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TRACE
OF EVIL



Alice Blanchard



MINOTAUR BOOKS
NEW YORK



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Doug, forever

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Detective **Natalie Lockhart** pulled into the cemetery and parked in front of a run-down church covered in ivy and twining vines, her hands tightening on the steering wheel. This part of the weed-choked graveyard was isolated and neglected. She sat for a moment, scanning the grounds, chiseled engravings of skull-and-crossbones staring back at her with their hollowed-out eyes. Haunting stuff. The weeds grew tallest around the old slate stones from a cholera outbreak in 1825, obscuring the names of the dead. *Here lyeth Ezekiel Young. God Shelters Goodwife Palmer.*

Natalie shivered and glanced at her watch. Five o'clock. The sky was overcast. The Weather Channel kept predicting rain. Time to do this thing before the downpour ruined everything.

She got out of her smoke-gray Honda Pilot, popped the trunk, and gathered up her supplies—spritzer bottles full of harsh chemicals, a soft-bristle brush, trash bags, a plastic scraper, and her grass clippers. The air smelled of balsam and pitch pine. It was mid-April in Upstate New York, a time of renewal. A time for shedding the past and moving on. Except not today—not for Natalie.

Today was her sister's twentieth deathiversary.

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She slammed the trunk and, juggling everything in her arms, proceeded along the overgrown path toward the newer part of the cemetery. At the top of the incline she paused to catch her breath and locate her sister's grave. *Willow Mercy Lockhart*. Fingers of fog curled around the granite slab, creating the impression of a damp loneliness. Willow would have been thirty-eight years old. Natalie was thirty, and her sister, Grace, was thirty-six. Their parents were gone.

Natalie's father, Officer Joseph "Joey" Lockhart, had been blue through and through until the day he died, a proud member of the Burning Lake Police Department for thirty-five years. He spent his career directing traffic, rescuing kittens, breaking up bar fights, and arresting drunk drivers. He was a fitness buff with scruffy brown hair and warm hazel eyes, and his favorite saying was, "Put a fork in us, we're done." As the father of three daughters, he'd always wanted a son, but after his wife put her foot down and said, "No more kids," Joey scooped up his youngest daughter—the one who adored him, the one he'd named after Natalie Wood—and taught her everything he knew about being a cop. Natalie was born with a knack for solving mysteries, Joey claimed. By the age of eight, she'd read all of Agatha Christie's and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novels, and she beat everyone at Clue and Trivial Pursuit.

Now Natalie turned up the collar of her cheap jacket. Wow. It got worse every year. She surveyed the graffitied headstones—pentagrams, 666, upside-down crosses, *Redrum*. The grass was littered with crushed beer cans, melted candles, and half-burned incense sticks—evidence of hard-partying kids who were into the occult. The local teenagers liked to speculate about life and hunt for spirits in the town cemeteries, hoping to communicate with the dead. Dabbling in witchcraft was something of a rite of passage in Burning Lake, New York, and Natalie sympathized, since she'd gone through a witchy phase herself—conducting séances, wishing for a boyfriend, hexing her rivals with an acne flare-up or two. *I wanna be a teen witch, fuck you*. The dark side had a powerful appeal in this town.

Natalie got down on the ground and started to clip the weeds around the base of Willow's headstone. She hacked away at the stubborn thistle stems, then sat back and glanced at the swollen sky, which was making

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ominous rumbling sounds. With a renewed sense of purpose, she picked up the plastic scraper and removed thin shavings of moss from the pink granite. A scrub brush and pump sprayer cleaned it up good. Now for the graffiti—pentacles, horns, hexagrams. The worst one was a resurrection spell calling Willow back to the world of the living. *Come through this Mortal door.* It disgusted Natalie. “Come on,” she muttered angrily. “Let her rest in peace.”

For centuries, Burning Lake had buried its most shameful secret. In 1712, three innocent women were executed as witches. It all began when two little sisters accused their village neighbors of bewitching them. Panic ensued. Accusations flew. In the end, three “scurrilous, wicked creatures” were convicted of witchcraft—Abigail Stuart, Sarah Hutchins, and Victoriana Forsyth. Many years later, their accusers admitted they’d made it all up.

The town fathers had tried to bury Burning Lake’s sordid history for centuries. The city’s rebirth began in the 1960s with the completion of the Adirondack Northway, which connected the idyllic beauty of upstate New York with Manhattan. In the 1970s, a book about the witch trials was published to critical acclaim, drawing hundreds of tourists to Burning Lake. By the 1980s, the town realized its potential and went full-bore Salem. A cottage industry blossomed around Abigail, Sarah, and Victoriana. Today, downtown Burning Lake was full of occult gift shops and New Age boutiques selling everything from spell kits to magic crystals. For those residents who were “into the Craft,” you could find whatever you needed at the local 7-Eleven—Ouija boards, tarot cards, even a tiny cauldron. Fall was their season. Halloween was huge. There were guided tours, a witch museum, and a monument on Abby’s Hex Peninsula, where the executions had taken place. In October, the trees blazed a spectacular orange color, and thousands of tourists came from all over to see the world on fire.

Now Natalie selected a chemical recommended to her by the paint store guy, a shy man with deep-set eyes who had a thing for her, and spritzed the headstone with it, then scrubbed off the offending graffiti until her arms grew tired. Willow had taught her how to hold herself erect and twirl around like a ballerina. She taught Natalie how to make a boat out of newspapers

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and float it in the lake, how to identify fish in the water. Her favorite was the darting sunfish, small as a hand, flickering in the early summer light.

Willow had woven herself into Natalie and was part of her now, and Natalie couldn't take a step without . . . somehow, somewhere inside her body, feeling Willow's faint presence, like a glimmer of life going on inside a house that was no longer yours. Just a glimpse of a tiny figure dancing back and forth, so tall and slender, so light on her feet.

Ten minutes later, only a "girly skull" sticker remained on the granite slab—an ironic skull-and-crossbones cartoon with a bright pink bow. Natalie used the scraper to chisel away as much of the sticker as she could, then dabbed on paint remover to get rid of the gummy residue.

Finally. Done. She stood up and brushed the grass clippings off her hands. Next she gathered up the beer cans and fast-food wrappers, filling two heavy-duty trash bags. Okay. Best she could do. It was closing in on six o'clock.

On her way downhill, heading back to her car, something caught Natalie's eye—a defaced gravestone with chalk marks covering the speckled granite. The handwriting was nearly impossible to decipher, but she recognized a few shocking words: *fuck, cunt, dead*.

