

The Pursuit

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Missing Person statistics

Every 40 seconds, a child goes missing in the U.S., that's roughly 2,000 per day.

When a child goes missing, the first 3 hours are the most crucial in finding the child safely.

It can take over 2 hours to get information about a missing child from a panicked parent

More than 99% of children reported in missing in America today come home alive.

It is estimated that nearly 800,000 children will be reported each year in the U.S; 40,000 children go missing each year in Brazil; 50,500 in Canada; 39,000 in France; 100,000 in Germany; and 45,000 in Mexico. An estimated 230,000 children go missing in the U.K. each year, or one child every 5 minutes.

In most of the developing world—including Africa, Asia, and Latin America—no one is counting missing children.

There are as many as 100,000 active missing persons cases in the U.S. at any given time

Family abductions are the most common type of child abduction. Of family-abducted children, fathers are responsible 53% of the time, while mothers are responsible 25% of the time.

It is estimated that at least 8 million children worldwide go missing each year

When the phone rang, they knew she was likely dead.

“Turn that god damn thing off!” his handler whispered. “Are you trying to get us killed?” Jake quickly powered the phone down and focused on his goal.

She had been missing for twenty-four hours and the trail had been difficult to follow. As they entered the office building, he was amazed by the number of cubicles throughout the interior. The building was a huge call center; in the dark he could see a long corridor with wall after padded wall.

Jake felt like a rat in maze except instead of searching for cheese, they were looking for a killer. As they walked down the corridor, his heart thumped so loud he thought it was going to explode through his ears. He kept thinking that someone would jump out of the cubicle behind him and shoot him in the back. He fumbled around the darkness without the benefit of his partner’s night vision goggles. It didn’t matter though, even in the dark, he could follow the victim’s trail.

His partner Dani stopped suddenly but his forward momentum slammed him into her back. Her head turned around and he didn’t need light to know she was angry. He was about to apologize when she made a motion towards her mouth to stay silent. *No sense tipping off the kidnapper.* He pointed towards the boardrooms as she grabbed his hand and pulled him forward again.

As they rounded the corner, a bright light flashed into their eyes. His back was turned sideways, and his body shoved to the floor. For a second, he could not breathe but realized that it was Dani holding him down, not the killer. The light flashed off and she pointed her gun around a corner. The light blazed again. He felt her weight shift as she got up.

“Damn!” she cursed.

“I thought we had to be quiet,” he whispered.

“We did until the motion light gave us away. We just triggered his signal.”

“Maybe it’s just security lighting,” he suggested.

“Jake, look at the table,” as she pointed into the room.

He tentatively moved his head around the corner. Maybe if he moved really slowly then nothing would happen to him. The light flashed off. He blinked into the darkness for a moment before the light turned back on. Once the spots faded from his vision, he looked at the boardroom table with a flexible lamp sitting in the middle. Under the lamp was a propped-up sign with the words “*WELCOME*”. A shiver ran through his body as the light flashed off again. Dani flicked her cell phone open.

“Rico, Mac. We’ve been made. Do not enter the building – the place is likely wired. Call local police, they’ll have to help now.”

“Roger boss,” a thick male Spanish accent replied. “Mac and I will take a quick look around outside. Maybe we’ll find him.”

“He’s watching us, but I doubt he’s here. Be careful, last time he left a bear trap in a pile of bushes.”

“We’ll tread carefully; I bet he has more traps waiting for you two inside.”

Dani flicked her cell phone and gave Jake a cold stare.

“Can you still see the trail?” she asked.

“You know I can,” he answered.

“Then point it out but stay behind me and take my cell phone.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because if I get taken down, the last thing you want to do is run around and set off another trap. If that happens, call Rico and he’ll come get you.”

“Fine,” he grumbled and snatched the phone. “But how about you try to keep both of us alive?”

“Gladly,” she smiled. “Hope for the best, but plan for the worse. Which direction?”

He pointed to the right as the trail doubled back from the boardroom towards the windowless side of the call center. They stepped slowly towards the kitchen and even though their presence had been detected, they remained silent. The kitchen was in the center of the building and had no outside light. Dani stepped in first and Jake followed, looking at the wall. He instinctively flicked the light switch. The kitchen was illuminated, and the microwave turned on.

“No!” Dani turned and screamed. She tackled him and his head fell back and hit the wall in the corridor.

“Why did you do that?” he yelled back and touched a tender spot on the top of his head. Then the microwave beeped and exploded. He instinctively ducked but since they were in the corridor, the damage remained in the kitchen.

“Wait here!” Dani pointed at him, leaving no doubt of who was in charge. There was silence as if she was scanning the room. Several seconds passed and then he heard the crunch of glass under her shoes. “Okay, you can come in, but God damn it, don’t touch anything!”

He thought about asking if his feet could touch the floor but decided against being a wiseass. He stepped inside the doorframe and surveyed the kitchen. He noticed the crunchy glass of the microwave all over the floor. The walls were a different story. He examined a bulletin board and read a flyer about a weight loss clinic. Imbedded in the papers were jagged small metal objects about the size and thickness of a dime. Imagine if a metal pineapple exploded, sending its lethal rain of metal spikes all over your body. Jake was about to touch one sliver to feel its sharpness when he was tapped on the shoulder.

“Bomb was activated by the heat. He rigged the light switch to turn on the microwave. Wouldn’t have killed you but would have cut you up pretty bad or worse, take out an eye. Are you okay?”

“No,” he answered. Jake knew from the briefing that he wasn’t supposed to touch anything, but he never thought turning on a light switch would be hazardous to his health. “I screwed up. Again.”

“All I ask is that you listen and watch me. Think as me as an all-knowing parent – don’t make any moves without my okay.”

Great. Special Agent Danielle Harmer thinks I’m a child. He felt himself giving into his emotions.

“I track victims, not killers – this is beyond me,” he stated tersely. Instead of meeting his frustration by yelling, he could sense by her silence that she was thinking of how to calm him down. Last thing she needed in a building of death traps was a partner becoming a liability.

“This kidnapper is different than the rest – it’s a game to him. He’s testing us to see if we are worthy of finding his prize. And somehow, he seems to know something about your ability.”

“How? I don’t fully understand it.”

“Now’s not the time to explain,” Dani gestured, “somewhere in this office building, she’s waiting. Focus on her trail.”

He squinted his eyes, and then pressed his fingers so hard that he could feel the nails digging into his palm. The trail reformed in front of him, weaker than before, but enough to follow.

“I see it. We need to go this way.” he pointed to the stairwell and Dani moved ahead. Fortunately, the stairwell door was propped open by a door jam; otherwise she would have spent a few minutes checking it for booby traps. They inched slowly, the trail leading to the management offices on the above floor. In the distance, the sounds of sirens filled the air.

“Great. The locals are coming. It would be nice if we could wrap this up before they come charging in.”

Wrap this up? Sounds like a Christmas present instead of a human life. As long as I had been affiliated with the FBI, I’ve never understood their insensitivities to the people they serve.

As they turned the corner into the upstairs corridor, he saw a large reception area with a series of office doors.

“Did you want to guess which door?” he asked.

“No need,” Dani replied and pointed to an office by a fire escape door. Something metallic hovered in front. Passing car lights gleamed though the window and reflected off the wall. It was a helium balloon with a weight holding it up to chest level. They approached the door tentatively, making sure they didn’t set anything off. The words *Congratulations* stared at them as the balloon slowly rotated in the air.

“Just a coincidence?” Dani asked.

“No, the trail leads straight into that office. This is it,” he replied.

Dani took out a mirror on a small handle and slid it under the door. She took a few moments to examine the office for anything hooked to the door.

“Clear around the doorway,” she nodded to him, “but it’s too dark to see far into the office.”

“I hope she’s there, the trail is starting to fade,” he added.

“Unless they went out the window, she has to be here.”

“And so, could he,” Jake answered but not believing it. Dani pushed the door open; it creaked so loud he was surprised it couldn’t be

heard outside the building. He resisted the temptation to turn on the light switch as Special Agent Harmer circled her flashlight around the room in a slow circular movement. She crossed the floor, passing some chairs and a coffee table. She moved her light higher, scanned a desk with high back chair, a few diplomas on the wall, some framed landscape prints. They both stopped moving forward as she illuminated the top of the walls and ceiling. A fan hung from a stucco ceiling. They looked at each other. *A whole lot of nothing. Where do you put a body, in a closet?* There was only one door in and out so unless his ability had failed, she was in here.

Dani's flashlight gleamed off something metal. The high back chair stood with its back to them, as if someone was looking out the window. Dani walked slowly around the chair as Jake stuck close behind her. In the chair, sat a large duffle bag zipped up to the top. The way it was slumped in the chair, a body could be inside. The bag remained still; if she was breathing inside, there was no sign.

"Aren't you going to unzip it?" he whispered.

"One more minute, something doesn't seem right. This is too easy." She examined the carpet for wires, motions sensors, anything out of place. Her hand ran down the back of the chair, looking for any foreign objects. Finally, her hand rested on the zipper on the duffle bag. "Back up, in case this turns bad."

He stepped back; realizing that a few feet probably weren't going to make any difference. Dani pulled the zipper down and a head lurched forward out of the bag. He moved forward to help and received several severe hand motions from her to stay back. Dani put her ear to the woman's drooping head to feel any breathing. She nodded her head.

"Breathing shallow, but she's alive." Jake relaxed as the tension in his body released. On the lawn below, a flashlight shone, and the voices of several police officers drifted in the night air. Their footfalls rattled off the metal stairwell to the fire escape. Finally, it was over, and Jake leaned against the back wall.

The wall exploded behind him. His body went flying into the hard desk and then he crumpled into the floor. In the dark, he raised his head and tasted blood in his mouth. Then sweet oblivion took over and the world was silent.

Chapter 2

The Vanishing

Her voice haunted him every time he slept. She was only five years old when she disappeared. She was beautiful, just like his wife. The two of them would giggle at him or ask him to read with them. He missed a lot of bedtime stories. So many late nights, building his clientele, trying to save one more patient. He always thought in another year and he would take it easy, spend more time with his family. There would always be a next time, another opportunity to redeem himself in his daughter's eyes.

His wife had all of the patience in the family. So many times, he cancelled appointments with them. Never realizing how much he hurt them when he wasn't there. *Why did they love me so? What was it that I gave them? Money? A house? I'd give it all up to spend one more day with the two of them. Nothing fast paced, a quiet day at home, a picnic, a walk in the park. Time to actually talk and listen to them. You never truly appreciate what you have.*

Until one day they are no longer there.

He woke to the smell of disinfectants, fluorescent lights and an IV stuck in his arm. He heard the sound of screams bouncing off the walls. He felt disoriented and sick to his stomach. The yelling hurt his ears and he slowly realized that they were his screams. He was no longer at the call center office. From the metal brace on the side of the bed, he guessed he was in a hospital. A hand touched his shoulder and he immediately swatted it away.

"Calm down Jake. It's me, Dani." He looked up and saw a small burn mark on her forehead and bandage on her chin.

"You look awful," he remarked.

"You should look at yourself," she retorted. "I guess by your charming remark that you're okay. What was all the yelling about?"

"Unpleasant memories," he said not wanting to elaborate. Dani gave him a stare like she was deciding whether to press further. She looked away and he guessed that her curiosity lost the battle. "What happened? Why does my back feel so tender?" he asked.

“Probably because you shielded an explosion between yourself and the victim.”

“What did we set off?”

“We didn’t. The local police barged up the fire escape to get into the building despite Rico warning to proceed with caution. The door was rigged with explosives on opening. Pretty clever actually. We were so intent on finding a trap around the victim that the killer probably thought we would relax after finding her and trip it upon leaving.”

“Do you think we would have checked the fire exit door . . .?” he started.

“Probably. I would have likely checked the door once we had her secured but sometimes when you think it’s over, you get lazy. I guess I’ll never know.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“One officer was killed instantly. The officer behind was badly burned but will survive. Had you been outside the office waiting in the corridor, I would have been visiting you in the morgue.”

“How’s the woman? Is she okay?” he sat up in my bed, realizing that the whole search had been to find her.

“She’s fine. Shaken up, scared out her wits but physically okay. Unfortunately, she never saw or spoke to her attacker. He drugged her in a parking lot, coming from behind. She passed out before she could turn around.”

“But she was gone for twenty-four hours. She must have remembered something. A smell, a sound?”

“Rico is questioning her now. She’s pretty disoriented; it may be awhile before we get anything from her, if at all.”

“So, we’re no further ahead,” he slumped back into my bed. “All of this time spent to catch him and we’re no closer. It’s a game to him and he makes all the rules.” Jake slammed his fist into the bed railing. “When does this end!” Dani grabbed his arm to stop him from acting out his frustration any further.

“You saved a life today. If you hadn’t tracked her to the office building, she’d be dead. She would have suffocated in that duffle bag. Today we won.”

“Tell that to the officer who died. If we weren’t there, he wouldn’t have opened the door rigged with explosives,” Jake replied.

“Don’t do this!” Dani leaned in to face him. “This killer kidnaps and hurts people. You can’t take responsibility every time he murders someone during our investigations. The guilt will eat you up; maybe that’s exactly what the killer wants. He knows you are on these cases and has some idea of your abilities. He’s trying to kill you a little at a time.”

“He’s winning,” Jake held his head in his hands.

“Only if you let him. Whatever game he is playing with you, you’re giving him what he wants.”

‘What should I do?’

“Take a week off. Collect yourself. They’ll release you after tomorrow. Go home. I’ll call you when you’re ready for the next case.” Her eyes shone with pity for him as she walked out of the hospital room. He watched the door close behind her.

Home? Where is that? When you’ve lost your family – is there even a home to go back to?

Portland, Oregon 16 months earlier

Jake was jogging along the Willamette river, admiring the scenery. He had always felt that Portland was one of the most beautiful cities on the west coast. That high praise because cities like San Francisco, Seattle and San Diego were attractive cities to live in as well. Portland had the amenities of a big city but not the pollution or gridlock of the large populations further south. In the distance, he could see the tip of Mount Hood, a great outdoors of nature hikes.

Jake had lived in Portland all his life, meeting his wife, Monica at the University of Portland just before he entered medical school. They spent a number of years trying to establish themselves before having a little girl and settling down. He worked hard, completing his residency before setting up his own private psychiatry office. He was gifted; a great listener and a strong talent to understanding the issues his clients were dealing with.

He was taking a rare break from work after having a busy week. He usually worked six days a week and had a waitlist of clients. His

wife always teased him that he had a “God complex,” always believing that his clients couldn’t manage one day without him. Psychiatry was a tough specialty; most of his fellow classmates urged him to specialize in a more science-based area of medicine such as surgery or urology. Those fields had definite treatments which when performed; your patient healed and went home. Studying someone’s mind was hard to determine the cause and even harder to find the solution. Jake joked that his clients would be with him for a lifetime.

Jake received calls from patients at all hours and worked long days. His family rarely took vacations because he always was afraid of missing time with his clients. He had no hobbies and seldom relaxed, spending more time at work than with his family.

Despite his lack of home life, his wife was supportive. She worked as an occupational therapist at a nearby hospital and kept regular hours, so their daughter was always looked after. Even when Jake pulled long days or worked weekends, he knew she had it covered. Unfortunately, he missed a lot of time at home and his daughter, Ella, bonded more with his wife. *Looking back now, I hardly blame her.*

There was an art festival downtown this weekend and they were going to spend the afternoon visiting the craft booths. As he ran down a street, words jumped up at him. Portland was unique in that bronze plates were embedded in several downtown cobble stoned walking streets. These plates had poems, sayings or even motivational statements. Everywhere words stared back at him. Superstition took over and he avoided stepping on any words. Most of the time, he barely read any of the sentences, so focused on his run. However, as he turned to avoid a woman walking her dog, a plaque on the street grabbed his attention and made him stop. The word’s intent was simple but direct.

Vision to See
Faith to Believe
Courage to Do

He had worked so many hours lately, spending his waking hours listening to his patients lives and ignoring his family. He really needed to spend the day with his family to remind him of what was important in his life. Twenty minutes later, he was jogging down his

street and slowed down to cool off. Once he got home, he noticed their SUV was not in the yard. *Guess they must have left for groceries.*

He threw his sweaty clothes into the laundry hamper and jumped into the shower. The cold water felt refreshing. It was so infrequent that he enjoyed the mundane moments in life that he savored every second of the shower. He dried off and changed into casual clothes, waiting for the girls to get back home. Jake looked downstairs for a note but couldn't find one. He finally relented and called Monica's cell expecting her to be pulling into the driveway at anytime. The phone rang but immediately answered that the caller did not have her phone on.

Monica – why do you always leave your phone off? He settled down in their breakfast nook and read the Saturday paper. By 11am, he tried her cell phone again and got the same message. *What could be taking her so long? Was I forgetting about some appointment?* By 1pm, Jake was fuming mad. *Why couldn't she call me to tell me where she was? I so rarely took a day off, why did we have to waste our day together?* He started calling friends, seeing if she had dropped by and had lost track of time. After exhausting that list, he called some of her co-workers at the hospital hoping she had been called to work and had taken Ella with her. By 3pm, Jake started knocking on neighbor's doors, hoping somebody had seen her leave in the morning.

Hours later, he had been everywhere from the local convenience store to everyone on the street whether he knew them or not. Frantic, he called Monica's parents in Los Angeles and her sister in Vancouver in case she had spoken to them, but they knew nothing. Their panic amplified his own and he immediately called the police.

They were surprisingly helpful when he drove down to the precinct, not requiring his wife's absence to be twenty-four hours to begin investigating. The fact that his daughter was involved may have added importance to the situation. They reviewed all the steps he had taken and asked for all family information. They asked questions about family issues, stressing that they weren't accusing him of abuse but that they had to cover all angles. Jake was too scared about their absence to worry about the police thinking his family was on the run from him. They put a broadcast across the state asking officers to be on the lookout for a blue SUV with his license plate number and a description

of his wife and daughter. Mentally exhausted, he was escorted home by an officer with a promise to follow up in the morning to review his home for possible clues.

Jake laid down not able to sleep, not able to focus on the television, not able to think about his next step. His mind was numb and played over and over the most awful thoughts of what could have happened to his family. He sat down at the kitchen table and wrote down every place he had checked and every person he had called. Maybe he'd notice if there was anywhere, he missed. His heart raced every time a car drove down the street and then sank as quickly when the car kept driving.

By 3am, he was almost delirious with fear and the room became awash with a rainbow of colors. As his panic grew, the colors intensified, swirling around the room as if they had a mind of their own. He felt like he was in a weird dream or a psychedelic cartoon. Blues and greens circled his head and swirled into opposite directions around the house. It wasn't until much later that he realized that the colors were trying to lead him.

Present day 6:30am – Dayton, Ohio

The road leading into the warehouse parking lot had potholes in the pavement, creating hazards for driving. Little noise travelled across the early morning air. The land surrounding the buildings was dry with sparse vegetation. The spinning of forklift tires rattled the windows from several blocks away. A blackened window stood out of one structure; its walls covered in a rusty blue tint with a faded sign reading *Brooks Distribution*. A couple of barrels lay toppled at the corner of the warehouse with a wreck of an old pickup truck that had been scavenged for parts. Lighting was sparse with several dark lamp poles, either from broken or burnt out bulbs. Although the area looked mostly abandoned, a closer inspection showed several inconsistencies.

The fence surrounding the warehouse was maintained with no gaps or breaks. At the top of the fence, barbed wire in three strands was forked back and made entry difficult for an intruder. In the corners of the building, a video surveillance camera watched the main entry point.

Near the left side of the building, a dusty steel door had been opened recently, the latch holding the door shut and the lock was new.

Inside the warehouse, gas smells from welding equipment permeated the air. The sound of grinding metal reverberated off the walls and the overhead steel beams. A gloved hand held an iron rod as he ground it to a sharp edge. The small grinder spat sparks into the air and dissipated in seconds. His foot lifted from a pedal and the machine stopped spinning, the work area suddenly became quiet. He lifted his welding goggles from his dirty face and admired his handiwork. Satisfied, he placed the rod on the work bench and turned his attention to his other project.

On another workstation were several wood working tools, a skill saw, a lathe, a sander, metal files and dozens of pieces of sandpaper. He reached into his carpenter bag and pulled out several finishing nails. He knelt down and touched the sawdust surrounding his project. It felt soft to his touch as it settled down to the floor. He ran his fingertips along the wood; it was smooth to his touch. He had been meticulous, removing any chance of a splinter from defacing his handiwork. Lovingly applied, the work was done with care and attention to detail. He walked around the work bench, examining his project from all angles. He imagined its final use for his next delivery.

Today he would deliver another angel to heaven. It had been months since his urge had become this strong and he couldn't resist anymore. It was like the tides; nothing could prevent the pull on his body and mind. He had his angel already picked out. His planning was thorough, and he wouldn't let his urges rush him into making a mistake.

He looked at his watch – time to load his supplies and drive into the city. He would scout the surroundings one final time. His choice was perfect, they always were. He had detailed the routine in his journals over several weeks. He knew when to strike and where to grab. He always found their weakness. And today, she would be his.

12:08pm Dayton, Ohio – Five Rivers Park

Many city workers came to the park for lunch to escape their offices and to shake the stink of work off of them. Summer was ending

and people were enjoying every last day of warmth. There were tables around a tree filled area where picnickers ate with a fair amount of privacy. Through the main entrance, a chorus of giggling children marched through the gates. The Appleby Daycare was located three miles from the park, a popular daycare for parents to drop off their kids as they headed to work downtown. The driver backed the bus into a parking zone, and then the children crossed the parking lot.

The kids were four to five-year olds, all preschool. Many were excited by this September and constantly talked about what school would be like. The children were attached together by a rubber leash and had the orderly manner of a herd of cats. The daycare teachers guided their students toward the picnic benches and opened up a backpack full of brown bag lunches. An elderly woman with a kind face addressed her enthusiastic group.

“Okay children. You have fifteen minutes to eat your lunches. No desserts until all of your sandwiches are eaten.”

“Yes, Ms. Becker,” a chorus of smiley faces responded and greedily attacked their meals. The teachers untethered the leash to allow the kids to seat at several picnic tables. The kids milled around jumping from table to table excitedly comparing their sandwiches and crackers. A blond boy named Aidan pushed the hair out of his face so he could finish his sandwich. He swallowed a piece of cheese and looked across the table.

“Do you want some of my crackers?” he asked a small red headed girl named Mandy. She gave him a small nod and Aidan handed over his treasure. She fed half of the cracker to her stuffed rabbit and then ate the rest herself. Suddenly the kids from the table across from them squealed with delight.

“Look at the puppies!” they screamed. A teenage girl walked into the park with three baby beagles in tow. The children evacuated the benches and rushed to pet the puppies. The teenage owner smiled and stopped. The beagle puppies tried to lick the expectant hands. Aidan ran to the front of the group and a puppy tried to steal some cheese from his hand.

“Stop it! You’re tickling me,” he giggled as he unsuccessfully tried to pull his hand away amid many puppy kisses.

“Children!” Ms. Becker called. “Please get back to your lunches,” she motioned for them to return to the tables. They waved goodbye to the puppy owner and she pulled the beagles with her although they seemed more eager to stay with the kids. Aidan ran back to the table and looked around for the rest of his lunch. He searched for a few moments and noticed someone was missing. He waved his hand at his teacher.

“What’s wrong dear?” she asked.

“Ms. Becker, where’s Mandy?”

As a white service van drove past the park, the driver watched the scene of panic. Teachers and children alike called out for Mandy but there was no answer for them. Unfortunately for Appleby Daycare, one child would not return home tonight.

Chapter 3

Trail of Hope

FBI field office – Boston, Massachusetts

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has field offices located in major metropolitan areas across the United States with a bias to the east. Each office carried out investigations, assessed local and regional crime threats, and worked closely with partners on cases and operations. Each field office was overseen by a special agent in charge, except Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, D.C., which are headed by an assistant director in charge due to their large size.

Special Agent Danielle Harmer sat at her office. Not one for formalities, she insisted that her friends call her “Dani.” Her desk was a pile of files, articles and reports laid around in a hap hazard way. For an untrained eye, the office was a mess, a chaotic pile of paper with incoherent information. Yet to Dani, the mess was organized. If a certain piece of information was required, she could pull it from the mess in seconds, glean the important information and slide it back into its home.

On the wall hung her degree in criminology, a picture of her graduating into the bureau with her father and mother, an award for target accuracy at a local gun club among other course certificates. She had a pile of collectable toys on a shelf, gifts of too many fast food restaurants. Some knick knacks sat on her desk; a soap stone polar bear from a case in Alaska, a wooden parrot from Hawaii, and some precious stones from a cave in Texas. Dani's commitment to her job was legendary and often a source of amusement for her co-workers.

“Boss?” a tall woman with long black hair entered the office. Mac was the forensic expert of the team and she resembled the exact opposite of the nerd lab techies on the 5th floor. She was dubbed the ‘Amazon’ by the male staff, but never if she was within earshot.

“Yes Mac?” Dani looked up. At six foot two, Mac looked down on most male counterparts and as a former body builder, had a build that commanded respect. While most bureau men talked about her physical attributes, Dani appreciated her intuition and efficiency in

breaking down a crime scene. She was focused and didn't let the men distract her from her job. Sometimes she could be a bit too serious, but Dani appreciated a kindred spirit. In a man's world, it was good to have a capable woman at her side.

"Analysis came back from the explosives used at the call center. As usual, there wasn't much trace material and the only identifiable items are run of the mill, nothing left had a signature or identifying marks," Mac answered.

"I'm not surprised. The kidnapper never leaves anything unique behind. But it's always worth a try. One of these days, he's got to make a mistake." Mac made a strange face as if she wanted to ask something. "What's wrong?" Dani asked.

"Is Jake going to be all right? He seemed really hurt in the hospital, and not just physically. He seemed almost... broken," Mac sat down in a chair facing the desk. Dani was silent for a moment as she considered her answer.

"I don't think Jake ever healed when he lost his wife and daughter. He's been hurt ever since. The problem is that his ability makes him so useful, but it also prevents him from healing. Imagine reliving the loss of your family on every case."

"But he's done so much good. Families have been reunited. Several children have been found," Mac pointed to a pile of case files on Dani's desk.

"If only he spent some time with the victims he saved. He invests so much energy trying to find them. When he actually tracks them down, the family swoops in and Jake doesn't listen to their gratitude. He still feels a sense of failure for not finding his own family. It hurts him to see other families reunite and he distances himself from their reunion."

"Boss, he can't keep continuing like this. He beats himself up after every case. Lately he complains the migraines from his ability are getting worse. I don't know if he can keep it together much longer."

"At his current rate, he won't. No therapist, no friends, no family member can help him. His guilt is too great. These cases are a form of purgatory."

"Shouldn't we do something? He seems like he has no one else but us."

Dani considered Mac's request. In the back of her mind, she wondered if this was professional or personal interest in Jake. He was immensely tragic – maybe this was attractive to Mac. Dani decided against pursuing this chain of questioning. *Better to not go there.*

“You're right. But I've tried to coax him out of his pain, tried to get him to open up. His agony is so close to the surface that you can see it in his expressions and the way he talks. I'm not a miracle worker Mac. Men are pretty poor at expressing their emotions and Jake is the king of holding onto his grief. I'm at a loss.” The phone on Dani's desk rang. She motioned to Mac to wait a second while she answered. “Special Agent Harmer.” She nodded a few times and then responded, “We'll be right there.”

“What's up boss? Another case?” Mac asked.

“You bet – I don't know what kind of condition Jake is in, but he better get ready. A child has been kidnapped.”

Dayton International Airport, Terminal Rd

Jake walked through the gate past a coffee shop listing its inflated prices. His clothes were disheveled, and his hair was messy. He yawned as he walked towards the escalator. At the bottom of the moving stairs, a familiar face looked up at him and smiled.

Special Agent Rico Santiago was impeccably dressed without a hair out of place. Rico was five ten, about 195 pounds and as thick as he was tall. He was from Texas and the youngest of ten children; he seemed to have different story about them each time we met.

“Hey Jake! No luggage to claim?” Rico looked at Jake's rumpled clothes.

“Not me Rico. I travel light, makes it a little bit easier going through security,” as he got off the escalator.

“You know Jake; it doesn't hurt to bring more than one pair of clothes. You have a pretty strict time limit to find the victim, but you look like you haven't changed in days.”

“Sounds about right. When you find a look you like, it's best to stick with it.” Jake answered sarcastically and tried to bring his cowlick under control.

The two of them walked out into the evening sun and Rico directed them towards his vehicle. An airport security guard walked towards them since the SUV was in a no parking zone. Rico waived him off by showing his badge. They stepped into the vehicle and Rico turned the key in the ignition as he stared Jake.

“Jake— are you sleeping at all? Man, you look horrible.”

“Sleep is way overrated. Now, less attention on me and more on the case. Tell me about the missing child.” Rico nodded and pulled out his phone, placing it Jake’s lap.

“Flip through the screen for the case information on the girl. Her name is Mandy O’Brien, just turned five. She is an only child of Andrew, an electrician and Beth, a nurse at a local hospital. The daycare is near the Tusket subdivision, typical safe suburban area, and low crime rate. The daycare takes a weekly trip to the park which is only a five-minute bus ride. She was taken in the middle of day in front of dozens of witnesses, yet no one saw anything.” Rico started the vehicle and pulled away from the curb.

“How do we know she was taken? Maybe she wandered off.”

“Read the file.” Rico pointed at the phone. Jake moved his fingers on the screen and tapped through a series of scanned reports and images of the scene. Mandy disappeared at 12:20pm and 911 was called to the scene at 12:43. Police reports detail the search throughout the park. All tree covered areas, all-natural depressions and park buildings were searched with no sign of Mandy or her belongings. The adjoining neighborhood was canvassed. A traffic cam picked up a white van with a driver loading something into the rear of a vehicle in a street adjacent to the park. Resolution of the picture was bad; the driver wore a hood and large sunglasses. Two hours later, the same van was found abandoned at a strip mall. Several pictures showed the van with a book bag taped to the steering wheel. The bag was identified as Mandy’s.”

“He left her book bag in plain view! This guy wants to be caught. Why are we involved?” Jake asked. “A kidnapper like this should be easy to find.”

“Not so simple. The kidnapper left a calling card – something in the back of the van that makes this time sensitive.”

“You mean a ransom note?”

“I wish – he left something with a more definite message,” Rico seemed to hesitate.

“Stop drawing this out Rico – what the hell was in the van?” Just as he asked, his finger traced upon a picture of the back of the van. A wooden giraffe about six inches tall stood in the center of the back of the van. It was painted, varnished and well made. “What’s so frightening about a wooden toy?”

“Everything. It’s become a pattern for this killer. He leaves the wooden figure as his calling card as an offering for the child. Unfortunately, once we find the child, we’re also going to find another offering.” Rico fingers move to the next image on the tablet. The picture was of a small coffin, polished, smooth, and highly finished. Although it was beautifully made, its image sent a chill down Jake’s spine.

“Kidnapper is called the Coffin Killer. He leaves the kidnapped child dead in a handmade coffin. Families are so repulsed by the coffin; they never permit their child to be buried in it. This is the sixth disappearance occurring in the states of Ohio, New York and Indiana. Each time about 2 days later, the body is found, usually in highly visible place. Body is in pristine condition; cause of death is injection of poison. Once he takes the victim, the family never sees the child again alive.

“The other victims – anything common between them?”

“Not that we’ve found. All came from middle class families. There have been three boys and three girls taken. He usually snatches the victim from a highly visible place without any witnesses providing his description. He has an innate ability to blend in.”

“Kidnappings aren’t random. He must scout out his victim and the surroundings well beforehand.” Rico was turning off the highway towards a residential area.

“Are we almost there?”

“About five minutes out. Still following the same procedure?”

“Nothing’s changed. I have to meet the family first. If I can’t create a bond between myself and the victim right away, then the kidnapped girl will be lost to me.”

O'Brien Family Home – 53 Thomas Drive

Rico pulled the SUV towards a ranch style home in an older subdivision. Several police cars were parked outside the O'Brien home. Every light was on in the house. An older couple with a tray of food walked up the front steps and into the home. Jake assumed that they were either neighbors or grieving friends by the look of worry on their faces. As he got out of the car, Dani and Mac walked down the front steps to greet him.

"Thanks Jake for coming so quickly. Police are searching the house for anything that might give us a clue. They are checking with neighbors to see if anyone unusual has been seen in the neighborhood over the last few weeks."

"They probably won't find anything," Jake said.

"In the cases before, nobody was identified out of the ordinary," Rico added. "Middle income families aren't looking for strangers; they are busy taking their kids to their music classes, sporting events and fundraisers. Chances are this guy posed as a repairman and drove around in a service vehicle."

"That maybe so, but it's procedure and the local police force will follow it to the letter. Jake, we need your ability. We have told the family that you are an outside consultant who profiles kidnapers. Stick to that script and the parents should give you all the details on their daughter that you need."

"Let's get in there," Jake offered. "The sooner I can establish rapport with Mandy's family, the sooner I can start tracking her." They started to the front door and walked silently into the house. They entered the main foyer and Mandy's parents were sitting on a couch, both of their faces filled with anxiety. A female police officer sat directly across from them asking questions. An older male officer was standing beside the female officer taking copious notes. Dani whispered in Jake's ear.

"No deviations, I want you playing this straight from our script." He nodded knowing the type of response he would get if they explained what was really happening. He would play his role. Dani

slipped in behind the female officer, said something to her and then the officer got up from the chair. Dani sat down and introduced herself.

“Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, my name is Special Agent Danielle Harmer from the Federal Investigations Bureau. On behalf of myself and my team, I want to express my concern on Mandy’s disappearance. We will do everything in our power to bring her home to you.”

“Please call me Beth and my husband’s name is Andrew. Tell me Ms. Harmer, do you think our daughter is still alive?” Mrs. O’Brien asked. Dani looked over at me as I sat down in an adjoining chair.

“I don’t know, but we are going to believe that until the evidence tells us otherwise. The Dayton police are following up on a number of leads to track the kidnapper down.”

“Excuse me Officer Harmer, you say kidnapper, but we haven’t received any call or note. We don’t have a lot of money, why have we been targeted?” Andrew O’Brien asked.

“That’s why we have been brought in. This is Jake Valance.” Jake reached forward and shook both O’Brien’s hands and sat down in an adjoining chair. “Mr. Valance is a consultant that we use. He has an ability,” she lowered her eyes to look at Jake, “to profile missing persons to better understand why he or she has been taken. He has already been successful in several cases in returning several people.”

“What do we need to do?” Andrew asked.

“Tell me about your daughter, everything she likes, her dislikes, her quirks, things that make her special,” Jake asked. Both parents looked at each other with puzzled looks. He took this opportunity to prod them a bit further. “What I’m hoping to discover is why Mandy was taken instead another child in her daycare. Often by discovering what’s unique about the missing person can give us clues on why, where and who would have taken her.”

“Okay,” Andrew answered. “Where do we start?”

“Show me her bedroom and tell me about any special things she likes to do.”

Jake sat alone on Mandy’s bed while Dani and the O’Brien’s went over details down in the living room. He scanned the walls, looking at the interests of the little girl. The walls were covered with safari animals, friendly lions and zebras prancing along the grassy

plains. A pile of stuffed animals lay stacked in the corner. Bears and dogs seemed to be wrestling to sit on top of the mountain. A bucket of crayons lay on a shelf with stacked coloring books. He reached over and grabbed the top book. The first couple pages were circus drawings, seals bouncing a ball, clowns jumping into a water bucket. Mandy's coloring was quite good for a five-year-old – staying mostly in the lines and showing favoritism to the color pink.

“Are you looking for something, Mr. Valance?” He looked up at Beth O'Brien who was watching him from the doorway.

“Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. There's a gap among the stuffed animals on the bureau. What's missing?” Beth looked up and smiled.

“That's her stuffed bunny. Mandy calls him ‘Mr. Benjamin’. The two of them are inseparable. He used to be bright white but over the years he's become more of a brown.” Jake nodded and became silent, looking over the room. Beth felt the need to ask a particular question. “Do you have any children?” Her eyes were wide and needy to talk to another parent.

“I had a daughter – but she was taken away from me.” Beth's face was horrified as she sank to the bed. Her hand gently touched his to offer condolences.

“I'm so sorry; I didn't mean to bring up your past.”

“You didn't – the hurt really never leaves, so you really can't make it any worse. It's a feeling that I hope you won't experience much longer.”

“Was she kidnapped?”

“Are you sure you want me to answer that?” Jake turned his body and looked at Beth.

“Yes,” she answered.

“My daughter was taken, and her body was never found. I've never stop being angry from not preventing her from being taken. There has been no closure, no means to say goodbye, no way to move on. It's what drives me to help others, to complete what I was unable to do for myself.” He looked into Beth's face and saw tears streaming down her face. “I'm sorry, I knew this would upset you, but you wanted the truth.” Beth motioned with her hand to disagree but took a moment to swallow before responding.

“No, you misunderstand. I understand your loss; I’m feeling it right now. Nothing else matters to me except getting Mandy back. I won’t consider her not coming home. I can’t live without her.” Beth dropped her face into her hands and sobbed. Jake knew no words that could console her, nothing he could say that would lessen the pain she felt. His life had not been worth living since he lost his child, lost his family. The only chance at redemption was preventing someone else from suffering. And he knew only one way to do that.

He grasped Beth’s hand lightly and she raised her head at his touch. “I promise you that I will do everything to find Mandy. I know that you don’t know our team and it may sound like an empty promise, but we are very good at what we do. If anyone can find her, it will be us.”

“I believe in you Jake.” And it was at that point, that he saw Mandy’s trail. It crisscrossed around the room and out the door. As had happened on previous cases, once he learned something personal about the missing person, their trail appeared to him. Jake was emotionally connected to Mandy now; he could follow her. And he had less than a day to do it.

Outside of the O’Brien home

“Can you see her trail Jake?” Dani asked as they drove off in the SUV.

“Yes – it’s coming through pretty clear; it hasn’t dissipated yet.” He looked down the street and a smoke trail went straight ahead – retracing Mandy’s steps this morning when she was taken to daycare. “We better get going to where she was abducted so I can begin following her steps.

“What color is the trail?” Mac asked. Jake was silent for a second, and then looked over at Mac.

“It’s a deep pink with purplish hue strands circling around the thread.”

“Amigo, that sounds a lot like your daughter’s trail,” Rico said and immediately regretted his comment.

“That’s enough!” said Dani. “I need everyone’s head on this case. Am I understood?”

“Yes boss,” Mac and Rico obediently responded.

“Actually,” Jake lied, “the pink is bit redder than my daughters was.”

In reality, they were very similar. Following a trail always made him emotional because he was following the person’s last known whereabouts. He always worried that he would be too late and find the client dead.

It didn’t help that tracking made his emotions raw. With Mandy’s trail looking like his daughter’s, he could easily turn into a basket case. There was no doubt in his mind; this case was going to be hard on him.

Chapter 4

The Searchers

Portland Oregon – 16 Months ago

Jake remembered when he first noticed her trail. It was early in the morning and the neighborhood was quiet. He was half asleep or half awake; he didn't know how to describe his condition. He was lying on the living room couch, looking up at the ceiling and playing over the day's events in his mind. He had Ella's favorite blanket wrapped around him, he almost felt her warmth.

Had I forgotten to tell the police an important detail? Should I call them (again) to see if they had found any new information on my wife and daughter? Was there a friend I didn't call who might know where they were going? Then the thought he had tried to avoid all day finally hit home. What if they were gone? What if I never see them again?

His body shook with grief before the tears came. Jake curled up in a ball on the couch, his body cold with fear but his face was hot from anger, thinking of whomever took my family. He didn't know if he laid there for minutes or hours but suddenly, he noticed colored smoke trailing through the living room. Jake jumped up immediately fearing the house was on fire. He rushed upstairs, past the hallway closet and into his daughter's bedroom. For some reason, the smoke seemed to originate from there.

He went to the bed and the smoke swirled from under the covers. He pulled them back immediately, expecting some type of fire to be generating them. The pink haze disappeared from the wind of the covers being withdrawn. *What the hell is going on here? Am I going insane? Is this some ghostly apparition of my daughter? Is she dead?* Dozens of questions rattled around his head. He stopped the internal debate and did the only thing he could think of. He followed the trail of smoke throughout the house.

It circled into the upstairs bathroom and back down the stairs. It became thicker on one of chairs in the kitchen and caressed its seat. It passed through the outside door as if it wasn't there. The smoke resembled an airplane trail in the sky – thick in the center and slowly

dissipating along the edges. Its trail was never straight and curved around objects as if it was an insect following a human host. Not knowing where he was going, Jake threw on his jacket and stepped outside into the driveway. The smoke trail streamed down the driveway, swirled in a circle where the SUV was usually parked and then proceeded out into the street.

Jake walked out into the middle of the street and watched the smoke trail go off in the distance, disappearing towards the freeway. He turned and looked straight on into the head lights of an oncoming car. The car slammed on his breaks and stopped half a car length away from him.

“Get off the road! You’re going to cause an accident!” the driver yelled. Jake walked up to the car window.

“Can you see it? Can you see the pink smoke trailing up the road? Tell me you can see!” he exclaimed.

“I don’t know what you been drinking buddy. There ain’t nothing to see out here. Go sleep it off.” The driver swerved around him and drove off in the distance. Jake stared at the car as it drove through the pink trail. *Have I gone crazy? What am I looking at? Am I dreaming?*

He stumbled towards his house, contemplating his next step. *Should I try to get some sleep? Maybe tomorrow these hallucinations would be gone?* Jake was so tired. He stared again into the distance and knew that he couldn’t fall asleep.

Minutes later, Jake was driving on to the onramp to the highway. Traffic was light – a few transfer trucks passed in the opposite direction as well as several cars with workers making their shift change. The night was quiet, and he didn’t want silence to contemplate. Jake wanted to see where the smoke trail would take him. He drove closer downtown and exited near the main library. *Could they have been returning library books?* For some reason, an image of several children books on the kitchen table stood out in my mind before his morning run.

He pulled into the vacant lot and stopped at a parking spot halfway up to the front entrance. Smoke swirled in a circle over a parked vehicle, a ticket hung over the windshield. *My wife’s car!* Even in the dark, he could see the small toy dog that dangled from the rear-

view mirror in the interior. For a second, Jake didn't know if he should be excited or scared to death by his discovery. *Had I already known where she had gone, and my mind was playing a cruel joke? Or had I been able to follow my wife's trail from earlier in the day?* Jake stepped out of the car and stopped in my tracks. *What if they were in the car? Their faces a ghastly death grimace, frozen in pain?* He forced his feet forward. *Enough dramatics, something had brought me here. Stop wasting time!*

He looked into the car interior. Empty. No bodies, no books, nothing that he could see of interest. He followed the smoky trail to the front entrance of the library and the tendrils entered the right door. Jake pressed his face against the window, wary that he might set off an alarm or be recorded on video camera footage. The trail went up a huge staircase to the second floor and then was lost in the darkness. *Could they still be in the library? Trapped in some room unable to leave?* He walked along the front, contemplating whether to break into the library and looked for an easier entry. Instead Jake found his answer.

Inside on the right side of the library, a door opened into the children's book section. Exiting from that door was the same distinct smoky trail but instead of swinging back to the front parking lot, it trailed to the back of the library. Jake followed it to the back-employee lot. The smoke swirled in a circle around a parking spot near a lamp pole. The trail then continued out of the back of the parking lot and went onto the highway. His mind raced and he felt like he was about to spin out of control. *Why did they leave the car behind? Did another car pick them up? Was it by choice or by force?*

Jake ran back to his car and gunned the engine. He picked up his cell phone – *should I call the police with my finding? Would they believe how I found it?* The smoke trail beckoned to him. He closed his cell phone and threw it into the passenger seat. The answer lay at the end of this trail – and nothing was going to stop him from finding his family. As the vehicle's headlights searched the dark street; his journey began.

Present day Dayton, Ohio – Five Rivers Park – 1 am

Jake ducked under the police tape around the park benches as Dani waved her credentials at the officers on the scene. Several spotlights illuminated the area; some were so bright that looking back at the lights caused spots to dance on Jake's eyes. He looked down at the picnic table, a smoke trail traveled from it and off into the darkness. Over twelve hours had passed since Mandy's abduction and time was dwindling until the trail would be gone. A hand tapped Jake on the shoulder.

"Are you ready to follow her?" Dani asked.

"I never am. But I want to find her. No matter what."

"Then let's get going. Our clock is ticking." Dani looked to him for direction.

"This way," he pointed, leading to a path through the park.

"Rico, Mac," Dani yelled behind them. "Get the vehicle – meet us at the far parking lot." They walked into the darkness; Dani's flashlight illuminated the ground in front of them. They were quiet but Dani knew that Jake wanted to talk about the case. "I know you want to ask. So, go ahead already." Dani stopped walking and raised her flashlight so she could see his face.

"What are the chances that Mandy survives?" he asked, knowing her answer.

"Next to none. This 'Coffin Killer' has kidnapped six times. Five bodies. I'm not pulling any punches Jake, unless a major break comes up, you're this girl's best chance. Now, keep moving." The ground became rocky as another pathway appeared. Jake led them down the slope to a service building and parking lot. Rico and Mac pulled up with their vehicle.

"He must have parked here and then left the park," Jake motioned to an empty parking spot.

"Everybody into the car," commanded Dani as they stepped in.

"Which way?" Rico asked from the driver's seat.

