in high speed.

Then, about two hours prior to the camera going out, someone approached the car.

"Hang on." Jo's hand shot out to slow the video to normal speed. "That's Paxton and Alexia, at what, almost one in the afternoon? But my aunt said she left for the mall closer around ten in the morning—"

Paxton and Alexia approached the trunk, extracted a bunch of bags, and headed back toward the mall.

"Oh, I see." Jo switched out of reverse, and let the recording play forward. Paxton and Alexia reappeared, Paxton's arms laden with shopping bags. Paxton popped the trunk, put the bags inside, then headed back toward the mall.

"She was just dropping off the shopping," Arnett said.

"Except..." Jo leaned forward and replayed the segment again, then turned to stare at Arnett. "When I searched the car, the trunk was empty."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You think this was all just some robbery gone bad?” Sciuto asked them, eyes wide.

Jo’s hand flew back to the diamond on her necklace. “How bad would a robbery have to go to end in an abduction of a mother and child?”

“Maybe they wanted to make it look like a robbery gone bad.” Sciuto’s eyes lit up. “Or maybe it was just somebody she knew and he didn’t want her to ID him. Or maybe there was a clue in whatever she bought.”

As much as Jo knew Sciuto was trying to help, his attempts were siphoning attention away from where she needed it to be. “If so, we’ll see it when we look at the internal footage.”

“Any chance there’s any coffee around here?” Arnett asked, reading her frustration.

“I’ll go get you some.” Sciuto took off.

Shaking her head, Jo reached over and started the recording again.

Twenty minutes later, Paxton and Alexia appeared again, got in the car, and backed out of the spot. Jo switched to playing forward at regular speed. The Kia slid back into the spot at ten-thirty, morning light glinting off her fender. Paxton got out, unbuckled Alexia from her car seat, then headed toward the north-most of two entrances on that side of the mall.

“That entrance is covered by internal camera four.” Sciuto, who’d returned with their coffee, reached past Jo. “I’ll pull it up.”

The pair appeared through the doors, Paxton looking chic despite the wear on her brown trench and boots, Alexia’s round cheeks pink with excitement as she pointed toward something in front of them. Paxton smiled and nodded as she replied. Alexia bolted forward, tugging at her mom’s hand.

Jo fought back the tears that pricked her eyes, and the rush of desperation compressing her chest. They’d started their day happy and healthy, but now... She refused to allow her brain to follow the thought through, and forced her focus back onto the recording.

“There, clutched in the hand Paxton isn’t holding. The teddy bear we found under the car.” Jo pointed at the screen.

“So she had it at that point.” Arnett reached for his coffee.

Within a few dozen feet, the pair turned into Alex Baby And Toy. Jo jotted the name down on her pad. “That seems strange—she can’t be buying toys for Alexia when Alexia’s right there to see?”

Arnett winced from the heat of the coffee he’d just swallowed. “Nah, it’s smart. We used to do it with the girls. They run around figuring out what they want to put on their list for Santa. Get out their excess energy, plus you let ’em pick out a small toy to occupy them for the rest of the trip while you do your other shopping.”

Jo nodded—just one of the thousands of parenting tricks she knew nothing about. “Do we have footage from inside the stores?” Jo asked Sciuto.

“Each store runs their own internal cameras. How many they have and where they’re located are up to them. I can ask them for you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Jo said.

Sure enough, when Paxton and Alexia emerged forty-five minutes later, Alexia was holding a small doll in her hand, and the teddy bear had mostly disappeared into the child-sized

backpack she wore, with one brown paw extending past the zipper.

“Detectives.” Marty, who turned out to be a short, skinny blond man with an exceptionally bushy mustache, appeared inside the door next to a tall, crew-cut male officer.

“The camera was definitely damaged,” the officer said. “Smashed clean off, lying in pieces on the ground. My guess is with a golf club or a baseball bat.” He turned and looked at Marty. “You all should really put them up where they’re harder to reach.”

Both Marty and Sciuto shot him death stares.

Jo thanked them and turned back to the footage. Over several hours of recording, she and Arnett followed Paxton and Alexia as they dipped in and out of Yankee Candle, American Eagle, Bath & Body Works, Dollar N Things. At that point Paxton was overloaded with bags; that’s when she dropped everything off into her trunk. When they returned to the mall, Paxton bought a small frozen yogurt for Alexia, but pulled a bag of something out of her purse for herself. Tears pricked Jo’s eyes again—a Christmas splurge for her daughter, but economizing for herself.

When the pair finished, they headed to the Santa Claus Station at the end of the mall, outside of Macy’s. The angle of the closest camera was designed to catch the broad entrance from the mall into Macy’s; Santa was set up to the left side, and the semi-bird’s-eye view captured it awkwardly. Amid a backdrop of artificial pine trees decorated with red and gold bulbs and garland, Santa sat perched in a sleigh. After a brief wait for two children ahead of them, one of whom had a tantrum, Paxton lifted Alexia onto Santa’s lap. Paxton stepped back out of the camera’s sight, Jo assumed to deal with the photographer. A few minutes later she lifted Alexia back off Santa’s lap, and headed over to the counter where she paid.

“So, what, they send the pictures by mail?” Jo asked.

Sciuto nodded. “Or you can pick ’em up in an hour if you want to wait.”

Jo nodded acknowledgment as Paxton and Alexia headed into Target. Almost an hour later to the minute, they reemerged, picked up the Santa pictures, and headed out to the car. They exited at three thirty-two.

Jo glanced back over at her notes. “The external camera went offline at two-forty, about fifty minutes before Paxton and Alexia exited the mall.”

Arnett consulted his own. “So whoever took it out did so while Paxton and Alexia were in Target, about twenty minutes after they finished with Santa.”

“So with respect to the timing, it’s most likely someone who saw them in Target, *if* we’re talking about someone who already knew what vehicle to look for. If it was someone meeting them for the first time, they likely followed them out when Paxton went to drop off the bags.”

“Why would they wait so long to take out the camera? Why not take it out right after Paxton and Alexia went back into the mall?” Arnett asked.

“Good question.” Jo rewound the recording, then turned to Sciuto. “Can you contact each of the stores on this list and get us access to their in-store security systems? In the meantime, we’ll go back and double-check if we missed anyone watching or following them in this footage.”

“Sure thing.” But Sciuto’s face drooped as he left the room to make the calls.

Arnett shook his head as he watched Sciuto leave, then grabbed his coffee. “I’m guessing not much happens around here other than shoplifting. This may be his one chance to be relevant.”

Jo glanced back, then dropped her voice. “Either that or he had something to do with her disappearance.”

Despite reviewing the footage a second time, Jo and Arnett weren’t able to detect anything they’d missed.

“If someone’s following her, they’re doing it from a distance,” Arnett said.

“I’ve been trying to keep my eye out for anyone appearing in the footage multiple times, but one run-through isn’t enough.” Jo shook her head in frustration. “I’ll need to go through and make a running list of who appears when, and cross-check it.”

Arnett threw her a concerned look. “Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

They sorted through the security footage from the stores as it trickled in. In Bath & Body Works Paxton consulted a list, grabbing candles and hand soap and lotion as Alexia played contently with her new doll. Other customers passed by, but none spoke to her or even glanced at her for more than a second. Paxton’s interaction with the woman at the register went smoothly, and predictably. The same was true of Target, and the dollar store. In Dollar N Things the cashier was so busy talking to another cashier she barely looked at Paxton as she checked her out.

“That cashier wouldn’t be able to pick Paxton out of a lineup.” Jo slipped in the next memory card, and a toy store lit up the monitor. An employee, an average height white man with dark hair, greeted Paxton when she entered the store. He continued to stock a table with the same Squishmallows Mystery Boxes Jo’s niece Emily had been obsessing over recently, but watched Paxton’s progress.

Jo leaned in toward the screen. “What do you think of this guy?”

“She either has a history of shoplifting in there, or he’s into her,” Arnett said.

Alexia made her way through the store with Paxton in tow. The employee changed tasks periodically, always keeping within sight of them. He shifted stock on the shelves, reorganized a display of beach balls, then shuffled papers at the register. He didn’t stare, but his glance flicked to them intermittently.

“Hang on a minute. He looks familiar.” Jo reached for the keyboard and pulled up the internal mall footage, referencing her notes to get her to the right points. She clicked forward in the food court until Paxton and Alexia appeared, and watched them navigate the frozen yogurt.

The toy-store employee appeared in frame.

He circled around the tables, finally picking one two rows back from Paxton and Alexia, then sat in the chair facing them. He opened his paper bag, pulled out a sandwich, and began to eat.

Jo took several still shots of the man, and called Sciuto in. “Do you know this guy?”

Sciuto stood straighter. “I make it my business to know all the employees in the mall. In the smaller stores. Hard to keep up with Target and the Kohl’s and the Macy’s, though.”

Jo took a mental deep breath to hold onto her patience.

Arnett did not. “So what’s his name?”

Sciuto’s face tightened. “Trevor Rodgers. Nice enough guy. Always helpful, loves kids. Pretty new, only worked at Alex Baby & Toy for about a year I think? Maybe a little more.”

Jo jotted down the information. “I’ll send a text out to the team to let them know we’re going to want to talk to him ourselves.”

Arnett nodded and swapped out the memory card for the next. The rest of the stores went without incident: Paxton shopped efficiently, Alexia played with her doll, the employees were helpful when she asked for something but left her alone when she didn’t.

They finished up with the Santa Station footage. Their camera was placed far lower and at about a ninety-degree angle from the mall camera, predictably focused more toward the cashier, with Santa on the edge of the frame. For the most part, it was just a different view of what they’d seen before, except now Paxton remained on camera when Alexia was with Santa.

As she waited, Camera Elf initiated a conversation with Paxton; Paxton shifted away, increasingly uncomfortable.

“What about this guy?” Arnett asked Sciuto.

“John Carpazi. Him I don’t know too well, just met him for the first time today,” Sciuto admitted grudgingly. He stood and crossed to a small filing cabinet. “They’re seasonal and it’s their first day on the job.”

Jo took the file Sciuto handed to her. “How does that work? Are they just like any other of the retailers?”

“Not exactly. The mall puts on the Santa Station each year and hires the team directly, like the janitors and the security.” He gestured to himself. “Independent contractors bid for the work. Same for the Easter Bunny in spring.”

“What’s the name of the vendor?” Arnett asked.

“Company’s called Seasonal Stations. We’ve been using them for years, for both our Santa and our Easter Bunny.”

Jo turned back to Arnett. “I’ll send an alert out to the team that we’ll need to talk to him, too.”

They returned to the footage, watching as Paxton shifted subtly away from Carpazi, and Carpazi took the picture once Alexia’s conversation with Santa was done. Paxton gathered Alexia up, paid for the pictures, and hurried off to Target.

Jo pulled the memory card out of the computer and gathered up the stack. “We need to go talk to at least these two before the mall closes, but we’ll want to take a closer look at all this. We’ll need continual access to your footage.” She slipped the cards into the interior pocket of her blazer. “Do you have all this backed up in some sort of cloud?”

“Of course.” Sciuto stopped short of snorting.

“I’ll have Christine Lopez, a member of our team who specializes in computers and tech-based investigation, set up access with you. Oh, and we’ll need a master list of every employee who works at the mall.”

“At the stores she visited?” Sciuto asked.

“All the stores. Our perpetrator may be someone who works at a store she didn’t go into but who spotted her as she was walking in the mall. We’ll cross-check everyone, and we’ll need to get their fingerprints so we can rule them out. Including you and Marty, along with alibis, so we’re not playing favorites. How long will it take to get the list?”

He shifted his weight. “Me and Marty have been here all day including lunch. We had a couple issues with shoplifting, but you can track us through the mall on the footage if you need to. As for the other employees, we keep a general list, but some of the stores only update it bi-weekly. I’ll get on it as fast as I can.”

“Thanks. Before the mall closes would be ideal.” Jo turned back to Arnett. “I texted Lopez to start a background check into Trevor and John. In the meantime, let’s go chat.”

CHAPTER NINE

Trevor Rodgers spotted them as soon as they walked into the toy store. He stood up from inventorying Matchbox cars and made a beeline for them, metal clipboard still in hand.

“You’re the police?” he asked.

Jo shot Arnett a surreptitious glance. “Sciuto mentioned we were coming?”

Rodgers’s brow flicked together for the briefest moment. “What? Oh, no, not specifically. But he called and asked for the footage, and I’ve had a few calls from other managers.”

Jo nodded and introduced herself and Arnett. “You’re the store manager?”

He motioned them to follow and led them to a small room behind the register. “I’m one of two assistant managers. I can give you the manager’s contact information if that will help.”

“Thank you.” Jo continued as Arnett jotted the information down. “You’re already an assistant manager? We were under the impression you hadn’t been working here that long. You must be excellent at your job.”

A ghost smile flashed over his face. “I’d like to think I am. But I was hired on in the position. And I was an AM at my previous job.”

“What was your previous job?” Jo asked.

“Incredible Toys in Springfield. I was there for about two years.”

“What made you change chains?”

His face tightened. “My mother was sick. I took this job so I could move in with her.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.” Jo softened her tone. “You said ‘was.’ I hope she’s doing better?”

His jaw clenched and unclenched. “She had double bypass surgery. She seems to be recovering well, but she’s got her own ideas about what makes life worth living. So, time will tell.”

Jo’s mind flew to her father’s recent bout with cancer, and his reluctance to follow even the simplest of the doctor’s instructions. “I’m sorry to hear that, but glad she’s recovering well. She’s lucky to have a son like you.”

His eyes flicked over her face before he nodded. “Thank you.”

Jo showed him a picture of Paxton and Alexia on her phone. “Do you know this woman and her little girl?”

He paused for a moment and perused the photo like he was trying to remember—or decide what to say. “They were in the store today, and I’ve seen them before. They come in from time to time.” He stared back into her eyes, his expression now worried. “Are they okay?”

“You greeted her when she came in, and rang up her purchase.” Jo noted the slight stiffening of his posture. “Do you remember anything she said or did that was unusual, or gave any insight into her plans for the day?”

“Unusual? Not that I can remember.” He paused to think again. “I *think* the little girl might have said something about going to see Santa? But they all say that this time of year, so I may be mistaking her for someone else.”

Jo nodded, and shifted her own posture in line with the boom she was about to drop. “Ah. We thought you might remember them in particular, since you were paying close attention to them later in the food court.”

The color drained from Trevor's face, popping out a series of veins around his eyes that gave his face a sickly lavender-gray cast. "Was—was she there? I didn't notice. I was preoccupied, and must have been staring out into space as I was thinking. I certainly didn't talk to her or anything like that."

No way was he telling the truth—he'd followed Paxton and Alexia around the store quite purposefully, and the surreptitious way he'd watched them in the food court wasn't the result of random distance-staring. But calling him out wouldn't do much other than put him farther on the defensive, so she nodded empathetically. "Malls are strange that way. Little mini cities where the same people wander around for hours at a time."

His relief was both visible and palpable. "Exactly. And I eat at the food court every day. I'm sure there's always a customer or two hanging around there."

She half-smiled. "And after you finished your lunch, did you go anywhere?"

He shook his head almost manically. "Nope. I came straight back here, and I haven't left since. You can check the videotape."

"Got it." Jo craned her neck to look around a second door into a small hallway. "Does the store have a back exit?"

The manic shaking continued. "Nope. We have a small bathroom at the end of the storage hall, and that's it. We have to exit through the main mall."

"Do you mind if we check?" Jo asked.

"Sure thing. I'll show you." He crossed toward the hallway with jerking steps.

As they followed, Jo did a quick scan. Metal shelves lined the hallway-slash-storage room stacked with extra stock. As promised, the restroom marked the end of the space, with no other entrance inside or out.

"Your restroom is impressively clean." Jo had been fighting PTSD-related obsessive-compulsive tendencies for

years, but despite a fair amount of success, still dreaded the times when her job inevitably forced her into filthy public restrooms.

He regained some composure, straightening pridefully. “I clean it myself if I have to. When a little one has to go, they deserve a healthy place to do that.”

Discomfort tugged at Jo’s mind, and she examined it as they followed him back to the office. “You said you’ve seen Paxton before. Was her demeanor any different today?”

“I didn’t really notice.” He squinted an apology. “You know how it is when you’re busy. And with the holiday rush...”

“I imagine.” She pulled out a card and handed it to him. “If you remember anything else, anything she said or did, or anywhere else you saw her, can you let us know?”

His relief returned. “Absolutely I will. Is she okay?”

“We hope so.” Jo had to fight to keep her expression neutral. “May I use your restroom?”

His relief flickered. “Sure thing. You know the way.”

She strode back through to the restroom, again scanning the shelves and walls as she went. Once she closed the door behind herself she turned on the taps to create cover, then quickly started to search.

The north wall of the room was covered in another set of shelves, also filled with stock; she quickly sorted through the boxes, lifting and shifting, careful to put them back as she found them. Then she shifted to the standing cabinet next to the sink; inside she found only cleaning supplies and backup paper products. She finished up by squatting and stretching to see every inch of the floor and walls.

“Dammit,” she said aloud, then washed her hands. She’d been positive she’d find a hidden camera.

But then, maybe he wasn’t the type who was satisfied with watching.

CHAPTER TEN

Jo fought an odd sense of disassociation as she and Arnett strode across the mall toward the Santa Station, taking in every inch as she went: The too-bright light reflecting off the white-tiled walls, the globe-sized ornaments and twenty-foot wreaths dangling from the two-story ceiling, the preternaturally cheerful elf figures scampering mischievously around intermittent fifteen-foot trees. It all should have elicited the warm, cheerful embrace of the season, but from her current perspective it felt sinister and surreal. Like a trap where young women and children were snatched off into the night, lured by this false sense of joy and security.

She gave herself a good mental shake. “What did you think about Rodgers?”

“He’s lying,” Arnett said, as he also scanned the surroundings. “But I’m guessing if you’d found a camera in the bathroom, you’d’ve told me by now.”

She gritted her teeth. “I was so sure after his impassioned speech about ‘little ones’ having clean bathrooms. And it would have simplified everything—an illegal cam would’ve guaranteed us a warrant, possibly even a confession. That might have saved their lives.”

Arnett dropped his voice. “Unless we find out Trevor’s lying about not leaving the mall, the most likely scenario is still Paxton’s ex. And there’s no reason to think he’d kill either of them.”

Jo exhaled a frustrated puff of air through her nose and waved her phone. “Right. Except the patrol we sent out to bring him in still hasn’t found him. He’s one step away from being a vagrant, and without a license or car registered to him, by the time we track him down through friends and family he could have them dead and buried in the Canadian wilderness.”

“Last I heard—and you well know—over ninety-nine percent of children abducted by family are recovered alive,” Arnett said. “I know your mind goes to worst-case, especially when it’s your own family. But we’re not there yet.”

“I take your point, and I know I sound like a broken record.” She stared straight ahead, searching the faces around her. “But how often in child-family abduction cases does the mother disappear along with the child, unless she’s the one doing the abducting?”

Before Arnett could answer, the Santa Station came within earshot. Jo had a moment of panic—they couldn’t just walk up to someone dressed like an elf in front of children and announce themselves as police without scarring someone for life. But as she scanned the area, there were no children to be found. In fact, the lights on the signs had been turned off, and the employees appeared to be packing up for the day.

At six-foot and in his mid-twenties, John Carpazi was both slightly older and slightly taller than the security footage had led Jo to believe, most likely an illusion created by the festive red-and-green elf costume. When he lifted one hand to nervously adjust his brown hair out of his eyes and under the elf cap, Jo spotted a dark spot on his forearm. He had a tattoo—maybe more than one—that he’d covered with makeup for the job.

“Sorry, we’re closed up for the night,” he said, eyes shifting and searching for a place to land.

Jo held up the picture of Paxton and Alexia. “Do you recognize this mother and daughter?”

His expression fell instantly, and he glanced around him as though searching for an escape route. “Aw, shit.”

Jo tilted her head. “Is that a yes?”

“Yeah, I know them. But you know that already, don’t you?”

Keeping her face neutral, she responded carefully. “How do you know them?”

“Look, I don’t know what Paxton told you, but I didn’t do a damned thing.”

“Then explain,” Arnett said.

“What was I supposed to do? Patrick’s my boy, and she’s being a complete bitch for no reason. We’ve all made mistakes in our lives, but that’s his daughter, yo. *His daughter*. You can’t just keep a man from his daughter, that’s not right.”

“So you hassled her about it,” Jo said.

He threw up his hands. “What was I supposed to do? It’s killing Patty not to see Alex. How’m I not gonna call her on that when I see her? So, yeah, I told her everybody deserves a second chance, and to look at me, right? Complete fuck up before rehab, in and out of jail. But I took some classes and I’m making a life for myself here.” He waved toward the camera set-up.

“What did she say?” Jo asked.

“Psh.” He flicked a hand like he was shooing a fly. “She got an attitude and told me to take the picture.”

“So you called Patrick,” Jo guessed. “He told you to call if they showed up, because he knew this was likely where Paxton would bring Alexia to see Santa.”

“No,” he said. “I mean, yes, I called him. But he didn’t ask me to, I did it myself. Because if she doesn’t return his calls or whatever, how’s he gonna talk to her? This way he could at least see Alex for a few minutes.”

“So Patrick came to the mall,” Jo said.

He dug a hand into his hip pocket and pulled out a phone. “I don’t know. I got his voice mail, so then I sent him a text,

but he never responded. See?” He held up his texts for her to see.

She scanned them without touching the phone. “Show me your call log.”

He clicked and scrolled, then pointed to a call to ‘Patty S,’ duration one minute.

“Did you tell anyone else she was here?”

He shifted his weight. “I mean, I sent out a group text, yeah. I didn’t know where he was.” He tapped and showed another text.

Yo, Paxton and Alexia just walked in. Can’t reach Patty tho. Where he at?

Three names appeared on the chat besides Patrick: Jared, Kenny, and Benji. Only Benji responded, expressing excitement and asking what they should do. Jared and Kenny said nothing.

Arnett jotted down the names and numbers. “Call Patrick now.”

John hit the call button, and they waited while the phone rang. Voice mail picked up.

“Not answering. But I’ll tell you what, it’s bullshit that she called the cops on him. She doesn’t have a restraining order. There’s no reason why he can’t come to the mall.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed as she tried to decide if he was putting on an act. “She didn’t call us. She’s missing, and so is Alexia.”

John shoved his phone into his pocket and thrust both hands up into the air. “Oh, *hell* no. He never said anything about anything like that. No way would Patrick do that.”

Jo seized on his slip. “So Patrick *did* ask you to keep an eye out for Paxton and Alexia.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed and he shifted his weight again. “I mean, he might’ve said if any of us ran into her to let him know. But it was just so he could talk to her.”

She gestured toward his pocket, where his phone was now stashed. “So all the guys in your friend group are on the lookout for Paxton and Alexia?”

“I—I didn’t mean it like that,” he stammered.

“When was your last break, and your lunch?” Jo asked.

“We all took lunch from twelve to twelve-thirty, and a ten at six. But the only place I went was the food court. I know you have the security video, you can check it.”

Jo put her hands purposefully on her hips, shifting the blazer so her badge was subliminally visible. “Here’s the deal. You’ve already lied to us once. So as things stand, you’re looking at an accessory-to-child-abduction charge. That means it’s time to put the bro code aside if you want to stay out of jail. When he calls you or texts you, you need to contact us immediately.”

“Right, no, of course.” He nodded so fast it looked painful.

“Excellent,” Jo said. “Because if we don’t find them alive and well, we’ll be holding you accountable.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Paxton had no idea how long she'd been sobbing before a voice in the back of her mind sliced through her panic.

Time's up, Paxton. You've had your five minutes—far more than five minutes.

She rubbed her eyes with her non-shackled hand and forced herself to engage with the trick, one of many her Al Anon sponsor had taught her for getting out of her own mind. *Take five minutes to feel your feelings, to really wallow around in them. Then pull yourself together and live in the solution rather than the problem.*

Paxton hiccupped an hysterical laugh. That was all well and good for when your ex and his family were filing with the court or your father was berating you in a drunken rage or you ran out of eggs during breakfast shift at work. Not when you found yourself and your child manacled to a fucking wall.

But then Alexia stirred in her arms, and reality crushed down on her. She didn't have time to indulge in self-pity—her daughter needed her. For the last five years—since she'd left home, really—she'd had to step up and figure out how to do what needed to be done. She couldn't stop now.

Ha, her father's voice echoed in her head. You threw away your potential and screwed up your life. You call working at McDonald's stepping up?

Still clutching Alexia to her chest, she squeezed her eyes shut and hunched herself physically against her father's voice. She forced herself through a series of slow, deep breaths, and

when her shaking slowed enough that she could trust herself to loosen her grip on her daughter, she reopened her eyes. The fear, and her father's mocking voice, immediately tried to overwhelm her again, but she pushed back by sitting up straight and visualizing herself as a warrior readying for battle. This situation was just another adversary to be overcome, she told herself. There was always a solution, but only if she remained calm enough to think clearly.

They'd been kidnapped, that much was clear. She started to berate herself again—between her street-smarts and all the true-crime TV she watched, she should have known better than to trust anybody in a dark parking lot asking for help—but she cut the self-flagellation short. Because this was weird, unlike anything she'd seen on any of her shows. Kids got snatched from playgrounds and stores when they got *separated* from their parents—nobody ever attacked the moms or dads directly to steal the kids, and nobody ever kidnapped a mother *and* a child. Something strange was happening here, and she had to figure out what.

She turned to study the room. It was large, twice the size of the studio apartment she'd shared with two roommates in Boston before moving back in with her parents, although that wasn't saying much. No windows—they could be above ground or below, and she had no idea whether it was night or day. The mismatched furnishings and braided area rugs divided the room into four spaces. One with the bed, night stand, and a bureau. To her left, another with a couch and rocking chair, with a small, door-less bathroom attached. Directly across from her, a two-shelf bookcase flanked by two armchairs. And diagonally from the bed, a kitchenette with a sink, a counter, several cabinets, and a table. And between the bed area and the bookcase area, a tiny entryway, big enough only for one person to stand in, framing a door.

She gently shifted Alexia off her lap and crossed to the light switch in the entryway. The chain clanked and jangled, and she slowed to minimize the noise—once Alexia woke, she'd be terrified, and Paxton needed a plan for what to tell her. Then she flicked the switch, and once the room flooded with light, she reached for the doorknob. Locked, of course.

Turning back around, she processed the implications. At first glance, the room seemed comfortable, even cozy. Cheery hand towels with little puppies on them hung next to the sink, and a bowl of fruit decorated the kitchen table. The colors were warm and went well together: slate blue and avocado in the bed area, browns and reds in the living area, white and yellow in the kitchenette. The couch was plush, and a red throw-blanket was folded neatly over the back. But as soon as she looked closer, the strange combination of what was present and what was missing sent a creeping numbness down her arms and legs. Of course the manacled chains cemented into the wall, not bolted on, but built purposefully into the plaster. But also, the bathroom without a door. The lack of a stove, or even a hot plate, in the kitchenette, and no pictures or other personal items on the walls or bookshelves. And, no clock of any sort.

She glanced over at Alexia. At the mall, she'd been wearing a brown winter coat, a red hat and mittens to keep her face and hands warm, and sneakers. They were missing, along with her own coat and hat and shoes. She crossed to the bureau and checked the drawers—all empty. That also couldn't be a coincidence, but why take them? It wasn't like there was carpet in here to preserve. In fact—she bent down to touch the cement—the floor was heated. Which made sense, because as she looked around again she realized there were no heating vents, no radiators, no space heaters. Just like the kitchenette—nothing dangerous. Nothing she could use to start a fire or as a weapon.

No, none of these things were accidental. This wasn't a living space, it was a prison.

A thought occurred to her and she carefully scanned the room again, looking for some sort of camera watching her. There was nothing obvious, no blocky metal box attached to the ceiling or red light flicking in a corner. She crept around the space, searching every object for a hidden lens. Her chain wasn't long enough to reach the sink and cabinets in the kitchen area, but she could see well enough, and couldn't locate a camera. That also had to be intentional—but what did it mean?

As she tried to puzzle that out, keys rattled in the door behind her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As the stores closed and most of the employees left the mall, Jo and Arnett spent the next few hours doing as much as possible.

“Creepy with all the mannequins peering out of the darkness.” Arnett craned his head to look around the now dark, nearly deserted mall. “Very post-apocalyptic—Lopez would feel right at home.”

“I didn’t think the oversized decorations could feel more ominous, but I was wrong.” Jo looked back down to scan the check-ins from the rest of the team. “Nobody remembers anything unusual happening, and almost nobody even remembers Paxton and Alexia.”

“Too many people here today,” Arnett said.

“So that leaves us with two strong suspects and a potential accessory. Trevor Rodgers was borderline stalking Paxton and Alexia today, but claims to have been back in his store when Paxton was abducted, so checking that is a priority.”

“Lopez is checking his background for any hint of sexual predation. Plenty of reasons why you might choose to work at a toy store, but proximity to children is definitely one of them.”

“Then there’s Patrick Sills, assisted by John Carpazi,” Jo said. “If Patrick abducted them, I don’t believe for a second John didn’t know about it. We also need to check the recordings to confirm he didn’t leave the Santa Station after Paxton and Alexia left, but I don’t expect to find anything

there. Far more likely he did the tipping off and Patrick did the abducting.”

“Rule number one—always start with the significant other.”

Jo popped her brows. “And we need to start the paperwork for warrants in both cases.”

Jo’s phone rang. “Lopez,” she said to Arnett, then answered the call. “What do you have for us?”

“A lot of nothing so far. The team contacted the three registered sex offenders in the area, who all turn out to have iron-clad alibis. The beauty and the curse of Thanksgiving weekend—lots of people are together with loved ones. And I wanted to let you know as soon as possible that Trevor isn’t on the Sexual Offender Registry Board. No record of any sort, and the employment history he gave you checks out. Nothing even the slightest bit suss.”

“Anything on Carpazi?” Jo asked.

“There my cup runneth over. Low-level slimeball with the typical priors you’d expect to see in someone who’s formed a committed relationship with methamphetamine. Assault, theft, domestic violence, possession charges. Eerily reminiscent of Patrick Sills’s record, in fact.”

“That’s because they’re best buds,” Arnett said to the phone. “Just found out.”

“A-yup, that tracks,” Lopez said. “Sounds like you’re closing in.”

“Let’s hope so,” Jo said. “But we can’t seem to find Sills. Not answering his phone and no hits yet on his parents’ car’s license plate. God only knows who’s car he borrowed or stole. We have the request in to access his phone records and such?”

“We do. Because of the Amber alert, I’m expecting it to come through any minute.”

“What about Paxton’s records?” Jo asked. “Anything helpful there?”

“What your aunt told you seems to be correct. I couldn’t find evidence in her phone or email records that she’s dating anybody currently or recently. Her phone calls are generally business related, no close friends I could find. I called the manager on duty at her McDonald’s and asked for a roster of employees. We’ll do background checks on them all, see if anything jumps out.”

Jo bounced her fist on her thigh—she’d been hoping there was some friend or boyfriend her aunt hadn’t known about that could help elucidate the situation. “Thanks, Christine. Let me know if you find anything.”

“Not done yet—you knocked me off track. Back to our boy Trevor Rodgers—I personally checked the tape, and he was exactly where he said he was after finishing his lunch. Back to the store and didn’t leave again until you appeared. Cute boots by the way. Very cozy.”

“Thanks.” Jo glanced distractedly at the fur-lined ankle boots she’d thrown on to keep warm while out Christmas-tree hunting. Had that really only been a few hours ago? “How the hell did you have time to check that footage too?”

“Called in all the extra bodies I could because of the time issue.”

Jo nodded. “Thanks. But it occurs to me that if Patrick has a friend helping him scope out his ex, Trevor could easily have a buddy that helps him with young girls. We need to take a look at phone calls and texts for both of them, and Carpazi.”

“On it. Don’t worry, Jo. We’re gonna find her.” Lopez hung up.

Jo clenched her jaw and checked her messages again. “Still no sign of Patrick Sills,” she told Arnett. “Since the only connection we have is his parents, I say it’s time to go make this their problem.”

Even the light dusting of snow wasn’t able to hide the shabby state of Susan and Jerry Krepila’s Phelpston apartment complex. On the contrary, despite the festive lights and rosy-

cheeked Santas strewn across several of the tiny cement balconies, the snow added to the gray structure's sense of 1960s' fascist bloc architecture. As Jo and Arnett crossed the yard, they waved to the patrol car waiting for Patrick Sills to make an appearance, then located the apartment on the second floor.

The peeling door swung open to reveal a mid-fifties peroxide-blond white woman with a stocky build. Her oversized purple tunic declared her a 'Boss Bitch,' and her facial expression agreed.

Her eyes swept up and down Jo, then Arnett. "What do you want?"

Jo introduced herself and Arnett, watching Susan Krepila's eyes widen. "We need to talk to your son Patrick."

"He ain't here." Her jaw clamped down.

Jo weighed Susan's hostility and lack of curiosity. Police on her doorstep must be a common occurrence, and getting into a defensive power struggle would throw up walls Jo didn't have time to smash down. She made a quick decision. "We need to find him urgently. His daughter's missing."

The choice of approach had the desired effect—Susan's face instantly transformed into unmitigated fear. She turned, leaving the door open for them to follow, and screamed toward the hall off the living room. "Jerry! Alexia's missing."

"Did that bitch take off with her?" A medium-height late-fifties white man stomped into the room, shaggy brown hair flying, the one-size-too-small graphic tee straining against his beer belly. He stopped short when he saw Jo and Arnett, but the cloud of marijuana continued toward them. "Who're you?"

Jo pushed down her reflexive reaction to the profane attack on Paxton and reintroduced herself and Arnett. "Both Alexia *and* Paxton are missing. We found Paxton's car in the mall parking lot, open and unattended."

His eyes narrowed, and he waved a finger. "That's exactly what she'd do, leave her car behind to throw us off. Always did think she was smarter than us."

Susan plucked her phone from the papers and dirty dishes on the coffee table. "I'll call Patrick."

Jo nodded consent, and waited.

Susan dropped the phone from her ear. "He's not picking up." She attacked the phone with her thumbs.

Jo turned to Jerry. "Did Paxton say something to make you think she'd run off with Alexia?"

"She was trying to steal our granddaughter from us already!" He gestured a wide circle that suggested that was all Jo should need to know. "Wouldn't let us see her. But Patrick was fighting it, and it was only a matter of time before the judge forced her. So she took Alexia and ran."

Jo took a deep breath. She had to admit it was possible—Paxton wouldn't be the first woman to disappear in order to keep custody of her child, especially since this wouldn't be the first time Paxton had taken off without any explanation. "Did she ever make any threats to that effect? Do you know where she might have gone?"

He waved her off. "Paxton hasn't talked to us in months."

"Do you have any idea where Patrick is right now?"

"We just got back from working all day," Susan said. "We work together at the Cherry Blossom Motel. But he said something last night about him and Hanna—his girlfriend—hanging out with a friend today."

Jo pulled out her own phone. "We'll need their names and numbers."

She shook her head. "The one I know is Jared, but I don't know his number."

"Last name?" Arnett asked.

Her eyes darted back and forth. "Richards? Reynolds? Something with an 'R.'"

Jo recognized the name from John Carpazi's group text. "Do you know where they hang out?" Jo asked.

“I don’t. They play pool somewhere in Springfield sometimes?” She turned to Jerry, who shrugged. “He don’t tell us much these days.”

Behind them, keys rattled in the front door’s lock. Jo turned as the door opened to reveal a uniformed officer behind Patrick Sills and a mid-twenties woman. Patrick’s clothes hung on his thin frame and his brown hair stuck out from under a drooping bucket hat; the woman with him was equally thin, with scraggly bleached hair and black-lined brown eyes methodically taking in everyone in the room.

Patrick stared at Jo and Arnett as he spoke. “Ma, what the hell’s going on?”

“How many times have I asked you to answer your fucking phone?” Susan snapped. “*Alexia’s missing.*”

Patrick froze for a long moment, staring. Jo inventoried his and his companion’s wan complexions and dark circles. Was he concerned about Alexia, or about police detectives catching him with drugs?

“What do you mean, missing?” he finally asked.

Jo hurried to preempt his mother. After repeating what she’d told his parents, she jutted her chin at the mystery woman. “You’re Hanna?”

The woman glanced back and forth between Patrick and Jo. “Yes.”

“Have either of you heard anything from Paxton or Alexia today?” Jo asked.

They both shook their heads. “I haven’t heard from Paxton in weeks,” Patrick said.

“Where are you coming in from?” Jo asked.

“Hanna and I were hanging with my boy,” he said.

“Who’s your boy? And where were you hanging?”

Patrick’s lips tightened, as though he might refuse to answer. Then he pointed back toward the officer. “My friend

Jared, who just dropped us off. He's downstairs with that guy's partner because they wouldn't let him go."

"What were you doing at Jared's house?" Jo asked.

Patrick shifted his weight. "You know. Just vibing. Playing XBox."

"Were you three the only ones there?" Arnett asked.

Patrick paled—no easy feat since his skin was already deathly white. "Um, yeah. Just us."

Hanna shot him a look, but said nothing.

"Just hanging out. Did you have your phone with you?" Jo asked.

"Yeah, of course," he said, then seemed to regret it.

"But you didn't answer it, despite multiple people calling and texting," Jo said.

Patrick looked down at the phone in his hand, then back up at Jo and Arnett. "I think I need a lawyer."

"Patrick, what the fuck?" Hanna said. "Your daughter's *missing*."

Jo seized on the opportunity. "If you want an attorney present, that's your right," Jo said. "But I'd advise you to get one over here fast because time is of the essence if we're going to get your daughter back."

Patrick shot a nasty glare at Hanna, then at his mom. Jo watched carefully, reading their reactions.

"I turn off my phone notifications when I play video games so I don't get distracted. Go ask Jared, he'll confirm every word I'm saying. We've been at his house all day. Another friend of his dropped by for a few, but not for long, so I forgot about it for a minute. So stop wasting time with shit that doesn't matter and find my daughter."

"Your whereabouts are very relevant." Jo narrowed her eyes at him. "Right before they went missing, they visited Santa at Oakhurst Mall. John Carpazi texted to alert you they were there."

His eyes blazed. “I didn’t get the text.”

“He told us you asked him to keep an eye out for them,” Arnett said.

“Hey.” Jerry Krepila took an angry step toward Arnett. “What do you think, he’s got her hidden in his back pocket?”

Arnett threw up a hand at Jerry, warning him not to come further. “I’m thinking a lot of things. One is, if your son has a friend willing to put his job on the line to alert Patrick when his daughter shows up, he may have another friend who’d stop by to snatch her. Another is Patrick left his phone at Jared’s so location data didn’t give him away while he snatched Paxton and Alexia and hid them somewhere.”

Jerry Krepila seemed to expand several inches in every direction. “Why would he kidnap *Paxton*?”

Arnett drew himself up to match Jerry’s expansion. “Maybe Paxton didn’t let Alexia go easily. Maybe there was a fight, and she’s lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Or maybe Patrick had to grab them both. People do unpredictable things when they’re pumped full of drugs.”

Patrick gulped. “We’re not on anything.”

Arnett’s gaze swung pointedly to his. “Then I’m sure you won’t mind coming for a drug test.”

Patrick was silent.

“Didn’t think so. So if you’re not responsible for what happened today, you’d better help us figure out who is. I want access to your phone records, your email records, and a list of any friends or relatives who might’ve been tweaking or dabbing enough to think snatching your daughter was a smart idea—or who decided to use the opportunity for their own purposes.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I made sure the keys rattled loudly as I turned the lock, then paused so they'd have a moment to compose themselves. I needed a moment to compose myself, too; so much depended on those next few minutes.

I stepped in tentatively, with no fast moves. She sat on the bed, taut and awkward, like a coiled phone cord pulled straight, appraising me with wide eyes and a set jaw.

I reminded myself to be patient. Of course she'd fight me. That was natural. Expected. I just had to work through it. So I kept my posture relaxed and crossed to the closer armchair. "Hello. It's good to see you again."

She waited so long before responding I worried she was giving me the silent treatment.

"What are we doing here?" she finally said.

"Ah, yes, let's get right to the point." I put on a reassuring smile. "The three of us have a lot of adjusting to do. I want us to get along, and I hope you want us to get along, too."

She didn't answer. I glanced over to the other side of the bed.

She followed my gaze, and her eyes widened further. "Yes. I want us all to get along."

"That's so good to hear. First things first, then. I'm going to call you Angela."

Her face tightened, but when she spoke, her tone was even. "Why?"

I made sure my smile was warm. “New names for a new start.”

Her mouth drew into a tight line for a moment, and I could see her mind working. Finally, she capitulated. “Then what should I call you?”

My smile was genuine this time; she was making good choices. Far better than I’d expected. “You can call me Husband.”

Her face flicked and twisted; then she cleared her throat. “Husband?”

“Husband.” I looked at the other side of the bed again. “And we’ll call our daughter Evie. Is she still sleeping?”

She started to say something, then stopped and started again. “Yes. What did you give her?”

“Just a little something to make the transition easier.”

“How long have we been— What time is it?” she asked.

“It’s nighttime, that’s all that matters. I hoped you’d both be up by now so we could start getting to know each other better. But it’s probably best that you and I discuss the rules before she wakes.”

She nodded, but said nothing.

I leaned forward and softened my voice. “I know this will be hard for you, that’s natural. It’ll be easier if you think of it as an arranged marriage and commit yourself to making it work. Arranged marriages have existed since the dawn of mankind and are still very common in other parts of the world. Love often grows from them.”

I paused a moment to watch her reaction. Confusion. Fear. Desperation.

I glanced over to Evie. “This is your life now, and it’s best for all of us if you accept that as quickly as possible. I’ll do everything I can to make it as easy as possible for you, and to give you and Evie a good life... if you let me.”

Her eyes searched my face, but she remained silent.

“How hard or easy it all is, that’s up to you. If you obey the rules and try to be a good wife, prove to me you’re committed to our family, my trust in you will grow. Right now your chains are short, and you can’t reach everywhere. Once I trust you, I’ll lengthen them. I’ll reward you with luxuries. I’ll bring books you like, and a DVD player with movies.”

Her jaw clenched and released.

“But if you disobey me or try to escape, I’ll have to punish you.”

Her eyes snapped to mine, and fear bloomed in them. I could feel her forcing herself not to look at Evie.

“I don’t want to have to punish you. All I want is a happy life with you. Do you understand?”

Tears filled her eyes as she stared up into mine. I held the eye contact; I needed her to understand how serious this was, that the situation was life or death.

Finally, she nodded.

“I’m so glad we understand each other.” I stood and made my way to the door. “You’ll need to explain everything to Evie when she wakes. The same rules apply to her.”

“She’s only five.” Her voice came out in a whisper, and her eyes darted around the room. “She won’t understand all this.”

“It will be difficult for her at first. But children adapt to their surroundings. Soon she won’t remember anything else.”

She swallowed. “If you have to hurt someone, hurt me.”

I shook my head. “The last thing I want is to hurt anybody. But that’s up to you. So please take this seriously, for all our sakes.”

After she nodded again, I left, and locked the door behind me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When the door closed behind him, the world turned unnaturally bright and Paxton's body seemed to lose all its weight. She couldn't afford to pass out—she had to think—so she ducked her head between her knees and tried to keep her breaths long and steady.

As soon as she'd heard the key in the door, she'd gone into survival mode. If she and Alexia were going to stay alive, she had to learn as much as possible about him so she could come up with a plan. She had no chance of overpowering him, especially while keeping Alexia safe, *especially* while chained up. So she'd listened and tried to learn, and icy terror crept slowly through her as she realized he was insane. Not just twisted—legitimately, certifiably insane.

But maybe he just wanted her to think that? Maybe this was all an attempt to mess with her head, to keep them placid and compliant while he arranged to sell them into sex trafficking or whatever. Because he couldn't *really* intend to keep them there forever as some sort of sick kidnapped family, could he? How would that even be possible?

A name sprung up in her mind: Jaycee Dugard.

She'd seen the show just a few months before, about an eleven-year-old girl who'd been kidnapped and kept in some sort of storage container for eighteen years. *Eighteen years*—during which time her captor forced her to bear two children, who also grew up in captivity.

So yes, it was very possible. For all she knew, Jaycee's case had inspired him.

In fact, hadn't Jaycee been forced to use a different name, too? The expert on the show had said it was a brainwashing device, to make the girl lose touch with her identity. The expert had also talked about Stockholm Syndrome, where captives began to sympathize and identify with their captors. But Paxton wasn't an eleven-year-old girl, not nearly as susceptible to that sort of mind game, especially after an entire life of dealing with her father and how he'd tried to—

A second name popped into her head: *Patty Hearst*.

Patty Hearst had been an adult, *and* she'd rebelled against her controlling parents. She'd been so completely brainwashed by the radical group who kidnapped and raped her she became a member of their group. Or had she? Some people claimed she joined voluntarily and made the rest up—

Paxton shook her head to refocus. It didn't matter. What mattered was Paxton knew the danger she was in, both physically and psychologically. And being aware of the mental games gave her an advantage. She wouldn't let him into her head, or Alexia's.

"Mommy, are you okay? Who was that man?"

Alexia's sleepy voice pulled her out of the horrible thoughts and into a panic: how the hell was she going to explain this to her innocent five-year-old daughter?

"I'm okay, honey." She tacked on a reassuring expression, swung herself upright, then hugged Alexia into her chest. After a moment she pulled gently back, stroking both sides of Alexia's head while scouring her face. "Are *you* okay? How are you feeling?"

Her little brow pursed. "I feel funny."

"Sick funny? Or tired funny?"

Alexia considered. "Tired funny. And my head hurts a little."

"Do you hurt anywhere else?"

“No, but I have to go potty.”

Paxton laughed with relief. “Okay, honey. There’s a toilet over there.”

Alexia followed Paxton’s head nod. “Where are we?”

Paxton’s muscles tightened again and her brain leapt into overdrive. The truth would scare Alexia, but if Paxton lied to her, how was she going to explain—

As Alexia shifted toward the edge of the bed, the chain around her wrist rattled. “Why—why is this on me?” Her voice rose.

Paxton forced herself to smile. “I have a whole long story to tell you about that chain. So first let’s both go potty, then we’ll cuddle up under the blankets and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Alexia stared up at her, lips quivering. “I’m scared.”

Paxton took Alexia’s chin in between her thumb and forefinger. “I know. New places are scary sometimes. But I’m here to take care of you. Come on, I’ll go first.”

Her brain frantically searched for a place to land as she helped Alexia navigate the chain. Alexia was smart—if Paxton lied or spun the truth, she’d pick up on something that didn’t fit and would end up frightened regardless, but would also feel she couldn’t trust her mother. Paxton knew the pain of having parents she couldn’t trust, who lied and manipulated her. *He* would exploit any crack in the bond between mother and child, making Alexia more susceptible to whatever sick Stockholm Syndrome brainwashing was happening here.

Once they returned to the bed, she cuddled Alexia into her chest, monitoring her closely. Alexia’s muscles were taut, like a cat about to jump, and her head bent back, eyes darting around the room. Like she’d regressed to her stranger-anxiety phase, when she’d cling to Paxton’s legs and stare out, terrified.