She paused between rows four and five, feeling a stab of anxiety. The name on the headstone—Teresa McCarthy—was one of the nine cold cases she'd been assigned as a rookie detective in the Criminal Investigations Unit. Twenty-one-year-old Teresa was last seen one April morning more than two decades ago, hitching a ride out of town. Teresa had led a troubled life. She was a tweaker, a meth head who scratched her skin so much it was covered in sores. Her sunken eyes conveyed her shrunken dreams. Last year, her parents finally gave up hope of ever finding her alive and had Teresa declared legally dead. There was no body buried here. Just a stone slab to remember her by.

Now the wind stirred Natalie's hair. The graffiti on the grave was not the usual occult bombast—it was scarier than that. The handwriting was mostly illegible, but the ten percent she could make out displayed a unique brand of nastiness and bile—absolute hatred for the deceased. Who would do such a thing? Nobody in town remembered Teresa McCarthy anymore,

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except for her parents and the detectives who were keeping her cold case alive.

Natalie glanced warily around. None of the other graves in this part of the cemetery had been defiled. During her first year as the designated newbie of the unit, her assigned task was reinvestigating “the Missing Nine”—nine beat-to-hell plastic binders, battered around the edges, their dog-eared pages full of old leads, inconsistent witness testimonies, and dried-up lines of inquiry. All the other detectives in the unit had taken a shot at the Missing Nine and failed. It was tradition to pass the burden along to the newbie, since what was needed was a fresh pair of eyes.

In the past twenty-five years, nine transients had gone missing from Burning Lake, and it was Natalie’s turn to find out why. Nine people had vanished off the face of the earth since the mid-1990s—drifters, drug addicts, indigents, alcoholics, the lowest rung of the ladder. The FBI field office briefly got involved back in the mid-2000s, but since the victims were all drifters by nature, it was assumed that they’d drifted on, passing through Burning Lake on their way to warmer destinations. It was difficult at best to keep track of the transient homeless population and freight hoppers who rode the rails.

In the end, the Missing Nine were Burning Lake’s problem. These pitiful victims were mostly unloved and forgotten—people whose families had given up on them. With the exception of Teresa McCarthy, there were no graves for them. No deathiversaries. No wilting bouquets of remembrance.

Natalie studied the defiled headstone, every inch of dark granite covered in hastily scribbled words, placed too close together, most of it illegible—and yet the message was clear. *Teresa, shit, pussy, fuck, cunt, dead.* Deeply troubled, she took out her cell phone and snapped as many pictures as she could, while the sky made guttural rumblings in the distance. She leaned down to rub off one of the letters and validate her suspicion—yes, it was chalk. White chalk. Which meant the message would vanish in the oncoming storm. Natalie documented the scene as best she could, then checked her watch again. She didn’t want to be late.

2



Natalie put everything away in the trunk of her SUV, used a hand sanitizer, brushed her fingers through her hair, and grabbed the bouquet of marigolds from the backseat. Just in time.

Grace Lockhart drove her Mini Cooper through the cemetery gates, while Grace's fifteen-year-old daughter, Ellie, waved at her aunt through the windshield.

Natalie smiled and waved back.

They got out of the Mini Cooper with their bouquets and silver helium balloons, and Natalie opened her arms wide. Hugs and kisses all around.

"Hi, Aunt Natalie."

"How's it going, kiddo?"

"Pretty good, thanks."

"Hey, sis." Grace was an exceptionally pretty divorcée who hadn't aged a day since high school. She had luminous blue eyes and a halo of golden Botticelli hair. She came across as placid, almost complacent, as if nothing fazed her, but Natalie knew a deeper truth. Grace was a natural-born worrier, the type of person who couldn't prevent everyday problems from weighing heavily on her. She was sensitive to a fault, although you wouldn't

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know it to look at her. She was a biology teacher at the local high school, and she'd divorced her hedge-fund-manager husband six years ago, when Ellie was nine. Ellie bore the scars of the divorce on her sweet, sad face.

"Sorry we're late," Grace said absently, checking her phone. "Ellie had a thing after school."

"I was with my friends," Ellie clarified.

"Sorry . . . what I meant."

"Mom, where's your head today? Put that thing away."

"Pot. Kettle." Grace smiled and finished checking her text messages.

"You told me to put *my* phone away," Ellie reminded her.

"Just a second."

"Sheesh. Pot. Kettle." Ellie was a stunner, an avid book-reader and the world's biggest cynic. Her lovely, skeptical eyes were a waxy blue. She'd dyed her naturally blond hair raven black in order to distance herself from her mother, but otherwise she was the spitting image of Grace. Ellie was born during a hurricane. The gale-force winds had swept in from the southwest, shaking the traffic lights and fanning the suffocating rains. Lately, she reminded Natalie of a hurricane, with her escalating moods and fiery defiance of her mother's rules.

"Are we all set?" Natalie asked.

"Yeah," Grace said, putting her phone away. "Let's go."

They found Willow's grave and placed their flowers at the base of the headstone, while Ellie handed out the balloons—one each. Every year, they performed the same simple yet heartfelt ceremony. First, they took turns telling Willow what had transpired since her last deathiversary; then they said a silent prayer; finally they released their balloons.

"Ellie, you go first," Grace said. "I'll go next, and Natalie, you're last."

"Wow, you're like a well-mannered bulldozer," Natalie joked.

Ellie giggled. "Mom's used to ordering her students around."

"I don't order anyone around," Grace protested.

"Then why are you rushing us?"

"Because I hate graveyards," Grace admitted with a shudder.

"You always do this," Ellie protested softly. "Every year, you come up with some excuse to leave early."

“No, I don’t.” Grace blushed. “Do I?”

Ellie turned to Natalie and asked, “Was she always this superstitious?”

“Grace is the most superstitious person I know.”

“It’s like . . . if I spill a grain of salt,” Ellie said with a derisive snort, “she’ll toss a pinch over her shoulder. If we come across a ladder or a black cat, she’ll walk in the other direction. It’s crazy.”

“Go ahead and mock your mother. I can take it.” Grace rolled her eyes. “Honey, you’re up,” she coached her daughter.

Ellie shuffled her feet. She was rail-thin, with an upturned nose, and today she was dressed all in black—black nail polish, black boots, a black lace blouse, black jeans. She was growing out her bangs, and you could see her sly eyes through a curtain of hair, the suggestion of mischief in her adolescent mouth. “Okay, well, um . . . Aunt Willow, I’ve been wondering lately . . . what it must feel like to lie underground, year after year, while everyone who visits your grave is so sad . . . all that negative karma must drive you nuts. And so I want you to know I’m feeling happy for you today, instead of sad, because you’re beyond all the bogus BS.”

“Ellie,” Grace said.

