

FACING THE PAST

A person with long, dark, wavy hair is seen from behind, looking out over a misty, forested landscape. The person is wearing a dark jacket. The background is a soft-focus view of trees and foliage, creating a somber and reflective atmosphere.

**'AN ELECTRIFYING JOURNEY INTO ONE FAMILY'S HEART OF
DARKNESS. GRABS YOU BY THE SHORT HAIRS
OF YOUR NECK AND DOESN'T LET GO.'**

- JOHN LING, USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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J. J. CAGNEY

FACING THE PAST

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FACING THE PAST

J. J. Cagney

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FACING THE PAST

A childhood tragedy. An unsolved murder. In the quest to rewrite her family's past, Danielle Patterson could lose her future.

After her mother's sudden death, the Dallas housewife struggles to hold her young family together...especially after she uncovers a dark secret that shatters her reality. Determined to bring her brother's killer to justice, Danielle picks up exactly where her late mother left off. All too soon, her reckless pursuit proves Danielle—and her mother—knew the killer.

Facing the Past is a poignant domestic thriller that explores the interplay between relationships and regrets. If you like the lyrical prose of Gayle Forman and the gripping family drama of Marisa de los Santos, you'll enjoy this captivating novel.

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NANCY WAS DYING. Cancer nibbled away at her insides.

No more time.

She picked up the phone and called the detective who'd worked on the case all those years before.

"Chief Hardesty," he rumbled into the phone.

"Arlen?" Nancy licked her lips. "This is—"

"Nancy," he said, his voice softening. "I haven't heard from you in years."

"Probably ten, I'd guess. I wasn't sure you were still there."

He chuckled half-heartedly. "They haven't gotten rid of me yet. Got about five more weeks till I'm outta here for good."

"Oh." She paused.

"What can I do for you, my dear?" His voice was softer still. He'd always tried to help her.

"I . . ." What to say? What to do?

"I wrote journals," Nancy blurted, unsure about this call, about the decision she'd struggled to make for years.

"All right." His voice stayed pleasant.

"I want . . . make sure Danielle gets them. Not Hank. *Please.*"

Chief Hardesty was silent for a long time. "Only way I can do that, Nancy, is for you to hand them over to my department or for them to be part

of a search warrant.”

“In the attic. Boxed up in the back. Hank can’t have them. He’ll . . .” She blew out a breath. “He hired Trevor Dresden. He plans to put Trevor in the directorship for his foundation.”

“Hadn’t heard that,” Hardesty said, his voice contemplative.

“You need to talk to him.”

“Hank?”

“Trevor.”

“He was a little boy Nancy,” Hardesty said. His voice held a hint of pity, maybe even frustration. “The FBI did talk to him. I was there. He was so scared.”

Nancy clutched the phone. “I’m dying, Arlen. Soon. Trevor *knew*. He was there. Closer to the killer than I was even. Please. The journals. For Danielle—after you go through them . . . promise me.”

Chief Hardesty sighed in a long, drawn-out affair. She sensed that he wanted her to leave him alone. He must yearn for a time when the case of a kidnapped and murdered seven-year-old quit haunting him. At least that’s what Nancy supposed his sigh meant.

“You want me to reopen the case?” Arlen asked.

Nancy thought of Danielle, of her pretty green eyes and the worry she buried deep inside herself. The idea that came out, ever so softly over the years, that Danielle considered herself unlovable. Nancy’s fault for not being the mother her daughter deserved.

With each passing moment, Nancy’s mistakes piled higher, choking her. She leaned her head back against the recliner’s tufted pillow. The memory bubbled up, taking over her consciousness as it always did.

Nancy screamed his name. Danielle was pressed against Nancy’s heaving chest, clutched tight. Too tight. Nancy couldn’t make her arms loosen. Her heart beat so hard, her ribs ached with each pounding.

“Jonny, Jonathan!”

Danielle mewled into Nancy's neck.

The street and park were empty; it didn't matter how many times Nancy looked, how far she jogged up and down the road, clutching her daughter, yelling Jonny's name.

Nancy's breath broke as she stumbled over Jonny's ball glove lying on a crack in the sidewalk. Just five feet from their station wagon.

Five feet.

"Yes," she gasped, pulling herself, grief fresh, from the recollection.

"I'll do what I can," Arlen replied.

But Nancy heard the skepticism in his voice.

She'd waited too long.

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ARLEN HARDESTY SET the phone back in the cradle. Damn. Not the call he'd wanted today—not that he'd ever turn Nancy Foster away. Still, he was days from retirement now. He and Irene marked each day off the calendar after dinner. Over the last six months, the ritual became soothing, pleasant, moving them a day closer to an extended vacation and less stress.

He closed his eyes and dropped his face into his palms. Oh, he remembered that gruesome day—and the harrowing week, month, even the year that followed. An investigation of a murdered child wasn't something he was ever likely to forget, and Jonathan Foster's had been his first.

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HANK LED Arlen into the parlor, its disuse evident from the vacuum marks in the light brown shag. Arlen edged cautiously into the spindle-legged orange-and-green floral chair toward which Hank had gestured.

“I’m really sorry, ma’am,” Arlen said, looking to Nancy. “Y’all know pretty much where things stand already.” He rolled and unrolled the edge of the dress blazer he kept in his office on a hanger since the day he’d made detective three-and-a-half years and seven pounds earlier. He could feel the fabric pulling apart at the stitches up the back seam and imagined the darker black of that last bit before the seam became visible as he leaned forward. He needed to lose some weight. Or get a bigger suit coat.

“We’re gonna keep at it, keep looking. Of course.” His voice was hushed as he eyed the baby lying prone in Nancy Foster’s lap.

Nancy’s eyes, red-rimmed and wild, veered over to her husband, who moved to sit next to her on the couch.

“When does the ground search start up again in the morning?” Hank rasped, his throat sounding dry.

“At first light, maybe before.”

Arlen looked first into Hank’s then Nancy’s eyes, holding her stare until her breathing regulated.

“I want to go, too,” Hank said.

Danielle whimpered, and Nancy began to stroke the baby's back soothingly. Pat pat pat. Pat pat pat. Pat pat pat.

Arlen decided sheer exhaustion kept the baby, Danielle, from going into another full-blown wail. The mite sniffled and burrowed in closer to her mother. Hank leaned closer and placed a hand on Nancy's thigh, down by the knee, as she continued to shudder, her teeth clicking.

"Now, Mr. Foster, I can't tell you no."

"That's right; you can't. So just tell me where to be." Hank's pointed chin thrust out, the sloping ridge of his jaw snapping in, out, up, down.

"Now, I can't tell you no," Arlen continued, failing to keep his voice as neutral as intended. "But I can tell you I don't think it's a good idea."

Hank stood, a sharp jerk of a motion. Arlen watched as six feet of thick-boned male pantomimed grace. Except fear and despair had eaten at Hank's joints, muscle, bone.

"Then it's a good thing I didn't ask," Hank said, his voice escalating from a low, almost inaudible drone to a near shout, stepping forward.

A crunch.

A red fire truck was buried in the carpet when Hank lifted his foot. Both men stared at it. The ladder lay broken, the upper part caught in the couch's stitching. Hank collapsed back onto the couch.

Arlen sighed. "Meet us at the station at dawn," he mumbled, his gaze stuck on the truck. His son had one like it.

Hank nodded. Arlen lifted his head, opened his mouth, glanced back at the truck and shut it. He tilted his head to Nancy before following Hank to what he assumed was a seldom-used front door. Its intricate leaded glass side panel caught the light.

The door swung closed. The click of metal catching metal jolted out from inside the now-silent house. Arlen drove home that night to sit by his son's narrow bed, a prayer of thanks looping through his head.

Still a good twenty minutes to full light. The air settled over them in a cold, though sticky aura. Clouds built at the edges of the horizon. Seventy-two people stood in the main room of police headquarters, in a pseudo-line of churning bodies, awaiting their assignments. Half of that number was police personnel, either local or from neighboring areas. The rest was concerned friends, mostly fathers, shaking their heads, stomping their feet, not meeting each other's eyes and unable to bear the sight of Hank as he slumped against one of the station's gray walls.

Arlen stood at the front with the chief of police, the county sheriff, and someone in a suit none of the locals knew, but whom the uniformed officers eyed warily. Assignments were divvied and handed down. Groups of six to eight, covering a fifty-square-mile radius. For now.

They bundled into cars, doors slamming, voices low.

"Can't believe it. Just can't believe we're doing this," Arlen said. He heaved out the faintly sweet breath from the four sugars he took in each cup of coffee. He rubbed his hand over his eyes, removing the crud that gathered near his thick-bridged nose, then swiping his hand absently against his jean-clad leg.

"I spent the night tossing so much my wife got mad a couple of times. I'd go in and watch my kids sleeping for hours, seems like. Go back to the bedroom and get kicked out again. Don't know how you do it regularly," he said, facing the man in the suit.

Suit's answer: a shrug, sip of coffee, eyes creasing and measuring the disbanding group.

"Any live wires in the bunch?" Suit asked. "I want to know where they all were yesterday at the time of the child's disappearance. Anyone that showed up here today, I want to know."

Chief stood nearby, sucking in his gut, unable to keep it from spilling over his brass-and-silver belt buckle. He said, “Now see here, it isn’t gonna be one of our own.”

“You don’t know who took that boy. In fact, you’ve got zilch,” Suit said, his voice quiet. “So, we start with what we do have. Thirty-seven people unaffiliated with this or another department showed up today to look for Jonathan Foster. I want to know why they’re here and we’ll start with where they were yesterday.”

Chief mumbled, cursed, then headed back to his desk because “someone’s gotta man the fort whiles you boys are out there.”

Arlen trudged off to join his group, his head hanging low between his shoulder blades. The first gray hairs shot upward from the cowlick at his crown, highlighted by the fluorescent tubes in his bathroom earlier this morning. He’d stared at them, mesmerized.

The helicopter was circling the town, thrumming through the air in lazy, large loops. Mosquitoes buzzed, swarmed and men cursed as they swatted ineffectually.

Arlen shot a quick glance down at his battered, scratched watch when the call came in: 12:23. Thoughts of his kids, the heat edging upward of ninety degrees, and a diet of caffeine and a stale jelly donut turned his intestines into a murky, dank swamp.

“Hardesty, where you at?”

“Southeast edge of my plot, over by Framb’s back pasture.”

“I’m on the other side, by the ditch. You need to head out thisaway. Soon’s you can.”

“On my way.”

Arlen’s stomach lurched in a horrendous exchange of icing and burning. He swiped his neck, wishing he hadn’t drunk a whole pot of coffee. He already knew what he’d find as he stepped up to the edge of the ditch, but

knowing still didn't prepare him for it. He could *never* have prepared himself for finding Jonathan's body.

"Damnation and hellfire," he hissed. "Christ, God Almighty. Suit's gonna need to see this."

Arlen backed away, bringing the rest of the group with him. Six gray, damaged faces. Not a scene any of them would be able to forget.

"Where's the father? Hank?"

"Over by the park."

"Keep him there," Arlen said, his voice clogged. He sucked in air, shook his head. "Not a word to him till they can get this boy covered up some. At least. No, we'll take him to the funeral home to do it properly. Might help. Jesus H. Christ, I hope to hell it does. Not one word about this here. We are not telling that family how horrendous this boy looks. Get me?"

He stared down at the far edge of the four-foot-deep ditch, seeing it again in his mind, swallowing again and again. The coffee had burned its way back up his throat.

Two of the men behind him heaved into the thick underbrush.



Arlen wished he could purge the memory of that little boy's body from his mind. He couldn't—instead, he kept seeing it each time he closed his eyes, not just that day but for years.

Nailing the son-of-a-bitch who did that to a child had become Arlen's goal.

To date, he'd failed.

DANIELLE NEVER INTENDED to delve into her brother's death. *Don't go digging*, her mother liked to say. *You won't like what you find*. For nearly thirty years, she managed as she always planned—as her mother wanted.

Until she received the packet in the mail. The *mail* of all mundane life experiences.

The thick, large, white envelope with her name scrawled across the top in thin, elegant writing. Danielle recognized her mother's handwriting.

Strange. Her mother never sent her letters.

Heart slamming against her ribs, Danielle slit open the envelope and pulled out the single sheaf of plain stationery paper atop a much thicker, stapled document. She glanced down at the note.

"Cremate my body, and I don't want a preacher there."

She signed the page "Mom." The packet included her will, which Danielle thought was odd because Nancy knew Danielle planned to stop by her house that afternoon. She and the boys had made a big batch of sugar cookies.

Nancy loved them, the kind with the icing spread on top. Danielle had made these into different shapes for the boys: a dog, an appalling version of a ball glove, a heart, a bird, and a circle. Danielle made sure not to bring any of the gloves to her mother.

Danielle offered the cookies first when she arrived at her mother's large, dark house near the SMU campus in a posh part of Dallas' city center—the coveted Highland Park address Danielle knew Nancy had *never* wanted. But, here, on the oak-lined boulevards, the noise from 635 or even Love Field, with its constant airplanes, dared not penetrate. At least not fully.

This area of town was supposed to reek of wealth and prestige. And Danielle was sure it did for most residents. But after stepping into the 1960s-tiled entry and then into the small, formal sitting room with its old, faded blue carpet, Danielle did not feel prestige or permanence or whatever the hell else people here in this insulated heart of Dallas elite felt. She felt as she always did: duty-bound and sad.

Danielle placed the plate of cookies in Nancy's lap. Her mother picked one up—a circle—and took a bite. Nancy set it back down on the small teak side table next to her recliner, the small rounded teeth marks noticeable at the cookie's edge.

“Thank you, Danielle, but I don't have much of an appetite right now.”

“Have you eaten anything today?” Danielle asked as she shuffled into the kitchen. She came back to the sitting room and set a cup of chamomile tea next to the nibbled cookie.

“I'm not hungry.”

“Mom . . .”

Nancy made an impatient gesture with her hand before it collapsed back into her lap.

“Leave it alone. I don't want to eat. If I get hungry, I'll enjoy the cookies you brought. They taste better than any of those frozen things.”

Danielle's back stiffened. She couldn't help it just as she couldn't help the hint of hurt that crept into her voice when she said, “I made you a roast on Friday.”

Nancy turned her head. Her hair had faded to a sallow gray and thinned at the top enough to show peaks of pale-pink scalp. Danielle barely

remembered the thick, mink brown it used to be. Nancy's eyes, though, were still as green as Danielle's. Only her mother's were different: shadows lurked in the back, deep, flitting upward during conversations, then fading back as her will overpowered their need to come to light.

"Honey, I know you did. I know it was a lot of work. I appreciated it then, just as I do now."

Danielle bit back a retort. "I'll bring you something else tomorrow, then."

Nancy shook her head a little. "Don't bother. I'm nauseated, and I don't much feel like putting any effort into eating, no matter how good the food. You always were a good cook, much better than I ever was. Now, tell me about the boys."

"I will, but first I want to talk to you about this," Danielle said, pulling the letter from her overstuffed purse leaning against the papered wall. The sheet of large, gold-foil flowers peeled away from the drywall beneath. Danielle detested this wallpaper.

Nancy stared at her letter, her mouth tight and her cheeks sagging over the edge of her jaw. "It's self-explanatory. You're a smart girl. Always were smart as a whip. Just like those two boys of yours. Is Kevin liking third grade any better now that he's settled in? That's a tough year."

"He's doing very well in school now that he's got geography down. We have some problems with east and west, but they're getting better."

Her mother's eyes crinkled a little, and her lips lost their grimace. "You never could do left from right," she said.

Danielle's lips twitched. "It helped when I got engaged."

Nancy looked down at her hands. They were starting to spot a bit with age but remained smooth and pale. Never been much for the out-of-doors, even before Jonny died.

"Only took you nineteen years to get that trick worked out. I got engaged at twenty-one."

“Is that your engagement ring?” Danielle asked, one of those details she always craved. The ring was the only piece of jewelry her mother habitually wore: a large square-cut diamond with tiny, barely visible baguettes on either side in a brassy-looking gold band.

“No, this was my mother’s. She gave it to me a few months before she died.”

“Oh.”

Nancy continued to stare down at it, twisting it around and around. It was looser than it used to be, spinning on her finger as she touched it. She eventually clenched her hand closed around it.

“I’ve got the one your father gave to me. It’s in my jewelry box along with our wedding bands and my parents’.”

“Mom, are you sure you don’t want me to invite Aunt Mel to your funeral?”

Aunt Melinda was her father’s sister. She was a veterinarian who lived with her husband in Memphis. She called Danielle every year on Christmas and her birthday, filling Danielle in on what was happening with her kids and nine grandchildren. Danielle gave up wishing she was part of her aunt’s family when she met Garrett.

Nancy looked up at Danielle then. Her face animated for a moment, showing the signs of the beauty that lingered under pills, loss, and secrets.

“Why would you want to do that? Melinda and I were never close and she proved less fond of me after your father left. You were there that day, same as your aunt and her kids, when your father and I fought. She overheard enough of it to blame me. And she never forgave me for it. Said I should have been easier on your father because he lost his son.”

Danielle did remember. She’d been in the hall, heard more of their words than Aunt Mel.

“You could have apologized,” Danielle murmured.

“To Melinda? No, I couldn’t. I told you, she wouldn’t even talk to me after that weekend. And she shouldn’t have been eavesdropping anyway.”

“I was there, too,” Danielle said. She waited until her mother’s eyes caught her. “I never told you before, but, yeah, I heard all of it.”



“You were gorgeous in the moonlight, that first night we were together. For years, I could see that; it was so close, I could almost touch you there again. We had those memories for years, Nancy. I want those days back.”

“Our relationship died with Jonny.”

“Why can’t you let go of the anger?” Hank’s voice rose.

“Why can’t you say your son’s name?” Nancy snapped back. “What are you hiding, Hank?”

“You haven’t tried to understand me in years.” A fist slammed against something—the countertop, maybe?

“And you were . . . that day. You didn’t answer your phone,” Nancy hissed.

“I was busy.”

Nancy’s laugh was caustic. “Aren’t you always busy?” Silence. “I told Detective Hardesty. In case something happens to Danielle.”

Hank drew in a ragged breath. “What?”

“You heard me.”



Nancy closed her eyes, her lips tugged tight together in irritation or pain. “Your father always was a convincing bastard. Hell, he had his own sister hoodwinked into hating me.”

“What does that mean?” Danielle asked.

Nancy sat still, her forehead furrowed into rigid lines of tension. “He used Jonny’s death, Danielle. He benefited from it—opening the foundation, getting national attention for his pet project.”

Danielle shivered at the venom dripping from Nancy’s words. No wonder her parents split—the betrayal Nancy had lived through still blazed out of her emaciated form.

Danielle wiggled in her chair, trying to ignore the urge to scratch her legs—a nervous tic she had to consciously work to stop. Stress had always made her itchy. “I don’t understand. Any of this. What are you saying?”

Her mother turned toward her. Her green eyes were dark, a bog of unlive d dreams and painful revelations. Her eyes took a faraway look. “I called him. The detective.”

“Mom . . . I’m so sorry Dad hurt you.”

Her mother’s eyes flashed up to hers, the green vibrant with anger, though the pain Danielle always saw still lurked. “He wasn’t much of a husband even before Jonny died. You knew about the women. We all knew. You have to understand . . .” Nancy sighed. “After Jonny, I just didn’t care.”

Danielle frowned, her fingers unable to settle and remain still. “Women. You mean he had *multiple* affairs?” She’d known about Janice, her father’s young, pretty secretary, but had said nothing, hoping her silence would somehow protect her mother.

Nancy’s scowl deepened. “Look, Danielle, I told you how I wanted my death to be. I expect you to follow my wishes. I know you will because I wrote it down for you. Now, I’d just as soon watch some shows.”

She picked up the remote beside her chair and clicked it. A young chef’s bright face and happy chatter filled the screen and air around them.

Danielle sat there for another few minutes, willing Nancy to turn it off. She didn’t.

Danielle checked through the large, plateglass window that showed the stately, if overgrown, front yard. Sure enough, Sunny, her mom’s nurse, was

just pulling up to the curb.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday,” Danielle said. Talking loudly over the inane monologue about mushrooms.

Danielle grabbed her purse and went to open the front door.

“She’s in the living room,” Danielle said as Sunny approached the door.

“Not feeling that well?” Sunny’s middle-aged face was more lined than her mother’s and a lot livelier.

Danielle leaned on Sunny so she wouldn’t have to bring home to her family the anxious, slow march toward death. And she felt a small stab of satisfaction when the agency sent her father the bill, which he seemed to pay without comment.

As a hospice nurse, Sunny understood the decay of the body much better than Danielle did. Danielle wondered, though, if she was the one with more experience with a crumbling soul.

“She never is,” Danielle murmured.

“What’s that?” Sunny said, glancing back.

“Nothing. I just heated up her tea. She wouldn’t eat anything.”

Sunny nodded. “She’ll have another round of pills right before dinner. She usually eats then.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” Danielle sighed.

Sunny’s sweet brown eyes remained earnest in her thick-featured face. “You don’t worry about a thing. I got this here.”

Danielle squeezed her fingers lightly and strode toward her car without glancing back. She dialed her husband Garrett’s number to see if he was free for a late lunch. They met at their favorite Tex-Mex place a couple of miles from his office.

Garrett’s dark, wavy hair fluttered as it caught in the blasting air-conditioning. His eyes were warm, his smile crooked and happy. He kissed her lips in a soft but thorough fashion, and she melted into his warm body, so glad to call him her own.

“How’s your mom doing?” he asked once they were seated. He grabbed a chip, letting it hover above the two bowls of salsa. He plunged the point into the crimson cup, brought it loaded and dripping to his mouth.

“Not so good,” Danielle replied, looking around for their waiter.

“Hot,” Garrett said. He picked up another chip and began to nibble on it as his eyes watered.