“I don’t like it here.” Alexia’s voice shook. “I want to go home.”

Paxton forced her own panic back, then made eye contact. “You trust me, right? You know I’d never let anyone hurt you?”

Alexia nodded.

“Good.” Paxton kissed her forehead, then met her eyes again. “A bad man brought us here. He gave us something to make us sleep, and then brought us here while we were sleeping.”

Alexia’s eyes got painfully wide, and she stared at the door. “Why?”

“I’m not sure why. But we’re going to find a way to leave.”

The trembling slowed. “How?”

Paxton raised her eyebrows. “I have to figure that out. And I need you to help me, okay?”

Alexia shot another look at the door, then looked back at Paxton. “Okay.”

“You know how games have rules? Like when it’s your turn to pick a card?”

Alexia nodded, but looked confused.

“This place has rules, too. The first rule is we don’t want to make the man angry when he comes back. He wants us to pretend we’re playing house. You’ve played house with your friends before, right?”

She nodded.

“He also wants our pretend names to be Angela for me, and Evie for you.”

“Why?”

“That’s just how he wants to play.”

Alexia considered that. “Evie is a pretty name.”

Anxiety stabbed at Paxton—she needed Alexia to play along, but her quick agreement showed how terrifyingly easy it would be for Alexia to lose herself in this. “It’s a pretty

pretend name. We'll still use our real names when he's not here, okay?"

Alexia nodded.

"I need you to say it to me, honey. That your name is Alexia, but only when he's not here."

"My name is Alexia, but only when he's not here," she repeated.

"And, part of playing house is having a daddy, right? So he wants you to call him Daddy."

Alexia's expression turned to one Paxton had never seen before. Nearly two years had passed since Alexia had seen her father. She didn't know him, and she didn't fully understand what 'daddy' meant. She'd even had a small altercation with a play-date friend who'd insisted that everyone had a daddy.

"Can you do that?" Paxton prompted.

Alexia nodded, staring toward the door like she was in a trance.

"While we're playing his pretend game, I might say strange things or ask you to do strange things. I need you to do those things for me, okay? Whatever Mommy asks."

Alexia's tears finally came, in a low, stuttering wail. "I—I don't like this g—game."

Paxton pulled Alexia into her chest. "I don't like it either." She rocked back and forth, trying to soothe both her daughter and herself. "But if we want to go home, we have to play it."

Alexia hiccupped. "Will he let us go home if we play it?"

"I don't know, honey. But if we play his game, I can trick him and get away. Will you help me trick him so we can get away?"

Alexia's little face twisted up again, and her eyes squeezed shut. Paxton braced herself for the wail that was about to come. When it did, it came with a stuttering burst of words. "Home. Trick him. Because I want. To go. *Home*."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The rest of that evening was the most frustrating of Jo's life.

Patrick gave Jo and Arnett permission to look into his phone and email records, as did Hanna; neither showed anything useful. Jerry and Susan gave them permission to search the apartment; as small as it was, it didn't take long to verify that neither Paxton nor Alexia were on the premises. Hanna lived with them, sharing the smaller of the two bedrooms with Patrick, eliminating any possibility she was hiding Paxton and Alexia at her own residence. Jared, who'd been isolated from Patrick, confirmed Patrick's story. He also gave permission for Jo and Arnett to search his home; his apartment was even smaller than the Sills's, and since it had only the barest of furniture essentials, took even less time to search. They found no sign of either Paxton or Alexia, but did find a stash of OxyContin and marijuana well beyond the legal possession limit.

Jo updated Lopez as Arnett pulled away from Jared's apartment. "They're taking him down to Phelpston PD as we speak."

"Maybe a nice little drug charge will give Jared reason to come clean if he's covering for his boy," Lopez said.

"That's the hope. I don't suppose you've had time to find anything in Patrick's phone records yet?"

"John and Jared are the only friends he talks to regularly on their own, but he does contribute to the group chat with Benjamin and Kenny, too," Lopez said. "There's another guy

labeled as ‘Stew’ that I think is his dealer, based on coded texts referencing Skittles, Sweet Tarts, and Pixy Stix. We’re working on backgrounds and whereabouts.”

“Any other women he’s seeing besides Hanna Perez?” Jo asked.

“Nothing since a few Tinder exchanges a couple months back. If he’s getting it wet behind his girl’s back, he’s doing it on a meet-as-you-go basis.”

“Yeah, okay.” Jo raked her teeth across her lips. “Either Patrick is innocent, or someone’s helping him.”

“Extended family?”

“Patrick’s an only child. No cousins and only one unmarried uncle, who lives in the same apartment building. We checked there, too, but found nothing.”

“We’ve put in a request for a search-and-rescue dog, and we now have the warrant that allows us to monitor Patrick’s communications,” Lopez said. “If one of his buddies did this, they’ll be in touch with him one way or the other soon.”

“Unless,” Jo said, fighting the bile that rose in her throat at the possibility, “like Arnett suggested earlier, one of his friends knew about the situation, saw the text about Paxton and Alexia, and snatched them not on Patrick’s behalf but for their own purposes.”

“Shit,” Lopez said. “If we’re talking about people who’ve been in trouble with drugs, they could be in all kinds of bad situations.”

“And pretty young women can be worth a handy sum,” Jo said, through clenched teeth. “Even more so pretty little girls.”

Arnett shifted in his seat. “We need to start sending out feelers to our informants, and reach out to CAT.”

Jo had called the Commonwealth Anti-Trafficking task force while she initially waited for the team to show up. “I gave them what we knew, and they’re searching for anything that might be relevant. Which brings us back to the final option, that Patrick had nothing to do with it and Trevor or

some other unknown subject is our perpetrator. So we can't let up, we need to keep scouring every possible lead. Every employee at the mall, everybody she worked with at McDonald's, every car that passed hers in the parking lot."

"I've got the team going over the exterior footage with a fine-toothed comb listing out the license plates. Someone needed a car to get them away, and they might have passed at least one of the other cameras in the lot. In the meantime, do you have eyes on Patrick?"

"The same patrol tonight at least. Hayes will have to clear more beyond that," Jo said. "Gotta go. We're pulling back into the mall parking lot now."

Alternating red and white flashing tow-truck lights turned Paxton's Kia into a twisted candy-cane parody as Arnett pulled up next to the scene. Marzillo waved a hand in the air, and the beep-beep-beep of the backing truck stopped.

"Looks like you're on your way out," Jo said as she slammed the car door behind her.

Marzillo stripped off her gloves. "We printed every surface we could, inside and out, on the trunk, all the doors, and the child seat. We'll do some fuming back at the lab on the nonporous surfaces, but we already have dozens we'll need to go through."

"I have my mother getting some of Paxton's belongings so we can eliminate her prints. And the head of security is helping us get prints for all the mall employees."

Marzillo continued, watching Jo's face. "We also have a nightmare level of hair, fibers, and detritus to analyze. Most of it is likely incidental—any car that regularly transports a child is going to have a lot of flat-out dirt, let alone trace evidence. I'll call in every spare tech I can."

Jets of cold shot down Jo's limbs as Marzillo's words settled on her. Processing was going to take days, maybe weeks—but if Paxton and Alexia were still alive, they likely only had hours. She nodded, then turned and strode back to the car.

“Next steps?” she said to Arnett.

He gave her a wary look. “It’s two in the morning, Jo. The next step is to go home and get some sleep.”

She nodded tightly and dropped into the driver’s seat. “I’ll drop you off, then head back to help the team at HQ.”

Arnett plopped into the passenger seat. “Not just me, Jo. You, too.”

She shook her head and punched the button to start the car. “I can’t go home and sleep when Paxton and Alexia are God knows where being subjected to God knows what.”

His hand snaked out and grasped her forearm gently. He didn’t speak.

At first she refused to turn and meet his eyes, afraid she’d lose her tentative grasp on her emotions if she did. Then she channeled her fear into anger and turned to him with eyes blazing.

He shook his head at her. “You’re smarter than that, Jo. You know we’ve searched everywhere we legally can tonight, and you know we have a solid team of people working shifts around the clock to get you information and warrants. And you know that if you’re sleep deprived, you’ll likely miss the very thing that will help us save your cousins.”

She held his eyes for a long moment, then turned back to the windshield. Finally she nodded agreement, then slipped the car out of park and into motion.

Half an hour later, she pulled into her driveway. She sat for a moment, staring up at the house, struck by how far the day had veered from what she’d expected. Normally she returned from the tree lot with a small tree for herself, which she placed in her living-room window, decorated with a simple set of white lights and red bulbs. Last night she’d pulled the decorations out from the garage, excited about putting it up for the first time with Matt. The dark front window stabbed at her, like an

accusation—there would be no light or joy until she found Paxton and Alexia.

But something else about the sight was bothering her. What was it? She narrowed her eyes at the window and willed the niggling tension to make itself known.

As if in answer, a light flipped on in the upstairs bedroom: Matt.

In the course of her job, she'd left Matt home alone more times than she could count. But this wasn't just leaving him to eat dinner alone on a random night. This was the holiday season, their first together, the time of year you made special effort to prioritize loved ones.

Yes, that was part of it, but the tugging hadn't stopped. There was something more...

Matt didn't decorate the tree, the tugging whispered to her. *Why didn't he decorate the tree?*

Not that he should have, it wasn't his responsibility. But that was the sort of thing Matt just *did*. It wasn't one-sided; she tried to do the same for him when he had to work unexpectedly. But in the months they'd been together, especially since he moved in with her, he'd never *not* done whatever thing would make her feel loved. And this was such an obvious gesture to have missed, it made peering into the darkness where the tree should have been a metaphorical neon sign.

She rubbed her face with both hands. She was being ridiculous. Worry for her cousins and lack of sleep was combining with her guilt over abandoning him at Christmas and creating a toxic stew.

Still chastising herself, she exited the car and made her way up the porch into the house. As her key slipped into the lock, the door swung open. Matt searched her face, his expression worried and his black hair ruffled from sleep, white undershirt hugging the muscles of his chest.

“Any news?” he asked, closing the door behind her.

She reached up to give him a kiss before she answered. “I promised my mother I’d call with an update regardless of the hour. Let me grab a glass of wine and I’ll catch you both up at the same time?”

“You call her. I’ll get the wine.”

“Thank you.” As he led the way to the kitchen, she admonished herself for the doubts she’d had in the car, then searched her brain for some excuse to put off making the call. While sinking into the kitchen chair, she slowly clicked through to her mother’s number and connected.

Elisabeth answered almost immediately. “Josette. What have you found out?”

Jo went through a stripped-down version of what they’d learned, and the steps they were taking to find Paxton and Alexia. She had to strike just the right balance—she needed to reassure, but her mother could spot a spin job from a thousand miles away. After fifteen minutes of answering her mother’s questions and assuring her the team was following up on every possible lead, Jo ended the call and sank into her glass of wine.

Matt reached over and stroked her arm. “It sounds like you have a strong list of suspects, at least.”

Jo raked her teeth over her bottom lip. “We do. The problem is, none of them could have done it alone. Patrick, Trevor Rodgers, John Carpazi, they all have alibis for the times in question. Yes, Patrick’s friend and girlfriend may be lying for him, but even so, someone else has to be helping hide Paxton and Alexia.” She took another gulp from her glass. “But, if I’m ever going to sleep, I should try to put that aside for now. Especially because I owe you an apology.”

Matt’s brow pursed. “What for?”

“For walking out on our festive evening.”

Matt waved a hand and leaned back in his chair. “No problem there. Once I helped David with the trees, I had him drop me off here.”

“You didn’t go over to Sophie and David’s for dinner and the tree decorating? Stringing the cranberries with the girls, all that?” A thought struck her. “Sophie didn’t cancel it all, did she? I figured she wouldn’t want to disappoint the girls, or worry them.”

Matt glanced down quickly, then reached for the bottle of wine and stuck the cork into it. “No, you’re right, she didn’t want to upset the girls. It was hard enough for her to explain why Grandma and Grandpa weren’t going to be there.”

Jo winced. “What did she tell them?”

“That Grandma’s sister wasn’t feeling well and she had to go check on her.”

Jo nodded, and took in a deep breath. “Well, regardless, the point is, I abandoned you at the worst time of year, and I owe you. I’ll make it up to you with some other holiday festivity. What would you like to do?”

He shrugged. “Just a cozy night in watching a movie by the fire would be perfect.”

Jo grinned a flirty smile. “We do *that* all year round. How about we go ice skating up at Lake Bray? They do a whole set-up, with festive food and drink and displays and all that.”

He grimaced. “I’ve seen far too many ice-skating head injuries. And going out into frozen weather is the opposite of a cozy night in front of a fire.” His grimace shifted to a laugh.

“Well, if you want cozy, I know the perfect thing.” Jo raised her brows at him. “I’ll fill up a Thermos with some hot cocoa and we’ll sit inside a nice warm car and do Bright Nights at Forest Park, just you and me. Miles and miles of festive holiday lights to drive through, all while Christmas carols serenade us on the radio.”

“Sure. If you want to.” He looked up at the clock on the wall. “But it’s getting late. As it is you’ll only get a few hours’ sleep.”

The tree-lot discomfort returned. She watched his face carefully as she stood. “Is everything okay?”

The briefest flash of something—not quite annoyance, but akin to it—crossed his face. “Everything’s fine. Why do you ask?”

“I just—” she started, but stopped herself. This wasn’t the right time to have this conversation, as tired as she was and with her brain filled with Paxton and Alexia. “Nothing. I’m just tired and want to make sure we’re okay.”

“Always,” he said, then pulled her to him and kissed her, long and slow, his hands softly stroking her back.

But as they fell asleep, instead of cuddling into her arms, he turned away from her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Paxton let Alexia cry herself out while stroking her back and holding her close. Even after Alexia fell asleep she continued, soothing herself as much as she'd been soothing her daughter, wrestling her wildly swinging thoughts into the cold void where she hid from her emotions. The void was her survival mechanism; she'd had enough sliding-scale therapy to know that much. A safe place she could go when her environment was out of her control. A safe harbor when her father's nightly bourbon turned into ten and every disappointment in his life turned into her fault.

Worthless. Ungrateful. Spoiled. Quitter. Failure.

His favorite words, and the cornerstones of her childhood and adolescence.

Being a member of this family comes with responsibilities. Your choices—especially your bad choices—reflect on us. We deserve better than this.

Her eyes skittered around the room. She and her father had very, very different opinions about what constituted a bad choice, and she'd spent years busting her ass making up for her mistakes. Proving to herself she was strong and capable. She couldn't let his voice buzzing in her ear paralyze her.

You can't run from who you are, little girl, the voice came again, accompanied by her father's slurred laugh. A fast-food employee that can't keep her legs together. Pathetic. You sure showed us—came running right back home like I always knew you would.

She pushed her palms deeper into her eyes and forced the thoughts away. She'd broken away from her father's toxicity once, and the therapy had all but muted his voice—but here it was again, slashing at her, louder than it had ever been, right when she needed to be her strongest to get out of this nightmare.

You'll never be strong enough to escape this psycho.

No, you're wrong, she mentally shouted back. I am strong enough to get away from him, I just need to get your damned toxicity out of my head.

She chanted the last part until the voice receded, then shifted into replaying the visit, searching for any clue she could find.

The door had opened slowly, slowly enough to give her a clear view of the space behind him: a small landing, then a half-enclosed staircase leading upward. Every New Englander knew that sort of staircase well—it was the kind that lead down to a basement.

Shit—that meant the door was the only way out. Even *if* she found a way to get out of the shackles.

She shook her head—she couldn't afford to think that way. The last time she let fear and desperation lead her, the results had been disastrous. If the door was the only way out, she'd take out the door.

She carefully slipped out from under Alexia and crossed to it. Solid, painted gray like the walls and the floor. She rapped her knuckles on it, hoping it was made of wood, but the tinny echo of metal dashed her hopes. She wouldn't be able to kick it down, or even splinter it.

But there had to be something here that would help.

She checked the drawer of the nightstand—empty. She rechecked the drawers of the bureau, hoping she'd missed something. She examined the bookshelves—several children's books, and several non-fiction biographies. She rechecked the bathroom; a built-in shelf held spare toilet paper and hand soap, toothpaste and two toothbrushes, a hairbrush and comb.

The sink was exposed plumbing with no cabinet. She pulled open the tank of the toilet, not sure what she was hoping to find; there was nothing but water and a flushing mechanism.

There was no help to be found in the kitchenette, since she couldn't reach it. But she could reach the mini-fridge; inside were several bottles of water and two protein bars. She grabbed a bottle, cracked it open, and drank it down.

Dropping to her knees, she scanned the room from a different vantage point. The walls were plastered so she couldn't tell for sure, but they were probably cement like the floor—she'd need a jackhammer to make a dent in anything. She circled the room, moving the furniture—nightstand, bureau, bookshelf, armchairs, sofa—checking behind each for any sort of anomaly, hoping for a forgotten trap door. In the bathroom, she closely examined where the fittings met the wall, hoping something had worn away or at least come loose with time. Nothing had.

Staring blankly at the door, she took a series of deep breaths. There was nothing here she could pin her hopes on, but she couldn't afford to stop hoping. Her hand reached to rub her eyes again, clanking the chain. She looked down at it.

All of this was pointless if she didn't get the shackles off. She needed to focus on that first; once she figured that out she'd move on to the rest.

She collapsed her fingers close together, trying to make her hand as small and streamlined as possible, but the fit was too tight. She'd have to either break the chain or pick the lock. The only reference she had to lockpicking was what she'd seen on TV and read in books, and that wasn't much. The only halfway realistic depictions she'd seen involved two pieces of metal, like paper clips, used to push back some sort of prongs in the lock. But she'd just searched the room, and hadn't seen anything that could work. Even if she did have the tools, working them with two hands would be hard enough—but with one restrained by the shackle itself, it would be impossible.

Pushing down the frustration before it sent her back into a spiral, she jumped to the last option. She worked her way down the links, tugging as she went, but the metal was solid and the links were welded together. She strode to the loop attached to the wall, and noticed there were actually two on her side of the bed—one at waist height, and one near the floor. Something had to be holding it in place; she examined the higher one, hoping there was a screw under the paint she could uncover and loosen. She ran her thumbnail over the paint on the base of the loop, and a tiny fragment flaked off.

Her heart beat faster, and she dug her nail back in. A few more flakes fell, but then nothing—until her nail broke. She swore, and scanned the room again. She needed something with an edge stronger than her nail—even a butter knife would do. But if there was a butter knife in the kitchenette, she couldn't reach it.

Her hand flew up to her ear. He hadn't taken her jewelry, and her earrings were studs. Could she use the post to scrape away at the paint? She could, but that would leave visible marks, as opposed to the more natural-looking flakes of paint she'd already removed. Uncovering enough to find a screw would take time, and she couldn't risk him spotting her handiwork. The bottom loop was far less visible. She dropped to her belly so she could get a closer look.

She did a double take. The paint there was already scratched—and the scratches were surrounded by smears of dried blood.

Someone had clawed at the paint until their fingers bled.

She and Alexia weren't the first people to be held captive there.

NOVEMBER 25TH

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jo was up before the sun hoping for good news, but her phone was frustratingly silent. She raced through a shower, threw on her clothes, and didn't even bother to make her own mocha before leaving for HQ—a fast stop-off at Starbucks would have to do.

Clutching her quadruple mocha against the frigid air biting through her coat, she headed directly into the lab when she arrived. Alicia Sweeney, a relatively new hire who'd quickly proven herself invaluable when processing outdoor crime scenes, was bent over one of the tables in Lopez's workspace. If Lopez left Sweeney overseeing her personal command center, that meant Sweeney had risen quickly in Lopez's esteem as well.

“Alicia, good to see you. I appreciate you coming in to help.”

Alicia straightened with a grim smile, pushing back a strand of red hair that had escaped her ponytail. “Not a problem. I'm a night owl by nature, so working graveyard has never been a problem for me.”

Jo returned a half-smile. “I just reached out to the team by text, but haven't heard back. Have you seen any sort of update?”

“I have.” She shifted to a different desk and peered down at a monitor. “Our teams will resume canvassing the mall employees as soon as it opens today,” she began.

Jo checked her watch—five in the morning. That wouldn't happen for at least four or five more hours, depending on the holiday scheduling.

“They're still doing what they can to canvas surrounding areas, and they brought out a search-and-rescue dog in the early hours—”

“Damn, I wanted to be there for that,” Jo said. “I knew I shouldn't have gone home.”

“What were you going to do, sleep here in the lab?” Marzillo's voice said.

Jo turned to greet her. She looked predictably sleep-deprived, with dark smears under her eyes and black bun messier than usual. “I wouldn't be the first.”

“I thought you wanted to solve the case, not end up stumbling around in a fugue of sleep deprivation. And the dog didn't need you there to do its job. What did they find?” Marzillo asked Sweeney.

“Unfortunately, nothing. When they tested the dog, he was able to lead them to the spot where Paxton's car was parked. But he wasn't able to pick up a trail that lead anywhere from there. They actually brought in a second dog, but the same thing happened.” Sweeney grimaced apologetically.

Jo waved off her demeanor. “No, that's good, it tells us she left the scene by car, not on foot. Which makes the most sense, anyway, because if someone pulled a vehicle up next to hers, that would have provided at least partial visual cover for whatever they did to her and Alexia.”

Sweeney continued on. “Also, the team has been working up background checks all night, and we've knocked out a large portion of our potential suspects.” She typed something into the keyboard in front of her, and Lopez's printer started rumbling. “Here's what we've done so far. We'll start in on the alibi checks as the sun comes up.” She reached over and grabbed the printed papers to hand to Jo. “We've divided them into mall employees, Patrick's associates, and Paxton's associates.”

Jo paged through the considerable printout.

“For the mall employees, we’ve divided up by store, and also by whether they were at the mall working yesterday.” She reached for another set of printed pages. “Before she left last night, Lopez finished up the checks on Patrick Sills, Trevor Rodgers, and John Carpazi. From her notes, she didn’t find anything more interesting than what she told you earlier in the evening.”

Nodding, Jo took the second set of papers. “Okay, thank you. I’m gonna take all of this back to my desk and see what I can distill out of it.”

As she settled into her desk and pulled over the pages Sweeney had given her, she stopped short. Where in the stack she started depended on which scenario she considered most likely, but all the possibilities had the same sticking point—who would kidnap both a mother and child at the same time? Arnett was probably right, probably something had just gone wrong during the abduction, but she couldn’t afford to assume that. At the very least, she needed to rule out any other recent mother-child pair abductions. She pushed the printouts aside and pulled her keyboard over, then settled in for a long, ultimately fruitless, multi-step search of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

But almost instantly her criteria pulled up a missing mother-daughter pair from Springfield: Emma Whitney and her daughter Joy had been reported missing in December of 2019 and had never been found.

Her pulse raced as she tracked down the missing persons report for the Springfield pair, and she warned herself repeatedly it was most likely a coincidence. Although the exact time and circumstance of their disappearance weren’t known, the pair had gone missing approximately two weeks before Christmas. The report hadn’t been filed until mid-January, when Joy hadn’t shown back up to kindergarten after winter recess. Her teacher, Anna Hopkins, had filed the report. She considered Joy an ‘at-risk’ student—Emma Whitney

struggled with money and the school staff suspected she was involved in some sort of substance abuse. So when the school wasn't able to reach Whitney despite repeated attempts, Hopkins had gone to Whitney's apartment to check on Joy. When she found nobody at home, Hopkins talked to the landlord, who told her he'd also been trying to locate Whitney because her rent was past due. The Springfield PD officers did a digital search; they determined that her phone, a prepaid model, hadn't been active since mid-December. They tracked her one credit card; the last charges had been made on December fourteenth at Eastfield Mall. No further trace of the pair was found, and the current assumption was Whitney had left the area for reasons unknown.

Eastfield Mall.

A bone-penetrating chill seeped into Jo at the words. It could certainly be a coincidence that Emma Whitney had visited a mall before she disappeared—most people did around Christmas time, and the mall visit might have been unrelated to the actual disappearance. Nonetheless, she plugged in a search for a list of the stores at Eastfield Mall in 2019.

Arnett appeared at his desk next to hers. “Hey, thanks for the coffee. I got here as early as I could.”

“I appreciate it,” Jo said. “But you’ll need to nuke the coffee.”

When he returned from his trip to the microwave, Jo told him about Emma and Joy Whitney's disappearance.

He peered down at her monitor. “Didn't Eastfield Mall just close? Even so, I'm sure the stores were different pre-pandemic.”

Jo pointed at the header on the page. “Internet Wayback Machine. It's a trick Lopez taught me. They take periodic snapshots of the internet so you can go back in virtual time. This is the actual site back in 2019.”

“Nice. And smart to look up missing mother-child pairs.” Arnett gave a quick head tilt of appreciation, then his brow

pursed. “Hang on. Wasn’t there a mother and child found in a grave a while back somewhere out in Franklin County?”

“You think it was Emma and Joy?” Jo asked.

“Not sure. But remember that big missing persons push the governor’s office did earlier in the year? With EOPSS et al?”

Jo nodded; the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security had worked with several law enforcement agencies to put together specialized training on best practices for investigating missing persons and unidentified remains.

“Goran was involved, and I remember him saying something about a case recently where DNA testing allowed the detectives to link the remains to a mother and child. I can’t remember if it was a daughter or son, but I’m pretty sure it was up near Mt. Toby.”

“Only one way to find out.” Jo grabbed her phone and put through a call to the Northwestern District.

“Jo Fournier,” Detective Lee Argentine said when he picked up. “Long time no speak.”

After a brief exchange of niceties, Jo summed up what they were looking for. “I know that’s vague, but I don’t suppose you remember a case that involved matching the remains of an adult and child found together?”

“I do. I’m not sure it’s the one you’re talking about, but I know Tom Grunwald was on a case involving something like that. A set of remains found, what, about a year ago?”

The name Tom Grunwald struck a memory, but it was a vague one. “Do you have his number, by chance?”

“Yep.” He rattled it off. “But just to warn you, he’s retired now, and protective of his time. I’ll see if I can hunt down the case for you, too.”

“I appreciate it.”

She put a call through to Tom Grunwald as soon as she hung up with Argentine.

“Lo?” a gruff voice answered.

“I’m sorry to bother you.” Jo introduced herself quickly. “Lee Argentine thought you might have been involved with a case that involved identifying an adult-child pair of remains.”

“Aspyn Meadows and her daughter Ivy.” The answer was immediate, and his tone shifted from annoyed to urgent. “Why?”

Jo summarized. “I’m following up on any cases that might involve a missing mother-child pair.”

“Meet me at Starbucks on Oakhurst Ave in fifteen minutes. Bring me whatever you got.” He hung up before she could reply.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Paxton wasn't sure how long she'd sat frozen, staring at the bloodstained loop plastered into the wall. She also didn't remember straightening up and crawling back into the bed; the only thing she remembered was the warmth of Alexia's body melding into her own as the terrifying realization echoed through her brain like a song she couldn't tune out: *Someone was here before us. Whatever game he's playing, it's not as simple as he wants us to think.*

Somehow she slept, until her bursting bladder demanded she wake. She gently extricated herself from Alexia and crept over to the toilet, the blood smears still running through her mind. She shook her head to clear it because, really, what did it matter? The situation was still the same—she had to get them out of the dungeon as quickly as possible, and until she could, her only chance was to convince him she was willing to play by his rules.

Alexia stirred, and called to her groggily. “Mommy?”

“In the bathroom, honey.”

As Alexia crept out of bed and over to her, Paxton's eyes slid around the space. Something normal, that's what they both needed. So she grabbed one of the hand towels folded on the shelves, grabbed the bar of soap, and washed both their faces. Then she brushed their hair, and put Alexia's back into ponytails. They could probably both use a bath, but without a larger towel that would be difficult, and could wait for now.

As she placed the towel back on the shelf, keys rattled the door.

Pulse racing, Paxton scooped Alexia up and bolted to the bed. Just as she made it the door opened and he peeked in, like he was playing hide and seek. Alexia buried herself into Paxton's side; Paxton stroked her arm reassuringly.

“Good morning, Angela,” he said.

“Good morning,” she answered.

He didn't move, just stared at her. Waiting.

Alexia's head in her ribs prodded her as much as his stare. For once, her father was right—she couldn't let her pride put them in danger. “Good morning, Husband.”

He smiled and slipped the rest of the way through the door, holding the handles of a large plastic bag in one hand.

She stared at it, every hair on end. What was in it? If he tried to hurt Alexia in any way—

But she choked back her reaction. Alexia would sense it and follow her lead. And she needed to stay calm regardless. Alert for anything she could use to her advantage.

He crossed over to place the bag on the kitchen table, then reached in. He produced a single-serve container of yogurt and held it up for her to see. “I brought breakfast.”

She cleared her throat. “Thank you.”

He turned his attention toward Alexia. “Good morning, Evie. Do you remember me?”

Alexia looked up at Paxton for direction. Paxton nodded her head; Alexia nodded, too.

“I brought you a surprise for after you eat,” he said.

Alexia looked up at Paxton again. Paxton forced herself to smile encouragingly and swung her feet over the edge of the bed. Alexia grabbed her hand, and let herself be led over to the table.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d like,” he said. “I brought breakfast burritos, bananas and oranges, and yogurt.”

Paxton scanned the food. The burritos and yogurt packages seemed intact—but then, if he wanted to poison or drug them, he didn’t need to sneak it into the food. She pulled a burrito and a banana over for herself, and an orange and a yogurt for Alexia; her shaking hands made it easy to show how clumsy the chain was on her wrist.

He pulled three paper plates, napkins, and a plastic spoon from inside the kitchenette cabinet, then opened the burritos and plopped them on the plates. He handed one to Paxton, and slipped the third plate under Alexia’s orange.

While he worked, Paxton forced herself to speak. “Are you eating with us?”

“Of course.” As he sat back down, he pulled the plastic cover from Alexia’s yogurt, stuck the spoon in, and pushed it back to her. “I think it’s important for families to eat together, don’t you?”

“Very important,” Paxton said. There was a familiarity to the comment that struck a chord in her, shifting a portion of her fear to defiance. This was a brand of mental chess she knew—she had plenty of experience pacifying delusions of happy family in the middle of anything but.

“Mommy, I’m not hungry.” Alexia stared at the yogurt like it was a poisonous snake.

Paxton saw the disapproval flash over his face, and hurried to intervene. “I know it’s strange to eat in a new place, honey. But if we don’t eat, we’ll get sick.”

The line in his brow flattened back out. “And remember I told you I have a surprise for you? But only after you finish all your breakfast.”

When Alexia’s expression made clear exactly how little she cared about his surprise, Paxton’s heart froze. “A present! That sounds really excitingly exciting!” she crooned, praying Alexia would play along. “If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.”

For a long moment, Alexia didn't move. Then she reached for the yogurt.

"That's a good girl," he said. "Now let's get to know each other better. What types of things are your favorites to eat?"

Paxton's pulse sped and her mind raced. This was an opportunity, she just had to figure out how to exploit it. "Um, well. For breakfast I try to cook Alexia—"

He shot her a look at the slip.

"I try to cook *Evie* something that stays with her, like pancakes or eggs or homemade oatmeal. Not the packaged kind because sugar is for treats." Not true, but if she could get him to give her some sort of utensil—

"What's your favorite dinner?" he asked to Alexia directly.

"Pizza," she said hesitantly. "And pasghetti with meatballs."

"Mine, too." He bit into his burrito, chewed, then swallowed. "And what kinds of sandwiches do you like?"

The questions continued, shifting to their favorite colors and what size clothes they wore. He asked about Evie's—Alexia's—favorite toys, and Paxton's hobbies. Paxton searched for answers that could yield anything helpful.

Finally, Alexia finished eating. "Are you ready for your surprise?" he asked.

Alexia nodded hesitantly, pushing herself up against her mother.

He reached into the bag, paused with a big grin on his face, and then pulled out a rectangular present, wrapped in festive candy-cane paper.

"An early Christmas present." He slid it across the table to her.

The tug of an unopened present pulled Alexia out of her reluctance. As she stuck her little fingers in the folds and pulled, Paxton forced herself not to stiffen. It was good she wasn't fussing—but it repulsed her to see Alexia accept the

gift. It was a clever gateway to worm himself under Alexia's defenses, and to undercut Paxton's control.

Alexia ripped back a huge swath of paper, revealing a brand-new Candy Land game.

"Do you like it?"

She ran her hands over it. "Yes."

"Yes, Daddy," he corrected.

Alexia glanced quickly at Paxton. "Yes, Daddy."

"When I was a little boy, I loved playing this with my mother," he said. "Because it was *her* favorite game when *she* was a little girl."

Paxton hurried to distract her. "Go ahead. You can play with it."

While Alexia opened the game, he unloaded the rest of the bag. Two large towels. Two pairs of pajamas, one approximately Paxton's size and one approximately Alexia's. Two sandwiches, more fruit, and two bags of chips. "The sandwiches are turkey, but now that I know you like ham and cheese, I'll try to get you that tomorrow." He straightened and glanced around the room. "You have books, toys, water in the fridge. Is there anything else that would help your transition?"

"Maybe a clock, so I can keep Evie on her schedule?"

His voice turned brisk. "No clock—I'll keep you both on schedule."

She'd known he'd say no to that; she'd learned the best way to get her father to say yes to something she wanted was to first ask for something she knew he'd refuse. She put a disappointed look on her face and lifted her hand to rub her nose. The chain clanked, and she had to shift because she was at the end of its tether. She looked down as if just now having a thought. "Is there any way you could chain our ankles instead of our wrists? It's hard to do anything with them in our way, especially for Evie."

His face tightened and he glanced between her wrist and ankle. Finally, the creepy smile returned. "That seems fair. I'll

be back.”

He strode out of the room, leaving the door open slightly behind him.

“Stay here,” she said to Alexia. She grabbed her chain to keep it from rattling and crept toward the door, keeping an ear out for any sound of his return. She scanned every inch of the staircase she could through the crack he’d left, working up her nerve to open it wider—

Footsteps echoed above her.

She bolted back toward Alexia. As he walked back into the room, she leaned over to kiss Alexia’s hair.

“Angela, come over here, please. Evie, you stay put,” he said.

Paxton crossed to the bed.

“Put your other hand on the bedpost.”

She did. He produced a pair of cuffs, attached her to the post, then pulled out a key and released the chain on her other wrist. With one hand securing her leg in place, he shackled her bare ankle. Without handcuffing Alexia—why would he need to?—he repositioned her chain.

“Thank you,” she forced herself to say as she rubbed her wrist.

“A first gesture of good faith,” he said as he straightened up. “Now I have to go to work, but I’ll see you soon.”

The bolt slid into place behind him with a deep clunk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I've always loved winter.

It's a time of stillness, when the world pauses to take its breath and allows you to take yours. The snow, of course, the way it blankets the world in frosted beauty and forces everything to slow. The days draw in, bringing darkness early in the evening and keeping grasp of it long into the morning. I love driving in the winter mornings, gliding along as though sheathed by a cloak of invisibility; it's a form of meditation, when I can sit alone with my thoughts and my hopes.

And that morning I was more hopeful than I'd been in years, decades really, with wonderful things to think about. The changes I'd made were working. New Angela was skeptical of me, but she was the first who wasn't openly hostile. It wasn't clear sailing yet, but the request to move the shackle was a good sign; it's far easier to compress the joints of the hand through the shackle than a foot, given the impediment of the heel, so her mind was on adapting rather than escaping.

Not so fast. Mother's voice popped into my head, accompanied by her raspy laugh. If you're too confident, you'll fuck it up. As soon as she sees who you really are, it's over. And you know what that means.

I winced, and answered her out loud. "I have a plan. I'll do whatever it takes to make it work. This one will be different."

Her disappointment rang through my head. I wish I could believe that. But we both know better. I've only ever wanted one thing from you, and you've only ever failed me.

I blasted the radio, trying to drown out her voice with Christmas carols, reaching for the optimism I'd held just a minute ago by calling up a mental picture of New Angela. She looked enough like Angela in the face, despite the green eyes and the too-short hair. But the hair would grow, and I'd buy her colored contacts for Christmas. Give her plenty of high-calorie food so she'd put on a little weight. She'd look more like Angela with each passing day.

Little Evie was nearly perfect. Her eyes were brown like Mother's, as though she really were her granddaughter. And she'd been so well behaved! I'd be able to play games with her and read stories to her, and let her fall asleep on my shoulder. She'd let me be her father and she'd come to love and trust me. And once she trusted me, Angela would too. And then everything would be all right.

I turned the music up louder and sang about 'Frosty the Snowman' as loud as I could, determined to keep the bad thoughts at bay, focusing on my beautiful pair of angels.

I managed to keep hold of the positivity until I got to work. But the job was so rote, required so little concentration and thought, especially now that I had what I needed. It left me far too restless, with far too much time to think. Too much time to doubt myself, and revisit all the things I wanted to be free of.

I wasn't normal, and never had been. My father made that crystal clear before I was old enough to know what the word 'normal' meant. I'd never understood what was wrong, or how to fix it—I only knew that whatever it was destroyed my family and my mother's happiness along with it.

It happened when I was five, not even in school yet. I'd spent the morning avidly watching my father take apart a broken toaster. When he tried to put it back together, he couldn't, and told my mother he needed to go to the library to find a book to help him. I had little toy tools and loved

building things and taking them apart, so I told him I could do it. He gave me the odd look that always opened a pit of sadness in my stomach, then left without another word.

I wanted that pit of sadness to go away—I wanted him to be proud of me. And I knew I could do it—I could see in my head where all the pieces went. So I started, and by the time he returned with his book, everything was back together. I bounced around the kitchen waiting for him to come home, excited to see how happy and proud he'd be, anticipating how he'd give me a big hug and ruffle my hair like daddies did to their sons on TV.

When he came through the kitchen door and spotted the toaster, he stared at me like I'd sprouted three green heads. Far worse than how he normally looked at me. Disgusted, but more than that. Almost like he was afraid.

"We need to take him to see someone," he said as I listened outside my parents' bedroom. "He's not right. I think he might be one of those autistics."

"There's nothing wrong with him, Phil. Just because he's not like you doesn't make him bad. He just likes books and tinkering with things, what's wrong with that?"

"It's more to it than that," he replied. "He never wants to be around other people—"

Mother's voice rose. "What other people? If we had any friends, he'd be able to play with their kids."

The accusation in her words was clear even to me: it was his fault nobody ever came over and they never went out anywhere. Which was strange, because he went plenty of places on his own, especially when my mother had her fits.

"When he starts school he'll make friends," she continued. "It's only a few months away."

"No. This time I'm putting my foot down. Something's wrong with him, and he needs to be checked."

Mother burst into a frenzy of tears. My father stormed out of the room, past me and out of the house.

I ran in to where Mother lay curled on the bed sobbing. “It’s okay, Mother,” I said as I climbed up next to her. “I don’t mind. The doctor gives me lollipops.”

She crushed me into her chest. “No, honey. This is a different kind of doctor. He’ll want to take you from me, and then I’ll be alone. Your father doesn’t care—all he cares about is going out drinking and screwing other women. All I have is you to love and take care of me, and he’s trying to destroy that.”

The pit in my stomach opened up, and I went cold all over. I wasn’t sure back then what exactly all that meant, but I knew my mother was scared, and that made me feel helpless. There was only one thing I knew to say that would help, so I said it. “It’s okay, Mother. I’ll never go away.”

She crushed me in tighter. “I know it. You’re a good boy. You’ll never hurt me, will you? You’ll always take care of me?”

“Yes, Mother.”

She kept asking, over and over. And I kept trying to give her peace.

The light coming through Mother’s white lace curtains always faded long before she stopped crying. One of my arms had gone numb and I was so hot I was sweating. But if I pulled away she’d start crying all over again.

Finally she lifted her head. “Baby, can you go get Mother’s migraine medicine?”

My heart sank. “Yes, Mother.”

Mother’s migraines were the start of what my father called her ‘fits.’ She’d disappear into her bedroom for days with her bottle of pills, and my father would stay in the guest room until she was better. She’d cry off and on, but I learned not to go in until she asked me to, so I’d try to distract myself with my building toys and my books until she called me to bring her tea or food or to rub her back. Eventually her shower would start

and she'd appear in her robe with wet hair like nothing had happened, and I could finally breathe again.

This time my father didn't wait for the fit to be over. He strode into her room the next morning. "I found a doctor yesterday in Scoby who had a last-minute cancellation. We're going together because you need to hear what the doctor has to say."

She started screaming so loudly it hurt my ears, swearing and calling him names. He left the room, and went into the kitchen.

When I peered in, she held her arms out to me. "Baby, I need to talk to you."

I crept up and sat next to her. She put one hand on each of my shoulders and stared down into my eyes, her voice panicked. "When we see the doctor today, I need you to be very careful. I love you even though you're not like other boys, but the doctor won't understand that."

The pit opened in my stomach. Mother thought something was wrong with me, too? "Why?"

"Because he wants to take you away from me, that's what those doctors do. So you have to explain things to him the right way. He's going to ask if you like to play with other children. You need to say that you do, but that sometimes you're just shy."

That wasn't hard, because it was mostly true. I was shy. But while I liked to play alone, I didn't mind playing with other children.

She held my eyes. "Can you say that back to me?"

"Sometimes I'm shy."

"Good. He's also going to ask you about putting together the toaster. Just tell him it was mostly all together and you just finished it."

"Mother," I asked. "Do you think something's wrong with me?"

She broke eye contact. “I’ll always love you no matter what, that’s what matters. And we’ll always take care of each other.”

I nodded, but the pit in my stomach grew big enough to swallow me whole, and I fought so hard to keep from crying that I threw up.

When the time came, the doctor didn’t ask me the things Mother said he would. Instead he gave me games to play, games I’d never seen before, and talked to me while I played them. Then we went back over to where Mother and my father waited on the other side of the room with a nurse, and he told my father I wasn’t autistic.

“That can’t be right,” my father sputtered. “He’s not normal.”

The doctor asked me to go play with a pile of toys. As soon as I started sorting through them, he shifted into a low voice, but I listened carefully.

“He’s not typical,” he said, stressing the word, “but that’s not due to any sort of developmental disorder. He’s mechanically inclined and he’s introverted, but not in a way that’s cause for alarm.” He paused for a moment, and then continued. “But I can see a lot of tension in the family. Negative patterns of family interaction can have long-lasting impacts on young children. Getting some tools for better communication and coping can help, so I think it would be a good idea for the three of you to go talk with a family therapist.”

Mother exploded.

“No head-shrinker will ever touch me or my child,” she spat. “They put my aunt Millie away and we never saw her again.” She jumped up, grabbed me, and took me out to the car.

My father didn’t come out for quite some time, and when he did, he didn’t speak. Until I was in bed that night—or supposed to be.

“The doctor’s right.” His voice was low, but scary. “We can’t keep going on like this. It’s making him maladjusted. A therapist can help us.”

Maladjusted?

I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew it was bad.

“Of course he’s maladjusted,” Mother spat back. “His father abuses his mother, going off God knows where, cheating on me—”

“For fuck’s sake, will you stop with that shit? I never cheated on you, not once—”

She continued over him. “You’re to blame for this. And now I have to fix it. I’ll find a way, by myself. I’ve read about how shrinks turn their kids against their mothers by convincing them their mothers are horrible and planting memories of abuse. You just can’t stand that someone else loves me. So go have all your women and leave me and my son alone!”

My father sat silent for a minute. Then he stood, turned, and slowly walked out without another word.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jo drove as quickly as she could amid the morning's new batch of flurries, making it to the Starbucks on Oakhurst Ave in eight minutes rather than her normal ten.

"Like we don't have enough to do right now, we can just drop everything and meet him on command?" Arnett grumbled as they strode toward the café's door.

"Lee warned us he wasn't the fuzziest man alive." Jo reached a gloved hand for the door. "And since everybody and his brother so far has an alibi for the time Paxton went missing, this is our hottest lead."

The comforting coffee aroma and soft jazz holiday classics welcomed them as they scanned the tables; a Pavlovian tug in her amygdala veered her toward the order counter until the intense stare of a sixty-something white man, dressed in an olive fisherman's jacket with a multitude of puffy zippered pockets, jerked her to the back-most table.

"Detective Fournier?" He stood up to greet her.

"And this is my partner, Bob Arnett." She took the hand he extended and shook.

"Appreciate you meeting me." His chin dipped brusquely. "I was on my way to Quabbin to get some fishing in and I hate talking while I drive. Especially about something that needs my full attention."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Jo said cautiously. "I thought you said fifteen minutes."

“Old trick I picked up years ago. Best read you can get on someone is when they arrive somewhere. Tells you what all their priorities are. And I can see you need some coffee.”

Jo laughed. “We’ll get it on the way out. Don’t want to keep you from your fishing any longer than we have to.” She summed up the situation with Paxton and Alexia. “Do you think Aspyn and Ivy’s disappearance could be related to theirs?”

“Maybe so, maybe no. You take a look.” Grunwald slid his phone over the brown-laminate table toward them.

She peered down at the photo displaying a makeshift grave in a forested area. Two skulls, one large and one small, sat amid a scattered array of bones in a shallow depression. “This is Aspyn and Ivy? How exactly did this all go down?”

“Got a call about five months ago, just before I retired. Kids up near Russell Hill on Mt. Toby were having a kegger, you know how they do. Couple of ’em brought their dogs, and one of the dogs went crazy at this site. Started digging, and the kid couldn’t pull ’em off it. Next thing they know they realize they’re looking at a skull and they lose their minds since half of ’em were underage and most of them were on more than just beer. Site got nice and trampled, not that we were looking at any sort of fresh evidence regardless.”

A small, odd glint of gold in the picture caught Jo’s attention. “What’s this?”

Grimacing, Grunwald grabbed the phone, swiped to another photo, and gave it back to them. “It’s an angel. Christmas ornament that messed me up nice and good. It’s an antique, made in the early nineteen hundreds. When we couldn’t find anybody missing that seemed to map up with the pair, and given the age of the ornament and that there were no scraps of clothes or anything else, I figured the forensic anthropologists would come back and say they’d been buried out there for decades. But I don’t like to assume, and since there was that big focus on missing persons and unidentified remains, I went ahead with a DNA check. Didn’t match any missing women or children, but the profile of the young girl

came up as the daughter of a guy doing a stint down in Hampshire County Corrections. We talked to him, and based on the approximate age of the younger remains, he gave us a name of the woman he'd been dating at the time the child would have been conceived. Sure enough, when we tried to locate her, nobody'd seen her for a year and a half, since December 2021."

"Nobody filed a missing persons report?" Jo asked.

"She was the type nobody missed." The hand next to his coffee clenched into a fist. "High-school dropout, got herself into drugs and alcohol early. Lived with boyfriends when she could, on the street when she couldn't. Had a habit of disappearing for weeks at a time, but got herself clean when she found out she was pregnant."

"How'd you find out about that?" Arnett asked.

"Her last known address on record was for a sober house. Did a stint in rehab, then transferred into that residence. Made a couple of friends, none real close but one a little closer than the rest, named Celia. I tracked her down, and she told me. Aspyn was turning her life around, but it was slow because it's never gonna be fast when you've got a baby, no high-school diploma, and family who disowned you."

"The friend assumed her disappearance was some sort of relapse?"