“Well, she is,” she insisted. “She’s moved on, and we haven’t. We’re still wallowing in the past. Meanwhile, she’s out there, flowing free with the wind and the water and . . .”

Grace put a hand on Ellie’s shoulder. “Honey, just tell your poor aunt what happened since her last deathiversary,” she pleaded. “C’mon, you know the drill. You’ve had all year to think about this.”

Ellie glanced at Natalie, who refused to take sides. With a sigh, she said, “All right. I got straight As again this year, just like last year. Probably because I’m so good at regurgitating whatever my teachers tell me and sitting quietly for hours, like a good little conformist. I’m an upstanding member of the Honor Society who does what she’s told . . . basically I’m Pavlov’s dog. Mom thinks I’m a genius. She’s my helicopter mommy.”

Grace gasped. “Good grief. Where on earth did you come up with that?”

“What?” Ellie said.

Grace turned to Natalie. “Am I a *helicopter mommy*?”

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Natalie felt the surprise in the pit of her stomach. This child knew herself. She seemed so utterly self-possessed, so very much her own person, that Natalie felt a little lost by comparison.

“Well, it’s the truth,” Ellie said obstinately. “School is mostly bogus. Anyone can get straight As. It’s all about obedience and rote memory.”

Grace grew disheartened. Her posture wilted. She lived off Burke Guzman’s alimony payments, but teaching was her passion. “Can we talk about this later, honey?”

Ellie nodded and said, “Anyway, I’ve never met you, Aunt Willow, but I hope you’ve found peace. Perfect peace.” She smiled softly. “Okay, Mom. Your turn.”

Grace didn’t bat an eye, she just launched into a recitation of last year’s activities, hitting all the highlights—two weeks in Martha’s Vineyard; a weekend in Boston to check out Harvard and MIT; Christmas in Bermuda. They were thinking of Harvard or Yale, maybe Columbia or Princeton. Ellie was in the top one percent of her class and doing great. Everything was great. Great, great, great. It was seven minutes and counting before she ran out of brag.

Then came Natalie’s turn. She never knew exactly what to say in these situations, since she preferred to grieve in private, like her father, Joey.

“Well, let’s see,” she said. “Zack got a job offer, and I didn’t feel like moving to Seattle, so we decided to separate. Test the waters.” That wasn’t the whole truth. Zack Stadler, Natalie’s boyfriend of three years, had left her after a bitter fight during which unforgivable things were said. Zack hated that there was a gun in the house, whereas Natalie had grown up with a gun in the house. Zack hated the autopsy photos she occasionally left out on her desk, whereas Natalie had grown up with autopsy photos on her father’s desk. Zack really didn’t want a cop for a girlfriend, although he’d initially been fascinated by her uniform, her bulletproof vest, her duty belt, her handcuffs, her police baton, her tactical boots, and of course the gun and extra magazines. But once the sex got old, their relationship died. During their final year together, Zack seemed to be fuming underneath the surface, repressing his resentment, which he took out on Natalie by fucking her from behind, always turning her over so he wouldn’t have to look

at her indifferent face. Zack wanted prestige, he wanted status, he wanted much more than a town like Burning Lake could offer. And so, eight months ago, he'd packed his belongings and relocated to Seattle, where he went to work for a promising e-zine that covered the art scene. Natalie didn't feel bitter or heartsick about it, so much as empty. They used to mock other cardboard couples. In the end, they began to mock each other.

Now Grace and Ellie were watching her closely. She ignored the looks of sympathy and talked about her job, some of the domestic abuse cases she'd solved, some of the brutal men she'd put away.

When she was done, they all held hands, said a silent prayer, and released the balloons, which slithered into the fog like jellyfish.

"Mom, I'm going to take pictures of the graves," Ellie said.

"Sure, go ahead." Once the sisters were alone together, Grace said, "Wow. Twenty years."

Natalie nodded. "Hard to believe."

Twenty years ago, Willow Lockhart had been savagely murdered by a jealous boyfriend behind the Hadleys' old barn. Stabbed twenty-seven times. When Natalie's mother heard the news, she screamed until her voice wore out. Sixteen-year-old Grace ran upstairs and vomited in the bathtub. Joey collapsed on the sofa, tears streaming down his face and dripping off his chin, like a drooling baby's. Ten-year-old Natalie punched her fist through the mesh screen door and sprained her wrist. Days of mourning followed brutal loneliness. Her parents' fights late at night. Phone calls from the media.

Now Natalie couldn't help but feel that their grief had diminished over time, like a fading newspaper obituary. Every year, they stood in this same spot, summoning up the old heartbreak, but the loss wasn't half as sharp or bitter as it had once been. Today felt more like an obligation. Like something to check off the to-do list.

"She's growing up so fast," Grace said of her daughter, who was traipsing among the weathered fieldstones, snapping pictures. "It's a little scary."

"She's a good kid," Natalie reassured her. "You raised her right."

"One minute she's my adorable little girl, and the next thing I know, she's screaming at me like a banshee. Everything's always my fault. She

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wants to get as far away from me as humanly possible.” Grace kept a careful eye on Ellie, who was taking pictures of a half-melted candle in front of a particularly decrepit grave. “Last night, for instance, she texted me IN ALL CAPS from the other room. And I told her—you need to come in here and talk to me face-to-face. I need to see you in real life.”

“She’s just testing the limits.”

“Fifteen, right? I guess it’s normal,” Grace said with a tired, proud smile. “She reminds me of you at that age.”

“Yeah?”

“Totally.”

Not really, Natalie thought. Grace couldn’t have remembered, because she had been six years older and living away from home by the time Natalie turned fifteen. Everything about being a teenager was difficult. Fifteen was a confusing, in-between age for a girl. You weren’t a child anymore, but you weren’t a full-grown woman yet. Life wasn’t rainbows-and-kittens anymore. The clouds weren’t made of cotton candy, other kids could be cruel, boys were suddenly interested, and it was up to you to navigate your way through this mess called adolescence, where your hormones kept pushing you toward spontaneous combustion.

“Anyway, she’s acing all her classes. Blowing away the competition. My little brainiac.” A damp gust made a play for Grace’s golden hair. She patted it down and said, “Did you check out that dating app I sent you?”

“God, no.” Natalie laughed. “Lol.”

Her sister’s pale forehead crimped with worry. “Eight months is a long enough time to waste on a broken relationship, Natalie. You should go out there and mix it up.”

“Mix things up?” Natalie winced. “What is this, the nineties?”

“I’m serious. I started dating a few months after the divorce.”

“Grace, you’ve been dating your entire life.”

She smiled and shrugged. “I can’t help it if I’m not as picky as you.”