Danielle rolled her eyes as she grinned. “You do this every time we come here. Haven’t you learned to wait for your drink?”

He grinned a little. “Now why would I want to break a tradition? Anyway, the salsa’s great. Just spicy.”

Danielle picked up her plastic cup of ice water the waiter had settled at her elbow and took a sip before she dipped her chip tentatively into the red sauce. Pieces of jalapeño seeds spread as she rotated her chip so that the drops of sauce expanded over most of the surface before taking a bite.

“You’ve got to plan ahead. Can’t be too hard, Mr. Accountant.”

“Not about hard, Dani. More about priorities.”

Which got her thinking again about her conversation with her mother. What the hell had that letter *really* been about? Not her Aunt Mel.

Once again, Danielle wondered if she’d ever known either of her parents. What secrets they kept from her.

She looked down at the chip—at the crack that easily snapped the fried corn into pieces. Many secrets, she decided. Secrets that broke them.

And most of those lies and omissions had to do with her brother’s death.

AS SHE LEFT THE RESTAURANT, Danielle paused, a thought catching her by surprise: Nancy didn't want Hank at her funeral.

Danielle understood: her father's indiscretions, especially if there were more of them than even Danielle knew about, proved upsetting. Granted, Danielle would never be able to resurrect her parents' dead marriage, though she'd always puzzled over their lack of official divorce. She needed to ask her mother about her thought process there—except any conversation about her father seemed to upset Nancy. Danielle tended to avoid the topic altogether.

Danielle pulled into the line of minivans and SUVs in front of the long brick-and-concrete school her sons attended. Yellow buses chugged around the corner, full of rowdy faces and a few arms hanging out the windows. Happy yells filled the air as more kids pushed out the front doors—a virtual cascade of bright eyes, open mouths and too-large backpacks bumping against small bodies.

She hopped out of the car with a smile as Kevin, her older son, walked with his friends toward her. He saw her and dipped his dark, curly head, his eyes silently begging her not to come forward, not to kiss him.

The pang of separation in Danielle's heart grew as she stared at the miniature version of her husband, but she waited for Kevin to finish his

discussion. She turned to the right in time to see Reid's blond head bounce closer.

"Mom!" his happy boy's voice called, and she bent down on one knee, thrilled to scoop up her younger son, his superhero backpack banging on her arms as she pulled him tight to her body. Oh, how she loved being a mother.

Danielle's mother wanted lots of kids—she knew this from her grandmother—whereas Danielle feared giving birth. Not the actual pain, because she asked to be hooked up to an epidural as soon as she made it past the observation room. Being responsible for such tiny, defenseless creatures ballooned her anxiety so high she came close to bursting from the *what-ifs* flying through her mind.

Oh, Danielle wanted kids, desperately. She still did. More of them now, as she aged. More pacifiers dropped on floors and between couch cushions, more gurgles of delight. More middle-of-the-night feedings. More snuggles and soft, milk-laced sighs.

She was thirty-two. At some point—whether thirty-five or possibly later—it became riskier for her to try to carry a baby in her body. Somehow, the years blinked past and she feared missing the opportunity even to try.

But Kevin was almost eight and Reid was in kindergarten. Garrett sighed with relief each time he saw a baby. Not that he didn't indulge in cuddling one. He'd been a hands-on father, changing diapers, feeding the babies whenever he was home—but their infancy took a toll on him since he'd also been working his way up in a large, prestigious accounting firm.

After settling the boys and herself in the car, Danielle flipped on the radio, hoping to ease the melancholy of her thoughts. Probably just a response to spending time with her mother. Danielle glanced back at the boys in her rearview mirror as she pulled up to the stop sign, smiling at their antics.

Her phone rang.

“Danielle?” Sunny’s voice quivered.

Danielle’s stomach plummeted at the tone of Sunny’s voice. “Where did you take her? Parkland Hospital?” she asked.

“Yeah. And Danielle? I’m so sorry we’ve come to this point, honey.”

“Thanks, Sunny.” Danielle tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, considering her options. Miranda, the boys’ other grandmother, was at home. She was Danielle’s first choice to watch the boys and this constituted the emergency Danielle feared would come. Just not this soon . . . she had so many more questions . . . about her parents’ marriage, Jonathan’s death . . . her mother’s feelings toward Danielle.

“I’ll drop the boys at their grandparents’ house. I’ll be at the hospital as soon as I can. Thank you, Sunny, for everything.”

Ending the call, Danielle dialed her in-laws, fighting to get the words past her trembling jaw and the boys’ loud questions. Her mother-in-law told her to swing by, and she did, thankful they lived closer to the hospital than Danielle and Garrett did.

Danielle raced from Miranda’s house to the hospital, her heart pounding loudly in her ears.

Don’t let me be too late . . . I need to find out about my brother. I have to get the answers you didn’t want to share earlier. Before the opportunity is gone forever.

Please don’t let me be too late.

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HER DAUGHTER ENTERED the hospital room, breathless from racing down the long, sterile hall. Danielle's long blond hair cascaded over her red cheeks and shoulders, her green eyes clouded with worry. Such a beautiful young woman. She never would agree, worried about her thighs or the dimple in her chin.

For years, Nancy watched as Danielle mooned over the bright promise in Nancy's old photographs, exclaiming over the fresh, laughter-filled gorgeousness captured there. Danielle often confided in her that she'd wanted to look like Nancy then. Now, she was sure Danielle knew enough to want to be her own person.

If only Danielle could see herself as Nancy did: a survivor, someone who'd gone on to create a rich life despite her mother's shortcomings.

Danielle settled in at Nancy's side, loosely grasping Nancy's cool fingers. The drugs she'd been given—morphine, the nurse had said—shimmered through her veins, causing her tongue to loosen but also feel too big for her mouth.

Nancy turned her head on the white institutional pillow to face Danielle. Her lips cracked under the effort to smile a welcome.

"He knew." Nancy's words were soft, clipped, and way too hard to push over her tongue. So much to tell her daughter. Not enough time to get through even the tip.

“He knew something.”

Nancy’s lips twisted with bitterness both from the thought and her difficulty getting the words to form. Nancy gripped Danielle’s hand, Nancy’s nails were neat, a wasted extravagance she couldn’t bear to forego.

“Do you remember Jonny? That day? Can you see him?” Nancy asked, her voice urgent.

Nancy remembered Jonny’s mussed, toffee-colored hair falling into his huge brown eyes. In those last moments, they leaked tears down to his trembling, open mouth.

Danielle tried to pull her hand away. Nancy didn’t let go. Danielle struggled harder; Nancy gripped tighter.

“He called for me. I know he did. In my dreams, I’ve heard him. ‘Mommy, I need you!’”

Danielle tugged again and Nancy’s hand dropped to the hard mattress. Nancy glanced at it, the exposed palm up, vulnerable and pale.

“You need to see him,” she cried.

Part of her understood this was a hallucination. Her actions scared Danielle.

Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.

She needed to say those words, but those weren’t the ones that dribbled past her lips.

“Trevor. That’s wrong. Need to stop that mess. The *bastard*.”

No, that wasn’t what she wanted to say. Nancy inhaled deeply and said, “Need to tell you about Jonny.”

But she didn’t have the chance.

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BEFORE SHE SPOKE AGAIN, told Danielle what upset her so, Nancy's breathing stopped.

Long after the heart monitor shrilled its loss, Danielle stayed, gripping the chair next to the hospital bed, staring at her mother's narrow frame huddled under the mound of blankets.

What *was* that?

Nancy's last moments held more emotion than Danielle ever saw before.

Trevor.

That name stuck out. Must be Trevor Dresden, Jonathan's best friend.

Her mother called him a bastard with such spitting anger. What had he done?

Danielle stayed there, even after the nurses and doctor bustled in. Nancy never shared her secrets.

And, now, Danielle feared they were deeper and darker than she'd imagined. She knew where those secrets stemmed from: Jonathan.

In some ways, her entire life revolved around her brother—the child who *wasn't* there.

Trevor, her father's lover Janice, her parents . . . all the people mentioned, all the people Nancy thought about today related back to Jonathan.

That old, unquenchable need to discover every detail of her brother's murder consumed her. Should she ask her father? *Your father isn't as resilient as he likes to think . . .* Nancy told her that often growing up, and Danielle knew the truth of those words. A strong man wouldn't leave his daughter alone with a woman who'd tried to commit suicide.



Garrett opened the garage door and met Danielle there, pulling her into his arms.

"There's a lot of paperwork to sign when someone dies," she mumbled into his chest, glad for the quiet and the man holding her.

Garrett pulled back and looked down into her eyes, studying her face as if searching for signs of her cracking under the weight of the strain. Danielle always resented her mother's depression because she feared Garrett waited for her to succumb to its genetics.

"I'm fine," Danielle said on a sigh. She didn't feel fine. Garrett must have understood that because he tightened his hold and pressed a soft kiss to her temple.

"Love you, Dani."

"Mmm. Love you, too. I'm glad you're here."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm sad and maybe a bit angry she didn't tell me . . ." Danielle heaved another thick sigh. "I'm fine."

"You sure? This is a lot to deal with, and if your dad didn't—"

Danielle's eyes narrowed. "He showed up. He had to sign most of the paperwork but I didn't want to leave Mom there, alone." She trailed off, her gaze sliding away from Garrett's to the garage's concrete slab.

Garrett took her hand and squeezed it, pulling her gently into the house. Some of the grief Danielle carried sloughed off as she walked into her

bright, happy kitchen.

Home. The word wrapped around her heart, creating warmth she hadn't known she needed.

"I'm sorry Hank was an ass," Garrett said.

Danielle shrugged. "Wouldn't want to break the tradition."

Garrett brought her a glass of red wine and a plate of reheated pizza. Danielle smiled her thanks. Garrett was a terrible cook, but he knew how to order a great pizza. She took a large bite, enjoying the comforting flavors and textures.

"Thanks," Danielle murmured, taking a large gulp of wine. "The boys?"

"In bed. They were exhausted."

Danielle nodded, but her mouth turned down and her heart ached a little. She loved bedtime. Both Kevin and Reid snuggled into her sides, heads on her shoulders, as she read to them. Kevin wouldn't want to hug her, not tomorrow.

She set down her slice of half-eaten pizza on her plate.

The doorbell rang. Danielle's wineglass rested halfway between the table and her mouth. She caught Garrett's questioning glance.

"You expecting anyone? Hank?" Garrett asked.

Danielle shook her head. "Dad and I . . . we didn't get into it, but the situation was tense. He wouldn't stop by, I don't think." He'd been so cavalier about her mother's death, which caused Danielle to reply in short, chilled responses. Hank didn't appreciate Danielle's attitude and let her know it. Just another fun family interaction.

Garrett made a disapproving sound in his throat. "Sit and eat. I'll take care of our visitor."

"Thanks," Danielle said.

She glanced out the window in the breakfast nook, his eyes widening as she caught a glimpse of a police car. In that moment, she feared what would happen when Garrett opened the door.

CAPTAIN ARLEN HARDESTY rang Danielle's doorbell even as he fidgeted on the stoop. He glanced around, his gaze drifting left then right as he took in the neighbors' neat two-story brick homes and the number of late-model cars in the drives and at the curbs.

Nice area. New. A master-planned community with some of the best schools in Lewisville. The neighborhood took its identity seriously—between the themed street names and parks, there was no doubt each family considered their home their castle.

These types of places made him nervous. Not just their newness but their sameness. His little town might have grown over the years, but his house was a traditional '50s ranch. Arlen loved its low-slung profile and the redbrick faded by the harsh Texas sun. He liked the hominess of the single-story dwelling surrounded by large oak trees.

This place was . . . up-and-coming. Ambitious. Definitely what he'd expect from Hank Foster's child. That man had always enjoyed the respect of his position and dreamed of more than being a small-town lawyer.

Arlen shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

He hated to drop by so late—nearly nine.

The glass-and-wood paneled door opened, and he stared eye-to-eye with a young man who must've been about thirty. Dark, curly hair, hazel eyes.

Dark brows drew lower as he took in Arlen and then the police cruiser stamped with the Mansfield logo on the side.

“Can I help you?” the young man asked.

“I’m Chief Arlen Hardesty. From Mansfield.” He tossed his thumb over his shoulder at the car behind him. “I’m looking for Danielle Foster.”

“It’s Patterson,” a medium-height blonde said from behind the man. She peered past the man’s shoulder with the same wide green eyes as Nancy’s. Her face wasn’t quite as delicate as her mother’s, but fire lit those eyes and she had a mouth used to smiling.

A good face—interesting. Good-looking couple.

“You got your mama’s eyes, I see,” Hardesty said. He fumbled for his badge, tugging it from the pocket of his khakis his wife Irene insisted he wear. She said they made him more professional—as if his pants would impact his ability to do his job.

He flashed them both his badge, then his license.

“Mind if I come in? I wanted to talk something over with you, Mrs. Patterson.”

Danielle blinked before looking up at the man beside her, who shrugged and opened the door wider.

“Call me Danielle, please. And this is my husband, Garrett,” Danielle said as Garrett shut the door. Arlen had a moment of déjà vu, setting foot for the first time in Nancy and Hank Foster’s house all those years ago.

“Your mother called me today.”

Danielle’s mouth gawped before she cleared her throat.

“Oh, wow. She was busy today. Um . . .” Danielle glanced back at Garrett. “She . . . she died.”

As Danielle blinked back tears, her husband slid his arm around her shoulder in a protective gesture.

Hardesty felt the punch of emotion to his own chest. With a mental curse and a sigh, he offered his condolences best he could, feeling awkward

and too large and country for their pretty Dallas home.

He didn't want to bring all this old ugly into the clean, bright hallway. But he was here now and Nancy's urgency beat against his conscience for disrupting these young folks' lives.

"Can we sit a few?" Arlen asked.

"Yes, of course." Danielle gestured forward. Her husband held her hand while she led them into a spacious living area that opened to a large yellow kitchen on the far side. White crown molding trimmed the room, accentuating the steep pitch of the double-story roofline.

The furniture was slightly worn with obvious favorite spots on both couches. A box of LEGOs spilled across thick beige carpet along with some action figures.

Danielle's gaze darted to the mess before she sighed and led Arlen to the couches. She waited for him to sit before she did. Garrett walked into the kitchen and returned with a glass of red wine, which he handed to Danielle.

"Want anything?" Garrett asked.

Arlen shook his head. Garrett settled next to Danielle and put his arm across the back of the sofa. Good. The young man seemed to care about her, seemed protective. That was really good.

"I can barely believe you're the baby I used to give gummy bears to," Arlen blurted.

"Time has a way of passing," Danielle said. She sipped her wine.

"You got that right, Mrs. Patterson. Danielle." He corrected with a slight grin. He heaved a sigh and settled his bulk more comfortably in the chair. "I've been in law enforcement for a long time, over forty years. And I must tell you that I've seen a lot of bad stuff, stuff that'd shake you."

He paused, looked down at his clasped hands. "Times have changed. Mansfield's growing. With growth comes more crime. Not much you can

do about it, just like there doesn't seem to be much you can do about budget concerns. Things were different there, a lot different back then."

He glanced at Danielle from the corner of his eye, then turned to face her directly. "In the eighties, we weren't that close to Fort Worth. We weren't big and didn't have any plans to be. Our crime consisted of a few D&Ds—that's drunk and disorderly—and maybe domestic violence or a robbery. Assault, of any kind, was rare."

"I'm not sure why you're here, Chief Hardesty," Danielle said.

He closed his eyes briefly. "Give me a sec. I need to tell this in order. We got the call from Nancy Foster. She was inconsolable. She knew, just flat out *knew*. I hated that she didn't have any hope to live on. But it wouldn't have been right to give her any because we were sure it was bad, too."

"Why?" Danielle asked. Garrett took her hand, his grip gentle but firm.

"Because boys aren't just plucked off the street when they're walking to their mamas, Mrs. Patterson. That's just not the way things happened then, in our town. It's different now, not just here but all over. You gotta watch your kids real close and even then, it might not be enough. We all know that, though. That doesn't make it right and doesn't make it any easier for parents who don't and pay the price."

Danielle's wineglass tilted. Garrett grabbed it, fumbling slightly but managing to keep it from spilling. He set it on the gleaming wooden coffee table.

"Back then, walking home a block or two wasn't anything to worry about, just like playing in the woods or letting the boys drag race off 287 some Friday nights. It didn't hurt anyone, just kids getting some of that macho out.

"Then, we got us a missing boy. We knew the guy was driving a Chevy pickup. Your mother told us that. Little Trevor Dresden saw the truck, too,

when he was biking up the road with his friends back to their houses. Four other boys were out that night. That keeps me up at night, still.”

Arlen cleared his throat.

“Anyway, Nancy even knew it was an older model with a dent in the right fender.”

He met Danielle’s gaze. “We knew the time Jonathan had been walking down the road, and we knew almost to the second when the truck passed her ’cause the bagging boy heard it too as he was going on back into the store. He didn’t see it, but he heard a truck rattling past. Typical sound around those parts. In those days.” Arlen’s eyes teared up, as they always did when he talked about this particular case. “We couldn’t find him, not even a glimpse of him, and we started looking within an hour of the call.”

Arlen’s head collapsed down between his shoulders.

Garrett shifted on the couch. Arlen dipped his head in acknowledgment of the slowness of getting to the point. “Sorry. I got a bit caught up.”

“I . . . I didn’t know all that,” Danielle said. Her voice was rough with emotions. She turned to share a long look with her husband. Something passed between them, something important.

Arlen slapped his hands on his aching knees. “It’s late. Y’all have been through a lot. I just needed to let you know your mother wanted me to go by her place. Pick up some journals from the attic.”

Danielle’s face turned whiter than fresh cream. Arlen’s cop radar lit bright and started whirring.

“Journals?” she choked out.

Arlen nodded. “That’s why she called me.”

Danielle cleared her throat. “She . . . she kept them?” Danielle asked, her voice rising.

“That’s what she said,” Arlen responded. “I knew she was sick.” He frowned. “Didn’t know it was that bad.” He paused, blowing a thick stream of air out of his cheeks. “Look. I’d like to pick them up. I got a warrant.”

He pulled the document out of his back pocket. “Figured we should keep it all legal.”

“You’ll be running up against my father,” Danielle said, her voice dry. “It’s always a good idea to dot i’s and cross t’s with that man.”

“Don’t I know it.” He tried not to growl out the words but failed to keep his voice even.

Danielle swallowed. She turned to face her husband. They communicated without words yet again.

“Would tomorrow morning work? Say, about eight thirty? It’s my day to carpool the boys,” Danielle said.

“I’ll do that, Dani,” Garrett said. He had a nice voice—deep, pleasant, full of caring for his wife. Hardesty liked him.

“You sure?” she asked. “I know it’s getting to be tax season and—”

He squeezed her shoulder with gentle pressure. “I’m sure. You do this with Chief Hardesty.”

Danielle nodded. “Is that okay? Tomorrow, I mean?”

Hardesty wanted to tell her no. That he wanted to go tonight, get it done. But he had no desire to crawl around a dead woman’s attic at ten o’clock at night. Tomorrow, in the light, would have to work.

“All righty. I’ll see you there.”

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SLEEP ELUDED DANIELLE. By the time she rose, groggy, from the twisted sheets, her neck had developed a crick, and her head thrummed with each beat of her heart. She shuffled from the bed, feeling fuzzier and more drained than the night before.

After brushing her teeth and washing her face, she made the mess of a bed: she pulled up the white cotton sheet with the tiny eyelet lace edging and fluffed the pillows. Next came the thick chocolate damask comforter and then the assortment of throw pillows, all the while thinking about Chief Hardesty's comments about her mother's journals and her brother's death—the endless loop she didn't know how to break.

Danielle moaned when the first whiff of coffee hit her nose—the expensive kind that required being ground fresh from beans. They didn't usually drink it during the week, which meant they were either out of the other stuff or Garrett knew Danielle was going to be drinking a couple of mugs. She couldn't manage more than one cup of the big-can kind because it made her stomach hurt.

"Thanks for starting that," Danielle said, glancing at the clock. With a yelp, she hurtled over to the refrigerator and began the morning scramble to get breakfasts and lunches completed before the boys exploded into the room. As she made the meals, Garrett poured himself a cup of coffee, then he made one for Danielle, placed it at her elbow. He sipped from his mug,

eyes dark and narrowed as he considered her over the rim. His English muffin and sliced melon sat on a plate near his hip, half-eaten.

“You going to be okay today?” he asked, setting his mug down on the counter. He leaned against the white-and-gray flecked granite negligently, his long body rearranging itself into a more comfortable position. But Danielle didn’t appreciate the sight like she normally would. She was too busy slapping the bread onto the top of sandwiches she’d finished building.

“Of course.”

Danielle glanced up to see Garrett still leaning there, considering her.

“What?” she demanded before she raised the coffee cup to her lips.

“I’m worried about this Hardesty fellow. What he’s asking of you. What it will bring up.”

Danielle jerked, splashing coffee on her hand.

Garrett gave her a dishtowel, his gaze still solemn. “I know it bothers you. Jonathan’s death.”

“You have no idea.” Danielle sighed.

Garrett picked up his coffee again. She watched him bring the cup to his lips, tip it, and drink. Danielle met Garrett’s eyes, the slight crinkles at the corners more pronounced, as they always were when he was trying to figure her out. Knots formed in her shoulders and throbbed in painful syncopation with her pulse.

“I—I don’t know what to do.” Danielle’s words stopped as she struggled for breath. “You hated her.”

Danielle’s chin trembled. Her mother had died yesterday.

Danielle wasted so many years wishing Nancy had been different, and now . . . her mother was dead.

“Dani,” Garrett began, pushing himself from the counter. He walked over and lifted her chin, searching her face before cupping her cheek. “I didn’t hate your mom. I just . . . she was hard to know.”