"Or that she met a guy, because that had happened before. Either way, since they weren't 'BFFs,'"—he marked the acronym with finger quotes—"she didn't think twice about not hearing from her. Last she could remember was shortly before Christmas, about a week or two. Said Aspyn was looking forward to taking Ivy to visit the flagship Yankee Candle in South Deerfield. It'd been a yearly tradition when Aspyn was a little girl herself. Celia swore up and down Aspyn was in a good mood, excited because it was the first year Ivy was old enough to remember it. But you know how it is with addiction. Good times can be just as much a trigger as bad."

Jo nodded as her pulse sped—there were too many similarities to be coincidence. "And nobody saw her after

that?”

He shook his head. “The conversation with Celia was the last contact I could find. Her mother and father’d washed their hands of her when she was drugging. Had something akin to an intervention where they told her they wouldn’t enable her any longer by giving her money or shelter, and she had to stop using or get out. Celia said Aspyn never forgot that, and even after she got sober, her parents were dead to her. ’Course, when I pushed, she hinted that the family dynamic wasn’t peaches and cream to start with.”

A vision of Uncle Jim tossing back Sazerac and her aunt popping pills flashed through her mind. “It’s never simple, is it? Chicken or egg.”

Grunwald nodded again. “Good news was they were willing to give me DNA, and I was able to confirm the adult female remains were Aspyn. So there’s closure on that end, at least. But in terms of the investigation, it dead-ended at that point. I was never able to find any indication who might’ve killed them.”

“Were you able to determine cause of death?” Jo asked.

“That was the only clear thing about it all. Nine-millimeter to the back of the head. Both of them.”

Jo went cold. “They were executed?”

“Forensic anthropologists couldn’t be more specific than that. Could be they were executed, could be they were running away. Could be they were caught in some sort of drug drive-by crossfire. Impossible to say from what we had to work with.”

Jo pointed back at his phone. “Did you come up with any theory about why they were buried with a Christmas ornament?”

With a frustrated sigh, he shook his head. “That always bugged me. Who shoots a kid in the back of the head, then buries them with a Christmas ornament? Feels like some sort of regret or apology, that’s why I leaned toward it being some sort of accident, like a drive-by, wrong place at the wrong time.”

Jo's throat tightened as she considered that. "What happened to the case when you retired? Is it still being actively investigated?"

"Officially, I'm sure. But given how cold it was, I doubt the resources are there to make it a top priority. Too much crime to solve and never enough time to solve it."

Jo glanced at the time on her phone. "Well. We appreciate you taking the time to meet with us. We'll take a closer look at the file."

"I'd appreciate an update on anything you find. This is one of those cases that comes to me late at night and won't let me sleep."

Jo nodded as she stood and shook his hand. "Will do."

"Thoughts?" Jo asked once she and Arnett were back in the car, hitting the drive-thru on the way out.

"Hard to say." Arnett pulled out his wallet. "We know too little about the other two cases."

"But we have definite similarities." Jo began ticking off fingers. "One, all three happened just before Christmas."

"Not *just* before," Arnett said. "Thanksgiving was just two days ago. Christmas is a month away."

"But within a few weeks of each other during the same time of year? And the only three mother-child disappearances we were able to find that weren't the mother abducting the child from the father? That strikes me as statistically odd."

He held up a conciliatory hand. "It's worth noting, but it's pretty slim connective tissue. The holidays are a stressful time for lots of people. Alcohol and drug abuse skyrockets, so it could just be that."

Jo scraped her teeth on her bottom lip. "That's another similarity. In Paxton's case she never had a drug problem that we know of, but Patrick and his buddies certainly do."

“True. I’m just saying we have to be careful to look at it the right way round. Relapses and abusive boyfriends are related to potential relocations around the holidays, but it doesn’t mean the three cases are related. Maybe Emma took off because baby daddy showed up and tried to snatch Joy, but Aspyn found herself wrong-place-wrong-time while scoring some Oxy to ease the holiday stress.”

“Then let’s talk about the shopping aspect. Paxton and Emma, the last traces of them are at malls, and the last thing anybody knows about Aspyn is she was looking forward to a trip to Yankee Candle. And we know for sure Paxton went into Yankee Candle yesterday. Our kidnapper may be someone who works for Yankee Candle, and moved locations.” Jo pulled out her phone and scrolled.

“The Yankee Candle Killer—the chain’s gonna love that.” Arnett rubbed his head. “But everybody shops during the holidays.”

“Dammit. No Yankee Candle in Eastfield Mall in 2019.”

“And the company heaves a huge sigh of relief.” Arnett shook his head. “But your theory could still be right, only with toy stores. Aspyn most likely would have gone to *some* toy store during the holiday season for her daughter, maybe even before or after the trip to Yankee Candle.”

“Good point.” Jo fired off a text. “Either way we need to look carefully at where our suspects were when the other women went missing. All of Patrick’s friends, even all the mall employees. It’s very possible somebody worked at Bath & Body Works one year, and Yankee Candle the next.”

“It’d even be smart to move to different stores.” Arnett rubbed his thumb over his chin. “And maybe Aspyn or Emma knew someone that Patrick knows. Maybe they even met that person when they were in rehab.”

Jo’s head snapped up from the notes she was jotting to herself. “That would make a horrible form of sense for someone in Patrick’s current circle of friends. Someone obsessed with mothers or little girls—if they knew Patrick’s situation, that text from John Carpazi may have been a golden

opportunity for them to snatch Paxton and Alexia for their own purposes.”

Arnett rubbed his chin harder. “You never know what a psychopath’s fixations are gonna be. Like with the Golden State Killer, the theory is he was trying to get back at the ex-girlfriend who rejected him, acting out his revenge with the rapes and murders. Maybe it’s someone whose own ex took their daughter away.”

“So we need to widen all our background searches to include whatever we can find out about Emma Whitney and Aspyn Meadows.” Jo texted furiously. “Reopening it might be timely—someone may realize something was important that they didn’t back when the pairs went missing.”

“Sounds like we have a plan, then.”

Jo nodded. But this plan would need a hundred pairs of eyes to enact, and every passing hour decimated the odds Paxton and Alexia were safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Maladjusted.

I didn't know what the word meant then, but I never forgot it. Eventually, when I learned how, I looked it up in the dictionary: Failing or unable to cope with the demands of a normal social environment.

I couldn't deny that—I didn't understand the normal social environment. I'd always preferred books and things to people because people were unpredictable and objects were straightforward. If an electric toothbrush didn't work, I could figure out what part was broken and fix it. The robots I built followed the rules I programmed. But people didn't work that way, and while I wanted to have friends, figuring them out was so difficult and so stressful it was far easier to just not.

"I'm worried about you," my mother said, nearly every day. She'd look at me with shame and disappointment. "If you don't learn to be around people, your father's gonna force us to take you to that psychiatrist. Can't you at least try to pretend better?"

So I'd try to behave like other kids. But the harder I tried, the worse it was; when I'd talk or laugh with boys at school it came out fake even to my own ears, and I got caught in a loop of trying too hard that I didn't know how to break out of. When I didn't get better after a year of school, my father sat us down and told us he was taking me to a psychiatrist.

"I've made an appointment for Monday morning," he said to me. "You and I will go together, and your mother will stay

here.” He got up, strode to the door, and left the house.

The pit in my stomach seemed to cut me in half. The psychiatrist would take me away—and who would take care of Mother? I stared over at her, certain this would start one of her fits. But she didn’t scream and she didn’t cry. She sent me away to my room and told me to stay there and play with my toys while she figured out what she was going to say to my father. So I sat with my ear to the wall, trying to hear so I’d know when he came home and I’d know what she said to him. But I couldn’t hear anything and just had to hope for a miracle, that Mother would come up with the right thing to say. And I’d never been so afraid because while Mother was scary when she was crying and angry, at least I knew how to deal with that. I had no clue how to deal with her silence.

Whatever it was she told him, it worked. When Monday came, he didn’t show up to take me to the psychiatrist. Instead, Mother took me out for ice cream and explained to me that my father had left us.

“It’s for the best,” she told me as my double cone with one scoop of mint chocolate chip and one of strawberry melted onto the table. “This way the doctor won’t take you away from me. And it won’t make much difference having him gone anyway, since he always abandoned me when I wasn’t well. He’s not good for us.”

I stared up at her. She was smiling and she seemed happy, and that made me feel better. And maybe it was for the best—now I wouldn’t have to worry about trying to make friends or pretending to like things I didn’t like for my father’s sake. I could read my books and build things and my mother wouldn’t have to cry and worry all the time. And that made the pit close back up and made me hungry again, so hungry I ate all my ice cream and asked for more.

But I was wrong. Mother’s worries about me didn’t ease off—they escalated. And the older I got, the more desperate she became.

“You have to stop acting like a freak,” she’d say, shaking me by the shoulders. “You’re all I have now, and I can’t coddle

you. I need you to have a normal life, get married and have children to bring me comfort in my old age, and to carry on our family legacy. I can't sleep at night worrying there will be nobody to take over when we're gone."

So I tried harder and harder to force myself into friendships at school. But the harder I tried, the more I reeked of desperation, and young boys put lions to shame when it comes to sniffing out the weakest members of a herd. My desperate, awkward attempts propelled me from being the solitary weird kid they ignored to being the main target of their bullying. And I'd put up with it for as long as I could, but when you exist amid continual attacks, it's only a matter of time before you snap and fight your way out of the corner you're in. And then they'd back off for a while, but my mother would push me harder to fix it all, so I'd try again, and the bullying would start up again. And the cycle continued, winding tighter and tighter as each year passed.

Until high school, and Angela.

Nobody bullied me after what happened to Angela.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Mommy! It’s your turn.”

Paxton’s attention snapped back to the game. “Sorry, honey. Sorry, Alexia.”

“Why do you keep saying my name like that?”

Paxton picked a card from the top of the pile. “I want you to remember your real name is Alexia even though we call you Evie when the man’s here.”

She wanted to remind herself, too. When she’d seen the show about Jaycee Dugard, she hadn’t understood how someone could be so cowed they wouldn’t try to escape at the first opportunity. But as best she could guess, they’d only been in this horrible place for about twenty-four hours and already she was so worried about saying the wrong name in front of him she’d caught herself using ‘Evie’ in her own head. In less than a day he’d seared a new reality into her brain.

Alexia stared at the card impatiently. “What’d you get?”

She turned the card so Alexia could see. “Double orange. Looks like I’m gonna catch up.”

“Not for long,” Alexia proclaimed, and turned over her next card.

Paxton smiled, then refocused her thinking back to the chain on her ankle. So far so good, but she needed to find something to use for lock picks.

“Mommy, pay attention! It’s your turn again.”

Paxton'd never been good at multitasking, even under the best of circumstances. She stood up and kissed Alexia's head. "Why don't you play my turns for me for a few minutes? I have something I need to do."

Alexia pouted, but pulled a card, then talked herself through the correct spaces she needed to move.

Taking slow strides, Paxton moved around the room, reexamining everything from the new goal of finding makeshift lock picks. The bed frame: solid wood, short posts with round ends; no help there. The mattress? Newer ones were made of foam or gel or such, but the one she'd scavenged for her Boston apartment was old enough to have actual springs.

"My turn... I got green," Alexia proclaimed.

Paxton shoved the top mattress over, then pulled back the cover of the box spring to reveal thick material around the sides and the edges and a thinner fabric in the center. She pressed a finger down into it, targeting it with the corner of her squared-off nails. It ripped just a little, enough that she was able to press again and make it bigger. She gripped the separation and pulled to reveal what was underneath.

No springs. Only wooden slats.

So much for that. She pulled the cover back over the mattress, then the top mattress back into place.

She continued around the room, pulling open every bureau drawer and running her finger along every crease, hoping for a pin or paper clip that had evaded detection. She pulled every item off the bookshelves and examined the binding of the hard-cover picture books. Then the mini-fridge and the microwave, but still found nothing—no stray utensils left behind, no cooling element or shelf mechanism she could break off.

She crossed to the couch and sat. The back was hard and the seat cushions were removable, so she could easily feel there were no springs. She ran her hand over the material below—far more solid than the cover over the mattress, and

she couldn't get her fingernail to break through it. She needed something more substantial, something with an edge—

Placing her foot carefully on its side, she pressed the corner of the shackle's rectangle against the material, then dragged it along while holding the down pressure with one hand. It pierced the fabric; with shaking fingers, she pulled it back, praying to see springs below.

There were springs—but not the vertical kind. These were horizontal S-shaped lines, far too thick to be useful even if she was able by some miracle to break them.

She pushed the cushion back into place and sank onto it, then rubbed the heels of her palms into her eyes. What was she even thinking? Even if she were able to get out of the shackle, she'd never get past the door. Even if she made it past the door, for all she knew they were inside a walled, barbed-wired fortress. For all she knew, while they'd been drugged he'd driven them out to the middle-of-nowhere rural Ohio like her father had threatened to do when—

“Mommy, are you okay?”

Paxton's eyes sprung back open, and she plastered on a smile. “I'm okay, honey. Just a little tired. Did you finish the game?”

“Yes.”

“Well.” Paxton lifted her up. “Let's go play another one.”

Alexia rubbed one of her eyes. “I'm tired, too. Can I take a nap?”

Paxton's heart contracted again—Alexia never asked to take a nap, not unless she was sick. She stuck her hand onto Alexia's forehead. “Are you feeling okay? Sore throat? Sore tummy?”

Alexia shook her head. “Just tired.”

Paxton stroked her hair. “Okay, honey, let's both take a nap. Do you have to go potty first?”

Alexia nodded.

Helping Alexia navigate the bathroom this time was far easier than when she'd had her wrist shackled. That was a win, she reminded herself—she'd managed to get him to change the location of the shackle. If she could do that, she could figure out the rest. She just couldn't let herself get overwhelmed, she needed to look at it one step at a time. She could and she would, because she had no other choice.

When Alexia flushed the toilet, the whoosh pulled her back out of her thoughts. The mechanism—could something in there work for lock picks? The plumbing and walls in the bathroom weren't as new as the rest of the space, and she'd learned about older toilet mechanisms back in Boson when she had a toilet that ran incessantly and a landlord who never picked up the phone.

“Stand back, honey.” She shifted Alexia behind her, then held her breath as she lifted the lid.

The toilet's internal mechanism had exactly what she'd hoped: an old metal chain that raised the stopper when someone flushed. And the metal links were thin enough she'd be able to separate them with her bare hands, but thick enough they wouldn't break when she used them to try to pick the lock.

Heart racing, she did some quick math. They'd played three games of Candy Land, and each had probably taken about half an hour. For about half an hour before that, she'd talked with Alexia, reassuring her about the strange man who called them by different names. Then, this last game that Alexia played alone while Paxton searched would have taken a little longer, so it had probably only been about two and a half, maybe three hours since they'd had breakfast. He'd said something about work, but she had no way of knowing how many hours he worked, and this should be Saturday. If it were a partial day, wouldn't he have come back himself for lunch? She couldn't be sure, but most likely she had an hour or two before he reappeared.

She'd have to hurry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Paxton had to force herself to remain calm while pulling apart the flushing mechanism, because her shaking hands made pulling the links apart nearly impossible. It took her far too long to liberate two pieces of metal, each about two-thirds of an inch long. Shorter than she would have liked, but they should be enough.

Alexia woke from a short nap clingy and quiet, with her thumb stuck in her mouth—a habit Paxton had broken her of over a year ago. Paxton led her over to the bookshelf and pointed to a set of forty-eight-piece children’s floor puzzles.

“Remember how I told you we were going to get to spend time together just you and me? I thought it would be fun to play with puzzles,” she said. “You do yours and I’ll do mine, and we’ll see who finishes first.”

Alexia’s mood lifted slightly, and she dove into the set of boxes, selecting one with a group of kittens playing in a forest. “Which one are you going to do?”

“I’m going to see if I can get this open,” she said, pointing down to the shackle as she climbed up on the bed. “But it’s a secret okay? We can’t tell the man I did this.”

“We can’t tell Daddy?” Alexia ran her thumb and index finger over the corner of the puzzle box.

Alexia’s easy use of the name clenched Paxton’s stomach. She cleared her throat. “No, we can’t tell him. Okay, on your mark... get set... go!”

As Alexia ripped the top off the box and dumped the pieces on the floor, Paxton gingerly stuck her homemade picks into the bottom of her shackle's lock. Her only clue about what to do was her vague memory of a conversation Patrick had with a friend about a reality show where the contestants had to free themselves from a locked room. Patrick's friend had gone on and on about pressure and clicks and lining things up inside the lock, but all Paxton could retrieve was the impression she needed to lift something with one pick so the other could slide in. Far easier said than done, she quickly learned.

"All finished!" Alexia turned to her in triumph. "I won!"

"Yes you did! You're so good at puzzles." Paxton reached over and kissed the top of her head. "But I bet you I'll win this time."

"On your mark... set... go!" Alexia cried, ripping off the top of the next puzzle.

Paxton closed her eyes, trying to put all her focus on whatever was happening inside the little lock. Sometimes she felt resistance and sometimes she didn't; she kept fiddling, trying to tune in to the differences.

"All done!"

Paxton's eyes popped open, and she stared down at Alexia's second finished puzzle. She'd have sworn they just started a few minutes ago, but it normally took Alexia at least half an hour even *with* help to solve a puzzle like that. She glanced back toward the end table by the bed in frustration, as if a clock would appear through sheer will—she needed some way to be sure time wasn't getting away from her.

Alexia popped up from the floor. "I have to go potty."

Paxton watched her as she ran off, half smiling. Alexia had always been a very regular child when it came to just about everything, from eating to sleeping to bathroom breaks, and Paxton knew how lucky she was to have that—

She's always been regular.

The thought echoed through Paxton's brain—so regular, she planned around Alexia needing a restroom about every

three hours. It wasn't perfect, but it was as good a way to keep track of time as she was going to get.

Based on that, if their captor worked an eight-hour day, they didn't have long to go before he'd be back. She should stop now to be sure. But finally she was feeling some difference in the tension, and if she could just keep going she was certain she could get it unlocked—

“Mommy, I don't want to play puzzles anymore.” Alexia climbed up on the bed next to her. “Will you read me a story?”

Paxton's heart screamed silently—she needed to get back to that lock, and time was running out. “I have a better idea. Why don't you pick one out and read it for Mommy?” She'd been working with Alexia on reading since she turned four, and Alexia could puzzle out quite a range of simple words. When she encountered one she didn't know, she made up the rest of the story as though she did.

Alexia nodded, then padded over to the books. As she looked through them trying to pick one, Paxton returned to picking the lock.

Until the sound of keys in the door froze her in place.

Her heart slammed against her chest—she'd pushed the time too far, she knew she should have stopped. The picks—she had to hide them, or he'd know what she was doing. But where? She couldn't risk him moving something and finding them.

She reached under her pillowcase and shoved the picks through the fabric of the pillow itself as if they were needles, into the stuffing. Even if he stripped the bed, he wouldn't find them there. She shoved the pillow back into place, just as the door opened.

But her expression must have looked guilty because his smile froze in place when he saw her, then disappeared as his eyes scanned the bed. “What are you doing?”

“N-Nothing. Alexia—Evie—was just reading to me because I have a headache. When I heard the keys I got up to greet—”

His eyes turned to steel, and his shoulders seemed to broaden. “Get up. Get over there by Evie.”

She bolted toward Alexia.

He strode toward the pillow, then ripped off the case. He pulled back the comforter, then pulled up both sheets. When he found nothing, he shoved the top mattress back—and revealed the rip she’d made earlier in the box-spring fabric. He froze, still bent over, staring at the tear.

Then he straightened wordlessly and strode out of the room. The door slammed behind him, and the bolt clunked into place.

Paxton clutched Alexia to her, unsure what to do, her blood pulsing so hard she could hear the whooshing in her ears.

“I’m scared, Mommy.”

I’m scared too, she wanted to say. Instead, she stroked Alexia’s hair. “Don’t be scared, everything’s going to be okay. He’s just mad because I ripped the mattress earlier.”

Alexia stared at the door, eyes wide. “Is he coming back?”

“I don’t know, honey—”

The keys rattled again, but this time there was no delay before the door flew open and he strode in, carrying a small metal case that reminded her of the ones that stored her father’s guns. Face beet red, he set the case down on the table and pointed to a chair. “Set her there, then go sit on the bed.”

Panic flooded Paxton, and she took a step back. “No, please. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, please—”

“I begged you not to make me do this. I explained the rules. For your own good, this is a lesson you have to learn.”

“Please, I didn’t—”

“Now.” His tone transformed to calm steel that drove the word into her skull like a spike.

But she couldn’t—no way in hell would she hand her daughter over to him willingly. She’d rather he kill them both

now than let him take Alexia and—

He strode toward her and grabbed her arm. She tried to twist away but he was stronger and with Alexia in her arms she had no leverage. As he dragged her to the table she desperately tried to gain some sort of purchase, digging the toes and heels of her bare feet into the braided rug.

Still holding her arm, he flipped up the lid of the case and pulled out one of two syringes inside. She struggled harder, flailing desperately, but his muscles didn't even flinch, and the syringe swung around to her. She felt the tiniest of stings, then pressure.

The world went fuzzy, then black.

When she came to on the bed, for one delicious second her heart soared—the whole thing had been a horrible dream. But when she opened her eyes the gray walls and oak bureau were waiting for her, like traces of a nightmare that wouldn't go away.

She rolled over. Alexia's shackle lay empty on the bed.

NOVEMBER 26TH

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As the rest of the team continued with canvassing and background work, Jo and Arnett spent the rest of the weekend digging into the cold cases, looking for any connection they could find with Paxton and Alexia. They talked to as many of Emma Whitney's and Aspyn Meadows's friends and family as they could find, including Anna Hopkins, the teacher who'd filed Aspyn's missing persons report and reconstructed a rudimentary timeline for the last few years of each woman's life. Unfortunately, Emma, Aspyn, and Patrick had all gone to different rehab facilities, and while it was possible some third individual had intersected between them, Jo couldn't access the confidential records of the facilities to confirm or rule out the possibility.

"I could have an answer for you in about an hour if it weren't for that whole fruit-of-the-poisonous-tree thing," Lopez had said, with a glint in her eye that worried Jo.

"I'll settle for help with the warrant paperwork," Jo'd replied as Arnett shook his head.

Jo spent another chunk of her time chasing down HR records from Yankee Candle's flagship store for December 2021, along with all the stores present in Eastfield Mall during 2019. The latter turned out to be a nightmare of HR departments closed for the weekend and one-off stores and kiosks she struggled to confirm even still existed. Of the records she was able to locate, she found no crossover, and could only hope for better luck when the rest trickled in.

Shifting gears, she did another digital search for both Emma and Aspyn. Nothing turned up—no attempts to access their meager bank records, nothing on their credit cards or apps, and no new accounts opened in either name or social security number anywhere else in the United States. If Emma had relocated, she was using completely new information.

Sunday afternoon, Jo looked up at the ceiling as she rubbed her neck. “I can’t sit at this desk a minute longer. I’m going to check out Emma’s last known address and take a look at Springfield Mall. I want to compare the layout and security to Oakhurst Mall.”

“I’m game.” Arnett grabbed his coat.

“Surrounded by the parking lot on all sides,” Arnett said as they pulled in, “same as Oakhurst Mall. Emma didn’t have a car, but the back side of the mall makes for an easier, more isolated abduction.”

“And the buses come around back.” She nodded at a B17 bus waiting for her to pass by what used to be Fast Footworks. “My guess is Emma came by bus since she didn’t have a car. And this little pocket is completely hidden from the streets, between the buildings and the trees. Especially after dark like this, it wouldn’t have been hard to pull someone into a car.”

“No.” Arnett gestured up toward the building next to them. “The security cameras aren’t on the lampposts like at Oakhurst Mall, they’re up on the roofs. But the footage is long gone.”

Jo squinted up at the white box. “From the angles, it looks like there would have been a big blind spot right over there, regardless.” She pointed back toward the cinemas building.

They continued around the perimeter, but nothing else jumped out at either of them. Once they’d finished they went to Emma Whitney’s apartment building, but didn’t spot anything of interest, and nobody currently living there remembered her.

“I have to head home,” Arnett said. “I promised Laura I’d be home tonight before she went to sleep.”

“That’s fair,” Jo said. “I should get home to Matt myself.”

But when she pulled up forty-five minutes later, the house was dark. She checked her phone and found a missed text from him saying he’d gone into work to check on a struggling patient.

She let herself into the house, and Cleopatra, the Sphinx cat she’d accidentally adopted, came running up to her with a loud *broooowrr*. Jo picked her up and, brain furiously circling to find any lead she might have missed, carried her to the bedroom. She took the stairs slowly, delaying as long as possible the moment she’d have to send a text to her mother and aunt reporting another day of failure.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Alexia was gone. The crazy son of a bitch had taken her.

As that reality penetrated her drug-fogged brain, Paxton lost all control, pounding the walls and screaming until her throat felt like she'd swallowed broken glass. When she couldn't any longer, she collapsed and sobbed until her muscles cramped, trying desperately to banish the visions of what he might be doing to her daughter.

Alexia was the only thing that mattered in her life. Every choice she'd made for five years was directed at ensuring her daughter was healthy, felt secure and loved, and didn't have to go through life battling depression and PTSD and self-hatred like Paxton had done. Now, in the stroke of an instant, this motherfucking monster had wiped out any chance Alexia would ever have peace again.

I warned you, her father's voice rang through her head. You're too useless and selfish to be a mother, I told you that. It's a serious responsibility and you're not up to it. Now you understand why I did what I did.

She pressed against her temples, trying to push the thoughts out of her head. But he was right—Alexia was in danger and there was nothing she could do because she *was* a useless failure.

“No!” she cried out as her anger reared back up—this wasn't *her* failure. She wasn't the sicko that had abducted them and shackled them into a dungeon. This wasn't a normal

situation and she hadn't caused it—she wouldn't let her father's voice in her head convince her otherwise.

But your other baby's death was your failure, his voice boomed back.

“That's not fair,” she whispered, deflated like a punched balloon. Because it was fair, and she knew it. Getting pregnant in high school was the result of her choices, nobody else's. Nobody had forced her to have sex with her boyfriend. And she could have managed to get birth control pills if she'd put her mind to it instead of relying on condoms. They'd been easier, yes—but far less reliable, as she'd learned the hard way when one broke.

She hadn't been surprised when her father yelled for hours, telling her how selfish and irresponsible and ungrateful she was, and how she was the stupidest smart person he'd ever known. But she was surprised when her uber-Catholic father insisted she have an abortion. Apparently his principles meant nothing when a baby threatened to ruin the future he'd invested so much money in expensive prep schools for.

Paxton wasn't against abortion in principle; she'd even taken a friend to get one the year before. But the moment she discovered a little life was growing inside of her, she knew she could never abort it. She fell asleep every night with her hand on her belly, wondering if the baby was a boy or a girl, what sort of personality they'd have, what their dreams would look like. Whatever they were, she wanted to help make them come true, more than she'd ever wanted anything. So she told her parents she was going to have the baby, on her own if she had to. And when she'd stood up to her father and taken control of her life, she'd felt proud of who she was for the first time.

Underestimating him had been a mistake.

Less than a week later, when she got into the car so her mother could drive her to school, her father slid into the passenger seat and engaged the child locks on the doors. As her mother drove down the Mass Pike, he told Paxton she had a simple choice to make: go—right then—to an abortion appointment they'd set up, or they'd drive her straight to her

father's family in the middle of rural Ohio. She'd work on the farm to earn her keep until she had the baby; once it was born, the family there would either adopt it themselves or put it up for adoption. Either way, she'd never see it again; she'd return to a different school in Oakhurst, a year behind everyone else, and double-up on her schoolwork so she could graduate on time.

Desperation engulfed her as the words sank in and the world began to spin. Green trees streaked across the windows. Monotone talk radio droned around her like a swarm of bees. Her father's eyes, the size of frying pans, bored into her, demanding her answer. Nausea swept through her and blurred everything together, and images of the Ohio farm flashed through her mind like lights at a railroad crossing.

Not just because it was so isolated she'd never be able to run away.

Not just because she didn't know what the laws were in Ohio—could they take away her child since she was underage?

But also because of what had happened to her the summer she'd stayed there when she was nine.

She'd broken some rule, and her uncle had punished her. He'd put her over his knee with her bare bottom exposed and whipped her with a switch. The strikes had burned and she'd cried, but that wasn't the bad part—the bad part was the look on his face, and how he'd rubbed himself against her as he beat her. As soon as his grip loosened she bolted and hid, and she didn't see him again until her parents came to pick her up the next day. She didn't tell them—she wasn't fully sure what exactly had happened or how to put it into words—and she never had to go back, so there was no reason to tell them later. They'd never believe her now, and the thought of having her baby raised by the sick fuck who'd done that to her—it made her hunch over the seat and vomit onto the floor of the car.

When she finished throwing up, her father repeated the choice. She agreed to have the abortion.

During the ride to the doctor's office, she even convinced herself it was for the best. But the moment the procedure was over, as she lay silent in the back of the car while her mother and father discussed her future in low tones while her abdomen was on fire, she knew it was the biggest mistake she'd ever make.

She slipped into a deep depression that lasted for weeks. Barely an hour went by that she didn't cry, wondering what her baby would have looked like and what they might have accomplished. Curing cancer or brokering peace in the Middle East or even just making others smile. They'd never do any of it, because their mother had killed them.

"Snap out of it," her father had said. "I've had enough of your spoiled, self-indulgent bullshit. *You're* the one who got yourself knocked up. *We* made it possible for you to get your life back. Show some gratitude, for fuck's sake."

It had been the last straw. "You made me kill my baby!"

He bent to shove his face right up into hers. "You had a choice," he hissed. "Your baby could have lived. *You* chose to kill it."

Then he strode off, leaving her alone with that horrible, undeniable truth.

That's why when she got pregnant with Alexia there was never a question what she'd do. Her entire reason for drawing breath was to protect this child. To give it everything and anything it needed to prosper and be successful in the world, for their own sake, and the sake of the baby she'd failed.

But now Alexia was in the hands of a madman.

You've failed again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After she'd drained herself physically and mentally, Paxton lay helpless but taut, trapped and waiting while her father's recriminations echoed endlessly through her head alongside images of Alexia bound and terrified.

Finally, the bolt clunked back. He strode through the door, Alexia slumped against his shoulder.

Paxton lunged off the bed toward him.

He extended one arm and hunched like a running back plowing through opposing players. She bounced off his hand, and her own inertia threw her sprawling back on the floor. Before she finished falling she scrambled to get back up.

"She's fine." His voice held steely warning. "But she won't be if you keep this up."

His words halted her forward motion. "Liar!" her scream came out as a hoarse croak. "She's not fine—"

"She's asleep. She's been sedated the entire time. She'll never even know she left the room. Now sit down and stay quiet."

Paxton scrambled for the chair, desperate to believe him. "She's been asleep?"

"Do *not* move." He stepped to the far side of the bed and lay Alexia down, then attached the shackle to her ankle.

Paxton gripped the sides of the chair to keep from springing to her daughter's side. As he laid Alexia down she

shifted, making one of her habitual mewling sleep sounds. Paxton nearly collapsed with relief.

He crossed to the mini fridge, cracked open a bottle of water, and set it in front of her. “Drink.”

She drank a gulp as quickly as she could and scoured every inch of Alexia. Her clothes were intact, with a pair of pull-ups over her tights. Her ponytails were slightly more lopsided than when she left, but no more than usual when she slept.

“Are you calm enough to listen now?” he asked.

She turned back to face him. “Yes.”

“I warned you there would be consequences if you didn’t cooperate. You didn’t listen. For your own good, I had to show you how serious this is.” There was an odd undertone to his words. “I had to show you the danger you’re putting Evie in. Nothing happened to her this time, but if you want her to stay alive, *there cannot be a next time*. Don’t make choices that put her in danger. Do you understand?”

The words sent a thousand volts of electricity through her.

“Do you understand?” he hissed, leaning toward her.

“I understand,” she croaked.

He stood and left, muttering something under his breath; she made out the words ‘mother’ and ‘angry,’ but all she was listening for was the sound of the bolt, and once it slid into place she flew to Alexia and crushed her daughter into her chest.

The motion woke Alexia. “Ow, Mommy, you’re hurting me.”

With a half-relieved, half-hysterical laugh, Paxton loosened her grip. “I’m sorry, honey. Do you feel okay otherwise? Does anything hurt?”

Alexia shook her head back and forth, eyes half-closed, and her thumb slipped up into her mouth.

Paxton stared down at her daughter, suddenly overtaken by the sense she was dreaming. This wasn’t real—it couldn’t be.

She couldn't really be here, because none of it made sense. Why would he take Alexia and bring her back unharmed? Was she hallucinating? Maybe this was a fever dream, and Alexia was really still gone?

She shook her head sharply, then literally slapped herself in the face. The sting bit into her cheek—the pain was real, that much she knew. That and if she lost hold of herself, they were dead in the water.

She turned to stare at the door, and his words rang through her head.

Don't make choices that put her in danger.

The words woke a long-battled anger. But instead of fighting it she stoked it, using it to push off the surreal sense of unreality.

How fucking dare he claim any of this was her *choice*? He was just like her fucking father, giving her a sick illusion of control so that no matter which choice she made or how things turned out, she was the one who bore the unrelenting agony of responsibility for it all.

Fuck him. Fuck her father. Fuck them both, straight to hell.

She sprang up and paced, unable to stay still as the anger spread its tendrils through her. She'd find a way to kill him if she had to fashion a shiv from a puzzle piece. She'd chew it to a point with her damned teeth if that's what it took. Her eyes landed on the bottle of water he'd forced her to drink, now sitting right in line with the microwave. That's what she'd do, she'd put a bottle of water in the microwave until it was boiling and throw it at his disgusting face—

She tripped and fell, hard. She swore out loud as she rolled onto her back and rubbed her knees, looking to see what had happened. The rug had shifted, most likely from when she fell earlier and had scrambled to bounce back up. Her foot must have caught on some ripple, flipping half the rug over in the process. She stretched forward to flip it back so Alexia wouldn't hurt herself on it.

A scratch on the painted floor stopped her. She leaned forward to examine it.

Shaped like an arrow, it was deliberately scraped into the paint—and it pointed toward the bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Mother's voice pounded through my head the whole way to work after I returned Evie to Angela.

I told you it was going to go wrong. But you insisted on doing it your way.

Blasting the radio didn't help. I pressed one palm into my eyes, but I couldn't drive like that for long.

You never listen. You never learn. I've only ever wanted one thing from you.

"Damn!" I slammed both palms onto the steering wheel. "Damn, damn, damn!"

It startled the voice into silence. For a moment, at least.

Only Mother was right. I should have known Angela would try something. It was human nature, and I should have factored that in from the start. But she'd seemed so reasonable. Why couldn't she just listen to what I told her? Maybe I hadn't made it clear enough the stakes were life and death? If so, it was clear now.

I hoped so, at least. Because the thought of having to start over yet again broke me out into a cold sweat. How many failures had I racked up since I started, back in seventh grade when girls pushed their way up among hockey and video games for the boys' attention like crab grass that couldn't be eradicated. Back when, instead of just being a loser freak, I became the loser freak that no girl could ever possibly want.

Tears rolled down Mother's face the day I turned thirteen, as she stood washing remnants of birthday cake off the dishes.

"Are you okay, Mother?" My throat tightened with dread—so many of her fits started this way.

She cried harder. "I'm worried about you and girls. Aren't there any at school you like?"

The pit opened up in my stomach. Because I felt the same way about girls I felt about friends: I didn't dislike them, but I didn't feel any need to be around them. I didn't understand why the other boys were suddenly so obsessed and competitive over them. And my attempts to talk to girls were even more awkward than my attempts to talk to the guys.

She swiped at her tears. "I watch you when you watch TV. I put on movies with sexy scenes so I can see what you do. You never watch the girls."

I looked up. Her face was twisted and flushed, the way it turned right before her sobbing took over. So I reached over and grabbed her hand. "I learned a joke at school today. Want to hear it?"

She pulled her hand away. "I want you to tell me the truth, right now. Are you gay?"

"What? No, I'm not gay," I sputtered. I wasn't any more attracted to men than I was to women—I wasn't attracted to anybody. When the guys talked about kissing, it sounded gross and pointless and part of me figured they must be lying because I couldn't imagine liking it with anyone, boy or girl. "In health class Mr. Kostas said it takes some people longer than others. He said they're 'late bloomers.'"

"You're not a late bloomer. Your hormones kicked in a while ago, you even have fuzz on your upper lip." The spots on her cheeks grew redder.

I didn't know what to say. "I—I don't know what's wrong with me."

Her eyes squeezed shut and she gripped the edge of the counter like it was holding her up. "Why did I go through the agony of giving birth to you, and waste my life raising you?"

Since the day they put you in my arms I've dreamed of your wedding and of the daughter-in-law who'll learn my grandmother's recipes for cherry pie and pot roast, and the grand babies who'll make me smile when I'm old." She bent over in half, clutching her abdomen, and wailed. "It was all for nothing. It was all for nothing. It was all for nothing..."

The pit widened, sucking me in, and panic sent bees roaring through my head. "It'll be okay, I promise. There are some girls I like more than the rest." I grabbed frantically at names of the girls in my class. "There's Lisa, she's pretty. And Winnie."

Her tears slowed, and she straightened.

Encouraged, I continued. "And Angela. She's my favorite."

"The MacIntire girl?"

"Yes. She's in the robotics club. We've been working on a robot that can carry a soda."

She straightened fully, but her eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you tell me about her when I asked?"

I scrambled to cover. "I guess because she doesn't like me back."

"How do you know that? She told you that?"

I couldn't come up with a lie fast enough, so I just shrugged. "I can just tell."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "You can't know that until you ask her out. Invite her over for dinner Friday," she continued. "I'll make lasagna. Everybody likes lasagna."

The thought made me go lightheaded—no way could I ask Angela out, and I certainly couldn't ask her to come to my house. But the hope in Mother's eyes made the pit recede, so I scrambled for a solution. She wouldn't want me to seem weird—she always told me to do things the way other people did. "I don't think that's what the kids do. I think they go for pizza, or mini golf."

She grunted. “Of course, that’s stupid of me. You ask her what she’d like to do, pizza or golf, and I’ll drive you.”

The pit gaped open again—no matter what I said, she was going to make me do it. And what if Angela said no—

A light went off in my head. If she said no, that would solve everything.

That was it. I’d just tell my mother I asked and Angela said no, and that would be the end of it.

A genuine smile spread over my face. “Okay. I’ll ask her Monday at school.”

But she didn’t give me a chance to enact the plan.

I worked on my story all day and walked into the house after school ready to tell it. Mother greeted me with a beaming smile.

“There’s my sweet boy!” She grabbed my face between her hands and kissed my cheek. “I had the best chat with Mrs. MacIntire today. I told her you were planning to ask Angela out, and she was so excited! She said Angela has been pining about going on her first date, and she was sure Angela would say yes. Tell me all about it!”

My brain screeched to a halt. Because if she’d called Mrs. MacIntire today, she’d call her again if she felt she needed to. I was stuck.

“I, um...” I stared down at my feet as I tried to think. “I was too scared to ask her.”

She stared at me. When she finally spoke, her eyes didn’t leave my face.

“These are the choices that make you a man or a loser.” She tilted her head at me. “If she says no, you’ll pick yourself up and ask another girl. This is important—for both of us.”

There was nothing I could do—she’d keep on me until somebody said yes. I couldn’t let her down, and I couldn’t risk that she’d give up on me. “Yes, Mother.”

I dragged myself through school the next day, praying for an asteroid to destroy the planet. When it didn't come and time ran out, I forced myself to go up to Angela.

"Hey, can I talk to you a minute?"

She looked up at me, and smiled nervously. "Um. Sure."

I told myself the best way was to just get it over, like ripping off a Band-Aid. What did one more humiliation among a thousand matter? I didn't know then that some types of humiliation were far too deep and soul-crushing to come back from. So I blurted it out.

"I was wondering if you'd like to get some pizza sometime?"

My blood stopped flowing when she said yes.

I spent the next forty-eight hours in a black cloud of dread. I had to go sit at a table alone with this girl, for hours, struggling to find something—anything—to say. My own version of hell, second only to Mother forever stuck in a fit.

At first we picked at our pizza in silence. Then she asked about the robot I was working on, and made a few helpful suggestions. I asked about hers, and made a few back. Then she told me she loved old video games, so we went into the alcove attached to the pizza parlor and played Pac-Man. Having something to do took the pressure off, and by the time my mother picked us up, we were talking comfortably.

Mother was thrilled, and asked when I was going to take Angela out again. I hadn't thought past that first date, but once the shock of the question passed, I realized I really didn't mind the idea of taking Angela out again. And it would keep Mother happy.

The more time I spent with Angela, the more I wanted to spend with her. She was easy to be with, and I could talk to her in a way I couldn't talk to Mother. We got to know each other gradually; her father had passed away right around the same time mine had left us, and when she mentioned it I could tell

from the expression on her face that she didn't miss him any more than I missed mine. When I asked her, she started crying and told me he used to beat both her and her mother. Tears were something I knew how to handle; I put my arms around her and she curled into my chest, and I patted her back and told her everything would be okay.

She stopped after a few minutes, far faster than Mother ever did. And when she pulled away, she looked up at me with a watery smile and kissed me softly on the lips.

I'd seen enough TV and heard enough guy talk to know what was expected of me, even if it had always sounded strange and unpleasant. I lifted one hand to her face and kissed her back. Our noses almost hit and her lips felt warm and soft against mine; it wasn't unpleasant exactly, but none of the things the boys said about erections and excitement happened, either. I just felt—nothing.

When she pulled away her pupils were wide and her cheeks flushed. "That was nice."

I smiled back. "It was."

She gave me another quick, shy peck, then turned back to the circuit board in front of her.

I lay in bed that night trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I cared about Angela and wanted to spend time with her. I missed her when we were apart. I brought her flowers just to make her smile. Those things were romantic, or so books and movies said. So why didn't I enjoy kissing her? Why didn't I want to do more? My father had been right about me needing a psychiatrist... But the idea of being committed to some institution for the rest of my life, unable to care for Mother, terrified me.

No, the only choice I had was to keep pretending to like what normal people liked. I'd done a good job so far, and everybody, including Mother, was happy. A little kissing now and then was a small price to pay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Paxton stared at the arrow scratched into the floor, trying to make sense of it. No way it was there by accident. But why would somebody bother? The only thing under the bed was dust. She pulled up the rest of the rug as much as she was able, but couldn't find any other markings below. Maybe the furniture had been in a different arrangement when whoever it was had scratched the arrow there?

After flipping the rug back into place, she crept forward gingerly on her sore knees. Maybe something was written or stuck on the bottom of the mattress? She flipped over and slid under, face up. But she couldn't find anything.

Maybe there was something more under the other side of the bed? She scooted back out and tugged at the bed, gently so she wouldn't wake Alexia. She didn't have room to move it completely off the rug, but if she could move it far enough away from the wall, she could lift one section at a time. She tugged, and the bumps of the rug's braids caught on the legs, making progress jerky and difficult. She lifted Alexia and carried her to the couch, then returned to the bed, braced herself, and shoved with her shoulder.

As soon as the bed shifted away from the wall, she spotted it—a missing piece of plaster. A small circular section about the size of a quarter, with a horizontal line a few inches long moving out from it.

She dropped to her knees, fresh bruises screaming in protest. Enough was missing that she could see the material underneath. Old stone, surrounded by crumbling mortar. The

lines around the circular section were clean, like it had popped out as a single piece, maybe as the result of something slamming into the wall. But the line extending out from it was uneven, like someone had chipped away at it, following the line of the mortar, leaving scrape marks behind.

Glancing back at the door, she pushed the bed quickly back in place. She had no idea when he'd be back, and by the time she heard the lock turning she'd never have time to push the bed back into place. Once she had it safely secured again, she dropped onto the bed to think.

There was only one explanation for those deeper marks—someone had been trying to escape. Most likely the person whose blood she'd found on the shackle loop. Had he caught them trying to break through the wall and killed them? But if he had, wouldn't he have plastered over the damage? More likely they'd been working on escaping and hadn't been fast enough. Maybe they'd spotted the same dry blood she had and knew that was a possibility, so scratched the arrow into the floor to help whatever future person might be trapped here?

She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms and shook her head. But why? This wasn't *The Shawshank Redemption* prison with just a few feet of crumbling wall that led to a crawl space. This was a basement, she'd seen the stairs up herself, and that meant the other side of the brick wall was solid dirt. Whoever had been chipping away at the wall must have been too desperate to think it through.

But something tapped at her mind like a fly trying to get out of a window. What was it? She pushed her palms into her eyes and tried to think, going back over what she thought she knew about the space and the basement.

The staircase outside the door—that's what was bothering her. She'd only glimpsed it, and tried to call up the details. It had been old, an odd contrast to the new room with the heated floor and perfectly plastered walls, more like the older bathroom. But there was something else. Something about the wall? No—the problem was the lack of two walls. The other side of the staircase had a railing with an open area beyond it.

And that meant there was another room next to this one, behind the fieldstone wall. No yards of dirt to tunnel through, just a few stones to loosen, and she'd be out. Her predecessor hadn't been short-sighted, they'd been brilliant.

Her breath quickened, and she forced herself to keep calm so she could think. Surely he'd locked the house upstairs, too, or had some other type of booby trap. But all she needed to do was loosen one stone to get a better look at what she was facing, and she could cross the other bridges when she came to them. There was only one way to find out.

But—she had nothing to loosen the stone with.

How had her predecessor managed it? Maybe they'd tricked him into leaving them a fork or some such? If she could get back on his good side, she could manage *something*. But after the ripped mattress, who knew how long that would take?

She scanned the room desperately again, going over every inch in her mind. The frustration and panic rose up again, as though someone was squeezing her abdomen like a tube of toothpaste. She'd already done this—there was nothing. She'd been lucky to have the toilet chain for the lock picks, but those little metal pieces were far too small to do any real damage to the stone—

But there was more in the mechanism than the chain. Pieces she'd dismissed before because they were too big to use for lock picking—but could possibly chip off mortar.

She pictured the exposed stone in her mind. Fieldstone walls stopped being used in basements decades ago, in part because the extreme Massachusetts winters wreaked havoc with their structural integrity. Years of expanding and contracting cracked the mortar and stone, no matter how solid the wall had been to start with. Even so, it would take time to loosen even one stone with an awkward tool like that. And it would take time to disassemble and reassemble the floating mechanism, and move the bed. If he caught her in the act, he'd hurt Alexia—maybe even kill her. Maybe the smartest thing

was to forget about the wall until she convinced him she was compliant.

But that could take weeks, maybe months. And she had no idea what he was planning, no idea what had happened to the people before her. As it was she was already starting to mix up Alexia's name in her own mind and starting to question what was real and what wasn't. How long would it take before he really did brainwash her—or worse, Alexia?

No, she couldn't wait. She had to try to get away, now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I was ridiculously naive to think my beautiful status quo with Angela would last forever. But I did, until one day, after our habitual kisses, Angela pulled away and stared at me like I was a malfunctioning robot.

“You never try anything with me,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I genuinely didn’t understand. “Do you want to go bowling or something?”