To the left of Willow’s grave were Joey’s and Deborah’s plots. To the right of Willow’s grave were two empty plots reserved for Natalie and Grace. Neither one of them wanted to be buried here. Grace rubbed her shivering arms and said, “We should really sell those stupid plots, don’t you think?”

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Natalie nodded. "Yeah, it's probably time."

"Just scatter my ashes somewhere pretty," Grace said. "Better for the planet that way. Less creepy than being buried here for all eternity. No offense, Mom and Dad." Her phone buzzed. She checked the number. "It's Burke," she said anxiously. "I have to take this. He wants to increase visitation rights, but then he shouldn't have signed the divorce agreement, right?" Grace's ex-husband, Burke Guzman, lived in Manhattan and was never around, so it fell on Grace's shoulders to raise their only child. "I don't want Ellie to overhear this. I'll wait for you in the car, okay?"

"Sure. It's going to rain soon anyway. We'll be down shortly."

Grace headed down the hill. "Burke?"

After a moment, Ellie looked up and noticed her mother was gone. She pocketed her phone, walked over to Natalie, and said, "You were in a coven once, weren't you, Aunt Natalie?"

"Yeah, sure. We all were, for a short period of time."

She tilted her head. "Why'd you quit?"

"The coven?" Natalie hesitated. "It got pretty dark."

"How dark?" Ellie asked, her face tensing with interest.

"My friends and I decided to stop. We moved on to other things."

"Your friends . . . including the girl who disappeared?"

"Bella. Yes. Only she didn't disappear," Natalie explained. "She ran off to California on the eve of our high school graduation."

Ellie tugged on her earlobe. "Did you ever see her again?"

"No. In fact, I never heard from her again."

"Oh." She frowned. "Then how do you know she's alive?"

"She sent a bunch of postcards to her parents. No return address. I don't think she wanted to be found."

"Why not?"

"Long story," Natalie said. Because her father was sexually abusing her, she thought, the old anger simmering just underneath the surface. "How did you find out about that?"

"Mom mentioned it once or twice," Ellie explained. "How dark did it get? In the coven?"

Natalie smiled warmly at her. “Where are these questions coming from, Ellie?”

“I’m just curious,” the girl replied with deeper interest than mere curiosity.

Natalie nodded and said, “Bella and I thought it would be fun to explore Wicca, so we chose our witch names and slept under a full moon, you know . . . the whole nine yards. Black lipstick, astrology, Elvira streaks in our black hair. It was scary fun . . . until it wasn’t. I’m guessing you’re asking me about this now because you’re in a coven?”

Ellie’s pretty blue eyes widened. “How’d you guess?”

“Gee, I dunno.” Natalie smiled warmly at her. “Maybe it’s the hair that clued me in. Or the all-black outfit. Or the reference to wind, water, earth, and fire.”

Storm clouds were rolling in. Ellie kicked at the grass clippings. “Mom hates anything witchy. She says she saw a ghost once during a séance, and it scared the bejeezus out of her. She says that’s how she became so superstitious, because of the coven. She won’t even let me get a tattoo. All my friends have them. It’s no big deal.”

Natalie shook her head. “Are you kidding me? It’s a huge deal.”

“India has one. Why can’t I?”

Sixteen-year-old India Cochran was Ellie’s best friend—a natural beauty with almond-shaped eyes and raven black hair, and just like the rest of Ellie’s friends, a high achiever. Honor Society, debating team, class secretary two years in a row. “Since when did India get a tattoo?”

“Last summer. Besides,” Ellie stubbornly went on, “Mom’s got a tat over her left boob, which makes her a hypocrite.”

“When you’re young, all adults seem like hypocrites.”

“*Seem* like?”

Natalie smiled indulgently. “Does Grace know you’re in a coven?”

Ellie’s face flushed. “No. And please don’t tell her, Aunt Natalie.”

“I won’t. But you should talk to her about it. She might surprise you.”

“Trust me.” Ellie rolled her eyes. “She’ll be furious.”

“Look, your mom hasn’t had an easy life. It may appear easy on the

surface, but Grace is very sensitive. She cares a lot. Maybe too much. She only wants what's best for you."

Ellie glanced skyward. "Can I ask you something else?"

"Shoot."

"What happened to you and Zack?"

Natalie heaved a sigh—her niece was all over the place tonight. "A relationship can swallow you up. At first it was exhilarating, but after a while, it felt claustrophobic."

"Why?"

"Zack had to have an explanation for everything. He knew everything there was to know. He had to win every argument. And I let him, because it was too exhausting not to. After a while, we stopped communicating. And that's death to coupled-om."

"What a horse's ass," Ellie muttered, the color rising in her cheeks.

Natalie tucked her hands in the pockets of her jacket. "We were just wrong for each other, Ellie. It took us both a while to figure that out. But I'm much happier now."

"How come?"

"Dodged a bullet."

With a loud clap of thunder, the sky opened up, and it began to pour. A flat-out torrent. They'd forgotten their umbrellas, so they ran down the access road together.

Grace waved at them from inside the Mini Cooper while Ellie hugged her aunt good-bye and hopped in the car, little loops of hair sticking to her pale face.

Grace rolled down her window and said, "Next time, Natalie, I promise, we'll have dinner afterwards. Like a *pro-pah* deathiversary."

"Sounds like a plan," Natalie said, knowing next time would be no different. She watched as the Mini Cooper backed down the crumbling road toward the cemetery gates. Soon the taillights disappeared into the fog.

Drenched to the skin, Natalie got in her car, started the engine, and turned on the wipers. The rain made ever-changing streaks of amethyst on the glass. She could feel the fury of the storm as it approached from the

south, could feel it booming through the hills and darkening the air, stirring the trees and driving the birds to seek shelter—how did they hang on?

She switched on her high beams and studied the fractal intricacy of the yellow foxtail growing by the side of the road. Twenty years ago today, Willow was stabbed to death by a self-proclaimed rebel who liked to dress all in black—black T-shirt, black denim jeans, black Chucks, jet-black hair. Natalie used to think Justin Fowler was cool. Now he wore prison orange and was serving a life sentence for first-degree murder.

You never got over it.

Rest in peace, Willow. Same time next year.

3

In a **midsize** town like Burning Lake, New York—population 50,000—there were slow days down at the police station, and then there were crazy days. As a general rule, their call volume held fairly steady and wasn't as high as the typical caseloads you'd find in Albany or Syracuse, but the BLPD was busier than most of the sleepier burghs south of the Adirondack Mountains. They popped a lot of DUIs and had their share of domestic disturbances. This idyllic rural American town wasn't supposed to have a drug problem, but in the past decade or so, methamphetamines and opioids had flooded into the upstate market. Black tar—a low-grade form of heroin that was cheap to buy and came in little balloons you could hide in your mouth while cruising around—was taking over the west side of town, where the residents had been hardest hit by the economic downturn.