“I feel like I lost my last link to the past. The only person who knew me before *I* did. The only one who would have ever told me the truth about my brother.”

Garrett threw his hands up in frustration. “It wasn’t *your* past. Jonathan’s death, it took something from all of you, from *you* most of all. I just . . . don’t get sucked into this. Please. From what Hardesty said, it’s unsolved for a reason, and I . . .”

She drew a deep breath as Garrett spoke and she cut him off mid-sentence—not her typical style when communicating with her husband but she didn’t want to hear his reasoning. Not now.

“I’m not sure where Chief Hardesty’s investigation will lead. But he asked me to open the house to him and I need to honor that—as my mother’s request. Her *last* one.” She lifted her face, beseeching him to understand.

Garrett stepped away, both his shoulders and face were rigid; Danielle’s stomach muscles clenched in response. “I can’t protect you from this. From the past.”

She studied him, that face that was developing some interesting creases where it had once been smooth and baby soft. Nearly fifteen years together now. She’d watched that face mature, develop more texture and character over the years. They’d done that together, learned and loved and learned to love together.

“I’m not asking you to,” Danielle murmured. “Just . . . I’m going to need you. My mom’s death hasn’t hit me yet. But I . . . I think it’s going to be hard.” She swallowed, trying to get some moisture back into her dry throat.

She walked to him and Garrett once again wrapped her in those strong, warm arms. She rested her cheek against his chest, surprised by how much she needed the comfort. She turned and kissed the throbbing point just

above the collar of his crisp, blue dress shirt. He tightened his arms around her and the embrace soothed her—as Garrett often did.

“She told me she didn’t want you to know the details,” Garrett said after a time.

He must have felt Danielle stiffen, but before she could say anything, Kevin walked into the kitchen, yawning. His curly hair, his father’s hair, was standing up all over his head. He looked so much like Garrett, her knees weakened. His father’s face, if less wise and more animated, stamped permanently within his own.

Looking into her son’s face, Danielle couldn’t see anything of herself, of her parents even. Who knew if Kevin shared any of Jonathan’s characteristics? Not in the face itself, but in the mannerisms, speech. She would never be certain. That’s why she wasn’t sure she should have more kids. What if something happened to one? What if that child was like her mother?

She shuddered, unable to stomach the thought.

It had been eight and a half years since Kevin had been inside her, a part of her, this child of fierce independence. The rip of separation was fresh, delightful, and hideous. Terrifying when seen through her mother’s—even Chief Hardesty’s—lens.

Danielle pulled away from Garrett as she popped the waffles out of the toaster oven. She used the moment to try to get some control over her tumultuous emotions.

“Here you go, sweetie,” Danielle said as she kissed the soft, tickly hair, trying to smooth it down a little. It just sprang back into total unruliness. She dropped another kiss on Kevin’s head, making him squirm.

“Thanks, Mom,” Kevin said as he slid into his chair, attacking the waffles before his butt even hit the wooden seat. If experience was anything to go by, he was in the process of bulking up before the next shot skyward. With this growth spurt, or perhaps the next one as he neared his teen years,

he was going to reach her height. Why was it so amazing and frightening to watch one's child grow?

"I'll get you some milk."

"What's for breakfast?" Reid asked, rubbing his eyes. His green T-shirt was on inside out and backward, the tag tickling his chin. Kevin smirked and nearly lost the enormous bite he only just shoveled in.

Danielle felt her lips twitch in response. She jerked Reid's shirt up, which got stuck on his forehead, much to his brother's delight. At least this time Kevin's mouth was empty. As Reid struggled to get his thin arms through the shirtsleeves and she yanked ever harder, Kevin screamed with laughter.

"You did this. Somehow you set this up," Danielle breathed to Garrett. He continued to lean against the counter, grinning through her cool stare.

"Ain't it grand?" he said with a smirk.

Then the dog ran in, circling through Danielle's legs, yipping and wagging her tail. Weaving in and out, in and out, then another tour between Danielle, Reid, and Garrett, who was just watching the whole scene with shining eyes.

"You could help here," Danielle panted at Garrett just before Reid started yelling, though his words were muffled by his shirt that pulled back down over his whole face when he'd tried to get his elbows out. She slid her feet out farther to allow Shiloh, their mutt-stray they'd picked up from the pound last year, to circle her faster. Planting her legs, she used her newfound leverage to yank the shirt off.

Garrett stepped forward, his eyes widenings as the dog ran back under Danielle's legs again, this time whacking her just behind the knees, causing her to fall backward. Reid's shirt popped off as he tumbled forward, landing on top of Danielle, even as she tried to get off the now-whining dog.

"Okay, now try again," Danielle wheezed, handing him the offending garment. She patted the dog, who licked her hand before skulking under the

table, looking for possible crumbs. Not likely. The boys ate with an intensity of soldiers on a forced march.

“Jeez, Mom, you nearly took my head off,” Reid said as he stood, holding his shirt as he stared sourly at his brother. He rubbed a red line around his mouth as he glared at his mother then at his shirt.

“Luckily for you, it’s still attached,” Danielle said, having made it to her hands and knees. Garrett bent down to hoist her up. His lingering grin pulled an answering one to her lips.

“You looked like a trout, just like that fish I reeled in at the lake, except Mom was doing it,” Kevin wheezed, gasping for air. The three of them dissolved into a fit of hysterics.

Danielle shook her head with a chuckle. “Yes, we all know how well I fish.”

That sent them into another paroxysm of delight and, despite herself, Danielle was laughing, too.

She placed Reid’s plate down and tried to kiss his reddened cheek, though it was more of a moving target than she’d anticipated. She pulled back quickly to avoid a bumped nose.

Glancing over at Kevin, she couldn’t help but laugh again as he slid lower in his chair, eyes glazed with tears. He continued to hoot for another couple of minutes between making fish faces before subsiding enough to finish his remaining waffle, dipping his finger onto the plate to get every drop of syrup.

“Kevin, you have ten minutes before we’re out the door,” Garrett said. He ruffled both boys’ hair before turning to Danielle.

“I’ll see you tonight,” Garrett said, bending down slightly for their ritual goodbye kiss.

“Kay, tonight,” Danielle said.

He brushed his lips across hers quickly before searching her eyes. “Call me if you need to talk. Or my mom. Or one of your girlfriends. That’ll take

up half the day.”

She gave him a little push. “Oh, please. I’m not that bad.” She totally could be, which is why he teased her about the time she spent with her friends.

Garrett didn’t mind—in fact, he seemed relieved she’d built up a group of confidants here in their neighborhood. At his serious look, Danielle placed her palms on his chest. “I’m coping,” she said, her voice soft. “Really.”

He studied her for a long moment before he nodded.

“Remember to meet us at the field,” Danielle said.

“Got it. I’ll be there by six fifteen,” Garrett said, studying the calendar with its red-permanent-markered times for Reid’s games. Kevin’s were all in blue. “Are you leading off, Reid?”

Reid nodded, his face beaming, syrup lining his mouth.

“That’s my man. You’ll set the tone for the rest of the team. No pitcher can take you on.” Garrett picked up his briefcase. “Grab your homework and backpacks and meet me in the car, guys.”

After throwing on some jeans and a blouse, she herded the boys—they only returned once for Kevin’s history homework, still on his desk—to Garrett’s Camry hybrid. Both boys wrapped their arms tight around her, grappling her into their exuberant, if brief, embrace.

Trying not to think about how her boys were so close in age to Jonathan, Danielle headed toward the minivan as she considered her sons. Baseball was such an integral part of their young lives, just as it had been for Jonathan’s.

No, not much of substance had changed about little boys in thirty years. Danielle turned the heater on full blast and rubbed her arms as she stared after Garrett’s taillights.

She started the car and drove toward her mother’s house, unease building with each mile.

She flipped on the radio, hoping to alleviate some of the tension in her chest. Instead, she was greeted with the piercing noise of the warning system.

She flicked to another station and it had the same. She tried another as the tension crawled up her neck.

The words on this station were worse than the warning signal.

“Amber Alert. Amber Alert. Police are requesting you to be on the lookout for Christian Rodriguez, age nine. He was taken from the local playground in Ovilla, Texas. He is wearing a blue T-shirt and faded jeans with a hole beneath the right knee. He has on white Nikes and was last seen wearing a Texas Rangers ball cap.

“Police are looking for a brown sedan with a license plate that contains a six and a G. There is no current description of the driver.”

Danielle fumbled with her phone, managing to pull up the number Arlen Hardesty had given her the night before.

“Chief Hardesty,” his deep voice boomed into the phone.

“Hello. This is Danielle. Danielle Patterson. I just heard . . . there’s an Amber Alert out for a little boy.”

Hardesty’s sigh held so many emotions. “I know. Got the alert just before you called.”

Tears pricked Danielle’s eyes as she clutched the steering wheel with her free hand. “This isn’t . . . this isn’t going to end, is it? I mean the guy you’re looking for. The one who killed Jonathan.” She didn’t say the words, but they sat there, between the two phones: *The man who kidnapped this child today might kill him just as Jonathan was murdered.*

“No.” The chief of police sighed one of those bone-deep breaths. “I can’t tell you if this is the same man who kidnapped and murdered your brother, but until we catch him, boys will keep dying, Mrs. Patterson.”

“HANK. Thirteen hours. At dawn, Jonathan, gone for thirteen hours.”

Hank turned toward Nancy, his look hollow. Nothing moved across his face, through his eyes. He tilted his head, marginally interested as she swallowed then gasped for air. Hank closed his eyes. “I can’t see any better in the dark than they can,” he said. “You heard the detective say they brought in the dogs. A helicopter from Fort Worth. It’s a full-scale search, almost everyone in town was out looking till it got too dark.”

A faint hum. Louder, a thwap, thwap overhead, a blinding spotlight. Again.

“They could miss him from up there.”

“We’ve already missed him,” Hank shot back, eyes glinting in the semi-darkness.

Nancy shrank back, away from him.

He lowered his head nearly to his knees. Inhaled, exhaled. “My son.”

Cicadas hummed, pressing their bodies against the house. Nothing could hold them together. Not with Jonny missing.

A whippoorwill called. Hank stood there, between the foyer and the living room where Nancy huddled.

“What are we going to do?” she asked him.

Another pass from the helicopter. A dog barking.

Hank hesitated again before seeming to consciously lift his leg to step into the room.

He lay his hand on her shoulder, fingers against her collarbone, his face telling Nancy he was too used up to do more as darkness crowded out the faint porch light.

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MUCH AS ARLEN hated telling Danielle Patterson the truth, she needed to hear it. Still, he hesitated before he knocked on the door to Nancy Foster's house promptly at eight-thirty. He'd had to leave Mansfield just after six to make it back north to this posh area of town. No one answered. He tried the knob. Locked. He nodded his head. Good. He strolled around to the back of the house, noting the overgrown, weedy path.

That door, too, remained locked. No lights shone through the windows. He frowned, unhappy with the morning gloom—and the potential to move through it undetected.

A car engine rattling up the drive drew his attention. Hardesty placed his hand on his weapon as the gray minivan pulled to a stop in front of the garage.

"So sorry!" Danielle gasped as she stepped from the car. "Traffic on the Tollway was brutal. I should have told you I was running a bit late when I spoke with you earlier."

Arlen nodded. Traffic always was lately.

"Any word on that little boy?" she asked, her eyes hopeful.

"No." The word sat heavy, distasteful, in his mouth. "Mind if we go in?" Hardesty asked. The pile of paperwork he'd left on his desk last night would be much higher by the time he made it into the office this afternoon.

They might all live in the Metroplex, but the driving time from one side to the other was a damn nightmare.

“Sure.” Danielle fumbled for the right key, fitting it into the lock. She opened the door and led him into the kitchen, which, though dated, remained surprisingly clean.

“There’s a cleaning crew,” Danielle said in answer to Arlen’s unspoken question. “They were here a couple of days ago. Each Friday at eleven.”

Arlen nodded, eyes sweeping the space. “Who else has a key? Besides the cleaning crew?”

“Sunny, my mother’s nurse and me.”

Arlen turned back toward Danielle. “Your father?”

Danielle shook her head. “My mother changed the locks on the house when I was . . .” She paused, her gaze thoughtful as it turned toward the ceiling. “I guess I was sixteen.”

“All right.” He walked into the living space and glanced up the stairs. “She said the box was in the attic. Mind if we head up thataway?”

“Sure,” Danielle said, but her voice held a tinge of anxiety.

“Not a fan?”

Danielle bypassed him and moved toward the stairs. “Not since my mother found me up there, going through boxes. She never actually yelled or anything. Just got really sad for weeks afterward.”

“Why?” Arlen asked. He didn’t understand major depressive disorder, had little personal knowledge outside of what he’d heard on television or in his staff’s ongoing training. He knew about triggers and that the emotions could dysregulate, but that didn’t explain how a daughter’s jaunt to the attic would set Nancy on an emotional implosion.

“I found a picture,” Danielle said. Her shoulders rounded in. “Of the four of us. In a box. Mom couldn’t even look at it.”

She released a soft breath at the top of the stairs, squaring her shoulders to grab the dingy cord that led to the space above. She glanced back over

her shoulder. “It’s the only picture of us all as a family that I know of.”

Her gaze and eyes held a wistful quality that made Arlen want to pat her shoulder. Instead, he maneuvered around her and tugged down the slightly warped wooden stairs. A dry, musty smell and a wall of dank air hit his face as he started up.

“You don’t have to come up here, you know.”

“No,” Danielle said, her voice determined. “I want that picture. And Mom wanted you to have those journals.”

“Any idea why?” Arlen asked, fishing for the information he wanted—Nancy’s thought process, or at least her motivations.

Danielle made a noncommittal sound as she stepped over the lip into the dim light. She wrinkled her nose, distaste for the space or maybe dismay at the number of boxes, evident.

“She didn’t talk about Jonathan.” Arlen squatted in front of a box near the edge, hoping to get lucky. He didn’t—the box overflowed with school-related stuff. Danielle’s report cards and faded construction-paper projects. Arlen smiled a little. “Ever?”

At Danielle’s silence, he glanced up to see her shaking her head.

“What do you think led to her calling me?” Arlen asked.

She moved in the opposite direction, unerringly toward a box. Must be the one with the picture.

“I don’t know,” she said, glancing back up at Arlen. “She journaled for years. Never let me look at them—guarded those suckers pretty close.” Danielle inhaled for a long moment. Held it as if the next words needed more oxygen to get out. “I’m going to guess she found out something. Something that scared her.”

“HUH,” he said. His sun-browned fingers were covered in dark hair with a smattering of gray that made them look like fat caterpillars crawling to the nail beds.

“I hope I’m wrong,” Danielle rushed to say.

“I have less than five weeks until I retire,” Chief Hardesty said. He closed the box and shuffled it aside, reaching for another. “I’d like to finish up this case myself.”

Danielle bit her lip as she opened the heat-softened cardboard. Because he wanted the glory of closing the case? Or because he didn’t trust anyone else to complete it?

Danielle pondered what little she knew of Chief Hardesty’s motivations, studying him surreptitiously as she worked through another box. His face reminded her of modeling clay left in the sun too long. Except that it was age, not heat, that had caused the skin to blur and sag. He seemed a decent sort—hardworking, intelligent, maybe even empathetic. Danielle understood why Nancy had trusted him. She hoped she could, too.

In the next box, she found the photograph. The ugly brass frame was still shoved face down on top of some of Jonathan’s clothes. She remembered her frantic movements after her mother caught her in the attic, the corners of which were thick with shadows and cobwebs. It didn’t

surprise Danielle; her mother hated dusting, especially places she rarely visited.

Nothing had changed up here—well, maybe more dust and cobwebs. While the rest of her life continued to march inexorably onward, the attic remained consistent in its secrets and grime. The warped plywood decking groaned under her feet. Danielle glanced up at the six A-framed joints overhead, thinking how fragile a house was, how fragile *life* was.

Rolling her head on her stiff neck, she wondered if helping Chief Hardesty was a good idea. Maybe she should just let the past be that . . . past.

She swiped at the thick film of dust covering the glass and tipped the frame to get a clearer view in the moldering light. Her eyes kept returning to Jonathan's young beaming face above that bright orange shirt.

They, Jonathan and she, looked nothing alike. That might have been the one thing that kept Nancy able to function. Well, sort of. Nancy didn't have to look at the face of her dead child every day once she'd packed away his things.

Danielle thought about Kevin, so grown up at eight. Reid, at six, shared the same eyes though not the same hair color or skin tone. With just one glance at her boys' hazel eyes fringed with the thick, dark lashes, anyone could see they were brothers, their father's sons.

Danielle set the photo to the side and continued to work her way through the box. Nothing worthwhile in it. She tipped the box and read the single word in black marker on the side: Attic.

She nibbled her lip. The last time her parents moved was into this house, nearly thirty years before. From the look of it, this box was put in the attic then and ignored since.

She glanced over at Chief Hardesty as he shoved a box to the side, and she shuffled on her butt to the next box nearest her, opening it. Danielle

pulled out a newspaper clipping that had fallen loose from what looked like a scrapbook.

A 10-year-old Boy is Missing

Danielle continued to read past the headline. Yes, some of the details were like Jonathan's kidnapping. Words jumped out: *Chevy pickup truck. Kidnapped. Knife wounds.*

Danielle flipped to the next newspaper cutout, scanned, exhaled, flipped, and read, eyes burning across the page, breath leaping out of her chest. *So many of them.*

Danielle shook the box. Her stomach roiled, and her heart beat painfully, loudly as more aged newsprint pages fluttered to the warped plywood at her jean-clad knee. Her eyes were already skimming over the words as she stooped to pick up the clippings. Hank's name was near the bottom of the piece.

Hank Foster, Esq., whose son was abducted and murdered in 1983, contacted the Bethel family to offer his condolences and support during this time.

Foster's organization, the Agency for Missing, Exploited, and Abused Children (AMEAC) is based in Dallas, Texas. It works with families across the country to help find missing children. The group has an educational arm that works with local communities, especially rural ones, to explain the importance of proper civilian vigilance, not only by parents but also by the community-at-large.

AMEAC is currently working with fifty-six towns and police departments to educate parents and teachers on how to spot an abused child or a potential child predator. Hays is on a waiting list to become an AMEAC-sponsored town.

The book—a journal like the ones her mother used to write in—lay beneath the clipping. She pulled it out with shaking hands. Flipping through the slightly yellowed, stiff pages, she found a table. A column of dates.

Writing to the left. She scooped up the clippings. Yes, they matched. 1977 was the first. Entry: "Unknown. A possibility."

Jesus. No wonder her mother hadn't liked her digging through these boxes.

The next was 1980. "Hank at a conference in Little Rock June 17-23."

Danielle frowned, not understanding why Nancy made note of this.

The next entry was dated 1983—the date of Jonathan's death. "Hank stated he was in his office. Secretary can confirm he went in at 3:45. No one saw him again until 7:15 p.m. when he arrived home. He did not answer his phone at all that evening. Never admitted to having an affair with his secretary either."

Danielle's vision blurred as she continued to stare at the page. Affair with his secretary? Well, that wasn't new. Hank seemed to like to screw his secretaries. He'd gone through . . . how many was it at AMEAC now? Six, maybe more.

She touched the page, running her forefinger over the words, trying to grasp their meaning.

But . . . none of this made sense.

Her mom couldn't believe...it would mean Hank had hurt his own child.

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“WILL you tell me about the investigation?” Danielle asked, her voice hesitant. She was clutching something in her arms.

Papers. She passed them over to him with a trembling hand. A few of the loose newsprint pages fluttered to the plywood flooring.

Arlen picked them up and scanned them, glowering. This better not be what Nancy wanted him to find.

“Yeah, I’ve seen these,” he grunted.

“Oh.” Danielle’s shoulders slumped.

“Your mom put a lot of her time and effort into helping with the investigation early on. I didn’t have the heart to tell her it was unnecessary. We had manpower from the local FBI as well as most of our own team on the case.”

Not that any of those hours actually turned up enough evidence. He sighed, wishing he had better news for Nancy’s daughter.

They’d been up here a good forty-five minutes, close to an hour. Arlen pulled out a faded red bandana and swiped at his forehead. Different type of investigative work, this. Just as physically demanding as that day so long ago. Part of why he’d gone for chief when he hit fifty. The extra weight and the high blood pressure made this part of the job more strenuous than he cared for.

He shoved the bandana back into his pocket and shuffled to another box. He opened it and stared down at Matchbox cars. His boy had many of the same.

“I put out an APB after your mother gave the description. We found the truck, found some bloodstains on the vinyl seat, on the driver’s door. You got to remember this was before DNA testing was all the rage. We had all that—all those samples are locked up still. I had ’em run back when we got the equipment and the blood was a match for Jonathan’s. We got blood and fibers from under Jonathan’s fingernails—proved a dead end.”

Arlen’s throat ached with the need to yell, just as it always did when he thought back to the meticulously-preserved evidence that did him, did Jonathan and, now, Jonathan’s sister no good.

“The son of a bitch who did this in my town walked free,” he murmured.

He pulled out a birth certificate sealed in a large zip-top baggie near the top of the next box. Under trumpeting, stylized angels sat his name in a fancy script: Jonathan Henry Foster.

Clothes and toys were folded with sheets of tissue paper between each layer. The clothes smelled strongly of the mothballs mounded around them and were heavy on polyester, but they were all intact. Hardesty guessed these must be Jonathan’s toys—the beat-up ball glove was the obvious favorite—were in the next large box.

So, far no luck on the journals—or any legal papers. Just that goddamn table and those news clippings, taunting him.

“We never *proved* who it was. Gotta do that. Have proof. The FBI was in our little town; the special agent thought the killer might have gone up through Oklahoma to Kansas because another kid was murdered there—like what we had here—but we never found him. Neither did the Kansas police. Neither did the group in Alabama where it seems to have started. Leastwise, best as I’ve been able to tell.”