Her face shifted like she was about to cry, and she tucked her arms around her chest. “We’ve been dating over a year and all we ever do is kiss. You’ve never even tried to touch my breasts. Aren’t you attracted to me?”

I cursed mentally and scrambled to cover. “Of course I am, why else would I want to kiss you? But I don’t want to pressure you.”

Her stare didn’t break. “My friends at school aren’t virgins anymore. But you never look at me like their boyfriends look at them. And you ignore my signals.”

“I—I—” My mouth and throat had gone completely dry. “You’re the only girl I’ve ever dated. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Her face softened and her arms dropped. She reached for my knee. “You’re the only boy I’ve ever dated, too. We can figure it out together.” She leaned forward and kissed me again, and when I kissed back, she lifted my hand to her breast.

The pit opened up in my stomach, so big I felt like I was falling. If I didn't touch her, she'd be upset and probably break up with me. And Mother would be angry and she'd insist I ask someone else out, but I didn't want to ask anyone else out. I liked Angela—more than liked her. I cared about her more than anybody else on the planet besides Mother. So why didn't I want to have sex with her?

But the 'why' didn't matter. There was only one thing to do: act like normal boys acted. So I ran my hand over her breast.

"Does that feel good?" I asked, desperately fishing for direction.

"I can't feel much with my shirt and my bra," she said, her eyes closed.

I slipped my hand under her shirt.

She jumped back, startling me. "Your hand is cold," she giggled. Then she rubbed my hand in both her own, and slid it back under when she decided it was warm enough.

As I slipped it upward, I prayed harder than I'd ever prayed for anything that whatever was missing in me would kick in. She was soft like my favorite pillow, and smooth like my mother's ceramic vase. In the center of the swell a hard, round button poked up; when I ran my fingers over it, she shivered and moaned, and her breath quickened. She kissed me harder.

But I felt nothing. I might as well have been stroking the arm of my couch.

Our new routine kept Angela happy for several weeks, maybe a couple of months: we'd kiss, she'd stroke my chest, I'd stroke hers. Then she'd guide my hand up her thigh and under her skirt rather than her shirt; I touched where she directed me, stroked with the pressure she showed me, and watched her face as her body clenched, froze, released. My body still didn't respond, but it made my heart happy to please her, and I looked forward to those moments.

Until the day she reached for my pants.

I jerked away like I'd been stabbed. "I—I'm not ready for that."

She looked confused and disappointed, but mostly frustrated. "Why don't you want me to touch you?"

My heart banged against my chest like a fire alarm. I wanted to turn and run. What was I going to do? She'd know the instant she touched me I wasn't turned on, and I'd lose her.

"I—I don't have any condoms," I blurted, wincing as I said it, already knowing it was too flimsy, too easily remedied.

She tilted her head at me like she was trying to solve a puzzle. "You don't have to worry, I don't care if your penis is small. My mother said it doesn't matter what size it is, it can still feel good."

Flames shot from the back of my neck up to my scalp, and I leaned away from her without thinking. I'd never even considered that, that I might be too small. Everything else about me was abnormal, why wouldn't my penis be, too?

She took the color on my face as confirmation. "I promise it's okay. And I know something we can do without condoms." She started to slide downward.

I jumped back. "I just—I have to go." I bolted toward her bedroom door.

"No, don't—let's talk about this—"

But I'd already yanked the door open and was halfway out of her house, glad her mother wasn't home so I didn't have to be polite or social. My mother wasn't due to pick me up for another two hours, so I ran down the road at a sprint, not even thinking about the miles from Angela's house to mine.

I ran until I couldn't breathe. I'd handled that so badly, she'd break up with me for certain, and the thought of losing her felt like daggers flaying off my skin. I had to fix it somehow, make it right. But how? I couldn't delude myself any longer that at the right, magical moment my sexual instincts would kick in. And this wasn't something I could just pretend

and fake, like I'd fooled her in other ways. Unless—maybe I could just use my fingers? But no, she already knew what those felt like—

The answer came in a rush of remembered shame. About a year before, when I couldn't find my mother's medication on the nightstand, I searched inside her drawer. But the only things inside were several long cylinders that vibrated when I pushed their buttons—I'd heard the other guys talking about 'dildos' more than once, and knew right away what I was looking at, much to my eternal embarrassment.

Could I use something like that? People had sex in the dark, didn't they? So how would she know if it was my penis or an object designed to simulate a penis? If I did it right, she'd never know, and she'd stay happy.

Hope rose up again, and my mind sped as I worked out the details on the rest of the way home.

Angela greeted me by her locker Monday morning the way she always did, and gave me a kiss—but looked at me the way my father had when I fixed the toaster.

I squeezed her hand to keep from slipping into the pit in my stomach and stared directly into her eyes. "I was afraid, but I'm not anymore. Your mother has Bunko this Friday, right?"

"Yes." Her eyes were still unsure, but now held a glimmer of hope.

"I want to try. Can we try?"

The glimmer flared to a flame, and she stepped closer to me. "Really? You're sure?"

I gave her a long, slow kiss. "I'm sure."

Every night that week, I planned and prepared. I watched videos of people having sex, not the fake porn ones but the nicer clips from movies, with people who loved each other. In those videos it was face to face, sometimes under the covers and sometimes not, but always the couples either gazing lovingly into each other's eyes or kissing with their eyes closed

—not looking elsewhere, even when the man’s hand slipped beneath the covers to guide himself in. After watching I practiced under my own covers until I had the movements down, like a magician practicing sleight of hand.

I was nervous, terrified my hands would shake and I’d drop the toy, but also excited about becoming what Angela needed me to be. I wasn’t stupid, I knew it wouldn’t work forever. But if I could make it work long enough to learn how to please her, she’d see how dedicated I was and how much I loved her. Surely it couldn’t possibly matter how I made it happen? What mattered was we loved each other. If I could just get this right...

Determined to make the evening as perfect as possible, I brought candles and flowers and made a playlist on my iPod to play in the background. She made spaghetti for dinner and wore a red-and-white polka-dot dress. There was a tension as we ate, but it was a good one, like when you’re in a theater waiting for a movie to start and you don’t mind because you want to enjoy every moment. Once in the bedroom, I was eager. We kissed and cuddled and I paid attention to her slightest shift under my lips, using everything I’d learned about her over the months and adjusting accordingly.

When she reached for my pants, I gently put my hands on hers. “I’m nervous.” I pointed to the lit candle I’d brought in with us. “Can we turn out the lights? And get into bed?”

A smile spread under her flushed cheeks. “That’s so romantic.”

I crossed the room and extinguished the light, then pulled back the covers so she could slip under guided by the dim light.

She giggled. “So chivalrous.”

I slid in next to her and distracted her with kisses, then with my bottom half angled away from her, slipped out of my pants and underwear and dropped them close by. Then I borrowed a trick I’d learned in the movies—I kissed my way down her chin and neck, and after a brief stop at her breasts, down her abdomen and between her legs.

She responded instantly, her body arching and her hands stroking my head. I closed my eyes and tried to pretend I was eating a big ice-cream cone, trying to ignore the swaths of wetness on my mouth and cheeks. It felt so strange I wasn't sure how long I could keep it up. Thankfully, she gripped my hair with both hands and said, "I need to feel you inside of me."

My heart raced and fluttered at the same time. I was so close to making it happen, so close to getting everything I wanted and needed. So I lifted my head and, just able to make out her face in the dim light, smiled. "Hang on, let me get a condom."

She smiled back.

Leaning away from her, I slid my hand under the covers rather than out of them, and pulled both the condom and the pink cylinder out of the pocket of my chinos. I made a show of crinkling the condom package, then slipped the condom over the toy so it would feel right if she felt it on her leg. I turned back toward her and lifted myself into position. Then, with a thrust of my hips behind my hand, I pushed the toy in.

Or, tried to. Her opening now felt like a solid wall, and she cried out in pain.

I stiffened, alarmed, and yanked the toy away. "Should I stop?"

"I—I don't know." She pushed back onto her elbows, tensed like a cat ready to spring. "My mom told me the first time hurts, but I didn't realize how much. I think we just have to get through it."

"If you're sure." When she nodded I adjusted my position, then parted her gently with my fingers before repeating my careful move. But when I thrust in with the help of my hips, it felt like I was pushing the toy through the mattress itself—despite a slight yielding, the resistance didn't give.

Her face was twisted up in pain, like one of Mother's fits, not the excited pleasure I'd seen when we did other things. I

tensed—what was the point if she wasn't enjoying it and had to force herself?

“Maybe we should stop,” I said.

“No.” Annoyance flickered across her face with the candlelight. “After the first time it'll be good. Maybe I need to get on top.”

She shifted under me before I knew what was happening, and knocked the toy out of my hand. Her brows knit, and I felt her hand searching.

“What the—” Her hand appeared from under the covers, and she gaped down at the toy. “A dildo? Why would you—” Her other hand shot under the covers, and before I could stop her, she clutched my flaccid penis.

Her eyes hardened, and my entire life fell apart.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she yelled, her face red and splotchy. “Get out. Get out of my house now, and don't ever come back.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Angela wouldn't take my calls. Her mother told me she wasn't feeling well. And the expanse in my stomach widened and deepened, accompanied by a consuming panic that crushed my chest and sent stinging tentacles down my arms. I couldn't lose Angela—I just couldn't. I loved her so much more than I'd realized, and not only would it destroy me, it would destroy my mother. It would destroy everything.

The following Monday I arrived at school early and waited by her locker with her favorite yellow carnations. When she appeared around the corner, she froze when she saw me. The world went too bright, like someone had turned on a floodlight in the darkest part of the night.

I strode to her quickly and whispered so nobody could hear. "You have every right to be mad. But I can explain, I swear. Can we go talk out back by the track?"

Her face stiffened, and she gave a single, sharp nod. "Yes. We need to talk."

It killed me not to grab her hand, or start immediately promising her everything would be alright. But I held back and marched in stilted silence until we reached the middle of the empty field.

The explanation I'd rehearsed all weekend came rushing out. That I had some sort of physical problem, and I was going to the doctor to get it fixed. That I'd done what I did because I loved her and wanted to be able to give her what she wanted.

I reached for her hand as I finished. “Will you forgive me? I promise to make it right. And I’ll take care of you, forever, if you’ll only let me.”

She pulled her hand out of my reach. “You tried to rape me with a sex toy. What sort of sick, twisted mind even thinks of something like that?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I agree there’s definitely something wrong with you, and I hope you get it fixed. But if you ever try to even talk to me again, I’ll tell every girl in this school exactly what you did. And, I’ll report you to the police.”

The world spun around me as Angela strode away across the expanse of grass, and the pit engulfed me completely. I sank to my knees, then into a ball on the wet grass, thoughts and emotions and memories swirling around me, too fast for me to catch, pain and desperation and fear and humiliation, all with Mother’s voice wending through like ivy amid stones.

How is anyone ever going to love you if you can’t at least pretend to be normal?

I’ll never have grandchildren.

No wedding. No daughter-in-law. No babies.

You’ll be alone forever...

I squeezed my eyes shut and clamped my hands over my ears to quash it all. I was born a freak and no matter how much I tried to pretend otherwise, I’d always be a freak. Mother warned me I had to keep up the act or nobody would ever love me—I was too flawed, too broken, too maladjusted for anybody to ever love. I might as well be dead, everybody would be better off—

How dare you even consider leaving me here alone with nobody to take care of me? *Mother’s voice came.* After everything I’ve sacrificed for you!

No—she was right, I couldn’t kill myself, because she needed me to take care of her—

“Hey, are you okay?”

The voice snatched me back like I'd hit the end of a bungee cord, ripping my eyes back open. Mr. Krackney, the gym teacher. Carrying a net of soccer balls, leaning over me, searching my face.

"I—uh—sorry, Mr. Krackney. I was jogging and I fell and hurt my ankle."

His eyes twitched his disbelief. "Go see the nurse."

I scrambled to get up. "No, there's no need. I'm already feeling better."

"Get yourself to class, then. Bell's about to ring."

"Okay, will do." I hurried off, putting a slight limp into my step.

I don't remember anything else until I climbed in the car after school. When Mother asked how my day was, it all came pouring out in jagged rasps. As she listened, her face paled and her jaw tightened.

"It's fine," she said when I finished. "We have each other. We'll find someone better for you."

"I don't want anyone else. And any other girl will feel the same way if I can't—"

She sliced the air with her hand. "There are pills and pumps that'll fix this. You should've told me when you realized."

"It doesn't matter because I'll never feel the same way about anybody else. I love Angela—"

Mother grabbed my arms and shook me. "You love her? After she humiliated and rejected you when you were just trying to make her happy? After she turned on you and threatened you?"

I thought back to the hardness in Angela's eyes and the cruelty in her words. Mother was right—she'd turned from someone I trusted into someone ready to ruin me in an instant. I shouldn't love someone who'd done this to me—I should hate them. That's why I was in pain—because she was horrible to me, for no reason.

And I let my anger take over. As it did, my tears dried up—the pain was still there, but it was different. Energizing.

And I learned: there's power in pointing your anger at someone else rather than always pointing it at yourself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Uncle Matt! Where are you?” Jo’s niece Emily called out from the living room.

“Geez, Louise, somebody has ants in their pants today,” Jo said. “Good things come to those who wait.”

Emily groaned and collapsed onto the carpet with her tongue sticking out of her mouth, a deeply visual representation of her opinion on waiting. Isabelle rolled her eyes and shook her head, and Jo laughed at them both.

She couldn’t show it, but she agreed with Emily. Matt had been gone for ten minutes, far longer than needed to grab the bag of mini marshmallows for their hot cocoa. Strange, because she’d been so busy searching every way she could for Paxton and Alexia, and they hadn’t been spending much time together, so today was special. She’d agreed before the disappearance to take Emily and Isabelle so Sophie and David could make a date night of his company’s holiday party, and Jo had figured it would be a good opportunity to all spend time together and preserve at least a tiny bit of seasonal spirit. An assumption, yes, but normally he loved spending time with her nieces; even so, it wasn’t like Matt to pout when a situation didn’t go his way. The hard ball that had formed in her stomach at the Christmas tree lot returned, backing bile up into her throat.

“Start without me,” he called from the kitchen.

While Emily grimaced, Isabelle turned to study Jo. She was at that age where male-female relationships were starting

to be important, and everything she saw, even the smallest expression on Jo's face, would be a brick in the foundation of Isabelle's romantic expectations.

Jo jutted her head toward the television. "Start up *Muppet Christmas Carol* first. I'll go see if he needs help."

Emily made a grab for the remote, but Isabelle's reflexes were faster. "You always mess it up when you use the remote."

Jo found Matt standing against one counter, phone to his ear. He looked up when she entered, and held up a finger; she nodded, then opened the cabinet across from him to pull out the marshmallows. He smiled and flicked his wrist toward the living room, again telling her to go ahead without him. She leaned back against the counter, marshmallows in hand, and waited.

He shifted his weight, then took a few steps away from her. "No, that doesn't sound good at all," he said into the phone. "I'd better check myself. I'll be right there." He hung up, then turned back to Jo. "I need to go check on Mrs. Krantz."

Jo nodded, face carefully composed. "If a patient needs you, you have to go." She stepped forward and kissed him lightly, then held up the bag of marshmallows. "I'll take care of this, and we'll see you when you get back."

Obvious relief crossed his face. "Thanks for understanding. I shouldn't be long."

After walking him out, she watched through a crack in the door as he drove off, trying to understand why this bothered her so much. His job was like hers, demanding and unpredictable, and they both routinely had to cancel plans when emergency situations arose. But this felt different, and she wasn't sure why—the same part of her gut that picked up on discrepancies between what suspects said and how they acted clanged like crazy.

"Auntie Jo!" Emily called. "You're missing it!"

With a last glance toward the now-empty street, she hurried back into the living room to join the girls.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Paxton decided to wait to tackle the hole in the wall until after breakfast the next morning, so she could be relatively sure he'd be gone for at least a few hours. Even then, she'd need to only work for short periods to be sure everything was back in place before he returned. She'd use Alexia's potty schedule to estimate when she needed to stop.

But he didn't show up at breakfast. Or at least, when Paxton thought breakfast should be; she had no idea what time it really was. Maybe she'd only been knocked out for an hour, maybe for a full day—for all she knew it was the middle of the night. So she read to Alexia on the couch and tried not to dwell on how even her sense of time was in someone else's control.

Before long, Alexia's stomach rumbled, confirming at least one mealtime had passed. Paxton gave her a banana; Alexia ate it quickly and begged for more, but Paxton couldn't risk ruining her appetite. He'd been clear he wanted them to eat together, and she couldn't anger him again so soon.

Paxton stared at the door and swore silently to herself. This is what he wanted—to keep them walking on eggshells, to have their mental energy and choices channeled into anticipating him. Anger radiated through her at the thought and she almost gave Alexia one of the spare protein bars out of sheer defiance. But that was her ego speaking, and she couldn't let herself make bad choices. But if she had to control herself, wasn't that giving him power over her, taking away her spirit and her free will? Her head began to spin on a loop

she couldn't break free from, where every choice was wrong and led back to him.

She clasped her hands to either side of her face and forced herself to take a deep breath. The important thing, she told herself, was she recognized what was happening. The knowledge she was being manipulated would keep her from being sucked down the rabbit hole. She hoped.

Paxton picked up the book she'd been reading and continued on. When Alexia's thumb slipped into her mouth, Paxton fought the urge to pull it back out. Alexia's jaw and teeth development were the last of her worries right now, and she'd give her own eyeteeth to have a way to self-soothe.

Halfway into their third reading of *Winnie the Pooh*, the lock clunked again.

He strolled into the room, smiling and happy, holding another large plastic bag. "How are my angels today?"

"I'm hungry," Alexia said. "Mommy only gave me one banana for breakfast."

"Ah." He pursed his brow down at her. "That's because Mommy was naughty yesterday, so I couldn't bring you any breakfast today."

Alexia looked between him and Paxton with a confused expression, then pouted at Paxton. Heat rose up Paxton's neck as her shame and anger and helplessness mingled. The bastard was good, purposefully leaving them without food to manipulate Alexia into being grateful when he fed her. Half of her wanted to rip his face off, and half wanted to burst into tears—and she had to hide them both.

"But luckily," he said, beaming, "I brought your favorite sandwich for lunch: peanut butter with grape jelly."

Alexia's eyes lit up. "Yay, grape jelly!"

"And, I have a surprise for you," he continued.

"What?" Alexia craned to see inside the plastic bag.

He pulled out the sandwiches, some goldfish crackers, and baby carrots, then, after a dramatic pause, produced what

looked like a clunky laptop.

“I brought you a portable DVD player! And some DVDs.” He reached in again, this time extracting several DVDs of *Elinor Wonders Why*, then flipped open the top of the machine to reveal the screen.

Alexia squealed with joy. “Can I watch them now?”

“After you finish up all your lunch,” he answered, and turned to Paxton.

“A full charge has about six hours of watch time,” he said. “I don’t think she should be watching more TV than that anyway, do you?”

Paxton put all her effort into seeming grateful for the gift. “No, that’s plenty, and it’ll make her very happy. Thank you.”

He smiled. “I’ll take it with me when I leave after dinner and charge it, then bring it back with breakfast. And if we get back on the right track, I’ll bring some shows for you, too.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He laid a hand over hers on the table and leaned in. “I’m so glad you’re feeling better. Christmas will be here soon and Santa can only bring presents to good girls and boys, can’t he?”

Her stomach clenched, but she nodded.

He looked down at his watch. “I have to hurry back to work. It’s hard to get away, but after you had to skip breakfast I wanted to be sure you were fed.”

Once the telltale clunk came, the smile slid from Paxton’s face. Morning was gone, but if he was telling the truth about hurrying back to work, she had a few hours, at least. And with the DVD player, she now had a perfect way to keep track of time, and that would cut the risk down dramatically.

Paxton’s leg bounced uncontrollably while she waited for Alexia to finish her sandwich. She set Alexia in front of the DVD player, turning it away from the bed in case it contained a hidden camera. Then she went to work, the blood rushing so

hard in her ears it drowned the DVD to a buzz in the background.

The toilet mechanism disassembled quickly, and she pushed the bed back only enough to slip behind it. She ran her finger over the damage, gauging the best starting point, then angled the metal rod down into the small gash and tapped at the plaster. Bits flaked off, fewer than she'd hoped, but with less effort than she'd feared. After a few more attempts the space widened, giving a better view of the stone and mortar behind. Several clear cracks ran through them; she targeted one, stabbing at the mortar as though using an ice pick.

A small chunk flew off onto the floor. She carefully gathered it to her with shaking hands.

The next few stabs were less successful, but fragments continued to separate. Just when she felt she was getting the hang of the angle and the pressure, Alexia announced the fourth episode was done—Paxton's signal to stop work.

She couldn't bear the thought of stopping. Surely a few minutes more wouldn't hurt, maybe just one more episode? If she could just see what was on the other side, even through a small hole—her fist gripped the rod, muscles taut, and she drew back to strike again.

The vision of Alexia draped unconscious over his shoulder stopped her before she made contact with the wall. If he caught her, he'd hurt Alexia. It was too risky. And, she reminded herself, getting through the wall was meaningless if she couldn't get the shackles off them. Practicing the lock picking was far safer, regardless.

Once she pulverized the small pile of plaster and mortar she'd accumulated with the hairbrush and flushed the particles down the toilet, she shifted the bed back in place. Then she grabbed a book from the bookshelf and plopped seated onto the bed with a pillow in her lap, ostensibly to hold the book. She pressed against it until she located the two small pieces of metal she'd hidden there, then worked them back out through the fabric. When they were free, she returned to working on the lock.

She followed the same routine the next day, and the next. Breakfast, work the wall for two hours, work the shackles until he returned. The days began to blur into one another and each time it killed her to walk away from the wall, frustrated with her slow progress.

Tomorrow, she continually told herself, well aware she'd become a twisted *Annie* parody. Tomorrow would be when the shackles popped off. Tomorrow she'd see light through the stones.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Jo threw everything she had into picking at every thread of the case, trying desperately to get something to unravel.

Trevor Rodgers had in fact worked at the Incredible Toys store at Eastfield Mall during the time when Emma Whitney and her daughter disappeared—but didn't work at Yankee Candle or anywhere in the South Deerfield area when Aspyn Meadows disappeared. John Carpazi wasn't employed anywhere near either location at the time of the abductions, but as they dug into the employment histories of Patrick Sills's other friends, someone was always employed relatively close by in both of the other women's cases. That didn't rule out some sort of coordinated effort by two or more of them, but it made it extremely difficult to justify any sort of warrant into their homes or records.

The canvassing and tip lines turned up dozens of people who saw something suspicious, but when the tips were followed up, they turned out to be nothing. They cross-checked names with license plates, phone records, and employment records, but no connections of consequence arose. They scoured social media, but produced nothing they could connect to Paxton and Alexia's disappearance. When that didn't work, they took the search down a level deeper and started looking up friends of friends, and cross-referencing all of those. But no matter how they widened the net, they didn't come up with any new possibilities.

Jo's highest hopes were that surveilling Patrick would lead them to something. But Patrick went to work and came home,

and nowhere else. His calls and texts were also squeaky clean—suspiciously so. Having physical and digital eyes on him prevented him from being able to contact his drug network, and whatever stash he had tapped itself out that Monday. Just past noon, Jo got a call from the team letting her know Patrick had checked himself into rehab.

“That tells us one of two things,” Jo said to Arnett, throat dry. “Since it’s hard to visit your kidnapped daughter while you’re in rehab, he either didn’t kidnap them, or they’re already dead.”

“He could be playing us. If he does have a friend who’s holding them for him, this may be a way for him to throw us off,” Arnett replied.

“What’s the point of kidnapping your daughter only to not see her for months?” Jo asked.

“Not likely, but possible.” Arnett’s expression made it clear he wasn’t convinced.

“I’ll call Lopez and catch her up.” Jo tapped her phone to put through the call.

“Okay, what sorcery is this?” Lopez said when she picked up. “I just picked up the phone to call you, and here you are. But that’s where, exactly?”

Nonplussed, Jo glanced around. “At our desks. Why?”

“Because we have quite the smorgasbord of delights you’re gonna wanna feast upon with your very own eyeballs.”

“On our way,” Jo said.

When Jo and Arnett swept into Lopez’s workspace a few minutes later, Janet Marzillo and Hakeem Peterson were already there, standing next to Lopez, all staring at a monitor like the Stygian witches watching a potion.

“What’s going on?” Jo asked.

Lopez gestured to Peterson. “You first.”

Peterson's jaw set even more firmly. "We got several matches back from among the fingerprints we collected. A set of prints on the trunk of Paxton's car matched with a man named Brandon Glover."

"Do we know anything about him?"

"He's got a slew of convictions for you to choose from, mostly larceny." Lopez held out two printouts. "No kidnapping or anything like that, though."

"There's always a first time." Arnett took one of the printouts. "We'll find him and bring him in for a little chat."

"Before you do, there's more." Marzillo gestured them into her office, then gestured to a table. "A citizen found Paxton's pocketbook behind one of his bushes this morning when he was doing some yard work. He lives in the residential neighborhood right over the wall from Oakhurst Mall," Marzillo said. "Her wallet's inside, but the money and credit cards are gone. No car keys, no phone, only an assortment of typical detritus."

"So somebody tossed it over the wall." Jo surveyed the lipsticks, pens, goldfish cracker packets, receipts, and sunglasses. "I'll check with her mother, see if she can identify anything else that's missing."

"We found a few prints on the strap and the wallet," Petersen said. "Given Brandon Glover's prints on the trunk, I looked to see if these matched up. They did."

"Excellent work. This should be enough for a warrant to search his premises, and for a productive interrogation." Jo turned to leave.

"Ah-ah-ah, not so fast," Lopez said. "He saved the best for last."

As Jo turned back, Petersen continued. "You said your top suspects were Sills, Rodgers, and Carpazi. So I've been manually comparing their prints to the ones we collected at the scene." He held up a picture. "And I found a chef's-kiss-perfect set of thumb and index-finger prints on the passenger rear door that match Trevor Rodgers perfectly."

Jo's eyes snapped to Petersen's face. "So there are prints from *two* individuals on the car? Are you sure?"

"Positive," Hakeem said. "I verified my work via computer. But it couldn't be a clearer match if I was showing you a textbook example."

"I just started work on the warrant," Lopez added.

"Trevor Rodgers." Jo's hands flew to her necklace. "How is that possible? He was in the store all afternoon, up until we got there."

"He must have a way of sneaking out," Petersen said.

"We checked that, too," Arnett said.

"I'll take a closer look at the security footage from his store," Lopez said. "There must be some sort of blind spot, or maybe he looped the video."

"I'd appreciate it." Jo turned to Arnett, still trying to make sense of the print. "Looks like we need to talk to both of them. We know Trevor should be at the mall. Let's see how hard Glover is to track down."

Brandon Glover turned out to be the easier of the two to locate—he'd been picked up by Phelpsston PD that morning while trying to steal the catalytic converter out of a Toyota Prius. They were only too happy to escort him to HQ for a chat with Jo and Arnett.

Jo opened the door to the interrogation room to find a tall, skinny black man barely into his twenties. His dark hoodie was nondescript, and his plain jeans were streaked with dirt and what looked like oil, probably from his trip under the morning's vehicle. He stared at them wide-eyed, not trying to hide his fear.

Jo introduced herself and Arnett, and re-explained his Miranda rights.

"What's this about?" Glover asked.

“Just to be clear, you’re willing to talk with us without an attorney present?”

“I want to know what this is about?” he asked, watching them both closely. “’Cause if you all are *detectives*, this ain’t about this morning and I’m not trying to go to jail for the rest of my life on some bullshit charges you all made up.”

Jo chose her words carefully. “This is about an incident at Oakhurst Mall the day after Thanksgiving. ”

Glover’s brow creased, but the fear didn’t leave his eyes. “What incident?”

“Were you at the mall that day?”

“Yeah, I was there.” He shifted in his chair. “I had some Christmas shopping to do.”

“We found your fingerprints on a Kia in the parking lot. Can you explain to us why your prints would be on a car that doesn’t belong to you?”

The crease deepened. “Hold up, hold up. This is bullshit. ’Cause first off, the trunk on that car was already open, I just lifted it higher. You don’t want people to take your shit, don’t leave your trunk open. And the purse was lying on the ground right next to the car. That ain’t theft, that’s *finding*. And finders keepers.” His finger stabbed the table in front of him.

Jo studied Glover’s face—there was a ring of truth to his reaction, and his explanation fit with the previous charges on his record better than a kidnapping or violence gone wrong. “How did you happen to notice the trunk was open?”

“Saw the purse first, lyin’ on the ground. When I went to pick it up, I saw the trunk popped a couple inches.”

“Just walking from the mall to your car?” Jo asked.

He paused a beat before answering. “Yep.”

Jo picked up on the delay, and played a hunch. “So if we check the security footage we’ll see you just walking from the mall exit, see you spot the purse, check the trunk, then head to your car and drive away?”

He shifted in his chair, then cracked his knuckles. “No, because I was walkin’ around stretchin’ my legs. You walk around mall parking lots, you find shit. People drop money, all kinds a shit. If someone gonna get it, may as well be me. Nothing illegal ’bout that.”

Jo glanced at his hoodie and translated the scenario in her head. Most likely he’d been checking parked cars for doors left inadvertently open or for clearly visible valuables. That would explain the dark clothing that, when tightened around his head, would make it nearly impossible to identify him from security camera footage at night.

“Here’s what I think,” Arnett said. “I think the owner caught you finding the contents of her trunk and confronted you, and you attacked her.”

“No fucking way.” He leaned forward and pointed at the folder in front of Jo. “See for yourself, I never touch nobody.” The crease in his brow reappeared. “If somebody saying I hurt somebody, you tell ’em come ID me. But I know you ain’t got nobody, ’cause I don’t do that shit.”

Jo leaned forward. “The woman who owned that purse, Paxton Reynault, is missing. And so is her daughter.”

Glover’s mouth snapped shut and his face turned to ash. “You mean, like, kidnapped?”

Arnett held his eyes. “We mean, like, kidnapped.”

“Shit.” Glover fell against the back of his chair. “I think maybe I do need an attorney.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

After a few phone calls, Jo arranged for a public defender to sit in on the interrogation. Once the full importance of what was happening became clear, Glover cooperated fully. He'd stumbled on the purse around four, just before the snow had started, and immediately took the cache from the car to his own vehicle. He quickly went through the purse and, since it was cheap and worn, tossed it over the wall that surrounded the parking lot. Then he took off home to figure out what was worth fencing. After, he took his mother to an evening church service, and listed several witnesses to verify his presence there. He'd never heard of Trevor Rodgers or any of the other names they threw at him, and allowed the attorney to search his phone for the relevant contacts. Despite repeated questioning, his answers were tight and consistent.

"That's one set of questions answered," Jo said as they hurried from Glover's interrogation room to the one now holding Trevor Rodgers. "I couldn't wrap my head around why our abductor would take Paxton's shopping bags, or how a simple theft could turn into an abduction. Answer: she'd already been abducted, and an opportunist snatched what was left behind."

"We still have to cross-check, but I agree, what he says fits," Arnett said.

"After this, maybe he'll think twice about open cars and abandoned purses in the future," Jo said.

"Nah, he'll just wear gloves from now on," he said, then opened the door.

Trevor Rodgers's leg bounced under the table as he waited for them, elbows perched on the gray table, one thumbnail clenched between his teeth. His clothes were almost identical to the ones he'd been wearing when Jo and Arnett first questioned him; a light-green button-down replaced the previous light-blue, but the navy-blue chinos and tie were the same.

His leg froze and his thumb dropped from his mouth when he saw them. "Was it really necessary to bring me down here? Pulling me away from my store is a hardship. There's no manager there right now, and if something goes wrong, I could lose my job."

Jo pulled out her chair slowly, taking the time to calibrate her approach to Trevor. She'd tried the kind approach before, maybe she should go in harder this time? She nodded to Arnett to bring him in to what she was doing. "Before we get started, I need to make sure you understand your rights." She slipped into a standard version of them, ending with, "Keeping those rights in mind, are you willing to talk with us today?"

The thumb he'd been chewing flexed in and out of his clenched hand. "I told you the last time we talked, I don't have anything to hide. There's no way I could have been involved with that lady's disappearance."

"The lady *and* her daughter." She shifted toward him. "You worked at Incredible Toys in Eastfield Mall in 2019."

"That's right," Rodgers said.

"You said you transferred to Oakhurst Mall because you needed to move in with your mother," Jo said. "But Springfield's not that far away."

His face tightened. "I'm not sure I understand your point."

"So the change wasn't because of any trouble at that mall, anything like that?" Jo asked.

His face scrunched in confusion. "Trouble? None that I know of."

Jo took a studied sip of her coffee. "And where did you work before that?"

“I was self-employed, trying to start my own business. But I had a hard time making enough to support myself.”

“Doing what?” Jo asked.

“Web design.”

“Do you have any friends who work in South Deerfield? Say, at Yankee Candle?” Arnett asked.

Rodgers’s head jutted backwards slightly. “No. Why?”

“Do you know a man named Patrick Sills? Or Brandon Glover?” She and Arnett were circling, making sure when they asked the main question he’d be off balance.

His gaze flicked a path around the room again as he searched his memory, and his thumbnail popped up to his teeth again. “Neither of those names is familiar. But if they were customers at the store, I wouldn’t necessarily know their names.”

“You told us that you didn’t know Paxton and Alexia Reynault, that you’d only seen them briefly in the store,” Jo said.

“I said they might have come in before.”

“But you’d never spoken to them outside the store,” Arnett asked.

He shifted in his seat. “That’s right.”

Jo held his gaze. “We want to give you an opportunity to think about that a little longer, because we know for a fact that isn’t true.”

His eyes widened and bounced back and forth between Jo and Arnett for almost a full minute before he answered. “Okay, look. Yes, I noticed her a while back. She comes in every month or so to buy Alexia a little something. I’ve talked to her and she’s kind and funny, and she’s good-looking. But I’m not good with women, so I’ve been trying to work up the courage to approach her.”

Jo popped her brows at him. “So you stalked her around the mall?”

He slashed both hands in a horizontal X. “No, no way. I did *not* stalk her. I saw them pass by the store later, and I heard her ask Alexia if she wanted some frozen yogurt, so I hurried to take my lunch so I’d be in the food court at the same time.”

“But you didn’t talk to her,” Jo said.

“No, I didn’t. Like I said, I’ve never been good with women. I don’t know how to approach them, and I get awkward and I can tell they think I’m weird. So I was hoping *she’d* notice *me* and recognize me from the store and say hi, and then I wouldn’t come off as some weirdo hitting on her.”

“But she didn’t. So what else did you try?”

His mouth opened and shut. “Nothing. You saw the footage. They finished and went on their way, and I went back to the store.”

Jo shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “Come on, Trevor. This is your last chance to be honest with us about this.”

“You’ve already lied to us,” Arnett added. “And we don’t appreciate people who lie to us. What else did you do? Slip out of the store and follow her to her car hoping to get her number?”

Trevor’s wide eyes narrowed. “No, nothing like that. I told you, check the footage from the store, you’ll see I never left.”

“So what you’re telling us is you never, that day or any day before, ‘ran into’ her at her car or anything like that?” Jo put the words into quotes.

“No, I swear.” He shook his head, tone rising. “This was the first time I did anything, and I barely was able to force myself into the food court. I don’t even know what kind of car she drives.”

Jo flashed a glance at Arnett.

“See, we have a problem with that, Trevor.” Arnett crossed an ankle onto his knee, and leaned forward. “Because we found a nice, clear set of your fingerprints on her car.”

Rodgers went completely still. They watched as he sat, saying nothing, until he finally spoke.

“I’d like to call my attorney now.”

Rodgers wasn’t able to get an attorney to join him before Jo and Arnett executed the warrant Lopez had secured, and arrived back at his house under the watch of two uniformed officers.

“I don’t know what to make of this guy,” Arnett said as they approached his front door. “Either he’s insanely smart or insanely stupid.”

“You mean how he tried to get us to delay executing the warrant claiming it would upset his mother to be here when it happened?” Jo asked.

“Did he really think we’d give him time to hide whatever it is he needs to hide?”

Jo glanced back at Rodgers, trying to read his face, but said nothing. Arnett rang the bell.

Sally Rodgers opened the door looking tired and confused. She appeared to be in her sixties, but given the operation Rodgers had previously mentioned, Jo revised her estimate downward. Her short, light-brown hair was an obvious wig and her makeup was hastily applied; her clothes were loose on her tall frame.

“Can I help you?” Sally said, examining them carefully.

As Jo explained who they were and why they were there, the woman transformed: her expression hardened and the slightly stooped posture straightened. When Jo produced a copy of the warrant and explained that Sally would need to be accompanied by the uniformed officers, Sally stepped back to allow them all in, then forward again to join Trevor and the officers—all without making eye contact with her son.

For a woman who’d recently been unwell, Sally Rodgers kept an exquisitely clean house. Not only clean, the decorating style was what she’d generously call *minimalist*, with the

practical styling of an IKEA showroom, leaving Jo with the sense the house had been staged for sale. Strange for a house where an entire life had been lived and a child had been raised; regardless, it made fast work of the search, with few places to hide anything, and few belongings to go through. Neither Sally nor Trevor appeared to be sentimental, and even the boxes in their closets contained only summer clothes and shoes. The attic was empty except for a few small pieces of furniture, and the garage, apart from Sally's car, contained only a small laundry space.

When they arrived at the basement door, Jo's stomach tensed. If Paxton and Alexia were being held here, the basement was the most likely spot, along with any dangerous booby traps to keep out intruders. With senses on high alert, Jo pulled open the door, flicked on the light, and extracted her flashlight to illuminate any unexpected dark corners.

She led the way down the stairs slowly, scanning each step as she went, flashlight strafing the open space over the railing to her left.

Shelves with boxes. A workbench. A washer and dryer.

The stairs ended in a square landing, with several more steps turning left into the small room. Very small—about five hundred square feet total, all visible from where they stood. Another set of metal shelves lined the wall just past the staircase, filled with household goods: cleaning liquids, rolls of paper towels, more boxes. Hooks holding garden implements covered the far wall.

“Does this basement feel oddly small for the size of the house?” Jo asked.

Arnett's head rotated as he considered. “You thinking hidden room?”

Jo nodded, then glanced overhead to mentally reconstruct the rooms above. She pointed to the wall with the shelving, near where the staircase ended. “There, where the bedrooms are upstairs. That's the most likely place for a hidden room, structurally speaking.”

Arnett stepped over and grabbed one end of the shelving unit. "Help me pull this out."

Jo took hold of the other end, and pulled.

The outline of a door that had been plastered over leapt from the shadows.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Jolts of electricity radiated to each of Jo's limbs as she stared at the rectangle in the wall—she hadn't realized how dangerously her hope had been flagging. She reached for the metal shelves again. "Help me get these the rest of the way out."

Once they'd shoved the metal shelves fully across the room, Jo returned to the outline. As she peered more closely, she ran her fingers up and around the slight ridge.

"Doesn't look like anyone's messed with this for years," Arnett said over her shoulder. "But that doesn't mean there's nothing behind it. They might have a separate way in."

Jo nodded, then strode past him. She plucked the small pick mattock off the wall, then, without breaking stride, crossed back and slammed the tool into the rectangle. Plaster fragments rained down to the floor as the metal struck something solid behind. A piece of wood, but one that had give—some sort of plywood. She struck again and a chunk of wood gave way, revealing an uneven surface of rock and concrete.

"What the actual hell?" Rodgers yelled from the top of the stairs, from between the officers escorting him and Sally behind.

"He insisted when he heard the banging," the taller of the two officers said.

"Does your warrant say you can tear down my walls?" Sally said, anger seething through her words.

“It authorizes us to search for captives that may be held on your premises. And this”—Jo waved at the hole—“is a potential hiding place.”

“It’s not a hiding place, it’s a staircase up to the outside exit,” Trevor said. “We blocked it up after my father died. My mother was terrified to come down here otherwise.”

“So, what, you just threw a bunch of rocks down here and poured some concrete over them?” Arnett asked.

Trevor’s face covered with red blotches. “I’m sorry my construction skills aren’t up to your standards.”

Jo threw a frustrated look back at the wall, then pulled out her phone. “We need someone here with jackhammers, as quickly as possible.”

Jo sat in the car to avoid pacing while the specialty crew was arranged and deployed. Despite her insistence, they wouldn’t allow her or Arnett to be in the basement as they broke through the wall, for safety reasons.

An hour after starting, the crew reemerged, their expressions grim. “Nothing,” the man in charge reported.

“What do you mean, nothing?” Jo turned toward the house. “That’s not possible.”

“Turned out to be just what he said, an old exit up and out of the basement, with rubble and a few other odds and ends tossed in. Some pieces of wood, a few bricks.”

Jo’s brain refused to accept the information. “Did they check the inside walls for anomalies once they pulled the rubble apart? There must be some other space in there.”

“Go check it yourself if you don’t believe me.” The man shrugged. “Make sure you wear safety gear.”

After throwing safety goggles and a hard hat on, Jo did just that, carefully stepping over the debris now strewn over the basement floor. As reported, she couldn’t find any sign of an opening anywhere in the enclosure.

“I can’t believe it,” Jo said as they drove back to HQ. “We have to be missing something. His fingerprint didn’t appear on that car by magic.”

Arnett shot her a glare, then turned back to the windshield. “What do you want them to do, get a warrant to knock down the whole basement?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Show me where to sign the request. But no, I meant he must have them hidden somewhere else.”

He raised a hand in apology. “No, right. But where? He doesn’t own any property.”

She rubbed her temples. “We must have missed something. We’ll need to go back and check again. He must have a storage space, or know somebody who owns a big farm, something. The fingerprint didn’t just appear, and if he can Houdini himself out of that store to her car, I put nothing past him. We must have missed something in the rest of the house.”

Arnett braked for a car that cut him off. “We were thorough.”

“Were we? Maybe we missed a loose floorboard or a false panel in the closet. I should’ve done more.”

He shot her a skeptical look. “There was nothing more to do. There’s nothing there.”

“We can get a second warrant, go back—”

“Jo, you’re spinning out. We’re not going to get a second warrant without new evidence. And we did our job. We didn’t miss anything.”

Jo slumped back in defeat, because she knew he was right. “Then I have to pray he’s holding them somewhere else. Because if he isn’t, it means he’s already killed them and disposed of the bodies somewhere.”

Jo’s phone rang, startling her. She groaned down at the screen—her mother. She closed her eyes and connected the call. “Ma, is everything okay?”

“No, it’s not.” Her mother’s voice was higher and tighter than normal. “Aunt Genevieve just collapsed. She’s in an ambulance on the way to the hospital.”

The hospital doors slid open with an odd suctioning sound, like the doors of the refrigerated sections at the supermarket. Except the air that blasted her was warm, a welcome change from the freezing cold outside. But by the time she spotted her mother across the waiting room the heat had turned cloying, and she peeled off her coat as she crossed to her. Elisabeth sat with her legs primly crossed at the ankle, a *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine sitting ignored on her lap as she stared at a wall-mounted television scrolling through profiles of the on-staff doctors.

“Ma.” Jo bent to kiss her.

Elisabeth raised her cheek. “Josette, I told you not to come. God knows how long it’ll be before they’ll find anything out.

“I had to come out this way anyway,” Jo lied. “And why are you here if there’s no point?”

She shot Jo a look. “Somebody had to drive Jim.”

Jo glanced back past the nurses’ station, as though X-ray vision could tell her what was happening with her aunt.

“Mrs. Arpent?” A brunette nurse called out from the nurses’ station.

Jo and Elisabeth hurried over. The nurse buzzed them into the back, then escorted them into a private office. A doctor waited inside, a tall, thin, gray-haired man with a kind face, and extended his hand to them.

“I’m Dr. Lawrence. You’re Elisabeth Arpent?” he asked. When Elisabeth nodded, he turned to Jo. “You must be Jo.”

Jo’s brows popped, and Dr. Lawrence smiled weakly. “I know Matt Soltero well. He made a few calls when he heard about your aunt. And Mrs. Reynault gave me permission to update you.”

She made a mental note to thank Matt profusely when she got home. “Thank you for talking to us.”

The weak smile disappeared. “Unfortunately, I don’t have much to tell you. It’ll be some time before we have the results back that we need. But from what I’m seeing, it looks likely Mrs. Reynault’s cancer has returned—and we’re concerned it’s metastasized.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Angela went missing the Sunday after she broke up with me.

When she didn't come home that night, the police began an official search the following morning. They questioned everyone she knew, starting with me. Angela's mother told them about our break-up, but she didn't know why we'd broken up. Since the best lies stay closest to the truth, I told them that when I saw Angela Monday at school, she'd told me she wasn't in love with me anymore. I also told them I had the feeling she was in love with someone else, which was true in a way—she loved who she thought I was, not who I really was. They drilled me on where I'd been and what I'd been doing, and I told them I'd been working at the pizza parlor. That part was true, too.

They searched our house and our car. They brought in multiple kinds of dogs, first search-and-rescue to follow her scent trail; they alerted to the house, and to the car. Of course they did—she'd been in our house and our car a thousand times, and only just days before. Then they brought cadaver dogs to search the property. Those dogs found nothing, because she wasn't there.

They came back several more times, repeatedly asking the same questions. I gave them the same answers, and eventually they stopped. Not because they thought I was innocent, but because they couldn't prove I wasn't. Everyone at school believed I'd killed her, too; they all kept clear of me, including the teachers. It didn't bother me; I'd discovered long before

that while it feels best to have someone love you, having people fear you is an acceptable substitute.

The police didn't find her for well over a year, and the only reason they did was because some hunting dogs dug up her skull out in the woods past her house. They eventually found some of her other bones in the area, too, with animal chew marks on them. They were never able to figure out for certain what killed her.

The chew marks shifted the theories in the newspapers away from me. They speculated she'd gone out for a walk, maybe fell and injured herself or was attacked by some sort of animal. Possibly coyotes, or one of those rare feral boars Massachusetts wasn't supposed to have. Or possibly she'd rendezvous'd with a man she met in one of the chat rooms that were newly proliferating on the internet, and he'd killed her. But none of that changed the minds of anybody at school. They'd known the weird loser loner kid far too long not to assume he was responsible for the missing girl.

I'll never forget what it felt like to bury her. How hard it was to dig the pit with the tears streaming down my face.

How hard it was to say that final goodbye.

How every shovel of dirt I threw over her beautiful face was a bayonet through my own chest.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

After making sure her mother made it home safely from the hospital, Jo struggled to sleep, managing only a few hours in between bouts of restless tossing and turning. The sleep deprivation didn't help the murky sense of being stuck that plagued Jo like she was slogging through a swamp she couldn't find her way out of. Her aunt's tests confirmed their worst fears. Her cancer had metastasized and she had, at most, only months to live—and unless Jo could find Paxton and Alexia, Aunt Ginnie would spend that time desperate to know what had happened to her daughter and granddaughter.