Downtown Burning Lake was clean and safe for the most part, and the business community worked hard to keep it that way. Main Street with its Victorian-era brick buildings and tree-lined sidewalks featured plenty of jazz clubs, bookshops, cafés, and art galleries. There was a summer music festival, a historical museum, and a performing arts center that headlined

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off-Broadway plays. Besides a myriad of cultural events, Burning Lake also boasted an enormous state park where you could go hiking, rock climbing, bike riding, skiing, and fishing. Not that the town was perfect. Far from it. The winters were bitterly cold. Heating bills could be a burden. Sometimes there was nothing to do. One of the main activities for the locals, especially during those long winter months, was drinking. Finding a bar wasn't difficult in upstate New York, where it could dip to twenty below in the winter and the waterfalls could freeze solid.

Tonight, Natalie found a convenient parking spot—a rare occurrence during happy hour in the commercial district—got out, and dashed through the rain, splashing through the puddles. She ducked into the Barkin' Dawg Saloon, very popular with law enforcement officers. Every Wednesday night, the lieutenant would get together with his staff over chili dogs and Rolling Rocks at the Barkin' Dawg to discuss any unresolved issues they might be having in the unit, a tight-knit group of seven detectives on rotating shifts who shared one week of "on-call duty" per month.

This week was Natalie's turn, lucky her. She checked her pager to make sure it was working and ordered a mineral water at the bar instead of her usual pinot grigio. No wine, no sleeping pills. You had to be alert and available twenty-four/seven.

The balding bartender didn't acknowledge her right away. Windom Petrowski had a ruddy, pocked face and huge strong arms from lugging around kegs and crates. He made no secret of the fact that he didn't think Natalie deserved the rank of detective and resented her promotion over his cousin, Officer Ronnie Petrowski.

"I'm on-call tonight, Windom," she said. "Just a mineral water, thanks."

He took his sweet time, serving another customer first, wiping down glasses, and counting out cash. Natalie leaned against the polished mahogany and decided to wait him out. The Criminal Investigations Unit consisted of six male detectives, one male technical expert, and the BLPD's first female detective—Natalie. In Windom's eyes, she was a diversity hire, but everybody knew that wasn't true. She'd come up in the ranks with the rest of the recruits—working foot patrol, directing traffic, volunteering for overtime, taking any shit detail she could. In fact, out of a desire to prove herself

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beyond reproach, Natalie had worked twice as hard as everyone else. Fortunately, the guys in the unit were cool with it. Only Windom and a few others weren't.

A few minutes passed before Windom strolled over and handed her a sparkling mineral water with a wedge of lime. She was tempted to give him lip for the lousy attitude. The BLPD was a high-testosterone zone. The language could get pretty coarse. Fortunately for Natalie, she had quite a mouth on her from all those years of hanging out with her father's cop buddies. When in Rome.

She took the high road instead and thanked him, asked about his wife and kids, asked about his job and how things were going, softened him up a little, left a modest tip, and wished him a good evening. Then she made her way through the bar, which was packed tonight. The flickering red candles on all the round tables gave the place its special glow. The waitresses were known for their sarcastic, ballbusting wit. Natalie spotted Lieutenant Luke Pittman in one of the back booths—he was alone, which was odd, because it was only seven thirty, and these bullshit sessions of theirs typically dragged on until eight or nine o'clock. So where were the guys?

"Hey," she said, approaching the booth with her Perrier and lime. "Sorry I'm late."

"Natalie. We weren't expecting you tonight," Luke said.

She shrugged. "It started to rain, so we ended it early."

"How'd it go?" he asked with a sympathetic smile.

"Feels like the past is fading away. And that makes me sad."

Thirty-eight-year-old Luke had the kind of handsome, weathered face that suited his chipped, rugged personality. He and Natalie had known each other since he was thirteen and she was five. Luke's father had abandoned him, and his mother had to work two jobs to keep them afloat. It wasn't long before Luke was hanging out with the Lockhart girls in their backyard. He'd been there during the most crucial events in Natalie's life. They shared such a rich history together that their current situation felt a little awkward at times, as if they were forever stepping over the line, and then retreating. She used to have a dreamy-eyed crush on Luke Pittman, but their timing was always off due to the eight-year age difference. By the time

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Natalie hit puberty, Luke was in college. By the time she'd kissed a boy, Luke was getting married and having a baby. By the time she entered college, he was divorced and in the army, being deployed overseas. By the time she joined the BLPD, Luke was a rock-star detective and Natalie was dating Zack.

Now she pointed out the empty beer mugs on the table. "Okay, I give up. Where'd everybody go?"

He shrugged laconically. "I guess things have been pretty smooth sailing down at the station lately."

"Yeah, right. I work with six prima donnas, and I know that's a load of crap."

"Oh, you wanted the truthful answer. My bad." He grinned. "You didn't miss a thing, Natalie. I fielded a bunch of complaints and gave my usual spiel about budget cuts. They grumbled a lot. Brandon's still here. He's taking a leak."

"What kind of complaints?" she asked.

"Legit stuff. Nothing I can do anything about."

"Let me guess. Overworked, underpaid, lack of equipment?"

"Hey, you're good," he said with a warm grin. "I told them I'd bring it up at the next meeting with the chief, but I can't promise anything."

"There's my girl!" Detective Buckner came tumbling out of the men's room with all the galloping enthusiasm of a puppy. At thirty-six, Brandon was a big guy, with a round face and twinkly brown eyes, but hyperactive and enthusiastic about everything. "Shove over," he said, and Natalie made room for him in the booth. "How did it go tonight? The deathiversary?"

"Sad but healing," she said.

"Here's to Willow." Brandon raised his shot glass.

"To Willow, may she rest in peace," Luke said, and they all clinked glasses.

Brandon Buckner hadn't been Luke's first choice for detective, second grade, but Brandon's rich-as-Midas father and the mayor were good friends, and Chief Snyder had a long-standing alliance with both men. Fortunately for everyone, Brandon turned out to be an okay guy. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but funny. Quick on his feet. Loyal. Sincere. Now he knocked

back his drink and said, “Christ, I’m thirsty.” He signaled the waitress, who was way ahead of them.

Anorexic Teena swung by with another round. “A Rolling Rock for the lieu, a Perrier for the lady detective, and a whiskey double-neat for the biggest dick in town.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark,” Brandon said with a hearty laugh, and when Teena didn’t reciprocate, he said, “You should eat something, Teena. You’re a stick figure.”