“So, it’s possible that he’s out there, still hurting children.” Danielle pressed her hands to her stomach.

“It’s plausible. In fact, it’s likely.” Arlen heaved a sigh, hating the words, hating what he had to say. “We see cases like Jonathan’s every so often and I worry.”

“And?”

“I haven’t caught a whiff of a crime that matches Jonathan’s in the past few years. The killer’s gotta be old now. Hell, I’m old.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s stopped,” Danielle said, her voice quiet.

Tough young woman. She’d lived through types of tragedies that emotionally crippled people—he’d seen too much of that. In her mother, for one. Not that Arlen blamed Nancy for her difficulties. Hell, he’d been a hot mess himself afterward and he got to come home to his wife and kids each night.

“It doesn’t imply much except I haven’t seen the same knife or pattern of stabbings.”

“So, ah,” Danielle said.

Her brows knit as she struggled with the violent aspect of the murder. She had boys—that’s where his mind went, each time he talked about a crime like this: to his boy, to his grandkids.

“So, you can tell who’s done the killing by the way they, ah, use the knife?”

Arlen wanted to pat her hand, wanted to offer some level of sympathy. Instead, he turned to the next box, unable to watch her struggle.

“Yes, usually the forensics team can tell us the right hand or left hand, the length of the blade, that kind of thing, from the wounds themselves. I’ve been keeping an eye out for years to see if any new cases look like our report here and those in Kansas, Alabama. Haven’t seen anything. And that’s the conundrum. We can’t catch what we can’t find. And serial killers are damn good at hiding. Usually in plain sight.”

“What does that mean?” Danielle asked.

Arlen wiped his face again, needing the moment to get his blood pressure back under control. Goddamn heart. “Means we probably talked to the guy—if not us, then the PD in Kansas or Alabama did. Someone talked to him about the boys’ deaths. But he was smooth and he covered his actions better’n most.” He closed his eyes, trying to get his heart to settle back at a normal clip. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to nail his ass. I want it that *bad*.”

Arlen settled against one of the roof joists. It groaned under his shifting bulk, but he needed the moment to let the wave of dizziness pass.

“There’s no way for me to tell you the number of times I’ve laid awake at night, thinking about the call from your mother,” he said. He closed his eyes for a moment, reliving that awful memory. “The way she looked that day. The absolute misery when we had to walk your father into that funeral home to identify his son.” He opened his eyes and met her startled, terrified gaze. “It took just moments. Maybe just two or three, and your brother was gone.”

“That’s it?” she squeaked.

Arlen shook his head, his tone rueful. “I’d love to be able to tell you that it was possible to find him now, but I can’t. We could look for what’s on the record again. I have my DNA samples, got my original evidence. If you want me to dig deeper, I’ll do it even though your dad asked for me to close the case. Your mama decided against it when I talked to her a few years ago. I’d done it anyway but there’ve been even deeper budget cuts.”

Danielle snorted. Arlen, cynical to the core after forty-plus years of this work, didn’t bother to say more about how much money it took to investigate properly. No one wanted to pay for that kind of thing because no one wanted those types of crimes in their neighborhood. He still fought the good fight and tried to get more resources for her force, but he no longer

gnashed his teeth and railed against the unfairness of it all when the city council decided not to add five percent to the police's budget yet again.

Danielle fiddled with the edge of a box, peeling away the layers of brown paper in thin sheets.

"I told your mother we'd find him, and it's always sat poorly with me," Arlen said. Damn, it set poorly.

Danielle raised her green eyes to his, Nancy's eyes but calmer. Clearer. The grief hadn't created the mania behind these eyes. He wanted to keep it that way.

"You have children, possibly grandchildren."

He nodded. "Yeah, three—boy and couple of girls. Two grandkids, boy and a girl. They sure are something." He chuckled, a halfhearted attempt. Not the same as when he considered Jonathan's murder could have happened to one of his kids.

"I remember watching America's Most Wanted when I was a child," Danielle said. "My mother hated the show. She refused to let me watch after she caught me. But I always wondered how many of those guys they caught. I guess too many are running free."

He looked into her eyes, searching. Danielle sat still, waiting for . . . something from him. Arlen wanted to give it to her—whatever she needed. He rubbed the stubble on his chin, thick hand scrubbing over raspy, hairy knobs.

"If there's one of those fellas out there," he said, voice low, slow. "If just one of them is out there to do it again, it's too many."

"That's why you do what you do," Danielle replied, her head tilted. "I mean, here, when you could be doing the administrative side. Your job now."

The ache in Arlen's chest loosened. He puffed out a breath. Drew in the damp, stale air permeating the attic. "Yeah, that's why."

"You said Hank—my father—asked you to close the case?"

Hardesty nodded, breath held. He knew little of Danielle's relationship with Hank. She might torpedo this before he got started.

Hank was a man Arlen had never been able to trust.

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THE TWO OF them continued to work in silence, moving deeper into the shadows of the eaves—the back realm of the attic. The longer they looked, the further Danielle’s heart sank.

This must be a waste of time even if Chief Hardesty kept working toward the payoff, trusting her mother.

Danielle wanted to have that much faith.

With a long sigh, Danielle opened a box shoved against the bare studs. She peered inside.

“Oh.”

Her hand trembled as she reached in, pulling out slim, canvas-bound journals.

Opening the cover, there it was: her mother’s small, loopy handwriting. Intrigued, Danielle scanned the first few lines.

March 12, 1985

A barely blue, dented Chevy. That was the vehicle. I saw it drive past.

A man drove. He was tall and wore a straw cowboy hat pulled down low on his forehead.

So normal I barely noticed. Until I realized the kids were no longer shrieking down the block. I couldn’t hear the crack of bat meeting ball.

Dusk had darkened into night while I was in the store. Never be out past sunset. I’d always told Jonny that.

“Chief?” Danielle said, her heart pounding faster than the NASCAR races she’d glimpsed on TV.

“Yep.”

“I think . . . I think I found her journals.”

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WE NEVER PROVED who it was.

As Kevin and Reid took their places at the table that night, Danielle's mind returned to her conversation with Chief Hardesty and her mother's journals.

After Chief Hardesty left, Danielle picked up her sons from school and spent the afternoon hearing about their day, making sure all their gear was prepped for the week's practices and games. She made dinner, and they all sat down at the table now to eat it. And, finally, Danielle began to wonder . .

. All Nancy's thoughts, all those emotions Danielle never understood, were in those slim, bound pages. Danielle wanted to see if that woman—Jonny's mother—continued to exist, locked deep within the shell of the silence Danielle grew up surrounded by.

Chief Hardesty had promised to return the books once they were no longer evidence. But he'd also explained that once logged as evidence, the books could be kept for years—even decades.

The journals were now evidence for her brother's murder. With writings she might never see. She had to be okay with that because it's what her mother wanted.

Unfortunately, Nancy rarely asked Danielle what *she* wanted.

She glanced around her kitchen, so different from the one in her mother's house. Danielle's was chic, probably oversized, but she loved the airiness. When they bought the house a few years before, Danielle spent hours picking out the right colors to give her men a sense of warmth. Would Garrett and the boys ever think of something so simple yet so important?

She knew they'd notice the lack because she missed those little details more than the grand gestures people always celebrated; Danielle craved Garrett's small touches, notes, glances that kept her deeper in love because they proved his interest.

"Nah, that pop up was way easier to catch than the one I caught yesterday. Right, Dad? Reid's was right to him. I had to run, and I even almost did a dive to catch it."

Kevin's dark, curly head swiveled, making the thick strands flutter across his crown. Danielle smiled at the sight, wanting to smooth them down but worried about the impatient look no doubt sliding into his eyes even now. Kevin's acceptance of hugs and kisses diminished sharply this year, seeming to take time and energy away from his great passion for baseball. Just like his Uncle Jonathan.

Danielle reached for her glass of water, hoping it would help propel the bite of pasta stuck in her throat.

"Nah-uh, Kevin. My catch was at least as good as yours. I got the game ball for it. You didn't."

Reid's smaller face flushed. His pale skin always betrayed strong emotion, just like Danielle's did. This child she could still touch, and she did, reaching out, sliding her hand over his silky smooth flyaway hair. He leaned into her hand for a moment before turning to scowl at his brother again.

"They were both excellent," Danielle said. "I can't believe how well you both played. I mean, didn't you both get like eight hits and twenty-seven BRIs or something?"

Reid slumped down in his chair, giggling, while Kevin rolled his eyes importantly.

“That’s RBI, Mom. For runs-batted-in. Jeez.”

“Oh, that’s right. I keep forgetting.” Danielle bit her cheek to keep her lips from quirking upward.

“Hey, she’s trying,” Garrett said, eyes dancing. “We’ve got to work on her lingo a bit,” he added, leaning back in his chair, his arm hooked with negligent ease over its back. “One of these days she’ll be talking stats and ribbies with the rest of us.”

“I thought ribs were lung protectors,” Danielle said, making her eyes as wide as possible.

Garrett smiled, his eyes lighting up with pleasure at her teasing. Reid slid farther toward the floor.

“You’re such a girl.” Kevin sighed.

“For which I am forever thankful,” Garrett said around a mouthful of pasta, winking at her.

More of the same. A conversation like this filled all their family dinners. Danielle wondered what it would have been like to have lived with an older sibling. Would the rivalry have been as strong?

Danielle turned one of the many stray pieces of spaghetti around her plate, watching it zigzag through the tomato sauce.

“Whatcha think about that, Dani?”

All three of them turned to look at her, nearly identical expressions of consternation furrowing their brows when she remained mute. Two were tanned and one so pale and smooth, just like her, sweet kid, that she choked on the love, and the fear, welling up inside.

Garrett’s mouth turned down on the left side. His fingers tapped on the table before he smoothed them through his hair. A curl sprang up on his crown. Danielle bit her cheek harder, blinking. He gripped her hand, his thumb rubbing small circles on her wrist. She swallowed, then again.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said. “No, don’t start with the whining, Reid. It’s time to get ready for bed anyway.”

He herded them upstairs, following them to the landing as Danielle rested her head on her elbows that she leaned onto the table top. Garrett answered the questions they hurtled at him. Then, she heard the squeak of the bathroom door’s lower hinge, which meant Reid would be in the shower soon, followed immediately by Kevin. On went the water, a faint hum seeping through the floor above.

Danielle gathered up the dishes. She clanked the plates and silverware hurriedly and settled the dishes there even as she heard Garrett’s footfalls; she pretended intense interest in the temperature of the water. Her prewash ritual was so ingrained that even when they’d bought this house three and a half years ago, she couldn’t break the habit. Once, years before, she tried to load the dishwasher, even buying the scrubber soap, but she rewashed half the load to get off the odd bits of stuck-on food. Better to continue what worked.

“Where were you, Dani?”

She shook her head, wishing he hadn’t asked. Garrett’s hands eased over her shoulders once she placed the dishes in the sudsy sink. He turned her, her body wooden and unresponsive.

“Talk to me,” he said, voice coaxing.

“Chief Hardesty said something that bothered me today.” Danielle tried to turn back to the sink, but his fingers remained firm on her arms.

“All right.”

She forced her gaze back up to Garrett’s. “He said the killer—Jonathan’s killer—is probably still out there.”

His hands fell to his sides. “Shit.”

“What do I do, Garrett? I’ve spent most of my life running away from my brother’s death. From my mother’s issues around my brother’s murder. I have the bare minimum of a relationship with my father.” She covered her

face with her damp hands. “I don’t want that to touch the boys. I can’t let my past hurt them.”

She whirled back to the sink and scrubbed the dish harder, needing a way to get her anger out. She was emotional right now, conflicted with all the questions that danced around in her head since finding those journals—since her last conversation with her mother, really.

“I don’t really understand your history. I can’t. I didn’t live it.”

Garrett’s voice was strained, but the words were right. He was trying, she knew. He reached around her and turned off the faucet. He turned her back to face him, ignoring the soapy water dripping from her fingers.

“This is your past—your family. I want to be here for you. But I don’t know what to tell you, Dani. I don’t know what’s right.”

She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek hard against his shoulder. “I’m scared.”

He slid his hand over her hair. “Of what?”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Finding out the truth.”

“All right,” Garrett said, his voice holding a note of uncertainty. “Do you want Chief Hardesty to keep you informed of the investigation? Do you want him to investigate at all?”

Danielle squeezed her eyes tighter still. “Yes,” she managed to push out, barely more than a faint breath. She pulled back, studying Garrett’s face. “I do. I mean, if it could save another kid, how could I not? But . . . I don’t want to tell the boys. Or my dad. Is that . . . are you okay with that?”

Garrett pressed his lips to her forehead. “I’m okay with that,” he murmured as he pulled her back into a hug. “Maybe you’ll be able to learn something.”

“What if it makes the situation worse?” Danielle asked, tipping her head back to see his expression.

“Then we deal with it,” Garrett replied. His teeth nibbled at his lower lip, a sure sign he didn’t like that option.

They stood together, hugging, Danielle drawing strength from Garrett, in the brightly lit sunshine-yellow kitchen.

“Chief Hardesty said it’s likely they talked to Jonathan’s killer.”

Garrett stiffened. “Then why the hell didn’t they arrest him?”

“I guess it doesn’t work like that.” Danielle sighed. “It sounds like the burden of proof is harder to get than it is on TV. They have to have enough evidence to bring someone in to interrogate them.”

“I don’t like this, Dani. I’ll support you, support your decision, but I . . . Shit. This makes me nervous.”

“Me, too.” Danielle closed her eyes.

I expect you to follow my wishes.

Danielle wanted. She wanted to honor her mother’s last request to her. Nancy’s writing it out in the letter made more sense. Nancy spoke in code about her wishes for Jonathan’s murder: She wanted Danielle to continue the search for her brother’s killer. To get the justice Nancy never procured.

Something had changed. Nancy’s death? Possibly, but Danielle couldn’t shake the worry that it was more than that.

“I have to plan my mother’s memorial service,” Danielle said.

Garrett pulled her tighter against him. “Ah, Dani, I wish I could do more for you.”

“You being here, this right here, it helps.”

“Your dad won’t help?” Garrett asked.

Danielle’s lips twisted down. “I didn’t call him.”

Garrett grunted. No doubt if she looked, Garrett would be wearing the expression she’d dubbed The Foster Look. Garrett never liked either of her parents. Somehow, he’d still managed to make her feel loved, wanted, respected.

She was damn lucky they’d met. She would never forget that.

“Why not?” Garrett asked.

“Because . . .” Danielle trailed off. “This sounds so stupid, I know. Mom wrote about his affairs. I read about one today.” She raised her gaze to his, trying to get her bearings, trying to articulate what she’d come to realize after her search through the attic.

“I don’t think my father loved my mom. Ever. And he sure as hell doesn’t care about me.”

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DANIELLE SPENT the next day talking to the funeral director and crematorium, and they set up a memorial service for late that following Tuesday afternoon.

Four days. In four days, Danielle would have to say her final goodbye. She called Garrett with the news.

“You need to let your dad know,” he said as they finished speaking.

“I know. I just . . .” Danielle hated talking about her father because she struggled to put into words her reaction based in part on her mother’s reactions to him.

“He’s a workaholic ass, Dani. I get it. But this was his *wife*. Your mother. He can’t ignore that.”

Garrett continued to have faith in her father where she didn’t. But she would call her father because Garrett wanted her to and she knew she should.

After ending her call with Garrett, Danielle scrolled through her contacts until she found her father’s name: Hank Foster. She hadn’t called him Dad in years. Danielle pushed the talk button with trepidation.

“Agency for Missing, Exploited and Abducted Children.”

She glanced at the clock. It was nearly six in the evening. Did he let anyone who worked for him have a reasonable schedule?

“Hank Foster, please.”

“Just one moment.”

She listened to the watery jazz music for a few minutes before the pleasant voice came back on the line. “I’m sorry, he’s in a meeting.”

“This is his daughter,” Danielle said, pulling the rarely used trump card. “And I really need to speak with him.”

“Hold the line.”

Meetings. Such a convenient excuse.

“Danielle.”

“I won’t keep you long.”

“Look, if this is about your mother’s funeral—”

“Memorial service. She didn’t want a funeral.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hank said on a sigh. “Just understand we’re busy here, and—”

“And attending your wife’s memorial service is the decent, *Christian* thing to do.” She put an emphasis on Christian, knowing it would anger him by pointing out his hypocrisy. “You were still married.”

“I don’t need a lecture about my actions.” His voice turned hard, just as she’d anticipated.

Danielle disagreed, but now wasn’t the time to argue that point. “That’s only part of why I called. I wanted to know what you intend to do with the house. Garrett asked if you wanted to sell it.” Her mom left everything to Danielle; that included Nancy’s half of the big house on the acre-lot near SMU with its astronomical taxes. Danielle wanted out, quickly.

“You sure you don’t want to move into it? It’s been in the family a long time.”

“Seriously?”

She waited. So did he. Was he clueless or a complete asshole? Maybe with Hank there was no difference.

“After my childhood there? No. Way.”

Hank sighed. “I guess you want me to get the house on the market.”

Danielle was a little surprised Hank didn't offer to buy her out of the place. She'd been hoping he'd do so. Would have made her life so much easier.

"I know a good real estate agent. Garrett's sister recommended her. But I need your approval to sign. Does Aunt Mel have any rights to the place anymore?"

"If you want to handle that, Danielle, I'll be happy to sign the paperwork. Mel doesn't have anything to do with the house, I bought her half after . . . look, I've got a lot going on right now."

When don't you? Danielle wanted to ask. Instead, she squeezed her free hand into a fist and kept her voice level. "I'll have the real estate agent send over the documents once we've established a price. Does that work for you?"

"That's fine. I need to get back to that meeting."

"I'm sure it's important."

"Look, I'll stop by the house later this week. Maybe tonight. I want to collect some things."

Danielle's breath froze. "The house?"

"You know, just some old keepsakes."

"Like what?" Danielle asked. "I'm going by anyway, I could grab whatever you want." She hadn't planned to step foot in the house again—spending her morning there with Chief Hardesty had left her shaken and unhappy—but she didn't like the idea of Hank rifling through Nancy's things.

Hank made a strange, almost annoyed sound. Someone called to him in the background. "I'll get it. It's from your . . . Jonny's . . ."

"Oh." Danielle huffed. "When did you get a key? I mean . . ." Danielle tried to think of a plausible excuse. "I would have been happy to give you one."

"I've always had keys to the house."

“I didn’t realize you stopped by to visit with Mom,” Danielle said, fishing for . . . she wasn’t sure what information she wanted. More than the tidbits Hank dropped throughout their conversation.

“I didn’t. She didn’t want to see me, but I own the place.”

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DANIELLE'S PHONE message stated Hank Foster had keys to the house. And he planned to go by the ostentatious residence this week. Well, that would prove interesting—especially if Hank was looking for the box of journals now in Arlen's possession.

Arlen frowned. Hank was a lawyer. A savvy one. Good thing Arlen worked through Danielle and had all the appropriate paperwork to justify his claim on Nancy's years of notes and research. But just to be sure, Arlen needed to work through those books lickety-split.

After signing off on the last of the day's paperwork, he heaved a sigh. Arlen had a choice. He picked up the phone and dialed his wife's number.

"It's after seven," Irene said in that calm way of hers he'd come to rely on. But beneath the serenity, her tone held a hint of surprise.

"I know. I should have called a few hours ago. Got backlogged with the new cruiser request and—"

"As interesting as all that is." Irene's tone let him know she did not find the conversation interesting. "Are you coming home for dinner or should I bring something up?"

Arlen glanced at the journals, then at the notes he'd made of Danielle's call. He wanted to be at Nancy's house should Hank swing by.

"You mind bringing me a bite?" Arlen asked.

“You working on that old case?” Irene asked. Her voice powered through the speaker, causing Arlen to think she’d squeezed it between her ear and shoulder, probably pulling Tupperware out of the fridge.

“Yeah.”

“You think it’s going to pan out? This new information you got?” Irene asked. Arlen heard her rip off some tinfoil. Damn, he married a good woman.

“I want to think so. But it’ll be a lot of work, Reenie. I gotta go through these books and keep an eye on a couple of guys.”

“Just remember your blood pressure, Arlen. You promised me a month in Florida when you retired. I plan to hold you to that.”

Arlen pulled up the first journal and opened to the first page. “As you should. Thanks, Reenie.”

“Be there in fifteen.”

Arlen skimmed the page of Nancy’s journal as he set down the phone in its cradle.

The casket was closed. Hank and I fought about that.

We seem to do that a lot now. I didn’t get to see Jonny. How can I know he’s gone if I didn’t see him there, eyes closed and body too still?

Hank said there was no way he’d have Jonny’s casket open.

Hank can’t understand that I needed to touch him one more time. To see Jonny in death. Because right now, even still, I can’t accept Jonny’s gone.

Hank can say that to me because he’s the one who identified Jonny’s body.

Hank came home so pale, his body convulsing. He looked so old and broken.

Shit.

These books were going to be harder than hell to read. He glanced down at the box and shook his head. Nancy had filled fifty of these bad boys. That was over five thousand pages.

Arlen picked up his phone. He spun the Rolodex until he landed on one of his buddies who worked up at the Dallas Police Department. Time to start calling in the favors he'd accrued over the years.

"You want me to what?" Jim Kondren asked.

"I know it sounds far-fetched, Jim, but just . . . trust me on this. Couple of days tops."

"You're asking me to put resources toward a stakeout. Of a dead woman's house. On a thirty-year-old cold case."

Arlen rubbed his thumb between his eyebrows, trying to ease the tension headache building there.

"I am."

Jim remained quiet. "How big we talking? I mean if this lady was right—if you find evidence in her personal effects?"

"If I'm right . . ." Arlen waved Irene in, smiling at her. She smiled back but worry shadowed her eyes. "This could rock some big boats, Jim."