The crucial initial time after Paxton and Alexia's disappearance had long since faded, and the doors of their leads had slammed shut. Trevor had lawyered up, and was refusing to answer any more of their questions. They broadened their search of sex offenders, moving from the immediate area into an examination of everyone listed in the county's registry. But they, along with all of the mall employees, were eliminated either through security footage or alibis. For those whose alibis were on all but the sturdiest of grounds, the team expanded the background checks, looking for anything that raised even the slightest suspicion. When nothing useful came back, Jo and Arnett continued double- and triple-checking everything, and directed the canvassing to continue, despite an increasing sense of futility. Jo clung to her experience that many cases were solved as a result of sheer bloody-mindedness: refusing to give up, talking to just one more person, canvassing just one more street, checking out one more lead, revisiting a suspect one more time.

“It might be time to release some details to the press,” Jo said. “See if we can’t flush out somebody who knows something about Aspyn and Ivy or Emma and Joy that way.”

“Do you think there’s a risk to Paxton and Alexia if we do that? If they’re still alive, their kidnapper may decide to cut and run,” Arnett said.

Jo tapped the picture of Aspyn and Ivy’s grave. “We know the other two pairs ended up dead without any press coverage whatsoever. Based on how long the bodies had been buried, Aspyn and Ivy weren’t killed very long after they went missing. That means time is already running out for Paxton and Alexia.”

Arnett nodded grimly. “You thinking Lacey Bernard?”

Lacey Bernard was a journalist Jo and Arnett had worked with during the course of another investigation, and who’d worked with them closely on several occasions. Jo pulled her phone over and put through the call. “I am.”

By midweek, Jo returned to the external security footage again, expanding her list of license plates to those that appeared on the two cameras adjacent to the one overlooking Paxton’s car. Most of the plates were visible at some point, but she found three cars that had no license plates whatsoever.

“See, this is the problem,” she barked at Arnett. “Isn’t it illegal to drive without plates in Massachusetts? How are there *three cars* with no plates over the course of a few hours?”

Arnett didn’t look up from the background checks he was expanding. “Wait, you mean people are out there breaking the law? Somebody better call the cops.”

She glared at him, willing him to feel it. “Laugh it up. But you know one of these is most likely involved in the crime, and if someone had done their job and pulled them over, Paxton and Alexia might be at home right now.”

This time Arnett did look up, and met her eyes. “This isn’t like you. What’s that annoying thing your therapist tells you? Live in the solution, not the problem?”

She pulled her lips in over her teeth and inhaled deeply. “No, you’re right. Instead of blaming people for something that can’t be helped, I need to start cross-referencing these three makes and models with the cars owned by our potential suspects, and put the information out on the BOLOs.”

He pointed to her coffee mug as he turned back to his monitor. “I’m guessing from your sunny mood it’s time for a refill, too.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and turned back to the list she’d been making.

Despite an afternoon and evening of cross-referencing, the only car that matched up with any of the makes and models turned out to be present, in full view of security cameras, in another section of the mall while its owner was working inside Target during the time of the kidnapping. Frustrated and desperate, Jo finally shoved herself away from the desk and forced herself to go home and get some sleep.

The next day, after going over Trevor’s and Patrick’s phone and financial records for the tenth time and sorting through the new tips that had come in on the hotline, Jo returned to the internal mall security footage out of sheer desperation, hoping the repeat viewing would help her spot something she hadn’t seen before. Rather than trailing Paxton and Alexia by only a few minutes, she broadened the window to fifteen minutes before and after they were in a given location, making meticulous notes of every person who passed by them, looked at them, or came into the space just vacated by them. For anyone who interacted with the pair in any way, she watched them for several minutes past when the interaction ended, looking for any odd behavior. She noted descriptions and cross-checked to see if anybody popped up multiple times. While there were several coincidental crossings—not surprising with customers shopping in the same mall throughout the day—she one by one eliminated them by following through the rest of their time at the mall.

As she neared the end of Paxton and Alexia's time at the mall yet again, her frustration crawled over her like an army of ants. She squirmed, grunted, and popped up and down repeatedly to get coffee, not for the caffeine, but for an excuse to move.

Trevor had to be behind it all. Fingerprints didn't appear on the car door of a missing person by magic. But Jo knew his attorney would simply say Trevor had passed the car at the mall on another day and touched it without realizing—there was no way to tell how old the fingerprint was. And since the security footage showed Trevor hadn't left the mall the day Paxton disappeared, unless Jo figured out how Trevor managed to slip out, the A.D.A. would never be able to make the fingerprint evidence stick. But Lopez hadn't been able to find anything wrong with the video, or identify any relevant blind spots—they couldn't find any plausible way he'd evaded notice. And none of their cross-checking connected Trevor to anybody who might be helping him.

She clicked her mouse with more force than necessary, pulling up the next-to-last segment of Paxton's trip through the mall, and followed her to the Santa Station. She noted the time again, then went to the internal camera for the Santa Station, and watched what happened for fifteen minutes before Paxton appeared.

Nothing did. The employees went about their business: the woman at the counter took payment, John Carpazi took pictures, Santa talked with children and their parents, ho-ho-ing through a little boy and a set of twin girls before Paxton and Alexia's turn. Jo watched their turn several times through, focusing on the other employees, especially during Paxton's conversation with John. The woman taking payments glanced over to them several times, but continued on with the customers in front of her. Santa also sent a few concerned glances their way, clearly struggling to do his schtick while John was distracting both mother and child, and failing to take the picture in a timely fashion. Alexia's attention kept shifting from Santa to her mother, so both could certainly hear what was being said, or at least were able to pick up on Paxton's

demeanor. Jo watched through again carefully checking for any customers paying a little too much attention.

When nobody stood out, she returned to the point where the picture was taken and Paxton took Alexia on their way. John, as he refocused on taking the next customer's picture, watched them over his shoulder. He pulled out his phone and sent several texts—Jo had seen all of these—and continued on with his work. Then everything returned to business as normal.

A complete waste of time, Jo sighed to herself over a large gulp of coffee, waiting for the minutes to tick off the counter so she could move on to the Target footage. What she really needed to do was stake out Trevor. She was sleep deprived anyway, maybe she should just go stake him out after he finished his mall shift each day...

Santa raised a hand and waved at John. Some sort of signal for a break, because John nodded and backed away from his camera, then put a sign in front of the first person standing in line. Santa walked to the left of the screen, and Jo expected to see him head back toward the nearby public restroom.

Instead, the counter girl went off to the bathroom, and Santa paced the length of the counter—he must need to move periodically after holding so many children on his lap. After a few trips back and forth, he stopped at the keyboard, typed something in, and peered down at the monitor. After a moment he pulled a phone out of his red-velvet pants and held it up to the screen; once he slipped it back into his pants he tapped the keyboard again, then stepped away.

Jo leaned closer and replayed the exchange, tingles radiating down her limbs. Something about the way he peered at the screen struck her as off. She swore under her breath, wishing she could see what was on the screen.

When the counter woman came back, he tag-teamed off to the bathroom. Jo watched the clock—he returned in three minutes. Once John went to the restroom and normal operations resumed, Jo put the tape into rewind mode, then upped the speed as fast as she could while still being able to

discern Santa's movements. She backtracked to the beginning of the day.

At no other point did Santa touch the computer.

Jo flipped through the stack of employee paperwork piled on her desk until she found the employee playing Santa Claus: Dustin Foley. He'd been cleared early in the investigation since he'd been clearly visible on the security footage during the time Paxton and Alexia went missing. Was it really that odd that he'd looked something up on the computer? Was she so desperate for a lead she was latching on to things that weren't there?

"Hey, Bob, come tell me what you think of this." She pushed her chair slightly to the side so he could angle his own in, and clicked on the position when Santa went to the monitor.

Arnett watched closely. "He's looking something up."

"He called the break about a minute after Paxton and Alexia walked away from the payment counter." Jo pointed to her notes. "Then he went to the computer, but that's the only time all day he touched it."

"And he took a picture, which is weird." Arnett grimaced. "But it could be a coincidence. Maybe he was just looking up a place to go for dinner or something."

But his initial reaction was enough confirmation for Jo. She grabbed Foley's file, then the coat off the back of her chair. "If that's the case, he shouldn't have any problem showing us what was on that picture. You drive and I'll get started on a warrant for his phone records."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Crown Vic's GPS system identified Foley's address as an apartment building in Scoby.

"That's not conclusive," Arnett said in response to Jo's disappointment.

"No, it's not." Jeffrey Dahmer imprisoned his victims in a small apartment in the middle of a large building, and more than one kidnapper had stashed victims away from their primary residence. But it didn't bode well, and she desperately needed something to break her way, for Aunt Ginnie's sake, Paxton and Alexia's sake, and her own. "For all we know, Foley's the building manager, with access to dozens of on-site storage spaces."

She led the way to Foley's second-floor apartment and rapped on the door.

Jo struggled to match up the man who opened the door with the one she'd seen on the video, realizing for the first time just how transformative a Santa suit was. The only thing she recognized were the dark eyes; the white hair and round beard had been replaced by short brown hair and a square, clean-shaven jaw. Foley also struck her as short and gaunt without Santa's padding and heeled boots, but as she took him in she realized that was a trick of her memory. He was far from scrawny, with a quiet solidity under his polo shirt and jeans. The sort of build that wouldn't make a woman feel threatened until it was too late.

“Can I help you?” His glance bounced back and forth between them, with the slight annoyance of someone dealing with a spam call.

“I’m Detective Josette Fournier of the Oakhurst County State Police Detective Unit, and this is my partner, Bob Arnett.” She made a point of glancing down the building corridor. “Can we come in?”

He immediately stepped back, the annoyance turning to concern. “Of course. What is this about?”

The two-foot entryway opened directly into Foley’s living room. A counter to the left separated the room from a small kitchen, and a door off to the right suggested a bedroom and bathroom. The furnishings were relatively new, the type that came in a bundle from a large furniture store, down to the bowl of raffia balls topping his coffee table. A pair of cheap landscape prints adorned one wall; below them, on a credenza, sat an aged picture of a young boy and his mother, and another of the same woman, older.

Jo bent down for a closer look at the picture. “Is this you?”

“Yes, I was about six there.” A shadow crossed over his face and he pointed to the other photo. “This was taken five years ago, just before my mother died.”

Jo straightened, and met his eyes, her mind flying to Aunt Ginnie. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

He nodded acknowledgement. “Please sit. What can I help you with?”

Once they all sat, Jo pulled up a picture of Paxton and Alexia on her phone. “We’re investigating the disappearance of this mother and daughter. Do you know them?” She watched carefully as he scanned the picture.

“The police came around asking us about them, what, two weeks ago? I didn’t remember them specifically, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t there. I see a lot of children.”

“We thought you might remember her in particular because your photographer had words with her.”

His eyes widened slightly. “Ah, she was *that* one. That makes more sense.”

“Why does that make sense?” Jo asked.

“The exchange wasn’t pleasant. Something to do with an ex-husband? I think I heard him say something about custody of the little girl.” He frowned. “But I’m sorry, I didn’t hear much more than that. I was trying to keep the little girl focused and get him to take the picture.”

Jo nodded. “Shortly after she left, you took a break.”

“I don’t remember for sure, but that’s possible,” he said.

“But you didn’t go directly to the bathroom, you let another employee go first,” Arnett said.

“I have to stand up and move periodically or my back gets too stiff.” He glanced back and forth between them and uncrossed his legs. “Hang on. Am I a suspect?”

“We’re trying get a clear picture of everything that happened around Ms. Reynault that day,” Jo said.

Foley tensed. “I’ll take that as a yes. Lucky for me I have nothing to hide.”

“That’s good to hear.” Jo kept her professionally blank expression in place. “While your co-worker was in the bathroom, you looked something up on the computer. What was that?”

He stared at her like she was speaking a foreign language, and his brows popped up. “I must have been checking our totals and rate for the day. We have quotas we’re supposed to keep up with.”

“Quotas?”

Mild annoyance flashed across his face. “We’re not supposed to spend too long with each child. I’m supposed to be jolly and show interest, but not linger. We need to stay under five minutes each, and I wanted to make sure I was getting the rhythm right.”

“And was your rhythm right?” Arnett asked.

He nodded earnestly. “It was.”

“Then why did you take a picture of the monitor screen?”

He shot Arnett the same confused look he’d given Jo. “A picture? I didn’t take a picture.”

Jo pulled out her phone and tapped her way to the footage she’d bookmarked. “Right there.” She pointed to his movement. “You took a picture.”

He peered down and watched, and then his creased brow smoothed. “Oh, no.” He waved a hand at her and smiled. “I wasn’t taking a picture. I got a text.”

Jo tapped to play the segment over again and watched. “That seems like an odd angle to hold your phone to check a text.”

He gave an annoyed shrug. “There must have been a glare on it or something.”

“Ah, got it.” Jo nodded. “You said you just got the text right then, as you were checking the monitor?”

“Yep. I set it to vibrate when I work, and it vibrated.”

“So let’s see. The timestamp on this is one thirty-seven.” She looked up at him so she could watch his expression. “Can I see the text you received at one thirty-seven?”

His expression didn’t change. “It was one of those scammer emails. I deleted it.”

Jo watched him carefully, searching for any hint of a lie on his face. But there wasn’t one, or even the slightest hesitation in his explanation. Had she read too much into it all? None of this meshed with the fingerprint on Paxton’s car, regardless. “Do you know a man named Trevor Rodgers?”

He pushed up his bottom lip. “Not that I’m aware of. Who is he?”

“He works at the toy store in the mall,” she said.

He shook his head. “Sorry, no.”

“What about Patrick Sills?” she asked.

“No. But I think ‘Patty’ or ‘Patrick’ was the name John kept saying to that woman.” Foley gestured to Jo’s phone, then took a deep breath. “Look, it’s pretty clear you think I had something to do with this. If you want to look through my phone, or search my house—please do.”

“We’d appreciate being able to clear you by checking your phone and home,” Jo said, and extended her hand.

Dustin pulled out his phone, then stood and gestured a circle encompassing the apartment. “Please. Check everything. I don’t want there to be any doubts.”

Jo knew before she lifted the first finger that the search of Dustin’s apartment would most likely turn up nothing. But Arnett made a recording while they searched, and Jo started with Dustin’s phone. None of the other names from the investigation were present, and there were precious few calls and texts, all related to work.

“Not much personal here,” Jo said to Dustin. “No jokes with friends or sweet nothings with your girl?”

He pulled his lips together in an apologetic smile. “Not currently, no. And I’ve never been much for texting.”

Jo handed back the phone, then she and Arnett made their way through the small apartment. Foley’s bedroom and bathroom were neat and sparsely furnished, and they made short, efficient work of checking each drawer and cabinet, as well as behind the furniture and in the closet. They came away with nothing suspicious or incriminating.

“Well, shit,” Jo said once they were back in the car. “What do you think? Is he the best liar on the planet, or am I losing my mind?”

“Both can be true,” Arnett deadpanned. “He was convincing, but lots of psychopaths are. What does the famous Fournier instinct say?”

“It’s looking for a place to land. For some reason my gut instinct is that he’s a good guy, not the sort who’d want to hurt

anybody. But maybe that's just because my first experience of him was as Santa, and five decades of socialization makes Santa Claus sacrosanct? Because his explanation for what he was doing at that monitor is striking an off chord with me, and we saw the dearth of personal connection in his phone, so he's definitely a loner. What did you make of that, by the way?"

Arnett shrugged and turned left. "I can count my friends on one hand, and I rarely text any of 'em. I have to set reminders for myself to remember to text Laura an 'I love you' now and then. And wasn't Lopez talking about that 'log off' movement or whatever? Where the younger generation is rebelling against the internet and technology since the pandemic?"

"That's Gen Z. Foley would qualify as a millennial, I think. But that's not quite what I meant. The phone was so sanitized I got the feeling it wasn't real. Like maybe he has a burner for his real business, and that's why he was so willing to hand that phone over to us."

Arnett gave a head wag. "Your reaction to him really *was* mixed."

She grimaced. "There's a disconnect I can't explain between my personal reaction to him and my reaction to what he told us, and I'm not sure that's ever really happened before." She pulled her phone back out and pulled up the mall footage again. "Yeah, see, when I watch that segment and match it up with what he said, I get an itchy feeling under my skin telling me something's wrong. But that could be because I'm so worried about my cousins and my aunt at this point that I can't see clearly."

Arnett glanced over at her. "If the footage bothers you, we need to take that seriously. First thing we need to do is call the Santa-rental place and find out if they really do have quotas."

Jo flipped a hand up in a gesture of futile agreement. "All well and good, but we're spinning our wheels and every day it gets more and more likely Paxton and Alexia are dead. What we really need is surveillance on our main suspects asap. Trevor Rodgers, Dustin Foley, and John Carpazi."

"Why John Carpazi and not Patrick's other friends?"

“Because he’s the one that notified everybody that Paxton and Alexia were at the mall, so if one of Patrick’s friends is responsible, he’s somehow connected to John. He hangs out where they hang out and goes to the places where they go, and that’s the best bet we have into the friend group right now.”

Arnett wagged his head. “It’s a viable approach, if we had unlimited resources. Hayes might be willing to give us somebody for Rodgers because of the fingerprint, but I can’t see it for Carpazi or Foley. In fact, I think we’ll be lucky to get a warrant for Foley’s phone records based on that interaction with the monitor.”

“Here’s hoping a mother and child potentially alive and in danger will get us a little more leeway than normal on the warrant. And I agree that Hayes won’t approve it if I ask for the surveillance.” She put on a smile and batted her eyes mockingly at him. “That’s why you’re going to ask her instead of me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Both Arnett and Jo turned out to be right.

“Hayes approved a surveillance team for Rodgers, since the investigation is stalled and the press have been up her ass,” Arnett explained after meeting with Hayes, once he tracked Jo down at Lopez’s desk. “I played that up, pushed her about how they’re calling Paxton and Alexia “The Christmas Angels” since we made the possible connection to Aspyn and Ivy, and how it’ll be a stain on the department if we don’t get them home in time to celebrate the holiday. That convinced her to give us one for Foley, too, but I couldn’t get her to move on Carpazi.”

“Dammit.” Jo slammed the stack of printouts she’d been holding down onto Lopez’s desk. “Why can’t she just for once be on my side?”

Lopez’s brows rose. “Whoa, pony. You never let Upstate Ursula get under your skin like this. How much sleep have you been getting?”

Jo’s eyes narrowed. “How many Rockstars have you mainlined today?”

Lopez’s brows rose still higher, and she tilted her head. “It’s not like you to be salty, let alone full-on belligerently briny. So you’re either hangry or overtired or both, and none of those are gonna help you solve this case.”

Jo deflated like a slashed tire. Lopez was right, she was overreacting and taking her frustration out on her friends.

“Sorry. You’re right. There’s too much going on in my head and not enough sleep.”

“Or food,” Arnett said. “You had a pack of peanuts from the vending machine for lunch that you didn’t even finish, and I’d bet cash money you didn’t have breakfast.”

“I had a banana,” Jo mumbled.

Without a word, Lopez stood and walked off into the depths of the lab.

Jo turned a questioning stare on Arnett. “Should we follow?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” He leaned over and peered down the hall.

After a moment Lopez reappeared, followed by Marzillo. She pointed to the door and slipped on her jacket. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Jo asked, alarmed.

“Fernando’s. I can’t fix the sleep deprivation, but I can damned well make sure you get food in that stomach before you text the wrong thing to Hayes and find yourself unemployed.”

When Fernando’s eldest daughter Alma set drinks and bowls of tortilla chips and salsa in front of Jo half an hour later, she felt hungry and nauseated at the same time. She scanned the room, trying to find some sort of hope in the red, green, and white Christmas lights that layered the cantina.

“Um, Jo? The whole reason we’re here is so you can eat. So eat.” Lopez shoved the tortilla chips toward her.

Jo forced herself to dip one into the salsa. As she shoved it into her mouth, she made eye contact with a stuffed Santa Claus hanging over the bar. In her periphery she watched Lopez mouth something to Marzillo with an agitated expression on her face.

“Jo?” Marzillo said.

Jo’s eyes slid to her. “Janet?”

“Far be it for me to agree with Christine about anything emotion-related, but I’m worried about you. I understand Paxton and Alexia are your cousins, but you didn’t even react like this when Diana Montauk was coming after you and Matt and Sophie and David.”

Jo chewed and swallowed, considering why that was. “Three differences. One, I had a plan of action. Two, the threat to my loved ones was theoretical, nothing had happened to them yet. And three, it was over quickly. If Matt or Sophie had been kidnapped and every action I took led me to dead ends for weeks, I’d have been just as much of a basket case as I am now.”

“So you admit you’re being a basket case?” Lopez asked.

“I’m obsessive, not delusional,” Jo answered.

“So you should also be aware that you need to find some outlet for the stress before you explode and take all of us with you.” Lopez pointed a chip at her.

Jo scrunched her face in objection. “How am I taking you with me?”

Lopez stabbed the chip into the salsa. “As it is Hayes isn’t happy about you being on a case that involves your family. If you give her even the teensiest sign that you’re human she’s gonna use it to blow up your life. And if she fires you, I’ll have to quit, and I really don’t want to have to look for a new job, especially around the holidays.”

Jo’s mouth dropped. “I have no idea what to say to that.”

“I’ll tell you what to say.” Lopez stabbed the chip at her again, sending a glob of salsa flying onto the table. “Say you’re gonna go find a healthy way to channel the stress. Spend the evening in a bubble bath surrounded by aromatherapy candles. Better yet, spend a night with that gorgeous man of yours playing ride ’em cowboy.”

“Yeah, well,” Jo grumbled. “Matt might not be the answer to my stress right now.”

“Oh no,” Marzillo said, pulling her water close. “What did you do?”

Jo's mouth dropped again. "Why do you assume it's my fault?"

They both stared at her without speaking.

"Okay, it might be my fault, I have no idea. And maybe I'm just imagining the whole thing. But Matt's been strange the last couple of weeks, like something's bothering him."

"Did you ask him about it?" Marzillo asked.

"No. I haven't had time with everything that's going on, and I'm pretty sure that's the whole problem anyway. Here it is, our first Christmas together, and all I can do is fixate on this case. But, I set aside an evening to spend with him watching Christmas movies with the girls and cocoa and he blew it off. And now with my aunt's cancer metastasizing I just feel like the entire world is spinning out of control and there's nothing I can do about any of it." Jo reached for her Diet Coke and took a large gulp.

"Okay, first of all, you can breathe." Lopez leaned over the table toward her. "Because in all the years I've known you, I've never seen you go into run-on-ramble mode, and I'm pretty sure it's a sign your brain isn't getting enough oxygen."

Jo facetiously inhaled a large breath through her nose, blew it out through her mouth, and despite herself felt calmer almost instantly.

Marzillo reached out and put her hand over Jo's. "My heart is breaking for you and your family having to face losing your aunt."

"I know, and I appreciate it," Jo said.

"And at a time like this," Marzillo continued, "with so much going wrong in your family, more than ever you need to be able to lean on your partner. You need to talk to Matt."

Jo took another deep breath before responding. "The truth is, I'm terrified. It was only a matter of time before I screwed this one up like I've screwed up all the rest, but now that it's actually happening—my heart is breaking."

“You are the dictionary definition of a double-edged sword,” Lopez said, then swigged her own Diet Coke.

“What the hell does that mean?” Marzillo asked.

“What makes her a great detective is there’s nothing on this planet she can’t pick apart until she splits even the tiniest thread. Only problem is, that doesn’t work so well when it comes to relationships.” She snatched up another chip. “Well, that’s not the only problem. The other problem is that while you can figure out what’s up with a stranger at twenty paces, you have zero understanding of your own personal life.”

Jo laughed despite herself. “Sad but true.”

Lopez grinned. “Okay, so, we’ve got you breathing again and you know what you have to do regarding Matt. So now we just need to all take a step back from this case and give our brains room to come up with a new approach. So I say we switch to margaritas, have Tony come and drive us home, and get a good night’s sleep.”

“Your boyfriend has better things to do than drive home three tipsy women,” Jo said.

“He really doesn’t. It’s kinda sad.” But she grinned widely as she raised a hand to call Alma over. “And I’m not taking no for an answer.”

CHAPTER FORTY

After Angela, I never wanted to date again. I delayed as long as I could, making excuses to Mother, but her impatience grew and the fits returned, each longer than the one before. So I resigned myself and screwed up my courage, sure that none of the girls at school would come near me after what had happened regardless. But several had developed a fascination with me, deciding I was a misunderstood, tortured soul. But they were nothing like Angela, and they wanted to have sex from nearly our first date. Doomed to failure.

College would be better, Mother said. My reputation wouldn't precede me. As it turned out, my anti-social tendencies also didn't stand out as much in the college environment; my large vocabulary didn't put academically-focused people off, and the computer science department was populated with people who were nearly as obsessed with computers and robots as I was. I was good at paying attention to what girls liked, and I learned to home in on girls who were eager to please and could be influenced. A few well-placed hints about hair color or style or the way they dressed and I could steer them to be more like Angela; I broke up with the ones who put up resistance.

But college-aged girls were more experienced, and quickly questioned why I didn't try to have sex with them.

"You need to find a religious girl," Mother announced to me. "Someone who pledged to be celibate until they get married. When they find out you can't get it up, it'll be too late

because you'll be married. We can use artificial insemination or a sperm bank. Whatever it takes."

A solid theory. But neither Mother nor I could fake our way through religious devotion, and, more importantly, women dedicated to celibacy were well-versed in standing up for their principles. I could get them to go out with me, but I couldn't mold them into my Angela.

On my thirtieth birthday, I found Mother staring out of the window, hands folded in her lap. "Thirty years old and you don't have a girlfriend." She refused to meet my eyes. "I can't keep on doing this."

The dark pit engulfed me instantly. "What do you mean?"

She just shook her head.

She was giving up on me. Abandoning me the way Angela had. And if I didn't have Mother, I'd have nothing. "No, please. I'll keep trying. I'll try dating sites, they'll make it easier to find someone who's right for me."

She waved a hand in the air, then let it drop back into her lap. "As soon as they meet you, they'll know you're not right. And by the time you trick someone into marrying you, they'll be coming to the end of their childbearing years."

Was that true? "I—I can date younger women."

Her laugh was dry and hopeless. "What do you have to offer a younger woman? What do you have to offer any woman?"

I tried to breathe in, but couldn't. The world swirled around me the way it had that day with Angela out on the field, and Mother's voice retreated as the dark pit swallowed me. I grabbed the windowsill to keep from falling down. The failure was back and the expectations were overwhelming and the ticking clock was blowing it all apart and it was all too much

"Please, just get out of my sight," she said.

No. No. She couldn't—after everything I'd done, I was so close. I could make it work if I just had time. But she was

casting me off the same way Angela had—

I fell to my knees, my hands covering my ears, Mother's voice ringing through my head. And the dark hole swallowed me completely.

DECEMBER 8TH

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

As the days passed, the new, horrible routine warped Paxton's sense of normalcy with frightening speed. When they'd first arrived in the prison she'd felt like she was trapped in a nightmare, trying to get back to her real life. But now her previous life felt like the dream, like something far-off she'd only imagined. She shook it off when she felt it creeping in, but it kept returning, taunting her. She'd experienced something similar during the pandemic lockdown when she and Alexia had to stay inside their tiny studio apartment in Boston for weeks on end, watching the number of deaths rise with no end on the horizon; at one point she'd wondered—maybe hoped—that the whole thing was a nightmare and she just needed to wake up. But during that she'd at least been able to take Alexia for a walk, see the sun and a change of scenery.

What terrified her most was that if she, a strong-minded adult, was struggling with her sense of relative reality, what was going on in Alexia's head? She watched her daughter carefully for clues and used every opportunity to remind Alexia of that far-off-seeming reality. She mentioned Grandma and Grandpa, play-date friends, and memories like birthday parties and Halloween that Alexia loved. But sometimes when she did, Alexia would shut down, and Paxton didn't know which form of trauma was worse.

Paxton clung to the belief that her hidden rebellion would keep her sane. Through the conversations during sponge baths and ponytails and playtime to keep herself and Alexia connected to before. Through the deception of being friendly over meals, lulling him into believing Alexia's absence had

resigned her to dependence on him. But most of all, through the hope that came with chipping away at the wall and trying to pick the shackle lock. Thankfully, he'd mentioned he wouldn't have any days off until Christmas due to the holidays, which meant she could mentally escape every afternoon.

Then, as her daughter chattered to her imaginary Candy Land opponent, she felt a soft click as the lock's tumblers lined up into place.

She sat frozen, afraid to move and mess it up, not sure she'd really felt what she thought she had. As gently as she was able she propped the pin against the pillow, then grasped the shank of the lock, and pulled, half expecting some *Saw*-like explosion to result.

It clicked up and out of the lock. She removed the small padlock from the shackle's loop. The shackle fell open, releasing her foot.

She slipped down off the bed, testing that her leg was really free—when it was, she instantly crossed over into the kitchenette and began pulling open cabinets.

“Mommy! You got the chain off!” Alexia cried. “Take mine off too!”

Paxton winced—how was she going to explain this to her?

She hurriedly pulled open the last few cabinets, but there was nothing of use in any of them. Then she motioned to Alexia to follow her, climbed back up on the bed and snapped the shackle back onto her ankle.

Alexia burst into tears and grabbed at the chain. “Why did you put it back?” she howled.

Paxton tried to pull her daughter up. “Shhh, honey. Come here so I can explain.”

Alexia resisted for a moment, then allowed Paxton to pick her up and set her down on the bed.

“The man doesn't want us to take off the chains. If we do, he'll get really angry.” She hesitated—but Alexia needed to

fully understand. “He’ll punish us. He might even take you away from me.”

Alexia stared down at the chains, still crying. “Why?”

Paxton took both her hands and looked into her eyes. “Do you miss playing with Kristen and Liza? Do you want to see them again?”

Alexia’s head drooped, but she nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you miss our Saturday trips to Friendly’s for our ice cream?”

She nodded again.

“Then we need to keep this a secret, okay?”

Alexia turned to the door. “You said we could go. When will we go?”

“I’m not sure, honey. I have to practice getting the chains off fast, okay?”

She stared back at the door, chin trembling. “I want to go now.”

Paxton pushed back her desperation at the pain and fear in Alexia’s face. “I know, baby girl, I do, too. I’ll practice as fast as I can, okay?”

Alexia slowly turned from the door, then stared down at her mother’s foot. “Practice now.”

But Paxton quickly discovered that replicating what she’d done to open the lock was harder than she’d hoped. By the time he brought dinner that night, she still hadn’t managed to get it open again, and the next day she worked through nearly two episodes of *Elinor* before she felt the tell-tale shift of the pins. But the time after that she finished in just under twenty-five minutes, and the time after *that* she did it in ten.

The wall was also improving; the more mortar she chipped away, the more space she had to work and the easier the next bit came off. She was almost finished extracting a first stone. On the fourth day of work, she finished the perimeter.

With electrical pulses xylophoning up her spine, she held her breath and wedged her fingers in as best she could, clawing with her short nails, trying to keep the vision of him sitting waiting on the other side out of her mind.

She shifted and gripped and finally it slid out.

A swath of inky blackness extended behind it. Afraid it might be a visual illusion created by a wall of dirt, she stuck her hand in slowly, but didn't hit resistance until she hit something plastic and curved. She shifted to the side to let the light behind her hit the hole, but with the headboard of the bed still blocking most of it, she couldn't see much. She gave her eyes a moment to adjust, and realized it was a bottle of bleach, maybe on a shelf?

She sagged back against the wall, eyes squeezed closed, trying to calm her heart and her breathing. Whatever it was, it wasn't a dead end, it was another room, and that meant there was a chance she could get them out of here.

She just had to not screw it up.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

*I stared down at the headline on my phone and clenched my jaw to keep from swearing aloud: **CHRISTMAS ANGEL KILLER AT LARGE.***

How in the hell had this happened? I'd been so careful. About the mothers I chose, about changing locations, about everything. Up until now the police had never had the slightest suspicion about my previous Angelas and Evies. They'd never even really investigated them until some drunken college kids stumbled on the grave up by Mt. Toby. I'd been so careful picking that location to bury them, far from the other locations, in such a remote spot. But off-the-beaten-path attracted underaged drinkers too.

They'd even published a picture of the angel ornament from the grave—a deplorable violation of my privacy, and theirs. And completely unnecessary, sensationalistic journalism pure and simple, to play on the heartstrings of readers. For them to exploit and twist something so personal into something so opportunistic—it turned my stomach.

I crossed to the window and cracked the blinds to stare down at the undercover car that wasn't very undercover. It wasn't just the journalist. The detectives must be part of it, or the surveillance wouldn't be there. I let the blinds snap back into place and paced the room.

I told you you'd fuck it up.

I clasped my hands up over my ears, but there was no point trying to drown out Mother's voice. She was right, I'd

screwed up, and this was very, very bad.

I warned you. But no, you couldn't do it my way. You had to do it your way.

I kept pacing. There was no point dwelling on what I'd done wrong. The surveillance was one thing—easy enough to evade them with a little ingenuity—but now with this, as well? Too much risk. Too much potential for things to go very wrong.

Cut your losses. You don't have any choice. They have to go.

No, no, no—of course Mother would think that, but she was wrong. I couldn't face that, couldn't give up now, especially when things were going so well! Angela and I were actually getting to know each other. Evie had even crawled up onto my lap. Everything was coming together—at this rate I might be able to spend Christmas night with them and wake up with them Christmas morning. It was fixable, it had to be. I just had to use my brain and figure a way out.

No, I realized—that was exactly wrong. I didn't have to figure a way out. I scanned the article again—they knew nothing. And, they couldn't keep the surveillance on me forever. If I did something drastic like try to move Angela and Evie, I'd make a mistake, and that's when I'd get found out. In fact, that might even be why they published the article—to panic me and force an error.

No, the key was to lay low. To do nothing. To do less than nothing.

I dug out my burner phone and put through a call.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Paxton hadn't realized how tenuous her grip on hope had been until the moment she removed the first stone from the wall. The empty hole had refortified that fraying thread.

And sent her impatience into overdrive. Now that she knew there was a way out, the space felt more claustrophobic than ever, and she couldn't bear the thought of staying one day longer than she had to. The first stone had taken her four days to chip out—four more meant sixteen more agonizing days. Every muscle in her body clenched at the thought of sixteen more days in this hell—they'd only been in somewhere around two weeks and she was already on the edge of losing her mind.

But—she didn't have to do all four sides of the stones, she could treat the group as one big stone. And now that she'd removed the first stone, she had far better angles to work with. Taking all that into account, if she hurried, it shouldn't take her much longer than the first brick did to do the rest.

She tossed and turned that night, trying to convince herself that four days was nothing. But he'd been dropping strange hints about starting a new 'family life' with new rules, like a new bed for Alexia. Did that mean he intended to share a bed with her? Her stomach clenched and twisted at the thought. She'd do what she had to do, and in the grand scheme of things, if she had to sleep with him in order to get out of here, she would—she'd much rather that than have him lay another finger of any sort on Alexia. But the thought made her skin crawl and her stomach contents erupt into her throat. She

needed to get Alexia, and herself, out before that could happen.

She decided it was worth the risk to push harder, allow three episodes of *Elinor* rather than two to work on the mortar. And between her furious motivation and the wider angles the work space gave her to chip out large chunks of mortar, by the end of the second episode of *Elinor*, she was tantalizingly close to being able to wrench out the group of stones. So much so, she grew careless; she chose a bad angle and a fragment of mortar flew backward into the room, out of sight. She searched for it but couldn't find it; she tried to tell herself it went under the bookshelves, and even if it hadn't, he'd never notice it before she spotted it. But she forced herself to slow down—she couldn't afford to be careless.

To distract herself from the impatience, she shifted to imagining the next phase of the escape. Once the stones were free, the smartest thing to do would be to wait until the next day, after he left for work. After an episode of *Elinor* to be sure he wasn't coming back for some reason, she'd unlock the shackles, remove the stones, and slip herself and Alexia through the hole. Then up the stairs, and out of the house. If there was a locked door at the top of the basement stairs, well, a door couldn't be all that much different than a padlock. All the more reason to leave in the morning rather than the afternoon, so she'd have time to unlock the doors if she needed it.

The episode ended, and the next one began. Her hand froze but didn't drop—she was so close, literally two inches from finishing. It would only take ten, maybe fifteen minutes to finish, and if she did, they'd be able to leave tomorrow.

You could fuck up a one-car funeral. Her father's derisive laugh echoed along with the words in her head. *The stupidest smart person I've ever met. Smartest in your class but couldn't keep yourself from getting knocked up twice. Pissed your potential right away.*

She stiffened, fighting the impulse to stab the metal rod right through the wall. Despite her father's lack of understanding, he was right about at least one thing: she'd

always made things harder for herself because she was just as stubborn as he was. But she'd always had one thing he didn't: the ability to learn from her mistakes. She needed to be smart, and the smart thing to do was stop and finish the following day.

She dropped the rod onto the floor and pushed herself away from the wall, then scooped up the considerable mortar she'd chipped away during the session. More than she'd realized, and she'd have to dispose of it more carefully than normal. She pushed the bed back into place, then crossed to the bathroom and began to pulverize the mortar so she could flush it.

She wasn't halfway done when the bolt clunked in the door.

Her heart exploded in her chest. How was he here so early? She shoved the pile of mortar dust into the far corner of the bathroom, the one not visible from the door. She hurried to wash the dust from her hands, staring back at the door as she did.

But when the door swung open, it wasn't him.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Paxton stared, frozen in place, as a woman stepped into the room carrying a tray of food. What the hell was going on?

She was in her late fifties, maybe early sixties, with medium gray hair swept back from her face with combs. Wearing gray slacks with a dusty-rose blouse, a turquoise statement necklace that did nothing to accent the neckline or the colors of the outfit, and rote swipes of lipstick and eyeshadow. Office wear, Paxton decided as the woman's dark, narrowed eyes swept her over from head to toe.

"You're Paxton," the woman said. Her eyes shifted as Alexia bolted to Paxton's side. "And you're Alexia."

Paxton didn't try to hide her surprise. "You called me Paxton."

The woman blew an annoyed huff through her nose. "My son's obsessed with his ex-girlfriend. We'll humor him, but I think it's good you and I know the truth."

She was his *mother*?

It fit; apart from the makeup, they looked so much alike they could be the same person. In fact—the movie *Psycho* flashed through her mind—*were* they the same person? But no, she was significantly older, and a few inches shorter.

"You don't remember me." Amusement bloomed on the woman's face. "Guess I did a good job of wrapping myself up at the mall." The woman jutted her chin toward the table.

As Paxton followed the unspoken instruction, lifting Alexia into one seat and taking another, she kept her eye on the bathroom, where the pile of mortar waited. “What should I call you?”

“You can both call me Grandma.” She distributed the food from the tray, already preassembled on plates. One sandwich each, plus a pile of chips and a brownie. “I know you’re used to having hot food for your evening meal. But my son can’t come see you tonight, and I have obligations I need to hurry to. I’ll get you some water.” Grabbing the two plastic cups still sitting on the tray, she rounded the table toward the bathroom.

Paxton’s chest contracted, and she fought to keep her face neutral. “Your son said we should only drink the bottled water?” She nodded toward the mini fridge since her fingers were visibly shaking.

The woman’s brow creased. Paxton held her breath.

She nodded, and turned back. “Probably best. We can’t raise my grandchild to think drinking from the bathroom faucet is okay.”

Paxton tried not to look relieved. “Why—why can’t he come?”

The woman cracked open a bottle of water and split it between the two cups before answering. “My son isn’t very—he struggles to make good choices without my help. He insists on doing things his way, but gets himself in trouble.”

Paxton’s chest contracted again, and she tried to read the woman’s face, but found nothing. “What kind of trouble?”

“Is Daddy sick?” Alexia asked, her little brow pursed.

Both Paxton and Grandma turned in surprise at Alexia’s reaction—Paxton disturbed, the woman clearly pleased. “Don’t worry, baby. He’s fine. Do you miss him?” she asked.

Paxton mentally held her breath.

“I like it when he plays Candy Land with me,” Alexia said.

The woman smiled, and Paxton breathed. “That was my favorite game when I was a little girl,” the woman said.

“I know. He told me,” Alexia said. “Can we play?”

The woman laughed. “Maybe tomorrow. Now eat your dinner.”

Alexia took a bite of her ham sandwich. “How come we never met you before?”

“Don’t talk with your mouthful, baby.” The woman tapped Alexia’s chin.

Paxton stiffened at the casual contact, but decided to use the opportunity. “Grandma’s right. You’ll choke that way.”

The woman’s brows rose slightly—she liked Paxton’s response, but didn’t trust it. “Daddy felt strongly that you needed time to get used to your new circumstances. He thought meeting me too soon would make things harder.” She turned to Paxton. “He thinks that’s why the others couldn’t adjust. But I disagree. I think mothers understand each other in a way nobody else can. Don’t you think that’s true?”

A chill ran down Paxton’s legs. “I do.”

“The hardest part of being a parent is letting them make their own mistakes, isn’t it?” The woman’s eyes dropped to Paxton’s sandwich. “You’re not eating, dear. I know you’re upset, but you have to keep your strength up.”

Paxton picked up the sandwich, bit into it, and chewed. When she tried to swallow, it stuck in her throat like a rock. She reached for the water.

The woman leaned over to whisper. “We have to set a good example for her, don’t we?”

Paxton nodded over the top of her cup.

The woman sat back in her chair and smiled. “You seem to have a better head on your shoulders than the others. That’s good. We don’t want you doing anything stupid.”

Paxton recognized the veiled threat. “I just want to keep my daughter safe.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. That’s what we want, too, that’s why we chose you.” She gathered the cups and plates up onto

the tray.

“I don’t understand,” Paxton said.

Grandma sighed. “Of course he didn’t explain it well, he never does. You’re a single mother with a daughter you’re struggling to support, whose drug-addict father is trying to steal her from you. You need someone to protect you and keep you safe, to be a father to Alexia and a husband to you.”

The chill went down Paxton’s legs again. This woman was as crazy as he was.

She leaned over and patted Paxton’s hand. “I know it’s strange.” She shook her head and tinkled out a laugh, like they were chatting over tea. “But you’ll see. My son is a good man, and he’ll make a good father. He has your best interests at heart.”

Unable to speak, Paxton simply nodded.

Grandma stood up and loaded the plates and cups onto the tray, shifting toward the bathroom. Paxton’s breath caught.

“More than he should, really.” She glanced around the room and her eyes landed on the bathroom. “He wouldn’t let me put a camera in here, did you know? He said the three of you needed privacy.” She shook her head like she’d never heard anything stupider. “He never listens. Now, let’s see, have I covered everything?” She glanced around the room, and her eyes landed on the bathroom.

Paxton forced herself not to look toward the room.

Finally, Grandma turned back. “Ah, yes, one last thing. We’ve had a frank conversation and know where we stand. But from now on, because it means so much to my son, I’ll call you by the names he chose. Even if it does make you blend in with the others.” She strode to the door.

Paxton found her voice again. “What happened to the others?”

She turned back. “I think you know, and I think you know why.” Her smile remained pinned in place below her steely eyes. “I have to go now. Sleep well, Angela. Sleep well, Evie.”

As soon as the bolt clunked back into place, Paxton raced to the bathroom to flush the mortar dust. Once it was cleaned she sagged down onto the floor, head in her hands as the implications of what had just happened and how close she'd been to getting caught tidal-waved over her.

A second captor—what did that mean for her escape plan? Paxton didn't know her schedule, and as it was she'd come within literal minutes of catching Paxton working on the wall. She had to assume the worst until she knew better—had to assume the woman was staying at the house, had to assume she kept different hours than her son, had to assume the woman would kill her and Alexia if she caught her doing anything wrong.

And that meant she couldn't go through with what she'd planned for tomorrow, it was just too risky. She'd have to wait until she knew the woman's schedule better, or until her son was back.

DECEMBER 11TH

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Paxton spent the next few days trying to learn anything she could from Grandma, in the hopes of getting back to her escape plan as quickly as possible. The woman claimed to want to get to know them, and Paxton tried to use it to her advantage, to build some sort of bond she could exploit. But the long line of questions she asked Paxton and Alexia felt more like an interview than anything, and no matter how revealing Paxton's answers were, when she turned the questions back to Grandma, they were skillfully deflected. The only information she was able to glean was that for some reason Grandma couldn't come see them at lunchtime, and so left sandwiches in addition to breakfast in the morning. And on the surface it seemed like a godsend to have a long stretch of day she could use to finish the wall and make their escape, but something about it all didn't ring true, like a trick designed to lull her into a false sense of security. So she continued on, listening and watching and hoping for something that would give her confidence, while the hole behind the bed pulsed like *The Tell-Tale Heart*, pulling at her sanity.

And then Alexia threw up while eating her breakfast.

Paxton's heart jumped into her throat as she dropped to Alexia's side. "Honey, are you okay?"

"I don't feel good," Alexia answered. "My tummy hurts."

Grandma turned on Paxton, stone-faced. "Do you really think I'm stupid enough to fall for a trick like this?"

Paxton glared up at her. "What do you mean, trick?"

The woman snorted. “Oh, please. The last Angela tried the same thing, pretending her daughter was sick so we’d have to let them out.”

Paxton threw her hand on Alexia’s forehead—it felt like the front of a furnace. “Oh, honey, you’re burning up. Is it just your tummy, or does something else hurt?”

“My head hurts,” she whined.

“Flu,” the woman said. “A couple of people at work had it, I must have come in contact with it and brought it to you. Hasn’t she been vaccinated?”

“She had one dose, but not the second yet. We were supposed to go—” Paxton stopped, trying to calculate what the date was. “This week, I think.”

Without a word, the woman turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

“Come on, honey, let’s get you back in bed.” Paxton picked her up and carried her, then laid her on the covers. Of all the scenarios that had run through her head since they’d been imprisoned here, the possibility of either her or Alexia getting sick had never occurred to her. Paxton’s stomach contracted—what if it was something serious, like appendicitis? She’d had her own out when she was ten, and her cousin Paul had his out when he was six.

The woman reappeared, now carrying a glass thermometer and a box of Theraflu.

She thrust out the thermometer. “Take her temperature. I wiped it down with alcohol.”

Nodding, Paxton told Alexia to open wide, then stuck the thermometer in. The woman monitored the time on her watch, and signaled when Paxton should check it.

“A hundred and two.” She turned to Grandma. “She needs to get to a doctor.”

The woman’s mouth set into a thin, solid line. “She’ll be fine. She just needs medicine.” She set the Theraflu on the

table and grabbed Alexia's barely touched water. She ripped open one of the pouches and dropped the contents into the cup.

"Drink this, baby. It'll bring your fever down." She thrust the cup toward Alexia.

With a glance at Paxton for confirmation, Alexia took the cup with both hands and sipped. She made a face. "It's yucky."

"I know, baby. But it's good for you. Drink the whole thing down, now."

Paxton glanced around the space, desperately wishing there was somewhere she could take this woman so Alexia wouldn't overhear. "A hundred and two is dangerous," she said. "She needs to go to the hospital."

She waved a hand dismissively. "It's only dangerous if it's that high for more than a day or two."

"Appendicitis runs in our family," Paxton said, trying to keep the shake out of her voice. "One of my cousins had to have an emergency appendectomy when he was six. We need to get her checked out."

The woman walked over to Alexia and pressed into the left side of her abdomen. When Alexia didn't respond, she turned to Paxton with a grimace. "There. No reaction. No appendicitis."