"Go straight," Jake motioned. "I'll tell you when to turn." The trail was hard to see in the dark and he squinted to make it out." He turned to Dani who sat next to him in the back. "How do you think he got her to come with him?"

“Who knows Jake. He may have posed as a family member, brought a small animal. People always are scared of the strange person who sticks out in their neighborhood. It’s the person who blends in, who is charming that is the wolf in sheep’s clothing,” Dani answered. “If he uses force, the child will scream and attract attention. If he persuades the child that it is in their best interest to come with him, then they come willingly.”

“FBI analysis from previous cases guesses that the kidnapper uses the wooden toy to entice the child. Maybe he promises to give it to them if they go with him,” Mac said.

“And all’s well until they realize that they made the wrong choice. Then the realization immediately turns to fear,” Rico added. “By then, the kidnapper has either bound or drugged the victim, so the truth comes too late for her to warn anyone.”

“Turn right at the next intersection,” Jake pointed, interrupting the team’s discussion. The street turned in a major thoroughfare and additional traffic began to fill in the street, some of their headlights created gaps in the trail. “Rico – slow down. I’m having problems following the trail. I don’t want to miss the next turn.”

“No problem Jake,” as he eased off the accelerator. “Looks like we’re heading in the direction of the strip mall where the van was left.”

“Still could be a stop between here and there. Never assume, might be the clue we need,” commented Dani. “Mac – what details do we have on where the van was dumped?”

“Not much – strip mall was half vacant, several empty store fronts. There is one security camera pointing at the liquor store, nothing for the rest of the lot. If the kidnapper didn’t leave the van in a handicapped parking spot, no one would have found it for days.”

“Why does he do that? Why tip the police off?” Jake asked and pointed to a turn at the next intersection.

“The usual. The guy wants to taunt the police to show how much smarter he is. Probably wants to get caught,” Rico suggested.

“My gut is telling me something else,” Dani commented. “This guy prepares his crime the same way every time. Well planned and executed. He leaves the same amount of evidence each time, no more, no less. I think this is a ritual for him. He’s given clues to police for the

other kidnappings as well. He isn't baiting the police; he's giving the essential details on the victim."

"Do you think he's trying to tell the family something?" Mac asked.

"I don't think the family enters his thoughts," Dani answered. "This is something he compelled to do. But I'm not sure what his relationship is with his victim."

"Isn't it obvious? He's a killer and a psychopath," Jake chimed in. Dani looked at him.

"You're letting emotion take over facts. The victims have no marks on them, and the killer always leaves them to be found. Almost like he has a sick sense of wanting them to back with their families."

"He's a real pillar of society." Jake added sarcastically. Rico started to say something, but Dani waved him off. The SUV turned into the strip mall and towards the parking spot marked off with police tape. The four of them got out of the vehicle.

"Van was towed earlier and forensics combed through it," Mac commented. "Van was pretty clean, probably lined it with plastic and then removed it with any evidence."

"Trail continues from this parking spot to over by the dumpster," Jake commented as they walked across the lot.

"They get into another car?" asked Rico.

"Can't say for sure." Jake shrugged. "But the trail swirled in a circle meaning Mandy was here for a short time before they drove back out onto the street."

"Mac, tape off this dumpster and do a quick search for clues. Rico – call local PD and have them comb this spot as well. Tell them we got a tip but don't give them too much. I don't need to spend time explaining Jake's abilities and getting a lot of blank stares," Dani remarked.

"Yeah, we get enough of those looks from our organization," Rico added. Mac's flashlight illuminated something on the pavement by the dumpster. She pulled out a pair of tweezers and a plastic bag. She bent down and scooped something small into the bag.

"Got something?" Dani asked as Mac tapped the bag.

"A small splinter of wood. Might be from the coffin the kidnapper made."

“Bag it and tag it, Mac,” commanded Dani. “People, let’s get moving. I don’t want this trail to go cold on Jake.” Rico ran over to the SUV and drove it back to the others.

“Which way Jake?” Rico asked. Jake looked out into the street; the pinkish hue as clear as day.

“Back the way we came,” he pointed as the SUV turned onto the street. Jake was silent for a second and then looked at Dani with a question. “Is there going to be a time where your superiors actually support our investigations?”

“Well we wouldn’t be here if our director didn’t support us Jake. It’s all about your results. Over the last fourteen months, you have delivered, and this team has saved a lot of lives. Now, many agents don’t understand your talents. . .”

“Understand? Agent Tarver calls Jake a fraud every chance he gets. He’s even gone so far to try having us disbanded,” Rico interrupted.

“He’s definitely got a hate on for us. It doesn’t help that he’s got a thing for you boss,” offered Mac.

“Enough about Tarver” interrupted Dani. “Our team gets results. As long as that keeps happening, we’ll keep flying to these disappearances with the full resources of the agency.” The vehicle drove by a huge parking lot,

“No.” Jake yelled.

“Relax Jake. I’m telling you we are supported.”

“No, not that. We have to go back. The trail went into that LumberMart we passed.”

“Rico!” Dani bellowed.

“Already turning boss.” Rico pulled a U-turn in the sparse traffic. The SUV turned into a parking lot which turned out to a 24-hour store for building supplies.

“Where did the kidnapper park Jake?” Dani asked.

“Over there,” he pointed to a corner of the lot that wasn’t well lit. As they drove up to it, he scowled. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“What’s wrong?” Dani asked.

“The trail should stay in the parking lot, but it leads into the store.”

“You mean he took his victim into the store? How is that possible?” Rico commented.

“Let’s find out.” Jake pointed to the entrance. The four of them emptied out the SUV. Mac grabbed her duffle bag from the back hatch.

“Is there really a reason for a 24-hour home renovation store?” wondered Rico as the doors opened automatically.

“Plenty of construction firms are under strict deadlines nowadays to deliver on time or face financial penalties. Delays are inevitable and a lot of firms work in shifts near the end of the contract. Some businesses take advantage and stay open. There’s probably minimal staff around,” explained Mac. Dani tapped her on the shoulder.

“Go find a manager. Take Rico with you. Go review all the security footage, inside and outside from today. I want to know before we leave from this store, who we’re dealing with,” commanded Dani.

“You got it boss!” The two of them replied in unison.

Mac and Rico headed over to the customer service desk and waved their credentials at the staff member.

Jake looked down an aisle of lamps and security lighting, following the trail’s path.

“Jake, you’re with me,” Dani grabbed him by the shoulder. “I want to know every isle this guy walked down. Show me every item you think he might have lingered on. Between the tape and your ability, I want to know what this kidnapper is buying.”

“Follow me. He went this way.” The two of them walked down an aisle and then down a main service expressway. Jake suddenly turned right.

“Seems like an odd choice to come down the electrical aisle. I would have thought the lumber section would have been more appropriate,” Dani asked.

“I don’t know, I’m just following the trail.” The store’s bright overhead lights made it difficult for Jake to see the smoke path. As he turned a corner, Jake bumped into a man in construction overalls who was pushing a sleeping boy in his shopping cart. Jake watched the boy’s chest heaving slowing. He stared as the man wheeled his child around the corner.

“Must be a single dad. Probably can’t leave his son alone so he brings him along. Must be tough on both of them,” Dani commented.

Jake felt a pang of grief as he thought of his missing daughter. He stopped and turned to Dani. “What if we run out of time? What is she is dead already?”

“Don’t do this Jake. Now is not the time to have doubts. You need to press on. This is your pursuit and we could be minutes or hours behind. All I know is when you can’t see her trail anymore, then this little girl dies.” She pointed to the end of the aisle. “Show me where this killer went next.”

Jake was silent, brooding over his doubts. Dani was becoming more his babysitter instead of a colleague. But being emotional is what kept the trail strong for him.

“This way,” he pointed to the aisle on the left.

The row was lined with electrical wire wrapped around wooden spools. The wire was in multiple colors, blacks and reds dominated. Bins of plastic bags with light switches spilled onto the floor. A row of wire cutters was enveloped with smoke more than the other items.

“Seems like he lingered around the wire cutters, maybe he made a purchase.”

“Where to next?” Dani asked.

“Down there,” he pointed. They marched forward and stepped into the tool rodeo; a plethora of power tools displayed on shelves. Power sanders, chain saws, generators; electrical and gas-powered machines. Jake concentrated; a trail weaved in and around the rows, passing by assortments of tools but none seemed to stand out. “Nothing’s jumping out, maybe the video surveillance will show what he was purchasing.”

“Anymore stops?” Dani asked.

The trail was beginning to fade. A sliver of panic began to creep into his body. He shook his head to regain focus.

“No, from here he went to the checkout line and his trail leads back out the exit. Whatever reasons brought him and Mandy in here, only took them to these areas.”

“Okay – let’s see if Rico and Mac have got anything.” As they walked over to the customer service area, Rico walked out of the manager’s office.

“Rico – what do have?” questioned Dani.

“Good news and bad news boss.”

“Give us the good news. We need some,” Jake pleaded.

“Store does have video surveillance – camera at the main entrance and a few around the store. We downloaded the footage to the laptop.”

“And the bad news,” Dani asked.

“There is no Mandy,” Mac exited the office. “We reviewed all the footage – she’s not in it. I’m not sure what trail Jake is following, but it’s not hers.”

Chapter 5

One False Move

Portland Oregon – 16 Months ago

As Jake drove down the interstate, the glowing trail stretched onward, silently beckoning to an unknown destination. He had dialed the police station twice and hung up, unable to find the words to explain his situation. *How could I explain what I'm doing?* Finally, before he could hang up on the third call, an officer picked up the phone.

“Portland police, desk operator Stan Wilcox speaking. How can I direct your call?”

“Officer Peterson, please.”

“Officer Peterson is off duty. Can I direct you to another officer?”

“Yes, please. And hurry,” Jake answered. He heard a click and the phone rang twice before being picked up.

“Officer Statson. How can I help you?” The officer sounded tired and uninterested.

“Officer, my name is Jake Valance. I filled out a missing person report with Officer Peterson.”

“Hold on, let me bring up your case number,” Fingertips clicked over a keyboard. “Okay, this is for Monica and Ella Valance. I have the case facts in front of me. Do you have any new information?” Jake took a moment to frame his answer.

“Yes. My wife’s car is parked in front of the main library on Collingsworth St. near Interstate 5. Could a police car be sent to investigate and check for fingerprints?” he asked.

“It may be awhile before a car can get there. Have you visited the scene? Are there signs of an abduction?”

“The vehicle was locked and there was no sign of a break-in. I was just hoping that the police might find something useful from it.”

“Give me your cell phone number and I can have an officer call you when they are going to the library and can meet with you.”

“No, I’m following up other leads. I just wanted the police to know about my wife’s car. I was hoping it might help find her and my daughter.”

“Sir, I’m not sure what you are following up, but if you have other information, you need to give that to me now. We have much greater resources and can find answers much quicker.” Silently Jake went over what his response should be. If he told the truth, the officer would treat him as a crackpot. If he remained silent, he was pursuing this alone. His fatigued ravaged mind could make only one decision.

“No officer, nothing solid. I’m just following up Officer Peterson’s suggestion to exhaust all possibilities and to alert the police if I find anything. Please let him know that I called and to call me if anything comes up of my wife’s car. The model and license number are in the report.” Jake hung before the officer could press him for anymore details. His adrenaline was starting to dwindle when he noticed the pink trail slithering off of the interstate and heading into a fast food district. He looked at his watch. *Quarter after six. Some of these restaurants will be open for breakfast.*

The trail flickered like a light switch. For a moment, his heart skipped a beat as he was afraid, he had lost the trail. He focused hard on the pink trail. As he drove down the strip of restaurants, a few early breakfasters entered the drive thru. The pink trail veered right to a coffee house, a brown square building with advertisements with donut and coffee specials. Jake turned into the nearly empty parking lot and watched the trail go into the main doors. The horizon had a hint of orange as the sun began to creep into sight.

He crossed the parking lot and entered inside. The smell of fresh coffee and hot danishes immediately made him salivate. The trail went to the cash register, wavered and then sped to the back of the store. A young girl looked at Jake as if he was ready to order and then frowned as he headed to the washrooms. The trail went into the women’s bathroom and Jake went in without hesitation. He looked around the washroom at two stalls and a single sink. A sheet of paper hung from the back of the door stating the washroom’s most recent cleaning. The trail went into the far stall; he looked under the door and nudged it open. Empty. Not like Jake expected any other result.

The door opened behind me and the young girl from the register marched in.

“Sir! Do you realize that you are in the woman’s washroom?” she asked with obvious sarcasm. His tired mind felt like making a flippant remark but instead Jake passed her without answering. The trail led back out a side door and turned into the parking lot. A red minivan was in corner of the lot, parked near a dumpster. The trail led directly to the passenger door. *Maybe they left the library in this vehicle.* Jake approached the door and peered inside. The front was empty, but the back windows were tinted and hard to see through. *Was that a booster seat?*

Without even thinking if he was breaking in, Jake pulled the door handle and slid the back door open. A man’s lifeless body spilled out and collapsed onto the pavement. Jake jumped back, repulsed by his find. He could only stare at the man’s eyes, looking sightlessly into the sky. He contemplated examining the man’s pockets, as if his identity might give him a clue on his family’s whereabouts. Jake looked back at the restaurant and saw the young girl from the cash register pointing at him while another employee was on his cell phone.

It was going to be long day.

LumberMart security office – present day

Jake was sitting with his head in my hands while Mac was reviewing video on her laptop. Dani was on her phone giving details of the case. Her facial expression was neutral but there was a hint of panic behind her eyes. Rico stood, pointing to the footage on the screen.

“Can you rewind the last footage again? I want to see the guy in the wheelchair again?”

“Why bother? Mandy’s not in the footage. She didn’t come into this building – as far as we know, I’ve been following a ghost trail,” Jake exclaimed.

“Why Jake? Why now?” Mac asked. “We’ve been on many cases together. You’ve never led us down a false path.”

“I don’t know. Mandy did remind me of my own daughter. Maybe I’ve lost my focus and began tracking a false trail.” Jake felt an

insurmountable weight was pressing down on him. Dani closed her phone and addressed the group.

“Listen up. We're being asked to gather all the evidence and send it back to the bureau. Another team is being assigned to the case. Unless we can prove that Jake can keep tracking, our pursuit is over.” Resignation had crept into Dani's voice.

“Come on boss. What does it hurt to continue following Jake's lead? Part of the trail was definitely authentic – he led us to the strip mall where the van was dumped,” Rico pleaded.

“Did he?” Dani questioned. “Or did he follow the case notes you provided to him from the airport? The address was listed in the pictures of the abandoned van.”

“I didn't read the address. The trail led me there, just like it led us to the LumberMart.” Jake stated.

“Then where is she? What trail did we follow in here? The cameras cover the main entrance and exit. She didn't enter or exit the building. She didn't come in here.”

“I don't know who we followed in.” As Jake stood, his arms were rigid and tight to his body. His hands were balled into fists. “I never wanted this ability. It exhausts me. I can't sleep during an investigation because we can't afford the time, or we'll miss the victim. I can't sleep between investigations because I spend my time thinking about my family!” Dani touched his shoulder to calm him down.

“Maybe that's the problem Jake. You pushed yourself too hard, past your breaking point. You created a trail to keep your mind off what is really wrong. You're not well. You need help.”

“Who's help? Who can help me?” Jake had spent too much time not dealing with his pain and pushing it underneath his guilt.

“Can we look over the tape one more time before we pack this footage?” Mac interrupted. “We know Mandy wasn't here but maybe the kidnapper was. There must be something we missed.” Since no one wanted to give up and go home, they reviewed the footage again.

“Is it worth sending the footage back to the bureau and analysing face recognition on all the customers? Who knows, we might come up lucky and find someone with a criminal record?” asked Rico.

“It won't hurt but with several hundred customers in the last twenty-four hours, it will be days before we get anything useful,”

responded Mac. “Mandy would be dead long before we get back anything useful.”

Jake lifted his head, watching the footage move at twice the speed – hoping for one of the customers to stand out. Fortunately with his strength as a psychiatrist, he was good at reading the body language of his clients. If he focused on the footage, perhaps he’d get a hunch on someone who looked like they were hiding something.

“Let’s go over the profile again. Try to narrow down the list of potential customers that match our killer. We know from previous cases and traffic cam footage, his rough appearance. Cross off any footage of family or children,” Dani listed off.

“Guy’s a loner – I would cross off any footage of anybody coming in with a buddy. I don’t think this guy has a partner,” added Rico.

“How many does that narrow down to?” I asked. Mac clicked through the footage reducing the number of windows by half.

“One hundred seventy-six.”

“Take out the outliers – remove any teenagers, any males over sixty,” Dani stated.

“I’ll just be taking a guess,” Mac warned.

“It will do,” Dani answered. Mac clicked her mouse several times and stopped. “Now, stick to white males – remove any men of ethnic backgrounds.”

“Give me a minute,” Mac feverishly deleted tracks from the rectangle in the upper right-hand corner.

“Once we narrow it down, anything you want us to look for?” Rico asked.

“The usual – anything odd about the individual. Odd mannerisms, poor hygiene.. .

“Talking to himself?” Jake offered.

“If we could find something so obvious, yes.” Dani responded. Everyone was focused on the monitor.

“Okay – we’re down to ninety-six suspects,” Mac clicked several times on the screen

“Can we view stills of the remaining videos? It could help narrow down the ones to watch first?” Jake asked.

“Sounds good,” Dani answered. “Mac can you move all the stills to the second monitor and then we’ll click through them.” Mac clicked the mouse with feverish precision, moving images around as if they were puzzle pieces forming a master picture. Jake sat in the table next to Mac while Dani and Rico stood behind them.

“Okay, is everyone ready?” The others were silent but nodded in unison. “I’m going to scroll through the stills, if a person looks interesting, let me know and I’ll play the footage and enlarge the image.” Mac clicked slowly on the images. All four of them examined the stills, looking for any inconsistencies that made them want to look more closely. The work was tedious and heavy on hunches. It could be a strange look in a person’s eyes, an odd gait in their stride, a scar that begged further examination. There was nothing scientific in their search, they could just as easily miss the real killer. Unfortunately, someone good at covering their tracks didn’t usually stand out.

“Okay stop. Can you play this footage?” Rico gestured at the screen. Mac played the footage of a man with long curly black hair wearing an army jacket.

“Okay – what attracts you to him?” Dani asked.

“The fatigues – thought maybe former army reserve or survivalist,” Rico answered. “Plus, his face is very neutral, no frowns or smiles – nothing that would draw attention to his face. His expression is very controlled.”

“Okay Mac – put a check mark by that one. Keep scrolling,” commanded Dani. Another six photos went by until Mac asked to roll the footage on another customer.

“What interests you about him?” Mac asked.

“Couple things – he’s wearing sunglasses, but footage is from the evening. I don’t like people who try to hide their eyes.” replied Mac.

“What’s the second thing?” I asked.

“His overalls – looks like he they are covered in sawdust. Remember the wood chip we found where the van was parked?”

“Good selection,” nodded Dani. “I’d be surprised if our kidnapper was this sloppy but it’s worth further review. Let’s keep going.” Images flowed by, men in t-shirts, leather jackets, ball caps, one man on crutches, a lab coat, torn jeans. . .

“Stop!” Jake yelled. “Scroll back to the man with the long coat.” Mac reversed back two images and enlarged Jake’s choice.

“What’s grabbing your attention?” Dani asked.

“There’s something in the left pocket of his coat. What’s hanging out?” Mac enlarged the image. The footage was not high resolution, so the image was getting a bit grainy.

“A cloth?” Rico suggested. “Maybe a glove?”

“No, I think it’s something else.” Jake turned to Mac, feeling his intuition rise. “Can you bring up some photos from the O’Brien home?” Mac went into another folder and pulled out a number of images taken from Mandy’s home. “Flip through the images from Mandy’s room,” Jake commanded.

“What are you looking for?” questioned Dani.

“I’ll know when I see it,” he stated. The pictures scanned all four sides of Mandy’s room. Something scratched at his mind and he remembered the shelf of stuffed animals and the gap of a missing animal. “Can you enlarge the picture of Mandy on the shelf?” The expanded image showed a smiley little girl in a rainbow-colored dress. She clutched her bunny doll with her left hand. *Mr. Benjamin*. “Hold that photo and compare it to the coat pocket.” Mac placed the two photos side by side.

“Is that what I think it is?” Dani asked.

“It may be hard to make out, but I believe that it’s one of Mandy’s rabbit ears that are sticking out of the coat,” Jake pointed to the computer screen.

“It’s the same color,” remarked Rico.

“It could be the ears or one of the arms,” Mac waved the mouse cursor over the laptop.

“Play the footage again,” Dani commanded. The man was in his mid-forties, wore a long grey coat with black jeans. He wore steel toed shoes and a ball cap that obscured most of his face. “Look as he turns past the camera, the object in his pocket sways like a cloth toy.”

“What does it this all mean? Are we still following Mandy or her kidnapper?” asked Rico.

“I think we’re doing both. I don’t understand a lot about my tracking ability, but I can’t just follow anyone. I need to establish an emotional link, that’s why I spend time with the family. It helps me

build a rapport with the missing person; to activate the trail. I believe this doll is Mandy's favourite toy and she must have an emotional connection with it."

"So, you're telling me that you can follow toys now?" Rico asked incredulously.

"Now give him a second," offered Mac. "We've treated Jake's ability similar to a scent. A bloodhound can follow multiple objects a person has worn or used as long as it has their scent. What's to say that this rabbit has Mandy's love and affection. Maybe Jake can follow anything the victim has a large emotional connection with."

"Whatever the reason, we're back in business!" yelled Dani and slapped Jake on the back. "Sorry if I doubted you."

"I doubted myself," he replied with a half-smile.

"Mac – pack everything up and send the footage to the bureau. Print off an image of our suspect. They can do an in-depth analysis and try to get a still of this man's face. If we're lucky, we may get a name."

"What's our next step boss?" Rico questioned. Dani looked at Jake.

"Looks like we keep following a young girl!

Chapter 6

The Chase

Dayton, Ohio

The SUV exited the LumberMart parking lot veering back into the street. The sun had risen and traffic was filling the streets. Dani and Mac were in the back with Rico driving. Jake rode in the passenger seat to focus on the street. His confidence had rebounded. He felt like they were getting closer to finding Mandy. Returning her to her family gave him strength and helped him fight through his fatigue.

“Is the trail still strong Jake?” Dani asked.

He watched the pink trail as its tendrils faded into the air.

“No, it’s getting weaker. We need to follow it or hope the kidnapper stops soon. Any more delays and it may fade away beyond my ability to see it.” The SUV continued through a commercial street lined with closed stores.

“Dani can you look at this?” asked Mac pointing at her tablet.

“What do you have?”

“I’ve sent the footage to HQ for face recognition. But I’ve noticed something on his sleeve. Take a look?” Dani watched the footage loop several times.

“Is that an emblem?”

“Maybe or a badge. I’m trying to enlarge and see if it’s a company symbol.”

“It’s not a sport crest,” Rico offered, “at least not any team I know.”

“I don’t think so; the placement on the arm is an odd place.”

“You don’t think this guy is advertising where he works?” commented Rico.

“We could be so lucky,” Dani responded. “Good catch Mac. Let me know if you can get any better detail on it.”

“You bet.” Mac hunkered down in front of tablet, clicking away on the keyboard. Jake pointed down a street for Rico to continue south and turned around to look at Dani.

“What did the main office say about our turn of events?” he asked. Dani looked him in the eyes.

“They don’t know yet. I was going to contact them once we had some definite evidence. I didn’t think they would believe that you were able to follow Mandy’s stuffed toy.” Jake shook his head and turned to look out the passenger’s window.

“Why do you associate with me Dani? My whole ability is a career killer. I don’t think there is agent outside this car that actually believes I can track a missing person.”

“Jake, I don’t care what other agents believe. I only care about results. Others may be critical, but what you offer, can’t be duplicated. Even if I throw all available manpower and resources behind this case, there’s no guarantee that we’ll find Mandy in time. You’re her best chance. Stop worrying about what a bunch of old men in suits think and concentrate on finding Mandy!”

“Yes boss!” Jake said with a smile. “Nice to have you on my side.”

“We all are buddy,” said Rico from the front, “but can you tell me which way to turn?” The vehicle had come to a stop light in which the road ahead ended, and the options were either right or left.

“Turn right and then turn left up ahead,” Jake responded.

“That will take us to a shopping mall,” Rico blurted.

“A fairly big one,” Dani mentioned. “First a renovation store, then a shopping mall. What kind of kidnapper makes all of these stops after abducting a small girl?”

“He must have drugged her,” replied Rico. “Otherwise, how could he leave her behind?”

“Still seems odd and very risky if she wakes up. Why not take her straight to his safe place? Mac, give me some information on where we are?” Mac hit a few keys and a website flashed up on the computer.

“Dayton Mall is the largest super-regional mall in the Dayton-Springfield metropolitan area. About eighty stores, a couple of anchor stores located at the far ends. Today is Sunday so most stores don’t open until noon but some stores like the bookstores, coffee shops and eateries open at 10am.”

“We’ll it’s quarter after ten, even if all the stores aren’t open. We should be able to walk around the mall,” offered Mac.

“No need,” Jake replied. “The trail leads straight into the bookstore. Park over there,” he motioned towards several empty parking spots.

As Rico parked, Mac put the tablet under her arm and the four of them got out of the SUV. The morning sun warmed their faces as Dani reached for her sunglasses. They walked silently into the bookstore’s main entrance and then followed Jake over to the coffee shop. Jake watched as the trail waivered throughout the store, weaving in and out of book aisles. It eventually led to the back, next to a coffee shop which fed into the mall. Dani went up to the counter and waved a picture of Mandy at the staff.

“Have any of you seen this little girl in the last twenty-four hours?” she motioned her finger at the photo. A number of blank stares greeted her question. Finally, a tall boy with curly black hair stepped forward.

“We don’t get many kids ordering coffee here lady,” he smirked and then looked behind as if hoping he would get a round of laughs from his co-workers. His comment did not sit well with Rico.

“Listen smart-ass, this little girl has disappeared and may have been in this store. So why don’t you and your friends take a second look.” He took the picture from Dani and shoved it in the kid’s face. The boy jumped back and bumped back into another employee.

“I haven’t seen her! Leave me alone!” He took off into the back room. An older female walked up to Dani.

“Hi, my name is Terri. I’m the manager here. Is there something I can help you with?” Dani flashed her credentials.

“We have reason to believe that either this girl or this man may have been here in the last twenty-four hours. Can you and your staff review these pictures?” Terri took the pictures and glanced at both for a moment before handing them around for her staff. No one was able to identify either Mandy or the coffin killer from the pictures.

“I’m sorry; his picture is hard to make out. There are a lot of people that walk through here in a given day. Unless they’re a regular, we probably won’t remember them.”

“Are there any cameras in here,” Mac motioned to the ceiling.

“No, but there are some outside of the mall. Check with the security office,” Terri motioned though the entrance to the mall.

“They’re located in the west side of the mall. A security guard is usually there twenty-four hours a day.”

“Mac. You and I are going to check out the security office. Rico, stick with Jake. See if the kidnapper stopped at any other place here besides for a coffee.”

“You got it boss. Come on Jake. Let’s go shopping,” Rico beckoned. The four of them entered into the mall and split up into two groups.

The mall interior was typical, flashy sale signs were displayed in many stores. A directory listed the stores by type of services and arrows indicated the main anchor store locations. There were a few pockets of people, some having breakfast in the food court. A group of seniors passed them in jogging suits and sweat bands as they looped a circuit of the mall.

“I don’t know about you Jake, but this is strange. What type of guy kidnaps a girl and then goes shopping?” Rico asked.

“I hope I never get to know him personally. He headed this way,” pointing in the direction that the joggers just came from. The smell of cinnamon buns drifted in from the food court. The two of them passed the food kiosk without a glance, focused on their task.

“Do you see a destination, Jake?” Rico asked.

“No, it seems to be going down this corridor and to the left. Our guy isn’t wandering from store to store; he seems to be looking for something in particular.”

“What do you think about the discovery at the renovation store? Has your ability changed?” Rico questioned.

“Maybe,” Jake nodded. “And maybe I always had the ability to follow important objects of the victim and never knew. Or maybe my ability is evolving; changing into something different. Dani and I have discussed it before. There’s nothing to say that I will always have this ability, who knows, maybe a year from now – poof! – and it’s gone.”

“That would be a shame Jake. You’ve helped many families.”

“I can’t correct my mistakes, but I’ll use this ability as long as I can help others.”

“Make sure you don’t drive yourself into the grave first. You know it wouldn’t hurt if you sleep every now and then,” said Rico. Jake didn’t take the bait.

“Take a right. The trail leads into the sports store,” Jake motioned. The chain store “Sports Inc.” blazed on the front windows with displays of summer sales of baseball equipment. The main doors had flexible steel gates with sport lockers on each side. Inside the store, a teenager with messy brown hair was counting receipts and placing coins in the till. Rico banged on the gate and beckoned to him to open the door.

“Sorry mister. We’re not open for another hour yet. I’m still working on the cash register,” the boy replied.

“That’s okay,” answered Rico. “We’re here to look, not to buy. Let us in,” he presented his credentials through the gate. “We’re following the disappearance of a young girl.” The teenager looked nervous and quickly opened the gate. Rico shared an image of Mandy and grainy image of the kidnapper from his phone.

“Sorry. Neither one look familiar but I only worked yesterday morning. If you call my manager, she can probably put you in touch with the other staff members.”

“Thanks. We’re going to walk around the store for a few minutes. Can you generate a list of all items purchased in the last twenty-four hours?” questioned Rico.

“You bet officer. I’ll print off yesterday sales and give them to you.” The teenager immediately went back to the cash register and pressed a button on the top keys. Seconds later the tape started spewing out, the boy pulled his cell phone out. A few overheard words confirmed he was talking to his manager.

“I think you made the boy nervous,” Jake said.

“Seems like a good kid – least he’s letting his boss know that he has people poking around his store. Do you think the kidnapper made any purchases?”

“My ability can’t tell but I’m sure reviewing the receipts can narrow it down.”

“Fair enough. Walk around the store; see if our guy spent any time around any particular items. I’ll start looking at the sales tape,” Rico said as he walked across the store.

Jake focused on the pink trail in front of him. Already it was growing weaker. Either he was getting tired or the trail was getting

cold. Or both. He had to stay alert. He couldn't take a nap and lose the trail.

The pink smoke wrapped around the perimeter of the sport store. Jake walked the aisles, passing sports jerseys, shorts and sweatpants. He passed the soccer clothes and immediately thought about his daughter. He missed so many soccer practices but always relived them from his wife's stories. During one practice, Ella had stopped midway during a shot to pick up a flower. She brought the flower over to her mother and marveled at its beauty. Meanwhile, the opposing team had picked up the ball, rushed to the other end and scored. A father of one of the other players had complained about Ella's action. What she said next showed a maturity beyond her years. *I can always kick the ball, but this flower is so precious.* Unfazed by the parent's comment, she returned to the game as if nothing had happened. Rico's hand on his shoulder interrupted his daydream.

"I've glanced through the tape for yesterday's sales. It was busy but not overwhelming. Does the trail take you by any objects in particular?" Rico asked.

"Seemed to spend a bit of extra time in the baseball supplies but no objects stood out," Jake responded.

"Ok – well Mac can review these sport sales and see who bought any baseball equipment. Maybe we'll get lucky with a credit card? Can't assume that the kidnapper is smart all the time."

A break right about now would be appreciated, Jake thought.

"Where to next?" Rico asked as Jake motioned to a side entrance. We walked out of the sport store and then turned down a narrow corridor. Rico stopped by the washrooms.

"Hold tight a minute Jake. I think I drank too much coffee." Rico stepped into the men's restrooms. Jake tapped his foot and looked at the door at the end of the corridor. *Why would the kidnapper enter through a bookstore but exit through a side door? Wouldn't it take longer to get back to his vehicle through this entrance?*

Jake walked to the door and peered out into the parking lot. He looked out onto a mostly empty parking lot with a few scattered shopping cart corrals. His feet stepped on some cigarette butts and he noticed a couple of pop cans on the pavement. The sun shone in his face, but Jake noticed a shadow behind the door, carrying something in

its hands. He was turning when a baseball bat came down on the back of his skull. Jake watched the pavement rush up to greet his face. He felt a warm trickle of blood on his cheek as unconsciousness took over.

Chapter 7

No One is Innocent

Portland, Oregon – 16 Months ago

Jake sat in an interview room with a half-filled cup of coffee. The line of questioning had been steady. Although they hadn't come out and said it, the police looked at him as a potential suspect. He couldn't tell them the truth. They would either believe he was insane, or he was the killer. If he was locked up, then he couldn't find his family. Jake had to continue answering questions without rousing suspicion and get out. He had to get back to the coffee shop and follow the trail. *If it was still there?* The door opened and Officer Peterson walked in. He was a big beefy man with short cropped hair and a humorless square jaw.

"Mr. Valance, how are you?" he asked with genuine concern.

"Exhausted. How much longer do I have to stay here? Is there any news on my wife and daughter?"

"This won't take much longer. I just need to review a few more questions. Unfortunately, I have no new information on your family. Thanks to your discovery at the library, we are no longer looking for your SUV. Descriptions of your wife and daughter have gone out to agencies within all adjoining states."

"Thank you. When I saw the vehicle empty at the library, my mind started assuming the worse."

"About the library, in your statement earlier, that wasn't one of the locations you mentioned. What made you go there in the middle of the night?"

"Officer, I don't know what time it is anymore. All I know is that I can't sleep until my family is found. The library was a long shot, but I had to check. I called it in to this office when I found the vehicle. Did you find anything in the vehicle that showed where they went?"

"We impounded it to our yard. An officer went though it but there was nothing unusual, no receipts or maps. Does your wife always keep her vehicle so clean?" Peterson asked. The officer examined Jake as if thinking he had cleaned the vehicle of any incriminating evidence. *Damn – even this guy thinks I'm a suspect.*

“Yes. She’s the neat one in the house. Always picking up my things. Her office space was neat and her car was always clean.” A thought crossed Jake’s mind. “Did the library have security cameras? I remembered seeing a bubble camera near the front entrance.”

“We have retrieved footage for the day. Your wife and daughter entered the library at 9:47am as noted by the front camera.

Unfortunately, there are no other working cameras. The ones in the back and side have been damaged by last winter’s snowstorms.

Because of budget cuts to the library, they haven’t been repaired.”

There goes my chance to see if Monica and Ella left in the car at the restaurant.

“Tell me more about where you went after the library and how you ended finding the dead body,” Peterson asked. “Why did you go south on the interstate and not drive north?”

This was the tricky part. Jake swallowed as he relayed his story.

“Monica tended to stay away from downtown,” Jake lied. Once you started, it was hard to stop. “She was never a big fan of traffic and would stay away from the busy restaurant areas.” Peterson wrote in his notebook but seemed to accept the answer.

“Continue,” he gestured.

“I kept going over places that I thought they would go. I got back on the highway and drove until I saw the fast food area. I remembered eating at a couple of those places and drove up and down the street. I was trying to remember which restaurants we ate at, when I saw the coffee place.”

“What was special about this restaurant?” Peterson asked.

“Nothing. But I tried the coffee house because Monica enjoys her coffee and I thought it was the most likely choice out of the fast food establishments.”

“What were you looking for?” Peterson questioned, leaning closer to hear Jake’s response.

“Anything! My family is not getting found by me sitting at home. I got lucky at the library; I was hoping I’d find something. Have you checked the video footage at the coffee shop?” Jake asked expectantly.

“It’s been taken with evidence although the full footage has not been reviewed yet. The staff at the coffee shop said you acted strangely, wandering around the restaurant and going into the woman’s washroom. Why didn’t you ask the staff if they had seen your wife and daughter?”

“This is getting us nowhere!” Jake’s composure gave way and he let his emotions loose. “How many times do I have to tell you that I haven’t slept since they disappeared? I’m grasping at straws hoping to find out where my family went. If the restaurant staff thought I was acting strangely, put one of them in my situation. Are we done yet?”

“Almost,” Peterson answered his face neutral to the outburst. “Two last questions. What made you open the door of the minivan? Do you know the identity of the dead passenger?” Peterson looked Jake directly in the eyes. There was no way to avoid the question; otherwise he would believe Jake was involved with the death.

“As I told the other officer, the minivan looked exactly like one of our neighbors. I was so tired that I just tried the door and the body fell out. I was over my head and called the police immediately.” Jake bent his head back to stretch his stiff neck. “Is there a chance that the two things are connected?”

“It would be an amazing coincidence if it was, Mr. Valance. All I can say is that it’s part of an active case,” Officer Peterson replied. Jake decided to go on the offensive.

“After grilling me for hours, are you going to tell me if this man is involved with my family’s disappearance?”

“We are searching for the man’s identity; he had no identification on him. If we find any connection between him and your family, you will be the first to know.” Before Jake could ask any more questions, a knock on the glass window forced Peterson to turn around.

“Please excuse me,” Peterson stepped up to the door and walked out of the room. A couple of minutes passed. Jake started pacing around the room, waiting to leave. He was just about to knock on the door when it opened, and a woman entered. She had piercing eyes and a strong physical presence. She seemed like a woman who could defend herself.

“Mr. Valance, have a seat,” she gestured at a chair and they both sat down. “I’m Special Agent Danielle Harmer. How about we take a few minutes and you tell me what really happened!”

Chapter 8

Obstacles

Dayton, Ohio Community Hospital – 12pm

Mac sat in the waiting room strumming the keys on her tablet. The hard-plastic chairs were uncomfortable, and she shifted her weight. It was hard to focus on her work as she wondered if Jake had regained consciousness. The attacker had been brutal, slamming the back of Jake's head and leaving him motionless by the mall side entrance door. He was found by Rico who quickly called an ambulance. Rico had examined the scene but there were no witnesses or vehicles in the vicinity. Mac had checked with the security office but there were no cameras in that area. Jake was the only evidence of an attack and he wasn't talking. Yet.

Mac stopped typing and leaned back in her chair. Her concentration was shot. She was exhausted, a hot bath and sliding under her bed covers never seemed more appealing. But unless something else broke in the case, their progress was at a standstill. She was less concerned about the case than she was about Jake. She had watched Jake since they began working on cases together. He was tortured by every missing person, reliving his family loss again and again. She thought by now his guilt would diminish yet his demons only grew. She cared about Jake; she wished she could help him with his grief.

She turned her head towards the window and looked out onto the street. She grew up in Chicago, growing up in a family of three older brothers. She had excelled at university and graduated in the top five percent. Friends were always surprised by her career choice, at slightly over six feet two; she carried herself like an athlete and stood out in crowd. Her physical beauty made sure that she was pursued as well. Yet she never had many relationships, friends always accused her of being too introverted and too focused on her career. *The truth is*, she thought, *she didn't find many men very interesting*. They always wanted something from her; she wanted a man who had something that she wanted.

Jake's ability was simply amazing. There weren't many people in the bureau who knew what he was capable of doing. Outside of their

unit, she probably could count them on one hand. Above Dani, they seemed to tolerate Jake's assistance rather than support and appreciate it. In fact, behind his back they seemed to ridicule and disbelieve his work. If it wasn't for the people he had found over the last year, the bureau would have cut him loose. As long as the agency looked good, Jake would be a commodity in demand; despite that no one understood his ability. A hand touched her on the shoulder, interrupting her thoughts.

"Agent MacKinnon. What a pleasure to see you," a man's voice spoke. Mac raised her face to look into the eyes of Special Agent Tarver. They were cold looking not unlike the man. Tarver was stocky, just over six feet and although he was in his mid-forties, he looked older and pockets of thinning hair appeared on his scalp. He tried to smile but there was meanness under his expression. He was not a team player and he played to win. His greatest asset wasn't his intelligence or his average deductive skills; he was the most persistence man she had ever met, a bulldog with a bone who didn't let go.

It was important for him to let everyone else know that he had arrived. And his arrival tended to bring bad news. He affectionally called himself 'the cleaner' since he only arrived to clean up other agent's messes.

She learned to avoid him; she had never worked a case with him but knew other agents that had. They said the same thing: support him so that he looks good and there is no trouble. Makes suggestions that are counter to his ideas, and he'll shoot them down. Disagree with his actions and you better get transferred off the team because he'll tie you down with so many mundane, unrelated details, you'll begin to wonder if you're working on the same case.

Tarver's persistence was legendary, if a suspect was guilty, he would wear them down until they confessed. The joke in the office was that innocent people would profess guilt just to get away from him. As long as he got results, none of the bureau directors cared about his poor people skills.

"Sorry to interrupt your daydreams, where is Special Agent Harmer?" For some reason, Tarver always had a thing for Dani. But although his persistence served him well with work; it had the opposite

effect on her. She despised everything about him and evaded his attempts at a relationship.

“Room 224 – she’s with Jake.” She pointed down the hall knowing full well that he could have got this information from the nurse.

“Of course she is. No need to accompany me,” he motioned as Mac attempted to stand up. “I wish to speak to her alone.” He turned and walked down the middle of the hall. He carried himself like a bull elephant, too big and important to move aside for anyone. One nurse had to move a patient on a wheelchair out of his way since he walked like he was the only one in the hall. He stepped through Jake’s hospital room and scanned the private room. A full lunch sat on a food tray, flowers in a vase lay on a nightstand and a window on a far side showed the traffic below. Dani looked up from the hospital bed and her expression quickly changed from concern to anger.

“Dani! It’s great to see you. How are you doing?” Tarver asked with a pleasant smile painted across his face.

“Friends call me Dani, it’s Danielle to you,” her voice filling with anger. “One of my team is unconscious with a possible concussion and the missing girl is still out there with a deadline ticking. How do you think I’m doing?” she responded through clenched teeth. “And why are you here?” Tarver paced around the hospital room looking with mock concern at Jake’s sleeping body and the apparatus attached to him.

“That should be obvious Danielle. Jake lost the trail, so your ‘advantage’ is gone. Your team is no longer primary – I’m taking over. However, you can be part of my team if you want to stay at the front of the investigation?”

“Tarver – you aren’t keeping up with current events. We thought Jake lost the trail, but we found it again and obviously he got too close. We’re running down all leads around the mall.”

“And you have nothing. No cameras, no witnesses, no leads. And yes, I read the report that you reestablished the trail. Following the young girl’s stuffed animal? You used to be a promising agent, now you’ve hitched your career to some psychic tracker! Your reputation is a joke.” Tarver sneered at her. Dani stood up from her chair.

“This ‘joke’”, pointing to Jake, “has reunited ten families since we have been together as a team. Why do I bother explaining this to you! You look down on anything you don’t understand. Thankfully our superiors have more foresight to support a team that gets results,” Dani answered.

“Which is why I’m here,” Tarver answered. “Because of your setback, I’m team lead now. Because of the kidnapper, this case is too high profile to leave to you. We need results now and the director felt my team was the best to deliver. I’m sorry that I have to take over your case.” Tarver did not look the least bit sympathetic.

“Sorry my ass! You’ve been angling to get one of my cases for months and prove that Jake’s ability is a fraud. Congratulations, you’ll sabotage this case going after Jake at the expense of a little girl’s life!” yelled Dani.

“Can you guys stop screaming? There’s a sick person here.” Both turned their heads to sound of his voice. Jake pushed himself up and rubbed the side of his head. “I was sleeping soundly when this horrible smell woke me.” He looked at the doorway. “Oh, hi Tarver.”

“Jake! How are you feeling?” Dani asked with concern.

“Awful. I spend too much time in hospital beds lately. I feel like a stampede of elephants just walked over my head. What hit me?”

“Probably a baseball bat. Jake, why did you walk off by yourself?” Dani moved closer to the bed.

“I didn’t think a shopping mall was a dangerous place,” he gingerly touched the bump on his head.

“And that’s why having a civilian on your team has jeopardized your investigation,” Tarver preached while looking at Jake. “Your lack of following basic procedures may have given the kidnapper the escape he was looking for.” Jake looked in disbelief and then turned to Dani.

“I know I just about had my head taken off my shoulders but he’s not making any sense. What’s going on Dani,” he asked with concern rising in his voice.

“Tarver’s in charge now. Likely he’ll bury our team with useless back up chores while the kidnapper goes free,” Dani spat out her words.

“Can’t do a worse job than your group. Ever wonder how the rest of the bureau gets by with hard work and investigation skills while

you depend on psychic tracker? His abilities are a farce and I'll depend on this any day instead." Tarver tapped a finger at his temple.

"Then the girl's as good as dead!" Jake yelled almost leaping out of bed to strangle Tarver. The door to the hospital room opened behind them and a large nurse interrupted.

"In case you visitors couldn't read, this floor is for sick people and requires quiet. Why don't the two of you (pointing at Dani and Tarver) take your conversation down to the main reception? And you (pointing at Jake), lie down until the doctor determines if you can be released." The nurse folded her arms and waited for the two agents to leave. Jake started to protest.

"Quiet Jake," Dani said as she walked to the door. "I'll just be down the hall; the doctor will be here soon."

"Trust me; the doctor only wants sick people taking up our beds. I'll be sure to tell him that you are awake and alert," the nurse said while looking at Jake.