"Arrests?"

Irene set a plate on his desk, next to Nancy's journal. "That's always the goal," Arlen responded.

"I can get you a guy over to Highland Park residence tonight 'cause we're slow. You're damn lucky I work in that jurisdiction."

No, it wasn't luck. Arlen had made friends in that police force on purpose. Not that he planned to tell Jim that.

"Thanks, Jim. Appreciate it. I'm worried," Arlen said on a sigh, shifting gears. "There's been no activity we can attribute to our killer in over four years. That's the longest stretch he's gone."

"Could be he died. Or quit, then," Jim said.

"Or could be we're about to find another dead boy. We got that Amber Alert today. Could be the same guy." Probably wasn't. Jonathan's killer liked old pickups. "You really want to take that chance?"

Irene laid her hand on Arlen's shoulder. He patted the back with his free hand.

"Dammit, Arlen. No. Fine. I'll figure something out to keep a guy there—just nights, right?" He waited for Arlen's affirmation "But now *you* owe *me*."

"Thanks, Jim." He settled the phone in the cradle and closed his eyes. Thinking back to Jim's parting words, Arlen muttered to himself, "Get in line."

"You think it'll come to that?" Irene asked. "Another little boy murdered?"

Arlen brought his wife's hand to his cheek. "Yeah, Reenie. I don't think he's stopped. It's too strong an urge."

"Sick one," she said.

He breathed long and slow, keeping his blood pressure in mind, like he'd promised. "That's why I gotta see this through."

"No, Arlen," Irene said, her voice and face calm and full of an understanding he probably didn't deserve. "You do this work because it's your life's calling. But I'm still making you go to Florida next month."

"You got it."

She kissed him—a short perfunctory kiss that said she understood where his mind was at and didn't plan to interrupt him. "Find that man, Arlen. I want you to enjoy your retirement."

Arlen pulled the journal and his plate of lasagna to the edge of his desk. He dug into both—he planned to find Jonathan's killer because he wanted to enjoy his retirement, too.

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AFTER DROPPING the boys off at school the next morning, Danielle drove by her mother's house. She wandered through the room, cataloging anything that was out of place. She paused in the doorway to her mother's room. The mess—clothes strewn around the room and spilling from the dresser—she'd never seen anything like it.

She called Chief Hardesty. "Someone's been here," she gasped. "At my mom's. Her room exploded."

"Yeah, I know."

"What?" Danielle squealed.

"Your father stopped by last night. Spent a couple of hours there. I bet he'll come by again today some time. I got a guy staking out the place."

"Why?" Danielle asked. She glanced around the room again, still shocked by the disorder.

"My guess?" Hardesty rumbled. "Your father's looking for the journals."

"But . . ." No further words came out of Danielle's mouth.

The front door opened, then closed. Danielle gripped the phone in her hand. "Someone's here," Danielle whispered.

"I got a guy outside, Danielle. You keep your phone on, in your purse or pocket, and you yell if you need something." Hardesty's voice held an edge. "I'll have him inside pronto."

“O-okay,” Danielle stuttered. She shoved her phone into her pocket and whirled toward the open door just as her father appeared in the hall.

They stared at each other.

“That’s quite a mess you’ve made in there, Danielle. Or did your mother do that?”

Danielle opened and closed her mouth, unsure of what to say. Finally, she snapped, “I didn’t do this!”

Hank shook his head, his brown hair feathered with gray, thinning and showing his pink scalp beneath in spots. “Nancy was such a disaster.”

“Why are you here?” Danielle asked, her voice as stiff as her shoulders.

Hank crossed his arms over his chest. “Why are you?”

Danielle’s breathing hitched. She dropped her gaze, her mind spinning, trying to latch on to anything that would seem plausible. Nancy’s favorite pink press caught Danielle’s eye. The one she’d worn to Danielle’s wedding lay strewn and crumpled on the floor. Not at all like Nancy’s normal, meticulous habits.

“I came by to get the dress she’s going to be cremated in,” Danielle said. “She wanted the pink one.” Danielle pointed at it.

“Well, get it then. I’m sure you have other things to do.” Hank’s gaze roved the room, never settling on any one object long. “I never should have let you stay with her.”

Danielle bit her tongue, trying to consider the best course of action. “Why did you?” she asked finally, long after the silence had turned awkward.

Hank shrugged but something dark shifted across his face. “She was your mother. I was busy working. It’s not like you could have come to live with me.”

“Right,” Danielle said. They stared at each other. Hank shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks. Danielle bent down and picked up the dress. She went to the closet and found the matching shoes. After a moment

of hesitation, she moved across the cluttered hardwoods and opened her mother's mahogany bureau. She pulled out a bra, underpants and a pair of nylons. Hank watched her the whole time. Danielle's skin tingled and burned as if she'd rolled in poison ivy.

"Did you find it?" she blurted, unable to take the silence any longer.

Hank's brows drew together. "Find what?"

Danielle shrugged as she stepped out of her mother's room, edging around her father toward the stairs. "Whatever you were looking for?"

Hank stared at her for a long moment, much as a hawk targets and studies its prey. "This is the first chance I've had to stop by."

"Sure. Of course." At the top of the stairs, Danielle turned back, trying to ignore her thundering heart and stay calm. She clutched her mother's items to her chest. "Remember, Mom's memorial service is on Tuesday."

Hank's eyes met hers, his focused, lit with something that looked an awful lot like annoyance. "Got it."

Once Danielle reached the bottom of the steps, holding the handrail for support because her legs turned rubbery and unsupportive the longer her father eyed her back, she turned away.

"See ya," Danielle said, beating a hasty retreat to her minivan.

She settled into the car seat and locked her car doors—a smart precaution in the Dallas area, but more to do with the weird interplay with her father.

"What the hell was that?" she whispered.

"Danielle!"

She fumbled to pull her phone from her back pocket. "Chief?"

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yeah." She blew out a breath. "Yeah. But that was . . . surreal."

"I wish he were responsible," Hardesty growled.

"You sure he wasn't?" Danielle asked, her teeth chattering.

“He checked out clean,” Chief Hardesty said, his voice a low rumble of irritation.

“My mom didn’t trust him,” Danielle muttered. She glanced up and saw her father looking down at her from the second-story window. “He’s watching me. Hold on.” Danielle pulled out into the street, the back of her neck prickling.

“I don’t either. No man that cheats on his wife is an upstanding man.” Chief Hardesty cleared his throat and spoke in a softer voice. “Sorry, Danielle. That’s your father.”

She snorted. As if she wasn’t aware of the duplicity that was Hank Foster. “True enough, though he quit being one before I can really remember.”

“In case you don’t know from the investigation then,” Hardesty rumbled, “no one saw him for a couple of hours, but his office was in our tallest building—fourth story. He would have had to get to the ground from the outside. No visible piping, no fire escape. In dress shoes. FBI ruled him out pretty quick based on that.”

He stopped, let the words sink in. “If that weren’t enough, his secretary came forward, admitted to extramarital activities. Sealed the alibi airtight. Your dad didn’t want to hurt your mama more with that. So, we hushed it up.”

Danielle knew that from her mother’s journal. The police—or the busybodies of the small town—hadn’t hushed it up very well. Or maybe Nancy had always known. Danielle considered that possibility. She knew so little of her parents’ lives before moving to Dallas, she couldn’t say what her mother would have done with the knowledge of Hank’s infidelity. Not then, when she was a stay-at-home mom with a degree in literature.

Times were different then, fewer women worked, especially in small towns.

“What do you think?” Danielle asked, pulling her thoughts from the past she couldn’t change.

Hardesty made a humming noise deep in his throat. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in thirty-nine years of law enforcement, it’s not to speculate.”

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ARLEN REREAD the words on the photocopied page. So few but crucial to the investigation.

Rusty Reynold had a truck matching the description of the blue Chevy that picked up Jonny. The man who bought it paid cash—\$600. He wore a straw cowboy hat pulled low over his forehead. Rusty couldn't remember his eye color. Rusty couldn't remember his height—taller than Rusty's about five-seven. Big man, Rusty said. Called himself Hunter.

The next page was a photocopy of two old snapshots: One was the truck on a lot, looking old and worn out then. The sign above it read “Rusty's Trucks.” Guy wasn't original but at least Arlen had a place to start looking. The second photo was the truck as they'd found it two weeks later in a creek bed in southern Oklahoma, about three hours north of Mansfield.

This detail was one of the pieces Arlen needed to move the stalled investigation forward. *Thank you, Nancy.*

Why hadn't she come to him when she'd discovered this?

Arlen reread the words again. *Hunter.* Arlen curled his lip. That better not be a pun. Because the man who killed Jonathan Foster was a goddamn butcher. Stalking a child wasn't hunting—it was murder.

Big guy. Hank Foster was a big man. About six feet. He'd thickened through the middle with age. So had Arlen. But even back when the Fosters

lived in Mansfield, Hank was bulky with muscle. A “big man” described him well.

Was that why Nancy hesitated to call Arlen?

He couldn’t say. And half the community was made up of big men. That’s what happened in ranch land—the men spent hours out-of-doors doing manual labor. They built muscle that eventually broke down as they slowed with age.

Arlen dialed the phone number written on a Post-It stuck to the back of the second picture.

Disconnected. Of course.

Arlen dialed his secretary. “Hey, Jan. Can you get some information for me on a now-defunct business? It was called Rusty’s Trucks.”

“Sure, boss. Where was it at?”

Arlen flipped back through the scant information Nancy had provided and his stomach sank. “No idea.”

Jan made a noncommittal sound.

“I know. It’s not much to go on. But . . .” Arlen narrowed his eyes as he considered possibilities, the details from Jonathan Foster’s case percolating through his mind. “Let’s say Texas and Oklahoma for now. If that doesn’t pan out, head east into Louisiana.”

“All right,” Jan said with a lot less enthusiasm. “Anything else?”

Arlen stared down at the other name on the page. Hunter.

“This’d be back in the early 80’s.” Arlen studied the picture, bending his nose close to the image. “You know what? Stick to Texas.” The license plate behind the man in the photo had an old, 1960s-esque Texas-style license plate. “Yeah, Texas. That’s all I got for now. Thanks, Jan.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Arlen hung up the phone, his momentary sense of euphoria withering much like a popped balloon.

“Shit. Shit!” Arlen scrubbed his hands over his face, the name reverberating through his head. He asked the million-dollar question: “Who in the Sam Hill is Hunter?”

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THE ITCH GREW—AS it always did between kills. Years now since the ten-year-old with baby-smooth skin and great big brown eyes.

Each thrust of the knife brought profound release—relief from the hunger building in him. That dirty urge to touch.

Wrong. Touching boys was wrong.

Only the knife sliding out of their bodies reduced the need. Made it bearable again. For a time.

He stared out at the dark night, battling his growing desire.

“You sick freak,” his dad had spat at him years before. When he’d caught Hunter with the other boy behind the bleachers. “No son of mine takes up with faggots.”

The beating Hunter had endured damn near killed him. His father wanted to, Hunter knew it. Kill the sick freak who liked faggots.

Before his tours through Vietnam, sloshing through the muddy, insect-infested rice paddies to prove, always to prove to his father he was a man.

A real man.

He groaned, the urge to touch, to fondle would not be denied much longer.

Over four years.

His palms itched, so did his fingertips. To touch or to kill.

Killing boys so he could be a man.

He'd waited too long. Much too long to see the soft skin separated by lacerations. Bloody and like . . . like meat with the same pungent smell.

Then, finally, the urge to touch dissipated. Gone just as his father tried to pound the yearning out of him all those years before.

Gone because Hunter wasn't a sick freak after all.

He was a man. A man his father could be proud to call son.

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THE NEXT MORNING, Danielle set two heavy grocery bags on the floor and clicked the button on the answering machine, looking for the pad she normally kept right next to the phone. The pen was in its place, but the small, green sheaves of paper were not. Danielle stopped searching as a voice filled the room, the words gripped her heart, bruising in their intensity.

“Danielle, this is Trevor Dresden.”

A pause ensued like she was supposed to know him. She did. *Of course* she did. *Bastard*, Nancy had called him. Her mother’s last word an epithet toward this man.

“I just heard about your mother. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know until your father told me. She meant a great deal to me.”

Another pause, longer. Danielle squeezed the pen as she tried to swallow past the lump in her throat, heard him doing the same.

“I . . . if there’s anything I can do. I mean that. Anything. Call anytime.”

The faint digital hum kicked in as Danielle stared at the machine. She found a piece of notebook paper and wrote down the number. She scratched absently at the back of her neck as she stared at her neat script.

Trevor. He was there, the day Jonathan died.

She copied the message to her phone’s voice recording software and forwarded the file to Chief Hardesty. He called her back within the hour.

“Before we get to Trevor, I wanted to get you up to speed on what I found out.” The chief outlined her mother’s journal entry and the phone calls he’d made.

“So we know it’s a big guy who wore a straw cowboy hat and could drive a standard transmission. Not much but more than we had to go on before.”

“Okay,” Danielle said, nonplussed. The information was scant. “So, about Trevor. Him calling me now, out of the blue. Does this have to do with meeting my father yesterday?” Danielle asked.

“Couldn’t say for sure,” Hardesty said, his voice meditative. “But if I had to guess, yes. It’s your father’s newest strategy: butter you up with the young, attractive guy.”

“But I don’t know Trevor, not really, and it’s not like I really want to.”

“But *would* you be willing to meet him?” he asked.

“Why?” Danielle asked, her heart racing.

“Your mother thought he knew more about Jonathan’s murder. I don’t know. Maybe he could tell you something.”

“If he’s involved . . . is this dangerous?” Danielle asked, her voice rising.

“I don’t think so. I told you, the guy who bought the truck was an adult—big.”

“But . . . but it could be?”

“I supposed. Any investigation has inherent risks, Danielle. If it’d make you feel better, meet him down here, in Mansfield. Say you’re going to visit your brother’s grave or something. I’ll have a couple of my guys in the restaurant with you. They can tail you to the place and all the way home again.”

Danielle considered the possibility. “You think it’ll help? Me talking to Trevor?”

“I think we can gather more information, try to put the pieces together and hopefully stop the person from killing again.”

Again Danielle paused, mulled over the possibilities. “I need to tell Garrett.”

“Of course,” Chief Hardesty said. “I’m through about ten of the journals now. So far I got diddly. With Trevor reaching out to you . . . well, I feel like it’s an option we should take.”

“You’re sure Trevor didn’t hurt Jonathan? I mean, he was a kid then. And the guy who bought the truck . . . he seems to be our main suspect right now, right?” She tried to regulate her breathing, tried to stay calm as a million thoughts raced through her mind.

Chief Hardesty remained silent for so long Danielle pulled the phone from her ear to make sure it was still connected. The numbers clicked forward, stating the call was ongoing, so she placed the phone back to her ear.

Hardesty began to speak.

“You want me to tell you that’s true, but I don’t have answers, Danielle. I got a truck that went by about the time Jonathan went missing. We looked into that one and ran into dead ends. Paid for in cash, unregistered. No clue who sold it or who even bought it. One of the two witnesses to see it was Trevor Dresden, who admitted to getting into a fight with Jonathan just before they supposedly split ways.”

“What are you telling me?” Danielle asked. Somehow, she knew she wouldn’t like it.

Hardesty paused for a long moment. “Look, I’m pretty certain we’re looking for a grown man.”

“Pretty sure?”

“Remember I told you about the DNA we had? How we ran it?” Hardesty asked.

Danielle’s breath stuttered. “Yes.”

“What I didn’t tell you is that some of the samples that came from Jonathan’s clothes, under his nails, belonged to Trevor Dresden.”

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HER FINGERS TREMBLED as she dialed Trevor's number. Trevor's DNA under her brother's nails . . . Chief Hardesty's statement did not reassure her.

Nor did the fact that Trevor now worked for her father. She was still creeped out by their exchange the day before—by the mess Hank had made of her mother's belongings.

She didn't know what she expected but it wasn't the deep, firm voice that answered the phone. She stumbled, almost hanging up, before she croaked his name.

"Who is this?" he asked sharply.

"I, uh . . . Danielle. Danielle Patterson. Um, I mean. Foster. Jonathan's sister."

There was a slight pause. She held her breath. Why had she agreed to this? Meeting Trevor was a *bad* idea.

"Danielle." The way he said her name—almost on a sigh—caused a tremor through the arm that held the receiver as if he'd reached through the phone to cup her cheek.

No, there wasn't anything beneath his tone—he didn't care about her. Trevor only called her because her father asked—forced—him to.

"I'm sorry t-to bother you," Danielle stuttered. "I shouldn't . . . that is . . ."

He rescued her. “No, no. Of course. I’m so glad you finally called.”

“Finally?”

“I ask your father about you often,” he admitted, his voice strained. Was it with chagrin or impatience? “But he said you weren’t interested in ties to Mansfield.”

“I’m not sure that my father would know what I’m thinking or feeling. We aren’t close.”

Such an understatement. Hank planned to destroy her mother’s journals. Danielle was sure of that. Just as she was sure Hank was using Trevor as part of his strategy—as Chief Hardesty suggested. But Danielle was not her mother.

A fire built in her belly, one of anger and daring and something more, deeper. Uglier. The beast clawing up and out drove her to say, “I’m ready now. Could we talk?”



That night, Danielle told Garrett she would be meeting Jonathan’s friend. He looked away from Kevin’s ball game, his eyes wide and startled.

“Um . . . I don’t get it, Dani. Why do you want to talk to this guy?”

“He talked to my mother off and on over the years. I know she told him about . . . about Jonathan’s murder.” She couldn’t bring herself to utter the words about her father, not here where other ears were so close.

Danielle scratched her bare arm. Garrett laid his hand over hers, stilling her raking motion.

“I get that you want closure and I even think it’s really noble to help out, but are you sure?”

Danielle hesitated. He stared at her in that unsettlingly calm way of his.

“What do you mean?”

“Chief Hardesty is using you,” he said with a sigh. “Your dad is trying to manipulate you. And now this new guy . . .”

Danielle jerked her hand back as she lowered her eyes. Garrett was right, much as she hated to admit it.

“I’m not sure,” Danielle murmured, unable to hold Garrett’s gaze. “I want to talk with Trevor tomorrow, see what he knew. He was there that day. He remembers.”

Garrett wrapped Danielle in his arms and kissed her forehead. “I’m worried about you. You’re not a detective—don’t have the training. That’s not a slight,” he said when Danielle opened her mouth to argue. “That’s me pointing out you have a degree in early childhood education. That you know how to deal with children and you’re one hell of a household organizer. But this is *murder*. Lives are at stake. And I don’t ever want to risk yours.”

Danielle touched his cheek. “Thank you. But I’m going.”

“I know.”

She turned back to Kevin’s ball game as she snuggled deeper into her husband’s arms.



“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Danielle asked the next evening as she stood in the empty room at the end of the hall of the Mansfield police headquarters. The building was made of white stone with a peaked entrance that reminded Danielle of a strip mall store except for the matching white stone plaque out front that read “City of Mansfield Law Enforcement Center.” The need to scratch her neck rose but she withstood the urge. The small recording device settled between her breasts, just above her bra line.

The tech strapping the recording device to her body didn’t even glance up. Thanks to an internet search, Danielle discovered Mansfield was much

larger than she'd expected and the police department now boasted a SWAT and K-9 unit in addition to its traffic and patrol divisions. The man attaching the device to her chest was with the investigative unit. He stepped back, patted her shoulder and said, "All set."

She didn't feel set—or settled.

Her nerves rose, making breathing difficult.

"We'll be there at the restaurant," the man said. He'd told Danielle his name and she felt badly she'd forgotten.

As Danielle drove to the café, jitters built in her belly. She brushed her hands down the fitted black pants she'd decided best suited the seriousness of the situation. Her loose sweater hid the wire and transmitter taped to her torso. The adhesive itched, but Danielle forced herself to ignore it.

"I hope this works," she muttered, mainly for the police department's benefit. "Because if I get busted for wearing a wire, I'm going to make a big scene."

She didn't receive a reply—that wasn't how this worked and she didn't have the desire to have an ear piece that Trevor might well notice.

With a deep breath, Danielle settled her engagement and wedding bands on her finger, wrapped her other hand around it, needing Garrett closer than the forty-five-minute drive across town. His concerns from last night rang in her ears.

Danielle was a housewife, like her mother. She didn't have any formal training, any idea of how to solve her brother's murder. She turned back toward her minivan, planning to drive home.

Another minivan drove past, two parents and three car seats blocking the kids' faces. Maybe they had boys in that car . . . maybe their child would be next if she chickened out.

Maybe . . . God, her worst nightmare . . . maybe one of her sons would be kidnapped, killed.

Maybe the killer would continue his vicious assaults on innocent lives whether she moved forward with helping Chief Hardesty or not. But Danielle could no longer take that risk. Learning more about Jonathan and his death made the whole situation more real. Seeing her father as her mother had—as Chief Hardesty did—made her unable to go back to *just* being Kevin and Reid’s mom, Garrett’s wife.

Straightening her back, Danielle closed her car door and crossed the parking lot. Trevor sat at a table tucked into a booth about halfway to the back of the room. Danielle recognized him from the picture on the AMEAC website. His thick strawberry-blond hair had begun to gray around the edges—a blurring that came with age. But his was the same hair from the baseball team photo Danielle had pulled from one of Jonathan’s boxes, the picture she’d found on his SMU Law alumni website.

She might be a housewife, but Danielle knew how to research.

The boisterous conversations and laughs drowned out her footsteps across the tiled floor. The wood laminate table held their silverware, a basket of chips, salsa and two large glasses of waters. She slid into the vinyl booth across from Trevor, who raised his head from the laminated menu, meeting her eyes with his light brown ones.

“Thank you for meeting me,” she said, her voice as businesslike as she could manage.