"Children don't always have abdominal pain with appendicitis. I didn't." When the woman's expression didn't change, Paxton reached for her arm. "Please. You said you and your son want to take care of us. But it's not taking care of us if you won't get her to see a doctor when she needs it. Take her on your own, tell the doctor she's your granddaughter."

The woman yanked her arm out of reach with a glare so fierce Paxton shrank back. "I won't tolerate having a daughter-in-law who gets hysterical at every little cough and scrape a child has. She's got some sort of cold or flu like all children get, and she'll be just fine." She leaned in and hissed the next words. "And you'd better hope you're wrong about the appendicitis, because there's no way in hell we're letting either of you see a doctor."

Paxton's knees buckled under her, and she had to reach for the bedpost to keep herself upright. "But she could die."

The woman straightened, and shook her head condescendingly. "You'd better pray to whatever you believe in that she doesn't. Because without her, you no longer serve any purpose to us."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Despite Lopez and Marzillo's warnings, Jo continued to work as many hours as she could stay awake, desperate to find the lead that would finally bring her to Paxton and Alexia. But the checking, cross-checking, and re-checking bore no fruit, and another weekend of work flew by. A necessary evil, she repeatedly told herself—the breakthrough would come soon, and once her cousins were safely at home she could deal with the strange signals she'd been picking up from Matt. But if she were honest, she didn't mind avoiding the conversation... and if she were really honest, she'd been hoping the problem would go away on its own.

On Monday night, Jo's phone buzzed through a text from Matt:

Should I make you up a plate of my chicharrones, or did you eat?

Jo stared down at the phone. Most likely it was her guilt that made the text sound accusatory, not any intention from him. But either way, it showed that Lopez and Marzillo were right—she couldn't effectively find Paxton and Alexia if she was too tired or burned out to think straight anyway, and blowing up her relationship with Matt along the way wasn't going to help. It was time to follow their advice and have a conversation with Matt.

Half an hour later, she found him on the couch, reading some thick book about the Vietnam war. "Hey," she said when

he looked up. “Would you like a glass of wine? I’d like to talk for a moment.”

“Sure, I’ll take a glass.” He stood and followed her into the kitchen. “What’s up?”

She selected a bottle of California Zinfandel from the wine rack while considering how to best approach the issue. Their relationship conversations generally centered around *her* issues, and she wasn’t sure how he’d respond to having his own behavior questioned. For two decades she’d dealt with her lack of relationship skills by refusing to become attached to any one man; Matt was the first man she’d been emotionally vulnerable with since her fiancé Jack was murdered and died in her arms twenty years before.

She uncorked the wine and poured gentle glugs into each glass. Then, as she set one glass in front of him and took the chair opposite, she took a deep breath and dove in. “I want to check in with you, because I’m picking up something I can’t put my finger on. I know I’ve been distracted trying to find Paxton and Alexia, but it started before then, on our trip to the Christmas tree lot. Since then our time together has seemed... stilted.”

He took a long sip of his wine, then rubbed his lips together before replying. “There’s no problem with us, I promise. It’s just been a difficult month.” He reached over and grabbed her hand.

The semantics of what he’d said hung her up for a second. She’d only noticed a problem for the last two weeks, not a month, and she cast her mind back to mid-November to try to identify what was happening. Then, with almost comic slowness, his real meaning hit her. “*December* is a hard month—Christmas. You don’t like Christmas.”

A shadow flitted over his face. “Not really, no.”

He didn’t say more. She didn’t want to push, but the pain on his face worried her. “Why is that?”

He lifted the wine glass by its stem and swirled the liquid inside, then watched the legs slide down before answering.

“You remember my brother Lucas?”

“He’s the reason you became a neurologist, right? He died of a rare neurological disorder?”

“Batten disease, although that name covers an entire group of neuronal ceroid lipofuscinoses disorders—” He cut himself off. “The upshot is, the body can’t dispose of cellular waste, and that results in seizures, cognitive impairment, and eventually death. He was only a year old when he started showing symptoms, and died just weeks later.”

The information came together in Jo’s mind. “At Christmas time.”

He nodded. “Diagnosed the last week of November, and died three days before Christmas.”

Jo’s chest went numb. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I can see why that would give the season a very different meaning.”

His brows raised. “There’s more to it than that. My mother decided it was her job to keep us protected from it. I was seven, Marcos was six and Angelica was five, and she decided we were too young to fully process the death. We needed normalcy, she decided, and since she’s always been a woman of profound faith, she also believed you turn to God in times of trouble, not away from him. So instead of putting the Christmas celebrations on hold that year, she decided the best thing was to celebrate Christmas as devoutly as possible.”

Jo remained silent as he paused to stare at the wall for a long moment.

“Other than to remind us to pray for Lucas, she made no mention of him whatsoever. We observed every single tradition. To this day I hate majarete because she made us force it down that Christmas Eve. I felt sick when she made us open our presents—even Angelica could tell something was wrong and didn’t want to. And when I unwrapped the radio-controlled car I’d asked for, I had to force myself not to throw up. I felt guilty, like I’d made some monkey-paw trade with

Santa, like he took my baby brother in exchange for giving me the car.” He broke off, and his eyes filled with tears.

Jo placed her hand on his arm. “You know that’s not true.”

“My mind knows that.” He rubbed his hand over his eyes. “But I’ve never been able to convince that little boy that lives inside of me.”

“I’m so sorry. You must have been so confused.”

He nodded. “I know she meant well. And Marcus and Angelica don’t have any hang-ups about the holidays, so for them it was right. Maybe I was just too old, because I could see her fighting through her pain with every ornament she hung and every dish she cooked. And I couldn’t do anything to help.”

“So Christmas is synonymous with pain and loss for you.”

He rubbed his eyes again. “It’s hard to explain. I love the sentiment that lies behind the holiday, and the time spent with family. But there’s something about the trappings that feel artificial to me now. Like they’re hiding reality.”

Jo thought back to the night Paxton and Alexia disappeared, when the mall’s Christmas decorations had felt sinister and surreal. “Once when I was talking to a crime-scene cleaner at some department gathering, he told me that after the first time you paint over bloodstains on a wall, you never look at paint again without wondering what’s underneath.”

He met her eyes. “That’s very well put.”

Jo took a sip from her glass and sank back in her chair. “And here I was pushing Christmas down your throat. I’m sorry, and I get it. I’ll explain to my family so you don’t have to come smile through it all.”

Matt’s hands dropped under the table. “No, that’s what makes it so difficult. I don’t want to be some hermit that hides out from mid-November until January.”

Jo’s index finger traced the bottom of the wine glass. “What’s the solution, then?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out for years. If I do all the things my family expects, I feel resentful and sick. If I don’t, I feel guilty and sick. I don’t think there is a solution.”

Jo reached up and clasped the diamond on her necklace. “Let me know if I’m way off base, but... have you ever actually grieved for your brother?”

He hiccupped a laugh. “I have no idea.”

She entwined her fingers through his. “That might be a good place to start.”

His eyes filled with tears again. “How?”

“I think it’s different for everyone. A therapist can help you find the way.” His hand stiffened under hers. “In the meantime, new relationships are the perfect time for new beginnings, so maybe we can come up with new ways to celebrate that step away from those memories.”

“That wouldn’t be fair to you. I’ve seen the joy on your face when you celebrate with your family. I get the sense this is your favorite time of year.”

“It is.” Jo shrugged. “That doesn’t mean you have to be there for every moment of it. Maybe you do what feels right and don’t do what doesn’t.”

“It’s worth a shot.” But he didn’t look convinced.

“And in the meantime I can have my therapist recommend someone for you to see.”

He hesitated just a moment too long before he responded. “Sounds good. For now, let’s get some sleep.”

She leaned over to kiss him. “I’ll be right up, as soon as I wash these glasses.”

He drained his glass by way of agreement, then headed upstairs. She watched him warily as he went.

Jo woke at three in the morning, heart pounding, covered in sweat. Paxton and Alexia loomed in front of her in the

darkness, Alexia screaming, Paxton angrily crying out to her for help.

The detective in her knew the statistics: Paxton and Alexia were almost certainly long dead. But as a family member she refused to hear that, like a child putting her fingers in her ears. *Her* cousins would be the miracle pair that survived and were rescued. And she viscerally understood all the friends and family she'd watched cling furiously to hope even after their loved one had been missing for years—even as the detective portion of her brain grappled with the delusion of it.

She shifted as carefully as she could, trying not to wake Matt. She was missing *something*, she knew it. People didn't kidnap women and children without leaving some trace somewhere, it just wasn't possible. If not physical evidence at the crime scene, then some sort of psychological evidence in it all. Every choice a perpetrator made revealed something about them. She'd tried everything, looked everywhere, and found nothing, started over and looked everywhere again. Usually that was enough, but this time—maybe she was just too close to it all? Maybe having family at the center of the investigation had blinded her to truths she should be able to see, and by extension, had blinded her whole team. Therapists didn't treat family members for just this reason—they couldn't be objective about the psychology involved. Maybe she should have recused herself from the case, and let someone else handle it. Or maybe she should call someone else in for a consult, maybe an FBI behavioral analysis unit, get an independent look at the psychology of it all. But they were far too busy to send someone for a case that could easily turn out to be a mother who decided to disappear, and if she waited until another mother-child pair went missing, it would be far too late—

An idea sprang into her head. If what she needed was another set of eyes, unbiased eyes, to give her insight into a potential serial killer—the FBI weren't the only experts she knew on the topic.

DECEMBER 12TH

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Jo glanced around the private visitation room, hands cradling the cup of coffee the prison guard had given her. She'd visited Pioneer Valley Correctional Facility more times than she could count, but they'd done a 'renovation' since her last trip. Surface only, as it turned out; the cement-block walls were painted a beige now instead of light gray, and the doors were brown instead of dark gray. A faux wood-grained rectangular table slashed the small room; Jo suspected the obvious laminate had been applied atop the pre-existing table. She pulled out her phone to send off a text to Arnett; she hadn't told him where she was going so he couldn't object to the plan.

The door opened just as she finished. Diana Montauk, a serial killer she and her team had hunted down a few months previously, stepped through the door, followed by a prison guard. As he gave instructions about the visitation rules and reminded Diana the meeting was being recorded, Jo assessed her carefully, then watched her smooth gait as she crossed to sit on the other side of the laminate table. There was a discordance between her carriage and the olive-green scrubs and cuffed hands, as though she'd been miscast in a community theater play. She watched Jo just as carefully as Jo watched her.

"How's my cat?" Diana asked as she slipped into the chair. Cleopatra actually belonged to Diana; she'd asked Jo to care for the Sphynx while she was in prison. Jo had agreed, without ever fully understanding why.

“She misses you, but she’s happy.” Jo held up her phone with a picture of Cleopatra curled in a sunbeam. “You’re looking well.”

“Plenty of time for beauty sleep and healthy exercise,” Diana said. “And plenty of time to think.”

“I’m glad to see you’re adjusting well,” Jo said, ready to weigh her reaction.

“You can adjust to anything for a time,” Diana said. “It’s temporary. The jury won’t convict me.”

Jo took a long sip of coffee and made her final decisions; this is what she’d been hoping for. “When we last met, in that garage, you told me you believed we were kindred spirits.”

Diana leaned back against her chair, setting her hands into her lap. “We do the same work. We neutralize men who prey on women. But you allow yourself to be limited by the strictures of the legal system, while I have full freedom to track down men who slip through the justice system’s cracks.”

Jo nodded. It was a seductive idea, throwing off the restrictions that allowed killers to go free, and Jo had almost succumbed to it. But she’d seen too often how badly things could go when law enforcement believed they knew better than the constitution who deserved protection and who didn’t. “Do you still see yourself that way?”

Her response came immediately. “As a warrior of justice? Of course.”

“Excellent. Because I’d like your help.”

Diana’s carefully composed neutral mask flickered, replaced by curiosity. “How?”

“Someone’s hurting women and children. My instinct says it’s a serial killer, but I need evidence of that, and I’ve exhausted every avenue. You’ve tracked down more than one killer. I’m missing something, and I’m hoping you’ll see what it is.” Jo opened the folder she’d brought with her and showed Diana a carefully curated set of photographs and documents about the case. Diana shifted her chair closer and flipped

through the documents. Jo watched her face shift through a cavalcade of emotions as she listened, ending on confusion.

Diana pointed to the Christmas angel ornament in the crime-scene photo of Aspyn and Ivy's remains. "This was buried with them?"

"Yes." Jo forced herself not to say more.

Diana flipped through the file for a few minutes in silence, then sat back in her chair. "Your instinct is right. They're connected. And while your killer may know the father, this has nothing to do with the custody battle."

So far all this did was confirm what Jo already knew—she needed something more. "Can you pinpoint why you think that?"

"The same reasons you do. Too many similarities. You were careful about how you phrased it, but the root of it all is someone's looking for mothers and daughters. That doesn't accidentally happen three times."

Jo waited.

Diana flipped back and tapped the angel in the picture. "This doesn't make sense. And that tells me it's the key to what you're missing."

Jo nodded. "Because it's there for a reason that makes sense to him. And since it doesn't make sense to me, I'm thinking about it all wrong."

"Exactly." Diana tapped her nails on the desk. "What I would have done was figure out why that angel's important to him. That gives me his psychology. Then I'd use that information to manipulate him into doing what I wanted."

Jo sighed. "I'm not looking to manipulate someone."

Diana tilted her head in acknowledgment. "No. But killers don't spring fully formed from the nether. They do what they do for a reason. Kill the way they kill for a reason. Every man I hunted had his own rotten core. Something in your killer's past will make *this* make sense."

Jo's eyes raked the pictures. If she knew what the presence of the angel meant, then she could develop a profile based on it. Or if she already had a profile for the type of killer who killed mothers and daughters together, she could use it to figure out how this angel fit in. But she needed one or the other as a starting point to move forward—

But no, she realized—she didn't. She already had this narrowed down to two main suspects, two people only, one of whose past contained something that would make sense of the angel. She just needed to learn everything she could about both their pasts until she found that thing. And she'd know it once she found it, because everything would slip into place.

When she glanced back up, Diana was smiling broadly, like a mother watching her child's first steps. She'd followed Jo's breakthrough on her face, and it was a chilling reminder of just how insightful and dangerous Diana Montauk was.

Jo considered her. "What was it that made you do what you do, Diana? Why do you hunt men who hurt women?"

Diana's broad smile narrowed to a tight, wry one. She stood and gestured to the guard outside the door. "Let's save that for our next chat, Detective. I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

Arnett was elbow-deep in his monitor when she arrived at HQ. She handed him the coffee she'd brought for him and tapped his shoulder. "Come on."

He followed her, gulping coffee, to where Lopez was glued to her monitor. Stacks of paper laid out around her, and several cans of Rockstar sat within inches of her hand. She swung around at the sound of their entry.

"Hey, Jo. You weren't here at the crack of dawn, so I'm hoping that means you managed some sleep." Lopez looked her up and down. "You don't look nearly as chewed up."

"Thanks, I think." Jo pulled a chair out for Arnett, then grabbed one for herself. "I had a mini-epiphany that I want to talk to you guys about."

Lopez pulled her legs up into a criss-cross position and grabbed her Rockstar. “I could certainly use one of those, so hit me with it.”

“So. I went to see Diana Montauk first thing this morning, that’s why I’m in late.”

Arnett’s eyes narrowed; Lopez’s head tilted in query.

Jo gave them a recap of the conversation. “I think she’s exactly right. Whoever our killer is, their past contains traces of who they are today. So I’m thinking we need to drill down into our primary suspects’ pasts hard until we find what we need. I don’t mean background checks and basic facts. I mean I want to know what they used to eat for breakfast when they were in kindergarten.”

Lopez’s brows flashed up. “Define primary suspects.”

Jo nodded enthusiastically. “We have three possibilities I can see. The first is easy. If one of Patrick’s friends is involved in this, John Carpazi is at the center of it, since he’s the one who sent the text alerting everyone that Alexia was at the mall —”

“But whatever his role was, we know he didn’t physically kidnap her,” Arnett said.

“Right. So in his case, we’re just looking for something we can use to lean on him and get him to cooperate with us. Once we have that, we can basically set him up as an informant to suss out who in Patrick’s circle is responsible.”

Lopez’s brows popped up again, and stayed in place. “That’s way more cutthroat than you’re usually willing to go.”

“I honestly don’t think we’ll need to do it. My gut says either Trevor Rodgers or Dustin Foley or both is our killer, based on Rodgers’s fingerprint and Foley’s strange behavior after overhearing Paxton’s altercation with Carpazi.”

“Speaking of, I just heard back from the Santa people. Foley was the Eastfield Mall Santa in 2019.”

“But Aspyn and Ivy were nowhere near a mall when they disappeared,” Lopez said.

“Maybe he was in the area and spotted an opportunity on that one,” Arnett said.

“And,” Jo said, “we know Trevor Rodgers also worked at Eastfield Mall in 2019. But despite that, we’ve run into dead ends with both of them, and Hayes will pull the surveillance teams if we don’t find anything new. So they’re the two we really go in hard on. School records, interviews with childhood friends, detailed maps of their location data, whatever we need to piece together to make a 3D model of their lives. And not just us. I’m going to call Lacey Bernard at the *Springfield Gazette* to put her on it, too. She has contacts we don’t.”

“By that you mean she can get away with lying and hacking and stealing people’s mail.” Lopez cracked her knuckles, then rubbed her hands together. “And it means I get to make myself some fake social media profiles.”

“Yes, please, do your thing. In the meantime, I want to go personally out to the places they grew up and talk to whoever knew them. I also want to go up to South Deerfield and check out the general area where Aspy and Ivy disappeared, see if I can spot anything that lines up with our other two pairs. You in, Bob?”

“Couldn’t pay to keep me away.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Jo pulled into the guest parking lot of Mt. Tom Public, where Trevor Rodgers went to high school, twenty minutes later.

“Why is it that whenever I walk into a high school, I feel like an awkward teenager again?” Arnett grumbled as they approached the white stone colonnade and tower that anchored the large red brick building.

“Because that sort of trauma is foundational,” Jo said. “It never goes away, it just weaves itself in amongst all your other trauma.”

A stop into the main office pointed them to two teachers who’d worked at the school when Rodgers had attended. Ritchie Santos, who’d been his history teacher, remembered Trevor as quiet, without many friends, but never a troublemaker. His attendance was good, and he produced consistent B quality work.

Carole Woody had been his English teacher. Since the lunch bell rang as they finished talking with Ritchie Santos, the office staff arranged for them to talk with her in the teachers’ lounge.

“Since I was a kid I’ve wondered what a teachers’ lounge looks like,” Arnett said as they followed the administrator’s directions to the right room.

“Same here.” Jo glanced furtively up and down the corridor. “Even in my late forties it feels like I’m doing something wrong opening this door.”

She pushed through it nonetheless. The room was surprisingly cozy and bright; three circular tables filled the center of the room while three futons and several armchairs lined the outer edges. On the left side a counter extended halfway across the wall, complete with sink, cabinets, and the all-important industrial coffee maker with dueling twenty-cup carafes. Two teachers were already installed at the tables: a gray-haired, bird-like man reading a book and eating a sandwich from a paper bag, and a woman with a blonde bob and stylishly casual clothes watching them closely.

“You’re the detectives.” She gestured toward the chairs around her table. “I’m Carole Woody. They said you wanted to talk about Trevor Rodgers.”

Jo introduced herself and Arnett as they sat. “Thank you for taking time out of your lunch.”

“Oh, this won’t take long. I’ve always wondered when someone would ask me about this.”

Jo shot Arnett a look. “Ask you about what, exactly?”

“Not anything specific so much. More like the sort of thing where he ended up splashed across the papers and they’d quote me saying, ‘I always knew something wasn’t quite right.’”

Jo’s eyes widened at the scenario, and a dozen questions sprung into her head. She couldn’t pick just one, so threw out two. “What did you imagine he’d be splashed across the papers for? And what wasn’t quite right?”

“Hmm.” Carole took a deep breath, then paused. “Put it this way. You know those men you hear about in the news who are angry because women won’t date them? Incels, I think they’re called?”

Jo and Arnett nodded.

“He was like that. Just couldn’t connect with girls very well. He didn’t know how to approach them. And he was desperate for their attention, and I’ll tell you what, teenaged girls pick up on that in two seconds flat.”

Jo's pulse ramped up—it fit with what they'd seen. “So he never had a successful relationship with a classmate, then?”

Carole grimaced and gave a head tilt. “There was one girl I think for a while. She was socially awkward, too, and for a while I thought, hey, every pot has a lid. But they broke up.”

“You know why?” Arnett asked.

“I don't. But I know it messed with him, and he was even more solitary after that.”

“Do you know the name of that girl he dated?”

“I don't. She was in AP English and I didn't teach that, so I never had her in my class.”

“You have old yearbooks around, right? If we look through the one from his year, could you recognize her?”

Jo wasn't even finished her sentence when Carole started shaking her head. “Nope. I've seen literally thousands of kids over the years. I barely remember the ones I have in class now unless they create problems or make As. The rest blur together into lumps of hairstyles.”

Jo stood and handed Carole a card. “If anything else occurs to you, please give us a call.”

Carole took the card, and gave a single, swift nod. “Will do.”

Jo and Arnett spent the rest of the morning hunting down anybody who knew Trevor Rodgers at his elementary school and at his previous job at Eastfield Mall. Nobody at the elementary school remembered him; several teachers were left from when he attended, but they hadn't had him in class. Everyone at Incredible Toys who'd worked with him said he was a good worker and assistant manager. He was quiet and not very social, they said, but they assumed that was due to him wanting to keep a professional boss-employee relationship. He seemed to really enjoy being around children, and got to the point where he knew quite a few of them by name, and would talk to them and their parents when they

came in. No, they couldn't remember if that included both father and mothers, or boy and girl children. No, none of them had found it suspicious.

After a quick break for lunch, they regrouped.

"Until we hear back from his neighbors, I'm not sure we can get much more on Rodgers," Arnett said.

"So we have a choice to make. It's about equidistant to the Yankee Candle flagship and Harper's Ferry, where Dustin Foley grew up. But I have some more phone calls to make to Foley's schools, so on second thought, scouting out Yankee Candle first would give me time to make those calls."

"Sounds good. I'll drive, you make the calls."

Hoping for the same sort of luck she'd had at Trevor's high school, Jo called into Harper's Ferry High School's administrative office and asked to talk to the teachers who'd been there when Dustin was. But Dustin was five years older than Trevor, and those five years made a difference; none of Foley's teachers were still with the school. She got names and phone numbers for the three who'd most recently retired, but ended up reaching a series of voice mailboxes. Then she tracked down both Dustin Foley's and Trevor Rodgers's yearbooks online.

"Found 'em!" she cheered as Arnett pulled into the Yankee Candle parking lot.

"I didn't realize you were so enthusiastic about candles," Arnett deadpanned.

"Funny," Jo said. "I found the yearbooks. Hopefully we can hunt down a few of their classmates."

Arnett peered up at the building as he clicked off his seat belt. "I forgot how big this building is."

Jo nodded. "And with a huge parking lot that goes nearly all the way around, just like the mall."

"And there's what, a popcorn store and a pizza place here." Arnett glanced around as they slammed the doors behind

them. “Perfect place to bring a kid for a fun day. Because, you know, it’s always Christmas here.”

Jo popped her brows at the reference to one of the store’s banners. “With a similar parking lot, you could easily have a similar MO for snatching someone you had your eye on. Especially after dark.”

Arnett reached for the entrance door, and Jo braced herself. She’d always been highly sensitive to smells—she couldn’t wear most perfumes—and it didn’t take much to overwhelm her. A store with literally hundreds of scents competing for her attention was the equivalent of ten radios all blasting different sounds at her.

They both surveyed the interior, getting their bearings. She wasn’t sure how it was possible, but splashed as it was with every manner of Christmas decoration, the store managed to look even larger on the inside, like some sort of seasonal TARDIS.

“We probably want to take a stroll through the Bavarian Village,” Arnett said. “That seems to be the nexus of the Yankee Candle Christmas experience.”

“So I see.” Her phone buzzed a notification. “Lacey Bernard’s texting.” She tapped to pull up the message.

Been doing some digging. Found a literal skeleton.

Jo’s pulse skyrocketed. *What do you mean? Where?* she typed, then crashed into Arnett, who’d come to a sudden stop in front of her.

“Dammit, sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going, Lacey said she—” Jo stopped mid-sentence as she followed Arnett’s gaze.

Among the multitude of festive displays, Yankee Candle had a Santa Claus for the children to take pictures with.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Paxton spent the rest of the day and all night pushing fluids on Alexia, and sponging down her face with cold water from the mini-fridge. She gave her additional Theraflu at intervals measured by *Elinor* episodes while the DVD player battery lasted, then by her best guess once the player died. The entire time she prayed furiously for Alexia's fever to break.

It didn't. By the next morning it read 102.3 degrees.

When Grandma showed up with breakfast, Paxton pleaded with her again to take Alexia to a doctor. The woman turned her back without a word, leaving another box of Theraflu and a four pack of Pedialyte bottles on the table behind her.

As Paxton stared at the pathetic excuse for medical treatment, the panic that had been building all night dissolved, leaving in its place a blinding clarity. Alexia needed a doctor—it might already be too late.

She couldn't be sure she hadn't lost track of one or more days, but as best she could tell, today was Tuesday; if she had missed a day, that would make it Wednesday, or Thursday at most, all typical workdays. And while on Saturday and Sunday, Grandma had appeared with their meals wearing jeans and a T-shirt, she was back in business attire again. All indications pointed to her going to work today.

She could be wrong. Grandma might have taken vacation to come watch over them for her son. She might only work part-time. She might decide to surprise Paxton in the middle of the day just to keep her on her toes. Paxton couldn't be certain.

But she knew for certain that her daughter needed a doctor—and that it might already be too late. She had to get them the hell out of this dungeon, and she had to do it now.

Paxton selected a book to read to Alexia and forced herself to read it slowly. Not for Alexia's sake—she was asleep—but to estimate as best she could a half-hour from Grandma's departure. Then, as soon as she flipped the last page, she sprung into action.

Shackles first. Thank God for all the practice she'd done, because the fear of Grandma walking back through the door reduced her to all thumbs and sweaty palms and it felt like she'd never finish. Alexia's were even harder since Paxton didn't want to wake her and had to work at an odd angle. But finally the second lock flicked off and they were both free.

As gently as possible she shifted the bed away from the wall, then retrieved the rod from the toilet tank. Her strikes were far clumsier than they'd ever been; her hands and arms shook and at least half of the strikes missed the mortar completely with vibrating clangs as metal hit stone. She paused to gather herself, taking deep breaths, and resurrected a tool she'd used during her time on the McDonald's grill years ago, flipping and assembling burgers to the tune of Lady Gaga's 'Bad Romance', like a sea shanty. Almost instantly her strikes became more coordinated, and her hands shook less.

Finally—finally—the last segment of mortar cracked and fell onto the floor.

She squeezed her fingers into the gap and worked the stone free. As she pulled it out, she held her breath, sure a pair of malevolent eyes would be staring back at her through the darkness. The stones were heavier than she anticipated, and they almost slipped from her hands. She swore aloud, gave her heart a moment to recover, then slid them down the wall.

This time her view of the bottle of bleach was almost fully unobstructed, along with rolls of paper towels next to it. She reached through and pulled the bottle gingerly through to her

side, then followed with several rolls of paper towels. She checked again—there was clear passage into the other room.

“Wake up, honey.” She gently shook Alexia’s shoulder. “Wake up.”

Alexia’s eyes popped groggily open. “I’m thirsty, Mommy.”

“Sit up, honey.” Paxton grabbed a bottle of Pedialyte off the table, cracked it open, and held it up to Alexia’s lips. “Small sips.”

As Alexia drank, Paxton weighed her demeanor. This wasn’t the sickest she’d seen Alexia—a severe case of RSV a few months before had led to bronchiolitis—but this wasn’t far off. Alexia wouldn’t be able to walk or run far, especially without a coat out in the December weather—even a few minutes to get to a neighbor’s house could be dangerous. And Paxton had no idea how far she’d have to go to find a neighbor who was at home in the middle of the day during the week. She might have to go several blocks to find someone who could help them.

And—what if it were raining, or snowing?

With a glance back at the still-locked door, she snatched Alexia off the bed and set her on the couch. She flipped back the comforter and grabbed the thinner blanket just underneath. She folded it in two, then reaching back to Alexia’s infancy, called up memories of how to assemble a makeshift BabyBjörn. It wouldn’t be much, but it would keep Alexia slightly warmer in the cold air, and would keep her from having to run in bare feet.

“What are you doing, Mommy?” Alexia asked.

“Hang on, honey.” Once she was satisfied the carrier would work, she grabbed an unopened bottle of Pedialyte, tucked it into one of the folds, then grabbed the makeshift lockpicks and stuffed them in her pocket. “It’s time for us to go, honey.”

Alexia looked down at her shackle-free ankle. “Now?”

“Yes, honey, now. Do you see that hole?” Paxton pointed to the wall. “You need to crawl through, and then I’ll crawl through right after you. Okay?”

Alexia glanced to the wall and back, eyes wide and chin trembling. “What’s in there?”

“Just another room, honey. Then we’ll go up the stairs and outside.”

“And then we’ll go to Friendly’s with my real grandma?” she asked.

Tears stung Paxton’s eyes. “Yes, honey. But we have to go now, and we have to be super quiet. How quiet can you be?” She put her fingers up to her lips.

Alexia imitated the gesture. “Shhhh.”

Paxton put on a smile. “That’s my good girl. Let’s go.”

When they reached the wall, she pointed through. “See, there are shelves, and a basement. I’m going to put your feet through first. Then you just scoot forward and step off the shelves, okay?”

Alexia nodded.

Paxton directed her feet back through the hole, and set her down as carefully as possible. Then she held her breath as Alexia cleared the shelving unit, praying she wouldn’t bang her head or knock the unit over. But years of mini-mover gymnastics had given Alexia excellent body awareness, and she made it off easily.

“Okay, Mommy’s turn. Stand back.” As soon as Alexia shifted to the side, she plunged her head and arms through, clearing her shoulders with a squeeze, and rested her hands on the shelf. Testing the shelves’ stability as she went, she walked her hands forward until she hit cold cement. She pulled herself the rest of the way through, placing each knee silently onto the metal shelf one at a time.

Once on the floor, she untied half of the blanket and pulled Alexia to her. “Put your legs around my waist and your arms around my neck,” she whispered.

Once Alexia followed her instructions, she rewrapped and retied the blanket, adjusting the Pedialyte next to her. She stood, praying it would hold. When it did, she sprung toward the shadowy steps at the left side of the room, racing up as quickly as she could, grateful for the silence of her stockinged feet, praying the door was unlocked.

When the knob hit her hand, it didn't turn.

“Shit.” She dropped to her knees and grabbed the picks out of her pocket. With deep breaths to steady her pulse, she stuck them in and closed her eyes, allowing her newly acquired senses to guide her. This lock was different, but enough of the same, and she forced herself to remain calm.

After what felt like an hour, the last pin slipped into place. A euphoric blast of adrenaline surged through her as she swung the door open.

She stepped into a kitchen straight out of 1995, decorated with worn dark-wood cabinets and a glass-topped table. Her gaze flew around the room searching for an exterior door; she spotted it and lunged toward it. Again locked, but this one had a safety button on the inside. She twisted it and yanked open the door.

Grandma stood in front of her, astonishment frozen on her face, keys in one hand extended toward the knob, the other clasping a brown grocery bag to her side.

Paxton gaped back across the threshold for a moment too long, and Grandma's face morphed from shock to anger. “How in the hell—”

Grandma stepped forward, dropping the grocery bag and keys onto the floor so she could reach for Paxton and Alexia.

A pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream rolled out of the bag, directly under Grandma's foot. She stumbled and reached for the wall to keep from falling.

The sight sprung Paxton from her shock. She grabbed the bottle of Pedialyte from the folds of the blanket and swung it as hard as she could at Grandma. The impact smacked her head against the wall, and she slid to the floor.

Paxton didn't wait to see if she was unconscious or dead. She flew out the back door, onto the porch. As she pounded down the small flight of stairs, she glanced up to find the closest neighbor's house so she'd know which way to run.

Instead, she screeched to a halt.

There were no neighbors. As far as she could see, there was only snow-covered fields, orchards, and forest.

And it was starting to snow.

CHAPTER FIFTY

“You have to be kidding me,” Jo said, staring at the Yankee Candle Santa Claus. “This can’t be a coincidence. All three of our missing mother-daughter pairs visited a Santa Claus before they disappeared?”

“Normally I’d say we shouldn’t jump the gun since we don’t know Aspyn even made it to Yankee Candle, but—” Arnett said.

“But since finding my cousins while they might still be alive is the most important priority, we have to follow every possible lead,” Jo finished for him.

He glanced around the brick-paved village, raking his hands through his hair. “Only problem is, follow it where? We searched his house, and he has no other property.”

Jo remembered the phone in her hand. “Hang on, Lacey also thinks she found something important.” Jo tapped through a call. “Lacey. I don’t suppose whatever you found is related to Dustin Foley?”

“It is. Why?”

“I’ll explain later. What did you find?”

Lacey dove in. “When you asked me to work my magic, I went into background-mode, checking the news archives for the relevant times and places, looking for anything that stood out.”

“Smart approach,” Jo said.

“I tried a few different combos of keywords right off the bat, hoping to avoid the hell of a chronological search. One of the terms I threw in was ‘Harper’s Ferry High School,’ and something very interesting came up.”

“What’s that?”

“One of Dustin Foley’s classmates, a girl named Angela MacIntire, went missing in 2003. I figured that might be the sort of coincidence you’re looking for.”

Jo shot a glance at Arnett, and shoved a finger in her ear to block out the Yankee Candle noise. “Yes, absolutely. What did you find out?”

“Her skull and some bones were found in a grave in the forest a year later,” Lacey said.

“Can you send me the article?” Jo asked.

“I’m sending it now,” Lacey said. “I also did a quick check, and the girl’s mother still lives in Harper’s Ferry. I thought you might want to go have a talk with her. I’ll send you the contact info I found.”

“Thank you, my friend. You may have saved a life today.” As Jo pulled up the information Lacey had just sent, she recounted the conversation to Arnett.

Arnett peered down at the article that appeared on her phone. “Angela bears more than a passing resemblance to Paxton. Darker hair, but similar face shape.”

“She does. And if that’s where this all began, Angela’s mother may be able to tell us something to help us find wherever he has Paxton and Alexia hidden.” Jo tapped to connect the phone number Lacey had sent.

“I’ll go check to see who’s responsible for employing Yankee Candle’s Santa.” Arnett strode off.

After a couple of rings, a middle-aged woman’s voice picked up. “Hello?”

“Hello, I’m Detective Josette Fournier of the Oakhurst County State Police Detective Unit. I’m calling for Shari MacIntire?”

“This is she,” Shari answered. “You said you’re a detective? Is this about my daughter?”

“Yes. If you have a few minutes, I have a few questions I’d like to ask you.”

There was a pause. “You have new evidence?”

“We might. Could I meet with you in person? I can get to you in about half an hour to an hour?”

“Can you come to my work? I’m not due to get off until five, but I can take my afternoon break to talk with you. Otherwise, I can meet you at home after six.”

“Your work is fine. Where is that?”

“Kitty Corner Café on Elm.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Jo hung up as Arnett returned from the Santa Station. “Any luck?”

“Yankee Candle’s Santa is provided by the same company Dustin Foley works for. The ‘counter elf’ gave me a contact at Seasonal Stations headquarters.” He held up a card.

“I’ve got an appointment with Angela’s mom, for as soon as we can get there,” Jo said. “You want to drive or make the call?”

“I’ll drive,” Arnett said. “Let’s get moving.”

The Seasonal Stations number deposited Jo into the voice mail of someone titled ‘regional manager.’ She left a message explaining the urgency of the situation and asking for a call back. Then she tried every other number she could find for Seasonal Stations, but nobody would give her any information about past employee assignments without clearance from said regional manager.

Jo’s leg bounced frantically against the Crown Vic’s seat. “Part of me wants to go grab Foley right now, throw him up against the wall, and tase him until he tells me where my cousin is.”

“Been there. But there’s always a possibility the missing girl and the Santa situation are coincidences. We’ve seen bigger ones,” Arnett said, then sent her a look. “Your instinct to dig back into his history was sound. If he did have something to do with this Angela girl’s disappearance, Shari MacIntire will know something that helps us understand his MO. Hang in there.”

Jo nodded, then pointed ahead of them. “That must be where we’re headed.”

The Kitty Corner Café was a thatched-roof white cottage adorned with cat murals. As Jo and Arnett crossed the postage-stamp parking lot, Jo eyed the empty planters, absently wondering what brand of flower would eventually bloom from under the half-melted remnants of gray snow.

Shari MacIntire spotted them the moment they opened the door, and before the bell stopped jangling waved to a second waitress to signal her break. As the door closed behind them, she gestured them toward a table in the corner, and put together a coffee tray with an economy of movement borne of years of experience. Jo compared her to the picture she’d seen of Angela; they had the same dark hair and eyes and the same pixie chin. But a haunted quality hung over Shari like an invisible storm cloud that contrasted with the happy optimism Jo had seen in Angela’s eyes.

As she slid into one of the two remaining chairs, Shari unloaded the tray. “I’m afraid to ask,” she said, expression wary. “What brings you here to me today?”

Jo recognized the learned helplessness of family members waiting in perpetual purgatory for news of their loved ones, hopes raised and dashed so many times the ringing phone itself was a trigger. Pulling her punches would only add to this woman’s pain.

“We’re investigating the disappearance of a mother and child from Oakhurst Mall. Also two similar mother-child disappearances from the past five years, one in South Deerfield, and one in Springfield.”

Shari's jaw clenched, and she held Jo's eyes. "If you think it's related to my daughter, I believe you're right. I've been saying for years my daughter was kidnapped and killed by Dustin Foley, but nobody wants to hear it."

Jo leaned forward, chest tight. "Why do you believe that?"

"He dated my daughter for two years, until she broke up with him. Then, not even a week later, she goes missing. There's no way that's a coincidence. And when all of Harper's Ferry and its surrounds came out to search for her? I saw in his eyes that he knew there was no point."

"And you told the police this?" Jo asked.

"Of course I did. But they wouldn't listen to me."

Jo's brows creased. Generally a recent ex-boyfriend was the first person the police would suspect. "Did they say why?"

"They said he had an alibi. Angela went missing on a Sunday evening. She'd been at her friend Sara's house, and she left at five to walk home in time for dinner at six. When she didn't make it, I called, but her phone went straight to voice mail. I called Sara, but she and her mother assured me Angela had left an hour before. I called the police right away, and she was nowhere to be found, so she must have disappeared between five and six. But Dustin worked at the pizza parlor in town, and several co-workers, including the owner, swore he was there and in sight of them the whole time. He got to work at ten minutes to five for the dinner shift, and hadn't even taken a break before six."

"But you're convinced he killed her," Jo said, careful to make sure her tone sounded inquisitive rather than judgmental.

"I know I sound crazy and fixated, but I know what I saw in his eyes." She stabbed at her chest to punctuate the words. "Sara must have been wrong about exactly when Angela left. Angela went over there nearly every Sunday and sometimes she left earlier than others, usually if she had a project or something due at school the next day. Sara must have gotten confused, or mixed up the days, and was too proud to admit it."

“So they just left it at that?” Arnett asked.

Shari’s jaw clenched. “They said they checked him out thoroughly. But of course her hair and fingerprints and DNA were all over his house and car and even his clothes, since they’d only just stopped seeing each other. The only thing that could have been used as evidence of foul play was blood, and they didn’t find any that belonged to her. But there are plenty of ways to kill someone that don’t leave blood.”

Jo winced. Culpatory evidence with an ambiguous provenance was the sort of scenario that gave her nightmares.

“Anyway.” Shari waved her statement away like a fly hovering over their coffee. “I hear from someone every few years because they have a new theory, but nothing ever comes of it. So let’s hear yours.”

Jo held her eyes. “Dustin Foley was seen with our missing mother and child an hour before they disappeared. We believe he may be involved, but we can’t prove it, and there’s no way he could be keeping them at his address. We thought he might have some sort of meaningful spot or hiding place from his childhood where he brings his victims.”

Shari laughed, a pink flush dotting her cheeks and throat. “Good luck with that. Two-hundred-fifty-odd acres of farmland and forest, especially one with big ravines and the like? You’d better bring scent dogs, because it’ll take weeks to search otherwise.”

Jo’s brows popped. “Can you give me the address of the property they used to own?”

Shari’s face flashed confusion. “Used to own? His mother still owns it. Been in her family for something like two-hundred years.”

Jo felt like she was caught inside a rotating fun-house tunnel. “Isn’t his mother dead?”

“Evelyn Gillette? I saw her down at the Big Y two weekends ago.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Paxton furiously scanned the landscape in front of her, eyes straining for any sign of civilization, or anything that could help her. A large field covered in uneven swaths of old snow extended around the house; just past that a ring of evenly planted orchards separated the field from dense forest and mountain beyond. The falling snow was currently gentle, but not only could that change in an instant, it meant the temperature was literally freezing, with evening fast approaching. The burst of adrenaline in her system was staving off the cold, but that illusion wouldn't last long. Heading out in the wrong direction would mean almost certain death—even if she had a coat and shoes.

She shot a desperate glance back over her shoulder. Grandma's feet were unmoving just inside the kitchen door—she was still unconscious. Paxton could go back in and find the phone, call for help, or better yet, grab her car keys—

Grandma's foot twitched, then moved to the right—she was getting back up, and God only knew what weapons she had. Paxton's only chance was to run.

Paxton flew down the porch steps and around the shoveled path. There was nowhere she could see to hide around the house, no bushes or outbuildings. She'd have to make it into the forest, then hopefully follow the road that led off the property to safety.

But, she saw as she rounded the house, there were two roads, both with patches of old snow marred by tire tracks. One ran past the front of the house and the other shot out at a

forty-five degree angle. One led out to the rest of the world, the other most likely to the depths of the farm—but which was which?

Grandma would be out of the house looking for her any second—she had to choose. Driveways usually led most directly to the house, so she took the one jutting straight from the front. Clutching Alexia tight to minimize the bouncing, she avoided the patches of snow and checked back over her shoulder as she ran, praying for the extra seconds that could get her to cover.

But by the time she reached the treeline, her adrenaline had been shattered by the cold. Icy knives stabbed her everywhere inside and out, except her feet—they'd already lost feeling, even through her socks. She pulled part of the blanket over her mouth to keep as much of the sting out of her lungs as possible, and forced the blocks at the end of her legs to keep clodding forward. The dirt road now bisected the orchard, twisting out of sight ahead of her as it entered the denser forest. She had no idea how far it went—all she could do was pray it would lead to something useful before a passing car—

A passing car. The words smashed into her brain, sending electric jolts down her limbs. Grandma wouldn't chase her on foot, she'd use the car. And she'd probably call her son, too, and he'd be coming from the other direction. Either one could appear any second. She had to get off the road and into the denser cover of the forest, *now*.

A cough wracked the bundled blanket. "Mommy, I'm cold."

"I know, honey. Hang on just a little while longer." She hugged Alexia closer into her chest, hoping to transfer what warmth she could as she veered off the road into the orchard.

The patchy snow here was packed and stiff, without much new accumulation yet because of the trees. It fractured randomly rather than leaving footprints; still visible to someone paying close attention, but harder to detect. Her progress slowed as she slipped and slid and stumbled, finding it nearly impossible to keep purchase at anything other than a

walking speed. But Grandma's twisted face propelled her forward, half-running half-stumbling through the final row of orchard trees, past a pair of small sheds, past a strip of clearing between the orchard and the forest. The wind shifted, slicing the snow in at sharper angles. She hunched against it, counting the steps until they were completely out of sight.

Finally, she crossed into cover of the forest, and her hope swelled. All she had to do was keep parallel to the road, and follow it while keeping herself hidden. It was only a matter of time until she made it out. She could do it, she just had to keep her head down and keep going, mind over matter—

And then her body started to shiver, violently and uncontrollably. The first sign of hypothermia.

She pushed down her panic. No, that couldn't be right, the shivering must be a coincidence. It couldn't be much lower than thirty degrees, maybe twenty-five, and even with no jacket and no shoes, for hypothermia to set in so quickly she'd need to be wet or something. She'd need to have fallen in water or—

Or be covered in sweat. The kind that accumulates when you're running as fast as you can while carrying a heavy load.

Her throat and chest constricted, and she nearly sank to the ground in defeat. Mind over matter wouldn't get her through hypothermia. Maybe if she wasn't carrying Alexia and she had the right clothes she'd be able to get herself to safety through the woods in the snow. But like this—people died of exposure in New England winters when they thought they could just keep going despite the warning signs. Stubbornness and pure will wouldn't save her.

If she kept going, she and Alexia would die.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Janice Evelyn Gillette returned to consciousness slowly, a thousand jackhammers trying to crack through her skull from the inside out, cheek pressed against something cold. Something wasn't right, but she didn't know what, or why. She opened her eyes and recognized her kitchen—how did she get there? She tried to push herself up, but the pain in her head magnified exponentially, and she crashed back down. She fought to keep consciousness, focusing on the cold drafts of air to hang on physically and psychologically. When she could bear to open her eyes again she rolled onto her side, then used the wall to brace herself up. She caught sight of the gaping basement door, and everything rushed back to her.

“How the hell...” She scrambled for her purse, then dug for the burner phone. Wincing against the throb in her head, she connected the call and waited for the voice mail to pick up. Dustin wouldn't answer his burner where people would see, but even so they had strict rules—a call rather than a text signaled something wrong, and he'd treat it as an emergency. As she waited for the call back, she carefully stood, closed the back door against the cold, then shambled to the cabinet for Advil. She dumped five tablets into her hand and swallowed them whole.

She'd never let him make another decision, not again. Fucking useless, always a screw up, no matter how old he got. None of this should have been hard—these women were desperate, poor, abused, drug users. Struggling to take care of themselves and their children. Like any child who didn't know what was good for them, they might have to be forced to take

their medicine initially, but with a little discipline they'd come around. There was no point coddling them slowly into accepting it, and he was a deluded fool to think otherwise, fatally obsessed with recapturing his lost love. She'd wanted to spare his feelings, allow him the illusion of dignity and agency, but this is what happened when she went against her better judgment. She wouldn't make the same mistake again—she was done playing nice with this string of little ungrateful bitches, and tired of finding new spots to bury their bullshit little bodies.

Her phone rang, sending a dagger drilling directly into her skull. Still leaning on the counter with one hand, she stabbed at the phone with the other.

“Mother?” His voice was panicked. “What’s wrong?”

“She escaped.”

“What do you mean, she escaped? How?”

The fingers of her free hand flew to the bridge of her nose. “I don’t fucking know, and we don’t have time for a fucking play-by-play. She got out, she knocked me out, she’s gone.”

“Are you sure? She’s barefoot and they have no coats—”

“For once could you please just *pretend* not be a worthless fucking moron? What do you think, she bashed me on the head and then put herself back in her shackles? You need to lose the police tail and get here as soon as possible. I’ll go get my gun and start looking for her.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Paxton gave herself five Mississippis to let the fear rip in and overwhelm her. Then she pulled herself back.