The agents left the room while Jake sunk back into his pillow. *What if he was off the case? What chance did Mandy have with Tarver running the investigation?* His senses were momentarily overwhelmed by the sickly-sweet smell of roses. He leaned over his nightstand to smell a bouquet of flowers. *Not like Dani to send flowers – she's not the sentimental type.* He reached for a small envelop tucked under the vase. He ripped open the card and scanned the contents. His stomach dropped after reading. He read it again in case the knock on his head had caused him to hallucinate.

dear jake,

I'm Sorry to hEar about the knock on your hEad. hate to see someone take You out of the game. still lOts of fUn for us yet. see you soon.

a fan

Jake pressed the nurse's station button feverishly, hoping to get her attention and bring Dani back in. Unsurprisingly, things had just gotten worse.

Outside of Dayton, Ohio – industrial park

As the truck came to a stop, a small dust cloud rose from the road and floated through the air. The truck door opened and a steel toed boot stepped onto the ground. Its owner walked to a steel door carrying his heavy supplies. He punched in a code and the door clicked open. The interior was dark and cool, several moments passed before his eyes adjusted.

How he loved making preparations. It reminded him of his childhood, putting up the decorations was the highlight, not the holiday. The holiday was always a disappointment, the result of too high expectations that always came up short. He had learned that the time of preparing the journey not the actual destination, was the time to treasure.

He made several stops before looking in on his little angel. He walked to a room in the corner of the warehouse. He looked in through the glass window on her door. She lay on a cot, still asleep from their earlier trip. He looked at her features. She was beautiful – like a porcelain doll and just as fragile. *A perfect offering.* When the time was right, he would begin the ceremony.

He walked back towards another room and stepped inside. The room was bare with a table and chair with a few items scattered across the tabletop. He sat down in a chair and looked out through a glass window onto the work area. He flipped open a laptop and blew dust of the screen. *No matter how hard he tried to seal off this room, dust always got in. I guess things that aren't supposed to get in, always find a way.*

He opened several websites on local papers to see if anything new had been reported on the girl's disappearance. He had learned that the police rarely tipped their hand, but some reports would often show if they had any good leads. He scanned the articles – pleas from the parents, vague description of the van he had dumped, details of the girl's features. Overall he knew the police were not making any progress. And they never would.

Suddenly an article caught his attention. A man attacked at the Dayton Mall – possible head trauma. Funny he didn't find it dangerous

Jim Kochanoff

when he was there. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He turned around and looked up at his visitor.

“Good I’ve been waiting for you. We have to something to discuss,” he smiled.

Dayton, Ohio Community Hospital – 3pm

“This is how we’ll proceed!” Tarver pointed to a projection on the wall from a laptop. They were seated in a small boardroom in the hospital; it was filled to capacity with both FBI teams seated opposing each other. Mac, Jake, Rico and Dani sat to the left while Tarver’s team consisted of agents Weight, Hastings and De Nano sat on the right

“That’s bullshit!” ranted Rico. You’re telling me that you want us to stay behind and follow up on your leads? There is nothing else to follow up. Mac has sent everything to analysis. This is not the time to sit our team when a little girl may only have a few hours to live!”

“Seems to me you have a problem with the chain of command?” Weight remarked tilting his head at Rico. Weight was Tarver’s second, about six foot four, muscular, shaved head and a man of few words. But when he spoke, mainly because of his stature, he commanded attention.

“No one is arguing who is in charge,” Dani answered undaunted by Weight’s comment. “You’ve made that abundantly clear. The question is that time is limited, using both teams would be the best use of resources.”

“We’ve seen how effective your resources are,” sneered Hastings. “Better to leave this job to the experts.” Hasting was a dour, fresh from academy tech who bought into Tarver’s superiority. He was skilled in processing evidence but seemed to have little free-thinking ability and was an ardent follower of Tarver’s commands.

“Arguing amongst ourselves isn’t getting us anywhere,” Mac added while looking with disdain at Hasting. “We have evidence that needs to be prioritized.”

“She’s right,” De Nano replied. He was an ex-marine with short cropped hair who had seen his share of battles. Of the group, he was the most reasonable although like a good soldier, he followed Tarver’s orders.

“Enough! This isn’t a democracy,” Tarver stood up. The four of you are to head to the local police detachment and set up shop in one of their offices. If I need you to follow up leads, I expect your response to be immediate. All information is sent via Hastings. Do I make myself clear?” He looked to the left side of the room to Dani’s team.

“Crystal,” responded Jake, his hospital gown gone and replaced with street clothes. “What I don’t understand is what you are doing with the letter I provided? You have evidence of a breach of our investigation, someone who has privileged information of our progress and you’re not doing a damn thing about it!” His face was screwed up with anger and everyone but Tarver was taken aback by his outburst. Instead of responding back, Tarver paced the room as if savoring the moment. He looked back at Jake with a huge grin.

“The way I see it Jake,” Tarver started with a measured voice, “is that you are delusional. I’d like to blame it on the knock to your head, but your mental health started deteriorating well before that. The reality is, your magical gift,” Hasting snickered and Tarver’s smile deepened, “is no longer required,” he turned to Rico. “What was the result when you two went back to the shopping mall?” Rico felt like giving an angry response but maintained his professionalism.

“We looked around the shopping mall, particularly around where Jake was clubbed. Unfortunately, we couldn’t reestablish Mandy’s trail.” Rico looked down at the floor.

“A fact that all of us already knew. Rubbing Jake’s nose in it shows how petty you are. You know that after a specific time, the trail goes cold and Jake can no longer follow the victim,” Dani explained.

“I don’t care!” Tarver answered. “I want results not excuses! The reason you were brought into this investigation was to lead us to the kidnapper. Jake is useless to us now. You’re lucky he has a seat at this table. I will decide what leads we follow, and Jake’s card at the hospital will not help us find the missing girl.”

“So, what is our next step?” asked Mac.

“Our next step,” Tarver pointed to his team, “will be to review your locations and re-interview with the family. To see if anything was missed by your team.”

“You’re playing with a young girl’s life while finding fault with my investigation,” Dani yelled. “This is pathetic – when this

investigation is over, I'll have your entire methodology questioned. I only hope your pride doesn't kill her."

"That's enough," Weight stepped in and then looked back to Tarver. "You may not like your orders, but you'll follow them just the same."

"Listen, we're on the same team here," added De Nano. "We all want the same result – this little girl reunited with her parents."

Maybe, Jake thought. Although I bet Tarver is more concerned about looking good than doing what's best.

"Danielle, take your team and head to the police station," Tarver barked. "Review the trail of evidence so far. Report any findings to me. If I have additional information, I will relay back to you for follow-up. Let's get going, we have a little girl to find." Both teams stood up to exit the room. De Nano opened the door for Mac and stepped through with her. The tension of the room spilled out with them and the two walked in silence.

"You know," De Nano mentioned as they walked down the hall, "the insignia you isolated on the footage on the jacket looks familiar."

"Do you think it's a military patch?" she answered, guessing at his background.

"No," he smiled. "But it reminds me of a decal. I'm a big fan of Nascar – can't figure out if I saw it on a car or vendor. It must be old though because it doesn't look familiar of any current sponsors.

"Thanks," Mac smiled. "You're helpful, not like the others."

"Don't let appearances fool you," he replied. "I want to get this guy as much as the rest of them, I'm just not going to take you out at the knees to get ahead. I think we both have a role to play." He gave her a salute and walked out to the parking lot.

"Did you get some useful information from your new boyfriend," Rico teased as he punched her in the arm. Mac blushed and tilted her head away from him.

"Just some professional courtesy – we're in this together, right?" As they came to the sliding doors to the emergency department, Jake and Dani caught up to them.

"We need to sift through the evidence at the police station ASAP. I hope we've missed something because we're running out of time," Dani commanded.

“How much time is left?” Jake asked.

“Based on past cases, Mandy has got about twelve hours before the kidnapper places her in a coffin,” Rico stated.

“If only we had a lead that would allow me to reestablish the trail,” said Jake. Mac stopped him in midstride.

“Maybe there is. Let’s get over to the station now. De Nano made me think of something. I need to review the footage again!”

Chapter 9

Trust the Man

Portland Oregon – 16 Months ago

“I’m taking a professional risk by taking you out of the police station,” Special Agent Danielle Harmer commented while looking at her passenger.

“How many more times you need me to repeat myself? Do you think I enjoy sounding crazy?” Jake slumped into his seat. Traffic passed by as they drove along the interstate.

“I believe that you think you’re telling the truth. Your ‘true’ story never wavered. But I don’t believe in special abilities, Jake. Your trail vision is straight out of comic book. This situation is one of two ways – you made this ability up out of the grief for your family or you are actually involved in the crime.”

“I’m sure you and Officer Peterson have already concluded I’m part of the crime.”

“No, but we are leaning in that direction. Even if you aren’t involved, maybe subconsciously, you know where they went. Maybe your unconscious is hiding this knowledge and leading you by putting out this breadcrumb trail for you to follow.”

“You’re telling me that I was already at the coffee shop before and knew the dead man was there?”

“Exactly. A traumatic event may have blocked your memory and this trail is leading you to places you’re already been.”

“You’re out of your mind!”

“That seems odd coming out of your mouth considering the circumstances,” Danielle smiled.

“Well it’s obvious that you believe I’m responsible for my family’s disappearance. I feel like a dog on its leash with this security bracelet,” Jake lamented.

“Considering your story, you’re lucky you’re not sitting in a jail cell right now. I used all my influence to have you released in my custody. A tracking bracelet seems like a small price to pay. Doesn’t it?”

“I don’t care if you attach a lead weight to me. I want my family back. And no offense, the police have found a big fat zero so far. Like it or not, my tracking ability maybe their best chance of being found.”

“That’s assuming you don’t already know their whereabouts and you are retracing your steps.”

“Are there people sick enough to play this game with their family?”

“Unfortunately. I have a few cases where that happened. One man claimed his wife had left him and kept sending emails to him. The family suspected foul play and when we reviewed the emails, some of her language seemed off.”

“What happened?”

“We eventually traced the email back to a storage facility he rented. The husband had been sending emails from her laptop. Unfortunately for him, the smell of his wife’s body was noticeable by some other storage owners. He never did admit to sending the emails and claimed that his wife had set the whole thing up.”

“Did you believe him?”

“No. And I’m pretty good at looking into someone’s eyes and determining if they are telling the truth.”

“What do you see in my eyes?” Jake looked straight at Danielle; she took a moment to answer.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t see some truth in them.”

“Thank you. I just want a chance to find my family.”

Danielle turned off the interstate and headed towards the coffee shop where Jake had made the grisly discovery. She turned the vehicle into the parking lot and pulled up next to the crime scene tape.

“Okay Jake. Tell me what you see?” He got out of the vehicle and surveyed the scene.

“Near the front of the parking spot, about two feet off the ground, there is faint trail of pink smoke.”

“Is it moving?”

“No, it’s perfectly still. Although,” Jake leaned forward and moved his hand through it. “It does move when my hand crosses it.” Danielle looked at the blank space. Jake wondered if she thought he was delusional. She stared at his face, studying his belief in seeing the trail. “But it looks different now.”

“What do you mean?” Danielle asked. Jake stepped under the tape and walked around the exterior of the minivan.

“It seems weaker, it’s harder to see.”

“Well it was darker when you were here before. Maybe it’s not as visible during the day.”

“That’s part of it, but the smoke seems more transparent. Almost like its fading away.” A worried look crossed his face. “What if this smoke trail dissipates after a certain number of hours? What if I lose the only way I can track my family?” Jake walked around the lot and pointed out to the road. “The trail heads back out to the highway. Please, I need to follow it. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to track them!”

Danielle considered his request. Down deep, she thought he was a nutcase. But her superior gave her leeway to follow cases at her discretion. Cases that often no one else wanted. She was committed to seeing how this one played out.

“Lead on Jake. Let’s see where this trail goes.”

Twenty minutes later, they had left the outskirts of Portland, heading south to Salem. Danielle kept looking at Jake as he was following the trail.

“Are you posted in Portland?” he asked, hoping to take her focus off of him. “I mean you responded to my case pretty fast?”

“No, I’m stationed on the east coast in Boston. I happened to be finishing a case in Seattle when I got this call.”

“You must have been surprised when you heard the details of my case?” Jake asked.

“No, but I get assigned the more unusual cases. I tend to approach things outside of the box.”

“But you still don’t believe me.”

“I don’t know. Do you still see the smoke track in front of you? Is it still on the interstate?”

“Yes. Do you think I’ll keep you driving until we hit Mexico and then try to escape?”

“I’ll be stopping if we pass the California border,” she grinned. “Tell me more about you and your family. Why do you feel so responsible for their disappearance?” Jake’s body tensed.

“Not much to tell. I’m Psychiatrist at Portland General for the last four years. I’ve built up quite practice since I began. Unfortunately, I’ve let my home life take a back seat to my job and my clients.”

“You’re not the first male overachiever I’ve ever met Jake.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better. I wasn’t there when my family needed me.” Jake looked out the passenger window for a moment to collect his thoughts. “I’m sure you’ve heard it before. A delinquent dad. An absent husband. I meant to spend more time with my family but work always seemed to come first.”

“I know the feeling. I’m usually in a different part of the country every week,” remarked Danielle.

“My absence isn’t as dramatic. I’m in Portland, just spending most of my time in the office or at the hospital with clients. I’ve always had a good intuition when it came to what is troubling my clients. I’ve helped a lot of people but the more I’ve helped the more addictive it is to try to help more people. I booked myself steady six days a week. Ten hours a day. Clients call me at all hours with problems they need to discuss. My family has been good about my absences but sometimes they felt my client’s lives were more important than their own.”

“Is that true?”

“Of course not. But my actions spoke for themselves. There are not too many family outings that haven’t been interrupted. My wife and I used to argue that I didn’t set enough boundaries with my clients.”

“Did you fight a lot?”

Jake could see she where she was taking this questioning.

“Some – but not enough that we every talked about ending our marriage. We love each other. I won’t want to be with any other woman.”

“But maybe your wife knew that your work was your mistress?”

“Well, maybe that had some truth to it. I’m sure she felt that I spent more time discussing other people’s problem rather than our own. Sometimes I’d have to meet with a client over a dozen times before I could get at the root of the problem.”

Not unlike my work Jake. You can pursue dozens of leads and be no closer than when you started.”

“Except I have to look into the eyes of the person I’m trying to help over and over. It’s tough to spend that kind of time with them and

not show any progress. It makes you feel like a failure when you can't help."

"Is that what this is all about Jake? Is your guilt driving this search?"

"I'm guilty of taking my family for granted. I'm guilty for making work my focus. I swear if we find them, I'll change my priorities."

"You know Jake, you're not the first husband who worked too hard. You can't hold yourself responsible for their disappearance. From your statement, it sounded like you wanted to spend the day together. Not the sign of delinquent dad or husband," Jake looked at her, wiping a tear from his eye.

"That's the problem. Usually on the weekends, we had breakfast together. But because I wanted to spend the day together, they rushed out in the morning to do some errands. What if I pushed them towards the kidnapper?"

"You can't continue this self pity. Be strong for your family's sake. Don't regret the past choices, you can relive them all you want later. Right now, I need your head in the present." Jake was silent, letting her words sink in. He noticed the trail changing direction.

"Turn right!" Jake pointed ahead.

"Over here?" Danielle asked.

"Yes. The off ramp coming up, turn right. The trail turns off here."

Danielle drove off of the interstate, turning into a mostly residential area. The suburb was modest with nice homes but on small tracts of land. The streets were tree lined; seemingly the urban planners had included 'green' in the streets vision instead of a developer's forest clear cutting. Jake beckoned to turn left down a street with mixed residential and commercial properties. To the right, a small river flowed, meandering towards a lake in the distance. Danielle rounded an 'S' curve and slowed down as she applied the brakes.

A small girl walking her dog was crossing the road. The dog barked at their car while the girl barely glanced at them as they hurried to a nearby playground. Jake pointed to an apartment building near the end of the street. She parked the car and killed the engine.

"Tell me what you see Jake?"

“I see the trail leading down this street. It swirls around an empty parking spot in the front. Then it heads inside the main doors, disappearing inside.”

“Empty parking spot? I wonder if they are still here or have moved on? Guess there’s only one way to find out.” Danielle pulled out her gun and flipped her credentials around her neck. “Come on,” she motioned to Jake.

“You’re letting me come in with you?”

“I can’t see where to go without you. You point me in the right direction but stay behind me the whole time. And whatever you do, let me do the talking,” commanded Danielle as she exited the car.

“Are you calling backup?” he asked. Danielle fixed him with a stare with her deep brown eyes.

“What do I tell them? That a possible suspect sees an invisible trail into this apartment building? After they stop laughing, they’ll tell me to go pound sand. It’s just you and me. For both our sakes – this had better pan out.”

The two of them walked briskly towards the entrance, Danielle cautiously examined the surroundings. The apartment building was four stories, balconies adorned each apartment with a collection of barbecues, flowerpots, lawn chairs and other assorted junk. The building was newer but simple architecture, probably about ten to fifteen years old. A flower bed with perennials made a buffer between the parking and main entrance. Danielle opened the front door and as they entered into the lobby. She walked over to an office, looking for the resident landlord. The office was empty, but an active computer showed that someone was here recently.

“Too bad. Landlord must be busy elsewhere. Looks like we keep following your trail and knock on any doors,” Danielle commented.

“They took the stairs,” Jake pointed to the left side stairwell. They climbed the steps and an older resident passed them with a laundry basket in his arms as he was heading to the basement. He smiled at Danielle and then noticed her firearm before hurriedly rushing away.

“We have about five minutes before the whole building knows we’re here. Where to next?” Danielle asked. Jake pointed to the fire

door which went into the second floor. As they entered, Jake looked at the interior. The carpet was industrial yellow brown made for wear and tear. A newspaper lay in front of a resident's door while a small half-filled garbage bag sat by another door. The pink smoke slithered down the hall and stopped from the second last door on the left. Jake pointed at apartment 216 and Danielle positioned him to stand one door down. She tapped her knuckles on the door frame.

"Please open up! This is police business. I'm placing my credentials against the eye hole," Danielle barked and kept her body against the wall while extending her arm. She was greeted by silence and then heard something dropping from within the apartment.

"Sounds like someone is inside," Jake's left ear to the wall.

"Or I spooked a cat," Danielle responded. She pounded on the door again. "Open up immediately!" she yelled. She positioned her foot at the lock of the door and kicked. The door snapped open and two bullets came flying out. Danielle dove to the ground, her weapon drawn.

"Still think it's a cat!" Jake said with sarcasm.

"Stay next to that wall!" She fixed him with a stare that didn't leave any negotiation. A window opened from inside the apartment and there was movement on the balcony. Danielle kicked the broken door open, its frame splintering. She stepped inside and placed her back against the wall facing the kitchen. She surveyed the apartment, looking for any surprises. It appeared to be a one bedroom. The kitchen and living room were clear, she moved forward to the bedroom.

"Police business – please come out of the bedroom with your hands up!" No response. She ran to the bedroom door and peered in. Open closets and a mess of clothes strewn on the floor. She ran to the balcony and saw a young female in the parking lot, climbing into a brown truck.

"Jake, come with me," she bellowed and dragged him back downstairs to the front entrance. They came through the front door as the brown truck sped out onto the street. Danielle squinted at the license plate as they ran her vehicle. She gunned the engine on the first ignition and sped in pursuit. She tapped her visor and dialed her cell phone.

“Dispatch! This is Special Agent Danielle Harmer of the FBI. I am requesting local police assistance in a shooting at 237 Parkland Drive in Hayesville. Please send a police unit to secure the scene. I am in pursuit of a brown four-wheel drive truck, four doors with short back bed. First three digits are 549 – tree background on plate. Cue in on my vehicles GPS to coordinate police assistance.”

“Affirmative Agent Harmer,” a male voice responded. “I am contacting the local police department and giving them your contact information. Expect a call within a few minutes. Please keep me informed of your status.”

“Understood,” Danielle looked over to Jake. “You get your first gunfire and car chase all on the first day.”

“Lucky me. Did you see anything at the apartment that looked my family was there?”

“Couldn’t tell. Looked like a typical messy apartment. The scene will be secured and we’ll go back later to search. I’ve got a feeling our runner will have more answers.”

“Why did she fire at us and then run?”

“Never got a chance to ask,” Danielle responded.

Danielle ran a stop sign and drove onto a main street – because it was the weekend, traffic was light. Jake gripped the seat cushion hard enough that his nails were cutting into the fabric. Ahead of them, the truck weaved in and out of traffic.

“Do chased cars ever get away?” Jake asked. “It seems in today’s wired society; she’s got to realize that you’ll be tracking her.”

“Cars get away all the time. Don’t get me wrong. If the stakes are high and resources unlimited, it’s practically impossible to get away. We have helicopters, cars, satellites, criminals don’t have a chance.”

“I sense a but.”

“You’re right. With all the budget cuts, police forces are stretched thin. I’m at the mercy at whatever the local department can spare. Just because I put a call out, doesn’t mean I’ll get any responders. If I hadn’t mentioned gun fire, we might have been the only pursuers. And trust me; it’s easy to ditch a pursuer when its one on one.” Danielle cell phone rang as it was on cue. “Talk to me,” she spoke into the phone that was planted on the dash.

“Officer Vernon, from Hayesville Police Force. I’m heading north to your current position on your GPS. Do you have any new information on your suspect?”

“Thanks Officer Vernon. We just left Fairway Street onto Church. Suspect is driving through a semi residential – commercial district.”

“Sounds like they are planning to cross at State street – I’ll set up a roadblock and redirect current traffic. You are about four minutes away from me.”

“Affirmative – I will call you if the suspect changes direction.” Danielle’s phone went dead.

“We have some support,” Jake said, while grabbing the overhead door handle as Danielle made a sharp turn.

“Hopefully he knows what he’s doing, or this could get a lot worst.”

The brown truck skidded around a curve narrowly avoiding a dog walker who waved his fist. The tires were bald and the engine was far from powerful. The driver knew she had to ditch this vehicle and call him for help. She had to get past downtown and then hide the vehicle in the town’s industrial park. She didn’t know why the cops were after her, but she couldn’t take the chance on getting caught. A bank building loomed up ahead signalling the downtown core. She turned right and immediately spied the police car cutting off access to the street. She slammed on the brakes. Moments later, the car that was following her from the apartment was blocking her exit. She hit her steering wheel in frustration and sat in the car.

“Please exit the car with your hands over your head. We don’t want anyone to get hurt,” Officer Vernon said from a microphone atop the police car. She killed the engine and looked around. Her fingers tapped the top of the steering wheel as she considered what to do.

Danielle braked the car and turned at an angle to prevent any other cars from driving past her. She looked at Jake.

“Get out of the car and stay behind it. She has a gun and I don’t need you to get caught in the crossfire.”

“But what if she knows something about my family?”

“Then it’s my job to apprehend and question her. Far as we know we knocked on a drug dealer’s apartment and she took off to evade arrest.”

“But the trail went right up to her door?”

“Fair enough – it’s a pretty big coincidence. But follow my lead or you spend the rest of your time in a jail cell.” Jake threw up his hands in mock defeat but followed her orders. A number of small office buildings occupied the street; most were only about three to four stories in height. A restaurant was on the left side with a few onlookers gawking over towards the scene on the street. “Great – this always attracts an audience.” Danielle pointed her weapon at the truck.

“This is the Hayesville police. Please drop your weapon on the pavement and step away from the car!” Officer Vernon repeated and stepped out of his vehicle, holding the radio microphone in his left hand. The woman in the truck slowly opened the door and tossed her gun into the grass median of the street. She stepped out of the car and stood by the door.

This might actually work, Jake thought.

A car slammed into the side of the truck causing it lurch sideways into the median and knocking the driver off her feet. The force sent her flying to the ground with her head landed on the concrete curb of the median. The driver of the sports car immediately jumped out of his vehicle

“I’m sorry!” a teenage boy yelled. “I didn’t expect the truck to be in the middle of the street!”

“You might have seen it, if you weren’t so busy texting your girlfriend,” his teenage passenger snarled. Danielle ran to the driver of the truck. She was face down with a nasty gash on the forehead. She checked her neck and detected a weak pulse.

“Officer Vernon! Call an ambulance! She has a head trauma with likely concussion. I’m going to stabilize her, she’s unconscious so I’ll treat as if she has suffered a spinal injury.”

“You got it,” he responded. “I’ll also take care of these kids.” He fixed the driver with a stare that meant the teenager was in serious trouble. Both the driver and passenger made calls on their cell phones as if calling for family support. Jake ran up to Danielle.

Jim Kochanoff

“Is she alive?” he asked.

“For the moment – but it may be awhile before she can tell us anything,” Danielle responded as blood from the driver’s head pooled on the pavement.

Chapter 10

The Baited Trap

Dayton, Ohio Police Station 1791 Harshman Road – 4pm

Jake walked into the main reception area of the police department and watched as several officers scrutinized their group. Rico waved his credentials and they were escorted to the back of the building. The officer showed them to a set of stairs and signaled to the basement. They walked down into the cool interior and headed to an empty room that had been propped open. Inside was a windowless room with stacks of files and half-filled boxes. Rico scanned the interior and smiled to the rest of them.

“Nothing but the best for the bureau. I think I smell mouse droppings in the corner,” he gestured by covering his nose.

“No time for complaints. If we do our job right, we won’t be here for long,” Dani answered. “Mac pull out your tablet, you and Rico can review the evidence. I’m going to call the lab to see if something can be rushed.”

“Dani – is there anything I can do?” Jake asked. Dani looked around, trying to think of a make work project. “Can you clear that table and bulletin board? If we have to use this space, we may as well make it functional.”

Jake appreciated the task – it took his mind off Mandy for a moment. He moved stacks of papers and boxes towards the corner of the room. Jake swept the tabletop with his hand and pushed the debris into a garbage can. But thoughts of Mandy kept coming back to him. *How much longer does she have? Will I still be able to find her trail?* Something tugged at his thoughts as he rubbed the bump on his head.

“Dani? Did we discover why the kidnapper stopped at the mall?”

“No – nothing definite. The techs in Boston are still sifting through hours of footage. With all of shoppers in the mall and poor camera angles, nothing conclusive has been found. If we can find him, we can find out what we purchased. Using your head as evidence, all I’m sure of is that he purchased a baseball bat. Why do you ask?”

“What if the kidnapper did more than shopping at the mall?” Jake questioned while Rico came closer, interested by their conversation.

“What are saying Jake– that the kidnapper was stopping off for a coffee?” laughed Rico.

“No, be serious. Remember my profession is the study of the human mind. What if he was leaving a message or meeting someone?” Jake said as Mac looked up from her tablet.

“That’s highly unlikely Jake– profile fits a loner male, why would he have a partner? It would make him more vulnerable to mistakes,” she added.

“Humor me for a minute. How does this type of person develop a relationship?” Jake asked.

“Usually the dominant person in the relationship – could be mentor to a junior partner or lover. Male or female. He might open up to someone who shows an interest in his expertise. Or it could start innocent, a common interest and then descend into something darker.”

“Jake– tell me why you think the kidnapper was meeting someone? You can track people – can you read their minds now as well?” asked Dani.

“No, just a hunch. Let’s review the places he stopped at.”

“Okay – we followed him to the strip mall, LumberMart, and then shopping mall. I’ve never seen a kidnapper make so many stops – it runs the risk that he’ll be noticed, or his victim could alert someone,” commented Mac.

“Although chances are that Mandy was sedated the whole time,” Rico added.

“Likely but you still don’t parade your victim around – too risky for something to go wrong. And this guy hasn’t made any mistakes in previous cases,” Dani pointed out.

“What if he didn’t take Mandy to these locations? What if he exchanged her at the strip mall with someone else? What if that person took her to wherever she is now, and the kidnapper met up with his partner at the mall?” Jake pointed at Dani.

“That would mean we followed the wrong trail – following the kidnapper with the stuffed animal and not the Mandy herself. Why?” Dani asked.

“I don’t know Dani – I don’t understand this ability. Why do I have only twenty-four hours to pursue the trail? Why can I follow important objects instead of the person?” Jake answered.

“Relax. No one is infallible. It may take you years to understand how your ability works and how it fails,” Rico said.

“Let’s get back on topic – let’s say Jake is right. The strip mall was a transfer point for the kidnapper and his partner. What do we do with it? The camera at the strip mall didn’t cover the whole lot. We couldn’t see where the van was left or transferred?” questioned Mac.

“No, but we might be able to review the footage – see if we get any license plates and then cross reference them with staff members at the mall. It’s worth a try,” Rico suggested.

“It’s a lot of footage but I can narrow it down to the probable timeline.” Mac began typing again on her tablet. “The camera from the liquor store doesn’t see any cars coming in but does see cars leaving the lot if they go out the main exit.”

“Let’s hope this kidnapper’s understudy went out that way,” Jake replied.

“Give me a few minutes, I’ll run some plates,” Mac replied while punching the keys on her tablet. She looked straight at the screen while she searched registrations. But the image at the LumberMart continued to bother her. De Nano had given her some ideas, but they hadn’t panned out. Yet. She thought again about his comment of a sponsor for racing. As she automated the registration search, she began a search for company logos online.

Since the image seemed familiar, she started by looking up the logo of each business they had visited in the last twenty-four hours. Minutes melted by and nothing matched. She breathed deeply and took a drink of her coffee. Her eyes scanned the cup and a thought tugged at her. She brought up the directory of all the retail stores at the Dayton Mall. She pulled up the coffee shop franchise and looked at the website.

“Guys!” Mac interrupted. “I got something. Take a look.” Dani and Jake crowded the screen while Rico looked over their heads.

“What are we looking at Mac?” Dani asked.

“A logo. Franchise called Coffee Time, currently based in ten states.

“That’s the coffee shop at the mall,” Dani said.

“Correct. Now I did a search and company updated their logo about five years ago. During that time, the company was a sponsor for several national racing events.” Mac brought the image of the emblem they saw at the LumberMart.

“So, it’s an old employee shirt from the coffee company!” Jake yelled.

“That’s not all,” Mac added. A current employee’s license plate passed through the strip mall during the same time the kidnapper was there.”

“Who?” Dani asked

“Terri Powers. Car registration shows that she works at the Dayton mall. Look familiar?” pointing to a copy of the driver’s license.

“Yes. That was the manager of the coffee shop!” Jake said

“Coincidence?” Rico asked.

“Don’t believe in such a thing. We need to find this manager now!” Dani commanded.

23 High Street – Fairborn, Ohio

Mac parked the SUV on the street as Dani exited the back. Jake watched from the back seat as she examined the house before knocking on the door. Several seconds passed and Dani scanned several neighbor’s home to make sure she wasn’t being watched. She walked around the house looking into the windows to confirm no one was home. As she disappeared behind the back of the house, Mac’s cell phone rang.

“Suspect is leaving the coffee shop now. We should be at her house in about twenty minutes. See anything?” Rico asked.

“Negative. We just got here, and we still haven’t got a search warrant yet. I’ve received records from her land phone and I’m running through them as we speak,” Mac answered.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and get a name and address of the kidnapper. I’ll call you in ten minutes as we get closer.” Mac closed her cell phone as Dani stepped back into the SUV.

“Anything unusual boss?” Mac asked.

“Nothing on the outside,” Dani answered. “Typical older suburban home, she lives alone. I looked in through the window; the house is tidy, not a lot of belongings that I can tell. No other occupants, no pets, nothing that makes this house stand out amongst the others. There is a locked shed that I would like to get in. Maybe there is tool that might tie it to another location.”

“Do you think Mandy is in the house?” Jake asked.

“I doubt it. It’s pretty tough to hide someone in a suburban setting. Too likely that someone will see Mandy going into or leaving the house. Plus, if Mandy yelled, it is likely a neighbor would report it. She’s somewhere else.” Dani looked at Mac. “Can you review the suspect’s client information with me again? I’m hoping for something to stick out.” Mac looked over her computer screen.

“Terri Powers, single, age thirty-five. Has a hospitality degree from Dylan Community College. No record, not even a parking ticket. Worked a number of restaurants, as a waitress, hostess, assistant manager. She’s been manager of the Coffee Time in the Dayton mall for six years. She’s never been married, IRS reports very modest income. Parents live in Florida, no siblings, few friends. She’s nondescript, nothing outstanding that would make her a partner for a serial killer.”

“Is there anything in her profile that gives a clue on other locations? Does she rent storage space, any other property in her name?” Mac clicked a couple of keys, a number of bank accounts streamed by. She turned her head towards Dani. “Nothing. If the Coffin Killer is using her, she’s buying properties under a different name or a company.”

“Would her car have a GPS in it? Something we could track her destinations?” Jake asked.

“We checked her car, it’s an old beater. No GPS with its purchase, unless she bought one off the shelf.”

“Can’t you go in and look around?” Jake suggested. “Maybe there is something in the house? Something that would give us a clue to her whereabouts.”

“Jake— how many times to I have to go over this? It’s illegal to search a person’s home without a warrant. Anything we find will not be admissible in court. We’ll be suspended or fired for entering without

just cause. Besides, my intuition is that we'll be more likely to find Mandy's location if we don't tip Terri off that we suspect her involvement."

"Mandy's time is almost gone. I'm sure her parents would appreciate if we took some liberties."

"I'm welcome for ideas?" Dani looked straight at him.

"Let me look inside. I'm only a consultant. I can always say later I didn't know."

"Jake. I'm still responsible for you. I can't willingly let you go."

"Then let me 'investigate' around the outside and you can say that you gave me specific instructions not to go inside." Dani took a few seconds to consider my request.

"If I do, what if you move something in the house? What if you tip Terri off that she's being watched and doesn't take us to her partner? This could end badly and then you contribute towards Mandy's death."

"And if we follow procedure, a little girl could die before the law catches up. I promise to be careful. I've been on a few cases now, give me some credit." Dani considered his argument and then looked over to Mac.

"You didn't hear any of this conversation, did you Mac?"

"What's that boss? I'm too busy working on my tablet. I'm not paying attention."

Jake took this as his cue and stepped out of the car, walking with Dani to the back of the house. Dani scanned the neighboring homes if anyone was watching from a window. Fortunately, several large willow trees lined the properties and Dani walked unseen to the back door. Removing some tools from her jacket, she worked a metal pick into the lock. With a minimal of movement, the lock opened and she pulled open the door. She looked at the back handle.

"Back door is self locking, just press the button in the center and close the door behind you. She's back in less than twenty minutes, you're out in ten. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," Jake answered and stepped into the doorway.

"Don't disturb anything! If a plate is so much out of place, she'll suspect someone was here. You understand what is at stake?"

“Yes, but if she doesn’t leave her house in the next day, Mandy’s dead anyway. I can’t wait until you get the proper warrant. I’m going in.” Jake turned his back and entered the house, closing the door behind him.

The kitchen was plain, white cabinets covered two of the walls. The sink had a few dirty dishes and overlooked the window into the backyard. A pile of old cookbooks lay in a messy pile in the corner of the counter. He looked in the refrigerator and the shelves were depressingly bare. *Doesn’t look like she cooks much.* Chinese food sat in a container; its smell told him that it was past its expiry date. The kitchen belonged to a single person who took little joy in cooking. As he looked at the refrigerator door, there were no pictures of friends or family, no lists of things to do, no artwork from important people in her life. The door was empty and probably her life was the same. He peered into the living room.

The curtains were drawn as the windows faced the street. *Probably didn’t want people out in street to see her alone watching television.* A bunch of DVDs’ sat in the corner with several old newspapers. He looked down expecting to see a number of romances, chick flick friendly titles. Instead Jake saw a number of violent horror and slasher movies, their blood and gore covers sent a shiver down his spine. He spied an address book on the table next to the phone. He searched through its contents, several fast food numbers jumped out, services such as a plumber and electrician as well as a dating agency. A pen with the name ‘Rowen’s Construction’ lay next to a note pad. He glanced at his watch, only five minutes left. He saw a flight of stairs and climbed towards the second floor.

The stairwell walls were gray and uninviting, no pictures or diplomas. Nothing to show she had any friends or was proud of any accomplishments. He considered his home might not have been much different if his wife and daughter hadn’t been there to brighten it. In reality, his home was as empty now as this one.

At the top of the stairs, there was a bathroom to the right and a bedroom to the left. He stepped inside the bedroom and saw an immaculate made bed, a dresser with an assortment of cosmetics spread across it and a paper day timer. *I can’t believe people still buy these in the age of cell phones.* Jake leafed through the pages, listing a number

of mundane tasks from laundry to banking. One item caught his eye though – a one-word reference. He scanned another month and it appeared again, second time on a Saturday. He looked further back and it appeared again during the week. *Warehouse. Was she referring to storage, a sale or did it have a more sinister meaning?* He scanned ahead; the next date wasn't for another week. Movement caught his eye.

He had been so intent on leafing through the book, he had stepped in front of one of the few windows which didn't have a blind drawn. There was an elderly woman leaving her backyard and entering her house. *I wonder if she saw me through the window?* Before he could consider it further, his cellphone beeped. The text message said, *Get out of the house. Now!*

Jake stepped quickly down the stairs and headed back to the kitchen. He pressed the self-lock button and closed the back door gently behind him. He walked slowly down the driveway and across the street. He stepped into the back of the SUV and looked into Dani's expectant eyes.

"Tell me that stunt paid off?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Jake answered honestly. "She does fit the profile of recluse, no friends, and no hobbies. House is plain, sad, she is definitely lonely."

"Doesn't mean she is susceptible to be influenced by a serial killer?" Dani offered.

"No, and in the short time I snooped around, I found nothing to prove that she's helping with the kidnapping."

"Any good news?" asked Dani

"Maybe, she refers to a warehouse that she visits once a month. Maybe be nothing, maybe be everything. But's there's no address, no maps to tell us where the warehouse is. Worse, because of her work schedule – she's not due to go there for another week."

"Boss – maybe we should bring her in. Try to force her to talk?" Mac offered. Before Dani could respond, Rico radioed in a status report.

"We're ten minutes out, she stopped at a grocery store for a few items. Nothing suspicious, she's probably staying in tonight. I'll see you shortly."

“Thanks Rico. When you get here, just drive past us. Jake may have found something, and we need to figure out how to draw her out.” Dani kept the phone line open so Rico could listen to their conversation in the SUV.

“She works tomorrow at 6am, so unless she plans to go out tonight after supper, finding Mandy not going to happen,” Mac commented while reading the work schedule for the coffee shop.

“If Jake is right, then we need to force her to see the kidnapper sooner. She may have already helped him and is not involved in the actual death,” suggested Dani.

“She’s still guilty,” Jake added.

“Of course, but if she’s not there when he commits the murder, how do we force it?” Mac asked.

“I vote for taking her to an interview room and telling her she’ll have two life sentences if she doesn’t comply,” Rico offered over the speaker phone.

“Too risky – we don’t have enough time to turn her or it could tip off the kidnapper. I’ll do it as a last resort, but we got to have some better options,” answered Dani.

“Send her home,” offered Jake. “When she goes to work tomorrow, close the coffee shop and send her home. Without work to keep her busy, she’ll be on the phone to her partner asking to join him.”

“It’s a good idea,” Mac nodded her head. “How about we shut the coffee shop down now? That way she gets the phone call – forces things to happen sooner,” Mac suggested.

“Good. Get the staff sergeant on the phone. We’ll get them to close the coffee shop and a few other businesses around it to throw off suspicion. Claim it was a gas leak and an inspector will need to take the day tomorrow to confirm everything is safe.”

“Sounds like my visit is already starting to pay off,” Jake grinned.

“Don’t get excited yet, Terri’s got to take the bait.” Dani’s cell phone rang. “Harmer.”

“Is something going on your way? We’re almost back and a police car just blew by me,” Rico asked.

“Mac. Check the police reports. Tell me what’s going on. Last thing we need is the local police to spook her.” Mac typed feverously on her tablet, accessing the local police database.

“911 call to Terri’s address. Apparently a neighbor saw someone poking around the house,” responded Mac.

“That’s my fault.” Jake replied. “I was too close to a window. I think a neighbor saw me.”

“If this blows up Jake, Tarver isn’t the only one who is going to take us apart.” Dani said and turned to Mac. “Call dispatch. Tell them to turn off the police lights. Have them visit the neighbor – explain that this is part of a police investigation. Make sure the neighbor does not contact Julie.” Mac began typing in frantically.

“Do you think you’ll stop them?” Jake asked looking over her shoulder.

“Maybe. It takes time for the proper clearances to be approved. Depends on how much time we have?” On cue, a police car came over the hill with its lights flashing.

“Please don’t stop in front of the house. Please don’t stop in front of the house.” Dani repeated hoping it would not attract the attention of the neighbors. Or worse, if the police car stopped in front of her home.

The police car lights suddenly went off as it drifted by Terri’s house. It turned the corner and disappeared out of sight.

“I just heard from the staff sergeant – the officers will talk to the neighbor and keep her away from the suspect,” Mac relayed after reading the text message.

“One disaster averted,” Dani remarked as her cell phone rang.

“We’re turning onto the street now, she’ll be coming to the driveway in thirty seconds,” Rico detailed.

“Drive on by and stay in your vehicle until she parks and goes into her house. Come join us once she’s settled. We’re going to try something to get Terri to reach out to the kidnapper,” Dani ordered.

“Roger boss. See you soon.”

A green sedan came slowly down the street. The car was older and had several dent marks on the right side. Terri turned into the driveway and stopped at the end the drive. She exited out of the driver

door carrying a canvas bag of groceries. She pulled out her keys and put them into lock of the back door. She disappeared into the house.

“I have the shopping center manager ready from his office to call Terri. Are we ready to make it?” Mac asked.

“Give me your tablet; I’m going to type in a script that I want him to read word for word,” Dani commanded. Dani typed away for an entire minute. She finished and passed the tablet back to Mac. Moments later, Mac had sent the message and the three of them looked up as Rico entered the vehicle.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“Nothing yet, sit tight. Mac – record the phone conversation. The phone tap was authorized even though we still have to wait on the search warrant. I want to hear everything she says,” stated Dani. Before Mac could respond, the phone rang as she connected it to the tablet. “Quiet everyone.” After two rings, Terri picked up her cell phone.

“Hello,” she answered.

“Ms. Powers?” a male voice replied.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Todd Reynolds from the Dayton Mall office.”

“Oh hi Todd. We’ve met before at the security office,” Terri answered.

Yes, that’s right,” the man’s voice sounded nervous. “I’m calling all of the tenants around the south entrance to confirm that this end of the mall will be closed effective immediately due to a gas leak.”

“For how long?” Terri asked, surprised by the closure.

“We’re expecting to be closed no longer than a day. It’s affecting two other businesses; can you notify your staff not to come to work tomorrow?” A moments silence as she contemplated the request.

“Yes, I can. Thanks for you call.”

“No thank you for help. The mall appreciates your patience – we will provide remuneration for the lost business.”

“Thank you Mr. Reynolds. I’ll call the owner as well.”

“Good night,” Todd replied as Julie clicked off her cellphone. In the SUV, the four of them looked at each other.

“How do you think she’ll spend her day off?” Rico asked.

“Maybe we’ll find out?” Jake pointed to the house as they saw Julie go upstairs. Seconds later, Mac’s tablet rang as Terri’s cellphone was calling another number.

“She’s calling her boss?” Rico asked. The phone picked up but instead of a person, a computerized voice responded.

“Why are you calling?” the robotic voice asked.

“My schedule has changed,” Terri replied. “I want to come up in the morning.”

“There’s no need. You have done enough,” the computer voice answered, dead of emotion.

“Please. I need to help. To learn. I promise not to stay long.” Several seconds of silence passed as the voice considered the request.

“Come in the morning. All you get is two hours.” The line disconnected and a light switched off in Terri’s house. Moments later, she was walking down the stairs heading towards the kitchen.

“We did it?” Jake exclaimed and slapped Mac on the back, almost knocking the tablet out of her hands. “She’ll lead us to Mandy.” Jake looked over to Rico and Dani. “Assuming she is still alive?”

“Fits the profile,” Rico answered. “Kidnapper would likely dispose of her before the end of tomorrow. My guess is that he will use Terri for any last-minute details.”

“What about the kidnapper’s voice?” Jake ventured.

“Likely a voice modifier, not taking any chances of voice recognition. Probably uses a disposable phone,” Dani offered.

“Doesn’t matter. Conversation wasn’t long enough to trace. We’re going to have to wait until tomorrow,” explained Mac.

“What do we do now?” Jake asked

“Get some sleep. I’ll notify Tarver and see if any of his team want to take the first shift watching Terri,” Dani answered.

“Do you think he’ll tail Terri to take credit for the lead?” Jake asked.

“I don’t care what Tarver tries. One way or another – we’re going to be there tomorrow to find Mandy!”

Chapter 11

Blown Away

Sleep Inn Motel – Dayton, Ohio

Jake's eyes stared at the ceiling. There was no such thing as a good night's sleep anymore. His feelings of loss always pursued him in his dreams; it took all of his will power to prevent from being overtaken. He looked over at the nightstand; the clock read 6:20am. He got up out of bed and walked over to the bathroom. Jake gazed into the mirror and for a moment, didn't recognize the face that stared back. He looked old, the lines in my face framed his pain. It was a lot of effort to get out of bed, fortunately the current case kept him going. A knock on the door shifted his focus.

He looked through the eyehole and saw Dani standing there. She was showered and looked ready for the challenge of the day. Jake opened the door.

"You got ten minutes. Surveillance shows Terri is up and having breakfast. She could be ready to leave at any time. Meet me out front." He was silent and Dani sensed his unease. She came in the room and closed the door. "Listen Jake. Just because you can't lead us to the kidnapper, you were a big help at the house. I need you to understand that you're still an important part of this team."