“Brandon,” Luke groaned.

“Don’t you make fun of my girl,” Natalie scolded him.

“Go ahead. Keep spewing your diarrhea, frat boy,” Teena said and walked away.

“Did she call me fat?” He looked down at his belly.

“Does Daisy approve of you being such an asshole?” Luke demanded to know.

“Daisy loves me. The whole beautiful package.”

“Pfft. You and your fairy-tale marriage,” Luke muttered.

“Speaking of which . . . big news.” Brandon downed his shot and clapped the empty glass on the table. “We’re pregnant. Ta-da.”

“Hey, that’s great news,” Natalie said, genuinely happy for them. “Congratulations, Brandon.”

“Right?” He grinned. “Drumroll, please.”

It wasn’t a secret that the Buckners had been trying to get pregnant for years now. Daisy Buckner, Grace’s best friend since kindergarten, had suffered through two previous miscarriages.

“Daisy wouldn’t let me spill the beans until after the first trimester,” Brandon explained. “She couldn’t face losing another one in front of the whole town, but the doc says three months is a good enough milestone.”

“I’m thrilled for you guys,” Natalie told him.

“Believe that? I’m gonna be a daddy.” He shook his head, dumbstruck.

Luke’s eyes softened with a faraway look. “Skye used to listen to ‘Motown’ when she was little. Dancing in the Street was her favorite song.”

“Yeah, huh?” Brandon said encouragingly, since Luke rarely mentioned

his daughter. Sixteen-year-old Skye Pittman lived in California with her mother, Luke's ex-wife, and it pained him to talk about it.

"I helped her make cookies shaped like bees once," Luke said, stroking his chin.

"Bees? Why bees?" Natalie asked.

"Why not?" He laughed, his eyes straying from the beer label to look at her. Luke's eyes had a gorgeous laziness about them tonight. He had a rangy, predatory grace, and she could picture his cynical, hip boyhood face superimposed over his no-nonsense, grown-up face. It made her smile. He was still there, underneath the professional veneer. Mocking authority and dreaming about his future.

"That's sweet," Natalie said.

"Hey, Teena! Over here!" Brandon signaled the waitress for another round. "Is she on strike or something? She keeps ignoring me. Hey, Teena!" He made another drunken swipe at the air, and Luke batted his hand away. "Ow."

"I'd stay out of the deep end of the bar if I were you, Brandon."

"Yeah, this is not a good look for you," Natalie agreed.

"You have to cut this shit out. You're going to be a father."

"C'mon, Lieutenant. I'm buying."

"You've celebrated enough." Luke scooped up Brandon's car keys from the table.

"Hey!" Brandon reached for his keys, but Luke held them out of reach.

"I'll take him home," Natalie volunteered.

"You sure?" Luke said.

"Yeah, no problem."

He handed Natalie the keys, then fished out his wallet and dropped a couple of twenties on the table.

"You leaving already, Lieutenant?" Brandon said with disappointment.

"Got to split."

"Party pooper," he said, sulking.

Luke stood up. "See you tomorrow, Natalie."

"Same bat-time, same bat-station," she said, keeping it light.

The way he studied her made her nervous. But he looked at everyone that way—dead ahead, like a cougar, sizing you up. Measuring your worth. “Don’t keep my best detective too long, Brandon. She’s on-call this week.”

“Yes, sir.” Brandon winked at Natalie.

Luke walked away, and they watched him tip the waitresses on his way out of the bar. As soon as he was gone, Natalie pocketed Brandon’s keys.

His eyes narrowed to stubborn slits. “Jesus, I’m not that drunk.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re drunk enough to make a DUI stick. Drunk enough to make our stupid-busts list. Drunk enough to get your wife thoroughly pissed at you. Do you want me to call Daisy? Because I will.”

“Daisy doesn’t get mad at me. I told you, she loves me. . . .”

“Right, the whole sorry package.” Natalie stood up. “C’mon, let’s go.”

The bar walls, like a pair of lungs, had absorbed decades of secondhand smoke. The lizard-skinned bouncer, Mickey, sat on his leather-padded stool watching ESPN. A bunch of locals were taking potshots at one another. Brandon grabbed a bottle of bourbon on his way out, and Natalie had to pry it from his sweaty hands.

“Quit embarrassing yourself,” she said with exasperation.

He laughed. “I sincerely enjoy messing with your head.”

They walked out of the bar together, sidestepping big puddles. Neon-blue lettering blinked on and off in the dusty plate-glass windows. Outside, the rain had blown away, and the evening mist slowly swirled up into the atmosphere.

“Seriously, Brandon. It’s time to cut back on the drinking.”

He stopped walking and just looked at her, his gaze slightly mocking.

“What?” she said, irritated.

“You and Luke.”

“Shut up.” She laughed dismissively but could feel the familiar tightening of her facial muscles, a physical reaction that occurred whenever Brandon—who prided himself on his candor—got too personal for comfort.

“Come on,” he said, studying her with excruciating honesty. “Ain’t no big thang. This is a small town, Natalie. Everybody knows everyone else’s

dirty laundry. Besides, I can see the way he looks at you. Especially since you dumped that loser boyfriend of yours . . .”

She cringed. “Keep digging yourself a deeper hole. Go ahead.”

“Relax. I’m busting your chops.”

“Well, cut it out! Quit trolling me.”

“Sorry.” He threw up his hands in surrender. “You know I love you, Nat.”

“Love you, too, you big dope.” She opened the passenger door for him.

“Now get in, before I arrest you for loitering.”

4



The distant mountains stole moisture from the clouds and soaked the county in forty inches of rain per year. Dense woods of jack pine, red maple, and yellow birch tumbled across the landscape, cloaking the valley in a lush green growth. Driving with the windows down, Natalie breathed in the chilly April air and felt an invigorating rush. As they crested the next hill, she could see the glittery lights of downtown in her rearview mirror. The frozen months of winter had left big potholes in the road, and one of these bumps woke Brandon up.

“Uh,” he hiccupped, producing a beer bottle from his jacket like a magician.

She glanced over at him disapprovingly. “Where’d you get that?”

“Ain’t sayin’.”

“Seriously, Brandon. What’s up with the drinking lately?”

“Nothing’s up. Dickwise, that is.”

She shot him a look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. We’re fine. Everything’s fine,” he muttered.

“Who’s fine?” she asked suspiciously.

This was a small community, surrounded by thick woods like a fairy-

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tale kingdom, and it was true—everybody knew everyone else’s business, or at least people assumed they did. Brandon wasn’t a problem drinker, but he’d been getting drunk after work lately—twice this week, three times last week, a worrisome trend. Natalie wanted to know why.