Being a victim is a choice, and you gave up that luxury when you decided to be a mother, she told herself. You're not stupid and you're not helpless and you've been learning lessons about surviving New England winters from your parents and scouts since you were Alexia's age.

The answer wasn't to give up and go back. The answer was to use her stubbornness in the right way—paired with her intelligence and knowledge. She cast her mind back to all the lessons she'd been taught and the horror stories she'd heard, particularly the survival stories of people caught out in storms. Survivors stayed warm. Survivors stayed hydrated. Survivors found—or created—shelter.

Hydrated was easy, she had most of a thirty-eight ounce bottle of Pedialyte, and that would keep them until morning. Warm was harder; she needed to build a fire, find shelter, or both. Her Girl Scout troupe had practiced rubbing sticks into makeshift grooves in flat-ish pieces of wood, using the friction to send sparks into a pile of tinder. If she hurried she could find dry wood before the snow blanketed everything, and then she just needed a place out of the wind to build it up.

Her mind flew back to the sheds she'd passed near the edge of the orchard.

She made an abrupt U-turn, praying the shed wasn't locked.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Giving the surveillance team the slip was easy; driving fast without catching the attention of state troopers wasn't. The entire time I drove out to the farm I could barely breathe or swallow. Or think—my mind just kept circling over and over, trying to make sense of it all.

This was bad. Extremely bad.

The others had never managed to get out of the room. They'd fought, both psychologically and physically, had tried to attack us, so much so we had to give up on them and start over. But they'd never come close to getting out.

For once could you just *pretend* not be a worthless fucking moron?

'Stupid fucking moron' was right. I'd actually believed this one might learn to love me. And little Evie—she'd already started to enjoy her time with me. If the police hadn't forced me to take time away, our bond could have deepened, and they wouldn't have tried to escape—

You still actually believe someone besides me can ever love you.

I winced; my hands flew up to my ears. It was going to be okay, because they wouldn't get far in this weather with no shoes or coats. And we'd find them quickly—I'd be able to track them easily in the snow that had started to fall.

As soon as I turned off the main road, I called her. "I'm on my way in. Where are you?"

“Driving toward you. I’m almost to the main road. I’ll turn around and meet you at the house. Keep an eye out for them, or for tracks. She’s wrapped in that thin blue blanket you took down there, that should be easy to spot.”

I slowed, trying to scan both sides of the road through the diagonal sheets of snow. I saw nothing.

When I reached the house, I pulled up behind Mother’s car and climbed out. She met me between the two cars, looking haggard and moving cautiously.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Her hands clenched. “I’m lucky to be alive, thanks to your incompetence. Luckily the girl is almost as stupid as you, because if she had any sense she’d’ve stabbed me while I was unconscious.”

The pit gaped open. I’d failed again, and now Mother had almost been killed—I was getting worse at this, not better. “Maybe we should just let them go. Let them go to the police and I’ll turn myself in, and we can end all of this.”

She barked a nasty laugh. “They saw me, too, Einstein. You think she won’t tell them about me?”

“I’ll tell them I forced you to help. If I confess, no jury would convict you.”

She leaned in toward me, face reddening, finger jabbing toward my face. “And then what? Who’ll take care of me then? I’ll be out here by myself, ticking off the days before I die alone and lonely in my bed. Maybe I should get some cats, that way they’ll be somebody to eat my body when I fall over onto the floor dead!”

I shrank back. “No, you’re right. We need to find them.”

With a derisive huff, she turned and stared down the road we’d just come from. “I checked most of the main road but didn’t see any sign of her. I’m guessing you didn’t either, since you haven’t said?”

“I—it was hard to scan both sides and drive. We should go out together so I can scan one side and you can scan the

other.”

“Take this.” She produced her taser from one of her coat pockets, then pulled herself up into the passenger side of my truck.

I got in the driver’s side and headed back down the road, my mind racing.

Because this was bad—as bad as it got. She wasn’t just angry, she was enraged to the point of no return. I’d seen the look in her eye before—four times.

I’d seen it when my father wanted to take me to the psychiatrist—right before Mother shot him and buried him by the lake.

I’d seen it when Angela broke up with me, right before Mother snatched her and strangled her in the forest, leaving her body for me to bury.

I’d seen it when the first replacement Angela had refused to eat, right before Mother put a bullet between her eyes and into her little daughter. And I’d seen it right before she killed the second mother and daughter for trying to ambush me when I came through the door.

I knew too well what that look meant. When we found my angels, Mother wasn’t going to just let me bring them back to the basement. She was going to kill them.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

“I’m an idiot,” Jo said as she flew down the highway toward the Gillette property, eyeing the falling snow. “I never double-checked that his mother was dead.”

“If you’re an idiot, that means Lopez and I are idiots, too. And I’m not a damned idiot.” Arnett tapped into the MDT, then into his phone. “We don’t automatically do a family tree for all our suspects. We all searched for Foley, which normally would have been enough. Even today most women still take their husband’s name, let alone back then. From what I’m seeing here, the Gillette family had a reputation in the area for their fruit back in the day, so she probably thought it made sense to stick with that.”

“You found her?” Jo said.

“Her, and now the property. Husband never was added to the deed, which makes sense if it was a family property she owned outright before the marriage. I’m checking the Google results now—looks like the business hit the skids about thirty years ago. Which explains why I’m showing her as employed part-time by Pioneer Valley Mutual.”

Jo’s phone rang. Her eyes flicked to the displayed name. Officer Rodriguez, one of the Oakhurst policemen that had been assigned to surveil Foley.

“I got it.” Arnett tapped to answer the call, then put it on speakerphone.

“Detective Fournier?” Rodriguez’s voice was tight.

“Arnett. Talk to me, Rodriguez.”

“We lost Foley.”

“What d’you mean you lost him?”

“We were positioned near the Santa Station, keeping an eye on him. He called for a break, then went to the bathroom. He was in there for a while, but we didn’t think much of it because the other two employees were waiting like they normally do, and the families were still in line. Then all of a sudden they start packing up, and tell the kids to go home. We went up to ask what was going on, and they said Foley was sick, and he called from the bathroom to tell them it wasn’t getting any better and they should pack up. So we went into the bathroom and he was nowhere to be found.”

Arnett swore. “How long ago did you last see him?”

“He left for the bathroom about forty-five minutes ago.”

“Son of a bitch.” Jo slammed her palms on the steering wheel. “Plenty of time to beat us. How did he know we were here?”

“You’re making assumptions,” Arnett said to her, then spoke back toward the phone. “Go to his apartment. Maybe he really is sick, and he headed home. If he’s not there, let us know. In the meantime I’ll put out a BOLO on his vehicle.”

Once Rodriguez confirmed, Arnett hung up the call, and turned back to the MDT.

Jo sped up—but felt the car slip in the snow. She carefully pumped the brakes.

“Dammit, we need to move! I’m already only going forty-five, I can’t afford to go any slower.”

“We don’t know he’s on his way here, Jo. And even if he is, there’s nothing we can do if we’re dead or buried in a snowbank on the side of Highway 20.”

She stared out at the falling snow, but all she could see was Paxton and Alexia, bruised and beaten, stashed God knew where. “No way I’m slowing down when we don’t have eyes on him and he has a head start on us. Hold on tight and say a prayer.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

We found nothing as we scanned the sides of the road, so drove back and took the utility road that lead straight out from the front of the house. Again we saw nothing.

“It’s been nearly forty minutes since you called,” I said. “Do you think she went off the dirt roads?”

“If she did, she has to be close by. She’d be insane to veer too far off and risk getting lost.” She glared at him. “And we know she’s smart enough to find her way out of your fool-proof prison.”

My stomach flopped, and I swallowed hard to fight the acid surging up my throat. “If she’s smart, she’s looking for shelter. We need to check the outbuildings.”

Mother didn’t look at me. “Better place to start than a grid search.”

“Good thing we’re in my truck, with the four-wheel drive.” My ears burned at how pathetic I sounded.

“Good thing I brought my Glock,” she said pointedly.

I winced, and pushed away the images that flashed through my head. Of Angela’s broken body, neck ringed with blue-purple bruises in the shape of my mother’s hands. Of women and children sprawled on the ground, blood pouring from bullet holes. Of makeshift graves dug under the cover of darkness, and their angelic faces slowly covered by sprays of black dirt.

I couldn't think about that. I had to come up with a way to fix all this, to convince Mother to give them another chance. But before I could do that, I had to find them and make sure we were all safe.

We started with the cold storage warehouse. With the apples long gone, it was easy to determine nobody was inside. Next we off-roaded to the utility sheds in the north orchard.

"Ha! Not so smart after all," Mother barked, pointing in the distance. "She didn't think to cover up her footprints."

Sure enough, a trail of something dotted the snow from the edge of the forest to the west-most utility shed. "She was probably hoping the snow would cover them up." I hit the gas.

"No, stop." Her arm flew across the cab to my chest. "Cut the engine. We'll go on foot. There's dangerous tools in there, she'll try to attack us if she hears us coming. Grab your flashlight."

I nodded, and turned off the truck. We climbed out, and headed silently toward the shed, puffing white air as we went.

As we neared, she motioned to me. With a complicated series of gestures she mimed that she'd open the door, and I'd to jump inside and blind Angela with the beam of the flashlight. When I nodded acknowledgment, she pulled the gun out of her pocket, removed the safety, and pointed it down with her right hand. With her left, she grabbed the handle of the door and pulled.

I jumped into the space, flashlight raised and ready.

The shed was empty.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

The thought of waiting out the storm in the shed had been seductive—Paxton would have chewed off her right arm to be able to set Alexia down and stop moving—but without a doubt it was the first place they'd look for her. But sheds held tools and other supplies, so she'd taken the gamble she could get there and back away before they checked.

Moving as quickly as she was able, barely faster than a walk, she'd plodded her frozen feet toward the shed, sinking into the fresh snow that had accumulated. That meant she was leaving prints—but on reflection, she realized she could use them to her advantage.

The shed was bigger than she'd thought, closer to a mini barn than a shed. It wasn't locked—they must have figured they were so far out in the middle of nowhere there was no need. She slid the doors apart, stepped inside, and slid them closed again against the wind; the instant relief felt like the silence after someone turns off a car alarm. The space was dank and dark, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the contents. Her arms ached to set Alexia down and rest just for a few minutes... But Grandma and son might appear at any minute.

Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, the contents came into view. Everything was organized, but most of the objects reeked of neglect. A small, rusty tractor. Other large tools she didn't recognize, and were too big to be of use to her, anyway. But at the other end, on a workbench amid a far newer chainsaw and pruning shears, she spotted what she needed.

She hurried over, trying to ignore the now-burning sting in her feet, and grabbed the trowel hanging from a peg board. Next to the workbench lay a pile of black tarps; she grabbed one and threw it around her shoulders. Then she snatched up a pair of shears, stuck both them and the trowel into the folds of the blanket, and twirled around to leave.

The thought of going back outside froze her in place, and for a horrendous moment she hadn't been sure she'd be able to break the psychological rigor mortis. *Hide behind the tractor, they'll never notice*, some treacherous part of her brain wheedled. But she knew that was ridiculous, and the small heart beating next to her own forced her to slide open the doors before she could think twice more. The light stabbed her eyes and her shivering returned as the knives of the wind slashed through her thin clothes again.

She scanned the ground for her footprints. Carefully watching over her shoulder, she stepped backward into the first print, then the second. *You're being stupid*, her brain berated her. *They'll be here any minute. Just run!*

But because of the old snow beneath, the prints were deep. If she had any chance of getting out of this alive, she had to cover her tracks. So, while that fear-based part of her brain screamed bloody murder with every slow step, she continued backward until she reached the forest.

When she was a few feet within it, the snow changed. Because of the denser trees, the new snow wasn't reaching the ground as quickly, and the forest floor still largely only had patchy remains of partially melted old snow. She continued to walk carefully, staying as much between those spots as she could, leaving next to no prints. Then, once she couldn't see the orchard behind her any longer, she ran gingerly toward the slope of the ridge, scanning for what she needed.

Within a quarter of a mile, she found it: a built-up bank of snow leaning against a tree and a slope, curving practically out of sight.

Alexia roused and shifted against her. "Momma, you're shaking."

“I know, honey. We’re almost safe, I promise.” She circled around the tree and examined the snow and the slope. It wasn’t perfect, but it was close enough, and it would have to do. She stepped back around and scanned the ground—she hadn’t left a trail of noticeable footprints, but if someone was looking carefully, they’d see some unusual marks. But she didn’t have the luxury of time to disguise them, so she’d have to hope they were subtle enough.

Back behind the tree, she dropped down at the foot of the bank, desperately dredging up her childhood memories. They’d practiced this on a scout trip, creating your own shelter if you were caught in the snow. They’d done it as a lean-to, using a snowbank to just block the wind. But with Grandma and son looking for them, armed with warm clothes and secure boots and flashlights and plenty of time to explore nooks and crannies, she had to get herself and Alexia out of sight.

She reached into the folds of the blanket and extracted the trowel. Keeping an ear out for sounds in the distance, she plunged it into the bottom of the crusty snowbank and scooped out as much snow as she could manage, trying to scatter it in a way that looked natural rather than piled up. It wasn’t perfect, but the new snow was coming down faster now, and hopefully it would camouflage them. *Dig upwards*, the scout leaders had told them. *Up and back, because heat rises*.

Alexia’s hand pulled down the edge of the tarp, and the blanket. “Where are we?”

“Hush, now, we have to be as quiet as possible. And keep yourself wrapped up, please, so you’ll stay warm.”

Alexia disappeared back beneath the folds.

The more snow Paxton pulled out, the more there seemed to be in her way. Maybe it was the awkward angle of working around Alexia, or maybe it was because she needed a much larger space than she had when she was ten, but the process seemed to take infinitely longer than she remembered. She tried to maintain a steady rhythm—stab, scoop, scatter, stab, scoop, scatter—struggling to stay accurate despite her unrelenting shivering so the whole thing wouldn’t cave in.

Each scoop seemed harder, requiring more energy she didn't have—suddenly the thing she wanted most in the world was to lie down and sleep.

The next phase of hypothermia.

Spurred by that fear, she doubled up her speed. The space recessed, little by little, and finally when she looked back they were completely inside the snowbank. She shifted her strategy, piling the snow she scooped next to the opening, piling it up to create a door. When it was nearly closed off, she left the smallest of cracks, then grabbed one of the sticks she'd uncovered as she dug and used it to poke holes up through the top of the snowbank.

“Okay, honey.” She let the tarp fall from her cramped hand, then pulled back the covers from over Alexia's head. “You can come out now. It'll get warmer in here quickly. But we still have to be completely silent, okay?”

She nodded, then whispered, “I'm thirsty.”

Paxton nodded with a finger to her mouth, then pulled out the Pedialyte. She let Alexia drink as much as she wanted, and took a healthy swig herself. Then she scooped snow off the side of their makeshift cave, and directed it into the bottle. *Never eat the snow directly*, her scout leader's voice came back to her. *It'll lower your body temperature. Melt it with fire, or in a canteen placed next to your body heat.* She stuck the bottle back into the folds, next to her, praying they'd live long enough to need it.

She eyed the tarp, considering the second part of her plan—to cut off strips of the material with the shears and wrap them around her feet. If she wanted to go any further distance even after the storm passed, she had to have additional protection for her feet. But she wouldn't need that until morning, and the intact tarp made a useful additional blanket while they waited. So she shifted downward onto her side and pulled the tarp over them, curling around Alexia. Already she felt warmer, which was good. But the downside was feeling had returned to her feet, and the pain was excruciating. She knew she shouldn't, but she reached down and carefully rolled

down one of her socks. Angry red patches covered her ankles and the top of her foot, worsening as she lowered the sock. When it finally came all the way off, she gasped.

Her two smallest toes were completely black.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Mother cried repeatedly as she circled the interior of the small shed, checking behind everything and anything for Angela and Evie. “That little bitch.”

I hurried to try to calm her. “But we have a starting point now.”

She narrowed her eyes and strode past me. At the threshold she safetied the gun and put it back in her pocket, then stood staring out at the landscape with her hands on her hips. “No, you’re right,” she finally said. “There aren’t any other footprints, and that means she backtracked over them. And that means we have a path that’ll lead us right to her.”

“It leads into the forest. The truck won’t be much use.”

“No. We’ll have to go on foot.” She launched herself out into the snow, and I scrambled after her, then past her. The trail was easy enough to follow despite having been softened by the new-fallen snow. The steps led back diagonally to the forest; she must have been trying to stay off the road before she realized she needed shelter.

Then, almost as soon as the edge of the forest began, the footsteps disappeared.

“Shit.” Mother stopped short at the last step, and scanned the ground. “Now we’re back to square one.”

My mind raced as I tried to focus on options. Mother’s gun lodged firmly in my head, along with the anger in her voice and the expression on her face as she’d mentioned it; there was no way I’d be able to convince her to keep them alive

now. And I couldn't face the thought of starting over: searching through hundreds, thousands more single mothers until I found what we needed. And what was to say the same exact thing wouldn't happen again? How many women and children would we have to kill before I could finally do it right? The pit in my stomach widened, and I grasped at my abdomen with one hand. I liked this Angela. She was smart like the real Angela and so loving to Evie. She'd even been kind to me—none of the others had. If Mother hadn't taken over their care, she might already have started feeling something for me— Pain exploded in my head, and my hands flew up to either side, trying to ease it. I couldn't face it anymore. I couldn't do it again. I had to find this Angela and this Evie, and keep them alive.

"Pull yourself together," Mother said. "We don't have time for you to fall apart."

"I'm trying to think." I opened my eyes again and studied the ground in front of me, and two possibilities popped out. "We can follow the trajectory of the trail. Most likely she continued on in the same direction."

Mother followed the angle with her eyes. "No. She tried to fool us by doubling back in her own footsteps. She wouldn't be predictable."

"No, but she's cold and she's carrying a child. It would make more sense to cut across the road and go into the forest on the other side, thinking we'd assume she'd stay on this side." I watched her face, praying she'd agree with the twists of logic.

She nodded. "Like running the exact opposite way."

I made a show of looking around in a one-eighty arc. "There's a lot of area to cover. But that's the most likely direction." I put a resigned expression on my face, and took a step forward. "Let's go."

Glancing around, she put a hand on my arm to stop me. "No. We can't put all our eggs in one basket. We need to split up. I'll go out the way the footprints are pointing, and you search around here."

“It’s not safe to split up,” I argued. “You’re injured, and out in this cold, you’ll—”

“I have my good boots and my heaviest coat and the cold will keep down the swelling anyway. I’ve got my phone and I know this property like the back of my hand. No more whining.” She took off at a jog, then turned back and called back to me. “Don’t just stand there!”

I made another show of glancing around, and when she was a few hundred yards out of view, I returned to the second thing I noticed.

A slight scuff in the dirt a few feet to the north, and a rounded dent in the snow several feet beyond that.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

After ten more excruciating minutes, the turnoff to the Gillette farm appeared. Jo fought the urge to speed up as she turned off, scanning the private dirt road and the trees that lined its sides.

“Two sets of tire tracks?” Jo asked, peering at the marks melding together.

“I think you’re right, one much fresher than the other,” Arnett said.

“It hasn’t been snowing long enough for him to have come and gone,” Jo said. “He’s not alone. His mother?”

“Hang on.” Arnett’s expression was grim. “We’re almost there.”

Within minutes, the road opened to a clearing that ended next to a multi-story colonial farmhouse. A brown Ford Focus parked next to it.

“That’s one of the cars I saw on the security footage.” Jo pulled up behind it. “Go figure, now it has plates.”

They jumped out of the car and unholstered their weapons. Jo led the way up to the front porch and banged on the front door. “Oakhurst County State Police Detective Unit. Please open the door.”

They listened, but heard nothing, so she announced them again. When they still got no response, she reached for the doorknob. Locked.

“You take left, I’ll take right,” Jo said.

Arnett nodded, then headed off. Jo scanned the surroundings as she crept around her side. As she passed the Ford Focus, she noted a set of tire tracks leading out toward the orchard, and a second set of fainter tracks running diagonally from the house. She and Arnett met at the bottom of the back patio stairs, and went through their procedure again at the back door. This time when they tried the knob, the door swung open.

Beretta at the ready, Jo stepped into the kitchen. “Clear. But something happened here.” She pointed to a spilled bag of groceries and a pint of ice cream melting on the floor.

“Crack on this wall.” Arnett gestured.

“If anyone is at home, announce yourself,” Jo called, but got no response. “The basement door is open. I’m heading down.”

Weapon raised, she flipped the switch on the wall next to the door and stepped forward. Scanning over the railing as she proceeded, she started down the staircase. Near the bottom it took a strange, protracted ninety-degree turn, with a bookcase against the wall of the bend. The stairs then opened into a large, fieldstone-walled basement with a furnace at one end; a workbench next to it was scattered with small appliances, tools, superglue, gloves—and oddly, a beach ball. On the other side, a metal shelving unit covered most of the wall, but its contents were partially strewn onto the floor.

Arnett bent down to inspect the corresponding gap on the shelves. “Holy shit.”

Jo dropped into a squat to follow his gaze. A hole, about two foot by two foot, was missing from the wall.

“No way I’m gonna fit through,” Arnett said.

She scooted forward and, after looking in as far as she could, cautiously stuck her head through. To her right was a bed, with two chains and shackles abandoned on it. To her left, a couch, a kitchenette, and an open bathroom. “Paxton? Alexia?”

Nobody responded. She pushed herself through the hole, then rose part-way, scanning for anybody hidden behind the furniture. Then she darted carefully out from behind the bed, weapon ready to fire—the room was empty.

No blood. No signs of a struggle. The missing stones sat next to the hole, surrounded by chips of mortar.

The pieces flew together in Jo's head, and hope sprang up in her chest. "There's a door. It must be hidden by that bookcase on the stairs. This must be where he kept Paxton and Alexia."

"So where are Foley and his mother?"

Jo's mind flew to the groceries on the kitchen floor and the open back door as she crawled back through the hole. "They either fought their way out, or were caught and taken to another location."

"I saw tire tracks leading off toward the orchard," Arnett said.

"Let's go." She took off up the stairs.

CHAPTER SIXTY

I couldn't tell for certain whether Angela made the marks in the snow. They could have been made by some sort of animal, but with the fresh snow falling, the creature would have had to pass there within the last half hour at most. Unlikely timing.

I moved on to the disturbed patch of snow. Crumbled and fragmented, with a vague curve. I scanned the area around it, looking for any similar disturbance. The next one was a few feet out.

The path wasn't straight, most likely a conscious choice on her part, and it frustrated my progress. I had to hurry; Mother could rethink her decision at any moment and return, and every moment put Angela closer to escape. My impatience vibrated in my chest, trying to rise up and out of my throat in a scream that would have given my position away.

I continued on, one mark at a time. Trying to think like she would. Mother said she had a blanket, but that was no substitute for a winter coat, and certainly not for shoes. Two-hundred fifty-two acres took at least forty minutes to walk, if you knew which road to take out over the ridge, and if it wasn't freezing. But she'd chosen the wrong road, and the snow was turning into a storm—she'd freeze to death if she kept going. But she was smart enough to realize that, and would try to find shelter. She'd also try to keep it out of sight, or camouflaged, and thus invisible to me.

About a quarter of a mile from where I started, the trail ended, without any sort of frozen bodies strewn in my path. That meant she'd either started covering her trail, or she'd

found a place to hide nearby. If she'd covered her trail, I was shooting in the dark. I had to pin my hopes on a hiding place nearby.

A text pinged through from my mother:

I'm at the eastern property

I swore under my breath. I needed to find Angela and get her back to the house before Mother reached me. Getting them secured again was the only way I'd be able to talk her out of drastic action. I typed out a quick reply:

No. I'm running a back-and-forth pattern along the ridge.

Then I rotated a three-sixty circle, taking in each aspect of the terrain. Trees, bushes, undergrowth. No caves here. No collapsed trees with trunks she could crawl into. No dips that formed makeshift trenches, not even any boulders shaped appropriately for her to use as a lean-to. She'd have had to construct one with tree branches, and if she'd done that, it would be instantly visible.

No, she wasn't hidden nearby. She must have realized she was leaving a trail, and started monitoring it. Picked up a branch to scatter snow behind her, making it impossible for me to follow any further.

Desperation joined my frustration and ripped out of my chest—my scream rang through the forest, barely dampened by the falling snow.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Within minutes of curling up around Alexia, Paxton's shivering stopped. Unfortunately, the warmer she got, the more her feet throbbed. And the near-silence created by the insulating snow was disconcerting—the whooshing wind was now only a ghostly whistle coming through the holes she'd poked, giving a strange feeling of being removed from the world. Like when, as a child, she'd get water in her ears while swimming and all sound retreated.

She tried to distract herself by planning, so she'd be prepared when the morning came. She puzzled out the best way to use the tarp as protective gear for her feet; she ultimately decided the best method would be to cut strips and wrap them around her feet, then put her socks over them to hold them in place. Her pants were skinny jeans, so once she pulled over her socks, they'd keep everything in place.

Then she turned her mind to the best way to run once the storm finished. It wasn't just a simple matter of getting to a road and off the property before they caught up—by the time the storm passed, Grandma and her son would have had hours to plan the best way to flush them out. They had advantages like cars and warm clothing. Her only chance was to figure out what approach they'd take and outmaneuver them.

So what would she do if she were in their position? She'd station one of them, probably Grandma, at the entrance to the property. They almost certainly had a fence that ran the perimeter of the property line, maybe not out here in the forest, but definitely where their private road exited to the main road.

While that person waited, the partner would search the property somehow. They likely had some sort of all-terrain vehicle that would help them cover the property quickly and thoroughly. So the smartest thing for her to do was pick a direction in between both roads and hope she came up to a neighboring property—

A faint snap interrupted her thoughts. Accounting for the insulation of the snow, it must have been far sharper than it sounded to her, not just something caused by a falling stick. She went rigid and still, listening for approaching footsteps, waiting for the snow to be caved in around her.

She didn't hear anything more. Had she imagined it? Or maybe it was just an animal. That wouldn't be much better than Grandma or her son—an animal could smell her and tear through a snowbank to get at her. A coyote wouldn't attack them but a bear might, especially if she'd inadvertently picked a spot near the bear's cubs. She wracked her brains trying to remember when bears hibernated in Western Mass. Sometime in late November or early December?

Another snap.

Then, an unmistakably human, male scream.

She held her breath to keep from moving even a millimeter, and prayed. Prayed that Alexia wouldn't pick this moment to wake up and stir, or worse, call out. Prayed that he'd keep going, that the spot she'd picked was enough out of sight that he'd never find it. Prayed the next sound she'd hear would be him moving away.

Silence.

If he'd tracked her this far, they were in bad trouble. The tracks she'd left were nearly invisible, and she'd counted on them being impossible to tell apart from random animal markings. And despite the wind, the snow must not be coming through fast enough to cover up what little she'd left in the first place.

Another snap. And some sort of odd choking? She couldn't tell if it was farther away or closer.

Alexia shifted under her. “Momma, I need to throw—”

Paxton’s hand snaked instantly around to cover Alexia’s mouth. In as low a whisper as she could manage, she begged, “No, honey. We can’t make any noise.”

Alexia stiffened, struggling not to vomit.

Paxton prayed.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

You failed again.

Mother's voice rang through my head, as loud and clear as if she were standing next to me, sending sharp, shooting pains up through my head to the back of my eyes.

No, *I told myself*. I can do this. I can find them. I have to find them.

I chanted it to myself over and over again, trying to drown out Mother's voice and face, choking back my moans. I had to keep going.

I forced my eyes open and surveyed the landscape again. If I were running, which way would I go? What looked like the easiest path? Away from the ridge, especially with all the snow that had piled up from previous storms along its base—

A long-forgotten memory from childhood came back to me. Boys in the schoolyard talking about making igloos, some skeptical, some insisting they'd preserve your body temperature inside...

I turned toward the ridge, scanning the snowbanks. Several trees and boulders interrupted its clean line, forming little L-shapes with the rising earth. I moved slowly past them, searching for anything that felt odd or out of the ordinary.

Then—little Evie's voice. Soft and low, like an angel whispering from heaven, cut off abruptly like a record played backwards.

I turned in a circle, searching for any sign of her. Then I closed my eyes and put all my attention on listening. But I heard nothing, no more of her voice, not a movement, nothing but the rustle of the wind in the branches around me.

I shook my head. Had I imagined it? Was I so used to my mother's voice in my head, I was hearing others now too?

Useless without me, Mother's voice split my other thoughts. Why do I have to do everything myself?

The pit in my stomach gaped open and I felt myself falling into it. I gripped the sides of my head to keep myself from being swallowed completely. "I have to find them," I whispered to myself. "I have to find them, or it's all over. I have to find them."

I opened my eyes and scanned the snowbanks again. But there was nothing—I was wasting my time. I needed to think—

The ghost of a retching sound rose up, seemingly from the sloping earth in front of me. Before I had time to question whether I was imagining it, the sound came again, and then a third time. I crept toward it, to a tree by a boulder with a pile of snow extending out.

With an uneven scattering of snow at the base of the snowbank.

I knelt to examine it further. The front of the snowbank had been manipulated, packed together like a badly made snowman. And a line of holes dotted the top.

With a single punch of my gloved fist, I knocked the wall out of the makeshift igloo. It crashed inward, collapsing several feet of snow above and around, revealing Angela and Evie curled up almost vertically against the slope inside.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Jo gripped the dashboard as Arnett drove the Crown Vic out across the field, sticking close to the tracks.

“Thank God the snow isn’t that thick,” Arnett said. “Not enough to cover up anything that’ll give us much trouble.”

Jo nodded her agreement, focused on the trail in front of her as they plowed into the lined trees of the orchard. “Look,” she said a few moments later. “Foley’s truck.”

“You see anybody in it?”

“I don’t. But I do see some sort of shed beyond it.”

Arnett slowed, keeping watch as they reached the truck. They got out of the car, weapons in hand, and approached. Jo stood as tall as she could, verifying the bed of the truck was empty, then juttied her chin toward the driver’s side. Arnett split off in that direction while she crept up to the passenger door. She pulled it open—the cab was empty.

“Footprints leading from this side to the shed,” she said.

“Same here.”

They followed the prints, leaving the originals untouched. The shed door stood open, and they quickly determined there was nobody inside.

Jo pointed to another grouping of footprints, this one leading out from the shed toward the forest. She scanned the prints, trying to judge how many people had made them. “What do you think? Two people, or three?”

He squinted at them. “Three. Some are bigger than others, and the third set is almost completely covered up. Two people are chasing a third.”

The snow fell faster and intermittent gusts of wind sliced against Jo’s face as they followed the rapidly disappearing depressions up to the edge of the forest.

“Shit,” Arnett said. “They end a few feet in.”

Jo scanned the ground. The snow wasn’t nearly as thick inside the forest floor as out, but the increase in snow and wind over the last fifteen minutes had laid a thickening layer of white velvet across the ground. “All three sets of tracks are going in this direction. I say we—”

A shot rang out through the trees.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

When I found Angela and Evie, I'd laughed at the sight of them, out of sheer relief. I knew I had to hurry to get them back to the basement, and figure out a way to keep them separate until my mother calmed down—but it could be done. Everything was going to be alright.

Angela had stared at me while she scrambled fully upright against the dirt and snow, clutching Evie to her. She raised a trowel up at me.

"If you come any closer, I'll plunge this right into your chest," she said.

I chuckled, still reveling in my relief, and reached into my pocket. "No, you won't." I held up the taser. "You'll drop before you get anywhere near me. And since you're holding Evie close to you, I don't know if the current will affect her, too. So let's not try it out."

A stunned realization settled on her face; she was probably remembering what it felt like when Mother used it on her in the parking lot of the mall. The trowel dropped an inch or so.

"Put it down," I said, trying to keep my voice gentle. "We need to get you both back inside, as soon as possible."

The trowel popped back up. "There's no way in hell I'm going back in there. You'll have to kill me first."

My relief evaporated—I didn't have time for this. "But that's exactly what will happen, Angela. If I don't get you back to the basement, Mother will kill you. She won't even hesitate. And if you fight me, this will easily render you unconscious,

and it might even kill little Evie. Either way I'll be able to carry you both back to the house without you being able to do a thing about it. So let's be smart about this and get you back to safety."

Her jaw squared off, and she hissed at me through clenched teeth. "My name is Paxton. My daughter's name is Alexia."

Pain screeched in my head, batting away the names. "Don't make me hurt her."

She raised the trowel even higher, almost at eye level. "She needs medical attention, and now so do I. Nothing you can do is worse than keeping us from getting it."

What the hell was she talking about? "She needs what?"

Her face shifted in a way I didn't understand. "Didn't your mother tell you? She's vomiting and she has a fever. If it's appendicitis, her appendix could burst any minute."

No, Mother hadn't told me.

That's why Angela escaped—it wasn't because she didn't love me. The burgeoning feelings I'd sensed from her were real—but she was worried about Evie. That's why she was fighting so hard.

I glanced back out toward the edge of the forest and changed tack quickly. "Listen to me now. Mother's on her way here, and she'll catch up to me any minute. I need to hide you, and figure out a way to get Evie to see a doctor."

Angela looked confused. "She said there was no way she could take us to see a doctor."

"She'll never take that risk. But I will. I'm your husband now, and I'll protect you. I'll take Evie myself if I have to. But we have to go, now."

She stared off in the direction I'd indicated, but didn't move.

"She has a gun, Angela," I pleaded. "She'll use it. Nothing I say will stop her."

She glanced to her right and her left, then at the vomit staining the snow next to them. "I'll go with you on one condition. We don't go to the house, we go directly to the doctor."

I started to respond—and Mother appeared, around a tree several hundred yards away.

"You found her!" she cried. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I—I just found her." My head felt like it was in a vice. "I haven't had time.

As Mother strode toward us, she produced the gun out of her pocket. She pulled back the safety and pointed the gun at Angela's head. "I'm going to enjoy watching you die, you fucking little bitch. How the hell did you get out of the basement?"

"Mother, stop. You didn't tell me Evie's sick. Angela just wants her to get medical attention." I turned to Angela, pleading with my eyes. "Tell her you're sorry and it won't happen again."

Mother laughed derisively. "You're beyond pathetic. You actually believe any of that? I told you this way would never work."

The pit in my stomach opened, but this time it didn't suck me in. This time the shame and embarrassment twisted and morphed like a pile of snakes in my belly, and spewed out something new. "You were the one who wanted this," I said. "I'm doing this for you."

She scoffed. "I wanted a grandchild. You're the one who had to have a replica of your bitch ex-girlfriend. You're the one that needs them to fall in love with you so you can play happy family. I told you, fear and pain are far better motivators than love."

My mouth dropped open. "You were the one terrified I'd never find a wife and could never have a complete life!"

"Only before I realized how much of a defective you actually were. No woman can ever love you." She waved the

gun in a zigzag up and down Angela and Evie. “This sick mess is your creation.”

“You— You—” I struggled to find words, unsure what I even wanted to say. I stared at her staring at me, eyes filled with disdain.

She must have seen something in her periphery, because her head snapped back to Angela. “Sit your ass right back down, princess.”

Angela had been inching up, hoping our divided attention would give her a chance to escape. She dropped back down. It reminded me what was really important.

“It’s too late now, Mother. We have our family and we have to keep it together. I can find a doctor who’ll see Evie without asking questions. Angela will come back willingly if we do that.”

Mother shook her head at me like she didn’t know me. “Even after all this, you still don’t get it. She’s lying. They aren’t ever going to love you. When will you understand? I’m the only one who will ever love you.”

Then she raised the gun and fired at Angela.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

The gunshot made Jo jump like she'd been electrocuted, and her mind flew to the pictures of Aspyn and Ivy buried together in their dank forest grave.

Please—not Paxton or Alexia.

“That was close.” Arnett’s voice pulled her back. He jutted his chin toward the forest. “From over there.”

She nodded. They both unholstered their weapons and started forward again. Arnett led, his weapon pointed at a forty-five degree angle at the ground in front of him. Jo followed, slightly to his left, keeping her line of sight unobstructed as they pushed into the trees.

Her senses shifted to hyper-aware, with every nerve and cell tuning in to the shifting environment. Her eyes swept a wide arc, left to right, right to left, checking for any movement or color that didn’t belong, and she strained for any sound other than the wind. Her mind calculated possibilities and generated alternatives that kept Paxton and Alexia alive—maybe Paxton had managed to get hold of a gun, and she’d been the one who’d fired. Or, maybe Dustin was a horrible shot, and Paxton’d managed to flee.

As they went deeper the trees blocked more of the wind, and she was certain she heard human voices. Arnett turned and shot Jo a questioning look—she nodded. They continued forward, straining to hear the voices again. For a long moment there was nothing, and Jo worried they were headed in the wrong direction. Then the voices came again—a man’s, and a

woman's. She fought back the urge to break into a run—if Paxton was still in danger, even seconds could make the difference. But if Dustin heard their approach, he'd start firing.

Arnett raised his empty hand behind him, signaling her to slow. Two figures were now visible in the distance, one holding a gun.

Arnett signaled her forward, indicating he'd circle around to cut off any attempt to flee.

She nodded grimly, and started forward.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

I wanted to leap forward, but I was frozen by sickening déjà vu. It was happening again—like it had happened with my father. Like it happened with Angela, and each of the Angelas since. Like I was caught, in some infinite Möbius strip loop, never starting and never ending. Now this Angela was dead, blood streaming down her face, and soon it would soak through the blanket and Evie would figure out what was wrong, and she'd be trapped in a nightmare she'd never be able to escape from again.

Nothing I did mattered—there was no way out. Mother was right. I was pathetic, a loser, unable to accept the truth about myself. No matter what I did, death would be the outcome. The weight of that futility pushed down on me as though I was balancing the entire universe on my head.

“Mommy?”

Had Evie said the word, or had I?

Whichever it was, it broke me free of my paralysis. I lunged forward to her, tearing at the blanket, gripping her to me as I searched for the knots or folds that would free her. And the cry came again, Mommy, louder now, more insistent, more hysterical as I uncovered her face and she saw mine and she realized her mother wasn't moving. And the entire time I arched like a cat, waiting for my own mother's hands to reach me and pull me away.

But she didn't move. She only laughed.

Finally Evie was free and I pulled her out, putting my body between her and her mother's, blocking her from the horrific sight. As I did, Mother stared down at me, her face twisted in scornful amusement.

"Why are you bothering? You know what has to happen," she said.

"Why?" I asked, my voice small and pathetic, grasping Evie to my chest. "We can keep her."

"She's too old, you know that." She shook her head. "She'll remember. She'll never be able to see us as anything but the people who murdered her mother."

I winced, and my hands flew to Evie's ears. "No."

"Yes." She nodded down at me. "You always tell me you're strong and you can handle life without me. But you never do. I always have to clean up your mess. So this time, you're going to do it. Set her down and step away."

The black pit was outside of me now, surrounding me. Swallowing me up along with everything on earth. "Mother. Please."

"Next year you'll get hired as Santa at a new location and we'll do it my way. We'll pick a child who's too young to remember anything but us, and we'll make sure her mother is too terrified to ever think of crossing us. And then we'll finally be happy."

Happy. All I'd ever wanted, as far back as I could remember, was for my mother to be happy. She loved me when I made her happy. And she was right—Evie would never love me, I'd only ever be the man who hurt her mother. It was screwed up beyond repair, and there was no way I could fix it.

I shifted Evie off my lap, back toward her mother, one of my hands holding Evie's while the other swiped at tears I hadn't realized I'd been crying.

As soon as she touched the ground, she pulled from me, twisting so she could run to her mother. But I gripped her hand—I couldn't bear to let go. She twisted and turned and pulled, screaming now, desperate to get away from me.

“Dustin. Now.”

I released her hand and she bolted, diving into her mother’s chest, sobbing and crying out for her.

Turning toward Mother, I straightened up and squeezed my eyes shut. “Do it quickly.”

She laughed again, and my eyes popped open.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? You’ll never learn if I keep cleaning up your messes for you,” she said. “You need to understand the gravity of your failures, and of not doing as I say. The only way you will is if you have to kill one of them yourself.”

Unable to speak, I shook my head.

She stepped toward me. “Take the gun now, and be a man. Fix the mistakes you made.”

I stepped back. Evie’s cries had stopped now, and I turned to look at her. She stared at me, her eyes wide and brown and terrified.

“Dustin. Don’t make me ask again.” She kept moving forward.

The blackness wasn’t surrounding me anymore—I was the blackness. Every inch of me, every cell of my body. My back hit a tree, and I stopped moving.

Mother extended the gun out to me.

I stared down at it, then back at little Evie. Mother was right—I’d made this mess. These were my mistakes, and not just the current situation, but all of it, from day one. And that meant I was the one who had to fix it.

I raised the gun—and pointed it at Mother’s head.

She laughed again. “You’ve never been able to take charge of any aspect of your life. You weren’t able to kill your father when he was going to have you taken away, and you couldn’t kill the bitch that wanted to ruin your life, but you expect me to believe you have the guts to kill the only person who’s ever loved you?”

Another pair of tears streamed down my cheeks as I took in her words.

Then I pulled the trigger, and watched as the black pit appeared in the center of her forehead.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

As the voices crystallized and discernible words reached Jo, she sped up, faster than she knew she should safely approach—but still the second shot rang out seconds before she was within accurate enough range to make her presence known. The sound hit her like the bullet had pierced her own chest, the agony nearly blinding her as she sprang through the trees and raised her gun.

“Lower your weapon!” she cried.

Dustin turned to her, face twisted with impossible pain. He was on his knees, moaning a guttural wail that sounded more animal than human. He released the gun, then sagged backward onto the ground away from it.

Arnett appeared from between the trees and stepped toward Dustin while Jo kept cover.

“Evelyn, I know you’re here,” Jo called. “Step out where we can see you, now.”

“She’s there.” Dustin gestured to the figure on the ground. “I killed her.”

Arnett kicked Dustin’s gun out of reach and secured him in handcuffs. Once he finished, Jo cautiously rounded the snowbank, gun at the ready.

A middle-aged woman wrapped in a beige knitted cap and black coat lay on the ground, blood pouring from a hole between her eyes. Behind her Paxton lay partly upright against a boulder, with a nearly identical wound. Alexia huddled into her lap, perfectly still.

Searing panic ripped through Jo's chest. She leaped toward the child. "Alexia?"

Alexia didn't move.

"Evie's—Alexia—she's alive," Dustin said behind her. "But she needs to get to a doctor, right away."

Jo dropped to her knees in front of Alexia, gun now holstered, and reached for her neck to check her pulse. Alexia's eyes opened at her touch. Jo choked out a sob of relief and fought back the urge to pull Alexia toward her—if she was injured in any way, Jo couldn't risk making it worse. "Where are you hurt?"

Alexia silently stared up at Jo with an expression she'd never seen before—but instantly recognized. The person Alexia loved most in the world had been killed in front of her.

"She's not hurt, she's sick. Like appendicitis," Dustin said.

Jo grabbed the blue blanket lying next to Paxton and spread it over Alexia, grabbing her hand in the process. "Don't move, sweetie. You're safe now, and we're going to get you to a doctor. Everything's going to be alright."

Alexia continued to stare at her, saying nothing. But her little hand wrapped around Jo's, and squeezed.

DECEMBER 19TH

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

“I’m not sure how I feel about this,” Arnett said as they drove down the highway to the Brigg-Nelson Center for Psychiatry a week later. “I’m not convinced the whole thing isn’t just an act. I trust your gut, but...”

Jo watched the windshield wipers arc rhythmically back and forth, each time gathering and compressing a clump of gray-white. “I’ve been wrong before. But I heard more than you did.”

He hadn’t been close enough to hear the last few sentences before Dustin shot Evelyn. But they were seared into Jo’s memory, along with the mocking laughter that accompanied them.

You’ll never learn if I keep cleaning up your messes for you. You need to understand the gravity of your failures, and of not doing as I say. The only way you will is if you have to kill one of them yourself.

You weren’t able to kill your father when he was going to have you taken away, and you couldn’t kill the bitch that wanted to ruin your life, but you expect me to believe you have the guts to kill the only person who’s ever loved you?

Jo still found it difficult to process. Derision. Ridicule. Mind control. It wasn’t just abuse, it was bare-faced evil.

Dustin had cooperated with them fully. Didn’t fight, didn’t try to get away, just sat rocking back and forth, muttering about Angela. Then, back at the station, he’d confessed everything. How he’d started working seasonally as Santa

because it was the best way to identify single mothers who lead at risk lives. Women who'd have a better life with him, once they accepted the new situation. He claimed he never wanted to hurt them, only wanted to love them. But each time something went wrong—illness or violence or escape—and his mother had killed them.

Arnett glanced at Jo. "I'm not saying the mother wasn't the one who pulled the trigger. I'm just not sure I buy he objected to it."

Jo's eyes followed the wipers—back and forth, back and forth. Could you hypnotize someone that way? "When push came to shove, he killed his own mother rather than Alexia."

"Everybody has a breaking point." He turned back toward the windshield. "How's Alexia doing? Has she recovered from the appendicitis surgery?"

"Oh, she bounced back from that like a champ. She's not supposed to be playing any team sports for another week, but that's not really an option right now anyway."

"And otherwise?"

Jo sighed. "She's still not talking, mostly. She's staying with my sister. Between my uncle's drinking and my aunt Genevieve's cancer prognosis, they don't have the resources to deal with her trauma. The doctor says Genevieve won't last much past the start of the new year."

"And for obvious reasons they don't want to turn her over to Patrick and his parents." He signaled a turn through a tall gate. "You said she's *mostly* not talking?"

"If you ask her a yes or no question, she'll nod or shake her head. And she says 'thank you.' Nothing more." She rubbed her eyes.

"Give her time." Arnett's tone was soft. "Kids can be tricky. There's no instruction manual."

"No," Jo agreed. "You know, I used to think some people just aren't cut out to be parents. Which is true, like Evelyn Gillette. But I don't think it's that simple."

He shot her another glance. “How so?”

“I think there are also mismatches. Like with friendships or romances. Sometimes you’re both great people, but you just aren’t great for each other. Maybe that was the problem with Paxton and my uncle Jim.”

Arnett shook his head. “Nope, I don’t buy it. When you become a parent, it’s your responsibility to figure out how to give your kid what they need. Some children are easy, some aren’t, but none of them know any better and they didn’t choose to be born. The parent is the adult, the one with the fully developed brain and impulse control and moral compass.”

Jo considered that. “I suppose since I’ve never had a child, it’s difficult for me to really know.”

Arnett turned left onto a narrow, paved road that cut through an expansive lawn. At the end, a white Georgian mansion loomed up over the sprawling gardens.

“George Washington could’ve lived here,” Arnett said.

“Are you sure he didn’t?” Jo said. “Maybe this was his summer place.”

Dr. Treyvon Davis met them at the intake desk. Just under six feet, with warm eyes and brown skin, his friendly smile and reassuring manner comforted Jo before he even shook her hand. A useful skill in a man who had to calm people through a variety of mental turmoil, and who needed to inspire trust—even as she consciously analyzed it, she found herself unconsciously smiling back at him.

“You asked to speak with me before you meet directly with Dustin?” he said.

“If possible. I know confidentiality issues in a case like this are complex,” Jo answered.