"I know but I'm worried that we're too late. I know it's out of my control, but I can't help myself. Having lost my own daughter, I can't control my anxiety," he shrugged his shoulders.

"Stop making these cases personal, you can't carry around this much pain all the time." She paced around the room, wanting to get going.

"Dani – after I lost my family, I wished I was dead. I do whatever I can to help save these missing people, I know it's what my family would have wanted." Jake sat on his bed and took a deep breath.

"Jake, we have to get going." Dani placed her hand on his shoulder. "You weren't responsible for your family's disappearance. Bad things happen to good people. After working as many missing person's cases, I know better than most. Your only crime was working too hard and not spending enough time with your family." She grabbed

him by the arm. "Take a shower. We're going to save a life today and I need your help."

Moments later, she closed his motel room door and the room became quiet. Jake went back to the bathroom and turned on the shower. The hot water quickly started to steam up the mirror. Before it had fogged up, Jake looked at himself. "We going to find you today Mandy. Just hold on a bit longer."

Twenty minutes later, Rico drove their SUV past Terri's house and around the corner. They passed Hastings and De Nano waiting patiently in a black minivan for the suspect to leave. Ten seconds after they parked, Dani's cellphone rang.

"Harmer," she responded.

"Let's be clear. I am in charge of this investigation and your car will follow ours." Tarver's voice bellowed from the phone.

"Can we move beyond the male posturing and get working on the case? Remember you wouldn't be here, if my team hadn't followed up the lead," Dani answered back.

"And I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Jake's screw-ups. Follow my orders and you can be there when I catch the kidnapper." The line went dead.

"Asshole!" She threw her phone into her bag. "His ego is as big as a house."

"How do we know that he's not going to lose Terri before she meets the kidnapper?" I asked.

"We have a GPS tracker on the suspect's car," Mac explained.

"But Tarver has those coordinates, what if tries to lose us?" Jake asked concerned.

"Standard procedure is to have a second GPS tracker placed far from the first as a backup to follow," replied Mac smirking, "although I may have forgotten to tell Tarver about the backup."

"Sounds smart to me. You never know when technology is going to fail," Rico said.

"That's what I'll put in the report," said Dani.

"She's moving," Mac exclaimed, magnifying a map of the city on her laptop.

Just keep us close, Jake thought.

“Suspect has exited off the I-75 interstate and is proceeding south to an industrial park,” reported Hastings in the command car. Mac relayed this information through her tablet to the others.

“About time, we’ve been on the road for over thirty minutes,” Rico added as he slowed down for the next off-ramp.”

“Kidnapper is not going to put himself at risk in a suburban area. With all the manufacturing jobs that have been lost in this part of the country, the number of abandoned warehouses and buildings around here would be an ideal location,” Dani commented.

Jake looked around the industrial area, he saw the decay of forgotten warehouses gone bankrupt or companies moved overseas for cheaper labor. Turning into an industrial park, they passed a large vacant warehouse, its windows broken and the parking lot cracked. Weeds overtook the asphalt and peeked out in several places. A machine shop sat empty, rusted materials laid around its exterior.

“This area is depressing,” Jake said. “Like a victim that was forgotten.”

“This part of America has been hit the hardest Jake. The type of industries that used to be America’s bread and butter can be done ten cents on the dollar overseas. In the search for cheap products, we have engineered our own decline,” preached Rico.

“Boss! Suspect’s car has stopped in front of a warehouse ahead. Tarver is advising us to park to the side and stay to the back. His team will follow her through the front. He is advising us to await his signal before we make a move,” Mac relayed.

“If he has his way, we’ll be on cleanup,” said Rico.

“If that’s our job, so be it. Let’s focus on saving the little girl,” commanded Dani as the SUV stopped.

Jake surveyed the building, it looked no different than the other warehouses, yet something seemed strange.

“Check out the top of the walls on the warehouse. All the windows are covered and boarded up with recent materials. The skylight looks newly furnished; someone has been maintaining this building,” Dani said, confirming Jake’s feeling.

Moments later, Tarver’s team was converging on the warehouse. Dani’s tapped her phone on. “Tarver. Don’t move yet, we

haven't even secured the building to check for surveillance or alarms. My team isn't in position yet," Dani yelled into her phone.

"Doesn't matter, we're striking now while the kidnapper is distracted by the woman," Tarver answered. "Get to the back of the warehouse now!"

"Rico, take Jake to the front and follow behind Tarver's group," said Dani as she got out of the vehicle. "Make sure they don't take any shortcuts in procedure. Mac and I will take the back." Dani turned to Jake. "Stay behind Rico, we have no idea what were up against."

"We're going in awfully fast," Jake answered.

"This is Tarver's operation. Let's hope he doesn't get anyone killed," Dani answered as Mac followed her to the back of the warehouse.

"Come on Jake," Rico instructed as they circled behind the other warehouses. In less than a minute, they could see Tarver's team about two hundred feet away. Jake headed towards Tarver's group when Rico put his arm in front of him.

"This way Jake. I don't want to take any chances on surveillance cameras." Rico pointed to the corner of the building. As Jake stepped behind Rico, he saw Hastings examining the front door while De Nano and Tarver were a short distance behind him. Jake looked upwards towards the blackened plastic windows at the top of warehouse. A flash of red caught his eye and he thought he was mistaken. He looked at the same area and the flash appeared again. The realization was instantaneous. He grabbed Rico's arm.

"I saw a surveillance camera. Tarver's team has already been discovered!" Rico pulled out his phone while Jake yelled and waved his arms to get the other team's attention. He was ignored as Hastings pried the lock open. Pulling the door to the side was the last act of his life.

The first explosion blew Hastings body straight up into the air. When he came down, there were too many pieces to count. He wouldn't be making anymore sarcastic remarks.

Tarver was yelling something at Jake, but his ears were ringing too much to understand. Jake shook his head and that infuriated Tarver more. Tarver started to walk over when the second explosion hit. Jake

fell off balance to the ground. Several moments later, he spat out dirt from his lips. A hand reached down and pulled him to his feet.

“What the hell happened?” Jake asked.

“Booby-trap. The whole place must be set up for unwanted visitors. We’re lucky that Hasting broke protocol and opened the door before examining it. Otherwise if we had been closer, someone could be picking up our body parts as well,” replied Rico.

“What about Dani and Mac?” Jake asked while searching the area. He couldn’t see the back of the warehouse from their vantage point.

“They were taking the back – the second explosion came from their direction.”

Jake’s heart leapt into his mouth. They ran to the back of the warehouse ignoring Tarver's yelling to stop. Turning the corner, Jake saw a burned out door which had slammed open from the blast. Debris from the warehouse had showered the area. Dani and Mac lay on the ground.

“Dani!” Jake rushed to her prone position. As Jake leaned close, Dani was breathing but covered by dust. Jake shook her shoulders. “Are you okay?” Dani looked up groggily.

“I can’t hear you,” she answered a bit too loudly and tilted her head to the side. “Thank God, Mac pulled us back after the first explosion or we might have been seriously hurt.” She turned her head to look behind them. “Mac?”

“She’s unconscious but breathing. I don’t see any external injuries,” answered Rico. Jake turned towards the burnt door and spied movement from within the warehouse. Mandy filled his thoughts and he instinctively moved towards the door.

“Wait Jake! Tarver’s team will secure the building. You don’t know if you will set off anymore traps,” Rico yelled while cradling Mac’s head. Jake ignored the warning; now that the killer knew they were there, any more delays would jeopardize Mandy’s life. Jake rushed the back doorway, the smell of smoke thick in the air. Visibility was limited and he had difficulty seeing through the warehouse maze. Jake looked up and spied a video camera looking down towards the inside entrance. *If the explosion didn’t tell him we were here, the camera would.*

The entrance area opened into a series of offices; a small window framed in each room. They were unused with dusty desks and old file cabinets littering their interiors. As Jake passed one office, he stopped and looked at a bank of video cameras. He saw himself in one of the monitors. In another view, Rico was propping Mac's head off the ground. In a third, Tarver was screaming commands while talking on his cell phone.

But Jake didn't see what he was looking for – a scared little girl. *Tell me you're still alive Mandy.* Something metal dropped outside the office door. He turned towards the noise.

Jake stepped out of the office and looked over the main area. A ray of light shone down from the ceiling window onto the workbench below. Dust from the explosion hung in the air and tools were knocked haphazardly around the room. A metal chain hung from a beam and he walked to one of benches. A small set of engraving tools laid open on a plastic case. Next to it laid pieces of cherry wood, probably left over from the coffins. *Did he already engrave Mandy's name?* A cold gun barrel to the back of his head, interrupted his thoughts.

"I should have killed you earlier, you've ruined everything," a female voice threatened and then she hesitated. "Do you know where he is?" Jake realized that any answer could be met with a bullet to his brain. He had to be honest but get her on the defensive to buy time.

"No. Where is Mandy?" he asked guessing at identify of his attacker.

"You wouldn't understand – it's beyond you." Terri's voice sounded twisted and angry; Jake wondered how she could hide it in her work life.

"Why don't you try me? I've got nothing better to do right now." The gun barrel felt like it was going to drill a hole in his head.

"Don't play games with me – you're only delaying the inevitable. No one can help you." Yet she hadn't pulled the trigger, Jake felt she had something to say to him.

"It's a waste to kill me before giving me a chance to listen. What have you got to lose?" he said with more confidence than he felt. There was a moment of silence and then the pistol at the back of his head disappeared.

“Turn around. I want to be able to see your eyes.” Jake turned, the woman that he met briefly at the coffee shop had transformed. Her hair was tangled; her eyes puffy, the lines on her face were full of anger.

“Where is she?” Jake asked although he had no power to demand an answer.

“She’s always been safe. She’s in a better place than you and I will ever know,” her cryptic answer did not reassure him.

“Why? Why do you help him take children?” Jake received a blank stare; her face registered no empathy.

“Trying to understand or categorize me? Think I was abused as a child? Bullied as teenager? Ignored as an adult? How about all of the above,” Terri said feeling justified by her actions.

“Why do you help him?”

“He needs me, the first person who actually wants my help. Do you know what it is like to go through life, accomplishing nothing worthwhile? You always have this sense of being busy, yet you never do anything important in your life.” Terri looked deep into Jake’s eyes, waiting for a response.

“You’d be surprised, I can appreciate what you are feeling,” as he remembered the mistakes he had made with his family.

“Don’t,” Terri answered, her hand shaking the gun at his face. “Don’t pretend to understand me. It’s insulting.”

“What do you want from me?” Jake yelled, forgetting the gun barrel trained at his forehead. “Is this the part where you tell me how tragic your life has been? How you are justified to murder a young girl? I can’t listen to your garbage any longer. You think you’re the only one who has every suffered in life? Please – pull the trigger.”

“If you insist,” Terri smirked, and the gunshot reverberated throughout the warehouse. Jake felt lightheaded, touched his chest and fell. The floor felt cold to his face with dusty wood shavings rubbing up against his cheek. There was no pain and he felt strangely at peace. A hand grabbed my shoulder and he prepared himself for the kill shot.

“Jake– get up. You’re all right,” said Rico. Dazed, Jake looked around for Terri. Her arm was bloody from a gunshot wound as De Nano was applying pressure with a bandage. Her hands were cuffed, and her gun was kicked away; lying under one of the work benches.

“Where’s Mandy?” Jake yelled. He was angry for allowing himself to be fooled.

“One life at a time. We saw you first and shot Terri. De Nano’s got her, let’s search the rest of the warehouse, but stay behind me,” Rico pointed to another row of offices in the far corner.

Jake stepped forward and saw from the corner of his eye, pure hatred from the Terri’s face as De Nano pulled her away.

The two of them walked down a narrow hallway similar to the back entrance. The wall to the right faced the parking lot and a twisted blackened door was at the end of the hall. *The first explosion that had killed Hastings*. The wall to the left faced a number of offices but these has no windows and all the doors were shut. There were three choices for Jake and Rico. Without the ability to look in, Mandy could be locked in any room or there could be further explosive devices. Both Jake and Rico looked at each other.

“I guess just opening the door is out of the question?” Jake asked.

“Not necessarily,” Rico pulled out a metal tube with flexible ends and a camera at one end. Rico examined the exterior of the first of three doors by slipping the tube under the door frame. The camera pointed up to examine the contents of the room.

“Clear.” Rico said after several seconds of examination. He checked the door, turned the handle and swung the door open. The light was dim, but the contents were illuminated from the sun in the hallway. Several shelves stood along the wall, boxes of nails and screws littered the shelves. Toolboxes with socket and screw sets sat neatly on one table. Several bags of concrete mix lay stacked in the far corner. “Nothing here, let’s check the next room,” Rico responded.

Rico repeated the exercise with the camera. This time, the interior of the room was too murky to see inside the room. Rico clicked a button that turned on a small pen light that illuminated the gloom.

“Clear.” Rico turned the door handle. The room was bare except a small cot with a dirty pillow. An environmental toilet sat in the opposite corner with a soap canister to clean hands. A small table with a single chair had a plate with orange peelings on it. Several fruit flies buzzed in the air. A stuffed bunny toy sat on the bed, its sightless eyes surveying the two men.

“Damn it Rico! She was here. Mandy was in this room!”

“And she still could be here in this building. Let’s check the last room,” Rico replied and stepped back into the hallway.

Rico again turned on the camera light and examined the interior of the third room. He took extra time to sweep it because the room was darker than the previous one.

“Clear.” Rico turned the handle and opened the door. He flicked a light switch which illuminated a storeroom, shelves of can goods and dried food. Bottles of water, sacks of flour, salt and tons of other ingredients lay stacked on the floor. A survivalist dream. Yet no Mandy and no kidnapper. They seemed to have vanished like they were never there. Jake kicked a flour sack in frustration.

“Where are they Rico? Where did they go?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “But don’t give up,” walking back into the hall. “We’ll get the rest of the team and rip this place up stem to stern. He will have left something behind. We’ll find her.” Rico reassured but Jake wasn’t buying it. He grabbed Rico’s shoulder as they passed the first room.

“No. He’s on deadline. If we don’t find her now, it’s too late for her!” A flash of color appeared at his peripheral vision.

“Jake, I’m open to any suggestions. We’ve checked all of the rooms. Where do you want to look?” Again, a glow of pink distracted him.

“Rico, why didn’t you need the light from your camera in the first room?”

“I’m not sure. The room didn’t seem as dark as the others.” Rico thought about this for a second. “That doesn’t make sense since the rooms are all windowless. Let’s take another look.” They stepped into the first room again. Jake’s vision seemed to playing tricks on him. Although the time limit had passed for him to follow Mandy’s trail – a pink haze glowed from the corner of the room. *Was she here recently?*

Jake walked over to the bag of concrete and examined a dirty rug beneath it. The dust around looked like it was dragged. He felt under the rug and touched a groove.

“Rico – come over here. I need your help.” The two of them moved the carpet and found a handle in the floor. Rico pulled the

handle upward and the floor opened, revealing stairs underneath. A faint glow meant that there was light from the room below.

“Stay behind me Jake. There’s no telling what other surprises are ahead.” Jake followed, the ceiling was low, but the floor had a concrete base. Ahead of them, a light bulb hung down with a small metal chain. The walls were smooth and cool to the touch. Jake looked down at a trail of wood chips, they were like breadcrumbs leading them deeper underground. “I think this tunnel leads to another warehouse,” said Rico. Jake was about to agree when he turned the corner and saw her.

Mandy lay strapped to a table, her face drained of color and her body motionless. A knapsack hung in adjacent chair with several articles of clothes. Rico’s arm pressed against Jake’s chest preventing him from moving forward. Rico looked carefully, examining for tripwires or other devices that might set off another explosion. Jake fought the urge to run to Mandy. Rico nodded at him.

“Seems clear,” he said. Jake ran to Mandy and felt for a pulse.

“She’s breathing,” Jake yelled and unstrapped her from the table. Rico helped him but Mandy didn’t wake up after they untied her. *Is she drugged or unconscious?* Jake thought.

“I’ll be right back,” Rico said as he continued further down the hall. His footsteps faded in the distance.

Jake picked Mandy up in his arms. Her body felt so thin and tiny in his arms. He imagined carrying his own daughter when she had fallen asleep on the couch. She was always so tired that even the bouncing on the stairs failed to wake her up before Jake placed her in bed.

A metal sound echoed through the basement interrupting his thoughts. Jake carried Mandy and headed to the source. He rounded the corner and a large iron door swung open to reveal sunlight. Jake stepped over the lip making sure Mandy’s legs didn’t hit the wall. As he walked outside onto a dusty roadway, he bumped into Rico.

“Relax, our kidnapper’s gone. It looks like a small truck was parked in adjoining warehouse. Tarver’s team didn’t check out the surrounding area well enough before we charged in. He must have escaped during the confusion with the explosions.”

“And he left his partner to face the police,” as Jake eased Mandy gently onto the ground.

“Does that surprise you?” Rico replied. They were interrupted by Tarver who stomped over from the front entrance.

“Is she alive?” he asked with concern.

“Yes, but call medical attention. She’s still unconscious.”

“As soon as I call headquarters to let them now we’re found the girl,” Tarver started to dial on his cell phone.

“Tarver! You can claim credit later – this girl needs help first!”

“Never mind Jake. I’m calling 911,” Rico dialed his phone.

“We’ll have help in no time.”

Jake took off his jacket to cover Mandy’s body for warmth. Her face was serene and her breathing was slow and measured. Jake wanted to be there when she was reunited with her family. Rico finished his call and turned to Jake.

“Help is on the way.”

“I wish we had caught him Rico. Now he is free to capture another kid.”

“Not your concern Jake. And now we have witnesses who can describe him. Trust me; he’s going to be caught. You did your part.”

Jake smiled. He did help, even without his ability.

“Jake! Rico!” A female voice yelled. They turned to the back of the warehouse. A weakened Mac was hobbling towards them. Rico ran over and propped her up on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong? Rico asked as he lowered her next to Mandy.

“He got her!” She replied although from her dazed expression, she wasn’t fully coherent.

“Who got who?” Rico asked.

“The kidnapper, the Coffin killer! After you guys went into the warehouse, the two of us were catching our breath from being knocked back by the explosion. I must have been dazed because I saw someone moving behind me but thought it was Dani. He kicked me in the head, and I heard Dani yell. By the time I got up, they were gone.”

“Did you get a look at him?” Rico asked.

“Not really, just from the side. I can describe his height and clothes.” Mac turned her head towards Jake. “You have to help. He’ll

Jim Kochanoff

retaliate against Dani for losing Mandy. We need your ability. You have to track her!”

Chapter 12

The Helper

Portland, Oregon – 16 Months ago

Jake sat on the concrete curb watching the ambulance come closer in the distance. Danielle covered the driver with a blanket to keep her warm. Officer Vernon brought a first aid kit to Danielle and she had applied bandages to the driver's head to stop the bleeding. The ambulance stopped at the curb and a paramedic jumped out carrying a kit of emergency care supplies. He kneeled next to the driver and looked at Danielle.

“What's her status?” he asked.

“The driver hit her car and the door bumped her to the ground. Her head came down on the concrete curb. She's been coming in and out of consciousness.” The paramedic looked at the back of head but did not remove the bandages to let the wound clot. He yelled over to the ambulance.

“Tony! Bring the spine board. Possible damage to her spinal column.” He looked down to the driver and to engage her. “Miss, my name is Andy. I'm a paramedic and I'm trying to help you.” She murmured something that sounded like yes. “Good. I'm going to ask you a number of questions and I only want you to respond yes or no – don't trying to nod your head. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” the driver responded weakly.

“What's your name?”

“Jennifer.”

“Where is your pain?”

“My head. It feels like I've been whacked with a hammer,” she complained.

“I'm taking off your shoe. Can you feel this?” He placed a pen on the sole of her foot.”

“I think so. Yes.”

“Wiggle your toes.” He looked and saw no movement. “Try again,” he requested.

“I'm trying,” She struggled as her toes began to move. Danielle intervened by waving her credentials at the paramedic.

“Can I ask her a few questions? It’s for a criminal investigation,” she pleaded.

“Agent, my only concern is this woman’s health. She has a head trauma, likely a concussion and maybe other internal injuries. Can this wait until she stabilized at the hospital?” Jake was standing behind Danielle and responded first.

“This woman has seen my missing wife and daughter. I can’t wait for her to stabilize – we need to talk to her now.” The paramedic looked at the driver who seemed to be staring off into space.

“You’ve got a minute,” he answered to Jake. “I have to get the spinal board which we’ll place under and strap her down. Once it’s done, we’re out of here whether you get your answers or not. Understood?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Danielle answered on Jake’s behalf. The paramedic went to the back of his ambulance to assist his partner. Danielle and Jake moved closer to the driver. They looked down on her frightened face. She was unhealthy thin, and her clothes were ripped and dirty. Danielle had seen the same look before with heavy drug users.

“I’m sorry you’re hurt. We just have a few questions,” Danielle began.

“I can’t go to jail again,” the driver cried. Jake could see the fear in her face. She wasn’t scared of them personally but terrified of law enforcement.

“If you didn’t do anything wrong, you’ll be fine,” Danielle answered. She held up a photo of Jake’s wife and daughter. “Have you seen either one of these people?” she pointed. The driver couldn’t seem to focus on the picture.

“I knew helping Jimmy was wrong. But he was so angry and I just needed enough to get by.” The paramedics came over and began easing her onto the board.

“Hold tight Jennifer, we’ve going to take care of you,” the first paramedic explained and covered her with a plastic sheet to keep her warm.

“Jennifer – look closely at this photo!” Danielle demanded. “This is life and death. We don’t care about your drug abuse; we’re just trying to find these people.” Jennifer seemed shaken out her daze for a

second and looked again at the photo. Her eyes flashed with acknowledgement.

“I’ve seen the little girl, not the woman. Jimmy brought her over yesterday to pick up a package. Kid seemed quiet.” Jake gasped as his heart rose and sank so quickly.

“You saw her? Was she okay?” Jake yelled almost grabbing her shoulders. The paramedic waved him back.

“Step back buddy! Any movements like that can hurt. We have to go!” They lifted her up and carried her towards the back of the ambulance.

“Wait! This is my family. Please Jennifer; tell me where they went after they left your apartment?” Jake pleaded as they placed her inside the ambulance. She looked up and she must have seen the pain in his eyes.

“I don’t know. Jimmy never told me,” she moaned.

“What’s his last name?” Danielle asked as the paramedics closed the right door.

“Weems. Jimmy Weems,” she answered as the doors shut.

“Anymore questions – you’ll need to come down to Queen’s General. We’re going,” the paramedic replied as he jumped into the cab of the ambulance. Seconds later, the sirens blared as it turned and travelled towards the interstate. Jake looked over to Dani in desperation.

“Can you search for this guy? Can you find Jimmy Weems?”

“No promises Jake, but I have the full resources of the bureau behind me. If he’s in our system, we’ll find him.”

“Thank you,” Jake felt some relief that they were making progress

“Do me a favor, almost no one calls me Danielle. Can me Dani. I don’t what’s going on, but your tracking is showing positive results. Now it’s time to bring in some assistance.”

Jim Kochanoff

**Portland Oregon – 16 Months ago Bureau Office 1111 SW
2nd Ave**

Twelve hours had passed since the truck accident and Jake felt more tired than ever. He shifted his gaze to a computer screen and

listened to his new companion's voice.

"Jimmy Weems aka James Wieksky. Professional con man, flies under the radar. Several charges but no indictments. Possible involvement in three fraud cases in two west coast states," Mac dictated while tapping on her laptop. She wasn't what he expected when Dani described her expertise. She was very tall and didn't match your typical tech nerd. Her confidence in using the latest technology certainly made her valuable to the team though. Although she didn't say it, she seemed uncomfortable with Dani's description of Jake's abilities. *It didn't matter if she believed, Jake thought, only if she could help find my family.*

The door opened to the office and Dani Harmer came in with a thick file that she dropped on the desk. She had spent the last hour reviewing the couriered evidence on Weems.

"You know boss," Mac said looking at Dani's loose papers, "Those files are scanned to the system. I can probably find most of that information online."

"I appreciate the offer Mac – but I'm bit more old school. I like tactile evidence, to see the documents firsthand. You can learn the investigators work ethic or documentation techniques that you don't always see from a scanned page. And sure enough, I spotted something."

"What?" Jake said, glancing at Dani with interest.

"Take a look," as she spread out several worn sheets with dirty fingerprints and food stains.

"The only thing I can see is the reporting officers were pigs," said Mac.

"Besides that – these files were important because they were referred to the most. Weems has a pattern – he is slippery enough to get away before he can be caught."

"Good instincts?" Mac asked, "Or does he have assistance?"

“One time lucky, three or four times are beyond a coincidence. Weems had help. The trick is how to find how he was tipped off.”

“So how does that relate to the paper files?” Jake questioned.

“If you look closely, these documents were the most worn and accessed the most.” Dani laid out the sheets in front of them. They studied them closely but after a minute Jake gave up.

“Besides the consistent ketchup stains, I’m not seeing what’s important about these particular files.”

“I’m with Jake, boss. Pull the trigger,” Mac replied.

“It’s not the files that are important, it’s who has been reading specific ones. Check the access log, a case file reports every time someone logs into a file, places a case note or checks out the paper file. It’s important because cases can get reassigned or other officers may fill in for someone on vacation. The computer log shows who checked into the file and when they did it. On four of the cases, the same person logged into the file several times yet wasn’t an officer assigned to the case.

“Jonathan Tyson, an intake clerk in Seattle,” Mac scanned several logs. Each time he was in the file for no more than a couple of minutes. Not much time to input any information but enough time to review a file to see how a case was progressing.”

“Think he’s related to Weems?” Jake wondered.

“Relative, a drinking buddy, owes Weems. Who knows? But he’s definitely our link to Weems and possibly your family, Jake.”

“What’s next?”

“We research Tyson, history, phone records. I want something to make him sweat. Then, we go to him.”

Chapter 13

Scent of the Missing

Dayton, Ohio Police Station 1791 Harshman Road

Tarver looked down at the group before him. Mandy had been saved, they should be celebrating yet the mood was sombre, Hasting was dead, Dani was taken, and the rest were rattled from the explosions. Everyone was waiting for Tarver to determine their next step. He directed his comments at Jake.

“Why should we involve you Jake? Mandy is fine and reunited with her family. You should be on a plane for home.”

“That’s idiotic!” yelled Rico, standing up from his chair. “Jake’s our best chance to find Dani. Sending him away would sabotage our search. Unless that’s what you want,” Rico eyes narrowed as he let his comment sink in.

“Nobody wants anything to happen to Dani,” De Nano intervened. “We need to act quickly. He won’t keep her alive for long.”

“She’s a fighter. If anyone can buy us more time, she can,” Mac defended.

“Why put her life in the hands of a civilian?” asked Weight.

“If you have such a big list of leads, why don’t you get out there and follow them?” Rico jabbed his finger at him.

“Enough!” Tarver interrupted, exercising his authority. “I’m in charge here. And I’ll decide if Jake is needed any longer.”

“Then decide. Dani doesn’t have all day,” Jake answered. Tarver looked him in the eyes.

“I don’t waste time and resources on someone I don’t understand. Why don’t you explain exactly what it you offer? Explain this ‘talent’ of yours.”

“This is ridiculous!” Rico knocked over his chair and paced the room. “As we’re talking, Dani could be tortured. Go read the past case reports on Jake’s cases!”

“I want to understand what I am dealing with face to face.” Tarver was unfazed by Rico’s outburst. Although his request frustrated Jake, he had to play by Tarver’s rules if he wanted to stay in the search. Jake motioned to Mac to bring her tablet and stood up to address the room.

“As you are already aware, I am able to track missing people but only within a specific time frame,” he started.

“Convenient,” Tarver grunted.

“This only works if you actually listen. Asking me to describe my abilities and then heckling me won’t help Dani.” Tarver looked as if he had a comment and then reconsidered. He spun his hand in a circle to motion Jake to continue.

“In order for me to follow a missing person, I must form an emotional connection with them. The best way is to meet the people that loved them or be somewhere they spent a lot of time.”

“What a load of crap,” Weight replied. “Tarver, I can’t believe you’re wasting our time with this.”

“Shut up!” Jake yelled with such force that Weight was speechless. “I’m providing the background on how I track missing persons. I don’t care what your opinion is – the missing persons I have found are all the results that matter. And the FBI can’t find Dani without my help!” Rico smiled at the look of shock on Weight’s face. Jake pressed on. “As we discovered by tracking Mandy, sometimes an item that is treasured by the missing person, can direct my pursuit. By following her stuffed animal, I was tracking in another direction and it threw me off the main trail.”

“Similar to how a dog can be thrown off a scent?” De Nano asked with genuine interest.

“Actually, that’s a really good point,” Mac interjected while spinning her tablet around. “Jake’s ability to track people is similar with dogs tracking people. When we analyzed Jake’s ability, we studied canine tracking ability as our best comparison. Here is some information that we logged.” Jake sat down to allow Mac to elaborate.

“All humans, alive or dead, constantly emit microscopic particles bearing human scent. Millions of these are airborne and are carried by the wind for considerable distances. Dogs and other animals can smell these particles or ‘scents.’ But dogs are the most trainable to follow these particles and they can be divided into several categories.

The first is the air scent dog which is the most frequently encountered and finds people by picking up traces of their human scent that are drifting in the air. This dog will not normally discriminate scents, so there is the possibility of a “false alarm” if other people like

searchers are nearby. Air scent dogs work best in situations such as large parks or private lands that are closed at the time, since the dog will hone in on any human scent. The success of an air scent dog will be affected by wind conditions, air temperature, time of day, terrain, and presence of contamination like auto exhaust and smoke.” Mac clicked through several images on the tablet to illustrate.

“So, are you telling me that Jake is tracking scents through the wind? Do you know how impossible that sounds?” Weight commented.

“We’re trying to explain Jake’s ability in layman’s terms.” Rico replied. “We don’t know what Jake is tracking. It could be particles in the wind; it could be smell, or something else that leaves the path of the person behind. Please listen to our full explanation and then make your own assumptions. Mac?”

“Thanks. The second category involves a trailing dog which is directed to find a specific person by following minute particles of human tissue or skin cells cast off by the person. These heavier-than-air particles, which contain this person's scent, will normally be close to the ground or on nearby foliage, so the trailing dog will frequently have its ‘nose the ground,’ unlike the air scent dog. Field contamination or the scent of others should not affect his work. He should be able to trail scents on pavements, streets, grass, and water. If there is a good scent article and a point where the person was last seen, a trailing dog can be the fastest way to find the victim. Without these two things, these dogs cannot follow a scent effectively.

“What about the ability to lose a dog by running through water?” De Nano asked. Weight made a face at his apparent interest.

“It’s a bit a misnomer,” Rico added to the description. “There are water search dogs which are trained to detect human scent in or under the water, focusing on the bodily gases that rise up. Because of currents, it can be hard to pinpoint the location of a body. The best search hound can follow a trail across running water, even when it is several days old. A dog’s sense of smell is a million times more sensitive than a humans.”

“What does throw a dog off?” De Nano asked.

“Perfume, deodorant, cigarette smoke, and other odors that linger on skin and clothing all combine to make up a person's individual smell. Changing that composite smell ‘picture’, using a new

perfume or none at all, can confuse a dog and dull his ability to recognize a scent. Heat can cause the rapid evaporation of a scent while heavy rain can wash it away. The terrain can make it difficult; rocks and dry ground do not retain scents while sand and snow can cover the track and make it nearly impossible to follow. But what people fail to realize, is that humans leave a proverbial trail of bed crumbs for dogs to follow,” Mac explained and pointed to Rico.

“Your shirt sleeves act like funnels, throwing out thousands of dead skins cells with every step. Run and you become like a saltshaker, putting more dead cells on the ground. These cells are attacked by bacteria and as they decompose as they are eaten, they give off the odor the dog can sniff,” added Rico. His explanation was interrupted by Tarver.

“Fascinating,” Tarver mocked by clapping his hands, “but can we get to the point to how this relates to Jake’s ability.” Both Rico and Mac looked at each other to see who wanted to continue.

“A dog following a scent is the best analogy to describe Jake’s ability,” continued Rico. “His tracking is not by scent but by sight. He sees a trail of smoke varying in hue that traces the victim’s last movements. This trail is created whether the victim walks or is transported by car.”

“What about by air?” De Nano asked.

“Haven’t tried yet,” Rico responded.

“And why does this supposed smoke trail dissipate in 24 hours? Seems fairly convenient for Jake to claim he can’t follow it anymore,” questioned Weight.

“We don’t know why 24 hours seems to be the time limit. But just like a dog can lose a person’s scent, we have to assume the same that Jake’s ability to track also fades over time,” added Mac.

“Can you describe the victim’s trail, Jake? The case reports provide few details,” De Nano asked. Jake realized his question was sincere and tried his best to give a visual answer.

“If you have every looked into the sky and seen a plane overhead, imagine the plume of smoke that trails the plane. The trail I see is similar; it usually flows several feet off the ground usually higher when tracking adults. It is rarely pure white, I’ve seen most colors but

usually it tends to be red, pinks and purples. Often several colors will swirl together to form the trail.”

“Does the trail ever stop and then start again somewhere else?”

“Not that I have noticed. It will get lighter and harder to follow with time; the trail goes through walls and doors following a person’s movements. It tends to get thicker when the victim is in the same spot for an extended amount of time and gets thinner when the victim is moving fast.” Jake looked into De Nano’s face. “I’m only able to follow a trail with someone I have an emotional link with. For my daughter and wife, the grief was my connection. With all other victims, I need to speak to the family and feel their grief by listening to their description of the missing person. When I make the connection, I can see the trail.”

“What about these headaches you get after the case?”

“Migraines actually. It feels like hundreds of shards of glass are trying to enter my brain. Usually occurs a day or two after a case is done and knocks me out for at awhile. I need darkness and quiet, I haven’t figured out why it happens, just that it is a side effect of using the ability. I guess nothing in life is free.”

“How is your success rate?” De Nano asked.

“Jake’s been on 14 cases over the last thirteen months,” Mac answered. He’s been successful in ten, finding seven children and three adults. In three cases, the trail was too old to follow, or he couldn’t establish a connection.”

“Aren’t you leaving one out?” Weight inquired, knowing the answer.

“Now isn’t the time to discuss Jake’s family,” Rico shot back.

“Well, when is it?” Tarver jumped in. “And you’ve forgotten to add the bureau’s investigation into Jake’s ability. The fact that no scientific evidence could be proved that it exists. It’s possible that he was involved with the missing victims in the first place and knew where to take the bureau. He’s created the cases to begin with!”

“How can anyone take you seriously? Even with your conspiracy theory, Jake would have to orchestrate disappearances across the country. Anyway, the bureau exonerated him on all cases. Unless you believe that Jake has created a network of kidnappings across the country to secure a wage less than yours,” Mac defended.

“Money?” Tarver pointing at me, “he does it for the fame, to make up for driving his own family away.” Tarver turned as his face was inches from Jake’s.

Jake stepped back and unclenched his fists. “We’re done. I’ve given the description you asked for you, even though you could have read it in the reports. I can help find Dani. I thought you liked her. Are you so caught up to attack my reputation that you’ll let her die?” All eyes turned to Tarver to hear his answer. His smirk disappeared and his face was flushed with angry.

“I don’t believe you can track people Jake. I don’t care you were exonerated by the bureau. You act like a victim but deep down I think you are doing this for attention and if I ever find out how you are doing it . . .”

“Enough threats! Are you going to let me track Dani or not?” Jake warned.

“Yes,” Tarver’s smile had returned. “Nothing would please me more to expose you as a fraud. I’m making you responsible if she dies.”

“Face it Jake, Tarver is going to take all of the credit and none of the blame,” Rico said to the group. Tarver growled in response but said nothing to disagree. Rico turned to Jake. “How do we get started, do you need to examine Dani’s belongings?”

“I’ve tried – I’m not having any success. I want to try a different approach if Tarver will support me.”

“I’m listening,” Tarver answered.

“Take me to the integration room. I need to talk to someone who knows Dani’s kidnapper. I want to speak to the coffee house manager, Terri Powers.”

Interview Room 3 – Dayton, Ohio Police Station

Her head was down and although her body looked defeated, she had given the police very little information. Tired and angry, Terri refused to give them any leads. As Jake looked through the one-way glass, he knew time was running out. Without something to go on, Dani was as good as dead. A police officer stepped over to Tarver.

“If you want your expert to go in, you have thirty minutes before the chief is going to try another pass at her,” the officer asked.

“He’s no expert,” Tarver laughed, “just a desperate man trying to prove he’s not a fake.” The officer looked perplexed while Tarver dismissed the question before it could be asked. “Let him in, he is under my authority. Just don’t expect any results.” Tarver motioned to Jake to enter the room. He knew his time was limited and he had to make every minute count. As Jake walked by Tarver, a hand grabbed him.

“If I don’t like what I see, I’m pulling you out. Understand?” Tarver’s eyes drove his point home.

“Just give me a chance. You want me to fail but if you wreck this interview, then you are just as guilty as the kidnapper.” Jake didn’t wait for Tarver to respond. Truthfully, he would rather spend time with a murderer than spend another moment with Tarver.

Jake stepped into the interrogation room. The walls were an ugly grey with water damage on a couple of ceiling tiles. Terri sat in a hard-plastic chair; her arm was wrapped with bandages. De Nano had told him that the bullet had gone through her arm, so no surgery was required. The bandage was clean and there was no sign of blood. Terri looked up with a sense of recognition crossing her eyes.

“You’re the guy at the warehouse. I almost killed you,” she said with pleasure in her voice. The defeat in her body was replaced with adulation. Jake sensed that his death would have allowed her to cross a line, to become something she was working towards. She was vile and deranged, just talking to her made him sick to his stomach. But he couldn’t find Dani without her.

“You didn’t act like a cop at the warehouse. Who are you and how did you find me?” She looked at Jake with contempt. He realized that to get her talking, he needed to be open with her. Jake would have to reveal more about himself than he would like.

“My name is Jake Valance and I’m not a cop. I work as consultant with the FBI in finding missing people.”

“I knew you were bad news at the coffee shop. I didn’t know how you trailed him to my work, but I knew that I had to get rid of you,” her fingers tapped her head. The realization struck him.

“You hit me outside the mall?”

“I saw you poking around the sports store. You were directing the other guy around. It was like you knew every step that had been made; I had to slow you down.”

“I still have a headache from your bat,” touching the back of his head, a bit of anger creeping into Jake’s voice. “Did you send me the letter in the hospital?”

“Letter? Why would I send you a letter? I wanted to get rid of you, you’re a cockroach. I try to finish you off, you come back. He warned me about people like you,” her smile was sickening, like a fox with its teeth around a chicken’s neck. The hair on his neck pricked up. *If she didn’t send the letter, and the kidnapper had already left, was someone else involved?*

“What other advice did he give you?” Jake probed. His eyes must have shown his interest as Terri hesitated in her response.

“You’re just like the cops; trying to get me to talk about him. It won’t work; it’s why he picked me.” Jake was skilled at getting information from people, even when they were unwilling to give it freely. His profession made him good at that. He tried another tactic to get her talking about herself.

“What makes you so special?” Terri smiled at Jake’s question which appealed to her vanity. She leaned in closer, her eyes were wild. Jake sensed that although she had been able to hide her true nature from most, he was seeing the real Terri now.

“Ever wonder why they say patience is a virtue? I found out when watching him whittle one of his small animal statues. He is methodical and tireless, never expending more energy than required to finish his work. He noticed my craftsmanship in an evening wood working class at the college. He praised my work!” Her cheeks were flush from remembering her experience. “His skill was unmatched; he outclassed the rest of the students. Yet instead of envying him, they shunned him. They were jealous of his skill,” Jake doubted this; he assumed her classmates sensed something that she could not.

“What type of things did he make,” Jake baited.

“He was a skilled carpenter but with low employment around here, he was forced to teach the occasional class at the community college. His tools were of the highest quality and his class instructions

were detailed. During one class, he showed us how to build a cabinet that an ordinary person would take days to build.”

“Tell me about the tools he used. Didn’t the college provide?”

“They did. But he refused to use anything that wasn’t his; he wouldn’t use someone else’s tools. One time a student mistakenly grabbed his sander by mistake. He only had to look at him for a second before the student stopped what he was doing. He commanded the class with respect.”

More likely fear. Her description of him was unsettling.

“How did you get to know him?” Jake was leading her to describe her partner.

“I was the only female in the class and always worked with my hands. He noticed my skill. At the start, he spent a lot of time reviewing my work. By the end of the class; he hardly needed to instruct me at all. He’s a genius.”

“What did you do after class?” Terri turned her head sideways.

“I already told the cops – I’m not giving you anything on him. No description, no name, no nothing. Whatever you’re trying to do, you can stop it now.” Jake moved in closer.

“I don’t care about him,” he lied, “the cops are tracking him as we speak. He taught a course; the college is going to have all of his identification info.”

“Maybe. But you’re never going to catch him. He’s too smart – he’s already changed his appearance and name. He’s probably a thousand miles away by now.

“Then you won’t mind telling me about after class,” Jake leaned into his chair, inviting her to speak. He looked at the wall for a second, trying not to show too much interest.

“He’d visit me at the coffee shop occasionally,” she reminisced, “tell me about the homes he worked on. The works of art he created.” Jake noticed her blissful description. *I think she cared for him, but he may have seen it as more of a teacher/student relationship.*

“Tell me about these works of art. What made them so special?” She looked at Jake, brimming with enthusiasm.

“He could build anything out of wood. And anything he built was flawless – crafted with care and expertise. He used mostly cherry wood and pine, but he could use any type of wood. His carpentry work

was amazing, his detail work exquisite. But his greatest work was his beliefs.” She became quiet as if trying to collect her thoughts together.

“How did his beliefs affect his woodworking?”

“He is very devout – he carved a number of statutes of Jesus and made many crosses. He carved the entire Christmas scene in the manger, over a dozen figures. But his prized possession was the arc. Noah’s arc was made of beautiful cherry wood, sanded and varnished so many times that the wood was soft to your touch. His carvings of the animals were so lifelike; his paints gave them emotion. Each time I visited him; I’d mention an animal I couldn’t find. On the next visit, it would always be there, standing out from the others.”

“What about his coffins?” Jake expected some resistance from Terri, but her face showed no concern.

“Most things he created for himself, the coffins were his gift to them.”

“Them?”

“The children. God wanted those children.” Jake gulped and involuntarily looked at the glass window. Fortunately, she didn’t notice his unease.

“He told me that God spoke to him and said that these children were needed in heaven. He was delivering them to him intact – they were never hurt physically. He passed them onto God as painless as possible. He always crafted the most beautiful coffin to honour them in their journey. He left a message with police so family could have closure, knowing they had gone to a better place.”

“And how did he decide on which children?”

“He said they were already picked. He told me that God had decided and told him who to prepare for their journey. You don’t want to defy the lord. When he wants a specific girl, you’re only preventing the enviable.”

Jake gulped. *Terri was a first-rate lunatic. Who knows if the kidnapper actually believed these reasons or if this is what he fed her?* A serial killer is a killer no matter what justification he uses.

“Why is it enviable? Mandy’s under police protection. He’ll never get close to her again.”

“Maybe not, but that just means God will pick another child to replace her. You’re really not thinking it out. Whenever I had doubts

about what we were doing, he told me to touch this,” her fingers handled a small necklace with an amber jewel.

“He gave this to you?”

“He made it for me. Anytime I questioned God’s will, I just had to touch it for comfort.” She rubbed the stone between her fingers. She watched his eyes stare at the necklace in interest. “Go ahead and touch it. Feel his work.” Jake reached forward and touched the stone. *He’s remarkable at any task that he requires him to work with his hands, like carpentry or jewellery. You wouldn’t make this for just anyone.* Moments after touching the stone, Jake received the emotional feedback he was looking for. His thoughts were interrupted by Terri’s hand squeezing his.

“The police say your friend was taken. You’ll never see her again!” she screamed. The necklace came off in his hands as she jumped up. The door to the left opened and a police officer instantly pulled Terri away from Jake. As the officer tried to quiet her down, Tarver motioned to Jake from the doorway to exit the room. The door closed behind them and Jake looked at Terri as she pointed to the one-way window.

“If God has requested it, she’s gone forever!” Jake shivered and then turned to Tarver.

“Tell me she gave you what you wanted. Can you track Danielle now?” Tarver demanded.

“No, this was never about tracking Dani,” Jake answered. “Dani had nothing of emotional value in her belongings here. We didn’t have time for Boston to send all of her personal effects.” Jake handed Terri’s necklace to Tarver.

“But now, I can track the kidnapper!”

Washington Township, outside of Dayton

The dwelling overlooked a number of small homes in a rural community outside of Dayton. He looked down on his captive; a dried streak of blood ran down Dani’s face. She had regained consciousness once and he had quickly returned her to dreamland. He knew she was a liability and that he would have to kill her. He wanted to kill her the moment he saw her outside of the warehouse. Although he saw others

at his building, he focused all of his frustration on the woman before him. If he had Terri in front of him now, he would break her neck. She had led the police to him, his methods were impeccable. He left no traces but still had lost everything; his workshop, his tools and most importantly, his sacrifice.

He kicked the wall in anger; plaster was dented after the impact. The home was dead to him, a shell of his former childhood that was crumbling away with decay. He needed to leave it all behind, to start over. His mind was a whirlwind of emotions and thoughts. He had problems trying to figure out his next step, the thoughts raced through his mind and unless he wrote them down, they returned over and over. Should he run, kill or hide?