She tried not to stare at the man across from her, wondering just what his relationship to her brother—to her father—had been before . . . and was today.

He smiled a little, the creases at the corners of his lips reminding her that he was only months from his thirty-eighth birthday. Age sat well on him, cloaking him in an aura of success and a kind of muted self-confidence that further enhanced his strong jaw and broad mouth. His nose was long with a thickening at the bridge, but somehow that added to the attractiveness.

“I’m so glad we could meet, Danielle.”

His voice was smooth and easy filled with a twang on the vowels that reminded Danielle of his rural upbringing. Of her father. How was it that she didn’t know Trevor well yet somehow she was already an intimate part of his life? Details of their pasts entwined, and she guessed he wouldn’t share those details with a casual acquaintance.

“I was delighted when you called me back. I knew you were in Dallas, but I wasn’t sure you’d want to talk to me. Your parents were pretty clear you wouldn’t.”

Danielle jerked, nearly oversetting her water.

“When was the last time you spoke with my mother?”

He tilted that red-and-silver head at her, eyes focused on hers. His gaze traveled back up over her cheekbones, warming them before settling back to meet her eyes.

“December.”

Danielle’s stomach rolled and she exhaled in a quiet rush. “Those were some of her final good days.”

“Yes, your father told me about the memorial service. Nancy never told me she had cancer.”

Danielle took a small sip of her water, hoping to steady herself. Trevor was more urbane, kinder, than she’d anticipated. “No, she wouldn’t have told you. She didn’t offer much of herself.”

“Hard for you. I can see that.”

Danielle tapped the side of her water, trying to decide how much to tell him. *Get the information you want. You owe him nothing.*

“What were they—my parents—like before? When Jonathan was alive?”

The question tumbled out of her mouth. Not one she should care about, but she did.

He leaned his six-foot-one frame back against the chair. His eyes drifted over her shoulder, and he squinted a little.

“He—your dad—was fun, laughed at our antics and with us when we told silly boy jokes. He worked as legal counsel for the town, did some other work for the school district.”

Danielle nodded, her throat constricted. *More. Tell me more.*

“He was always home for ball practice. He was the assistant coach, my dad the coach. They enjoyed each other’s company, drank beer together on the weekend after our games.”

He paused to take a sip of water. He continued to stare at the glass after setting it down, drawing his finger down through the drops of condensation forming.

“Your mom was a mom. I mean that in the best sense of the word. She was home, she made cookies for after school, made sure we got home or to wherever on time. I knew there’d always be a hug for me if I showed up; she’d ask about my day as she handed me a cold Coke. She let us run wild in the backyard, war whooping through her flowerbeds and throwing rocks at the squirrels in the trees.”

A pang hit Danielle. Her mother had once been the woman Danielle strived to be now.

“The only time she ever got angry was when we did something idiotic that could have hurt us or you.” He turned his face back to Danielle’s and smiled the kind of smile typically saved for a funeral.

“She loved you guys. It was so obvious even to me at four, seven, whatever. I wished my mom wanted to be home with me like your mom was. But my mother worked, liked being a career woman. As much as any small-town nurse can be, I guess. She loved getting up and dressed and leaving me for someone else to deal with.”

Danielle kept her fists closed in her lap. “Even after Jonathan was taken?”

He inclined his head. "Even after Jonathan died."

"Dad was so busy . . . he was an attentive father?" Danielle waited, watching his eyes warm as he nodded.

"He's a good man. My father said it all the time. That, and it was a damn shame what happened to Jonny and your folks." Trevor leaned back, his arm across the back of his booth seat.

"The eighties were a different time. Up until Jonny's disappearance. None of the parents worried much about us roaming the town, playing ball in the park. No one thought to worry."

"Tell me, please. What you remember."

Trevor sighed. "Old Man Framb was back in the feed store, talking to the owner when Jonny's killer grabbed him." Trevor paused. "I remember seeing him the week before. He tossed fifty-pound bags of feed into one of the big, dusty ranch pickups. I remember because I was surprised such an old guy could heft that much weight. That's why he was a suspect originally. Physically, he was capable."

Another pause, a long sip of water. "That day, as Jonny and I walked passed, Jonny wondered where his son, Leonard, was, and why Leonard didn't help Old Man Framb with the feed bags. Leonard was a Vietnam vet, POW. Came back state-side but went to the VA for months."

A smile slithered across his face, replaced by a frown.

"Jonny and I wondered what a V-8 was, but we didn't ask because we'd been eavesdropping on my parents' conversation. Everyone thought he was a little off. Your dad was one of the few who remained on friendly terms with Leonard. Said his weirdness, the standoffishness and even the strange staring wasn't Leonard's fault. The war messed him up."

"Anyway, you and your mom were in the grocery store. I know 'cause I came back with Phil Hansen—another one of our friends—to show Jonny my new bike while he gathered up his gear. I circled him, showing off. I finally had something Jonny didn't."

Trevor swallowed, waved the hovering waiter away.

“Jonny wanted to go to the batting cages that weekend. He was upset he’d popped up and lost our game. He figured your dad would take us because he needed to check on his folks’ house in Dallas. Your dad was starting to make some noise about moving there, tired of the small-town bullshit. Tired of being a small-town lawyer, I think.”

“He got his wish,” Danielle murmured.

Trevor’s eyes sliced into her, filled with questions, no doubt. Danielle sealed her lips, motioned Trevor to continue. Now wasn’t the time to go there . . . Trevor trusted her father, looked up to him.

Danielle would have to tread carefully through that relationship. She wasn’t sure she could navigate the deep trenches—how did one disabuse another of their hero?

Was it fair of Danielle to do so?

Great. Now she was worried over Trevor’s feelings, his needs.

She tried to close that part of her heart off, but it ached for the boy he’d been just as it ached for Jonny.

Some hurts are too deep.

Her mother had said that when Danielle asked about the picture of them—why it wasn’t out. As a mother herself, Danielle wondered how her mother had managed to keep going for so long.

The cancer, she knew, was a relief. Nancy closed her eyes that last time, ready to die.

But she left so much unfinished.

“I heard it,” Trevor said. “I was riding home, maybe a quarter mile down the sidewalk. Same side of the street. The truck door—*whack!*”

Danielle fell back against her chair on a long breath. “So, what’s good here?” she asked, opening her menu, needing a break in conversation—a short distraction from the fear, the longing to change the past, building inside her chest.

“Dunno,” he replied. He looked around, tension tugging at his mouth. “I tend to avoid this part of the Metroplex.”

The waiter came back and took their order. Danielle’s gaze swept the room and her stomach quit rolling when she saw the two officers, in plain clothes, at a table kitty corner to hers. The stouter one caught her eye and adjusted his chin downward just enough for Danielle to know he was paying attention.

She picked up the menu and released a slow breath.

“Did you ever want anything different? In your life, I mean. Want it to go differently?” Trevor asked.

“Yes.”

“What? A bigger house? A better-looking husband?” A small, fleeting smile drifted across his lips, but his eyes remained focused on her face.

Danielle cursed her fair skin as she felt the heat creep up her neck. She folded her hands on the edge of the table.

“A chance at normalcy,” Danielle said, meeting his gaze, holding it so that he could see the sincerity there. “I wanted to be like my friend Tamara. Sure, her parents were divorced, but she lived with her mom who drove her to her dance performances and made sure she had lunch money. Those may seem like simple, even silly details. My grandmother did them when I was young. When Grandma died, what little normalcy in my life disappeared. I don’t want my sons to have to live without that.”

“That’s it? Normalcy?” Trevor leaned back against the booth. The vinyl squeaked as he shifted.

The past anger at this man—the reason her mother fell apart, the man she called *bastard*—bubbled back up, and the words seeped from her mouth. Words she’d never shared with anyone. Ever.

“You want to know how bad it got after we moved to Dallas? Each trigger was worse, and my mother spiraled down further than ever before. You’d think there’s a bottom. There isn’t. When my grandmother died, I

didn't notice Nancy's problems for a few weeks because I coped poorly with Grandma's death myself. Dad lived in his apartment at this point, so there was no one to monitor her pills."

Trevor leaned forward, but Danielle was on a roll now. She steamrolled over his "Danielle." He wasn't there; he didn't know.

"She OD'd twice—had to have her stomach pumped the second time—but pulled it together for a few months. Then my father had a heart attack, and we sat in the waiting room with Janice, his then-secretary-slash-screw-buddy."

Trevor's eyes widened just a small amount. Satisfaction surged through Danielle. She'd shocked him. Good. He deserved to know her father was selfish, and that Danielle knew how to handle herself in the world.

The thrill of tarnishing his image of Hank was cruel, but Danielle couldn't let him think that was all of it. She continued, her fingers toying with the paper from her straw.

Danielle let the silence build; she was in the driver's seat, giving him a close-up look at her childhood.

"He doesn't plan to attend my mother's memorial service." She raised her eyes. "My father. And he's too busy to deal with her house—his family's house—so I get to handle those details, too." Danielle swallowed. "I'm having her buried here, in Mansfield, next to Jonathan."

As she said the words, they felt right. She straightened. Well, okay then. That's what she'd do.

"Wait. He told you he won't help you with any of that? He's not planning to go to his own wife's service?"

"You still don't get it," Danielle said, shaking her head. "He *left me* with her when I was two years old. The night Jonathan died. End of story."

Trevor drained the margarita the waiter had just sat at his elbow. Danielle felt the first pangs of sympathy. Trevor held her father up on a

pedestal, maybe an even higher one than her mother and she just smashed that beautiful, gilded ideal to the ground.

“This isn’t fair to you.”

He snorted. They sat there for another minute, staring at each other. Danielle scratched her neck. As a child, she was quiet out of fear. As an adult, she’d realized strength sometimes meant keeping her mouth shut.

Trevor’s gaze never wavered from her face. “Finish the story.”

Danielle dropped her eyes to the table, her cheeks heating with nerves but also with embarrassment. Trevor splayed his fingers on his side of the table, three feet of space wider than the Grand Canyon.

“Not much else to tell. The household I grew up in was not the house—the family—you knew and yearned for.”

“You felt betrayed,” Trevor said. “By them both.”

Danielle snorted. “I was forced to grow up. I wasn’t ready.”

“I’m sorry . . .”

“That you asked?” Her laugh was brittle.

Trevor sighed, running his hands down his suit jacket before buttoning the two buttons there. “No. That you had to live through that. The woman you speak of wasn’t the woman I knew, Danielle. She seemed so strong, so capable of handling every trial, working through her grief and mine.”

Here was the opportunity. “And my father?”

Trevor tugged at his lip. “He wants me to take over AMEAC. He told me thirty years is long enough. In March, I’m stepping into the chairmanship. He’s in the process of handing over the day-to-day activities to me. That’s the plan we developed when I came on board.”

“Has he cleaned out his office then? Already on the golf course?” She tried to keep her voice calm. Trusting Trevor with her secrets, with her fears, proved difficult. Or maybe stupid. He was, after all, her father’s protégé. She’d known this and she’d kept talking.

Trevor laughed a little, but his eyes were still dark, his pupils dilated. “Nah. Hank isn’t one to give up or out early. He’ll be in the office giving me hell every day for weeks yet, maybe years.”

Meeting Trevor had been foolhardy. So much for hoping her mother told Trevor her fears. As far as Danielle could tell, Trevor knew nothing that could help them solve Jonathan’s murder—and was opposed to Danielle even trying.

“I hope that goes well. Thanks for meeting me but I’m not hungry,” Danielle said. She stood, dropping some bills on the table.

Trevor nodded, absent-mindedly, when Danielle rose from the booth and headed toward the front doors. She paused, her heart racing when, when she glanced through the tinted glass in time to see a gray hybrid SUV pull away from the curbside to-go order parking spot.

She blinked, unsure . . . possibly caught up in her past . . .

The man in the driver’s seat looked like her father.

No, she realized with a gurgle of fear lashing up from her midsection. The man was her father.

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DANIELLE FUMBLED to pull out her phone and snapped a rapid set of pictures, all while her heart continued to gallop in her chest cavity. If that was Hank . . . well, what did that prove?

She climbed into her minivan just as Trevor walked out the doors. Their eyes caught, held. Danielle held her breath, wondering if Trevor would approach her again.

She released the pent-up air, swaying slightly from lightheadedness, when he turned away and headed toward his car.

She rubbed her damp palms up and down her chilled arms. The officers who'd been in the restaurant pulled up beside her in a beige sedan.

"You okay?" the one nearest her asked.

Was she? Mansfield held more than just the memories of Jonathan's murder. Something about her presence seemed to ripple through the air, causing a faint rumble at the very foundations.

"I will be," Danielle murmured. She glanced over. "Do you know if you guys got all that—what Trevor and I said—on tape?"

The driver leaned forward so that Danielle could see his face. Sharp jaw, almost a cruel line to his mouth. "We got it."

"All right. Well, I'm going home."

"We'll escort you."

Danielle shivered, considering the car she thought held her father and the look on Trevor's face when he met her gaze through her windshield.

"I'd appreciate that," she said.



Danielle sent the photos to Chief Hardesty's email address as soon as she set her car in park. He called her moments later.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"I've been better. Lots better." She gripped the steering wheel in a tight grasp as her heart rate once again skyrocketed. "Why didn't you meet with him?" Danielle asked.

"Could have," Hardesty said. "He might've told me. "I got a feeling he'd spill way more to a pretty gal like you than he ever would tell me, especially now that he's working for your dad."

Danielle glared at the front of her garage, wishing the chief could see her displeasure.

"What's your deal with my dad?" Danielle asked. She rubbed her fingertips against her forehead, much like she was trying to work out a headache. "Why don't you like him? I mean, do you know something—something I should? Was that . . . was that his car tonight?"

“IT WAS,” Arlen said. “We think he was checking up on you.”

For what purpose, Arlen wasn’t quite sure. He stared down at Nancy’s journal, which lay open on his desk. He’d gone through another four today. Still nothing of interest—at least as it pertained to the case.

Oh, Arlen had learned much about Hank’s ambition. He’d read, over the pages, as Nancy fell slowly out of love with her husband. At times wrenching and others angry, Nancy’s writings gave a deep insight into her relationship with Hank.

Unfortunately, none of it was evidence. Arlen needed a smoking gun.

He needed a motive. The note about Rusty’s Trucks was helpful, but Arlen needed more than a breadcrumb to follow.

He wanted to nail the SOB who’d done this more than he’d wanted to close any other case in his career.

His calendar mocked him. As of today, four weeks until retirement. Four measly weeks to seek justice.

Arlen pinched the bridge of his nose.

Much as he hated to tell Danielle the truth, she needed to know what they were dealing with—she’d guessed but hadn’t asked outright. He understood because the reality was too disturbing. For years, Arlen worried the man who killed Jonathan was a serial killer. One who preyed on little boys.

Arlen rubbed his fingers over his tired, bloodshot eyes. This was his first case in more than ten years. He wondered again if he should hand it over to one of his detectives. He'd considered it, for both his sanity and his wife's.

But he just couldn't. This case . . . it ate at him. Always had.

"I've let my counterpart up in Dallas know about the situation. We're going to do what we can, Danielle. Right now, that's all I can offer."

Not enough. But then, in this situation, it never had been.



Hardesty settled his bulk into his chair early the next morning. He logged in to his computer and took a deep sip of his coffee. He'd made it through another two journals last night. More ramblings. On some level, Arlen felt like a voyeur, going over every one of Nancy's penned thoughts. But she'd wanted him to have the books. Wanted him to read them.

He called the number his secretary had left on his desk, her handwriting only slightly more legible than his.

"Hello?"

"Hey, there. I'm looking for Rusty Williams."

"Speaking," the voice said, but suspicion laced his tone.

"Well, now, I'm looking for the Rusty Williams that owned Rusty's Trucks."

"Oh," Rusty Junior said. "That was my dad."

Arlen's mouth turned down at the word *was* but he asked, "He around?"

"He died ten years ago," Rusty Junior said.

Dammit. So far, Arlen had come up with nothing.

"How long did he run the car dealership?"

Junior laughed, a deep belly guffaw. "Weren't a dealership. Just old beaters that needed to be in the junkyard. I own that," Junior said, pride

puffing his voice and probably his chest.

“But you sold the truck part?”

“Naw. Shattered it. Actually, my dad did. Came home from the junkyard one day real pale. Said a lady, a pretty lady came by to see him, asking about his trucks—who he sold ’em to.”

At this Arlen’s heart began to pound. His face burned hot and he tried to take slow deep breaths like his doctor showed him to do when his blood pressure was on the rise.

“When was that?” Arlen asked.

“Oh . . . I don’t know. Maybe five, six years before he died. Who’d you say you are?”

Arlen looked down at the date on the journal entry. It matched Junior’s recollection—from sixteen years earlier.

“I didn’t. I’m Chief Arlen Hardesty of the Mansfield Police Department. I’m looking into that case—the one with the pretty lady. Her name was Nancy Foster.”

“Huh. I don’t like cops.”

Most people didn’t and not just those who had something to hide. These days, it was hard to flip through the news on those social sites his son and daughters liked so much without reading about a cop killer or some other horror. Arlen hung his head, wishing more people believed in his profession as he did. He’d always seen himself as a protector of his community. One of the good guys. Most were. Arlen had to believe that.

“Can you tell me anything else about that lady or what your dad said?”

“Not much else to tell,” Junior said. His words were more clipped, careful. “Dad looked real blue, said the lady showed him a picture of a truck that’d been used to kill her boy.”

Arlen tapped his pen on his large, yellow notepad hard enough for the cap to fly off. It clattered across his desk before rolling to the floor. “He tell you the guy’s name who bought it?”

“Naw. Just quit selling trucks and retired. Drank a lot and looked a bit peaked. Kinda wished that lady never stopped on by. He was happier afore that.”

Arlen knew that feeling. He thanked Rusty Junior and hung up.

He worked his way through some departmental issues, keeping an eye on the clock. After a bathroom break and another cup of coffee after his morning meeting, Arlen heaved a sigh of relief as his clock rolled over to ten.

Finally. He punched in the number. When the other man picked up, he said, “You get through?”

He’d had his son’s boss, a big shot lawyer up in Kansas City, call Hank Foster’s foundation. “Nope. Said he was out of the office.”

Arlen leaned back in his chair, wincing at his squeak. Yeah, those twenty pounds weren’t doing much for his health—or the lifespan of his chair.

“What about Trevor?”

“Also out of the office.”

Arlen needed to confirm that, which he’d do now. “Thanks, Jeff.”

“Any time. Though I do want to know why me calling AMEAC was so important.”

“Tell you once I know for sure.”

Jeff remained silent. “This a big case?”

“If I can prove it? Explosive.”

“Well, shit.”

Arlen hung up. His secretary needed him, then he had to deal with a shift dispute. Finally, he had another free minute, and he dialed the AMEAC line and waited to be connected to Trevor Dresden’s office. Might as well fish for information there first. A nice young woman picked up the phone.

“Hey, there, Fiona. My name’s Arlen Hardesty. I’m an old friend of Trev’s.” Sort of true. “I’m gonna be in town this afternoon and wanted to know when was a good time to stop by.”

Not true at all.

“Oh! I’m so sorry he’ll miss you, Mr. Hardesty. Mr. Dresden took the afternoon off for a funeral. Close family friend.”

“You know who that is? ’Cause that’s why I’m in the area. To visit with the Foster family.”

“Mr. Dresden planned to attend Nancy Foster’s funeral, sir.”

“Doesn’t that start at six?”

Arlen glanced at the clock. Three thirty. No need for the men to leave work early.

“I don’t know, Mr. Hardesty. Mr. Dresden left before lunch.”

“Thanks for the information, Fiona. You’ve been very helpful.”

He dialed back through the main switchboard and got a hold of another young woman, Kara, who was Hank Foster’s secretary.

“Kara, I’m in a bit of a bind. I’m an old family friend of the Fosters—knew Nancy and Hank back when they lived down here in Mansfield. I needed to speak with Hank to get the details of Nancy’s funeral.”

“Mr. Foster isn’t available,” Kara said, her voice frosty.

“Well, now, that’s a shame. I’d like to pay my respects to Hank and Danielle. That family’s been through so much.”

“I wouldn’t know, Mr. Hardesty. I’d suggest you call back tomorrow if you’d like to speak to Han . . . er, Mr. Foster.”

The slip was small but it flustered her. Arlen’s smile held no humor. Seemed that Hank’s charisma hadn’t faded with the ladies over the years.

“I’ll do that, Kara. You let Hank know I called. We go a long way back. Over thirty years.”

“Of course.”

“And let him know I offered my condolences on his wife’s death.”

Kara made a noncommittal noise.

He hung up the phone.

Time to haul his ass up to Dallas to check in on Nancy's memorial service—and make sure both Trevor and Hank attended.

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HER MOTHER'S service that next Tuesday evening was short and spare; a single oversize floral wreath next to a blown-up photograph, causing Nancy's pores to appear grainy, her sad eyes seeming to watch each person who passed by it.

Trevor walked in and sat, head bowed in a chair in the third row to the right. Danielle made no effort to greet him.

Chief Hardesty stood in the back, his arms crossed over his thick chest, eyes assessing each person. He moseyed over to Trevor before he left, saying a few words that had Trevor's eyes dropping to his shoes.

Danielle inched closer to hear what they were saying. Trevor's gaze rose, raking over her with a sullen displeasure that caused her skin to prickle.

"I don't see why you have to look back into Jonny's death," Trevor muttered to Hardesty. "What the hell does this have to do with Hank?" Trevor stepped in, closer to Chief Hardesty.

"I asked him to reopen Jonathan's case," Danielle said.

Trevor's blue eyes seared her face. "Why would you want to open that type of pain back up to others? To me? Your father?"

"My mother knew more about Jonathan's death than she said."

Trevor's eyes widened, dilating so much that the blue dissolved into a dark abyss. Trevor turned to look out the window. Chief Hardesty shifted

his bulk, firmly planted between Danielle and Trevor. He shot Danielle a watch-yourself look.