Davis raised a hand. “He’s given full permission for me to speak with you.” He gestured down the hall.

They followed him into his office. He’d decorated it to highlight the Revolutionary-era features, but with a nod to his

own style. Two rust-colored armchairs faced his walnut desk, and a pair of mid-century Beresford sage lamps rested at either end. A print of Romare Bearden's *Christ Healing the Sick* faced the desk; the cubist lines melded with the bold jewel tones to give the sense of a church's stained-glass window bringing light into the room.

Once they sat, Davis spoke. "To get straight to the relevant legal point, there's no diminished capacity here. Dustin Foley was fully aware of the rights and wrongs of the choices he was making, and of their potential consequences. He's also not trying to avoid responsibility for what he's done. He's stated repeatedly that he shouldn't be freed. In fact, he's of the opinion he shouldn't be allowed to live at all."

"Did you explain to him Massachusetts has no death penalty except for federal crimes?" Jo asked.

"I did. And I believe he'll kill himself if given the opportunity. He feels he's an irredeemable defective."

"I can't say I disagree," Arnett said.

Davis rubbed his lips together and considered Arnett before responding. "I've only had a few sessions with Dustin, so my understanding is still limited. I agree he shouldn't be released. But while I'd say he's certainly damaged, from what I've seen he's neither defective nor irredeemable."

"Please explain, if you can," Jo said.

"One of the questions relevant to anyone's mental wellness has to do with nature versus nurture. For example, some depression is biologically encoded in our genetic makeup, a predisposition we're born with. Some depression comes from trauma, or difficult life circumstances. How we treat the depression takes the cause into account."

"So you're saying he wasn't born this way," Arnett said. "Does that matter?"

"From what I can tell with the help of his academic and medical records, Dustin was an introverted, anxious boy in a turbulent family situation that exacerbated his anxiety. He was never comfortable around other people, and preferred solitary

pastimes. Not unusual at all, many children show the same preferences. Had he been accepted for who he was, and if he'd had his anxiety treated, he could have grown into a happy, well-adjusted man."

"But his mother was abusive," Jo said.

"Both his parents were, in different ways. I can't be certain since I never treated her, but what Dustin describes in his mother may be a co-occurrence of borderline or anti-social personality disorder along with bipolar disorder. His mother had periods of deep depression, manic episodes, difficulties with relationships, and only cared about others to the degree she could manipulate them. Dustin's father died when he was young—"

"He was murdered," Arnett said.

"I heard his mother admit to killing him," Jo added.

Davis nodded assent. "But even when his father was present, he was ineffective and unaccepting. They both told him from a young age he was defective. In his father's case, I believe because he couldn't accept a child who was so different from himself, and in his mother's case, her own mental issues terrified her of being alone, and she put that fear onto Dustin."

"She convinced him nobody but her could ever love him," Jo said. "The power of a mother's words is truly frightening."

"But that's not the worst of it."

Jo balked—she couldn't even imagine. "What is?"

Davis took a breath before answering. "Dustin is asexual. Are you familiar with that?"

Jo nodded. "Someone who can have romantic feelings toward someone, but who has no desire to have sex."

"Some asexuals have no romantic feelings, either, but yes, that's essentially correct. We understand now that's it's no more a disorder or a defect than preferring strawberry ice cream to chocolate. It's not as common as heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality, but it's just another point within

the range of normal human functioning. When Dustin was a teenager, struggling to come to terms with his sexual identity as we all do, asexuality wasn't on society's radar. Dustin had nobody to help him understand, and his mother demonized him for it. From her perspective, which only took her own wants and needs into account, he was a 'freak' who'd never give her a grandchild or a daughter-in-law, and she told him that repeatedly."

"So he tried to give them to her another way," Jo said.

"When your only source of security and love wants something from you, you're highly motivated to give it to them. But it's not quite that simple. Along the way, he developed deep romantic feelings for a girl—"

"Angela?" Jo asked.

He nodded. "Who rejected him very cruelly when she found out he had no interest in sex. She even threatened to tell their classmates about it. Since she was the only person other than his mother that he ever bonded with, her rejection destroyed any chance he had to break away from his mother and form a functional human relationship. Angela didn't know any better, she also wouldn't have understood asexuality. But that doesn't mitigate the impact on Dustin."

Jo winced. "So, like a serial killer who kills women who remind them of some woman who hurt them in the past, he's been looking for women who reminded him of Angela."

Davis bounced his palm on his desktop. "He also chose women he truly believed would be better off with him as provider and protector."

"Yet they all ended up dead." Arnett stood up. "Can we see him now?"

The room Davis ushered them into bore a strong resemblance to a prison cell. Small, hardly more than ten foot by six, with beige textured walls with a bed on one end, and a small writing desk on the other. Jo surreptitiously touched them as

they entered. Some sort of padding; Dr. Davis hadn't been exaggerating the fear of suicide.

Dustin, who'd been lying on the bed before they entered, sat up as they crossed into the room. A nurse followed them, carrying two additional chairs that she deposited so the three of them could sit.

"Hello, Dustin," Jo started. "We need to go over your statement with you, and have a few loose ends we need to tie off."

He rubbed the stubble on his chin as he nodded.

Jo walked him through everything in chronological order, beginning with the death of his father.

"I didn't know he was dead for several years. I thought he'd just left us, because that's what my mother told me at first. But when I was old enough to wonder why he never sent child support, she told me the truth. She'd killed him to keep me safe, since he wanted to take me to a psychiatrist. She told me a psychiatrist would lock me away because I wasn't normal."

More likely Evelyn had known the doctor would have removed him from her custody due to her abuse. "Are you sure she wasn't lying about killing him to scare you? Maybe he really did just leave."

Dustin's cheek twitched, and he worked his jaw like he was chewing gum. Then he said, "She took me to see where he was buried. The grave was shallow. I can draw you a map if you like."

Jo cleared her throat. "And Angela?"

"She knew Angela's routine and picked her up as she walked home from her friend's house. She strangled her, and dumped the body out in the woods. She told me where, and I sneaked out that night to bury her, because I couldn't bear the thought of the animals tearing her apart. They'd already started when I arrived."

"That was a big risk," Jo said. "The police might have caught you."

He swiped away a tear from his cheek. “I think part of me hoped they would.”

Jo moved on, walking him through the details of each of the kidnappings in turn, including where Emma and Joy were buried. “Why did you choose Oakhurst this year, if you were looking for disadvantaged single mothers?”

“I didn’t. If I had a choice, I’d have picked a less affluent area. Seasonal Stations chooses where they send each Santa.”

“But you found a candidate on your first day. How did that process work?” she asked.

He stared past her at the wall. “Have you ever thought about how dysfunctional a thing visiting Santa is? Parents spend so much time and effort teaching children about stranger danger and how not to take anything from them, then they plunk their children in a stranger’s lap and tell them to answer his questions and ask him for gifts. A good Santa needs to make the children feel comfortable, so it’s usually easy for me to bring the mom into it. And mothers will answer anything Santa asks, in order to set a good example for their child. That’s part of why I chose that method.”

“But we watched the tape of your visit with Alexia. Paxton barely spoke to you at all because the photographer was talking to her,” Jo said.

“In her case, I overheard everything I needed to know. She was single, struggling to take care of her child, and her abusive, druggie ex was trying to take her child away.”

“Far better off with you,” Arnett said.

Dustin turned to him, raw pain contracting his face. “I’m aware of how ridiculous it sounds. At the time I believed it. I even saw myself as a sort of Santa, there to give them a better life.”

“But now you don’t?”

Dustin’s hands shot up to his ears. “No. When my mother tried to make me shoot Evie—Alexia—something shifted in my head. Like when you pull a curtain back from the window, and light comes in.”

Jo jumped back in. “You didn’t leave the Santa Station during the time Paxton and Alexia went missing. How did you and your mother manage that?”

“I texted her Paxton’s information on my burner phone, that’s what I took a picture of on the monitor. She works part-time for Pioneer Valley Mutual, on their RMV desk, and during the pandemic they all got remote access to the systems. She was able to search Paxton’s license and see if she had a car registered in her name. Once she found it in the parking lot she disabled the camera and waited. When Paxton showed up, she approached her and said she was having car trouble. When Paxton went to help her, Mother tased her, then gave both her and Alexia injections to knock them out. She pulled her car up and loaded them in.” He paused a moment, dropping his hand from the side of his head. “Since my father died, we’ve both had to manage the orchards by ourselves. We’re stronger than we look.”

“In addition to having jobs?” Jo asked.

He nodded. “We don’t make much money from the orchards. Most of our income is from our jobs, and I do appliance repair work, too.”

“Then why not just give up the farm?” Arnett asked.

“It’s been in Mother’s family for generations. It’s the family legacy, and she couldn’t bear the thought of the trees her grandfather and his grandfather had nurtured dying off.”

“But you live in an apartment,” Arnett said.

“Just as cover. Most of the time I live on the farm, and do my appliance repair work there.”

Jo’s mind flew to the farmhouse’s workbench. “The beach ball I saw in your basement—next to the Super Glue and gloves. That ball was from the mall’s toy store. You bought it to get Trevor’s fingerprint and plant it on the car.”

He half-smiled. “That was my idea. One of the few times Mother was proud of me. The first two times nobody really looked for the missing women, but I knew that luck wouldn’t hold up. We needed something to throw the police off if they

did start to investigate seriously. So once I knew what mall I'd be working at, I stopped into the toy store to find someone who looked like they might kidnap a child. I grabbed a beach ball, wiped it down with my gloves, and pretended to shop until he was the only one at the register. I knew he'd have to touch it to scan it."

"And you raised up the fingerprints by fuming them with the glue." Jo had used the technique herself.

"Transferring them into the gloves was the tricky part. The trick is a mixture of hand lotion and protein powder, but even then I was only able to get two prints to transfer well. Mother just had to put the glove on and grab the car door when the time came."

"What would you have done if your target didn't have a car, and needed to take the bus?"

Dustin shrugged, but looked down. "Mother wouldn't have found a vehicle registered to her, and so would have intercepted her on the way to the bus stop. We did that with the other two."

Jo finished the last of the questions, then rose. Arnett and Dr. Davis followed.

"Detective," Dustin said. "I have one last thing I'd like to tell you."

Jo braced herself—whatever he had to say likely would not be pleasant. "I'm listening."

"I want you to know I'm sorry," he said. "And I know that even though I didn't pull the trigger, I'm just as responsible for their deaths."

The words kicked Jo in the gut; she wasn't sure why. "I'm sure the assistant district attorney will give you an opportunity to apologize to the victims' families."

He nodded, and looked her in the eye. "Possibly. But I saw how you reacted when you saw Paxton lying there, and how you tended to Alexia. I caused you pain, too. I want you to know I'm sorry."

Jo pushed down the lump rising in her throat as a realization hit. “That’s why you buried Aspyn and Ivy with an angel ornament. You were sorry. You never wanted to harm them.”

“No, I didn’t.” He shook his head, and his eyes filled again. “They were my angels. I wanted to protect them and love them. Including Angela.”

A deep sadness draped over Jo, pressing down on her like a lead blanket. As she studied his face, the word ‘love’ echoed through her brain, bringing with it images of her mother and father, her sister and David, her uncle Jim and Paxton, Dustin and his mother, repeating again and again until the word was no longer a word and stopped making any sense.

She gave a single nod, and strode out of the room.

DECEMBER 24TH

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

For once, Jo was the first person to arrive at her mother's house on Christmas Eve. She tried not to dwell on the fact that it was due, at least in part, to the fact that she was arriving alone.

Because that was a part of a mature relationship: compromise, and understanding each other's boundaries. And in the grand scheme of things, celebrating Christmas largely without Matt wasn't a huge compromise to make.

Her stepfather Greg opened the door in a flourish of clashing colors and flashing lights. His sweater displayed a sunglassed Santa on a motorcycle, with a light-filled Christmas tree on the seat behind him. Whoever wore the 'ugliest' sweater to Christmas Eve dinner won an extra pick during the white elephant gift exchange. A concept Jo took exception with, because she found the sweaters festive and fun, and firmly believed that anything that put big smiles on people's faces couldn't possibly be considered ugly.

"Oh, very nicely done." Jo set her gifts down on the hall table and wagged a hand up and down the direction of his chest. "That'll win for sure."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you? But then your friend showed up, and I'm not sure I'll ever be able to look at Christmas the same way again." His eyes widened and took on a haunted, traumatized cast.

"Jo!" Lopez popped out of the dining room. "I see that your family is one of those dinner's-at-five-really-means-

dinner's-at-seven families.”

Jo took an involuntary step back. Lopez's sweater was blue and beige—all the better to contrast with the greens and reds of the llama zombies transporting elf zombies across the desert toward the zombie Baby Jesus.

“Wow,” Jo blurted.

“Hang on, you need the full effect.” Lopez fiddled under the hem of the sweater and lights blazed on, accenting each figure's dripping brains and partially detached limbs.

Jo gaped. “Where on God's green earth do you find a sweater like that?”

Lopez tilted her head. “Do you really want to know?”

Jo threw up a hand. “No, I really don't.”

Elisabeth stepped out from the dining room to give Jo a hug and a kiss. “Sorry I didn't get here before Christine,” Jo said. “I see you two have met.”

“We have, and your friend is lovely. She's been helping me in the kitchen, asking all sorts of questions about what we eat for *Le Réveillon*.” She shot a glance at Lopez's sweater. “*She* understands the importance of tradition.”

Too stunned by her mother's willing embrace of Lopez's sweater to be offended by the not-so-subtle jab at Matt, she hung her coat in the closet and picked up a bakery box from her pile of packages. “Well, all's well, then. I have the *croquinoles*, what else can I help with?”

Elisabeth led them through to the kitchen. “The *tourtière* is in the oven, so we're set there. Pea soup is bubbling away, and I have asparagus in the oven. Christine was slicing the pickled beets for the salad, and I'm assembling the oyster platter. You can put out the foie gras and the toast points, if you don't mind.”

After setting the maple twists by her mother's stunning *Buche de Noel*, she pulled out the appetizer platter. They'd used the same one every year since she could remember, one

with frosted glass and Christmas trees debossed around the edges. Something about it felt like the epitome of family.

“I can’t believe I beat Sophie,” Jo said. “It’s not like her to run late.”

Frustration flashed across Elisabeth’s face as she pulled over a head of romaine lettuce. “She’ll never admit it, but David’s new baby is eating her up inside. And Alexia—well, you can imagine.”

Jo’s brow creased. “I can’t, actually. Sophie’s such an amazing mother.”

The hand holding Elisabeth’s knife rested onto the cutting board. “She is an amazing mother, of course. But she has two amazing girls who relate to her in a way she can understand. They started off as easy babies and have been relatively easy all the way through. Even when Emily was going through her nightmares she ran *to* Sophie, not *away* from her. Sophie has no idea how to deal with a child who shuts down and pulls away.”

As Jo nodded, considering that, the doorbell rang.

“Grandma! Grandpa! Auntie Jo!” Emily and Isabelle cried out a chorus of welcomes from the hall. Elisabeth hurried out, with Jo and Lopez following closely.

The two girls ran to everybody in turn, doling out hugs and kisses, looking like a scene from a Christmas movie in their matching red satin dresses. Alexia stood back, each hand gripping a side of her green gown.

As Sophie turned from putting the coats away, she spotted the material crumpling in Alexia’s fists. She opened her mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it. Jo crossed to Alexia without touching her, hoping to reassure her without making her feel pressured or uncomfortable.

“Your timing is perfect,” Elisabeth announced, her tone indicating anything but. “It’s time to sit down for dinner.”

Alexia trailed Jo as she went back to the kitchen. Jo bent down to her. “I need your help. Would you carry in the rolls for me?”

Alexia nodded, and held out her hands for the basket. She followed Jo to the dining room and handed them to Elisabeth. When Jo sat down, she slipped into the seat next to her—a seat whose place card was labeled for Lopez. Elisabeth started to object, but stopped when she caught Jo’s warning glare.

Alexia ate very little, but Sophie’s approving reactions indicated the amount was an improvement. When it was time for dessert, Jo slid her plate halfway toward Alexia and bent over to her. “I’m getting full. You want to share with me?” Jo whispered.

Alexia nodded.

After dessert, they went into the living room. Greg added logs to the fire, and the adults settled into couches and armchairs and oriented themselves toward the tree. As Jo leaned back from setting her mug on the coffee table, Alexia slipped up onto the couch next to her, and pressed into her side. Jo settled one arm tentatively on Alexia’s shoulder, ready to pull it back if she stiffened. Instead, Alexia climbed over onto Jo’s lap. Everyone in the room held their collective breath, trying their best to pretend they weren’t watching.

Elisabeth cleared her throat. “Our tradition for Christmas Eve is everybody gets to open one present. The rest we open on Christmas morning.” She avoided Alexia’s eyes, even though the speech was meant for her. “Everyone gets to pick the gift they want to open.”

“I have something there for Christine.” Jo pointed her mother to the gift bag.

“Aww, you didn’t have to do that.” Lopez reached out, wiggling her fingers. “But I’m so glad you did.”

Emily and Isabelle bolted to the tree. Alexia didn’t move from Jo’s lap.

“Would you like Emily to pick one out for you?” Jo asked her.

Alexia nodded.

Emily gleefully grabbed a shiny red package and brought it over to Alexia with a huge smile. “This is my gift to you. I

picked it out.” She raced back to her own gift without waiting for a response.

Emily and Isabelle tore into their presents, but Alexia made no move to touch hers. “Do you want me to open it for you?” Jo asked.

Alexia nodded.

Jo pulled off the paper, quickly but not too quickly, to reveal a stuffed sloth Warmie.

“I have one just like it,” Emily said. “It makes me feel better when I’m sad or scared.”

Alexia picked up the sloth, and hugged it to her chest, then grabbed Jo’s hand and pulled it in to the sloth, too. “Thank you.”

Sophie’s eyebrows raised.

Jo cleared her throat. “Christine, aren’t you going to open yours?”

Lopez picked up on the signal and seamlessly shifted her gaze to the gift bag on her lap, then reached in. She pulled out the board game *Zombie-Opoly* with a wicked smile. “How did you know I’d like this?”

Jo rolled her eyes. “I figured you might already have it, so the gift receipt is at the bottom.”

“Ooo, that looks cool!” Isabelle said. “I want to play!”

“I’m up for it,” Greg said, eliciting surprised and discomfited looks from Elisabeth and Sophie.

Sorry, Jo mouthed to them.

As everyone broke into side conversations and Alexia’s warm weight in her lap lulled her, Jo glanced around the room taking everything in.

Her mother and Greg, chatting and nibbling at the platter of cookies.

Sophie and David, directing the girls how to set up the game.

The candles on the mantle, throwing flickering light over the boughs of genuine holly her mother had surely woven together with her own two hands.

The ornaments illuminating the tree, each evoking a thousand memories, both of the good times her parents had worked so hard to create for her, and the bad times she'd never have survived without them.

Jo fought back tears as she leaned her head down to whisper into Alexia's ear. "Would you like to come live with me?"

Alexia squeezed her hand as she nodded.

* * *

If you were utterly gripped by *Angels in the Snow*, then don't miss M.M. Chouinard's totally addictive thriller, [The Vacation](#).
Eight Days. Three Families. One Missing Child.

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THE VACATION

AN UTTERLY GRIPPING THRILLER PACKED WITH SUSPENSE

One of them is missing... One of them did it...

NOW

Rose Martin sips her drink and closes her eyes as the warm Jamaican breeze brushes her face, her legs, her bare shoulders. The humidity is lush and sensual and when the air wafts past her, carrying the scent of the distant ocean up the mountainside, every inch of her skin comes alive, transforming her into a goddess. She wants to dance, slowly and with abandon, to the steel-drum melodies coming from the villa's Bluetooth speakers. Wants to laugh and sing, and make love long into the night.

Finally, *finally*, she's managing to relax, despite how hard the last couple of days have been. Maybe Brandon was right, maybe the vacation was just what they needed—time with family and friends in paradise. She's been ridiculous to stress so much about it, and she really does need to get better at dealing with her anxieties. She makes a mental note to make an appointment with her therapist as soon as they get back to the States.

"Gin," Anabelle calls.

Rose reopens her eyes to watch Anabelle spread her cards out on the wooden table with a single, graceful, well-manicured gesture; the moonlight glints off the pool behind Anabelle, playing up the contrast between her pink French tips and her brown skin. Rose glances down at her own pale hand—a dash of red polish might be the perfect touch for their upcoming Thanksgiving dinner.

"Dammit," Brandon says, and throws his cards down. "Five in a row. I give up."

Anabelle's uncharacteristically sharp laugh cracks across the tiled courtyard and echoes off the three mustard-yellow houses that enclose it. "That's because I'm the only one not drunk."

A chorus of half-hearted denials ring out, and Rose examines the nearly empty pitcher of rum punch as she sets her own cards down. It's the second pitcher, but even so, is that really enough to get six adults drunk? She's tipsy, without a doubt. Not a problem, the children are asleep, but she probably shouldn't drink anymore regardless. Everyone has to be up early tomorrow morning, and her brother- and sister-in-law have already gone to bed.

The thought reminds her. "I should go check on the kids. Do you want me to look in on your boys, too?"

Anabelle starts to answer, but her husband Mateo interrupts. "Chill out, Rosie, Brandon just checked on them. You're gonna turn into one of those—what's it called—helicopter parents. Oh, wait—too late."

Rose winces at the nickname he knows she hates, and stands. "I don't like being out of earshot for too long when they aren't feeling well. And believe it or not, it's been well over an hour since he checked on them. Time flies when you're having fun."

Mateo throws up his hands, a wry grin on his face. "An hour, well, then! My bad."

Rose refuses to rise to the bait—let him vent any way he needs to—choosing instead to shake her head gently and smile. "I'll just be a minute."

Sauntering toward the south-most house in the villa, she tries to refocus on the caress of the warm breeze. She steps under the gorgeous Moroccan-scrolled overhang to the door and then into the bohemian living room, all wicker furniture and bright, happy prints that make her smile. The room is stuffy—only the ceiling fans propel the warm air inside—and already she misses the intoxicating breeze. She cracks open the door to the children's room, and peeks into Jackson's crib. He's sound asleep, and she smiles at the sight of his face,

cherubic in the soft glow of the night light. Thank goodness he's sleeping soundly—it's hard enough to get him to sleep through the night even without the sniffles that have made him fussy all day.

The door swings open the rest of the way, and the hair on Rose's neck stands up in the breeze. Because it's organic again, natural and flowing, not the artificial swirl of the fans. The window shouldn't be open, but it is, curtains billowing out into the room, obscuring Lily's bed just underneath.

She rushes over and bats aside the curtains—the bed is flat, empty. Heart pounding in her throat, she pulls at the covers and sheets and pillows as though her daughter could be hiding underneath them, playing an impossible game of hide and seek.

“Lily?” She frantically dives to check under the bed, kicks away the wicker chairs, pushes aside the clothes in the tiny closet. “Lily, this isn't funny. Come out right now!”

But she knows this isn't a three-year-old's prank. Lily's not the sort of child who hides from her mother. And she's timid, anxious even—she'd never climb out a window on her own.

Rose clammers onto the bed and sticks her head out, glancing left and right, seeing nothing except the empty street that leads past the house through John's Hall and toward Montego Bay.

No Lily. No anybody.

Fueled by a last scrap of hope, she dashes back through the small house—master bedroom, kitchen, living room—calling Lily's name, louder now, any concern for waking Jackson gone.

No Lily.

She hurries back to the children's room and searches again, the bed, the closet, Jackson's crib, behind the chairs, refusing to admit what she won't find.

Then, she sinks to her knees, screaming.

ONE MONTH BEFORE

ROSE

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, I talked to Leo today.” Brandon froze at the entrance to the living room and smiled down at her. “You always look so beautiful when you’re in your happy place.”

Rose glanced up from her fabric swatches, legs tucked up under her as she cuddled into the couch, and laughed. “I never thought of it that way, but I guess strolling through a new set of fabrics *is* my happy place, like my brain’s version of running free through Disneyland. But I also got some really excellent news today. That boutique in Boston called and said my collection is selling so well they want everything from my spring/summer collection. I’ve been riding the adrenaline rush all evening, waiting for the kids to go to sleep so I can dive into these and start planning for next fall.”

“Congratulations, hon. Next step: New York Fashion Week.” Brandon gestured an imaginary marquee above his head.

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe a few more steps in between. But you were saying you talked to Leo today?”

“Right.” He set his glass of wine on a coaster, grabbed the television remote, and dropped onto the sleek black sofa. “He called and invited us for Thanksgiving.”

Rose turned cold. “In Jamaica?”

Brandon took a sip of the wine. “Where else?”

“I thought they might be coming back to the States for the holidays,” she said, her design process forgotten. “He called

you at work?”

Brandon cleared his throat. “He left a message while I was in surgery. For a really jacked-up facelift, by the way—the woman’s third, because the guy who did the second one butchered her. Anyway. I called Leo back on my way home.”

Of course Leo would try to convince Brandon first. He’d been trying to get them to visit for the last six months, and knew full well that Rose wouldn’t want to go. “That’s nice of them to invite us, but—”

“He’s inviting Mateo and Anabelle, too, so we’ll have the gang back together. And you were just saying how you weren’t ready for another New England winter.”

“But we were talking about Los Angeles or even Napa Valley. And sometime in January, not over Thanksgiving. My parents will have a fit.”

“We’ll see your parents over Christmas. But this is the only way we’ll get to see my sister over the holidays.”

Rose’s chest tightened. “But they’ll be moving back in the spring. That’s not so long, and we’ll see them then.”

He clicked on the TV, but muted it as he surfed the channels. “That’s just it. AmericAid needs him there for at least another year. I guess the hurricanes last year slowed things down, so his part of the project won’t finish on time. And Bree has never met Jackson. They need to bond.”

“We’ve talked about this.” Her mind raced. She slid the swatches onto the glass coffee table and grabbed her computer. She typed and clicked, then swiveled the machine to show the screen to Brandon. “Look. Travel advisory. Avoid unnecessary travel to Jamaica.”

He flicked his wrist toward her and reached for his wine. “They always say that.”

“That’s because it’s always true. Look here.” She pointed at the screen. “And I quote: ‘Violent crimes such as home invasions, armed robberies, sexual assaults and homicides are common. Local police lack the resources to respond

effectively to serious criminal incidents.’ The kids are too young for us to take those risks.”

“The crime isn’t against tourists, it’s outside those areas. You’re buying into alarmist stereotypes.” He settled on a twenty-four-hour news channel.

“It says incidents happen frequently even at all-inclusive resorts, and it lists Montego Bay specifically. And it goes on to say that even *government personnel* are prohibited from traveling outside prescribed areas and shouldn’t use public transportation. And that you shouldn’t drive or walk at night.” She moved her pointed finger across the lines as she read the page.

“Rose. There are plenty of places in *Boston* that aren’t safe to go to after dark. You find that everywhere.”

“But we know Boston. We know where to go and where not to go.”

He reached over and gently swatted the laptop closed. “And Leo and Bree know Jamaica. They’ve lived there for two and a half years, and other people in the organization have been there even longer. They know where it’s safe and where it isn’t. And Anabelle’s father was born and raised in the Dominican Republic. She’s spent time on every island in the Caribbean.”

Her voice wavered as she struggled to stay calm. “I told you about that piece I saw on *The Global Daily Gazette* site, about the little girls getting kidnapped in Jamaica.”

“And I told you to stop reading that gossip rag.” He gestured toward the TV with the remote. “Stick with real news. Hundreds of kids are kidnapped all over the world every day. You only clicked on that particular article because Leo and Bree are in Jamaica.”

Rose shifted in her seat and shot a glance upward, in the direction of the children’s rooms. “Can’t they just come back here instead? We can even host Thanksgiving dinner. You’ve always wanted to barbecue a turkey.”

Brandon followed her glance. He clicked off the TV and turned to fully face her. “Did you talk to the doctor about a new prescription?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“My body’s still readjusting from Jackson’s birth, and I don’t want to mess with that balance.”

He tilted his head at her. “It’s been over a year.”

The truth was she wanted to prove, mostly to herself, that she no longer needed the medication. She cleared her throat. “I’ve been fine day to day, and the doctor gave me some emergency Xanax if I have a panic attack or anything.”

Brandon’s expression was skeptical. “Good, bring it with you. But talk to your doctor about starting a new prescription before we go, because you shouldn’t be this distressed by a possible trip to paradise. I know why you worry so much about them, but we can’t let it rule our lives. You have to get past it, your therapist even said so. You know I’d never let anything happen to you or the kids, right?”

She nodded. She also knew that her own father never would have willingly let anything happen to her or her sister. And yet, Lillian Marie had drowned in Lake Merritt just the same.

“Okay, then. Talk to your therapist too, she’ll help you feel better about it. But we need this trip. You’ve been working so hard between the kids and your design work, and after everything I’ve had to deal with to take over the new practice, I need a break.” He gestured toward the swatches. “Think how amazing a little island inspiration will be. We’ll come back refreshed and happy. You’ll see. Trust me.”

Trust. She trusted *him* just fine. He made her feel protected and secure—his confidence and strength were the main reasons she’d fallen in love with him. But the downside of the alpha-male energy, the flip side of the confidence-and-strength coin, was he could be stubborn. He had strong opinions about

the world, and when he committed to some sort of action, there wasn't any changing his mind.

And her therapist would say he was right about this. It was far too easy for her to slip into her safe cocoon, and that wasn't good for her or the kids. The last thing she wanted was to pass her anxieties off on them; she knew too well how the neuroses of a parent could bleed into every aspect of a child's life.

So she might as well find a silver lining. "You always see those stunning resorts on the commercials. Beautiful spas and gorgeous restaurants, and I'm sure they're all very secure."

He waved the thought away. "You can spend your entire trip in one of those resorts and never even know what island you're on. Leo said he knows a little villa close to where he lives that we'll love. Three houses built around a shared courtyard, tall protective wall enclosing it all, with a view of the ocean. It even has a nice big pool. Sounds amazing."

The fear stabbed back through her. "Doesn't he live up in the mountains? They're doing something with windmills up there, right, or solar panels? The travel warning says you should keep to the tourist areas."

"Rose. Do you really think my sister would let her husband bring us someplace that wasn't safe? Me and you, maybe. But with the kids? She loves Lily like she's her own, and she'll love Jackson just the same."

Too much.

The thought came unbidden, and she chastised herself for having it. She pushed it down and nodded. "I'm sure you're right. I'm being silly."

He smiled and squeezed her hand, then clicked the TV back on and took a long sip of his wine.

She pulled the swatches back into her lap and stared down, not seeing them.

* * *

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A LETTER FROM M.M. CHOUINARD

Thank you so, so much for reading *Angels in the Snow*. Whether this is your first time reading one of my books or you're a long-time friend of Jo and her team, I'm deeply grateful to you for spending time with us. If you enjoyed the book and have time to leave me a short, honest review on Amazon, Goodreads, or wherever you purchased the book, I'd very much appreciate it. Reviews help me reach new readers, and that means I get to bring you more books! Also, word of mouth means everything to authors, so if you have a friend or family member who'd enjoy the book, I'd be so grateful if you'd mention it to them.

If you have a moment to say hi on social media, please do—I love hearing from you! You can also sign up for my personal newsletter at www.mmchouinard.com for news directly from me about all my activities, new releases, and updates; I will never share your email.

SPOILER ALERT: Don't read further unless you want to risk me spoiling the book for you!

When psychologists and psychiatrists talk about the range of human behavior, we're very careful with the word 'normal.' This is because there are many behaviors that may not be the *most prevalent* form within a range of behaviors, but are just as *functional* as the more prevalent forms are. As an example of what I mean, we all know most babies crawl. But some never do, and instead scoot on their bottoms, roll over, or slither like snakes to get where they want to go. Far more babies crawl than use these other methods; that means it's more *typical* for babies to crawl, but all the methods are *normal*, functional ways for babies to get around. Some atypical behaviors may be problematic; if a baby doesn't attempt movement in any way, you'd want to consult with a pediatrician to find out why. But many atypical behaviors are not problematic, and have no negative implication for development or mental health. Babies that bottom-scoot or roll over will develop just as well as babies that crawl, with no negative impact on their development.

Unless those individuals are stigmatized and forced to behave differently.

Such judgments and demands can result in severe emotional damage, and have mental health implications. By way of example, my grandfather was initially left-handed; he was told that behavior was evil and was beaten by his teachers until he learned to do everything with his right hand. He hated writing, reading, and school for the rest of his life because of that. We now know that approach to handedness is wrong, and damaging.

In this book, Dustin is an extreme introvert and an asexual. Neither of these things is bad, or 'abnormal'—they're just atypical, that is, not in the majority. Because Dustin's parents don't understand this distinction, they demonize him from a very early age, telling him something's wrong with him and demanding he be different. Both parents handle this badly, but his father at least shows an inkling of insight that the situation may be complicated, and he tries to understand his son. Dustin's mother's approach, on the other hand, is complicated by the fact that she, unlike young Dustin, suffers from mental illness; she shows signs of both bipolar

depression and antisocial personality disorder. And because children depend so much on their parents, her twisted priorities and view of reality have a severe impact on him that make it impossible for him to achieve any sort of functional outcome in his life. In essence, what could be a normal, happy life is twisted beyond recognition, until Dustin *becomes* mentally ill and does things almost as horrible as those his mother does.

In parallel to that, Paxton also comes from a home with a severely dysfunctional dynamic. But rather than buying into the judgments and demands her family makes of her, she breaks away and embraces her own identity. Her path is hard and she makes mistakes on the way, but she's not condemned to the sort of dysfunctional outcome Dustin is. This is one of the age-old puzzles in psychology—why do some people break away from bad circumstances effectively while others don't? Why is it that sometimes people in the worst situations manage to break free while those in objectively less severe situations fail to do so? The answer to that question is complicated, but revolves around what psychologists call 'protective factors,' positive factors that counter negative ones. There are different types of protective factors, but an important one, especially with abused children, seems to be having one parent or an outside person who acts as a type of pressure valve. Someone who shows interest in them, or gives them an alternative perspective, or validates who they are and what they're feeling. Dustin's isolation contributed to his lack of such a person. In Paxton's case, I'd like to think her cousin Jo allowed her to see it was possible to break away from her parents' expectations, and that her different priorities didn't make her bad or wrong.

So why am I writing about this in my author letter? For two reasons. First, I want to be sure nobody walks away from this book thinking Dustin's asexuality is a mental illness or the cause of his later dysfunctional behavior. Quite the contrary—it's his mother's *failure to accept him for who he is* that causes his mental illness and leads him to do the horrible things he does. And second, I want to underline that every single thing we tell a child has the potential to harm—or the potential to *help*. Never underestimate the importance of even one hug, or a hand squeeze, or a whispered, "Don't let that bother you—they're just wrong." Because you never know when, even with something that simple, *you* may be someone's protective factor.

Michelle

www.mmchouinard.com



THE DANCING GIRLS

Jo pulled together the victims' pictures. In all cases their arms were askew, in a way that looked like—what? It was like they were freeze-framed in the middle of some action. It was like they were dancing.

When loving wife **Jeanine** is found dead in a small leafy town in Massachusetts, newly promoted **Detective Jo Fournier** is shocked to her core. Why leave her body posed like a ballerina? Why steal her wedding band and nothing else? Hungry for answers, Jo questions Jeanine's husband, but the heartbreaking pain written on his face threatens to tear open Jo's old wounds. It's the same pain she felt when her boyfriend was cruelly shot dead by a gang in their hometown of New Orleans. She couldn't get justice for him, but she's determined to get justice for Jeanine's devastated family.

But before Jo can get answers, another woman is found, wedding ring stolen, body posed in the same ritualistic way.

Digging through old files, Jo makes a terrifying link to a series of cold cases. She knows a serial killer is on the loose, but nobody will listen to the truth—not her bosses, nor the FBI.

Still, Jo won't let her superiors keep her from stopping the murderer in his tracks, even if it means the end of her career.

Just as she is beginning to lose hope, she finds messages on the victims' computers that feel like the crucial missing link. Knowing the killer is moments away from selecting his next target, will Jo be able to take him down the before another innocent life is lost?

A *USA Today* bestseller, *The Dancing Girls* is the first book in an absolutely unputdownable and gripping crime thriller series. Fans of Robert Dugoni, Lisa Regan and Melinda Leigh will devour it in one sitting and will never see that OMG twist coming!

[Get it here!](#)

TAKEN TO THE GRAVE

It's a sleepy morning in the leafy town of Oakhurst when Jo finds Britney's body on a running trail. She stares into the girl's blue eyes as she gently lifts her off the ground—and finds a tarot card...

A few days ago, **Detective Jo Fournier** stood in the middle of the local college, looking at a truly horrifying scene: a well-respected staff member murdered in his office. And it was there that Jo met **Britney**—a smart and pretty student in the same department who was utterly distraught about the killing.

One thought is now racing through Jo's mind: **who would want to kill them both?**

When another body turns up inside a cabin in the woods, Jo is the only person who can see the link between the murders—the killer left a tarot card with all three bodies. She desperately wants to stop the killing before anyone else dies. Jo knows how it feels to lose someone you love. **Her failure to protect her fiancé on the night he was murdered has always haunted her.**

As the body count rises, no one else will take Jo's theory seriously. She's absolutely sure that the cards are the clue that will break this entire case wide open and lead them to the person who has stolen so many innocent lives. **But she's out on her own—can Jo track down the dangerous killer or will they find her first?**

From *USA Today* bestseller M.M. Chouinard, *Taken to the Grave* is a completely addictive detective thriller that will keep you guessing into the early hours of the morning. If

**you love Kendra Elliot, Melinda Leigh and Lisa Regan,
you'll be utterly gripped!**

[Get it here!](#)

HER DAUGHTER'S CRY

The woman stumbles through the woods, face burned from the sun, feet aching with fatigue. At last she catches sight of a road and limps towards the first store in sight. The kindly storekeeper rushes towards her, “Are you okay, sweetheart? What happened?” The woman looks down at her shirt which is covered in blood. “I—I don’t know. I can’t remember.”

On a crisp New England morning, **Detective Jo Fournier** interviews a woman who dragged herself out of the forest, covered in blood and unsure of her own name. Jo gently tries to help Zoe, as she wants to be called, remember anything about her life. The wedding band on her finger says she’s married, but she can’t remember to whom. And she certainly can’t remember the person who attacked her...

Then a shocking revelation comes back from the lab: **the blood on Zoe’s clothes belongs to her daughter**. Jo knows how painful it is to lose the person who means the most to you, her fiancé was murdered in front of her. One thought races through Jo’s head: **who hurt Zoe so badly that she can’t remember her own child?**

Next a man claiming to be Zoe’s husband turns up looking for her, clearly wanting to finish what he started in the forest. Zoe is utterly terrified and, not knowing who to trust, takes off into the night by herself to find her daughter.

Suddenly Jo is playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse where the stakes couldn’t be higher. She is desperate to save Zoe and her daughter and find them both before the killer

tracks them down. **But when Jo takes a deadly risk to save Zoe—will she escape alive?**

From *USA Today* bestseller M.M. Chouinard, *Her Daughter's Cry* will grab you from the first page and not let you go until the jaw-dropping twist! Perfect for fans of Melinda Leigh, Lisa Regan and Gregg Olsen.

[Get it here!](#)

THE OTHER MOTHERS

It's a crisp spring morning when the small-town community around Briar Ridge Elementary School is shattered by devastating news. Bright and shy five-year-old Nicole has disappeared at recess.

When the phone call comes, **Gia Marchand** is suddenly living every parent's worst nightmare. She feels like time has stopped and she struggles to truly understand it: she dropped her daughter at the school gate this morning and now Nicole is gone. In her big house all alone, she breaks down.

Her best friend was in the playground at recess but when Gia begs desperately for any details, the woman won't look her in the eye. Surely her closest friend wouldn't betray her? Then Detective Jo Fournier says her husband was in the school building this morning but now she can't reach him. Gia is left completely alone with her grief.

As time slips away and Nicole hasn't been found, Gia becomes utterly terrified: **is she finally paying the price for a secret that she has been hiding for years? Or is someone she thought she could trust committing the ultimate betrayal?**

From *USA Today* bestseller M.M. Chouinard, *The Other Mothers* is a completely addictive psychological thriller that will not let you go until you turn the last heart-thumping page! Perfect for fans of *Gone Girl*, *The Stepdaughter* and *The Girl on the Train*.

[Get it here!](#)

HER SILENT PRAYER

“Help!” she screams, kicking as hard as she can against the closet door. But it’s nailed shut, and nobody can hear her. She drops to her knees and curls into a ball like she did as a little girl, praying someone will find her before it is too late...

When the body of single mother **Melissa Rollins** is found trapped inside a bedroom closet in her immaculate suburban home, **Detective Jo Fournier** races to the scene. The small town of Greenfern is sweltering in a heatwave, and Jo is horrified to find that Melissa’s heating was turned up to the max whilst she died of thirst. **Who would kill a devoted mother in such a cruel way?**

Searching the house for clues, Jo’s team discovers that the front door was locked from the inside. And with no sign of a break-in, they realise the killer must be someone Melissa knew. But everyone in the frame has an alibi...

As she delves deeper into the case, Jo uncovers a link between Melissa and a recent cold case: another single mother who was tied up and brutally murdered. Someone is on a mission to kill single moms, and Jo knows they will claim their next victim soon.

But as temperatures continue to rise and the team works around the clock to stop a twisted killer, someone from Jo’s past catches up with her. They’re watching her family’s every move, and they will stop at nothing to get revenge... Can Jo save the people she loves and catch the killer before it’s too late?

From *USA Today* bestseller M.M. Chouinard, *Her Silent Prayer* is a completely addictive serial killer thriller that will not let you go until you turn the last heart-thumping page! Perfect for fans of Lisa Regan, Melinda Leigh and Gregg Olsen.

[Get it here!](#)

WHAT THEY SAW

Next to the lake's dappled water, a woman lies on her yoga mat, her limbs twisted as if she is trying to crawl away. Her mug of tea steams into the cool air and her lips, still warm, are parted mid-sentence. But she will never speak or see again...

When **Sandra Ashville** is found murdered in a sleepy town near Oakhurst, **Detective Jo Fournier** is first at the scene. Jo is shaken by the similarities between herself and the dead assistant District Attorney, a dedicated woman with a heart for justice. And as she examines Sandra's body, Jo discovers something that chills her to the bone: the bullet hole is covered by an intact blindfold. Why was Sandra only blindfolded after her death?

The very next morning Jo receives a shocking call. A judge has been brutally killed, before she too was blindfolded. Soon it becomes clear that the twisted serial killer is working with a deadly countdown: every morning, another body will be found. Working around the clock, Jo makes an important break-through: all the victims are connected to the same murder trial. And Jo's dear friend and partner **Bob Arnett** could be next...

With the next morning rapidly approaching, Jo and her team pull out all the stops to catch the killer. But when she uncovers a stain of corruption that includes Bob, Jo faces an impossible choice. Can she trust her partner, when the evidence suggests he turned a blind eye to a grave miscarriage of justice? And as

the body count rises, can Jo catch the killer before it is too late for her oldest friend?

From *USA Today* bestseller M.M. Chouinard, *What They Saw* is an utterly addictive serial killer thriller that will keep you reading into the early hours! Perfect for fans of Lisa Regan, Melinda Leigh and Gregg Olsen.

[Get it here!](#)

LITTLE LOST DOLLS

The young woman lying on the forest floor looks like she's dreaming; her brown hair fanning out into a crown around her head, her hands clasped over her breast. She could be sleeping—if it weren't for the brutal slash across her neck...

It's autumn in Oakhurst when **Detective Jo Fournier** rushes to local beauty spot, Crone Ridge Woods, desperately hoping to find **Madison Coehlo** alive. Instead, she discovers the pregnant woman's pale and lifeless body, killed in the spot where she loved to walk her dog. Madison looked after her sick mother and studied at community college, who could have wished her harm?

Madison's mother is utterly broken by her brutal murder, but she cannot give Jo any insight into **the tiny doll pushed into her daughter's hand**. Supposed to bring luck to whoever finds one, is it a coincidence or a warning from the killer? When Jo gets another frantic emergency call, she rushes to the scene, determined to catch this cruel monster before he can steal more innocent lives. Her heart pounds when she finds **another identical plastic doll**.

As the local community panics, Jo and her team work round the clock to keep other pregnant women safe. The call logs of the murdered expectant mothers give Jo the clue she

desperately needs, but her heart splits in two when she realizes another woman is in danger. **Can Jo get to her first, or is the killer pulling them both into a deadly trap?**

From USA Today bestseller M.M. Chouinard, Little Lost Dolls is a keep-you-up-all-night utterly gripping crime thriller with a truly jaw-dropping twist! Fans of Lisa Regan, Melinda Leigh and Gregg Olsen will be completely addicted.

[Get it here!](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank YOU for reading my books. I am truly grateful to every person who chooses to spend their time with my stories. Thank you also to everyone who reviews them, blogs about them, or requests them from their local library—those actions are what allow me to continue bringing Jo to you, and they mean the world to me.

None of it would be possible without my team at Bookouture. Rhianna Louise helped with the early stages of conceptualization, and Maisie Lawrence took over the editing. Hannah Snetsinger, Billi-Dee Jones, Jane Eastgate, and Nicky Gyopari all helped edit and produce it. Kim Nash, Noelle Holten, Sarah Hardy, and Jess Readett did an amazing job promoting it; Melanie Price, Occy Carr, and Ciara Rosney helped market it; Alba Proko made the audiobook a reality; and Jenny Geras, Jessie Botterill, Laura Deacon, and Lauren Morrisette oversaw it all. So many amazing hands making it all happen!

I couldn't write what I write without experts helping me along the way. Thank you to the NWDA Hampshire County Detective Unit, to Leonard Von Flatern, and to Detective Adam Hill for their invaluable expertise and patience answering questions about police procedure and random scenarios. I know how valuable your time is and truly appreciate you setting some aside for me. Any errors/inaccuracies that exist are my fault entirely.

Thanks to my agent, Lynnette Novak, and Nicole Resciniti both for your advice, guidance, and support!

Thanks also to my writing tribe, who encourage me, educate me, write with me, critique me, lift me up, and make me laugh. This includes my fellow SinC brothers and sisters (especially Ellen Kirschman, George Kramer, Ana Manwaring, T.E. MacArthur, and Heidi Noroozy), my fellow

MWA members (especially the Monday & Wednesday write-in crew), D.K. Dailey, Karen McCoy, M.M.'s Murder Mob, Katy Corbeil, and my fellow Bookouture authors. Writing can be so solitary, I am truly thankful to have friends like you.

My furbabies are my partners in crime. They sit on my lap and next to me, pinning me in place so I can't stop writing even when I want to. Then, when it's time for their walks and their dinners, they loudly insist I take breaks. They're the most vigilant—and the cutest—taskmasters I could have.

Most of all, without my husband my books would not exist. Behind every person who achieves a dream stands someone who believed in them and helped make that dream happen—my husband is that person for me.

And he makes damned good smoked salmon, too.

Published by Bookouture in 2023

An imprint of Storyfire Ltd.

Carmelite House

50 Victoria Embankment

London EC4Y 0DZ

www.bookouture.com

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-83790-432-7

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