A phone chime interrupted his thoughts. He was momentarily confused; he had crushed the agent's phone and threw it away miles ago. Although he had disposed of his phone with Terri after the warehouse, he kept a couple of clean phones. He reached into his duffle bag to take out the phone and destroy it. He knew that if they had traced it, the home could be surrounded right now. But the phone pinged with a text message, unusual for the police if they were about to capture him. He looked down at the screen.

Get rId of pHone. Bureau r tracking u. The kidnapper was alarmed and intrigued.

Who are u? Why help? The kidnapper texted back, wary but curious.

Share common enEmy. Jake Valance will track you down. The text came back swiftly.

How??? The kidnapper felt a kinship to his caller.

Can't explain now. You must outrun him. eLude for 24 hours; you'll be free.

I have complications. A hostage. The kidnapper texted, unsure of why he was asking this person for advice.

Kill her. The answer was exactly what the kidnapper expected but for some reason it didn't seem right. At this moment. Another text came through as the man on the other side grew impatient.

Get new Phone. Email me at playmate123@gmail.com. Send me yoUr new pin, if you want to survive. The cursor blinked; the other caller was gone.

Jim Kochanoff

The kidnapper looked down at the phone and reached for a hammer. The tool came down on the phone and it shattered under the force.

God sent me an angel. The sign I was looking for. My work can continue.

Chapter 14

Darkening Trail

Abandoned warehouses outside of Dayton

Yellow tape circled the warehouse building while Tarver paced near its main entrance. Forensics scoured the scene and were still finding parts of Hasting around the explosion area.

Although trained for patience as an FBI agent, Tarver hated to wait. It was his greatest strength and his greatest weakness. Because of his impatience, he didn't waste time and drove himself and his team hard. Often this produced results. And just as often, it produced dead ends when information had been processed too fast and important facts had been missed. More than one investigation had come to a halt because he proceeded without all the facts. His career had stalled – superiors didn't know whether to categorize him as driven. . . or sloppy. It was determined that with an FBI agent missing, he had to produce results.

“How long does it take him to find the trail?” Tarver asked Rico, tired of waiting for Jake.

“It's not an exact science,” Rico replied. “Sometimes it takes five minutes or fifty depending on who he is tracking. He's only been in there for fifteen minutes, so give him some breathing space. He's tracked missing people before, but this is the first time he's had to track a serial killer.”

“Well he better get it right or his job with the FBI is done.”

“He's more concerned with Dani's safety than a job,” Rico said as he walked away. “Maybe you could learn something from him.”

Despite the heat outside, the warehouse walls were cool to Jake's touch. He had walked through the entire building, hoping for the trail to appear without success. He found himself drawn to the workshop where he imagined the coffin killer spending most of his time. Jake looked over the tools, he could tell that they were well taken care of. He continued to stare at them, hoping to make a connection but the killer's trail remained hidden to him.

Usually, once he met someone who had a strong emotional attachment to the missing person, he would go to their last known location and the trail would unfold. The only mystery was what color the missing person's trail would take. He never understood if the color was meant to illustrate their personality, their emotions or both. His daughter's bright pink trail was seared in his mind.

Jake surveyed the room for the third time. Metal tools glistened in the sunshine. Despite the tool's glow, shadows swirled around the rest of the room. Jake picked up a small carving tool, running his fingers down the serrated edge. To his right, something dark caught his attention. As he turned his head, a sharp dart of pain came from his hand. Jake looked down as a small metal burr had caught his finger. He watched as blood seeped out and he put his finger to his mouth to soothe the wound. Instead of anger for his carelessness, Jake was surprised that one of the tools had an imperfection.

I guess even killers make mistakes, he thought. As Jake sucked his fingertip, he saw it. The pain made his vision focus on the surrounding shadows. The room was unique because the only external light came from above, not from windows. Jake stared at a ray of light and noticed a motionless trail passing through the sun and then disappearing into the shadows. He walked up to the sunshine on the floor and passed his hand through the trail.

It's black. His trail is black. It's the absence of color at all, no wonder I missed it in the shadows. His hand passed through it and unlike many trails he had followed, this one didn't seem to have a strong form. It was bloated and puffy and his hand made it dissipate like a dust cloud in the air.

Now that Jake knew what he was looking for, the trail became obvious. Similar to a 3D picture where if you stare at the image long enough, an object appears. The smoke trail crisscrossed around the warehouse, disappearing into the gloom but reappearing in any pockets of sunlight. Jake followed it to the outside door and then stopped when he realized what the color of the trail meant.

I have until dusk to find him. The trail color will make it impossible to follow him in the dark.

He looked at his watch. 5pm. He had about two hours to find the coffin killer. After that, Dani would belong to the killer for the night.

Chapter 15

Running Scared

16 months ago - Lake Forrest Park – Suburb of Seattle Washington

The front door opened to the small townhouse. A man of above average height dressed in a red tracksuit stepped out. He stretched his legs and rolled his neck to warm up his body. Moments later, he jogged down the suburban street. An elderly woman walking her dog came down the same side of street and the jogger moved out of her way. A SUV followed behind him, tracing the same route. Rico and Mac sat in the front while Jake sat in the back. Rico spoke the phone speaker on the dashboard.

“Tyson is out for his regular morning jog. From his file, this guy loves to work out. If he didn’t have a job, I think he would train all day.”

“What about his home life?” Dani asked, her voice low. She called in from a nearby car.

“He’s as antisocial at home as he is at work. Nothing obvious, he doesn’t try to pick a fight, but he’s has no close friends,” Mac added.

“I still don’t see how this is getting us any closer to my wife and daughter,” Jake added, frustrated by the lack of progress.

“Jake,” Dani voiced boomed through the speaker, “we have already discussed this. If we don’t approach Tyson correctly, then he’ll give us nothing and then you will never see your family again. He’s our only option and we need time to find his weakness.”

“But when are we going to act. I don’t know how much time my family has left.”

“You have to trust me Jake, just like I trust you,” Dani responded. Suddenly Tyson turned and began jogging towards the vehicle.

“Hold up boss. He’s changed direction, cutting back towards us.”

“Play it normal, don’t rush away or draw any attention to yourself. Let him jog by,” Dani commented. Rico drove up the street and watched as Tyson passed him. They continued several houses

down and then parked by a green home. Rico looked in his rear-view mirror.

“Boss I can’t see him.”

“Nothing on my side either,” said Mac.

“Well he couldn’t just disappear,” Dani stated.

“He didn’t,” Jake interjected. “He just ducked behind that car.”

“We’re made. I should have known he spot us with his police background. Get him now! If we lose him, so does our chance to find Jake’s family,” Dani commanded.

Rico swung the SUV around and turned towards where Jake pointed.

“He’s running!” Mac exclaimed. Tyson had left his hiding place and sprinted into a full-fledged gallop towards a neighbor’s lawn. Rico slammed the brakes and disengaged the door.

“I’m on foot!” he yelled, tossing his jacket into the back seat and chased after Tyson. Mac jumped behind the wheel.

“Is Rico dressed for a full out jog?” Jake inquired.

“No and I doubt he’d catch him anyway. Tyson is a powerhouse runner. Rico can only hope to flush him out so that we can grab him from the vehicle.” She gunned the engine and steered towards the next street.

Rico looked ahead and watched Tyson clear a fence like a hurdle in a track and field competition. *I’m not dressed for this.* As he came to the fence, he gripped it with his right hand to pull himself over. He was rewarded with a squeaky *spoosh* on the other side.

“Mom! Another man just jumped into my wading pool,” a little boy playing with a bulldozer said to her mother.

“That’s nice dear,” his mother half listened as she cradled a cordless phone in one hand and a frying pan in the other. “How about you come in for breakfast?”

Rico’s left foot was soaked, and he tried to shake the excess water out of his shoe while jumping the next fence. The next yard had brown grass and a weedy walkway to the front of the house. As Rico ran out into the street, he spied Tyson running towards a park entrance.

“Tyson’s just left the street and is heading into a parkland area. He’ll have more places to hide and more exits to duck out of,” Rico yelled into his cellphone.

“Then keep a visual, don’t lose him,” Dani commanded.

That’s easier said than done, thought Rico.

Mac – circle the park entrances; keep in touch with Rico in case Tyson tries to double back.”

“Roger boss!” Mac replied and drove the SUV past Rico towards the park.

“Watch your speed Mac. Kids are heading to school!” directed Jake. Mac noticed several clusters of kids, each carrying backpacks full of books and lunches.

“Don’t worry, I won’t endanger any child to catch this guy.”

Rico was panting heavily when he reached the parking lot and noticed the dust trail heading down a path. Sweat had begun to pool under his arms and he wiped his brow as he continued running. *Why did the suspect have to be in such good shape? Why couldn’t I be chasing some overweight, donut eating desk jockey instead?*

He passed a maple tree and almost ran into two teenage girls walking down the path.

“What’s wrong with adults today?” one said to the other.

“I’d be surprised if one of them doesn’t have a heart attack,” the other responded. Rico passed them, thinking the exact same thing. *I don’t think I can run much longer*. He turned towards a fountain in the center of the park. Tyson’s red track suit was bent over from exertion. Rico closed the distance and Tyson looked up at him.

“Stop – federal agent!” Rico yelled while gasping for air. Tyson immediately broke into a sprint as Rico gave everything he had left. *Why does yelling that never work?*

Tyson’s gait was that of a racehorse, his strides were efficient, and he didn’t waste any energy. His arms propelled his body forward and his legs slammed onto the ground. Rico was less fluid, his strides choppy; every step was a battle and the distance between them began to grow. *Damn the donut* as Rico clutched his stomach.

Tyson looked back and Rico thought he saw a grin. As Tyson turned, his body slammed into a red sedan. Tyson somersaulted over

the hood and landed gingerly on his tailbone. Seconds later he tried to get up, but a voice made him stop dead in his tracks.

“Run and I’ll put a bullet in your knee. After that you’ll never run again!” Dani had her weapon drawn and pointed at Tyson’s legs. He resigned himself to the ground. Mac pulled the vehicle to a stop from the opposite direction and got out of the SUV.

“You’re quick boss. Although give me a few more minutes and I would have caught him,” gasped Rico. Dani looked at him as he collapsed on the grass by the curb.

“I don’t know about catching him, but you certainly herded him towards me. Good job!”

“I don’t know who you people are,” Tyson replied as he stood up, “but I work at the police department. You have me confused with some other guy.”

“I don’t think so,” Dani replied while holstering her gun. “You want to tell me why you ran?”

“Some suits start following you in a car and tell me how you feel?” Tyson answered.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Jake interrupted and faced Tyson. “Where is Jimmy Weems?” He was several inches smaller and about forty pounds lighter than Tyson.

“Who?” Tyson hesitated a second before replying and it didn’t take a police officer to tell that he was lying.

“Back off Jake!” Dani replied and pointed towards the SUV. Reluctantly Jake stepped back but he didn’t get into the vehicle.

“You got the wrong guy. I’m not saying anything until I have my lawyer,” Tyson smirked.

“That’s fine,” Dani answered. “But if you lawyer up, I will use all the evidence we have on your connection with Jimmy Weems. I will personally make sure you are charged with aiding a criminal, jeopardizing an investigation and putting the lives of a woman and child at risk.”

“Now wait a second,” Tyson started.

“No, we don’t have a second to waste. See this man by the car,” Dani pointed to Jake. “Weems has his daughter and wife, every moment we waste, risks their lives.” Tyson seemed taken back and then regained his composure.

“Hey if I can help I will, but I need some guarantees that I won’t be charged or I’m not saying anything.” Dani rushed forward and her face was so close to his that he had to lean backwards.

“The only guarantee I’ll give you is that if you don’t talk right now, I’ll put in jail so fast, the only running you’ll be doing is from your new boyfriends.” Tyson looked genuinely scared as if Dani had found the right area to apply pressure.

“Ok, ok. I’ll give you what I know. He forced me to provide information, I didn’t know he would hurt anyone!”

“Save the tears for internal affairs – you’re going to do better than give me information,” Dani commanded, “you’re going to set up a meeting with Weems!”

Chapter 16**Captive Flock****Washington Township, outside of Dayton – present day**

Dani woke up and touched the dirt on the left side of her face. Her arms were tightly bound behind her back. When she tried to move her feet, she realized the same bond was tying her hands and legs together. *Much harder to get leverage this way*, she thought. Her mouth was surprisingly free of a gag so her captor must not be afraid of her yelling for help. She observed her surrounding quietly; not wanting to alert him that she was awake. The dirt on the floor was from a potted plant that was tipped over and looked near death; dried out petals littered the floor. The windows were covered with blankets, but enough light escaped in to tell her that it was late in the day. The house interior was sparse; she lay in a dining room with a metal table and a couple of chairs.

The walls were tattered with flowery wallpaper with paisleys marching in horizontal lines. *Must be an old lady's house*. A ceramic vase sat alone on an end table; a children's drawing of a house seared onto its surface. She thought she could hear a dull but steady typing sound. Then she heard a squeaking chair as wheels protested its backward motion. She turned and looked straight into his eyes as he turned the corner. He was above average build – over 6 feet. Muscular but not muscle bound, and his stride was slow but purposeful. Curly blond hair fell into his eyes giving him a youthful appearance, but he was easily in his late forties. He returned her gaze, but he showed no emotion and no fear. He turned one of the kitchen chairs backwards and sat in front of her. He had a tablet tucked under his arm that was the source of the tapping sound. For thirty seconds, they spoke no words and the silence became too much for Dani.

“Why did you take me?” Dani asked. He returned her gaze and his eyes registered her question, but no response came. “What’s wrong, someone steal your voice?” He flipped the tablet and typed a response.

“You could say that,” a metallic sounding male voice responded from the tablet.

Great – I’ve got a mute serial killer or an ex-monk who can’t break his vow of silence. There was no threat of violence so Dani pressed on.

“Why did you take me?”

“Because you took her,” came the metallic reply.

“Your partner?”

“No, my sa-cri-fice,” For some reason, the computer seemed to struggle with the word sacrifice as he typed, and it stretched the syllables.

“Am I her replacement?” She studied him. He didn’t respond immediately, measuring his answer.

“Only if God wills it.” The computer put extra emphasis on the word ‘God’.

“Why did you take children?” But her captor remained silent and waved his finger in a back and forth motion as if to wait.

“My turn. Who is Jake Valance?”

Dani hesitated; a good investigator tries to glean as much information out of their target while providing misdirection. She needed to decide what way to lead him in a manner of seconds. Once she committed, there was no turning back unless she wanted to get caught in a lie.

“He is a consultant who accompanies us on our missing person cases.” If he knew about Jake, he probably had an idea of what he was capable of. She didn’t think her chances were good to survive but she could still lead the killer to her team.

“Why?” the computer wailed. He used few words, but he made everyone count.

“Because he can find people no one else can,” she answered.

“How?” He tapped the keys and his expression looked as if he was frustrated. She decided to use that to her advantage.

“Because he’s like a bloodhound, he can track anyone no matter where they go. There is no one he can’t find.”

“You make him sound superhuman,” the computer chirped.

“Are you trying to scare me?” Dani ignored the computer’s question, the smile on the man’s face showed that he was playing with her. She remained silent, not wanting to give him anymore satisfaction. But he was not done.

“Now, now,” the emotionless voice replied, “you started this, don’t clam up.” The man erased the screen. “I have ways of making you talk.” The cliché line was without humor, but Dani watched as the man leaned his head back as if he wanted to laugh. The expression was spooky as no sound came out of his mouth. Dani’s flesh crawled but she pressed on.

“What do you want to hear? Sooner or later, you will be found. You’re delaying the inevitable. He follows a trail that you leave behind.”

“And what if the person he is tracking, dies?” He turned his head and looked deep into her eyes. She realized that any lie would be discovered. Truth or silence was her options. Truth won.

“Doesn’t matter. My death has nothing to do with his ability to find me.” The man’s face was interested but he realized that time was limited. He placed his tablet on the chair and went into an adjoining room. She heard activity as items were hastily gathered.

Minutes later, he returned carrying a duffle bag and a toolbox. He passed her and went outside. A vehicle door opened, and the packages deposited. In a few seconds, he returned with a trademark smile for Dani.

“Why do you take children? They have done nothing to you?” Dani asked with an even voice, but she could feel the anger creeping in. The man was interested by the question and sat down on his chair, his fingers dancing over the tablet.

“Because of the pain,” came the cryptic reply.

“Your pain or the children’s?” Dani shifted slightly in her chair.

“Will any answer satisfy you?” his fingers typed feverishly as if a floodgate of words were coming. The man was no two-finger typist, the sentences came easily, and the computer modulated words flowed out. “I never knew my father, he left before I was two. I heard he was a useless idiot, so I probably didn’t miss him. My mother hated him, and she reminded me of that every day.”

“So, your father’s to blame for all of your troubles?” Dani offered. She had caught so many troubled childhood stories from killers and criminals that she was literally sick of the excuse.

“My father had nothing to do with my life,” the computer replied. “You need to listen. My mother raised me, sacrificing

everything for me as a single mom. She made me into the man I am today. I'm making these sacrifices for her."

"You know that these deaths won't bring your mother back," Dani stated looking back into in his frigid eyes.

"I don't want her to return," the computer answered.

"Then why take the children," asked Dani.

"I'm making sure she doesn't come back."

7pm – Interstate 675 South

They had been driving for sixty minutes since leaving the warehouse. Rico drove the SUV with Tarver sitting in the passenger seat while Mac and Jake sat in the rear. Weight and De Nano followed in another FBI car behind them.

"We're got less than thirty minutes of light left Jake. Are we getting any closer to Danielle?" Tarver asked.

"I can't answer that. My ability doesn't give a time frame. It doesn't flash red when I'm getting close. It gives me a trail to follow whether it takes five minutes or five hours." Anger crept into his voice, not from Tarver's incessant questions but the fact that it would soon be too dark to follow Dani. The trail in front of them veered to the off-ramp. "Turn right," Jake directed Rico.

"I've finally got some information on our killer," Mac said, swinging her tablet around for all to see. She showed an image taken when he taught at the community college. "Joseph Williams, six feet two, over two hundred pounds. No fixed address. Carpenter by trade, worked for several construction companies but never lasted more than three or four years with an employer.

"Was he fired with any of his employers?" Tarver asked.

"No, actually his work was impressive. He was always on time, dependable, got the job done with quality craftsmanship, no conflicts with others. A model employee. He moved to other employers during building lulls, usually the winter and never returned."

"Any description of what he was as a person? Funny, rude, outspoken?" Rico inquired.

"None of the above," Mac answered. "Joseph was a mute, usually communicated by sign language or other gestures to get his

point across. But in his college course, he used a tablet to speak for him.

“You mean like Stephen Hawking?” Jake asked.

“Kind of although with today’s technology, your phone can be programmed to talk to you as a male or female, you can even ask for a certain accent or ethnicity.”

“And the college didn’t flag this as odd?” Tarver asked.

“Just the opposite. The college is a big proponent of accepting students and teachers of different backgrounds and special needs. His carpentry work was excellent, and the college was only too happy to employ a person with a disability.”

“Can you turn the screen around a bit,” Jake motioned. Mac obliged and he gazed upon the driver’s license. Rugged face, curly hair, hazel eyes. Not ugly, scarred or otherwise evil radiating from his eyes. A face in the crowd, hiding his true nature. No one would suspect him. Jake looked ahead.

“Turn here!” he commanded as the dark smoke trail veered right. The terrain had become hilly with vegetation and clumps of forest. The houses were less frequent and the occasional farm passed by with acres of plowed land. The SUV crossed over a stream as Jake watched the black smoke trail float three feet over the road. The trail turned left after a mailbox and up a twisty driveway to a white ranch style house. Rico slowed the SUV to a stop as Tarver talked into his cell phone.

“Cross the neighbor’s property and cover the back. I don’t want this guy slipping into the woods and losing us in the cover of darkness.”

Rico parked the car blocking the entrance. Tarver turned to Jake. “Does the trail lead up to the house?” The light was growing dim and the shadows were playing tricks with his sight, but he was sure.

“Yes. Trail leads into the white front door.”

“There’s no vehicle – do you think they’re still here?” Rico asked.

“One way to find out,” Tarver answered. “Mac, cover our consultant, make sure nothing bad happens.”

“I can clear a crime scene as well,” Mac answered, angry that she was being left behind while all the male agents surrounded the house.

“I am abundantly clear that you can Agent Macintosh. You will stay back with our consultant, unless you have a problem taking orders.”

“No sir,” she glared as Rico and Tarver walked quickly up the driveway. They both went to the front door and examined it for any explosives. Then they yelled and kicked the door down. They disappeared into the home’s interior.

“I’m sorry Mac that you got stuck on babysitting duty,” Jake offered. Mac smiled back.

“It’s not your fault. I just wanted to be part of the action. Dani could be in there. If I hadn’t been hurt at the warehouse, she might not have been taken.”

“If anyone can survive a psycho killer, its Dani,” They grinned at the thought of their team leader giving hell. Mac’s phone rang.

“House is empty,” Tarver’s voice chirped. “Bring Jake up to the house, let him sweep the house and see if his ‘powers’ can tell us where to go next.” The two of them got out of the car and started to walk up the driveway.

“Have you ever wondered why he hates you so much?” Mac asked.

“Jealousy, fear, ignorance. Pick one,” Jake replied. “He has no problem minimizing my ability, but he’ll use it when it’s convenient.” Jake kicked a pebble into the ditch.

“I’ve got my own theory,” Mac replied.

“Do tell.”

“Tarver sees you as a rival. A competitor.”

“What are we competing for?”

“Our boss. Maybe you don’t see it, but Tarver is jealous of your relationship with Dani. He sees how you interact, how you complement each other. He criticizes you because he hates that you have been successful together.”

Looking behind the house, Jake saw Tarver and Rico talking to the other two agents. The four of them spread out and began searching the grounds.

“Does Dani know?” Jake asked.

“I think she does. She finds Tarver so repulsive that it’s easy to dislike him. He makes that part easy.” Jake considered his next question.

“Do you think Dani likes me?”

“Of course she does Jake. We all do,” Mac answered not fully realizing his intent.

Before Jake could press further, the air seemed to push out of the house. Both Mac and Jake sensed the change but had no time to question it. The air seemed to ignite and sent the two of them flew backwards as the house exploded!

Chapter 17

The Big Fix

16 months ago – Tacoma, Washington

“You have to sell me the property today, Wesley. Otherwise the deal is off!” A pudgy man with white balding hair sat in a leather chair in the lobby of the Bayside Hotel. His face was flustered, and he wiped the perspiration off his forehead with the sleeve of his suit. He looked up into the smile of Wesley Moore, a handsome well-dressed man with an air of success. Wesley considered the request.

“It’s not our company’s protocol to sell assets without a complete security check of our buyer. I’m sure you understand our situation George?”

“What I understand,” George got out of the chair, realized how much taller Wesley was and sat back down, “is that you have several other buyers ready to scoop up this property. One of the company reps at Pricor sat next to me and he says they have already started the process. If I don’t get in today, the people I represent are going to be very unhappy.” George pressed the leather chair with his finger on the word ‘unhappy’ as if to make a point.

For a moment Wesley’s smile vanished as if considered George’s words and worried about the loss of the sale. “Are you sure George, you saw our sales pitch? There are no guarantees, diamond mining is a risky venture. I’d hate to see you lose any money on this deal.”

“Don’t patronize me. I saw your sales figures and your past histories. Your company is a hidden gem. I even contacted a company up north in the same area as your diamond mine. He says that your find is way undervalued.” Wesley gave a surprised look as if the validation was unexpected.

“Really! George you have really done your homework. I’m impressed; you and your group would make terrific investors in our property. It’s just. . .” Wesley’s voice trailed off.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, we only need five investors George. I already have six in a queue. Don’t worry though; I’ll make sure you’ll be top of the list for

the next mine we open.” Wesley gathered his suitcase and started to walk past. George abruptly stood up and stepped in front of Wesley.

“Wait! I can’t miss this opportunity – my partners aren’t going to be happy if I come back empty handed. You need to make an exception and get my company into the queue.” George leaned forward with both his hands on Wesley’s shoulders. He looked like he was about to beg. Wesley stepped back, looking around if anyone else in the hotel lobby was watching them.

“George, that would be unethical. You wouldn’t want to invest in a company that you couldn’t trust. Would you?”

“I don’t care what has to be done, I need this opportunity. What do I have to pay you to bump me ahead of the other investors?” George took a wad of cash out of his pocket to sweeten the deal. Wesley gestured his hands no.

“Can’t take a bribe buddy. I’d lose my license if that ever became public. But I’ll tell you what, I could bend the rules for it.”

“I’m listening.”

“You know that we put our investors through a pretty rigorous process, and it takes a few days for the investment to be approved. I could say that you accepted before our company presentation today and predate your application. But you would have to make payment due now.” George pulled out his phone.

“Show me what account to send the money to and we’ll complete the transaction.”

Wesley watched George exit the hotel and jump into a taxi. The documents he had provided to George looked very authentic. He was sure that George would be excited all night long by beating other companies to purchase shares in the diamond mine. The concierge came up to him.

“Here’s your bill sir for the rental of the ballroom and catering. Did you want to bill your company?”

“No thanks – I’ll pay in cash,” he handed several thousand dollars to the concierge. “I appreciate the staff members you brought in on short notice to fill the room. They did a terrific job of playing their parts.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what was it all about? The speaker seemed to be talking about investments and mining.”

“Just a run-through on a future stock meeting we have planned for our company. We wanted to block out some of the lecture so we’ll be prepared for our annual general meeting. Your staff members helped provide some atmosphere for our honored guests.” The concierge held out his hand as if waiting for a tip. When none came, he asked a question.

“Some of your guests seemed quite taken by the information, should any return to the hotel with questions, where should I direct them?” Wesley smiled at the question and deposited a business card and a hundred-dollar tip in the man’s hand.

“Beyond giving them my business card, I don’t see there is any other information you could offer.”

“Agreed sir. Thank you for your patronage,” the concierge walked off and helped a couple heading out for the evening. Wesley passed them and stepped out into the night air. He walked a few blocks before hailing a taxi, not wanting to connect himself to the hotel. As he closed the taxi door, he immediately checked a few false email accounts to see if he had any messages. One caught his eye; he typed a short reply and then hit send.

I will deal with that tomorrow Wesley aka Jimmy Weems thought. Tonight, is a time for celebration.

Chapter 18

In the Aftermath

Present day - Moments after house explosion

Jake looked up into the sky which was rapidly turning into twilight. Only a moment had passed since the explosion, but it seemed like another day. He was amazed at how silent everything was. No yelling, no animal sounds, no engines revving – complete and unaltered silence. A slap to my face brought the noise of the world back to him.

“Are you okay? Jake say something?” Rico came into his view as Jake looked up.

“How about you stop hitting me? Where is Mac?”

“Her ears are ringing but she’s all right. The explosion knocked both of you on your butts, but you were still far enough away to avoid any real damage.”

“What about the rest of the team?”

“We got lucky. Whatever we tripped, the four of us were talking and exploring the backyard when the house blew. I’m pretty glad we did a quick sweep, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Our killer knew we were coming?”

“Probably. Didn’t want to leave any evidence behind. Of course, the bomb could just have been for security measures.”

“Hate to be a delivery man around here,” Jake added.

“We really messed up Jake. After the warehouse explosion, we should have been much more cautious on entry to the house. We were lucky no one was killed this time.”

“But whatever the reason, our guy isn’t coming back. I don’t know if I’m more scared if he took Dani with him or left her behind.”

“Well she wasn’t left in the house. Can you sweep around the grounds? It’s getting dark.”

Jake grabbed Rico’s hand and pulled himself up. Jake looked at the house, it looked like a tornado had ripped through it, leaving pockets of flame. The roof and walls were demolished, only the foundation remained with pieces of twisted metal rebar, reaching to the sky.

Jake concentrated his gaze to the back of the house. Even with the light of the day rapidly disappearing, he could still make out the black trail exiting from the back of the ruined house into the woods. He ran towards the forest, knowing that he only had minutes left before the trail would vanish into the darkness. A pine tree raked at his face as he ran into the woods.

“What’s wrong with him? Did the explosion scramble his brains?” Tarver asked Rico as they watched Jake disappear into the forest.

“He’s doing his job. The killer’s trail must lead into the woods. If we don’t catch him now, he gets a whole night lead on us,” Rico replied. “I’ll catch up with Jake, after the house, there’s no telling what traps the killer might leave for him in the woods.”

Jake looked ahead, the black smoke trail spiraled around the trees and headed towards a river. The trail felt odd as if he was following someone on a leisurely walk and not a killer trying to escape. Jake brushed a willow branch out of his face as his feet stepped into water. The trail stopped and Jake couldn’t tell if it had become too dark or the killer had suddenly flown away. A flashlight illuminated the branches in front of him.

“Did you find something?” Rico inquired.

“More like I lost something. The trail just stops here.” Jake looked up to sky at the stars above.

“Did he climb a tree?” Rico asked.

Jake squinted, even in the darkness the trail had a hard edge; like someone had stood there for awhile.”

“No – and I can’t see anything go up or down the stream. Not like water has affected my ability before.”

“Then what – he can’t just disappear. Do you think Dani killed him and his body floated downstream? Do you think your ability to track ends if the person dies?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out. But the water is too shallow, we should see his body. And if Dani killed him, why hasn’t she contacted us?” Jake turned around and examined the trail he had followed. It was hard to make out but something was wrong, it felt thicker in parts as if. . .

Jake ran past Rico back to the remains of the house, realizing the truth. Unfortunately, it had come too late. The trail followed back to the driveway and then back into the street. He squeezed his eyes and then it was gone. The darkness had swallowed the trail and no headlights could separate it from the darkness. Jake bent over from exhaustion as Mac and Rico knelt beside me.

“It’s gone. I can’t distinguish it from the night,” he said.

“What the hell happened here?” Tarver demanded with his two other team members in tow. “All I have to show for tonight is an explosion and a tracker who goes running around the woods and finds nothing!”

“I found nothing because he knows! He knows what I can do!” Jake answered.

“That doesn’t make sense. Dani would never offer up this information and even if she did, he would never believe her anyway,” Mac suggested.

“Then why did this guy rig up his house to explode unless he knew we were coming,” Tarver offered. “Where did he go?”

“He doubled back from the woods and left the way he came,” Jake pointed to the road. “I should have noticed that when we drove in. The smoke trail was thicker in parts, as if he walked forward and backwards. He drove out the way he came. Now’s it too dark to follow,” Jake’s head was bowed to his chest. “I should have noticed sooner. Now for tonight, she belongs to him!”

Chapter 19

A Grave Mistake

His sensor had signaled an explosion had occurred. His mother's home would be vaporized now, if only his memories of her had also disappeared. He hoped that the tracker had been destroyed with the house. Soon once he dealt with this agent as well, he could start somewhere new.

Unfortunately, he would have to go it alone. He missed his partner; she had been a loyal pupil and looked to him for guidance. There were times when he needed her help to capture the children. She was a once in a lifetime student, he would not risk his work again by including another in his work.

His truck had hauled a small camper to a deserted farmland road; they would not be disturbed tonight. He checked on the agent, she appeared asleep, but he doubted it. He was sure the moment he laid his head to sleep, she would try to escape. He sat down on the hard earth to contemplate his next move. Dragging the agent around was slowing him down and he needed to leave. His work was done in the state of Ohio. He'd have to make changes, probably lose his computer interpretation for a few years and go back to regular sign language. There was always work for a skilled carpentry and he could create a new identity. But something nagged at him, the text from a man wanting to help him, a tracker who could follow him anywhere. He needed more answers, so he decided to accept the offer of help. He had checked the email address and had received a PIN number to text the caller. He texted *Looking for help* and waited. Several minutes later, he was rewarded with a response.

Your explosion failed, no one on the team was killed. You aRe still being followed. The kidnapper considered this information and asked for advice.

What should I do? he texted back.

Keep moving – the team is having problems. U have a break until dawn. Do you still have the Agent?

Yes. Why?

Do you Want to have some fun?

This isn't a game, killing her would be easier. Why should I play with her? Another question crossed the kidnappers mind. What is in this for you?

Valance is a question mArk to me. I don't understand his full capabilities. Before I ruin him, I need to push him.

And am I a pawn for you to plaY with?

Yes and No, the text replied truthfully. I'll give you information that will help you escape. I'm able to get Ongoing information on your case. Anything that pushes him to his limits, will help me break him.

Do you care if I'm captured?

I'd want you to escape. It will hurt Jake if he loses you. Especially if he loses her.

You think I should keep her alive? Seconds passed before the text was returned.

No, you should kill her. She Will divide your attention. Unless you can create a situation where Jake is the cause of her death.

He considered the advice. The agent was making things difficult. It was only a matter of time before she tried to escape or alerted her presence to others. Yet something tugged at him, something told him that she could have a use. And killing her before she could aid him, seemed a waste.

Agreed. I'll let Valance be part of her death. Tell me how I can trick his abilities.

The morning grey was fading as the sun was breaking the horizon. Jake was groggy, still feeling the effects of a sleepless night. He had to shake it off, Dani's captor had a ten-hour head start. Jake got out of the SUV and walked over to the debris of the house. His eyes squinted and it was almost light enough to see the black trail again. Tarver stepped behind me.

"Are you ready to go Jake? Time's a wasting."

"I need a few more minutes – as soon as the sun comes out, I should be able to follow him."

"Instead of driving with Mac and Rico this morning, I want you to come in my vehicle," Tarver commanded, pointing to De Nano in the driver seat. Jake frowned.

"Why? Don't you trust me?" he asked while folding my arms.

“Let’s see,” Tarver mocked, “I have a consultant who says he can see the trail of missing persons and follows them around the country. Really Valance, think about that statement. Now, get into the car,” he gestured to the back. Jake motioned to Rico that he was with Tarver. Weight headed down to the other car while Tarver and Jake got into the car with De Nano.

“Hey Jake,” De Nano said, looking at them in the back seat. “I don’t know your arrangement with Rico but just tell me where to go. If you can give me a bit a notice with turns, that would be great. If you need me to stop or go back to an area, just say it.”

“Thanks,” Jake replied, aware that De Nano and Tarver played good cop/ bad cop as their attitudes were direct opposites of each other. He wondered if it was accidental or on purpose.

“Where to Jake? The sun is up,” Tarver asked. Jake focused his eyes on the landscape. The sun’s rays illuminated a beautiful day. *If only its ends well.*

“Back the way we came,” the black smoke trail was fainter than last night and pockets of it seemed to dissipate. “Follow it back to the interstate and I’ll let you know where to go.” De Nano started the engine and pulled out of the driveway. Rico and the others followed behind. Jake looked back at the house foundation and a question formed in his mind.

“Did you find out what caused the explosion?” he asked while Tarver looked back at him.

“A forensics unit will be arriving shortly to examine the scene. I couldn’t get them out any sooner. I doubt they’ll find anything, but it’s part of procedure. There was no indication that we tripped any devices.”

“One of the problems of moving fast is that we didn’t properly assess our target,” De Nano added. “All we have on the killer’s file is his carpentry work. It’s obvious that he must have had some military or survivalist training. After the first explosion, shame on him. With the second explosion, shame on us for not better profiling his abilities.”

“Are you telling me that anyone can learn explosives?” Jake asked.

“It’s not that difficult with the proper training. But practice tends to attract attention. They are already making assessments from

the warehouse. Once forensics goes through the house debris, they can see what type of material was used and try to determine what type of training was given to create it.”

“There was definitely nobody inside?”

“No. The house was practically deserted – only a few chairs, kitchen table, desk. House was a slab so there was no basement. He was too generous with his timer, we were in and out of there and looking in the backyard when it detonated,” De Nano commented.

“Have you been able to find out anymore on his background? Something that would tell us more about his motivation?”

“You leave the detective work for the big boys Jake and concentrate on why you’re here,” remarked Tarver.

“I don’t see any harm in giving him some background Chief,” De Nano looked over to Tarver.

“I’m trying to understand the man I’m pursuing. Just because I can see his trail, doesn’t mean anything he is doing makes sense.”

“Last I looked; I was the officer in charge. You drive (pointing to De Nano) and you (pointing to Jake), follow the trail!” Jake considered Tarver’s words a few moments to prevent himself from doing anything rash. He decided he couldn’t help himself, lack of sleep, stress, ridicule – it all pushed him beyond his breaking point.

“Stop the car,” Jake commanded. De Nano looked puzzled but pulled over.

“Does the trail stop here Jake?” he asked. Jake was silent. As the vehicle stopped, he opened the door and stepped outside. Jake began walking along the shoulder of the road. He got about five steps when Tarver’s hand jerked him back.

“What the hell is wrong with you Jake? Danielle could be dead and you decide to go for a walk. You’re a bigger loser than I thought.” Jake pushed him back and although Tarver was a big man, he was caught off guard and staggered back a step. The other vehicle stopped in front of them on the shoulder of the road. Mac yelled back from the passenger seat.

“Jake– what’s going on?” Before he could answer, Tarver yelled back to her.

“Your partner’s having a hissy fit in a middle of an investigation. This is why I don’t approve of consultants when

professionals are required.” Jake tipped his head back and laughed at the ridiculousness of the statement. Despite the circumstances, the laughter made me feel good. Tarver looked at him as if Jake was out of his mind.

“You talk about professionals! You sabotage this investigation at every turn. You’re so full of yourself that you can’t stand anyone who offers an opinion better than you,” Jake yelled over the sound of the cars on the road.

“Now wait just a minute,” Tarver started to rebut.

“No, I’m tired of waiting for you to be part of this team. Guess what, I wish I wasn’t here either. I wish my family wasn’t taken from me. I wish I didn’t have this stupid ability to track people. But I do, and instead of going crazy sitting at home, I use it to try to help. Dani didn’t understand it either, but she tried to use it to help her investigations. To find people.” Jake took a deep breath. “All you do is belittle anything you don’t understand. I can’t help your short mindedness, your need to knock things down rather than support them. I guess that makes you feel successful.”

“I’ve solved more cases than you can even dream of Jake,” Tarver sneered. “You wouldn’t understand; you’re a tool to be used. I orchestrate a team to provide results.”

“And what great results have you have created?” Jake screamed. “You have already lost one team member; another was killed, and you almost lost your whole team in a second explosion. Maybe your superiors will look at your results and realize that you’re not the man for this job. Your actions are endangering Dani and the rest of this team!” Tarver measured him and Jake wondered if Tarver was going to abandon him on this freeway.

“What do you want?” Tarver asked.

“Respect,” Jake answered without hesitation. “I’m putting my life on the line just like you. I want Dani back. I don’t care if you hate me, think my ability is a waste of your time, but as long as I’m on this team – you need to support me. Stop road blocking me ever time I ask a simple question. I don’t know how long I’m going to be able to follow him. Knowing just a bit more information may strengthen that bond and give us a few more hours to track him. Does that seem too much to ask?”

A car beeped at us, warning us to get off the road.

“Jake— get into the car! That’s an order!” Tarver yelled.

“And?” he asked before moving a step forward.

“And I’ll answer your godam questions. But get into the car now! I don’t need any more delays. Do you understand me?” Jake didn’t answer but his action of moving back to the vehicle was clarification enough. Jake opened the SUV door and sat down, convinced he had made his point.

“Keep going south?” De Nano asked. Jake nodded. He waited a few minutes before pressing Tarver with questions.

“So, can you tell me more about him? Do we know why he prepares these coffins for his victims?” Jake questioned. Tarver hesitated for a moment, thinking on his answer.

“It’s mostly speculation at this point, despite our data mining; there is very little information on this Coffin Killer aka Joseph Williams. He has no previous records or infractions, done nothing remarkable that stood out. He’s been a complete ghost.”

“He must have some records of employment. Some training to be a carpenter?” Jake wondered.

“Here’s what we do know. Joseph Williams is forty-three, has no official training from a trade school. Must have been mentored or is self-taught. Social security number shows dozens of employers and job sites throughout Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. All good reviews, superior work, co-workers described him as quiet but not anti-social. He communicated through sign language or by writing notes. Whatever his mental issues are, he kept them well hidden from work. Because of his transient nature, he had no close friends.”

“Why do you think he choose teaching? Seems kind of visible for someone trying to blend in?”

“We can only speculate,” De Nano interrupted, taking his eyes from highway for a second, “but the time the coffin killings began coincides with his teaching.”

“It’s likely he may have experienced a life changing event – a death of a loved one, a breakup, an injury etc. that caused him change,” Tarver added. “Maybe he began to act out feelings that he had kept dormant. Teaching can be sharing or mentoring, or it can be act of dominance, telling people how something should be done. We checked

some of the performance appraisals from his students; he got high grades for workmanship but some negative feedback for being inflexible in how his projects were completed. He expected high performance and let people know if they were taking any short cuts.”

“An overbearing teacher is hardly the makings of a serial killer,” Jake commented.

“You’re right – but maybe he uses teaching to fulfill a need to dictate his will. If he wasn’t getting his message across, it may have been forced him to other methods,” replied Tarver.

“And that message would be?”

“Your guess is as good as anyone’s.”

“What about family members? Maybe one of them can shed some psyche on his childhood.”

“No living siblings. Father unknown, mother died about five years ago due to lung cancer.”

“Any idea what he does to the victim before he puts them in the coffin?” Jake asked.

“No – and since there are no signs of torture or abuse, I think in his own sick way, he thinks he’s taking care of them,” Tarver replied.

“Do you think he will treat Dani in the same way?” De Nano asked, wary about his question.

“We’re about to find out,” Jake pointed to the off ramp. “He went this way”, as he pointed to their destination.

The three of them looked at the acres of lush lawn with thousands of headstones. They fell silent, no one wanted to comment if Dani’s final resting place would be on the grounds of a cemetery.

Chapter 20

Dying Game

The morning sky was overcast with a threat of showers. The gloom permeated the mood as the two SUV's passed a sign posted as Oakwood Cemetery. The cemetery was old with black wrought iron fences with ornate figures molded into its bars. The graves were well maintained, and occasional flowers lay in front of the headstones. A paved road ran through the middle with several gravel roads that veered right and left to other parts of the cemetery.

Jake's SUV drove by a funeral, several families stood around an open grave. Jake's attention was taken by a little girl in a dark dress. While the rest of the family looked down into the grave, her eyes reached out to him, wondering why he was there.

"Jake— which way?" De Nano asked as they came to a fork in the road.

"Turn right," he commanded. The road narrowed and the SUV climbed up a small hill. The smoke trail left the road and meandered amongst the gravestones. "Stop here," Jake requested. The SUV pulled off the road and parked by several recent headstones. Both teams exited their vehicles.

"Where to?" De Nano asked. Jake pointed to a series of new graves and his chest began to tighten. Instead of answering, he walked briskly towards a fresh grave. The others ran quickly behind him, Tarver withdrew his gun expecting trouble. Jake scanned the area around the grave. The black smoke trail waxed and waned as if someone had spent a great deal of time around the grave. A shovel lay in a small mound of dirt to the right; fresh mud was stuck to its handle. Jake's instincts screamed and he began digging feverishly, as if Dani's life depended on it. Tarver watched with interest as Rico stepped around him, placing his hand on Jake's back.

"You think she's under there?"

"Don't know. But our killer sure spent a lot of time around this grave. Only one way to find out." De Nano had brought a couple of shovels with him from the SUV and threw one to Rico. The three of them went to work and within fifteen minutes had the dirt down to a coffin. Jake wiped perspiration off his forehead – it wasn't hot, but the

physical activity had warmed his core. But in the next moment, he thought he heard something.

“Jake! Are you out there? Can you hear me?”

“Stop digging,” Jake yelled. Both Rico and De Nano looked at him.

“What’s wrong?” Rico asked. “We’re almost there.”

“I know. Just be quiet!” Everyone was silent for a moment and Jake started to think he had imagined it.

“Jake, where are you? I’m in a coffin. I don’t know how much air I have left!” Although muffled, he knew the voice was Dani’s. The others heard the voice as well and they dug even harder.

“Dispatch. Please send an ambulance to Oakwood Cemetery to my GPS coordinates,” Mac yelled into her cellphone.

“Can you repeat Special Agent Macintosh? You want an ambulance to a cemetery,” an incredulous voice responded.

“Affirmative. Possible female agent is buried – getting to her now.”

Suddenly Rico shovel tapped the lid of the coffin. He and De Nano began scrapping the remaining dirt off the top. Jake threw his shovel away and tried to pry his fingertips under the lid. The weight was immense, and Rico took his shovel and placed it under the lid for leverage. Seconds seemed like minutes, but they were able to pull the lid off to view the interior.

It was not what Jake expected and definitely not what the team had hoped. The coffin was empty except for a cell phone placed at the head of the coffin. Dani’s voice screamed from the interior.

“Can someone hear me? Except for the light of the phone, it’s completely dark in here. I’m buried alive!”

Jake pulled the phone out of the coffin.

“Dani! Where are you?”

“Jake– I have no idea. I remember him driving me to a cemetery and next moment, I woke up in here. I can’t push the lid up; the dirt is too heavy. Help me get out of here!”

Jake got out of the grave and ran through the cemetery, tracking the black smoke trail. Within a minute, he came to another fresh grave in which the black smoke trail had swirled heavily around it. The rest of the group came running behind.

“He was here. We need to dig!” Jake looked for a shovel while Rico came forward.