She planned to.

“Don’t hurt your father like this, Danielle. I mean . . . your family was *perfect*. I wanted to be part of it. I wanted that more than anything.”

Danielle shook her head, motioning to the too-large, grainy photo of her mother and the mostly empty room. “Jonathan’s death destroyed whatever we had. I was too young to participate then and by the time I was old enough to remember, the tensions between my parents were high. My mother was a mess.”

“I just can’t believe that.” Trevor turned away, his back rigid.

“Trevor. I need to ask you something,” Danielle said, her palms wet and itchy as she rubbed them against her black wool skirt. She hated this dress, never wanted to see it again.

“I already told you what I know. The biggest takeaway was they never found out who did it.” Trevor slid his gaze toward Chief Hardesty, his eyes flinty and his tone hard, unforgiving. Chief Hardesty met Trevor’s glare with calm eyes.

Danielle knew—both from that look and from the reputation she read about on the internet—that Trevor was one of the most feared men in court. That ruthlessness would never bring Jonathan back. As Trevor’s gazes shifted toward the pretty bay window, Danielle knew that no matter how many criminals Trevor had gotten convicted he’d never be able to save Jonathan. Or the others before, but maybe they could save some now.

“Tell me about your fight,” Chief Hardesty said. “The reason Jonathan had your skin under his fingernails.”

Trevor blinked, his mouth dropping open in a silent o of surprise. He shook himself, returning to the calm, capable man he present to the world. “We talked about the coolest superheroes. I thought it was Flash, but Jonny was adamant that Spiderman was the best. We fought about it, yelling.

Came to blows. We rolled around in the dugout, the other boys egging us on.”

Trevor shook his head, eyes brighter. Neither of them mentioned that or the apparent thickening of his voice.

“You hit each other?” Danielle asked. Her own boys had never come to blows—she didn’t know how she’d cope should the situation arise.

“Knockdown, drag out. That was one of my very last interactions with my best friend. Us, beating the crap outta each other.”

Unable to take the pain in his eyes, Danielle touched his knotted fingers. The whiteness eased, and he linked his fingers through hers in a smooth, practiced gesture. He stood tall again, after a moment; an impressive form, supple and lean in his slacks and button-down shirt. Pent-up frustration and fear dried Danielle’s throat.

“You said my father wanted us to meet while you were in college.”

“Yeah,” he murmured.

“Did he ever tell you why?”

“Keeping it in the family.”

A shiver trailed lightly down her lower back, settling in the pit of her stomach. She glanced up at Chief Hardesty, who appeared to be calculating that statement.

“Keeping what in the family?” Danielle asked. “Why did he say that, Trevor?”

Trevor’s brows pulled low over his nose as if he’d never considered the question. “I don’t know.”



Danielle needed a moment after Trevor left. She scuttled to the ladies’ room and pulled in long, deep breaths while running the cold water over her wrists.

What the hell type of man was her father?

With each new revelation, Danielle became more disgusted. No wonder Nancy and Chief Hardesty didn't trust Hank Foster. He looked out for himself—period.

Garrett's family offered to follow her down to Mansfield for the internment of Nancy's ashes the next morning, but Danielle declined—why put these kind people through more?

They moved toward hall's exit with relieved sighs while Danielle waited for her father to appear.

He didn't show. Danielle hoped to feel relief at postponing the confrontation with him. Instead, anger licked up through her stomach.

She called him. He didn't bother to return it. She asked Garrett to detour past her mother's house, where his hybrid SUV sat in the driveway, the only light burning way up under the eaves.

Danielle's smile turned cold.

"He's too late."

Garrett glanced over at her, his eyes wide and startled. "I don't like whatever you're thinking," he muttered.

Danielle settled back in the passenger seat of the minivan. Kevin was engrossed in the iPad while Reid snoozed, his bright blond head resting on the side of his backed booster.

"Just that my dad is probably starting to freak out because he can't find those journals. I'm glad. He deserves the discomfort."

Garrett shot her a sharp glance. He turned back to the road as the traffic in front of him turned into a sea of red brake lights.

"You don't think he had something to do with . . ." Garrett trailed off, his mouth tight. He was obviously uncomfortable with even asking the question.

"Jonathan's death?" Danielle asked, her eyes never leaving the attic's glowing window. "Chief Hardesty said he couldn't have done it."

But Danielle wasn't so sure. The man's desire to find those journals seemed too intense for an innocent man.

"You're not going to do anything rash, are you?" Garrett asked.

"I'm not planning on it, no."

He shot a quick glance at her from the corner of his eye. "Why doesn't that make me feel better?"

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HER FATHER WALKED toward the cemetery's cobblestone path. The oak trees on either side of the stones made for a majestic entrance as did the wrought iron gates and the white angels trumpeting from the top of the white stone columns.

Hank seemed to pay no mind to any of the accoutrement that attempted to make the cemetery feel less depressing. Neither had Danielle, but for a different reason. She still couldn't believe her father dared show up here of all places a day late and without a phone call. From the bags under his eyes, she guessed he'd spent hours at her mother's house the night before and still came up empty-handed.

She'd waited between the cemetery and the parking lot, shivering in the shade of an old oak tree. She stepped out of the shadow and into his line of vision.

"Danielle," he said, voice laced with shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Just wanted to see if you'd ever actually show up to pay any kind of respect to the woman you married thirty-nine years ago."

He shoved his hands into his slate-gray dress slacks. "All right."

"You know, the one who bore you two kids and who you left alone when you forced her to move from her home to Dallas after the death of her son."

Hank pulled his hands out of his pockets and scrubbed them over his face, his palms rasping on the start of a beard. “I get your point. Missing yesterday was poorly done of me.”

“I don’t think you do understand how embarrassing that was. But it’s not like you’re going to tell me why you spent last night at Mom’s house instead of at the memorial service.”

He looked momentarily startled.

“We drove by.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You seemed pretty motivated to find . . . what did you call them? Childhood mementos? Look what you did to my mother’s room in your efforts.”

Hank’s chin fell toward his chest and he shut his eyes. He looked old, defeated. “You have no idea what’s going on, Danielle.”

“You’re right. Because you never bothered to talk to me.”

He spread his arms. “I’m here now.” His tone moved to belligerent—much as hers had.

“Oh? So you—what? Expect me to invite you to Kevin’s baseball tournament?”

Hank blinked, surprise stamped onto his features. “Your brother lived for that sport,” he muttered, his eyes darkening and focusing on some memory deep inside. “God Almighty, that boy loved baseball.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d hired Trevor Dresden to be your replacement?”

Hank’s eyes slid from hers. “Didn’t think you’d care. You don’t remember him anyway. He’s a helluva lawyer. Good boy, too.”

“I do. I remember playing ball with him after Jonathan’s death.” Danielle was shocked at the lie as it slid out. “Just like I remember Jonathan’s abduction.”

“But you were just a mite of a thing. You never mentioned anything till now.” He glanced around, almost as if he worried someone was listening in

on their conversation. Danielle wouldn't tell him he was right to worry—the Mansfield PD was listening right now.

She took a deep breath, trying to get her raging frustration back under control.

“You rarely asked me. My big brother was never mentioned. Ever.”

Hank's defeated look seemed to grow, making him appear older than his sixty-four years. “What is it you want to say, Danielle?”

“Maybe you could tell me why you were at the Mexican food restaurant the other night when I met with Trevor.”

Hank's gaze darted around and his skin paled, taking on a sickly pallor. “Some things are best left alone,” Hank said, his voice hoarse with some pent-up emotion Danielle couldn't place.

Danielle met his gaze with a stony look. “While I take the threat implicit in your words to heart, I'd really like to know.”

A fine tremor ran through Hank. “Opening this back up will only hurt you, darling.”

“I think I'm a better judge of what will hurt me than you could be,” Danielle said.

“You seem to think I never wanted to spend time with you,” Hank said, surprise lacing his words and widening his eyes.

“You weren't ever there,” Danielle said with a shrug. “That's a pretty good indicator of where I fit on the importance scale.”

“That's not right. I worked so hard to protect you.”

“From what?” She studied him for a long moment. “I guess I should ask, from who?”

By now, Hank had gathered himself and he smiled at her—the sly, patented one that got donors to open their wallets and probably got women to fall for him. That was so . . . ew. Danielle shuffled back a little, not wanting to be infected by her father's charm.

“Let’s talk about Kevin’s baseball tournament. How’s he doing? Get his batting average up over three hundred again?”

“Yes,” Danielle said. “It’s on Friday. In Frisco.” She rolled her lips into her mouth. Crap. She hadn’t meant to say that. She cleared her throat. “Those kids are regional champions.”

“Frisco, eh? I’ll see what I can do.” He tilted his head, gaze moving beyond her in that way that always left Danielle feeling insignificant. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to . . .” He gestured.

The anger at the ease with which he dismissed her bubbled up as he moved past her. She whirled around as she asked, “What do you know about Jonathan’s death?”

Hank paused midstep. He set his foot down as his shoulders tensed under his dress shirt. Danielle held her breath as her father faced her once more.

“Did your mother fill your head with her nonsense? Her damn journals.” Hank shook his head. “You found ’em; I’m guessing. Where’d she hide ’em?”

Danielle stared for a long beat, hoping to make Hank fidget. Didn’t work. “I never said anything about journals.”

Hank smiled as he shook his head. “C’mon, darlin’. We both know your mama was crazy. Why do you think I stayed married to her? I wanted to make sure she didn’t hurt herself too bad. She was a mess.”

“So that made it okay for you to trash her room looking for her personal thoughts?” Danielle asked.

Hank wrapped his fingers around Danielle’s arm. “You knew I was looking for them then?” Hank asked, once again his eyes flaring with surprise.

“No, I wouldn’t have known that. But apparently Mom did.”

“Where are they? Your house?”

Danielle's heart hammered so loudly in her ears she almost didn't hear Hank's words. "I don't have them," Danielle said. "Mom gave them to Chief Hardesty."

This answer seemed to surprise Hank to the point he loosened his grip. Danielle yanked her arm free. She hurried toward her car, opened the door, and slid in. She pressed the lock button, needing whatever protection she could get. She fumbled to stick the keys in the ignition, then she slid the car into gear, easing off the brake and rolling down her window.

"Never mind about Kevin's tournament. I don't want you there. I don't want you anywhere near my kids."

She peeled out of the parking lot, driving down a road blurred by her tears.

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HUNTER STEPPED out from the line of trees at the far edge of the plot where he'd been waiting. His thick-soled work boots made little noise as he worked his way toward Hank Foster, who stood, rigid, next to a freshly-dug small grave.

"Been a lot of activity here today," Hunter said, squinting into the sun as he turned in Hank's direction. "Who was the young gal?" he asked. "The one who don't have the journals?"

He crossed his arms over his thick chest, which was about half again as wide as Hank's. There was less sinew on those arms since he'd sold part of the family ranch to a housing developer for a seven-figure sum ten years earlier. Hunter hadn't changed much outwardly. He was wearing Dickey's coveralls over a faded, sweat-stained blue work shirt and Wolverines. His thick, tobacco-stained fingers twiddled absently in the breeze.

Hank's gaze rose, his eyes—those same broken eyes that had stared at him for three decades—lit with a fiery hatred he didn't like. Or deserve.

"Who was that woman?" Hunter asked.

"No one you need to think about," Hank snapped.

Hunter tucked his hands into his work coveralls. "Seems to me your conversation with her got you all het up. So, yeah, I will think on her."

Hank squeezed his eyes shut and Hunter nearly chuckled. He liked watching the big-time lawyer squirm.

“That’s my daughter. She’s upset I didn’t go to her mother’s memorial service.”

Hunter tucked that tidbit into his mind to chew on later. “Pretty woman.”

Hank clenched his fists. “Stay away from her,” Hank snarled.

“Or what?” Hunter said with a snort. He leaned in closer, close enough to see the flare of Hank’s pupil. “You gonna turn me in? Seems to me you’d do better to placate me.”

“I will,” Hank said, clenching his jaw so hard, Hunter heard his teeth crackle. “I swear to God I’ll turn you in before you hurt another person in my family.”

Hunter pressed his face in close to Hank’s, getting a thrill when the fancy-duddled lawyer stepped back.

“You got as much to lose as I do. Maybe more.” Hunter smiled. “Your job. Your reputation. Maybe even that whole foundation you worked so hard to build up on your son’s grave.”

“You are a sick fu—”

Hunter growled. “Watch it. I’m not interested in language, especially your vulgar vocabulary.” Hunter spat into the grass at Hank’s feet, pulled out a cigarette. He lit the end carefully before sucking a deep drag. “Now tell me all there is to know about this daughter of yours. From what I heard, she’s interested in her brother’s death.”

“It’s nothing. We’re not close.”

Hunter knew that and found it amusing that Hank lost contact with his daughter because of his ambitions.

Would have been better for Hunter if his dad paid less attention to him—he hadn’t been as lucky as Hank’s girl.

A gleam lit in Hunter’s eyes as warmth filled his chest. “She got kids? Any boys?”

Hank's face turned whiter than a new snow—rarity down this far south. But it also gave Hunter his answer. He'd heard it already. A baseball tournament. Frisco.

Hunter planned to be there.

Maybe there was a reason the hunger came back now. A way to keep Hank and his pretty little daughter in her place.

And out of his way.

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CHIEF HARDESTY CALLED Danielle on her way home, giving her an earful. “What were you thinking?” he boomed.

She wasn’t. Bottom line: she’d been scared and she’d just blurted out the very detail that might have helped them expose her father as the criminal she now worried him to be.

She touched her sore forearm, unsurprised to see the marks there. Hank had hurt her.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to get past her chattering teeth.

Hardesty remained quiet for a long moment. “It’s done. You stay safe, hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah, I will. But . . .”

“Jesus Christ in a peach tree. You do not know when to let the professionals do their thing. I cannot believe you went after Hank out there today. I did not authorize that.”

She shrank into herself a little with each of his words. She’d never expected her father to become so violent, so on edge. “I just thought . . .”

“What?” His voice was kinder than when he’d reamed her moments before. “Look. I don’t want anything to happen to you, you understand.”

“Y-yes. I really am sorry.”

Hardesty sighed. “Got any other plans I should know about?” he asked.

“Well . . .”

“Spit it out now. Better I know and can organize around you.”

“I thought I could contact my dad’s old secretary. His lover. As far as I know, his longest lasting one. He and Janice began their affair right after we’d moved to Dallas.”

Hardesty hummed into the phone. “Yeah. Let me check into her background. What’s her name?”

Danielle gave it.

“I want to make sure she doesn’t have a criminal history. I’ll get back to you by the end of day so we can coordinate.”

“All right.”

“Want me to talk to her?” the chief asked. “Save you the hassle.”

Danielle considered the offer. Her father spent hours of time with the woman—hundreds more than he spent with Danielle. Now, after her conversation with her father, that rubbed her wrong.

Like she’d misunderstood Hank Foster’s motivations. If anyone would know how Hank felt about the past, Janice would.

“No,” Danielle said slowly. “I’d like to talk to her. I mean, if that’s okay.”

“For now. Long as she checks out clean,” Hardesty said. He grunted. “I want to give this case my full focus but I’m splitting time and it’s not easy. I’d hand it over to one of my detectives, but I just feel like I need to finish it.”

“I appreciate that, Chief. I really do.” Though, Danielle wondered if a detective wouldn’t be better, too. Able to focus all his or her attention. Not that she was even sure that’s how a detective’s job worked. Maybe they had multiple cases going at once.

“If I give you the go-ahead on this, I want you to promise you’ll tell me the time and place you’re meeting.”

“You got it.”

“I’ll have an officer there. One of mine or maybe one from the Dallas PD if they can manage the personnel.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel better.”

“You know what would make me feel better?” Hardesty said. “You listening from now on.”

Danielle promised she would.



Chief Hardesty called her while she was making dinner. Since arriving home, she’d almost convinced herself the encounter with her father wasn’t as sinister as it had seemed then.

Almost.

Hardesty gave her the go-ahead to meet with Janice. He even provided Danielle with her current phone number, a courtesy Danielle appreciated. After thanking the police chief, she dialed the number.

“Hello?” the voice said. It was soft, friendly. Danielle’s ventral region seemed to hiccup then dance in self-recrimination.

“May I speak to Janice?” Danielle forced the words through her closing throat. This proved much harder than talking to Trevor.

The silence crackled, made Danielle’s perturbation palpable, a cold, sweaty gray-brown haze emanating from her mouth.

Then, “This is she. May I ask who’s calling?”

Danielle swallowed, the small amount of saliva choked her, causing her to hack before she could answer. Voice numbed with mortification, she said, “My name is Danielle Patterson. My father is Hank Foster.”

There was a long pause. Danielle waited for the click, anticipating Janice would hang up.

“I heard from someone at the foundation that your mother passed away recently. Cancer, wasn’t it? Condolences. I hated to hear that.”

The sincerity in Janice's words dripped from her voice, pulsing through the phone speaker and taking Danielle by surprise. What to say to the woman who cheated with her father?

"Thank you." The inanity almost made Danielle laugh. "I hoped you'd be willing to meet. For coffee or something. I'd like to talk to you."

Another hesitation. Janice must've been ruminating over Danielle's request, rolling there in the unlit space of telephone wires.

"When and where?"



The fresh, delicious scent of freshly brewed coffee struck Danielle as she opened the door. The place was mostly empty, which satisfied Danielle's semi-noire envisioning of their meeting: the once-young mistress seated, grilled by the self-righteous daughter.

But the music playing was quiet, introspective, and blew the mood. Some band Danielle never heard before.

Janice sat at a small table near the front, looking very like the image Danielle carried for the last fifteen years. A bit of gray crept through her wavy cloud of brown hair and her face was beginning to crease around her mouth, but her eyes were direct and friendly. Surprising.

Danielle settled into the chair across from Janice and rubbed her hands down her thighs.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Mrs. Granger."

Janice smiled. Her teeth flashed briefly, lighting up that freckled-visage and made her heart-stoppingly engaging. Danielle could see why her father had loved this woman; it would be difficult not to.

"Call me Janice, please. Married a decade, but I'm still not used to the 'missus' part. You turned into a lovely young woman. I knew you would be.

Your eyes are amazing. I told your father so. He worried as I'm sure most fathers do."

Danielle laughed. "There were a few years when I wasn't sure I'd turn out at all."

"Hmmm." Janice sipped her coffee, looking at Danielle over the rim of her cup.

"I think I'll order a drink," Danielle said, standing. Danielle forced herself to take a deep breath as she walked up to the counter.

Coffee in hand, Danielle returned to the table. She meticulously stirred in some cream. Tapped the spoon three times against the rim, and set it down on the chunky white saucer. Out of options to avoid looking at the other woman, she finally met Janice's eye.

"Didn't know you were in the area."

Janice tilted her head to the right, just a little bit so that brown hair spilled across her long, white neck. "Well, as you probably know, after Hank's heart attack, while the work remained vital, the place just wasn't the same. He soon found a new love, so I left."

Danielle forced her hands to relax their grip on the handle of her mug. "No, I guess it wouldn't have been pleasant to see the two of them together."

Janice stayed solemn, folding her hands neatly on the laminated tabletop. "Forgive me. I'm surprised you wanted to see me is all."

"I've thought about you over the years. Off and on," Danielle said, meeting Janice's eyes this time.

"And that was difficult. That's what you're not saying, right? I was the reminder for you that your parents didn't stay together."

"Look, this is getting away from me." Danielle took a deep breath, released it heavily. "Did my father ever mention Jonathan?"

"Ah." Janice shifted in her chair, more alert. "Yes, he did."

“I’m glad to know he had someone to confide in.” And Danielle was—because that meant she could now find out what was said.

“He never told me much—we didn’t discuss your mother,” Janice said with a deprecatory smile. “I didn’t want to hear about her. Call it jealousy if you will, but, now that I’ve looked back, I think I lacked the maturity to handle with my lover’s complicated past. And he did have quite a bit of baggage on those shoulders. Hank was so busy trying to save everyone else’s child, he forgot to take care of himself. Ninety-hour weeks and skipped meals were pretty standard for us then.”

Janice sighed, her eyes alight with the memories.

“He burned with this fire, an authenticity to him that isn’t easy to find. It took me a long while to do so.” Janice’s laugh was rueful, as rich and vibrant as she was. “I was also old enough to understand it would be better to have that drive tempered. Such ambition is what drew me to your father, but it ruined us eventually, as it did your parents.”

“My father didn’t ever say anything about that—about what tore my parents apart? About what happened between them after Jonathan’s murder?”

Janice drained her cup. “He so wanted to turn back time, as I’m sure everyone who loses a child does. When Hank spoke of Jonathan, it was halting, something he rarely did, if at all. There was more to it than he told me. Something about the way . . .” She paused, her lips pursed. “‘For the greater good.’ Hank said that often when he was neck-deep in work for the foundation, saving other kids. He regretted not being a better father.”

Heat surged through Danielle; she recognized it as anger at the depth of his betrayal. “He wasn’t one,” Danielle murmured. “Not to me. But that doesn’t matter now.” She hated the way her voice sounded. “I have two sons of my own,” Danielle said. “My youngest is just about Jonathan’s age now.”

“I want you to know that your father did help people. Statistically, the crime rates for abuse and murder fell six and three percentage points after AMEAC opened that shelter, and another two full points the following year. From there, we stabilized. Some years were better than others, but all in all, the rates never got back to what they were in 1983. That mattered a lot to Hank, as it did to me and the children he did help.

“I get calls occasionally. From some of the kids we took in. You must remember; this was before that Safe Place initiative. Our shelter was about the only place kids could go back then. I’ve received calls from four or five of the kids over the years, most from that first year or two, thanking me for getting them out of their destructive home lives. They’ve built better lives for themselves and their families now. One’s a state Congressman, and he helped draft the Safe Place bill.”