“I just felt like getting staggeringly wasted tonight, okay? So shoot me.” He took a defiant swig of beer, rolled down his window, and chucked the bottle into the night. “There. Happy now?”

“Jerk. You just littered.”

“I’m a deeply flawed human being,” he admitted, raking his fingers through his brown, medium-length hair until it jutted out all over. “Stay for dinner, Nat? I’ll let Daisy know you’re coming.”

“Sorry, Brandon. I can’t tonight.”

He ignored her and called home. “Huh,” he said after a moment. “She’s not picking up.”

“That’s okay. I can’t stay for dinner.”

Brushing her off, Brandon tried again. “Come on, babe. Pick up.”

The car rolled toward its destination through an endless expanse of woods—there weren’t many streetlights out this way. It got pretty dark and eerie out in the countryside, where the brambled trees reached for the moon. The wind blew year-round in Burning Lake, sweeping in from the southwest and deforming the hemlocks and sycamores over time, until they became as gnarled as old crones. At the heart of autumn, the constant winds made a haunting, ghostlike lamentation.

“Hey, did I show you my new barbecue yet?” Brandon asked, fumbling with his iPhone and swiping through the images. “Check this out. Thirty-six-inch grill, stainless-steel hood, rear-mounted rotisserie . . . she’s a beaut, huh?”

“Awesome.”

“And look at this,” he said excitedly, still swiping. “I got so sick of my front yard looking like crap every Christmas, I decided to plant some ever-green trees, you know? Spruce things up a bit. Ha-ha. But then I found out there’s more to it than that.”

“More to it than what?” she asked, glancing at digital pictures of Brandon’s torn-up front yard.

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“It’s called winter landscaping. You plant a bunch of colorful berries, like red-twig dogwood and Christmas holly,” Brandon explained, showing her the results. “See? Yew bushes will catch the snow in their branches, and bayberry smells like the holidays. My house is gonna look like a fucking Christmas card this year.” He put his phone away and sighed. “Okay, so my marriage isn’t perfect.”

She looked at him, startled by this admission.

“They say it’s only natural. We’ve been married for twelve fucking years.”

“Things are good enough, though, right?” she hedged. “With the baby coming?”

He shrugged it off, which disturbed her.

The clouds parted, and a frost of moonlight dappled the surface of the lake. Natalie took a left onto Lost Pines Road, which snaked through the gorgeous wooded countryside that used to belong to the Native Americans, then to the French fur traders, then to the Jesuit missionaries, then the pork farmers, and finally the apple farmers. Now it was a booming tourist destination with a budding technology sector. At least, that was what the town website wanted you to believe.

“I fell in love with Daisy in the fifth grade,” Brandon said quietly. “She wrote this poem about shoes . . . how a person’s footwear can tell you everything you need to know about them. God, she was cute. She said my sneakers looked comfortable enough to curl up in. That cracked me up. Anyway, life goes on, and then one day, you wake up, and suddenly you aren’t on the same page anymore.” He wore a look of frustration. “Daisy’s satisfied with what we’ve got—a house, a car, a barbecue. Life’s simple for her. It’s a series of goals.”

She glanced at his sweaty face in the moonlight. “But not for you?”

“Hell, no.”

Natalie didn’t know how to respond to any of this. Brandon had done nothing but brag about his marriage for as long as she’d known him.

“My wife’s smart. Book-smart. She likes to read and think about stuff intellectually, whereas I prefer to get my hands dirty. Dig around in the dirt, you know? Like with the winter landscaping. I’m a spiritual person, and

whenever I look at the sky and the stars . . . it moves me. But Daisy will spout a bunch of facts and figures, very cut and dry. Anyway, our sex life . . .” He shook his head.

“I’m sorry to hear it.” She winced.

“Too much information, huh? Maybe the lieutenant is right. Me and my fairy-tale marriage. Pfft.” He put the phone to his ear. “Still not picking up,” he grumbled. “Funny, I told her I’d be home by eight.”

Wolf Pass Road was home to generations of hardworking families and boasted some of the most beautiful Victorians and Gothics in town, painted all colors of the rainbow to highlight the original trim work. By midsummer, these historic residences would be swimming in oceans of black-eyed Susans and tangerine touch-me-nots.

“Listen,” Brandon clarified, “my marriage isn’t in trouble or anything. I love Daisy, and she loves me. We’ve been through some bad patches before. Maybe it’s just the stress of being pregnant again, having all our hopes and dreams wrapped up in this baby . . . I don’t know.”

Natalie pulled into the driveway and parked next to Daisy’s green minivan. Strange. The house lights were off. The property was completely dark—no porch or yard lights. The gabled house was bathed in moonlight.

Brandon got out and stood swaying in the front yard as if he were standing at the helm of a ship. The lawn was freshly seeded, and there were newly planted shrubs around the foundation with the price tags still attached—part of his winter landscaping scheme, she figured.

“Daisy?” Brandon shouted at the house.

Natalie left her keys in the ignition and followed him across the yard. On the wide front porch was a wrought-iron table and chairs with a floral centerpiece straight out of *Better Homes & Gardens*.

Brandon opened the door and banged his way inside. “Daisy? I’m home!”

Natalie prevented the screen door from slamming shut in her face and followed him inside. The first floor was open concept, with a long cherry-wood bar dividing the living room from the kitchen area. Brandon brushed the light switch with his hand, and several designer spots cast a pale hue over the handsome built-ins crowded with sports memorabilia—football trophies and team letters.

“Babe?” Brandon said as he headed for the kitchen.

Natalie tensed. The air smelled vaguely familiar—earthy, coppery. A stiffness invaded her limbs as she followed him into the kitchen, then froze in the doorway. Daisy Buckner lay in a puddle of blood at the base of the refrigerator. She wore faded Levi’s, a pullover top, and a pair of Marc Jacobs low tops. Her glassy eyes were open. Her arms and legs were sprawled across the floor. There was an ugly gash on the right side of her head, and her short red hair was matted with blood.

Brandon dropped to his knees as he tried to suck some relief out of the air. He crawled across the tiled floor toward his wife, and before Natalie could secure the scene, he was cradling her limp body in his arms. His mouth moved fishlike as he tried to produce a sound, but nothing came out. He sat there rocking his dead wife back and forth, silenced by grief, while Natalie stared at the bright spatter of blood arcing across the refrigerator and kitchen cabinets. A single can of soda had rolled against the base of the dishwasher, and there was a greasy cast-iron skillet on the floor not far from the body, and a smattering of cooked ground beef on the Mexican tiles. A blue-checkered dish towel lay crumpled nearby.