“The ground doesn’t look like it has been dug today. Are you sure?” Jake looked down and the realization made him sick. He sat down on the ground.

“Jake— give me the phone,” Tarver commanded. Jake handed it over to him.

“Danielle, its Tarver. Don’t worry; we’re going to find you.”

“Make it soon. It’s getting really warm in here and I’m finding it hard to breath,” she coughed.

“Relax and don’t talk so much. I’ll ask you questions – use as few words a possible to answer.”

“Ok.”

“Does he know about Jake?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Yes and No. He asked me questions about Jake’s ability, someone tipped him off.”

“Damn it! Weight – get HQ on the phone and have our case files accessed. Someone knows what Jake can do.”

“Forget that! We need to focus resources on Dani; she might only have a few minutes left!” Jake ripped the phone out of Tarver’s hands. He started walking away from the grave and Rico and Mac followed behind him.

“Where are you going Jake?” Mac asked.

“To the top of that hill, I want to be able to see the whole cemetery.” The three of them ran and reached the apex of the hill in under a minute.

“Dani – are you okay?” Mac spoke into the phone.

“Let’s see, I’m buried underground with muddy soil leaking into my coffin and I’m running out of air,” she gasped. “I’m doing great.”

“Sorry boss. Stupid question,” Mac answered.

Jake stopped and surveyed the cemetery. As he scanned the whole area, his worst fear was confirmed. The black trail snaked throughout the cemetery, circling dozens of graves. His disbelief was evident.

“What do you see Jake?” Mac asked.

“He’s. . . traveled everywhere, circling all kinds of graves. It’s almost like he knows about my ability and he’s purposively trying to lead me on a goose chase.”

“Jake, you have to focus, is his trail thicker around any particular graves?” Rico asked. Jake scanned the terrain, in several places, the smoke trail seemed thicker as if a greater amount of time had been spent circling that grave.

“Yes,” he pointed, “near that tree and by that roadway.” He moved forward but Rico held him back.

“Stay here,” Rico asked. “I’ll grab the rest and we’ll look around each grave to see if it was a recent dig. We’ll talk to each other over the phone. You oversee and give us other options as we need them.” Rico pointed to the phone. “Keep talking to Dani. She may be able to give us a hint.” Rico and Mac started down the hill. Jake watched as Rico spoke to Tarver, De Nano and Weight. The five of them broke up into two groups and began heading to the two locations.

“Jake, are you guys still there?” Dani’s voice sounded weaker and tired.

“Yes! We’re following his trail around the cemetery. It’s only a matter of time before we dig up your grave. You just have to hold on a little bit longer.” Jake was surprised by Dani’s laugh.

“You’re a terrible liar Jake. Even without seeing your body language, I can tell you’re lying to me.”

“How do you do it?” Jake asked trying to distract her.

“Do what?”

“Stay calm. If roles were reversed, I would be freaking out, slamming my palms against the lid. I would use every bit of energy and air to get out.”

“Even though it would be useless?”

“Of course. I have to do something, even if I know it will be worse than doing nothing. I have to try. Instead I’m a mess above ground while you’re trapped and sound as calm as if you’re in a yoga class.”

“I was never a fan of yoga.” Dani laughed. Her voice was comforting, and Jake was amazed at her composure. She was reassuring him. A beeping sound came out of the phone.

“What’s that?” Jake asked. Dani was silent for several seconds.

“I think the phone is dying. I’m sure my captor set this up on purpose. Listen, we don’t have much time.”

“Nonsense. They’re searching for you; they’ll be digging you out any moment.”

“Stop it Jake. It’s not funny anymore. Don’t waste our last few minutes.” Jake was silent and watched as Rico and Mac digging at the first site.

“What do you want to talk about? Is there anyone you want me to call?”

“No Jake. I want to spend my last moments talking about you.”

“This is ridiculous, Dani. I’m trying to coordinate with the team to cover the most likely burial places.”

“Jake, he didn’t make it easy for a reason. This is our last chance. Open up to me!”

“Dani – what do you want me to say? You’re the strong one. Don’t waste your last minutes of air dealing with my issues. Do you realize how much guilt I’ll have if you die talking about me?” Jake’s words were met with silence. “Dani, wake up! Do not fall asleep!”

“Cough! That’s easy for you.... to say. The lack of air is making me lightheaded. The dripping of water is so rhythmic, I just want to sleep.”

“If you fall asleep, you’ll never get up.”

“I know. . . . Jake?”

“What?”

“Tell me something about yourself. Something you’ve never told anyone.”

“If I do, will you promise not to fall asleep?”

“Only if you give me something worth listening to.” Jake was silent as he searched for something to share with her.

“I’ve really enjoyed working with you, Dani. You and the team have believed in me when no one else would. Not my family, not my friends. It’s hard to have people look at you like everything you say is a lie. Tarver just says what other people are already thinking. But you make me feel like I’m not crazy. You’ve given me a purpose. Because when I lost my wife and daughter, I thought by finding others, it would fill the void inside of me.”

“Has it?” Dani asked her voice growing dim.

“Sometimes but mostly it’s a black hole. Every time we find someone, it fills in slightly. Then after a few days, when I think about my family again; the hole grows again, and I feel as empty as before. Just like when I had my practice, I’m was an addict needing my clients to talk to. Now, I need these cases to breathe, but they also tear me apart.”

“But you have helped so many,” Dani gasped, her voice barely audible.

“But nobody I cared about. . . .”

“What...about...me?” the phone line went dead. Whatever juice the phone had was gone and Jake knew that asphyxiation was just moments away. No matter how great his ability was, it was useless right now. His tracking ability had been fooled.

Where was she? If my ability can't help, how can I find Dani in time?

Jake’s phone rang. He put Dani’s phone in his jacket and answered his own.

“Nothing Jake,” replied Rico. “We excavated the grave you pointed out. Recent burial, body’s only a few days old. No Dani.”

“What about Tarver’s group?”

“Doesn’t look helpful. They haven’t dug up the grave fully, but the dirt doesn’t look fresh. Is Dani still talking to you?”

“No, her phone went dead. I doubt she has more than a few minutes left.”

“What do we do Jake? If you had to pick one grave right now, which one would it be?”

Jake studied the graveyard, watching the black trail trace around it like a pencil in a kid’s maze book. The coffin killer had played with him, making his ability look foolish. What’s worse is that the answer was sitting in front of him, like a trail of breadcrumbs. *I know every step the killer had taken. What if Dani wasn't even in the graveyard at all, a cruel joke of a sick mind? What was I missing?* As his boot stepped in a puddle, the answer came to him as if lighting had struck. Jake dialed his phone.

“Rico. Go to the pond at the far end of the cemetery! Dani complained of being wet, it’s the only part of the cemetery that has any

body of water.” He didn’t wait for a Rico’s reply, Jake ran full tilt towards a grave by the pond. As he got closer, he could make out a thick black trail that circled the grave. There was a depression as if the grave had not been fully covered. Mac and Rico were right behind him with shovels in hand. They leaped into the grave and began to dig. There was no room for another person in the grave so all Jake could do was watch. Behind him, Tarver approached.

“Is this it Jake or is this another dead end?”

“Don’t know. Going on a hunch. If she’s not here, then it’s probably too late to save her.”

“Hunch. You better hope you’re right. You’re gambling with her life right now.”

“If you got a better suggestion,” Mac answered breathlessly from the grave, “please feel free to tell us where to dig. Otherwise shut the hell up!” Tarver became silent after Mac’s comment. Their shovels hit the lid of a coffin, the wood was beautiful, and one corner had a figurine carved into the top. They grabbed the lid and strained their backs to lift, while pushing away the dirt. Seconds later, inertia prevailed as the top came off and Dani’s body lay crooked in the casket. Because of her peaceful expression, her rescuers thought she was dead. Rico jumped into the casket and began applying CPR.

Jake watched helpless from above. One breath, two breath, Rico tilted his head to listen for her breathing.

“Is she?” Mac asked. Rico didn’t answer and compressed her chest. His fingers folded over each other, willing her body to breathe. Jake couldn’t tell if her chest was rising and a shiver went through his body. *Like a soul floating by*, he thought. Rico looked up at him and Jake could have sworn he had the look of someone who had given up. Rico was about to say something when a cough racked Dani’s body.

“About time,” she gasped. “Thought I was going to take a permanent dirt nap.” She coughed again and underneath her brave words; Jake could sense her vulnerability. She had faced death and was trying to laugh it off. As Rico lifted her up out the grave, Jake opened his arms. Dani guided herself over to him and they embraced.

“Thank God you’re okay,” Jake cried.

“Because of you,” Dani smiled. Tarver interrupted.

“Come on Danielle, ambulance is here. I want them to give you a full go over, make sure you’re okay.” He reached with his right hand and pulled her from Jake. She looked back.

“Don’t stop now Jake. He’s only a couple hours ahead of you.”

“But now that I’ve found you, it’s over. What’s the sense?” Jake replied. Dani’s strong grip on his shoulder surprised him.

“He’ll kill again. Maybe another child, a girl like your daughter. You can’t stop now. You need to find him and make sure he can never do this again!”

331 Octorloney Road – 10 minutes from Oakwood Cemetery

The phone beeped. He looked at the text and considered answering the caller.

She’s still alive! It repeated several times.

How? R u watching them at the cemetery?

No, but I’M close.

How did they find her?

Not sure – they haven’t filled out theIr reports yet. I’ll kNow more details in few hours.

How do you get their information? Are you an agent?

Not important. U need to go. ValanCe will keep searcHing. He will keep seArching for you. Until your tRail is older than 24 hours, he will find u.

How do I lose him? For almost a minute, the cursor flashed with no response. Then a location was texted with a message.

Go there immediately.

Why here? This a public place.

Trust me. I will have somethinG there that will shake his interest from u. Something that will changE his world!

Chapter 21

The Set-Up

16 months ago – Seattle, Washington FBI Safe House

The split entry home was plain, no decorations or photos hung on the walls. Half eaten Chinese containers sat in the refrigerator, the only magnets on the front door were for pizza delivery. The kitchen was open concept with a small island counter separating the dining room. Early morning sun shone through the window. Tyson sat at the dining room table with a laptop, reviewing the message on the screen. Mac was beside him, working on her tablet, researching a nearby location. Dani and Rico were guiding Tyson's response while Jake watched from the living room.

"I sent the message, my involvement is done," Tyson said as he pushed his chair away from the table.

"You're done when I say you're done," Dani reminded him. "The DA gave you immunity for your previous crimes but only if your information and testimony bring Weems to justice. If we don't catch him, you're going to jail. So, I don't have to repeat myself again, let's review the situation." She turned to Rico.

"Tyson has sent Weems an email about a widow whose wealthy husband was killed two months ago in a small plane crash. You have information on the deceased spouse that will help blackmail the widow from her husband's inheritance," explained Rico.

"Weems is going to be suspicious; we rarely meet. Most of our transactions are him calling or texting me," offered Tyson.

"Since he always calls you, there is no way to track him; he must use disposable cell phones or sim cards."

"That's the reason to bring him to us," replied Dani.

"And it has to be quick if I'm going to find my family," added Jake.

"Agreed," Dani replied. "We created this meet to grab him. Mac, let's go over the meeting place."

"No surprise – Weems selected a very visible location with multiple exits. It's an outdoor café adjoining two major streets as well

as a dozen side streets. You'd need an army of agents to cover every possible escape route."

"And we only have three, no offense Jake, agents to watch Weems," added Rico. Jake didn't respond but Tyson was offended.

"Just because I'm a police filing clerk doesn't mean I haven't taken similar training."

"The three of us have to watch you or you'd be gone as well," said Dani. "Mac, continue."

"Here's a picture of the square," she swung the tablet around for them to see. "Tyson will sit here, to the left which is near the washrooms. Weems will likely have to come here," she pointed to an entrance by a t-shirt kiosk, "or through the main courtyard from Rose St."

"You want me here?" Rico pointed to the center of the café.

"Yes, you'll be there about fifteen minutes before," Dani commanded. "At 10am, we can expect some business staff from the adjoining office tower coming down for their break. I'll be to the far right, by the electronics store, Dani to the far left by the fountain. Jake, you'll be in this 2nd floor office, observation only but you'll have a radio in case you see anything."

"And if I do see something?"

"Jake, I'm only going to say this once. For absolutely no reason do you leave that office. If Weems has your family, he is going to know what you look like. If he sees you, he'll be gone, and you'll never see him or your family again. Do you understand?" Dani asked, looking directly at him.

"I understand completely," Jake replied with a level voice. "And I appreciate you bending procedure to allow me to observe. I won't do anything to jeopardize this."

"Why is he here?" Tyson asked. "You don't bring in a civilian into an operation, especially when it involves his own family."

"Don't worry how I run my operation. He has a skill that we may need. Now do you understand what you have to do?"

"I hand him this folder with information on the widow. I ask for payment the usual way and I'm out of there. Don't make any small talk; don't give him any reason to suspect it's a setup."

"And if he asks why for the face to face?" Dani asked.

“I tell him that I’m being transferred to San Diego, won’t be able to help him for about six months or so.”

“And if you do anything to tip him off, all bets are off.”

“Understood. I’m not going to do anything to ruin my chance for immunity. I don’t owe him anything. Once he got his claws into me, it was impossible to shake him off.”

“How did you meet him?” Jake asked, hoping to get some insight about Weems. Tyson looked at Dani for permission.

“Go ahead, but in ten minutes we’re heading out,” Dani replied as she got up from the table. Jake sat down next to Tyson.

“I had, actually still have, a gambling addiction,” Tyson started. “I played the track, poker, sports pools; you name it. I’m actually pretty good and didn’t lose very much money. But that was probably the worse thing for me. By winning, I felt I could balance out the losing, figuring the next big score was around the corner. Classic addiction mentality, I still have a problem walking by the lotto booth.”

“Did you gamble against Weems?”

“And lost. Big-time. High stakes poker, I had a friend with deep pockets who was backing me because I won some previous games. I even won a few games against Weems until he suckered me into an unlimited pot. I was doing so well that I thought my luck would never end. He played me like a mark.”

“What did you bet?”

“All of my money but when Weems put \$100,000 into the pot and all he asked was for one special favor, I was hooked. After I lost, he took my number and I didn’t hear from him for months. He asked for something pretty minor, some license information on a vehicle and even paid for it. The next time, the information was more serious and payment more generous. My gambling was at an all time high, even if ethics should have stopped me, I needed the money. By the time, I wanted out, his true colors emerged. He threatened to expose me if I stopped providing him information.”

“What did he want to know about my family?” Jake asked.

“Pretty standard questions. Background check, financials, and relatives. But I should have realized that there was something different this time around. He usually targeted small companies and wealthy investors. Always for small amounts never more than \$500,000. He

didn't want to attract any major attention; his targets wouldn't usually go to the police."

"What was he looking for? If it didn't seem right, couldn't you have lied?" Jake asked, desperation creeping into his voice.

"I don't know what he wanted! But he mentioned that he knew others with access that would confirm if I ever gave false information. I never tried to fool him because of that."

"You mean he had others with police access?" Jake asked.

"More than that, I wouldn't be surprised if he knew someone who could get him access to case files within the bureau."

"That would explain how he always stays one step of getting caught." Jake paused for a second. Tyson's details somehow made him feel closer to his wife and daughter but also deepened his loss. The pain must have been etched in his face.

"Listen, if I knew he was going to hurt your family, I would never have helped him," Tyson pleaded.

Jake wanted to yell but knew his anger was misplaced. Tyson didn't take his family, but he was about to lead him to who did.

"Let's go everyone," Dani yelled by the front door. Jake got up with Tyson and they readied to leave.

"How did you break your gambling addiction?" Jake asked

"Easy, I replaced it with another addiction. Running. Although this is one problem, I can't seem to run away from."

Chapter 22

Joy Ride

Oakwood Cemetery

Dani lifted herself up from the stretcher and removed the oxygen mask over her mouth and nose. The oxygen was cool and invigorating; it was hard for her to stop using it. It was like cold water to a person who was parched. The paramedic had cleared her health but had recommended that she ride to the hospital for observation. She refused. As long as Jake could track this sick killer, she wanted to be there when they captured him. She didn't like being used as a pawn.

"Danielle, you sure this is wise? You almost died. Go to the hospital, get some rest. We'll bag this guy," Tarver told her.

"Is that an order?" she asked looking him directly in the eyes. He took a second to think about it.

"I could," he laughed, "But then we'd just get in an argument with the director. I can validate my response, but I know that you can be just as persuasive. Frankly I don't need the hassle and we're too close to catching this guy to have any delays."

"Seeing as I know this killer better than anyone now, that would be the right choice," Dani replied.

"Just remember who's in charge, Danielle. When we catch this guy, he's my collar."

"You never change. I don't care if you get the gold freaking award for his capture. I want to prevent him from killing another child. If all you care about is the parade in your honor, you can have it!" Dani walked away with her rage, her last few hours near death forgotten and her focus renewed. She stepped towards Rico who seemed to be evaluating her.

"I'm fine – clean bill of health," as if answering his silent question.

"What's next?" he asked.

"Grab Jake and Mac. Let's load up."

"Tarver is letting us take Jake?"

“I didn’t ask. Chances are he’s not going to care. He may even appreciate not having Jake in his vehicle. He only cares about the accolades.”

“And us?” Rico asked.

“We care about finding us a killer.”

Jake knelt before the empty grave, realizing how close the coffin could have been Dani’s last resting place. The killer knew about his ability and had treated the cemetery like his own personal amusement park. He imagined the killer enjoying himself, circling around the graves, faking the trail. The path reminded him of an old-time fable with a witch leading children with candy into a trap. Only the trap this time was to burn time, so Dani suffocated in her grave. Jake wondered how disappointed the killer would be when he found out that Dani had been rescued.

“Jake, are you ready?” He looked up and he swore Dani looked older since they had found her. It was almost like she had given up a year in exchange for escaping her underground cell.

“I’m ready. Should you be with us?”

“You’re sounding like Tarver. Have the two of you become best friends while I was gone?” she sneered.

“Definitely not, but as much as it scares me to agree with Tarver, you should sit this one out,” Jake answered.

“Just like you sat out when your wife and daughter were taken from you?”

“Leave them out of this.”

“How can I Jake, when you carry them around in every case. You tell me to stay behind, while you don’t practice what you preach. Anyway, enough debate, the trail’s getting cold.”

By Jake’s silence, she knew the conversation was over. He would focus on the task at hand. Jake stood up and starting walking. Dani knew his technique well enough to fall in step behind him and signalled Rico to follow in the SUV. Jake walked through the cemetery, momentarily glancing at several gravestones. At one gravestone, he stopped and looked at the inscription.

“See something interesting?” Dani asked.

“Not sure, I just know that his trail spent some time at this grave. I have the feeling that he didn’t choose this cemetery at random.” Dani looked down to see the name on the headstone. *Elica Williams 1942- 2005 Death is your savior.* “It’s an odd epitaph to have for your last words.”

“I don’t think it’s her words, I think they’re our killer’s,” Dani answered.

“Why do you say that?”

“He mentioned his mother and she may have triggered his killings. But they weren’t done for her, but to keep her away.”

“You don’t think he was paying a visit out of respect?”

“No, I think he was checking that she was still here. Sick as it may sound, he believed that his sacrifices were what kept her from returning.” Jake felt the gravestone and noticed that its handiwork was impressive. Several shapes were sculpted into its face; the stone carving was superior to other comparable markers.

“I think he made this. Everything this guy does is high quality, why should his expertise stop with woodworking.” Dani took a picture of the headstone with her phone.

“I’ll email this to Mac to analyse. You need specialized equipment to sculpt a headstone; it may limit our places to search. Where did he go next?” Jake scanned ahead and watched as the smoke trail led to a parking lot and then veered off to the west entrance.

“He left through that exit, probably heading back to the interstate.”

“Well if he learned anything, he’s going to try to throw you off his trail. Expect more false tracks. How much time do you have left?”

“Four hours. His trail is dark black so I might get a few extra hours. But once we reach dusk again, I’ve lost him for good.”

“Then let’s not lose him.” They walked to the SUV about fifty feet away. Dani put her arm around his shoulder.

“We’re going to catch him Jake. We’ll make sure he never hurts anyone again!”

North on Interstate 75

Several hours had passed since they had left the cemetery. Beside a couple of phone calls to Tarver, the interior of the SUV was strangely quiet. Rico focused on the road ahead, taking Jake's occasional direction instructions. Mac was on her tablet, looking for information on the gravestone picture. Dani stared out her window, her mind off in the distance. Considering what she just faced, she needed the downtime. Jake made sure that the black trail was always in front of them. Suddenly, he saw something that made me pause.

"Rico – stop up there," Jake pointed. The industrial zone had given way to farmland. The land was flat, landmarks that seemed close, took forever to reach. A series of dykes had been built to funnel water through the farms. Most crops were wheat and corn; with gas prices skyrocketing; ethanol production had pushed the growth of corn products. Throughout the dykes, a large river system existed, and farmers used small river boats to travel across their land. The SUV stopped at a small dock off the highway.

"What is it Jake?" Mac asked as she put down her tablet. He motioned to a dock with a parked car and a small boat moored to it.

"He took a boat; his trail goes along the river, across into the farmland."

"Do you think that was his boat?" Rico asked.

"No. I think he is testing Jake," Dani came out her trance. "He knows something about Jake's ability. He knows it works across land, now he's trying to test it across water."

"I haven't tried an ocean, but a river doesn't faze me. I can still see the trail clearly," Jake replied.

"He stole a boat to test Jake? Doesn't sound too concerned about being caught," added Rico.

"He's getting directions from someone who knows about Jake's tracking ability," Dani responded.

"Great! We have a psychopathic killer getting advice from another psychopath. Nothing like making him more dangerous," Rico shook his head. Tarver had gotten out of his SUV and interrupted the conversation by sticking his head into the driver's window.

"Are we taking a coffee break or are we tracking a killer?"

“He took a boat. Mind if I commandeer the other craft or are you going call in air support?” inquired Dani. Tarver considered the request.

“No time for a helicopter, every hour we delay and our killer has a greater chance of getting away. Take the boat, I’ll call police and let them notify the owner what we’re doing. Weight and De Nano will look over the car he left behind.”

“I’m taking Mac and Jake with me in the boat. Rico can bring the car.”

“Make sure you call me every ten minutes, we’ll follow behind shortly,” Tarver commanded as and turned to the back of the car.

“Don’t lose him Jake.”

“Like I’d want to,” Jake said under his breath. The three of them walked over to the dock.

“Do you know where we can find a key?” Jake wondered as he looked around the boat. Dani smiled at his question.

“Part of agent training is learning how to boost a car, or in this case a boat.” Dani pulled out a pocketknife and pulled on some wires underneath the main console. Several minutes passed and Jake felt like making a jab.

“Not as easy as you thought. They always seem to do it in a couple seconds on television.” Almost on cue, the engine roared to life.

“Life’s not like the movies Jake. Real life takes longer, but we still get the job done.” She took the wheel. “Have a seat you two. I’m driving.” The three of them climbed in.

Once the rope was pulled in, the boat drifted out from the dock and they steered north. Several cows watched the boat pass as they dipped their heads for an afternoon drink. Mac stopped typing on her tablet and looked at Dani.

“Do have a moment boss?”

“Until we find that boat, I’ve got nothing but time. What’d you got?”

“The photo you took is the gravestone of Joseph William’s mother.”

“How did she die?” Jake asked. He staggered as the boat lurched in a turn.

“Heart attack at age sixty-five. She was a smoker and overweight. Nothing suspicious in her death. However, there is something interesting about another family member. Joseph had a younger brother, Jeffrey who died of drowning as a teenager.”

“Why was it suspicious?” Jake asked.

“Jeffrey was on the swim team, yet he was found floating in a lake. They determined he drowned at night because his body was found in the morning by a duck hunter. Death was deemed an accident since no suicide note was found. But here’s the interesting thing, Jeffrey’s funeral was well attended with over a hundred people. Joseph and his mother are hard to find at the ceremony – look at the photo of the funeral.” Jake leaned in to look at the image.

“They’re in the background. Usually the family members are at the graveside with friends surrounding them.” Dani took her eyes off the river for a second to confirm.

“Maybe they felt guilty,” she said.

“Whatever the reason, they moved a few months later from the community,” Mac added.

“Do you think Joseph drowned his brother or was covering for his mother?” Dani asked.

“Both are viable options,” answered Mac.

“And you think this incident is what triggered his killings of small children? I don’t understand,” Jake exclaimed. A log crossed the river and Dani killed the engine. She let the boat drift past the log before turning to Jake.

“This isn’t a one-hour television show where the killer confesses, and everything ties up nicely in the last minute. This is real life Jake. You have to understand, our job is not necessarily to understand every motive behind his actions; it’s to learn how to stop him.”

“I understand Dani. I want to catch this killer. I’m just trying to understand who he is. Occupational hazard, my job was to understand what made people tick.”

“Then let’s get going. You can ask him in person,” Dani returned to the console, started the engine and the boat lurched back to life.

As the trail of black smoke meandered through the river way, Jake felt their journey was coming to an end.

The farmland along the waterway had ended. The boat entered Lake Erie. Under different circumstances, the three of them might have enjoyed the beauty of the coastline. Nature gave way to residential and commercial enterprises mixed around the coast. One destination stood out amongst them. Dani dialed her phone.

“Can you repeat yourself? I think something is wrong with this phone line,” Tarver barked.

“There’s nothing wrong with the phone. I told you that we had tied up the boat. Jake says that the trail leads to Spruce Point Playland, an amusement park outside of Cleveland.”

“Is this some kind of joke Danielle? First our killer goes on a boat ride and now he’s buying tickets to an amusement park?”

“We’re just following the trail Tarver! If you have a better lead, I’m all ears.” After a few seconds of silence, Dani continued. “We know he’s being given directions from another person. This source is using the coffin killer as bait through a maze, trying to test the limits of Jake’s abilities.”

“Do not enter the park until we get there! We’re five minutes out and I want the full team on the search.”

“I’ll send Mac and Rico into the security office to view security footage. It may give us an idea on where in the park he is.”

“Belay that order Danielle! I want all hands on deck. Send Mac only, I want Rico on the search.”

“Okay. Get here quickly. The park closes in an hour; I want to find him before thousands of people are exiting.” Dani clicked her phone off and looked over at Mac.

“I’ll head over to the office boss. I’ll show them the picture of Williams, see if we can find him,” suggested Mac.

“Call me when you have something. We’ll follow the trail, but I’ve got a feeling, he’s going to throw us a curve ball.”

Mac nodded and tucked her tablet under arm. She headed to the main gate and looked at the map of the park. Spruce Point was a rollercoaster heaven, not for the faint of heart. Mac saw a listing of over ten roller coasters, a 'Drop of Death' and spinning amusements that

made her queasy just looking at them. This theme park wasn't aimed for children or families, it was geared for teenagers looking for thrills or trying to impress their date. Mac noted the location of the security office and walked briskly to its building.

As she approached a door, a security guard in a white shirt with a badge on his sleeve approached her. He finished talking in his two-way radio and clipped it back on his shoulder.

"Ms? Is there something I can help you with?" Mac was tall but the guard had a good four inches of height on her. She flashed her credentials.

"I need to see your video surveillance room," she commanded. He nodded and used his swipe card and opened the door. As they entered, he pointed to a room three doors down on the left. He walked towards it and she followed. He opened the door and directed her in. She stepped into a large room with about twenty video feeds of various parts of the park. Another guard sat in a chair and was flicking different video signals with a touch of his mouse.

"Agent Macintosh. This is security officer Ben Price and I'm Joss Finer. Is there someone you're looking for?" Mac sat down in a chair and moved closer to the video screens.

"Show me the cameras to the entrances to the park." Ben brought up the computer map of the amusement park.

"There are forty-six cameras situated all around the park; six covering all exits and entrances, twenty covering all rollercoasters, ten on the restaurants, and the rest on any gathering areas, stages or high traffic areas. Can you show me who you are looking for?" Mac brought out an enlarged photo of Joseph William's grainy driver's license photo.

"What's he done? Joss asked.

"You really don't want to know. Trust me." Mac looked at the digital map of the park. "How many ways can a visitor enter the park?"

"One main entrance – exit through the same way. It helps funnel guests though the souvenir stands, makes more money for the park."

"The other exits?"

"Three emergency exits and two service entrances. It's pretty unlikely that your guy would have come in through these entrance

ways.”

“One entrance – less footage to go through. Can you copy over the footage for today to my tablet?”

“Big file, probably take a while to copy. Probably best if I compress it first,” replied Ben. “Just remember these cameras are not high grade, the footage isn’t the cleanest. Depending on their profile, unless they face the camera straight on, you may not get a clean look at their face.”

“Throw on a hat, sunglasses, hoodie etc. and if a person doesn’t want to be recognized, it’s not difficult to hide. Most of cameras are set up for liability issues, to notify security or a first aid if someone is hurt. Add the fact that thousands of bodies walked through today, you’ve got a pretty heady task ahead of you,” added Joss.

“Then I better get started,” Mac leaned back and waited for the footage through wireless transfer to copy. *I wonder how Jake and Dani are doing?*

Chapter 23

The Children's Hour

Dani and Jake passed through the main gate and headed towards the center of the park. Rico stayed back about a hundred feet with Tarver, Weight and De Nano to form a semi-circle behind them. If the killer saw Dani and ran, they would surround him. They climbed a small hill with flower beds on the left of the pathway, a rollercoaster with a dozen screaming teenagers rushed by on their right. Jake spied two adults sitting behind a teenage boy and he had to swallow down his grief. *I wish I could be one of those parents.* Dani noticed Jake tensing up and tried to distract him.

“When I was a kid, my parents used to take me to this small amusement park outside of our hometown. Every summer, they must have taken me dozen of times, I can almost remember every turn of the attractions.”

“Sounds like you had a fun childhood.”

“Not really, the park was old; the rides were lame and dirty. I remember one time, I refused to get into a ride because some one had gotten sick and they hadn't cleaned it up properly. But it wasn't the rides that bothered me the most.”

“Strangers hanging around the park?” Jake asked.

“Oh god, nothing like that. It was my parents. They were watchers. They always wanted me to have fun, but they would never go on the attractions with me. I begged and pleaded with them to go on the ride with me, but it didn't appeal to them. They were both professors and it just didn't interest them intellectually.”

“A dad will usually do anything for her daughter, even if he detests it.”

“Not always Jake. Parents want their children to be happy, but they don't always realize how to do it. I just wanted my parents to share the experience with me. They weren't bad people; they didn't understand that doing it alone wasn't as fun.”

Jake had to sidestep as a group of teenage boys barrelled through them, oblivious to anyone but themselves.

“And you're reminiscing this story with me because.....?” Jake asked.

“Because this place makes you think of the memories you never had with your daughter. Just don’t use some idyllic image of a perfect family to feed your loss.” Jake was silent but Dani could see some tension diminish in him.

They reached the crest of the hill and walked towards the center of the park. A huge stage was set up with several teenage performers’ lip syncing to a top pop music. A moat surrounded the stage and the singers walked back and forth across it, much to the delight of the mostly female crowd. Jake surged ahead and Dani caught glimpses of him as she walked forward.

I don’t understand any of this, why would the killer pick such a public place. Does he want to get caught? Dani thought. Her cell phone broke her train of thought.

“Mac – what you got?” Dani put her hand over her other ear to block out the crowd noise. Jake momentarily disappeared from her view.

“Is Jake with you?” Mac’s voice sounded concerned.

“Yes, he’s just a few feet away,” Dani looked through the crowd to get a glimpse of him. “Have you found footage of the killer? Is he here?”

“Yes and no. He entered the park about two hours ago and exited an hour after that.”

“Why did he do that? Is he just leading us to random areas to try to slow us down?”

“It’s more than that,” Mac continued. “I think he brought us here for a purpose. I reviewed the footage and he brought . . .” Mac’s voice was interrupted by a scream as several teenagers were yelling and the musicians on stage had stopped singing. Dani pushed through the crowd, asking people to separate. As she got the edge of the stage, she saw Jake stepping through the moat with the water past his ankles. The crowd was yelling for him to get out, but his eyes were fixed straight ahead on the main performing area.

“Jake? What is it? The killer has already left the park. He’s not here?” Despite the noise of the crowd, Jake stopped and turned for a moment, in response to Dani’s comments. Tears streamed down his face and Dani hadn’t seen such agony since his wife had died. He quickly continued walking, then stepped on the stage and collapsed.

His eyes were fixed in front of him and he swiped at the air with his hand. A security guard came up the stairs and walked forward, intent on removing Jake from the stage. The crowd watched the scene with interest, some even yelling at the guard to hurry up. Dani put her phone back to ear.

“Do you have footage of the main stage in the park? Did our killer hurt Jake? I lost sight of him for a second and now he seems in pain.” Dani headed towards the right end of the stage, intent on talking to the guard who was trying to pull Jake off.

“No Dani, it’s not the killer who hurt him,” Mac replied. “I watched the footage of the main stage ninety minutes ago and the killer talked to someone briefly. It was very casual, the two of them had their backs to the camera but you can tell by their body language that they were talking. Then the killer left and doubled back the exact way he came in.”

“So, we’re back where we started,” Dani replied.

“No, it gets worse. The person he met, probably the person you said our guy spoke to on the phone. He went up on the stage. It was during a performance break and there were other teenagers there having their picture taken with one of the performers.”

“Jesus Mac, would you just get to the point!” Dani yelled into the phone as she stepped on stage.

“The other man had a child with him. She was wearing a ball cap but when she turned to the camera, I was able to determine her features. Dani, the little girl was Jake’s daughter! I think he can see her trail again.”

Chapter 24

Meeting a Bullet

16 months ago The Tasty Chef Eatery Seattle, Oregon

The sky was overcast but occasional cloud breaks allowed the sun to filter through. Office staff milled through the outdoor square and ordered coffees and muffins from the eatery. Most customers returned to the office towers, but a few were seated while reading papers or talking on their phones. Tyson sat at his predetermined spot, nervously playing with a manila envelop. He had been fidgeting for the last ten minutes, obviously worried about talking to Weems. Dani did not give him a wire; the risks were too great that Weems might check. Instead, so as not to overburden him, she gave very simple instructions, hoping that Tyson could manage.

Although Tyson had met Weems several times, this would be the first time he had called the meeting. Weems had always made the appointments and he would be suspicious. Rico sat about five tables away, texting on his phone, otherwise ignoring Tyson. He knew that Rico was watching him but was very careful to avoid detection. Tyson had been coached not to look in Rico's direction. He knew the rest of the team was watching him.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Tyson turned as Weems sat next him. Weems's square jaw held a painted smile. *Where did he come from?*

"Can't complain," Tyson answered casually as he slid the envelop over to Weems.

"You're all business today. You got somewhere to go?" Weems leaned back in his chair. His posture looked like someone who had all the time in the world.

"Just got offered a promotion to San Diego – thought I'd give you parting gift before I leave."

"San Diego? Hope that doesn't mean I've lost my best source of information?" Weems moved closer.

"Nah. But I'll I need a few months to get the lay of land. Make sure I understand the new security protocols." Tyson started to get up, but Weems placed his hand on Tyson to stay.

“You’re in a big hurry – don’t you want to get paid?” Weems studied Tyson’s face as if to validate his response. Tyson had to think quickly.

“Figured you’d have to review the information to determine its worth. I don’t expect to get paid if you don’t pursue the mark.” Weems removed his hand, accepting Tyson’s explanation.

“You know what Tyson. I like you. You don’t always like what I ask of you, but you don’t complain. I’m thinking of letting you move on. Not bothering you anymore.”

“When did you find religion?” Tyson asked sarcastically not believing what Weems was saying.

“Ha! Good one,” he slapped Tyson on the shoulder. “No, nothing like that. It’s just that I’ve met someone. She’s made me think I can be a better man.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Not completely. But I do want to change my business. Take fewer jobs, less risks. I can’t stop what I do completely, but I may be able to reduce my dependency on it. Do you know what I mean?” Tyson thought about his issues with gambling.

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“There’s just one more thing I need you to do for me.” Tyson became nervous. Weems interpreted his silence as agreement. “There is someone interfering with people I know. People he shouldn’t know how to find. I want to know everything about him,” Weems slid a small sealed envelop across the table. “His last name is Valance; everything I know about him, full name, occupation, address is all in there. I need it by the end of day.”

“Why is he after you?” Tyson asked already knowing the answer.

“Not your concern, but I have something he wants,” Weems answered. Tyson got up, happy with an excuse for a safe exit.

“No problem, I’ll find everything on Jake and email the results back to you.” Tyson was happy to get up, his role was done. The cops would stop Weems on the way out and he would be free. It felt like a weight had been removed. As he passed Weems, a foot stuck out and his hand grabbed his jacket, pulling him down.

“I didn’t tell you his first name.” Weems pulled out his gun and emptied two bullets into Tyson’s chest. Instantaneous, Tyson’s back exploded with blood; his lifeless eyes looked at Weems as his body sank to the ground. The team sprang into action, too late to prevent Tyson’s death.

“Take him down Rico! I want him alive,” Dani yelled into her radio as Rico got up to take a shot at Weems’s leg.

“There’s the gunman,” a woman behind Rico screamed. Her coworker, a stocky male brought his full force onto Rico back as he tried to aim at Weems. Rico legs crumpled under him as he fell forward to the ground. Weems noticed the struggle and fled with several other screaming patrons to the square. Rico twisted and brought his elbow into his attacker’s chest as he hit the ground. The other man clutched his chest as he had the wind knocked out of him.

“FBI!” Rico flashed his credentials to the attacker and his female coworker. “Stay down!” he commanded. Both of them dropped like rocks and immediately regretted their Good Samaritan actions.

“I see him,” Dani yelled, running from her vantage point. Her legs were pumping as she navigated around a sea of frightened people. She saw Weems turn around a building onto the next street. She ran left, hoping to cut him off at the next intersection.

Damn it! This whole meet reeked of a setup. Why hadn’t he trusted his instincts and stayed away? Weems jumped over a railing and headed for the street. His vehicle was several blocks away and nothing would prevent him from escaping. There were too many routes out of the city to catch him. He passed a mother pushing her child in a runner’s stroller. He’d soon be getting back to his adopted family.

“Ooooffff!” The air was knocked out of Weems as he had jumped him from behind. He twisted his body so that his attacker took some of the impact as he hit the ground.

“Where is my family?” Jake yelled and Weems looked into the face of the man he was looking for. *Maybe this trip wasn’t going to be waste after all.* His movements were erratic, fuelled by anger not by skill. Weems could easily overwhelm him. They struggled and Weems punched him in the face, momentarily stunning Jake. When he regained

his wits, Jake was staring down the barrel of a gun. His anger didn't cool in the slightest.

"What have you done to my wife and daughter?" Jake tried to get up, but Weems smashed his head with the butt of his gun.

"They are well taken care of and they have a message for you. They don't want you anymore."

"They would never say that!" Jake wailed.

"Doesn't matter what you think. I've wanted to meet you. And now, my face is that the last thing you will ever see." Weems pulled the trigger and the gun clicked empty.

"Jesus! Can nothing go right this day?" He fumbled in his jacket for another clip to finish his work.

"BAM!" a bullet imbedded into a concrete pillar adjacent to Weems.

"FBI! Get off that man and put your hands up!" Weems looked across the street and saw an attractive woman with a gun pointed squarely at his chest. He complied with her first request but ignored the second. He pushed Jake away from him and immediately ducked behind a bystander. A truck passed, obscuring Dani's view and when it passed, Weems was gone. Dani flagged several vehicles to stop and crossed the street to Jake. She cradled his head.

"Jake? Talk to me. Are you okay?" He shook his head as blood dripped down his right temple. "I lost the only chance I had to find my family. I'll never see them again." Heavy footfalls came up from behind them.

"Don't give up yet," Rico interrupted his breath in large gulps. "I saw him leave in blue sport car. He was too far to stop but I got a partial license plate. He didn't see me, so he hopefully won't ditch the car right away." He helped lift Jake off the pavement as Dani spoke into her phone.

"Mac – get your tablet. Run a license plate and get access to any traffic cam footage. Now!"

Tasty Chef square – 90 minutes later

The ambulance left; its siren silent as it took Tyson's dead body away in its interior. Jake watched it, wondering how many more people would die in the pursuit of his family. A hand touched his shoulder.

"He was dead before he hit the ground. He probably didn't even know what happened. The shot ruptured his heart, he didn't suffer," Mac consoled.

"Still didn't deserve to die. Seems like I'm creating a trail of dead bodies."

"Weems pulled the trigger, not you."

Jake looked at the large bloodspot on the brick pavers where Tyson's life had ended.

"Where do we go from here?" Jake asked as Mac pressed several keys on her tablet.

"Car is registered to a Wesley Smalls. Driver's license has different hair color and facial hair but it's Weems."

"Does it show where he lives?" Jake asked anxiously.

"No. The address is fake. I ran it through the database and it doesn't exist." Mac answered.

"So now what? Have we lost him?" Jake was crestfallen. Dani and Rico joined them and sat down at the table.

"No, we haven't," Mac replied. "Ran the license plate and the car had a brake repair at garage in Duvall about a month ago."

"He used a credit card?" Rico asked.

"No, he paid in cash, but the garage owner documented the license plate when they towed the vehicle from a farmhouse. The garage owner thought the farm belonged to someone else, but was told by the car owner that he was the new owner. He didn't seem like someone who'd live in a farmhouse. I did a search on the farm and this is the picture of the owner." Mac scrolled down the screen to reveal a middle-aged man's driver license.

"That's the dead body I found at the coffee shop!" Jake exclaimed

"Now we know where the body came from," remarked Dani. "Did the garage confirm Weems description?"

“They did and one more piece of information. A traffic cam on the south side of the city caught Weems speeding on to the interstate. The direction of the car shows Weems is heading back to the farmhouse.”

“Rico!” Dani yelled.

“Already on it boss,” Rico was dialing his phone. “I’m calling the local police department; see if they can get a squad car to meet us there.”

“Make it happen.” Dani commanded. “We have family to save.”

Chapter 25

Killers by Nature

Spruce Point Playland – security office.

The office was packed full of bodies trying to make sense of the situation. Tarver was on his cell phone while De Nano and Weight watched security footage. Mac and Rico reviewed map information on her tablet while Dani stood over Jake in the corner of the room. His head was down with fingers grasping his hair. Without seeing Jake's face, Dani could feel his pain. She touched his back.

"Are you sure Jake? Are you sure that it's her?" Jake looked up slowly, his eyes puffy and red. His daughter's whereabouts had gone cold over a year ago; he wasn't prepared for his emotions to become uncorked again. He had forced them down under the weight of many other investigations. Now they sprung out of him quickly, like stepping on a landmine.

"It's her," Jake answered. I saw a video of her, and I can see her trail again!" This was a first. He had never been able to re-establish a trail; once twenty-four hours had passed, his ability to follow the missing person ended. Now he had a second chance, it was an opportunity Jake didn't intend to waste.

"Jake— what are you thinking? Please talk to me," Dani tried to encourage him to open up.

"I can't help you with the killer anymore. I have a chance to find my daughter. And I'm going to do it, with or without the FBI's help." Tarver stepped closer to them, listening to the conversation.

"Guess again Jake. We have a child serial killer; you need to follow him to the end! You are a consultant of the FBI and you take your orders from me."

"Well that's easy to solve," Jake answered, standing up. "I quit. You never supported me before, so I don't expect any help from you now."

"You've playing into his hands Jake. He has your daughter and knows your ability. He's going to lead you on and then cut you off. Not only will you lose her, but he'll get away. Think of that when another

child is taken and killed because of poor decisions!” yelled Tarver. Jake’s grief was overwhelming, yet he was torn by his decision.

“Wait a second Tarver. You seem to be missing an important piece of information,” Dani interrupted.

“Enlighten me,” Tarver snarled.

“Even with the poor picture quality,” she pointed at the security footage, “we know this is Weems. The two killers are connected and have been in contact with each other. We find Jake’s daughter and catch Weems; we’ll be able to pull in Williams at the same time.”

Tarver looked unimpressed.

“That’s a pretty big stretch, even for you. Williams is our main target. Pursuing a case like Weems is not as high a priority. The Coffin Killer is much higher profile. The director is not going to support it.”

“Then you got some explaining to do. You can sell the idea that Jake can’t be in two places at once. You can’t force him to abandon a chance to find his daughter. Twenty-four hours have passed; William’s trail is almost gone. In a few hours, it will disappear into the night.”

“From what I read about Weems; he’s not going to hand himself over. He’s got to have an escape plan. I suppose your team is the best to help Jake?”

“Of course. We work with Jake best.”

“And how do you expect my team to find Williams without Jake?” asked Tarver. Dani moved closer.

“Guess you have to use your field training just like any other case. Unless you’re not up to the challenge.” Tarver’s reaction was exactly what Dani hoped for. Once Tarver’s ego was challenged, there was no way he was backing down.

“Fine. I’m making you personally responsible if this goes bad.”

“I’m a big girl. I not afraid to take responsibility. I don’t need to set up a scapegoat.”

“You got twenty-four hours to show a result.”

“That’s all the time I ever have,” Jake replied.

South on I-95

The red brake lights flashed in front of him. Williams let his foot off the accelerator and the stolen truck eased down to the speed

limit. *After evading police today, there was no sense in getting pulled over for speeding*, he thought. He was tired but felt relieved. He had played the role of bait and now the tracker would be after someone else. He was free.