“Brandon?” She gently plied his shoulder. “You’re contaminating the scene.”

His eyes were frosted with shock. “What?”

“We need to protect the evidence. Put her down.”

He shook his head viciously. “Back off!”

Her mind spun like a compass needle. They were wasting precious seconds. It felt like an eternity. She radioed Dispatch to report the crime, then pried Brandon away from the body. After propping him in the doorway, she checked for a pulse on Daisy’s neck. Of course she was dead, but you had to make sure.

“I can’t breathe,” Brandon gasped, his eyes jerking in all directions.

“Stay there,” Natalie commanded. “Don’t touch anything.”

She tested Daisy’s skin for lividity. The blood had settled into the lower regions of her body due to the pull of gravity. A purple discoloration was noticeable on the lower sides of her arms, hands, and neck—all of which were bruised from blood vessels filling with red blood cells and coagulat-

ing inside her veins, skin, and muscle. There was no pulse. Her skin was cool to the touch. Her pupils were of differing sizes. The position of the body had been compromised. Because of Brandon's actions, there was the possibility of cross-transfer of prints, fibers, and hairs. Natalie placed the body back where they'd found it originally—or as close to that position as she could recall. Daisy had been dead for several hours now.

Her heart began to pound with an explosive mixture of adrenaline and fear. She tamped down her anxiety and had a flash-memory of the boy in the woods. *The stick. The dead raccoon.* A sour taste filled her mouth. A snowy dullness crept over her.

Natalie shook it off. She had to stay focused. For a few miserable seconds, she couldn't pry her eyes away from the refrigerator magnets that had slid off the stainless-steel door and landed in a darkening pool of blood. SpongeBob, Lisa Simpson, Wonder Woman.

Focus.

Thirty-six-year-old Daisy Forester Buckner was a petite redhead, five foot four, maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. She looked like a Barbie doll come to life, with her perfect teeth and hair. Her gemlike eyes drew you in. Her sleek red hair was cut short, and she wore very little makeup. It was common knowledge around town that Daisy had been having trouble getting pregnant. Finally, she'd managed a small triumph. Now she and the baby were dead.

Natalie had known Daisy Forester all her life. They'd grown up on the same street together. BFF's Daisy and Grace were the same age and had always been close. Now they were teachers at the same school, but when they were younger, they'd wanted to be Olympic gold medalists, swimmers as famous as Janet Evans. They were self-proclaimed water nymphs. For Natalie, who was eight years younger than Willow and six years younger than Grace, it felt like having two extra moms. Cool moms. And Daisy was a bonus mom. The three older girls had spoiled her silly. They'd piled on the love. They'd doled out Skittles and Reese's Pieces and brushed her hair and dazzled her with tall tales about witches and princesses trapped in towers, but as the years passed, they had gradually slipped into adulthood without her.

Natalie doubted the killer was still on the premises, but you never knew,

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and besides she had to follow procedure—first, secure and isolate the crime scene. “Brandon, wait here. I have to secure the area. Don’t touch anything.”

She unbuttoned her jacket, unfastened the safety strap of her shoulder holster, and lightly rested her fingers on the butt of her gun. Her clothes were clammy and damp. Natalie had a talent for shooting. On the practice range, she actually liked the smell of gunpowder and the “surprise” sound of shots ringing out. But she’d never had to fire her weapon in the field. *When to use your weapon, that’s the big question*, her father used to say. Because the answer was vital to the soul of all law enforcement personnel. It was the final solution, and only after every other option had been exhausted. Despite all her years of training, Natalie had no idea when that line would be crossed.

Now she searched the second story. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms. The second floor was clear. She went downstairs and swept through the dining room, the half bath, the living room and den. The basement was empty. There appeared to be no secondary crime scene, no blood or disarray found anywhere but inside the kitchen, the primary scene. This wasn’t a botched robbery, she decided, since all the things a thief might’ve taken were still there—computers, mobile devices, audio system, cash, jewelry, a thirty-year-old bottle of scotch.

The only disturbance was a cluttered desk in the living room. Daisy kept a fairly neat household, but it looked as if someone had rummaged through the desk recently. Drawers were open. Desktop items were askew. Messy paperwork—mostly test papers and student essays—littered the surface, with a few pieces coming to rest on the seat of the chair. Natalie tucked this observation away for later rumination and headed back into the kitchen.

The sliding glass doors overlooked the backyard. They weren’t locked. She stepped out onto the cedar deck, letting in the chilly night air along with a curl of moonlight. There was Brandon’s new top-of-the-line barbecue grill. She took out her iPhone, activated the flashlight, and illuminated the expansive backyard with its old-fashioned gazebo and flower beds bordering the perimeter. A tall cedar fence separated the three-acre property from the Buckners’ nearest neighbors. The backyard was great for sum-

mer barbecues, recessed about thirty yards from the road and surrounded by dense woods. Very isolated.

Back inside the kitchen, Natalie fastened the safety strap of her holster and looked around for Brandon. She found him in the living room, rummaging through his wife's desk. "What are you doing?"

"Son of a bitch." He held up a piece of paper. "Riley Skinner. He's in Daisy's class. The stupid prick was flunking out of school, and she was trying to help him. Daisy thinks she can *reason* with these animals. . . ."

"Whoa, back up. You aren't making any sense," Natalie told him. There was only one Riley Skinner in town—a sixteen-year-old troublemaker, well known to the police, whose father was an ex-felon.

"See this F?" he said, pointing at the test paper. "See Riley's name on top? Daisy jumped through hoops getting him to retake the midterms last February, but he didn't care. He never showed up. You know Daisy, right? She only tries harder to help these drug-addled bastards . . . Jesus." His voice broke with raw despair. "Riley threatened her a few weeks ago. . . ."

"He threatened her? What happened?"

"He's flunking out of school, and he blamed her for the whole fiasco." His eyes blazed. "I know where to find him, Natalie. We could pick him up right now. He's either at Haymarket Field or Munson's Lane, one of those two places . . ."

"Slow down." She struggled to understand. "I'll call Dispatch and tell them to put out a BOLO for Riley's vehicle, okay? In the meantime, you're in no condition to do anything . . ."

"I'm telling you, this asshole threatened Daisy's life. *He did this to her.*"

"We don't know anything yet."

He nodded numbly. "Fuck that." He scooped up a set of keys from Daisy's desk and bolted out the door.

"Brandon, wait!" She chased after him, but by the time she got to Daisy's minivan, he'd locked himself in. She pounded on the driver's side window. "You're drunk!" she shouted. "You're in no condition to drive. Get out of the vehicle, now!"

He hit the gas and sped off in a cloud of dust, leaving a nasty patch of rubber on the road.

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