Well, not completely. Obviously, the manhunt from the FBI would continue; he could never use his real name again. He would manage; the voice tablet would have to go. The police would be on the look out for man who communicated like this. He'd go back to sign language, change his look and move far, far away. He could go west, maybe Nevada where subdivisions were springing up overnight in the desert. A good carpenter is always an asset.

He had hidden some money away just in case for a rainy day. It was pouring now. He could grab it and start his new life. Get established and start his work again. Adrenalin coursed through his veins, he felt excited, unstoppable. Not even the full force of the FBI could catch him. But before he disappeared, he had one stop to make. He felt compelled to complete one last task.

Spruce Point Playland – parking lot

Tarver stood by his vehicle and looked at his watch. He was taking a big risk by letting Jake go. Yet again, there was no way to force him. Given time, he was sure he could wear him down, but time was something he didn't have. Since the death of Hastings, his superiors had him on a short leash. He wasn't going to jeopardize his advancement by stalling this case.

"Where to?" De Nano asked interrupting his train of thought. Tarver watched Dani talking to Mac by their SUV and walked over without answering De Nano's question. Dani acknowledged his approach.

"Jake says that both trails lead outside of the park heading north. He can barely make out William's trail much longer. I suggest we travel together until they diverge." Tarver looked at Jake in the back. Rather than make a comment, Tarver nodded.

"We'll be right behind you," and he walked back to his vehicle.

“Follow them,” Tarver commanded as he sat in the passenger seat. De Nano gunned the engine while Weight pulled out a laptop in the back seat. After a few seconds of typing, Weight spoke up.

“I’ve searched all of William’s bank accounts, property searches, and previous job employers. I’ve made a few phone calls but nothing substantial has come up. At the warehouse property we raided, he used a dummy name and it’s going to take more digging before I find anything. You sure it’s a good idea if we lose Jake?”

“No, it’s horrible idea but unless we put a gun to his head, I don’t see how to make it work. You got a better suggestion?” Tarver looked Weight in the eyes, moments later; Weight averted his gaze back to his laptop.

“That guy’s a basket case, you can’t rely on him,” Weight mumbled to no one in particular.

The SUVs exited out the main gate. The parking lot was emptying with weary families trudging to their cars, ready to make the long drive home. Tarver watched a family of four walk to their cars. The father looked defeated, his teenage daughter arguing about something while her mother feigned interest. The teenage boy walked ten paces behind the group; he looked around as if worried that his friends might see him with his family.

It reminded Tarver of his childhood except he always walked ahead of his family. He was the oldest of five boys, always eager to impress his younger siblings. He’d pick fights with kids bigger than him and then brag to his brothers that he was tougher than all of them. Instead of making his brothers proud of him, he was labelled a troublemaker. Everyone was surprised when he became an FBI agent expecting him to channel his abilities as a boxer or athlete. Now he devoted himself to his work and only saw his family once a year at Christmas.

His brothers had all married and each had one or two kids. Tarver was always a hit with the boys who constantly asked him to either to pretend to draw his gun or chase them like they were criminals. The rest of his family tolerated him, he was friends with none of his brothers and their wives avoided him like the plague. His dad was his lone supporter, he liked Tarver’s take no prisoner attitude and, in many ways, he was more like his dad than any of his brothers.

Looking back, Tarver remembered getting suspended from school for a fight with a bully. His mother was a strict pacifist and hated violence, pushing her boys toward academics. She made sure that Tarver's father discussed the issue with the family during supper. He remembered the speech as if it was yesterday.

"Everyone have a seat," his father bellowed, "and nobody touch their meal until we have discussed the day." All eyes turned to Tarver as the boys knew the topic.

"Adam – would you tell us about your day?" his dad inquired while speaking to the group. Tarver knew it wasn't a request but decided on as few details as possible as not to give ammunition to his parents.

"One of the boys at school was pushing my friend Joey around. When he pushed me, I pushed back." Short, sweet and to the point. He was no debating major, but he knew 'less was more' when it came to defending himself.

"And how did you defend yourself?" Tarver's mother went on the offensive.

"I'm sorry dear, is this topic mine to discuss or yours?" his father asked. His mother may have demanded that Tarver be punished for his fight but once his father began a conversation, he maintained control.

"Sorry," she replied, looking down at her dinner plate. There were a few seconds of silence, but it seemed like an eternity to Tarver.

"Please answer the question," his dad directed.

"I broke his nose," came the blunt reply. One of his brothers snickered but was quickly silenced by a stern look from his dad.

"Was that an appropriate response?" his dad questioned. Tarver had agonized over the response, knowing that he was being judged.

"No, although it was fair to defend myself, I could have been more careful. I should have tried to get help."

"Ah, he had it coming," his brother Phillip had answered. He didn't usually defend Tarver and the sentiment was unexpected. And unwanted.

"If I want your opinion, I will ask for it," his dad had responded. "Adam is explaining his actions, he has the floor." Phillip

sank in his seat and didn't speak again for the rest of the meal. "And what did the school do to you?"

"They suspended me for today and tomorrow. And I had to write an apology to the boy I hit."

"And what punishment do you think I should give you at home?" This was always the tricky part, if you were too easy on yourself, his dad would likely double or triple his punishment. If he was too hard, his dad wouldn't change anything. He decided to roll the dice.

"I think my brothers should decide this one," he said matter of fact. That was the equivalent of dropping an atomic bomb in the middle of the dining room. The room exploded with commentary; every brother had a completely different opinion. Each had a grudge against Tarver but also feared him because he was the oldest and biggest. His mother screamed her lungs out on two occasions for each boy to speak individually. But after a few minutes, a chorus of voices would start arguing as his brothers could not make a consensus. His mother eventually left the dining room to hide in the kitchen. Dad stood up with his ultimatum.

"Enough! This is not a democracy! Adam, you are hereby grounded for a week. Does anyone have any issues with that punishment? Cause if you do, that person can join their brother."

You could have heard a grain of rice falling on a plate; it was so quiet. The punishment was quite mild, so Tarver was surprised that no one tried to up the ante. Eventually everyone went back to their meals and mom even returned for a few seconds to take away some dirty dishes. But his father wasn't done, and he stood up to make his point.

"If this happens again, you can imagine that the consequences will be much more severe. Understood?"

"Understood," Tarver replied. The rest of his brothers had put their heads down, but his father continued to stare at him. Once he realized that no one else was looking, a slight grin appeared, and his dad winked at him. It was a defining moment for him; he realized that his dad had to set order to keep the rest of the family in line. But with one wink, Tarver realized that his father supported him in standing up against the bully. It inspired him with future life choices, like to join the

agency. And no matter how uncomfortable his family gatherings became; he knew he always had his dad's support.

"Why are you smiling?" De Nano asked as he turned the SUV off the interstate.

"Just thought of something," Tarver answered briskly, not needing to share his childhood memories. "What is Jake saying?"

"Mac just relayed to me that both illuminated trails are heading in this direction, although because of the incoming darkness, there's not much left to see of William's trail.

"Do you think the two of them will stick together? Like some brotherhood of serial killers," Weight asked from the back seat, looking up from his laptop.

"We should be so lucky. Soon they will go their separate ways." Almost on cue, the brake lights came on Dani's SUV and pulled over to the shoulder of the road. De Nano pulled in behind and Tarver jumped out of the passenger seat. He tapped the passenger side and Dani rolled down the window.

"Why are we stopping?" Tarver asked but he knew the answer.

"Jake says that the two paths go in different directions. Williams goes south, Weems and his daughter going east, back towards Dayton." Dani got out of the car and walked a few paces away, taking Tarver with her.

"Why does Weems still have Jake's daughter? I thought he would have disposed of her long ago," Tarver asked.

"Well Jake has been agonizing over that for the whole drive," Dani arched her head to the back of the vehicle where Jake was watching them. "It's been so long; he was coming to terms that his daughter was dead. Now he's panicking that he's going to lose her again."

"Call me with any reports on Weems. If you capture him, I will interrogate him on Williams. I want to know how he contacted Williams and what he's told him to do."

"If we get him and Jake's daughter, he's all yours." She was silent and looked down for a second, as if she had something to say.

"What is it Danielle?" Tarver asked, interpreting her body language.

“Thanks for allowing Jake to find his daughter. Thanks for acting like a human being.”

“It’s not like you gave me much choice. But maybe there’s hope for me yet?” he smiled, realizing this was one of the few conversations that didn’t end with both of them screaming at each other. Dani jumped back into the car and seconds later her SUV headed towards the stop light and turned east. Tarver got back into his car, ready to face the fact that their best lead had just driven off in the other direction.

“I got something,” Weight interrupted before Tarver had buckled his seat. “Williams used a dummy name to rent the warehouse that he was holding his victims. He must have rented two properties at the same time because the same name was used again for an office building.”

“Could it be someone else with the same name?” De Nano asked.

“I don’t think so; the name has the same fake address as the warehouse.”

“So, it’s our guy. Where is it?”

“On the southern side of Dayton. In the direction that Jake said Williams was going in.”

“We’re due for some good luck. Radio in for backup, tell the local police to hang well back, not to spook him if he’s there.” De Nano gunned the engine and the SUV drove at a much higher speed than the limit.

“This is our last chance. Once he picks up whatever he needs from there, he’ll be gone. A ghost. Able to capture kids in another part of the country. I won’t lose him, and I’ll do anything to make sure he doesn’t kill again.”

Chapter 26

Learning to Prey

It seemed forever since Weems had been this excited. His heart was literally bursting through his rib cage in anticipation of Jake pursuing him. He lived for these cat and mouse games, it made him feel truly alive. He gave Jake full credit, because of his interference, he had changed Weems. He no longer considered himself a confidence man, a man who took money from others. He now thought of himself as a man of change, changing the lives of those around them. He smiled at the buzz word ‘change agent’ as he realized that he had taken something so precious to Jake, that he had changed Jake’s life forever as well.

He turned the car into the center of the city. The headlights flashed by him as traffic was heading home for the day. He had a few hours head start and there were a number of things he needed to do. Preparations for the night’s festivities. It had been a long time since he had been face to face with Jake and he was savouring each moment in anticipation. So much had changed since Jake’s interference, he felt like a man reborn.

Yet somehow, he still hadn’t assessed Jake’s full abilities. He didn’t care how Jake did it, even the FBI didn’t understand. He wanted to study Jake’s limitations, to cause him to make a mistake that would cost someone their life. FBI reports were scarce, almost as if they didn’t want to document what Jake could do, to avoid being a laughingstock or sued by the media. He payrolled several sources and had hacked enough agent reports to create his own cheat sheet that measured Jake’s ability. The typed worn sheet never left his side. In some ways, he had a better idea of Jake’s abilities than his FBI handlers. He reviewed the list.

Jake’s Abilities

- 1) Can track for 24 hours from disappearance. If Jake appears onsite after that time frame, he won’t be able to pursue the missing person.

- 2) Color of trail – each missing person has a unique signature. The color and hue signify the person – like a snowflake, no two are alike.
- 3) Elevation doesn't seem to effect following the trail. Doesn't matter if you climb a tree or a mountain, the trail doesn't seem to diminish. Possible flight from an airplane would be impossible to follow
- 4) Backtracking can throw off the trail as Jake may spend time trying to re-establish link. In heat of a chase, may buy time to back track parts of route.
- 5) Emotional contact – Jake can't track every missing person. He must find out about the person from the people who love the victim. If Jake can establish the emotional link, the clock begins in his ability to find them.

Researching Jake had become a fulltime obsession but with no financial benefits. He still had a number of money schemes that paid for his lifestyle, but he no longer craved the attention. He made most of his money remotely or through secondary people; he spent little face time with the people he stole from. The schemes were a means to an end; they funded what he really enjoyed. His hobby. His habit. He wanted to take everything away from Jake, piece by piece until there was nothing left. He didn't want to kill Jake; he wanted Jake to do that himself. To Weems, that would be the ultimate win.

He pulled into the parking lot and turned the engine off. He turned to the back seat.

“Well my dear, are you ready to go in?”

Chapter 27

A Night at the Museum

Jake lay back in his seat, trying to process everything that had happened. He couldn't believe that he had been given a second chance. Jake would have given anything for this opportunity. The fact that Dani, Rico and Mac were supporting him, made it complete. Jake had spent so much time with his practice that friendships and family were almost alien to him. His parents lived on the east coast and they tended to see each other only one a year. His friends were few, his colleagues were work related and he could have no personal relationships with his clients who he spent most of his time with. For now, he actually felt part of a team and a family.

"Jake— any changes in the trail," asked Rico looking back.

"No change - still heading along route 65."

"Where is this taking us?" Dani asked.

"Assuming we keep in this direction, we're heading to the Dayton downtown core," answered Mac.

"Why would he take us back into the city? You'd think he want to keep on the open road to try to get as far away as possible," commented Rico.

"Nothing about Weems makes sense. He wants us to follow him; maybe even catch up with him. I feel like he's setting a trap for us instead of the other way around," Dani said. "Guy drops off the face of the earth for over a year ago and then reappears exactly where we are working a case. It feels like the call center kidnapping, he's toying with us. This is no coincidence; he's following you Jake."

"Why? What does he want from me? He's taken my family, what else does he want?"

"I think it's stranger that your daughter is still with him. He's a con man and a killer – how does he look after her?" inquired Mac. Jake leaned closer to her.

"You think he's keeping her to use against me? That doesn't any sense. I was nothing to him before he took my family. Why not release her and make it easier to disappear?"

"I don't think your wife and daughter was a simple abduction to Weems. He had a list of other crimes before but never kidnapping.

Everything about your case screamed personal. But if he isn't trying to hurt you, why do it? What is he after?" Dani asked. Jake looked at her.

"Everyone else has asked me from police to family. They all think that my wife was having an affair and wasn't abducted, she went willingly. Although I wasn't the greatest husband; she wouldn't leave me like that and take our daughter. If she wanted a divorce, I would have been against it, but I would have agreed if she truly wanted it."

"Do you think she knew that? Could she have helped take your daughter away?" Rico asked.

"Never," Jake said with a calm voice that surprised him. "I was neglectful, never vengeful. I would have tried to find a solution."

"You mentioned that before your wife died, that she said she was sorry. Did you ever figure out why?" Mac asked. Jake took a deep breath.

"I've played through our last conversation a hundred times. She could have been sorry for leaving me, she could have been sorry for not protecting our daughter, she could have been sorry for not warning me. I'll never know until I get my daughter back." Jake looked out into the darkness as her pink trail beckoned to him in the distance. *I will find you!*

The SUV drove along the downtown street through sparse traffic. Night had fallen and lights flashed from oncoming vehicles. The day had ended but people headed out for an evening meal.

"Okay Mac. Where are we?" Dani craned her neck to read a street sign. Mac tapped the GPS on her tablet.

"We're in the Oregon Arts District; it's full of galleries, shops and restaurants. It's the oldest neighbourhood in the city, dating back to the 19th century."

"It looks artsy farcy to me," Rico commented. "Where is Weems going?"

"There!" Jake pointed. In his excitement, he almost stood up the vehicle. "He went in there!" The structure was an impressive concrete building with large pillars and a domed roof. A large set of stairs lead up from the street to several entrance doors. Mac tapped on her tablet.

“Museum of Natural History – exhibits include displays of animals from early evolution to current day. Exhibits are stored on three main floors with a basement for storage of rotating exhibits.”

“Strange choice to lead us to. Jake are you sure her trail leads into the museum?” asked Dani.

“Right through the front door.”

“Rico – drive around. I want to make sure this isn’t some type of obstacle course and he’s leading us to other buildings.” They drove around the block for what seemed forever to Jake. He confirmed that there was no trail exiting the museum.

“She’s inside,” Jake said to no one in particular. As the SUV rolled out to the front again and parked, the entire vehicle was silent. All four of them realized what was at stake.

“Mac – call the local police. I want this museum cordoned off. Nobody gets in or out of this place. Understand?” Dani commanded.

“You got it boss. I’ll direct them as soon as they arrive.”

“Rico – you’re with me and Jake. We take this slow; he’s waiting for us in there and like the call center building, he’s likely to have a few ‘obstacles’ in our way. Jake you need to follow behind. Point me in the right direction and we’ll lead the way.”

“I’ll do anything to find her.”

“You better. I can almost guarantee he’s going to create a situation where you see your daughter. He’s hoping that you’ll rush forward. If you do, you’ll probably kill all of us. This is hard for you, but you have to keep your emotions in check. You have to treat this like an ordinary case. Can you do it?” Jake was silent; he didn’t want to simply repeat what Dani wanted to hear.

“I’ll try,” Jake answered weakly, speaking the truth.

“Try hard Jake. Your daughter’s life depends on it.”

The three of them donned vests and helmets as they entered the main entrance of the museum. Jake looked through the glass door and watched his daughter’s smoke trail weaving into the dark interior. The door was closed but unlocked. Rico cautiously stepped in first and walked towards the security desk. A body was slumped on the floor, Rico checked for a pulse.

“The security guard is alive, but his breathing is laboured. Could be head trauma or concussion.” Dani and Jake looked towards the main exhibit doors.

“Call Mac – get her to call an ambulance. Stay with the guard until they get here.” She looked at the bank of dead video screens. “See if you get the security system functional. I need to know where Weems is before we step into one of his traps.” Rico nodded and pulled out his phone. Dani looked at Jake. “Looks like it’s just you and me again. Where to next?” she motioned with her hand.

“The main exhibits to your right. The ones exploring the evolution of bugs,” Jake replied. They walked over to a huge scale model of a common housefly. It towered over the entrance and it was probably a hit with school age boys. In the darkness, it seemed to watch them with its huge eyes. Jake pointed inside and Dani stepped carefully, scanning the walls and floor before each step. They weren’t going to win a race, but she wanted to get to their destination alive.

The room was a mix of exhibits, computer displays, and glass cases with dozens of strange and exotic insects. There was a huge skylight that illuminated the room with moonlight. In the center of the display, there was a mass of moving bodies in a glass display. Jake watched his daughter’s smoke trail snake around the display several times as if she was interested in its contents. He peered closely inside. Hundreds of eyes returned his gaze and their mandible claws clicked in unison. Dani pointed at a picture of a man’s head buried in the sand.

“That’s the old torture of burying a person in the desert sand, with just the head jutting out and attracting army ants towards the immobile head.”

“That’s disgusting!”

“Kids are attracted to morbid things especially boys. Look at the display – it says the ants will attack a living person and eat the flesh to get at the salt in the tissues.”

“That’s not something my daughter should be looking at.” Jake walked ahead before Dani pulled him back.

“No – you point in the direction and I lead. Weems is expecting you to react emotionally. Don’t be rash – your daughter needs her dad.” Jake nodded and motioned to a circular stairwell that went up the back wall of the museum.

Dani climbed slowly, looking for trip wire or something out of place along the wall of the stairwell. Jake followed behind and each step seemed to take an eternity. The museum was deathly quiet – no creaks from the building, no scurrying of mice. Jake assumed that with children attendees, there was lots of crumbs left behind, snacks that rodents would greedily take. He wondered what exhibits Ella would enjoy in a museum like this. *Over the last year and half, how much had she changed? How much taller was she? Did she still love the same things?*”

“Jake pay attention!” Dani whispered as he bumped into her. Dani stopped as she pointed a laser light that shot a faint beam across the step. Dani looked at the gadget. “Low tech device, probably picked up at a security distributor, meant to tell the user if someone has entered a room.” She stepped over the beam and encouraged Jake to do the same. As they reached the top of the stairs, Dani’s phone vibrated.

“Rico – what do you have?”

“I’ve got the security cameras working; it’s not a very comprehensive system. About fifteen cameras are placed in key locations, at major exhibits and in commons areas. Lesser exhibits, offices, washrooms, emergency exits are not shown.”

“Any activity besides Jake and me?”

“Zero. But there are so many dead areas for the cameras that Weems could be waiting. But I’ll know he crosses any high traffic zones.”

“Okay – call if you see anyone besides us.”

“Roger. But Dani – something doesn’t feel right. Be careful.” Rico words made Dani look at Jake.

“We will. As soon as the local police arrive, assign one of them to the monitors and then you and Mac get up here. I need as many eyes as I can get.”

“A squad car has just arrived. We’ll see you in a few minutes,” Rico remarked as Dani clicked her phone off. The staircase ended and the second-floor exhibits showed a number of marine animals.

“Rico didn’t see anyone besides us, did he? No Weems, no sign of my daughter. What if she isn’t here? What if I lose her again?”

“Jake, this isn’t the time for this,” Dani warned. Jake could see the anguish in her eyes. He was doing exactly what she asked him not to. Jake swallowed hard and choked back his grief.

“They walked through that exhibit,” he pointed. They moved forward slowly and stepped under a large whale that hung from the ceiling. The shadow of the whale stretched the length of the hall – the tail grasped the wall like a hand. Jake looked into a fish tank as a school of tiny fish hid behind a rock. He scanned the room as the smoke trail circled the exhibits. The trail spent extra time around a touch tank full of shells and rocks. Jake smiled. She always loved to collect shells – they had spent hours on a trip to Oregon, collecting shells, rocks and pieces of wood. He must have carried two full buckets of stuff for her that had since sat quietly in the garage. *If only I could get a second chance to do it again.*

Dani’s phone vibrated again.

“Harmer.”

“Dani – head to the roof!” Rico commanded. “I didn’t notice it at first but there is a wooden box up there. Nothing else around. I’m taking the elevator up with Mac. Meet us up there.”

Dani turned to look at Jake, but he had overheard the conversation.

Two minutes later the door to the roof opened, Dani and Jake charged through. The smoke trail had swirled off the steps and drifted straight towards the box. Mac and Rico knelt beside the wooden box about five feet in length and about a foot and half high. A police officer stood behind them with a toolbox, a hammer and crowbar. A large plastic shield was tipped next to the tools. Jake walked briskly to the box; Rico held his hand out to prevent him from touching it.

“Can’t hear anything but I wouldn’t rule out a bomb. There no holes or anything extruding outside.”

“Jake– does your daughter’s trail lead to this?” Mac asked, pointing at the box. Jake scanned the rooftop. The pink trail crisscrossed across the roof, almost forming the shape of an X. But no matter how many times he looked; the trail’s final destination was the box.

“The trail ends there,” Jake pointed.

Although the air was warm, Dani shivered as she wondered why Weems had led Jake's daughter up to the roof. *Where was he? What was his end game?*

Jake looked down and saw an ant cross the side of the box. His mind drifted to the exhibit down below.

"Give me the crowbar!" he yelled. Despite protests from Rico about an explosive device, Jake placed the bar under the wood and heaved with all of his strength. The police officer brought his plastic shield to cover the agents but the other three waved him off. The boards creaked in protest and new nails began to pull up. A steady stream of ants exited from the gap in the boards. Rico stepped forward and pulled the wooden top off by hand. The contents of the box were horrible.

A white skeleton lay inside, the size of small child. Its hands reached to the top as if in desperation to escape its prison. The eyeless skull had an expression of terror etched across its mouth as ants covered the skeleton like a second skin.

Jake collapsed; his worst fears realised while the world around him turned grey. He knew what he wanted to do. Jake stood up so quickly that Rico's grasp on him slipped. Jake walked purposefully to the edge of the roof and prepared to join his daughter.

"Stop!" Dani yelled. "It's not what you think!" She pointed to the remains in the coffin. "This isn't your daughter; the skeleton is picked clean – these ants aren't man eating. Even if they were, it would take days for them to consume a body, not hours." Jake took a step backwards, letting the facts sink in.

"Weems has poured honey across the bones to make the ants crawl over them," Rico added as he examined the remains.

"Jake, the bones might not even be real," Mac said. "It's likely he took fake ones from the museum. He did this to hurt you, to make you think your daughter was dead."

Jake stepped away from the edges. He felt like a fool – tricked yet again by Weems. He may have this tracking ability, but Weems was one step ahead. He felt a mouse led through an endless maze.

"But where did they go?" Jake asked since the trail ended with this box. "We're on top of a rooftop; they couldn't just jump off the building." He looked at the street below.

Jim Kochanoff

Dani looked at the power wires leading to another building. *Could he have used a zip line? Maybe they needed to check the surrounding rooftops?* Suddenly a flash of light in the sky caught her attention. The answer came to her instantly.

“Mac – call all the airfields in the area. I’ve got a feeling Weems didn’t go down to the ground; he went up into the sky.”

Chapter 28

Down on the Farm

Duvall, Washington – 16 months ago

The SUV crossed over a small bridge; water flowed gently underneath. Although they were only a half hour from Seattle city limits, the population was sparse as they passed several farms. The land was hilly and rocky, not ideal for farming, but people still managed to earn a living. Jake looked ahead and noticed a farmhouse at a top of the hill. The SUV stopped next to a police car sitting under a large oak tree. Dani jumped out of their vehicle before it came to full stop. Two officers in the car looked up at her.

“Is anyone else coming?” she asked the driver.

“We’re it. There’s a big concert at the Seattle Center tonight. Every spare cop is doing security. Spreads the rest of us pretty thin when the real crimes happen. What do we need to prepare for?”

“It’s all included in my report. We believe suspect works alone, but we can’t be sure he doesn’t have some hired help. He killed a man in cold blood today; shoot to disarm but don’t put yourself in harm’s way.”

“What about the family?” the second cop in the passenger side asked. Dani leaned in closer as if to shield their conversation from the SUV.

“Could be a woman and a young girl. We don’t know if they are alive or dead. Proceed with caution; I don’t want this to become a shootout with bullets flying everywhere. If he’s there, he’s going to see us coming. Follow my team’s lead, make sure you cover the back and prevent him from escaping.” She tapped the top of the police car with her palm. “Let’s go!” Dani jumped back into the SUV. Rico drove towards the farmhouse.

The home was well kept but weathered. It needed a coat of paint but was not in disrepair. The farm covered about 100 acres of land with several barns spread around the property. A windmill silently spun, generating electricity for the farm which seemed to be off the power grid. The adjoining fields looked tilled and a John Deere tractor stuck its nose out of the barn nearest the farmhouse. No livestock were in a

fenced in the field, but the smell of manure confirmed that animals were likely in one of the barns. A pig weathervane shook slightly in the breeze on top of the main barn. As the cars stopped about two hundred feet from the main house, the farm was eerily quiet.

“No sign of the car – he might have already abandoned the farm,” Rico commented as he exited the SUV. Jake insides began to twist.

“Jake, stay here and don’t move. We’ll search the house and surrounding barns. If your family is here, we’ll find them,” Dani stated.

“But,” he protested.

“But nothing. If Weems is here, you could jeopardize yourself and your family. He may have started as a con man, but he’s already killed two people that we know of. Don’t turn into a statistic; your family needs you alive.” Jake knew Dani was right, but he was still angry at being left behind. Before he could argue more, the team and the officers exited the vehicles and slowly surrounded the farmhouse.

Jake instinctively knew his family were near. Unexpectedly, tears began flowing down his face. He had been stoic for too long and now his emotions washed out of him. A wave of exhaustion hit him, and his body shuddered. Jake peered behind the SUV and something caught his attention from a barn located farther up the hill. Movement. *Was that his daughter running?*

Jake raced out of the SUV and rushed up the hill. Dani and her team had already entered the farmhouse to begin searching. Another barn blocked Jake’s movement from the farmhouse and he rushed closer to his goal. Sixty seconds later Jake burst into the entrance, Weems blue sports car was parked in the center of the barn. Bales of hay surrounded its right side and the pink smoke whirled around the exterior of the car. Jake quickly looked inside, but it was empty. A sound caught his attention as he saw movement in the rear-view mirror. For a second, Jake thought he saw his wife approaching, her face etched with fear. He turned suddenly and in his effort to see her, slammed his head against the top part of the door frame. He cursed himself for his stupidity and fell dazed into semi-conscious state, lying onto the back seat.

Several seconds passed as the car radio blared country music, jolted Jake from his dazed state. The country singer wailed about his pain and Jake's head could sympathize. He could feel the car backing up and looked up to see the roof of the barn disappear. As he tried to sit up, the driver gunned the engine and Jake fell back into the seat. He pushed up like a man possessed ready to strangle Weems. When he saw his wife in the driver seat, he almost fell back again.

"Monica! Are you okay? Where is Ella? What has Weems done to you?" Jake tried to reach forward to touch her shoulder, but a pothole jostled the car, bouncing him back. Monica turned and there were tears in her eyes. She turned back to the road, but he studied her face through the interior rear-view mirror.

"Jake you shouldn't be here. He'll kill you. I'm the only thing keeping Ella alive right now." The car slid around a turn and Jake saw a truck pursuing behind them. He looked out the back and saw Weems was the driver of the truck. He did not look pleased.

"I don't understand any of this Monica. What happened? Why did you disappear? Why is Weems after us?"

"I don't have time to explain Jake! I'm a little bit busy right now!" She turned left and since Jake had no seat belt on, his weight came crashing into the door. The truck behind them gained ground. Jake saw Weems aiming a pistol from the driver's window.

"Damn it Monica! You have to explain! I've traveled up and down the west coast trying to find you. And now that I have you back, I'll don't understand what is going on. Where is our daughter?" The glass in the back window shattered and burst into clumps. They spilled onto Jake as Monica turned the wheel heading to the bridge ahead.

"Ella is alive but not safe. All of this is my fault Jake. Do you understand? This is all my fault!" The bridge ahead of them was gaining fast. It was an old bridge with wooden railings; the river below was fast and flowing.

"You're not making any sense Monica. This is Weems's fault! I've seen him kill an unarmed man. How could this be your fault?" She turned, the tears flowing fast from her green eyes.

"I'm sorry Jake. You don't deserve any of this. I've been so stupid. . ." The rear tire exploded throwing the car in a head on

collision with the first post of the bridge. Monica pulled hard on the wheel, but the car scrapped along the bridge railings.

“I don’t care what you think you’ve done Monica. I love you; I want us to be a family again!” Jake tried to touch her again, wanting to feel closeness to her. As she tried to look back at him, another bullet shattered the windshield. Her vision gone with the cracked glass, she lost control of the car. The driver’s tire skidded into the railing; the car ricocheted and spun to the outside. The extra speed cracked the railing in half; for a second, Jake thought the undercarriage would keep the car on the bridge. The screeching sound of metal proved otherwise as the interior eventually tipped the car, roof first into the river below.

“Monica!” Jake screamed as the car momentarily floated. He heard the water rushing into the engine as the car began to sink. Jake reached over the seat and shook both of her shoulders. Her body was slumped; she must have become unconscious on impact. The water was entering the window of the car, Jake pushed with his legs and shot out through the broken rear window.

The water was icy cold, and he shivered as it soaked his skin. He could see the river bottom, but it was still over his head. He swam around to the driver’s side and tried to pull open the door handle. The side of the car was smashed, opening the door impossible. The driver window was still intact, so he climbed in through the windshield. Monica’s eyes were closed as he shook her. Blood seeped from her forehead and mixed with the water. Jake tried to disengage the seatbelt, but the lock was twisted. He kicked at it furiously trying to pull it free. His strength proved superior and it came loose. His lungs were burning and against his will, he forced himself to the surface for a moment to fill his lungs. Only a second passed and he dove back down, the car was completely immersed now while slowly sinking to the bottom.

Jake reached into the car and pulled Monica with all of my strength. She barely moved. He looked closer at the driver side and saw that the crushed door had sandwiched her leg to the car. He pulled again with desperation, knowing that time was running out. Suddenly, Monica stirred, and her eyes grew wide with fear. She seemed confused by her surroundings and he pulled his face to hers. Jake pointed to her leg and she started to pull. He shot out of the car again to replenish his lungs. He gasped a huge breath and dove back down; the car was about

ten feet deep now. He pulled feverishly on the driver door as Monica was trying to release her leg. Her struggles became less as the lack of air started to overcome her. She turned to him and looked through the driver window. Her face was serene.

“I love you,” she mouthed. He face became still and her earlier panic changed to peace. Jake cried out, air bubbles escaping from his mouth. He smashed and thrashed to pull the door open. Finally, when his lungs threaten to explode, he shot to the surface. He gasped, spitting up water. The pain of lack of air was nothing compared to the agony of watching his wife die in front of him.

Chapter 29

Vantage Point

Dayton Natural History Museum – main admin office 3am

Jake sat groggily in an armchair, drifting in and out of sleep. He accepted that Weems had led this chase to divert them from the coffin killer and to trick him into believing his daughter was killed. He had nothing left to give – his emotions were raw. Everything with Weems was misdirection, a game to bring Jake to his knees. A game that Jake was losing.

Dani had set up a command post in the museum, playing on the hunch that Weems had taken to air from the rooftop, most likely a helicopter. Somehow Weems knew that he couldn't track through the air, only by foot or transportation by ground. *Weems knew so much about him while he was an enigma. What possible reason could he have for keeping his daughter?* Jake looked up into Dani's eyes who looked as exhausted as he felt.

"Police have checked in with all of the airfields within 50 miles. Only two private charter companies haven't responded back yet. It's been hard reaching people in the middle of the night. Police have sent officers to the homes when they only got answering machines. We'll find her." Jake didn't doubt her sincerity. Dani had done more for him since they met, than friends or family had done for him his entire life. The problem was Weems was too smart to let them catch his daughter's trail again. They'd have to approach this differently.

"Police checked the flight plan for Raptor Charters in southern Dayton. Pilot of four-person helicopter booked a flight plan earlier this evening over the city. Owner is the pilot but his helicopter not at the airfield. He's not returning phone calls on his cell or phone," Mac listed off.

"Could be asleep, drunk or with a girlfriend," Rico chimed in.

"Or dead," Mac said. They were silent, realizing that the pilot was probably killed.

"Either way, you can only hide a helicopter for so long," said Dani hopefully.

"If we don't find it in twelve hours Dani," Jake stated, "then my daughter's trail is lost forever."

Farmland outside of Dayton 7:10am

The sun's rays glistened off the moisture on the forest leaves. The farming community had few residents as most farms were thousands of acres in size. The forest was situated between two competing farms. Weems used his pruners to cut a few branches off of the trees. The helicopter was in a small field that Weems had directed the pilot to land. The pilot had been happy to land anywhere Weems directed when he had waved the cash in his face. *It was easy to offer money when the pilot would never collect it.*

The field was off the road and the helicopter couldn't be seen by the casual driver. Although his camouflage wouldn't hide it from someone in the field, it should keep anyone from finding it from the air. Besides, it didn't have to be for a long time, just long enough to keep Jake off of their trail. Weems wondered what type of reaction he got at the museum. He hoped that his heart broke in two when he thought the coffin contained his daughter. *How he like to play with Jake!* He imagined him so anxious now, trying to get his bearings. He would be unable to sleep, hoping for a clue that would reunite him with his child.

He looked back at the car; she was sleeping in the back seat. Quiet. Like an angel. Jake always thought that taking his family was about him, but he had it all wrong. Some things were more precious than revenge. He had what he wanted, and he would do everything to keep it; as long as he made Jake's life a living hell along the way. Once he was done with the helicopter, he had a phone call to make. Jake's pain was about to get worse.

1398 Blue Mountain Way Dayton 1:45pm

Tarver stepped first out of the SUV. The rest of his team were seconds behind him. He knew Williams had several hours head start and the likelihood of him still being in the city was slim. They had been on the move since earlier morning with only a few hours of sleep. The location that Weight had given them initially had been a dead-end. The address had been an old storefront, out of business along with most of

the stores on the street. The copious amount of dust showed that there had been no recent activity. The only evidence was a bunch of old receipts found in the trash can. The business must have been storage for items that he bought from the city core. Items that he would transport to his warehouse as needed. As soon as businesses opened in the morning, they had checked each company one by one.

Tarver was exhausted from lack of sleep and he envied his quarry. While he was dead on his feet, Williams could sleep in hiding, safe from his hunters.

Fifteen minutes earlier, Tarver's team had success from a fence and rope distributor in an industrial park in the west side of the city. Tarver had questioned the clerk to find out if Williams had been in recently.

"Have you seen this man?" Tarver raised a photo of Williams with his right hand. The clerk leaned forward on the counter to get a better look.

"Not a good picture, but yea that's the computer guy. Used to place his whole order while using his computer. He's been in a bunch of times. His robotic voice was kind of cool, something like that scientist guy from television." The clerk smiled as if he was making a joke. Tarver did not respond back, and the clerk became serious again.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"This morning."

"What?" Tarver could not believe the clerk's answer.

"Yea except today, he acted stranger than usual. Didn't use his computer, made a bunch of sign language motions that I didn't understand. Then he gave me a list."

"Do you still have that list? What did he order?" Tarver demanded.

"No, I gave him back his list, but I can check through the receipts to see if anything jogs my memory." The clerk opened the till and sorted through the morning receipts. A small bead of sweat trickled down his forehead as Tarver's eyes drilled into his head.

"There sure are a lot of receipts today," the clerk added sheepishly. Tarver made no attempt at small talk. A few seconds later, the clerk's hunt was rewarded. "Okay, this is it. He paid in cash, but I

remembered his order. Several rolls of wire, some thick diameter rope and a pair of wire cutters. Here you take the copy, I have the original in the cash register,” the clerk offered, eager to have Tarver leave. Tarver remained at the register.

“Did you notice anyone with him when he came in,” Tarver asked.

“No. He was alone although he did look back a couple times to the parking lot,” nodded the clerk.

“He didn’t say where he was going?”

“Maybe you forgot, I said he was using sign language and a note. He wasn’t talking.” Tarver was about to respond harshly but the clerk continued. “Matter of fact, probably an hour later, business dried right up.”

“What do you mean?” Tarver asked with interest. The clerk pointed outside. “There’s a daycare a couple of blocks west, you would have passed the street coming here. There were some sirens and one of sales guys said the street was blocked off.”

Tarver threw his business card at the clerk and told him to call if he thought of anything else. He directed De Nano to the daycare and barely spoken two words until he bounded out of the vehicle.

The daycare was single storey with a fenced playground on the right side. Drawings of animals were taped in several of the main windows. A key card door was positioned on a metal gate that entered the playground. Two police cars formed a “V” in the parking lot and prevented any cars from entering or exiting the parking lot. Tarver walked over to an officer who was talking to a daycare worker.

“Who is the officer in charge?” he flashed his badge while interrupting the cop’s conversation.

“That would be me – Officer Clancy. I don’t recall notifying the FBI for help, Agent Tarver.”

“Well consider me involved now – this is part of an ongoing investigation. I need to know every detail of this investigation and I need to know them now!” Tarver leaned his body forward. The officer nodded and flipped open his notepad.

“At approximately 11am, two groups of seven children each emerged from the red and blue rooms, pre-schoolers aged four and five,

and exited the daycare to the outdoor playground. It's a regular scheduled activity as each group plays in the outside before lunch. There were two daycare teachers in the playground while a third was in the kitchen preparing lunch. The group entered back into the daycare at 11:45am – teachers noticed that one student, Jeffery Thomas aged four was missing. Another student said that Jeffery left with his 'uncle' and waved to him in a black van. The man was strange and didn't talk, writing messages on a wipe board."

"Did Jeffrey leave anything behind?"

"No, although this was found in the sandbox. Teachers say they had never seen it before." Tarver spun the wooden zebra in his hands. The craftsmanship was impeccable and left no doubt of who left it.

"Any cameras on this building?" Tarver motioned to the daycare.

"Nothing, although you can be sure that's going to change after this. I have an officer canvassing the adjoining buildings for any security footage. So far, nothing facing the daycare but I'm hopeful we may get something off the street which would identify the van."

"When were you called?"

"Daycare immediately called parents as no uncle was listed as contact. Father confirmed that only uncle lives on east coast. Daycare called us and we cordoned off the area about an hour ago. Now why is the FBI involved?" Tarver initial reaction was to give nothing, the serial killer was his target. But he realized to get the police's full compliance; he had to give a few details.

"Kidnapper is possibly named Joseph Williams. He was linked with an earlier kidnapping in Dayton for a young girl named Mandy O'Brien. Our team found his location and saved the girl. Unfortunately, he escaped, and we have been tracking him ever since. We thought he had left the city, but I suspect he took this child to replace the girl."

"What can we do to help?" Officer Clancy asked.

"You need to keep this conversation confidential. I don't need the media alerting our kidnapper how close we are. At this point, he thinks he has a bit of time before the FBI gets involved. I need to have access to any new information you and your officers get. We have a very short window of opportunity before he will harm the child."

"He doesn't make any ransom demands?"

“None. We won’t get any leads from him.”

“We’re not going to have a lot to give you Agent Tarver. Especially if we don’t have much time. I hope you have some secret weapon to find this guy.”

“Actually officer,” Tarver clicked his phone and dialed. “I do.”

Chapter 30

The Caregiver

Kids Academy Day Care 4:30 pm

Rico eased the SUV towards the parking lot. He flashed his badge at the officer who lifted the police tape so the SUV could drive in. The vehicle parked as Dani looked to Jake in the back seat.

“I know you are tired of me asking this, but are you sure you can handle this so soon after your daughter?”

“Yes Dani. A thousand times yes. I can’t sit around the museum any longer hoping for a call on the missing helicopter. It’s too long now anyway. I might as well make myself useful. I can’t believe we saved Mandy and now this monster has taken another kid,” Jake said. Dani looked over at Mac.

“Stay here and continue to sift through the evidence the police have gathered so far. If you get something, come get me.”

“Roger boss,” Mac replied, looking up from her tablet for a second and then began typing again.

“Rico, talk to the officers around the scene. See if they have any hunches that they haven’t recorded into evidence. They know this city better than us; listen to what they have to say.”

“I’m on it.” Rico exited the vehicle and walked towards the officer who let them into the parking lot.

“Jake, you’re with me. We’re going to talk to some of the daycare workers.” Jake followed in step behind Dani, taking in the surroundings. They entered in the main door, passing a police officer who gave them middling interest. In the main foyer, there were a series of hooks and small wooden stalls where children hung jackets and stored their extra clothes. Name cards and colors highlighted the boys and girls with their belongings. They passed a main desk at the center of the building that went diagonally into a number of rooms of various colors. Jake looked in one room as they passed; the kitchen was minimal with a few chairs and two small tables. The stove and refrigerator were at the far end of the room and a wooden island separated the table from the appliances. They walked further and stepped into a room with purple walls and a number of paper plate crafts hung on the side wall.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Christine?” Dani inquired to the room full of people. An elderly woman with a kind face and red eyes stepped forward.

“I’m Christine, can I help you?” She looked tired and defeated but still willing to help.

“My name is Agent Harmer, and this is Jake Valance, a consultant with the FBI. I understand that you are Jeffrey’s teacher?”

“I am but I was making lunch at the time and I didn’t see anything. I’m not sure I can help.”

“We’re approaching this from a different angle,” Dani glanced at Jake, “is there somewhere we can sit?” Christine motioned to a small table with four kid sized chairs clustered around it. Jake felt like a giant as he sat down. Jake scanned the children’s toys; there was a shelf with colourful buckets adjacent to the table. Dozens of blocks, miniature cars and smiling dolls were overflowing from the square containers. A dress up stage was lined up next to the shelf, a mirror with a series of pegs stuck out of the wooden board. Costumes included a construction worker, a pink princess, an elephant costume, all to enhance a children’s imagination. Jake thought about his daughter and wondered if she still imagined herself as a princess.

“We’re more interested in building a profile of Jeffery and his interests rather than reconstructing his disappearance. Can you tell us more about what Jeffery was like?” Christine’s face brightens as if the subject was a welcome change from earlier questioning.

“Jeffrey is a definite character, a four-year-old boy going on ten. He was always organizing the other boys as if they about to embark on a grand adventure. Some days they were pirates sailing the oceans, on other days they would build towers of sand with the construction toys in the outside sandbox.”

“Sounds like he had lots of friends,” Jake offered. Christine nodded.

“And it wasn’t just the boys; he would chase and tease a lot of girls as well. They would laugh and scream, but you could tell the girls liked the attention. There was even a few that called him their ‘cutie pie.’” Christine’s smile was infectious as she described Jeffrey and Jake felt his mouth turning into a grin.

“Was there anything of his around that he liked to play with or a special book?” Jake asked.

“You could check his cubby-hole, but he didn’t have a stuffed animal friend and he tended to play with lots of things. Are you hoping to use his scent with dogs to track him down?” Christine’s eyebrows furled.

“Something like that,” Dani interjected. “What about his parents – did Jeffery seem more like one than the other?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only met his father, Dwayne, who also worked in the industrial park. His mom works on the other side of the city. He always seemed nice, outgoing, always asked me how Jeffery was doing.” Jake studied the room hoping for something that would spark the trail to follow.

“Anything else that would make him stand out from a group of boys?” Jake wondered.

“A big smile. I’ve seen children come and go through here for over fifteen years and you can count on their mood swings. One second they are laughing so hard that you think they are going to shake apart. Then five minutes later, someone trips or takes away a toy, and the same child that’s laughing, can be crying so hard that it makes your heart break. Jeffrey was always smiling, always having fun. He rubbed off on the other kids as well.” She choked back a tear as if realizing that she might never see his infectious smile again. “Is there anything else? I need to catch my bus home. I have family waiting.” Dani looked at Jake. He shrugged.

“Can you wait a few more minutes? I’ll make sure an officer drives you straight home,” Dani offered.

“Okay. I want to help; it’s just so draining not knowing who took Jeffery. Why would anyone want to take him?” Christine asked.

“We’ll do our best to find out. Excuse us for a few minutes,” Dani stood and motioned to Jake to join her. They walked a few paces until they stood by the window overlooking the playground.

“Jake– tell me you got something?” He shook his head.

“Not yet. I may need to talk to some other teachers and maybe his parents. It’s not an exact science, after I know a bit about him; I need something that was important to him to trigger the trail.”

“Take a few minutes to scan the room. If you don’t get something soon, we’ll go meet his parents at their home.” Jake nodded and looked around the room, hoping for some object to start his connection with Jeffery. He searched the corner shelf which held a box for the children to store their belongings. Each one was named and Jake found Jeffery’s name on the top left. He sifted through the plastic box – Jake found a pair of rubber boots, an extra jacket, a baggy with a change of underwear and socks. At the bottom, his fingers grasped something sharp. Jake pulled out a yellow metal dump truck and turned it over in his fingers.

Was this important to Jeffery? Something that he treasured? Several seconds passed with no trail illuminating from the room. No trail, no path to Jeffrey’s location. Jake gazed outside, his eyes scanning the playground. In the sand, the wooden zebra left by Williams stood atop the pile looking down on the other toys. Already dusted for prints, it was tagged with a number as evidence.

In the sandbox beside the zebra, something glimmered that caught his attention. Jake stood up and moved towards the door that exited into the playground. As he stepped outside, Jake noticed the sand was mounded into a pile and large dump truck was placed at the bottom with a tractor. The small dump truck in his hand looked strikingly familiar. Jake stepped towards the mound and suddenly a bright yellow trail exited the large dump truck. The tail swirled around the playground before finally exiting over the fence.

Jake turned around and motioned to Dani who was still inside the daycare. She walked briskly through the door to the playground.

“What is it Jake?”

“Tell Tarver I can see Jeffery’s trail. We need to load up now. I don’t know where this is going to end, but it’s going to end now.”

Chapter 31 See You at the Campground

Taylor River Campground – 8pm

The campground was seventy minutes south of downtown Dayton. During the summer, it bustled with activity. It was marketed towards families and the area was a favourite for kids under eight. By the main ranger station, were a playground and kid's pool. Further back, a huge trampoline was built into the ground where kids spent hours of their time bouncing towards the sky. An open area with a stage was set up where campers met each night for talent contests amongst the families. Camp activities ranged from nature trails to archery to swimming.

Now the campground was eerily quiet. Once September hit, the campground was vacant during the week with families returning on the weekend. The caretaker rode on his golf cart, patrolling the grounds making sure no teenagers had trespassed. He had worked at the campground for over eight years, living on the grounds during the summer in exchange for a small salary and year-round lodging. During the winter months, he worked snow removal for the district. It was a lonely job, but Phil Anderson found it rewarding to be surrounded by so much joy in the summer. Unfortunately, it did nothing for his love life. It was hard to bring a date back to your place with a thousand screaming campers. Most staff were teenagers or college students working for summer money. Teenagers didn't want a lot to do with a forty plus old man.

His cart turned a corner past the street of permanent summer trailers. They were occupied during the summer months, many families sitting outside while barbecuing their supper or parents having a few drinks. Tonight, they stood dark, their owners having returned to their homes in the city. Their fenced yards clean and tidy trailers with windows covered over for the upcoming winter months. He felt a tinge of loneliness tonight. Winter was different, no one was here but it was too cold to wander the park. It was warm outside, and it was sad that such a beautiful night was not enjoyed because the deadline of summer had passed.

A light in the distance caught his attention. *I must have forgotten to turn off the recreation hall.* He gunned the gas and the little cart bravely climbed the hill towards its destination. His stomach grumbled and he realized that he had skipped lunch today while picking up supplies for the weekend campers. *As soon as he was done, he would barbecue some chicken – use that new sauce he bought.* As he entered the rec hall, Phil was surprised as he saw a little boy sitting at a bench at the opposite end.

“Excuse me,” Phil asked. “The camp is closed until the weekend. Are you with your parents?” The little boy did not turn around. Phil shook his head and stepped closer.

“Excuse me,” he said in a louder voice. “This is private property. I’m afraid you are going to have to leave.” This time the boy reacted and turned slightly around. He appeared to be coloring a piece of paper. But instead of responding, he returned to his drawing. *What is wrong with him? As soon as I get him out of here, I’m calling the police. They can deal with this.* As he stepped forward, his foot stepped on a piece of paper. He bent down and picked it up. It had a drawing of a child running down a road. Chasing him was a black van with a shadowy head sticking out the driver’s window. The shadow’s mouth was open and bright white teeth gleamed with a flapping red tongue. *This kid’s got a strange imagination.*

The little boy turned around, his eyes looked red and puffy. Phil was confused, not understanding why he finally had acknowledged him. A chair skidded behind and he realized that the boy wasn’t looking at him. His stomach grumbled again, demanding that he get back to the cabin to make supper. As he turned his head to the noise, he realized he would never eat again.

Chapter 32

Death at a Funeral

16 months ago - Snow's funeral home, Portland

Jake stepped out of the funeral home; he looked up as the sun shone down on his face. The irony was for his wife's funeral, it was a beautiful day. With the world crashing down around him, Mother Nature sent her best to soothe him. His head had been pounding since this morning. He wasn't sure if it was a result of his grief or his body's way of fighting back after the last few exhausting days. Family and friends had paid their respects; many people had walked through the funeral home. Monica's sister had made a poster of dozens of pictures of her from a child to mother. The service was short with only a reverend and Monica's father giving a speech.

Jake didn't have the strength or the inclination to talk to friends about his feelings. He felt empty as people hugged him or shook his hand, expressing their condolences. Their words were hollow; Jake watched his wife die and had lost everything. His life was meaningless now with her dead and his daughter lost to him.

As the last of the guests drove off, the door to the funeral home squeaked open behind him. Expecting the funeral home director delivering the bill, Jake reached for his pen.

"It was a beautiful service Jake. Your wife had a lot of people who loved her," Dani stated.

"I didn't see you at the service," Jake replied, startled by her appearance.

"I was near the back. Mac and Rico were there too but left a short time ago. How is the rest of your family doing?" They both sat down on a bench on the front lawn.

"Monica's family thinks I'm responsible for her death. They don't say it in so many words, but their sympathy is measured. Her sister thinks that she was trying to run away from me while her dad can't understand why I didn't save her from drowning."

"They weren't there. It's not fair for them to judge you like that."

"Doesn't matter. Their daughter's dead and someone has to be blamed. My mother isn't much better. She can't understand why I was

with the FBI in cross state chases. She feels that I not telling her the whole story.”

“Maybe you should tell her about your ability Jake? Give her a chance to understand.”

“I can’t,” Jake lifted his head and looked into the sky. “I don’t understand this. How can I expect someone else to believe me? My mom will be kind, but she’ll undoubtedly think I’m crazy. Hell, she may be right!” Jake folded his hands on the back of his head. Dani forced him to look at her.

“You know you’re not crazy. We may not understand it, but the results stand for themselves. As much as you blame yourself for her death, Weems shot at the car, forcing your wife off the road. You can’t hold yourself responsible for his actions.”

“And yet I do,” Jake answered. “Any word on the country wide alert?” Dani shook her head.

“Weems's description has been fed into every police detachment on the west coast. But the reality is that this guy is a chameleon, he changes his appearance all the time for his cons and that was before we were onto him. He’s going to dig even deeper now.”

“And Ella? Do you think she is still alive?”

“Jake, there’s no reason to give up hope. We found no bodies at the farm and we have to hope that your wife would have told you if she was dead.”

“What’s the likelihood he’ll keep her alive?”

“I don’t know Jake. And it could be months before he makes a mistake. But when he does, we’ll bring you in and you can find her.” Jake listened while looking down on the ground. Dani tapped him on the shoulder. “Jake– what are you going to now?”

“I don’t know, I guess I could go back to my practice. Call my clients; tell them that I’m back. Try to lose myself in my work again. It’s just. . .”

“What?”

“Because of my long hours, I didn’t spend the time I should have with my family. I don’t blame my practice or my clients; I’m the one at fault. But I just can’t go back there right now; the work feels meaningless to me. I’m a different person now. I’m lost as to what I

should do next.” She must have expected his answer because she pulled out a file from her bag and laid it out on his lap.

“Come work as a consultant. Hundreds of people disappear every year. I can bring you to a crime scene just after it happens, so the trail is still fresh for you to pursue. Many times, the family never knows why their loved one disappears, and we never find them. Often if we find the person, it’s too late. You have an opportunity to prevent what happened to you, to bring families back together. In this file, are some of the disappearances across the country in the last six months. With your ability, we could find people like these as they happen. On top of that, you’ll always be able to keep on top of any new information on Weems.”

“How long do I have to make a decision?” Jake asked, looking into her eyes.

“You just buried your wife Jake. The invitation is open ended. Take as much time as you need. These disappearances never stop,” Dani hugged him and walked off without another word. Jake stared at the folder, afraid of the changes it might bring to his life. It was like a door that once opened, could never be closed.

For Monica and Ella. Jake flicked open the folder and he knew what his answer would be.

Chapter 33

Trail's End

Interstate 675 – 7pm

Tarver had mixed up the team's personnel to have better control of the operation. De Nano drove while Tarver sat in the passenger seat with Dani and Jake in the back. Rico drove the other vehicle with Mac and Weight. Tarver was passing back a coffee in an effort to keep Jake alert.

"I want you to go over what you've seen so far since we left the daycare. I'm texting the director right now on our progress."

"Progress? That's a funny word to use when you have discredited Jake's ability from the start," Dani interrupted.

"I was hasty in my assessment of Jake's tracking ability. So instead of telling me you told me so, let's concentrate on finding the boy alive and bringing this serial killer in."

"That's about as close to an apology you're going to get Jake," said Dani. He collected his thoughts as he tried to answer Tarver's question.

"After talking with the daycare teacher, I was able to establish the trail through Jeffery's love of the truck in the sandbox. His trail is bright yellow and very thick, I should be able to see the trail even in the dark.

"That's good Jake. Sundown is in about fifteen minutes," Da Nano added from the driver seat.

"Jake, this ends tonight. What if Weems has already contacted Williams and they escape through another copter tonight?" Tarver demanded.

"Not going to happen twice. We've contacted all private and state airports within two hundred miles in all directions. We've grounded all helicopter and other aircraft charters unless they've cleared the purchase through police. Now that we're alerted, we can run a GPS on any aircraft he could take," said Dani.

"I still can't help feeling that Williams is leading us on. Something is waiting for us, wherever he stops next," Jake replied.

“Could be. Or he’s a sick son of bitch and he can’t help himself. When you took Mandy away, you took away the gratification he gets when he puts a child in his homemade coffin. He couldn’t have anticipated that we would get to the crime scene so quickly and that Jake would find the kid’s trail right away. He thinks he’s got time. I hope he takes a few hours to rest so we can catch him,” Tarver exclaimed.

“And find the boy,” Dani remarked.

“Of course. But imagine if we can take this freak off the streets. How many future lives will we save?” The car became quiet as the highway sped by. It was only two lanes on each side as the countryside and forest took over from the city buildings. A huge sign appeared on the right and Jake pointed to the exit.

“Get off here,” he motioned. De Nano veered onto the exit ramp as Jake directed to the right, away from a nearby town. The population was sparse, with a few farmhouses on a meandering pot holed road. They crossed a bridge and even though it was dark, Jake swore he saw a fish jump in the headlight. He turned his head back and the yellow smoke that had hung over the road had disappeared. “Stop!” Jake yelled.

De Nano slammed on the brakes, unnerved by Jake’s ferocity. Fortunately, Rico’s SUV was well behind. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I can’t see the trail. It’s gone! I don’t get it; it hasn’t been twenty-four hours yet. I should still see something.”

“Turn the car around,” Dani commanded. “Retrace our steps.” De Nano spun the steering wheel as the vehicle turned back in the same direction. As they approached the bridge again, Jake caught sight of the trail.

“There!” he pointed to a large sign – ‘Taylor River Campground’. The sign showed a river running through a forest with the faces of happy campers. A second smaller sign was nailed into the bottom right hand corner ‘Only open on weekends starting September 6th.’ The yellow trail veered sharply down a dirt road and was swallowed by the darkness of the trees. De Nano stopped the car and Tarver jumped out of the vehicle as Rico pulled the SUV behind them. Tarver walked to the SUV and motioned to roll down the back window.

“Mac, tell me what we’re dealing with?” he commanded. Mac fingertips flashed over her tablet.

“Taylor River Campground is over three hundred acres of trails and cottages. Primarily a summer spot, there are over a hundred permanent trailers on the grounds.”

“How many entrances?” Dani asked as she and Jake had followed behind.

“Only one unless there is a service road that’s not showing up on the map. The campground primarily caters to kids and their families. Main Ranger station is about half mile up the road; several kids’ activities, recreation hall and meeting field are in the center of the campground. All the trailers and cottages feed out from the center like spokes on a wheel surrounding the main stage.”

“Lot of ground to cover. Why would he put himself in a dead end?” Jake asked.

“Because he wants us to follow him,” Tarver commented. “Why does every killer we chase want an audience?” He turned to Weight in the front seat. “Call the local police. Get a helicopter in the air. Set up barricades here at the main entrance. If a frigging porcupine leaves this campground, I want to know about it!” Tarver barked.

“We can set up a command base right here – who do want to join you on the campground?” Weight looked at Tarver hoping for the opportunity to be on the strike team.

“Myself, Dani, Jake and Rico. You (pointing to Weight), De Nano and Mac stay here. I need you to coordinate the police. I don’t need any of their screw ups to let this killer get away.” Weight looked frustrated and got out of the vehicle. He walked several paces away dragging Tarver with him.

“Jake’s a civilian. He’s just going to get in your way.” Tarver looked back at him by Dani.

“I’ll keep him on tight leash. The campground’s huge and we don’t have the time or the manpower to search the entire grounds quickly. We have to find this kid! Jake will lead us where to the killer is hiding.” Weight nodded and they both headed back to the vehicle. Rico turned off the engine and opened the back of the vehicle. He grabbed a small pack and pulled out a flashlight, passing others to Jake, Dani and Tarver.

“The rest of the way we walk on foot. He may know we’re coming but there’s no sense in broadcasting that we’re here now,” Tarver said. “Everybody ready?”

They nodded, realizing that the rest of the way there would be little communication.

“I’m lead and Jake follows right behind me. Dani, you’re in the middle but I want you scanning low to make sure we avoid any traps or tripwires. Rico, you cover our back, make sure someone doesn’t flank us from behind.”

The four of them began walking down the dirt road. The night sky had a half moon and there was light when not obscured by the tree canopy. It was quiet except for the rumbling of the river over the rocks. In the distance, an owl shrieked, flying after its prey. Their feet stepped over the rough gravel. As they walked, the ranger station came up on their right. At the entrance, there was a small convenience store and orientation center. The one storey building stood dark and silent. Tarver knocked several times on the door. He waited a few seconds and when no response, he turned the doorknob. The door swung inside as the three of them went inside while Rico circled the exterior to the back.

Jake told Tarver that the boy’s yellow trail had not gone inside the Ranger station. Tarver thought it important to check to find the caretaker, in case he could shed some light on where Williams and the boy were. Jake scanned the convenience store as they walked through. There were piles of firewood, boxes of fireworks, souvenirs and t-shirts. In the far corner there were a couple refrigerators with bottles of water, packets of luncheon meat and other perishables. To the right was another door which entered the Ranger’s home. Tarver opened the door and stepped into the living room.

As they entered, Jake swallowed as he saw a silhouette hanging from the ceiling fan. The man’s warm body hung limply, meaning he was killed recently. But Jake’s eyes were drawn away from the hanging body towards the position of his hands. Both hands were tied together, and another rope had them pointed towards the window in a grotesque pose. The back door opened, and Rico stepped into the kitchen through to the living room. He did a double take at the sight of the man’s body before he reported to Tarver.

“There is no one else, no sign of a break in or damage. Since he didn’t tie himself up like that, he was probably killed elsewhere and dragged in.”

“But why rope him up like this, what is the message?” Jake asked.

“I think he’s pointing to something.” Dani answered. “Look outside.” They gazed through the window as the man’s arms pointed to a large open area, the main meeting point for the campers.

“You’re right,” Tarver answered. “And it also proves that Williams knew that Jake would lead us here tonight. He’s waiting and probably watching us even now.” The four of them were silent, staring through the window into the campground.

“Doesn’t matter if he knows we’re here. As long as there is a chance that the boy is still alive, we have to press on,” Dani stated. She headed out of the living room to the back door when Tarver stopped her.

“Don’t forget who’s in charge. I’ll lead this,” he looked back at Jake. “I’m taking us back to the main camp road. Wherever this trail leads, follow it. What Williams has waiting for us, we’ll deal with it.” They exited the Ranger station; the body left hanging in place until forensics would come to cut it down. Tarver’s phone hummed and he clicked it open. “Tarver.”

“Local police are enroute, should have about five squad cars coming to the scene,” Weight’s voice rang through the phone.

“Sounds a bit thin for the amount of area we have to cover.”

“Best they can do at the moment. Major car accident on the freeway thirty miles south, a couple of fatalities. Tying up most of the police in the area.”

“Give me some good news,” Tarver asked.

“Air support is about twenty minutes out. No police copter available, but the local news station has a copter and the police have access. It has a large search light so it will aid the ground search.”

“I wish I had it now,” Tarver murmured under his breath, but everyone still heard him.

“I have one officer who was in the area and arrived in a patrol car moments ago. Said he’s familiar with the campground having camped here as a kid. He asked if he could assist with the search of the

grounds.” Tarver contemplated the question and weighed the advantages in his mind.

“Okay send him up to the Ranger Station. We’ll wait until he gets here.” The group stood silently by the front door of the Ranger Station, waiting for the local officer. Seconds later, the sound of gravel turning under the wheels of a vehicle drifted through the night air and the silent light strobing of a police cruiser in the darkness.

“No, no,” Tarver said, “I meant for him to walk down not broadcast his arrival!” He stepped forward to stop the police car’s advance still in the distance. It crossed the wooden bridge that traversed the river by the road. Tarver could see the cop’s features in the driver seat and signalled with his hands to stop the car. Then the darkness became day.

The explosion ripped through the bottom of the bridge and the back end of the police car went high into the air. The car flew but the rear end was propelled much faster and twisted sideways before the car landed on its side. Metal chunks flew outward and Jake fell to the ground because of the blast. He narrowly missed a metal piece from the car that imbedded itself into a tree several feet away behind him.

Dani was the first to her feet and ran to the smouldering cruiser. Embers floated from the incineration of the wooden bridge. The driver door was twisted and the window shattered. She reached in to disengage the seat belt and tried to pull the officer from the wreck. Rico assisted her and they dragged the coughing man from the car, hoping the gas tank didn’t ignite and engulf the car in flames. Mac and Weight ran up from the road. Mac stepped into the water and crossed the river where the bridge used to be while Weight examined some of the debris.

“He’s alive but badly burned. You’ll need an ambulance here immediately, once his shock is over, he’s going to be in a lot of pain,” advised Dani. Mac opened her first aid kit and began to examine the officer for broken bones and lacerations. Tarver walked over to Weight. Weight pointed with his flashlight to a small metal switch on the ground.

“Bridge was wired to explode by weight. You’re lucky that the four of you didn’t set it off. Kidnapper knows we’re here, should we wait until reinforcements arrive?”

“We keep to the plan. With more local cops, we up the risk of setting off more traps and endangering more lives. Use the local police for containment, nobody goes past this explosion. I’m not going to be responsible for any more deaths.” Tarver turned around. “Turn your flashlights on. Jake, point the way.”

Jake looked up the hill. The yellow trail snaked throughout the property, weaving in and out of trailers and campsites. It was hard to see where the trail ended and began. He pointed straight ahead and they walked forward. They passed a flagpole and a flag rippled in the night breeze. Jake imagined that it was a meeting place for the campers and their children at the beginning of each day. He hoped it wasn’t an ending place for the kidnapped boy. Jake stopped as the yellow trail seemed to cross and go off in several routes.

“What’s wrong Jake?” Tarver asked.

“Not sure where to go, there are several trails going in different directions.”

“I’m sure that is intentional,” Rico commented.

“You’re forgetting the ranger station. The body pointed over there,” Dani motioned. They looked over to the center of the campground with the main stage stood on a large field. As they crossed the field, Dani raised her hand to the group to stop.

“Two feet to your right is a trip wire about four feet in length,” she pointed her flashlight through the grass. “Two metal pins are holding the wire.”

“Explosives?” Rico asked.

“Likely if the bridge is any indication. Williams has proven that besides being a skilled carpenter that he has explosives expertise and access,” Tarver added. “He could have learned from his construction work from an employee who did blasting.”

“Should we take a different way?” Jake asked. Before anyone could respond, the light on the camper’s main stage shined bright. The stage was a couple feet off of the ground with a green background meant to symbolize the trees of the forest. On the right, was a door that likely stored supplies or props for stage entertainment.

However, in the center of the stage was where all eyes focused. At a slight angle, a small wooden coffin wrapped in chicken wire was propped up on the stage. Although there was no movement, Jake had

no doubt that the body of Jeffery Thomas lay inside. The only question was whether he was alive.

“He’s using the coffin as bait. We can’t leave it there for long if there is a chance that Jeffery is still alive,” commented Tarver. “If we walk carefully, step by step, we should be able to reach the stage safely.”

“That’s if he doesn’t have the whole stage ready to explode the moment you touch the coffin,” Rico added.

“We’ll have to work quickly and if there is any sign of a bomb mechanism, we’ll have to wait for a bomb defuser. I don’t want to risk anymore lives unless we can do it safely. Jake, we don’t need your services any longer. Head back to the entrance with Weight and Mac. If I need something, I call down,” Tarver commanded. Jake didn’t move, he had brought the team this far and wanted to see the trail to its conclusion. Tarver noticed his hesitation. “This isn’t a negotiation Jake. I don’t need you anymore. You’re a civilian, this is too dangerous for us to babysit you while we concentrate on getting through a minefield of traps,” Tarver bellowed. Dani put her arm on Jake’s shoulder.

“I hate to admit it Jake, but he’s right. We couldn’t have gone this far without you. If we save this boy’s life, it’s because of you,” Dani reassured. Jake felt his expression soften, realizing that his pride was preventing them from rescuing the boy immediately.

“Okay,” Jake replied. He wanted to say something like *be careful* or *I hope you get him*, but it sounded silly with a young boy in danger. Jake took several steps backwards when the intercom squeaked to life. Although Jake had never heard the voice before, he knew exactly who it was.

“Just like the campers who come here every weekend,” the digitalized voice spoke slowly but booming over the night air, “every evening there is show. Tonight agents, you provide that entertainment.” The agents turned to each other.

“He has to be close, either an intercom in an adjoining building or a wireless connection from a nearby trailer,” Rico whispered.

“Look at the area, there’s over a hundred trailers in view of the main stage. It would take us an hour to search them all,” Tarver hissed.

“I’ve got a feeling we only have minutes to save Jeffrey,” Dani answered drawing her gun. They had little time to review their choices.

“On the main stage,” the digital voice continued, “is tonight’s goal.” The spotlight illuminated the boy’s coffin. “You have three minutes.” The intercom burst into loud heavy metal music. The noise was deafening, distracting the agents from finding traps along the way to the stage.

“Spread out across the grass. We’ll each take a different route. Don’t let the music ruin your focus. Three minutes is lots of time,” Tarver yelled over the noise. The three of them walked steadily through the field, keeping about ten feet distance between them. The music made it hard to communicate as they focused on their goal. The tree canopy created shadows which made it hard for them to see any objects on the ground. Rico saw another tripwire and hopped over it. He was not expecting the ground to depress on the other side.

“Bomb!” he yelled, expecting his body to be incinerated in the blast. He fell on the ground and was greeted by silence. His hands over his head, he looked up and was greeted by a set of colorful explosions. Fireworks shot up into the sky, rocketing from the back of stage. Between the music and lights, the field became chaotic, with time ticking away. “Look!” he pointed at the ground. One of the fireworks had ignited a small trail that was blazing towards the coffin.

Dani and Tarver broke into a run, throwing caution to the wind. Only the safety of the young boy was their concern. A hundred feet from stage, the trail reached the coffin. As if it was doused in gas, the coffin immediately blazed. Dani was the fastest runner and jumped on the stage first. Her hands tried pulling the lid, but it was nailed shut. The flames burned at her touch. Tarver came behind and used his weight to pry open the boards, the flames licking at his sleeves. The wood gave slightly, providing some encouragement that it could be removed. The two of them heaved, the wood splintering further.

“Arrggg!” Tarver yelled, his side of the coffin was fully engulfed by flames and his hands were getting burned. Suddenly a splash of water covered the wood.

They looked up as Rico had carried a bucket filled from a hose outlet by the adjoining recreational hall. Before the flames could burn inside the coffin, the three ripped the top lid as if it was paper. The boy lay motionless, his face like a lifeless porcelain doll. Dani ripped him from the coffin and placed him on the stage, listening to his chest. *No*

breathing. She compressed his chest and began CPR. 1-2-3-4. Breathe goddam it!

The music over the intercom ended suddenly and from past the ranger station, Mac, Weight and a paramedic, ran towards them.

“Stay off the field!” Tarver bellowed, making them take the longer roadway to avoid any traps. Dani seemed to be compressing the boy’s chest forever when she was rewarded with a burst of air.

“Gasp!” the young boy began a coughing fit that shook his entire body. Besides the smoke inhalation, the burns looked minor to his face and hands. Mentally however, he might never be the same. The paramedic opened up his case and started providing oxygen to the boy’s hungry lungs. Dani stood up and looked at Mac.

“Did you leave Jake back at the car?” she asked. Mac looked puzzled.

“We haven’t seen him since he left with you.”

“But I sent him back, you should have run into him when you came up!” Tarver yelled. Dani looked back down the roadway trying to discern Jake’s shape. The realization struck her like a lightning bolt.

The kidnapping was never about the boy, it was about getting Jake here. He wanted Jake instead!

Chapter 34

Along for the Ride

Jake woke up on a bed, his hands and legs were buckled by leather straps; so tightly that they rubbed into his skin. His head was immobile, and Jake was forced to stare up at the ceiling. *What happened to me?* He remembered watching the fireworks light up the sky and Dani charging the stage when everything went black. He had no idea what happened to Jeffrey. Jake saw toolboxes on shelves on both sides of him. A light in the far side illuminated the space, he assumed that not much time had passed as it was still night outside.

His thoughts were interrupted as the door opened and cool air washed in. A young boy lay on stretcher and was wheeled in beside him. It was hard to see his face but he seemed okay; unconscious, but his chest was rising slowly.

“Excuse me?” Jake croaked through a dry throat. “I can’t move. Can you help me?” The attendant moved over to him and looked down. He smiled but not a friendly smile to tell you everything was all right. It was a creepy smile like a spider looking down on his lunch. *Williams!* Jake thought and redoubled his efforts to escape. The only reward was that Jake’s bonds dug deeper into his flesh. The attendant said nothing and closed the door. Jake tried to wiggle his feet a few inches to escape his bonds.

Tarver was covering his hands with an ointment before wrapping a bandage around his hands. Weight came over to report.

“No sign of Jake. With the extra resources of the local police, we have covered about a quarter of the trailers. No sign of Williams either.” Dani walked up to the two of them.

“Williams took him, this whole exercise was always about Jake! We would have never found Jeffery without him.” Dani drilled her point home by looking directly at Tarver.

“I know,” the realization surprised him. “We saved the boy. This is a victory for us.”

“Maybe you haven’t kept up with current events, but Jake is the victim now!” Dani shot back. She was angry for losing Jake and took all of her frustration out on Tarver.

“Come on Danielle! We’ll uproot every trailer, every blade of grass, every square inch of this campground. We’re going to find them,” he replied.

“And if we don’t, how many people are going to die because we lost his ability,” Dani responded. Tarver gestured in defeat as he walked away to a police officer for an updated search report. Rico grabbed Dani around the waist as he and Mac escorted her away. The team walked back to the main entrance crossing the bridgeless stream.

“Do you think Jake is still here?” Mac asked but she already knew the answer.

“He wouldn’t lead us to this campground if he didn’t have an exit strategy plan. Tarver is wasting our time with the search,” Dani answered. She sat down on a rock adjacent to the SUV while trying to think. Her capture, her lack of sleep and her adrenalin crash brought her close to exhaustion. But she knew to give up now would mean Jake’s death.

How would Williams escape with Jake in tow? The campground had one main exit; you couldn’t just drive up and leave without being noticed. Any vehicles not supposed to be here would be stopped. So what vehicles are supposed to be here?

Both SUV’s sat along the road unmoved, other vehicles would have been noticed by Weight or Mac. She scanned the rest of the driveway; five patrol cars were parked, lights flashing while sirens muted. According to Mac, there were another eight squad cars forming a square on the roads directly around the campground. Any vehicles leaving or entering the area were searched. *But a police car wouldn’t be.*

“Mac, can you do a search to see if any police cars have been reported missing today? It could be city or state enforcement agencies within a hundred miles.” Mac began typing on her tablet with surgical skill. Dani noticed a gap between two police cars and walked over to the space. Rico followed her while Mac continued to type. Dani’s flashlight lit over the ground, a mixture of dirt and gravel. She reached down and looked at a wrapper on the ground.

“Nothing’s coming up boss,” replied Mac. “But it’s possible one could have been taken from an officer off duty. Might not get reported until tomorrow.”

“That looks like bandage wrapper,” Rico commented as he knelt with Dani and held it in his hands. Dani didn’t appear to be listening as another thought crossed her mind.

“Who parked her Mac? It shouldn’t be vacant; one of the police cars would have parked here. Unless this space was already taken when they came.”

“I think the ambulance was parked there. It left a while ago to take Jeffrey to the hospital for tests.” As Dani stood up, the answer came to her.

“Not only have we let Williams get away, he’s retaken the boy and Jake!”

The vehicle hit a speed bump and Jake felt his head jolt. The boy had remained unconscious on the trip and Jake wondered if he had been drugged. He knew that if they didn’t arrive soon at their destination that he would soon start screaming. Having his body strapped down and immobile was a nightmare. He could understand Dani’s helplessness as she was trapped in the coffin. Jake was spared claustrophobia but the inability to move his head or scratch his nose was driving him mad. Just as he was about to cry out, the vehicle stopped. It turned in reverse before stopping again.

The driver door opened, and Jake heard footsteps crossing a hard surface. Seconds later, the back door swung open and the same paramedic entered. He stepped up and reached his arms under the boy. He lifted him up effortlessly, unfolded a wheelchair and deposited the boy in the seat.

“They will find you,” Jake said, spitting out the words defiantly. The man looked back at him and pulled out a computer tablet.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back for you,” the voice was computerized. It was strange to hear a voice, but his captor’s mouth didn’t move. The man left no doubt that he was Williams. He pushed the boy and disappeared into the night. Frustrated and bound, Jake could only wait. The minutes felt like hours and Jake feared what he would do to Jeffrey.

The door opened again, Williams stepped inside and then pulled the collapsible stretcher out. His movements were jarring, and Jake’s head rattled against the stretcher. *I guess he's not trying to make the*

ride comfortable. He didn't engage Williams but instead tried to make sense of his surroundings. The building had some unusual angles and was too big to be someone's house. The parking lot was large but before Jake could read the title on the building, Williams wheeled him inside. Fresh flowers were on the right and as they passed into another room. Jake saw the unconscious form of Jeffery at the far end of the room as the stretcher stopped.

"You're not what I expected," William's computer beeped.

"And you're exactly what I expected," Jake replied.

Williams walked around the stretcher; Jake found it frustrating that he stepped in and out of his line of vision.

"Why am I here?" Jake again tried to bring his head up.

Seconds later, the belt was loosened and then pulled off. Jake turned his head and he could feel the muscles spasming as he stretched. "Thank you."

"You don't want to thank me," Williams grinned as he typed.

"You're here because he wants you. If it wasn't for him, I would have been captured; he has a real skill for setting traps. I don't know what I would have done without his help."

Weems, I thought. Weems had been at the campground.

"What does he want with me?" Jake asked while getting a bearing on his surroundings.

"I don't know and I don't care, the deal's the deal," the computer chirped. "He's a strange one, bringing his little girl around the campground with him. Little ones really are best as gifts."

"No!" Jake screamed. "He couldn't have, I would have seen her trail!" Jake thought about how Ella being there and he hadn't seen her trail.

"Touchy." William looked puzzled and continued to type. "I assumed she was his, but I didn't see any resemblance. Must look like her mother."

"She's mine!" Jake yelled at the top of his lungs. Williams was surprised and then tilted his head to Jake.

"You know she has your eyes and nose. That's delicious. Now I know why you are after him. But it doesn't change what I have to do." He moved a coffin which lay on a wheeled table.

"Leave the boy alone. Do what you want with me."

“How noble,” taunted Williams. “But you don’t get to decide. I get what I want,” looking over to the unconscious form of Jeffrey, “and your friend gets what he wants.”

“And how will you prepare his gift?” Jake asked. Williams typed, opened the lip of the coffin and reached for a hammer and nails from the table.

“Well first I’m going to giftwrap you,” the computer replied.

Chapter 35

Chasing the Shadows

“Mac – can you bring up the satellite feed for the last hour within a hundred-mile radius? Do a search for any ambulances that have been on the road,” Dani requested.

“That’s a lot of footage to cover. It could take quite a while, especially if their lights weren’t flashing.”

“Do your best. I don’t think Jake has much time.” The three of them got back into the SUV. Rico started the vehicle and left the campground.

“Which way?” he asked.

“Head back to the highway. That’s the quickest way out of here,” Dani replied. They drove for several minutes, driving underneath the overpass of the freeway. A welcome sign on their right showed they were entering the town of Durham. They passed slowly through the town’s commercial district and saw closed store fronts. Dani’s cell rang.

“De Nano here. Just letting you know we found the paramedic. He had a huge goose egg on the back of his head, but otherwise alive.”

“Well that’s relief. Does he remember anything?”

“No, he didn’t see his attacker. He wheeled Jeffrey towards the ambulance but halfway there, someone knocked him on the head. He woke up lying in a depression in the woods.”

“Where’s Tarver?”

“He and the local police are searching every inch of the remaining trailers and woods. They should be done in the next thirty minutes. You can be pretty sure that as soon as they come up with zilch, we’ll be following your lead. Maybe sooner once he talks to the paramedic.”

“Okay. Tell Tarver I’ll call him if anything solid comes up.” Dani clicked her phone off and turned back to Mac.

“Okay boss, satellite surveillance analysis reports five ambulances in the general area within the last hour. I called the state dispatch and four have checked in. The fifth was last seen on satellite about thirty minutes ago driving through the town of Durham business park,” Mac explained and looked to Dani for further guidance.

“Keep getting satellite surveillance on the area in case the ambulance goes on the move again. Rico head over to the business park as fast as possible.”

“What if the ambulance is in a warehouse or garage? How will we find it?” Rico asked.

“Then we’ll have to make an educated guess. Jake’s life depends on it.”

The coffin had gone dark while Williams had drilled several screws into the lid. With his legs and arms bound, Jake could not push the lid up. Suddenly a beam of light appeared by his face. He coughed as sawdust floated into his lungs, but he assumed that the opening was an air hole. Jake was meant to be kept alive a little bit longer.

“I have to go. I have a feeling we’re not going to meet again,” William’s computer squeaked, his words harder to make out through the coffin. “But you were an interesting person; the ability to track people was very cool. You were almost like a superhero. Too bad your power couldn’t keep you alive.”

“You sick son of bitch! You can kill me, but the FBI knows who you are you. You’ll be caught, it’s just a matter of time,” Jake tried to sound confident. In the dark with his limbs tied, it took everything not to give into despair.

“We all die sometime. It’s just a matter of being able to use the gifts that God gave you. But I wouldn’t worry too much about me. There’s someone here to see you.” For a split second, Jake’s heart leapt into his mouth as he hoped that his daughter was there. The man’s voice dispelled that hope.

“Hi Jake,” Weems said into the opening. “Have you missed me?”

For a second, Jake’s mind froze at the realization of who was on the other side of the coffin. For the past sixteen months, his goal had been to find this man.

The man who had killed his wife.

The man who had taken his daughter.

The man who made his life a living hell.

A vortex of emotions played through his mind, anger, sadness, fear, hate. And the worst thing of all, Jake didn’t know how to respond.

His body bound, he felt like he was bound emotionally as well. Jake felt that Weems wanted him to react, he wanted Jake to scream. Weems fed on his despair, so Jake decided to give him the opposite of what he wanted. He found confidence in his psychiatrist role, talking to a patient; showing him who is in charge.

“About time you got here. We knew you would show up eventually,” Jake spoke with such calm and confidence that he almost believed what he said himself. Weems momentary silence meant that his words were having the desired effect.

“He’s lying. There is no way that he knew I was going to knock him out. He’s grasping at straws,” Williams’s computer voice had returned. He said something else, but it was inaudible to Jake’s ears in the coffin.

“Did you check his clothes for any tracking devices?” Weems asked. The question was met with silence. “Get out of here. You’ve done your task. If this goes sideways, you’ll have much more than the FBI to worry about.” There were footsteps and then the noise of a gurney was wheeled across the room. The slamming of a door confirmed that Williams and Jeffrey had left.

“Sorry for the interruption Jake. I wanted us to have some privacy. I imagine you must have some questions?” Jake could hear the smirk in Weems voice. Rather than play his game, Jake continued to play the only card he had.

“Sure. But we don’t have a lot of time. I have already signaled the team on your arrival.” Jake felt his voice waiver as he kept up his lie. Boarded up in a coffin where Weems couldn’t see his facial or body expressions, actually worked to his advantage.

“You can drop the act Jake. You must be dying to ask me about your daughter. Stop playing games. You’re right about one thing, you don’t have much time.” Jake hesitated in his response. He could only play tough for so long. When no one arrived soon, Weems would know his words were a lie. Jake decided not to ask the obvious question about his daughter, knowing that Weems would deceive him.

“Why are you here? Why get involved with this investigation? Why are you so fascinated with me?” Weems laughed at his questions.

“This is great Jake. I’ve wanted to talk to you for so long. I’m a changed man because of you. For years I always taken what I wanted.

Because of your interference, I lost my enmity, my contacts, and my life.”

“And you took my family away from me!” Jake yelled. He had so much pent up rage from his wife’s death that he couldn’t hold it back. *I didn’t care what Weems does to me, if only there was a way to save my daughter.*

“Go ahead Jake. Let it all out. I only wish I could have been a fly on the wall when you walked through the museum. Your daughter thought we were playing a game, she had so much fun leading you around,” Weems snickered, enjoying the image.

Jake was going to explode. He was bound and trapped in a coffin, surrounded by the man he hated the most and slowly dying inside that he would never see his daughter again. It was one of worst moments in his life. Then the gunshots began.

Jake listened as Weems rushed to a nearby window. After several seconds, he returned to the hole in the coffin.

“Guess you were telling the truth after all Jake. I don’t know how you set this up, but if I get caught, you’ll never see your daughter alive. Our time was cut short, but this isn’t over. I’ve got plans for you.” The room became silent and Jake thought Weems had left even though he hadn’t heard any footfalls. He was wrong. “And your daughter,” Weems said, level to the coffin. His voice was louder and traveled straight to Jake’s ear. He sobbed at the thought of losing his daughter forever to Weems.

“I’ll find you! I will track you to the ends of the earth and make you pay!” Jake felt the tears stream down his face but couldn’t move his hands to wipe them away. The room became silent, Weems was gone. The seconds melted into minutes and the gunfire was replaced by the squealing of tires. *Did Weems get captured?* Suddenly the door to the building was kicked open and Jake heard voices.

“Help!” he croaked, “I’m in here.” They must have heard him. A minute later, something hard was being pried into the lid to rip it off. The light flooded in and Jake looked into the Dani’s eyes. Immediate relief filled his body as he passed out.

Chapter 36

Daughter of Love

16 months ago Portland, Oregon

Jake pushed Ella high into the sky. The morning sun haloed a crown around her head. Her play set was always the most used item in their backyard. Jake had bought it and assembled it himself. It had a swing, slide, rope climb and miniature store front. After buying it, he realized that he should have just gotten the swing because it was the only item she used.

“Higher! Higher!” Ella screamed; her yells mixed with laughter.

“Be careful. Or I will push you to the moon!” Jake yelled which made her laugh even louder. It was one of those moments that Jake wished he could bottle forever.

“All right you two. I have a couple of errands to run,” a woman’s voice yelled to them from the back door.

“Ah Mom!” they both giggled. Ella jumped off of the swing and ran over. They walked over to the SUV and Monica opened the back door. Ella jumped in and sat in the booster seat. Monica smiled at Jake as she climbed into the driver seat.

“We’ll be back in an hour. Promise to be here when we get back.”

“You bet. I’m going for a run. By the time, you’re back, I’ll be showered and ready to go.” He blew her a kiss. *My god she was a beautiful woman!* She turned the key in the ignition and the vehicle gunned to life. Before it could back away, Ella’s window electronically opened.

“Daddy, are we going to have fun today?” she giggled.

“Absolutely. A Saturday to remember,” Jake answered.

“Do you promise?” she held out her pinky. “Can you make it extra special?” He gave her his hand to make a pinky promise.

“Darling, I’ve got a feeling that today is one we won’t forget,” Jake replied and waved as his family left the driveway.

Chapter 37

Never Endings

Lindsay Funeral Home

Jake lay on his back on a leather couch in one of the funeral offices. About thirty minutes had passed since he had been rescued. The paramedic had just checked him over and he passed the exam. Jake refused further observation. He had spent far too much time in a hospital beds lately and wanted to avoid another visit. Dani stepped into the office and knelt by the couch.

“I’m sorry Jake. We never knew Weems was here. Mac searched on the satellite to follow any vehicles that left here. By the time she found his car, he’d dumped it in a mall parking lot. He’s gone,” Dani consoled.

Jake closed his eyes, holding an icepack to the back of his head. With the bump on his skull and some cuts from the bounds on his wrists, he felt beaten up, both mentally and physically.

“How did you find me?”

“We figured out that Williams had replaced the paramedic after you disappeared. Mac did a satellite search, we were lucky. We don’t always get a live feed, or we may not have had footage of this area. It depends where the satellites are in orbit. We eventually narrowed down the area. Once I saw the funeral home, I knew from his history that he had taken you there. As we approached, Williams was leaving in the ambulance. We shot out the tires before he made it to the roadway. When he tried to escape, I shot him.” Jake was taken aback by her comment.

“Is he?”

“He’s alive; I shot him in the leg. He won’t be running from us again. I wanted to make sure he didn’t make a martyr of himself. He’s going to pay for what he’s done.” Dani looked into his face.

“I’m surprised you didn’t kill him, considering what he did to you.”

“Death’s too easy. He needs to suffer in isolation. Maybe we can learn from him to identify future serial killers. Hopefully we can find out more about Weems and what they discussed.”

Jake was so tired, and he could feel his eyes welling up. Dani reached around his shoulders and hugged him. The two of them said nothing. The tears washed down his face as Dani tried to console him.

“I can’t do this anymore. I was fooled by him. What if next time, I lead someone to their death?”

“Stop it Jake! You still have a lot to learn about your tracking ability. So now we know that there are things that can disrupt your ability to see the trail. You’ve done a lot of good. Don’t let Weems make you stop.”

“Dani – I have nothing left to give.”

“Look at you, you’re exhausted. You’re lucky if you can tie your shoelaces let alone follow a missing trail. Give yourself a break. That’s an order.”

“Dani, do you understand the pressure when it’s my ability that determines the life or death of a missing person?”

“I don’t, but you rescued Jeffrey and Mandy. You saved their lives and made a difference with their families. It’s over now!” Jake looked into her eyes and images of Weems and Ella flashed through his mind. Knowing that she was still out there with Weems, broke his heart.

“No,” Jake said with determination, “it’s only just begun.”

Epilogue

2 weeks later

Weems leaned back in the hotel chair with his fingers folded behind his head. So much had happened; he had come so close to utterly destroying Jake. So close, if only he had a few minutes more. Fortunately, there were many ways to torture Jake further.

Initially he had used Jake's daughter as a tool against him. He knew Jake would do anything to protect her from him. Now Weems felt differently, he didn't want to give up Ella; she had become more to him. He wanted to protect her from Jake. And he would do anything to keep him from her.

"Uncle Jimmy?" a quiet voice echoed behind him. He turned and looked at Ella's inquisitive smile. She may only be four years old, but she asked questions of someone twice her age. "Are you any closer to catching the bad guys?" Her big eyes looked straight through him.

"No, my dear, they are still after you. But you have been a big help to your uncle." She cocked her head slightly as if ready to ask another question.

"Why did the bad guys hurt my parents? Why are they trying to hurt me?" Her concern was genuine as she wished that her life could have been different. Weems opened his arms to beckon her onto his lap. He looked deep into her eyes and spoke with all the sincerity he could muster.

"I don't know honey, but I can promise you this. There is one bad man left and when your Uncle Jimmy is done with him – you'll never have to worry about him again."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Kochanoff is currently in a four-book deal with Silver Leaf Books in Massachusetts. The series is a young adult dystopian fiction with the first novel “Drone World” exploring the life of a teenage girl who thinks she lives in a perfectly safe city patrolled by drones, until she tries to leave it.

He signed a contract with Toonz Animation, Asia’s largest animation for an animated pilot of his novel “Men of Extreme Action.” To see images from this pilot, please visit his website at www.adventurebooks.ca

It’s tough to make a career as an author. About 1% can truly make a living at it. If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on your favorite book retailers’ site and tell others about the book.