Danielle nodded, thinking back.

Janice pursed her lips, her attractive brown eyes losing their sparkle. “He tried, Danielle. He worked hard as a demon all those years—I’ve never seen someone work so hard—to make things better.”

Janice’s eyes were an echo of her belief in him, still, even after he’d dumped her for a younger, bouncier version.

Danielle’s hand tightened around her coffee mug. “I don’t think I need to go into detail over my family’s tragic missteps. You saw more than enough of them.”

Janice’s eyes darkened, became less friendly.

“I don’t mean to be rude.” Danielle sighed. “It’s just not going to change what happened. Yes, my father’s choices shaped a lot of who I am, and I am dealing with that. I’m *trying* to deal with that. That’s why I wanted to see if my father spoke to you about Jonathan. I want to know, but more, I want to leave it in the past, where it belongs. Then maybe he and I can reconcile.”

Janice stared at Danielle for a long time, clearly looking for something. Then she leaned down and pulled out a beat-up yellow envelope. Danielle's name stood out in thick block letters across the middle.

"I found these in your father's briefcase the night he had the heart attack. I told him he must have left his briefcase at the foundation. He'd just gotten to my place when his arm went numb. I put his briefcase in the same place he always left it the next time I was in his office. I smuggled it in, under my coat. He asked me about it on two occasions. I lied, of course. He'd left me for Christy by then so I didn't feel too bad about it."

Janice smiled a bit, not the bright grin she commonly flashed.

"He began to treat me differently, and I think he knew I kept these, though he never found them. And he did look."

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ANGER DIDN'T ENCOMPASS what Danielle felt. Janice had held this information for years, had never bothered calling Danielle, handing it over to the police as evidence. Danielle never knew it existed for sure. She snatched the envelope from Janice, clutching tightly.

Janice stood. "'For the greater good.' That's all I know about your brother's death. I made my decisions; now you'll make yours." Janice touched Danielle's clenched hand briefly. "I guess they denied you a normal life even as they tried to protect you from what they'd done, become. Don't destroy yourself and your family by not accepting the gift you have."

Janice's eyes were serious and sad, then she turned and strode from the building, her brown suede boots clicking in a rhythmic tenor that seemed to nip at Danielle as they touched the wooden floor.

Long after Janice left, Danielle stirred herself enough to order another coffee. Glancing at her watch, Danielle confirmed the time. Half an hour until she needed to pick the boys up from school. With hands that trembled, she turned over the envelope and slit the back in small, careful flicks of her finger. A single sheaf of paper was inside.

She fumbled to unfold the paper, her fingers stiff.

Voluntary stay in Houston VA for hallucinations. Log says he checked out the morning of March 28, but no one saw him from 10:00 p.m. the night before.

Her mother's handwriting—the page maybe ripped from one of Nancy's journals? Danielle stared at the words. Her father was never in the military, never went to Vietnam. He couldn't have been at the VA. From what Arlen Hardesty had told Danielle and what she'd seen from some of the pages he'd shared with her, Nancy always wrote the name of the person. And each of the pages was dated. This one read 1997. The year Danielle turned sixteen.

Danielle remembered her father coming to the house for her birthday. He'd called and asked her to go to dinner with him the night after her sixteenth birthday. Just the two of them. Something they rarely did together, especially since he'd moved out. Three miles down Central Expressway to an efficiency condo near what would years later become the booming Lower Greenville section of the city. Then, it was a small oasis of decency in what would become a funky and eclectic part of town. Her mother had kept trying to talk Danielle out of going.



“Why don’t we do something instead?” Nancy asked, a worry line marring her smooth brow.

“It’s just dinner, Mom.”

“I know. But . . .”

“And it’s not even my birthday. I told him I couldn’t go on Friday because I already have plans.” Danielle looked at her mother’s puckered face. “We are going to that funky French movie, aren’t we? I’m totally psyched about eating pizza while I try to read subtitles.”

Nancy smiled, but it wobbled. “Yes, we’re going. It won the Cannes Film Festival. I’m glad you’re interested in some culture. We haven’t traveled as I’d hoped.”

“So, anyway it’s just for dinner. I think Dad’s taking me to Landry’s or something.”

“You’re going out to dinner?” Nancy said.

“Yeah, you know Dad can’t cook.”

“And then you’ll come back here? Straight back, right? I’ll expect you by eleven.”

Danielle rolled her eyes. “C’mon, Mom, I’m going out with Dad. It’s not like it’s a date or anything.”

Her father knocked, as he always did, and Danielle found that odd. Then she remembered her mother had all the locks changed after he’d moved out. He stepped into the hall and the energy in the space dimmed, then hummed differently.

“Mind if I use the bathroom?” he asked. “And I’d like to pick up my Bible. The family one. Should be upstairs in that spare bedroom. I’d like to have it for my study group on Wednesdays.”

Mom followed him to the foot of the stairs, watched him enter that room. “Hey, Mom. Do these heels look alright?” Danielle asked. She stood near the coat closet, examining her feet.

Nancy glanced back at her from her spot at the foot of the stairs. “What?”

“These heels, do they work with this skirt?”

“They look beautiful, Danielle.”

“You didn’t even look at them,” Danielle complained.

She turned to face Danielle fully. She glanced at her shoes and then at Danielle’s skirt.

“Yes, they’re perfect. You look lovely.”

“I think I should change them,” Danielle said as she wiggled her toes a bit.

“They match nicely. I’m going to see what’s taking your father so long.”

Her mother turned back to the stairs when Dad started down the steps, taking them so quickly he nearly ran into Mom. “Got it,” he said, raising the thick leather-bound book in his hand.

“What’s the magic hour before you call the police?” he asked.

“Eleven.” Mom walked Danielle to the door and hugged her. She whispered in her ear, “I mean it.” She leaned against the doorframe and watched them walk to Dad’s car—a late model SUV. He’d bought it just a few months ago saying he didn’t need a pickup anymore, though Danielle couldn’t remember ever seeing him use the bed of his Chevy.

Danielle waved back at her mother, who was standing there, stiff form silhouetted, when her father pulled out of the drive.

The conversation was relatively ordinary; he talked about his work to save kids while he ate his steak. Danielle wondered if she was supposed to be impressed with the restaurant or his work.

Her father dropped Danielle off at 11:20 and all the downstairs lights were blazing. He hugged her and kissed her forehead before she opened the door.

“I won’t see you for a while. Gonna be real busy.”

“Oh.” Danielle’s shoulders fell. She’d had fun.

Dad stood there for another moment before turning on his heel and sauntering back to his car.

“You’re late.”

Danielle rolled her eyes. “I was with Dad. C’mon.” She sat on the stairs to take off her shoes. Her toes had started to cramp.

“There are things . . . you don’t understand.”

Danielle smirked up at her mother. “Then explain them to me.”

Nancy looked away and crossed her arms over her chest. “Not now. When I’m sure.”

Her father must have ripped this page from her mother's journal. Probably that very night—one of the few times he was in the house after their separation.

The other paper was tissue-thin and ripped from a Bible, presumably the one he'd insisted on getting that night. The page was titled "Isaiah." Hank had written across the top:

God has forgiven me my sins. Because of Jesus Christ, I am washed clean.

Beneath, he had underlined:

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The greater good, Danielle's ass.

What an absolute *jerk*. She huffed, then again as she stared down at the papers.

Her meeting with her father yesterday at the cemetery might prove pivotal to Hank's next action. She didn't want to wait to see. She wanted to confront him with the knowledge growing inside—a tumor more disgusting than any that ate away at Nancy.

Danielle reread the words, her ears roaring as she began to understand why her mother never wanted to talk about her brother. Why Nancy refused to spend time with her husband. Why Nancy's depressive episodes became worse in those months after Danielle's sixteenth birthday.

Nancy found the truth. Hank did not kill his son. No. He was too smart for that.

Yet. Yet...

Her father set up his foundation on his son's own blood.

HE FLIPPED through the pages first, noting that each was short—about a paragraph synopsis of people’s lives and their connection to Jonathan. Better than what most of his guys could do. Arlen pulled out his file on the potential suspects, scowling at the list. One of them knew something—probably was the murderer. Investigations had changed, thanks to DNA testing and cell phones, but if the police didn’t get on a kidnapping within twenty-four hours, forty-eight at most, the evidence started to dry up, disappear, making it harder to put together the motive and the person involved.

Still, Arlen felt certain he’d spoken to Jonathan’s killer. Happened way too often. But without proof . . . he was back at square one. For now, he compared Nancy’s notes to the meticulous ones he’d taken thirty years ago.

September 19, 1991

Hank liked to hunt. He and that Leonard Framb talked about the best way to hunt and kill deer at the Framb’s Christmas party just weeks before Jonny was killed.

Hank field-dressed a lot of deer over the years. He used to have a big buck knife.

Like the detective said was used to stab Jonny.

I can’t find that knife.

Arlen tapped his pen cap on his legal pad. *Hank liked to hunt.* That never came up in their interviews. Could have been because the FBI suit led the questioning and never bothered to ask that simple question.

Arlen and the suit had interrogated Franklin Framb. Leonard hadn't been in town then. Off visiting relatives, Franklin had said. Up in Tennessee, he'd said. His wife's family.

Arlen had spoken to Leonard about the case when he'd come back. Not that Leonard said much. A quiet man who'd gotten quieter after returning from Vietnam. Franklin was dead now and Leonard was nearing sixty.

Thirty years was too long to let a case like this molder.

He read through the next entry.

Franklin Framb. Rancher. Last seen at the feed store at the time of the abduction. Drove an old gray Chevy truck; there are multiples on the Rocking F Ranch. I didn't see the logo on the one that passed by while I waited for Jonny.

Could it have been painted over? Or scratched off?

Detective Hardesty said the model used to abduct Jonny was a '73. Framb trucks were purchased between '72 and '77. Physically, Franklin was capable.

Motive? The boys (Jonny and Trevor) pestered his son, Leonard, about his time in Vietnam. Franklin didn't like that.

But Franklin helped with the search.

Jonny was found in his pasture.

Danielle called. He'd planned to listen to her recorded conversation with Janice, Hank's former secretary, that evening. "I have something to give to

you,” she said without preamble.

“All right. Whatcha got?”

She blew out a breath. “It looks like it was yanked from my mother’s journal. One of them. Have you noticed any pages missing?”

“Not yet,” Arlen said. “I got about eight more to go.”

“Okay. Well, the page says, *Voluntary stay in Houston for hallucinations. Log says he checked out the morning of March 28, but no one saw him from 10:00 p.m. the night before.*”

Arlen narrowed his eyes. “Rusty’s Trucks is between Mansfield and Houston. Up in Humble.”

“What’s that?” Danielle asked.

“Up from Houston,” Arlen said, his tone meditative. “Hmm. That could’ve worked. Can you bring those papers by?”

“Tomorrow,” Danielle said. “Our oldest son has a baseball tournament tonight.”

Arlen smiled as he leaned back in his black ergonomic chair. “I remember those days. My son, Paul, loved being out there on the field.”

“So does Kevin. It’ll be a late night and tomorrow’s my carpool day. I’ll text you a picture. Oh, and I have a Bible verse. From Janice. She took it from my dad’s briefcase.”

“Interesting,” Arlen said. “Shoot that over, too. Might not be permissible as evidence, but then, I don’t know if it’s useful.”

“Why else would my dad take it?” Danielle asked.

“Don’t know,” Arlen said. “That’s why I want to see it. I’ll finish these journals up tonight. I want to see where the ripped out page fits in your mother’s writings.”

“Chief?” Danielle asked in a hesitant voice.

Arlen’s heart lurched. “Yep?”

“My dad . . . you’re sure it wasn’t him?”

PROVED easy enough to find out where Danielle Foster lived, who she married, the age of her boys. Hunter chuckled as he shook his head. Amazing what computers offered up these days.

A quick search on the internet gave him a whole lot of information—thanks, in part, to her husband’s open-access Facebook account. Why people would want to be on those types of sites was beyond his understanding. While Danielle had her account locked up tighter than a steel drum, Mr. Garrett Patterson dropped tons of pictures of his wife and a couple of cute boys. Even posted today about how excited he was to see his eldest—that pride and joy of his sweet little family—get the pitching role for the first game in a big tournament up in Frisco.

Hunter studied the photos of both boys. The younger, blond kid was awful damn small.

Slight. That was the word his mama used to use. A slight child.

Hunter curled his lip. He’d hated being called that.

He clambered into an old pickup he kept out in the back shed. He’d bought it for cash over in Arkansas about two years ago. He puttered down the road, keeping his speed a couple miles under the limit. Had to be careful since this baby wasn’t registered.

He rolled down the window to enjoy the late winter breeze. He patted the edge of the rusted and dented door, smirking a little. Not hard a’tall to

dump an old beater like this one. Just took a bit of planning.

Hunter was good at planning but also good at taking the moment as it came.

He'd see what was what and go from there.

He stopped at a light and glanced over, his smile turning down when he noticed a Mansfield police cruiser. Damn patrol would be out. Well, he'd keep it slow and easy.

Make sure he made it to Frisco in plenty of time to watch Danielle's boy pitch some youth little league.

Anticipation hummed through his veins as he entered the highway. Yep, today the hunger would abate.

And Hank Foster would remember how he'd set this whole set of events into motion.

He began to hum a Johnny Cash song.

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THE BALL FIELDS and surrounding metal bleachers were jam-packed with people. Kids yelled, crowds cheered and groaned. Danielle and Reid waved at Kevin, who looked determined and nervous as he took the field, his brown leather glove folded against his chest. Danielle pulled out a baggie of baby carrots and offered them to Reid.

“How much longer till his game starts?” Reid asked. Each time he inquired, his voice shifted closer to a whine. Hanging out, waiting for his brother’s best-of-three game to start wasn’t easy for an active six-year-old.

“Not too much longer. It’s already five. How about some Mad Libs while we wait?”

Reid’s eyes lit up. “Okay!”

She bent her head close to Reid’s as they worked on the next page in the book. Reid snorted as he answered the questions, getting a faraway look in his eyes as he thought of the most outrageous words possible.

“So, we have ‘A swan in Kalamazoo was arrested this morning after he hurdled in front of a tractor trailer.’”

Reid’s giggle fits grew louder as he nodded his head three times in a row. “That’s so funny.”

She leaned over and ruffled his hair. “Indeed, it is. Want to finish the page?”

But Reid's attention moved to a group of his friends running toward him from an adjacent ball field.

"Wanna come hit the ball with us?" one of the boys asked. Reid snatched up his ever-present glove and hopped from the bleachers. But before his feet hit the ground, he turned back to Danielle.

"That okay, Mom?"

"Of course, buddy. Have fun. And don't go—"

"Anywhere other than that field and never go alone. Got it." Reid dashed off with the boys before Danielle even said goodbye.

She settled back on the bleachers, looking at Kevin's serious expression as he listened to the coach talking to him on the pitcher's mound.

Garrett hurried over, his stride long. He settled in next to her. "Good. Thought I'd be late. I had to park back in Dallas, I swear."

Danielle smiled, but it faltered when she looked to the left and saw her father leaning against the chain-link fence down the first-base line. Her eyes darted over to catch Reid laughing, his pale hair glinting in the late-afternoon sun.

"I'll be right back," she said. Garrett nodded but he scowled when he followed Danielle's gaze.

"Want me to talk to him?"

Danielle shook her head. "Reid's over there; just keep an eye on him," she said pointing. Garrett nodded, his gaze landing on his younger son.

Danielle steadied her trembling legs, a hand on the metal bleacher, before heading toward her father.

"Why are you here?" she asked, her voice filled with the anger of their last meeting.

"You invited me."

Danielle crossed her arms over her chest. "Or you couldn't stay away from an event like this, so filled with new potential victims."

Hank tipped his head back in a sharp gesture. "What?"

Danielle moved in closer. “You heard me,” she snarled. “I know you were involved in Jonathan’s death. You may have slipped out of the FBI’s net, but I don’t trust you. I don’t want you near my boys. Ever. Again.”

Hank’s lips firmed into a thin, narrow line, his mouth all but disappearing from his face. He dropped his gaze to the ground, showing Danielle the graying, balding crown of his head.

“You hate me,” he muttered.

A rising wave of noise came from the field behind her as the kids’ started their game. Parents and siblings cheered and clapped, leaning closer in their metal seats to get a better look at the first pitch.

Danielle’s anger spent and a wave of exhaustion hit her. She wanted to watch her son’s game, to participate in his victory or his loss. She wanted to let go of her father’s ugly past, cut all ties with the man who, at best, exploited his own son’s grisly murder.

“What’s to like?” Danielle shook her head, her disbelief stronger than his conviction in himself. “You’ve lied and cheated and hurt innocent children my whole life, all while professing to do something noble.”

Hank opened his mouth, snapped it shut. His jaw clenched and he met her gaze with an angry, defiant one of his own. “I’d never hurt a child, Danielle.”

Her laugh was caustic and short. “That’s where you’re wrong. You hurt me every day of my childhood. And you knew something about Jonathan.”

Hank met her glare, his face filled with a sadness she never expected. “I tried to protect you.”

Danielle shook her head. “You left me alone with a woman who couldn’t take care of herself. *You left me.*” Danielle let go of the fence and stepped back, away from the man who should have offered her comfort, listened to her stories at dinner, taught her to drive. “And you stole Mom’s journal entry—the one you felt somehow implicated you.”

None of those actions were to protect Danielle.

“Just go,” she said, weariness causing her shoulders to sag. “I don’t want to see you again.”

“Where is it?” he asked, urgency riding his voice. “The journal entry? What did you do with it? How did you get it?”

The bat cracked against the ball and the crowd cheered. The small figure in right field darted forward to pick up the rolling ball.

Danielle’s smile was not friendly. “I don’t have it anymore. Neither does Janice.”

Hank’s shocked expression morphed quickly into anger, then something darker.

“You can’t hide from your actions, Hank.” Danielle turned away, but Hank caught her arm in a bruising grip, his urgency transmuting through her skin, causing her to shiver.

“You don’t know what you’re doing—what you’re setting in motion.”

“Actually, Hank, I know exactly what I’m doing.” She wrenched her arm free and tilted up her chin. “I’m cutting ties with the man responsible for my brother’s death and my mother’s years of unhappiness.”

“Danielle!”

She turned her back on him and hurried away. Garrett was no longer seated on the bleachers. Danielle’s heart rate shot upward as she lifted up on tiptoe, trying to find him. He sprinted past where she stood, down to the next field. He waved his hands, obviously agitated as he talked to the boys Reid had been playing with.

Her father no longer stood at the fence line—she caught the back of his head as he jogged toward the parking lot. Danielle ran toward Garrett, who looked ready to bolt, tugging at his hair.

“What’s wrong?” Danielle gasped, out of breath.

Garrett’s eyes were wide and reddened, his face ashen. “Reid’s missing.”

No. Danielle wanted to make the word push past her lips, but it hovered there. Reid, her baby. Her baby who she'd let play with his friends, running between the fields while she and Garrett watched the game. Garrett couldn't hold her gaze, straining, frantic, searching. Searching for their son.

"Reid?" Danielle asked, her voice thin, high, frightened. Not her voice. Perhaps the same one her mother used as she called for Jonathan.

"A man. I think he grabbed him," Garrett said, his voice raw and his eyes wild. "I didn't see. I didn't. Reid's missing."

"Reid?" she cried again, her voice stronger. Instinct directed her to the left, caused her to crane her neck and run . . . search for her baby.

"Reid," she screamed, louder than she'd ever yelled.

"What's going on here?" A man caught her arms at her biceps, swung her around to face him.

"M-my son," Danielle huffed, sobbed. "M-my son is missing."

Oh, God. The pain. Her heart, her head, filled with images of Jonathan's death—what it could be.

No.

NO.

"Reid?" she called again, straining to look around the man, look toward the parking lot. They'd have to go there—more cars were parked beyond. It was Friday night—cars pulled in and doors slammed. People laughed.

Laughed.

Her son was missing.

Danielle tried to dart around the man; she needed to find her son. Garrett was in the parking lot now, running between the rows, calling.

The man in front of her placed his hands on her shoulders. He wore blue. Had a badge. An officer. She focused on him.

No, he wouldn't help. Not as fast as Chief Hardesty. She fumbled in her pocket as the police officer tried to talk to her, tried to gather information. She found Chief Hardesty's number.

"My son," she cried into the phone as soon as Arlen rumbled out a polite hello. "Reid is missing. From the baseball field. My father was here . . . my father," she moaned.

The officer shook her, speaking but Danielle couldn't focus on him.

"Jesus H. Christ. You sure?" Hardesty barked.

"He was playing on the field next to us. I went to talk to my father, to ask him to leave. Now Reid is gone. Garrett said . . . we can't find him."

"Son of a bitch," Chief Hardesty mumbled.

The idea of history repeating itself was something Danielle furiously disavowed, even in her head. By not letting the past touch her, grip at more than the edges of her consciousness, Danielle tried to pretend it had never happened, that nothing would happen to her child. Jonathan's murder had been a random, violent act.

That's what she'd told herself.

She'd lived in a bubble of false security for years. Only Danielle *knew* it was false, which made it that much more tenuous and precious.

"He's gone."

"We need to talk to Hank. Pronto. Faster we get information, better chance of finding Reid."

"What do I do?" Danielle cried.

“Get them to shut down those games. Code Adam. Tell the police there it’s a Code Adam.”

The police officer stopped shaking her when Arlen’s words floated through the airwaves, reaching him.

“Code Adam?” he asked. “Who are you talking to, miss?”

“Who’s that?” Hardesty asked.

“A p-police officer.” Her teeth chattered.

“Put the man on the phone, Danielle. Now.” Hardesty used his bossiest voice and Danielle complied, too dazed and scared to do anything but obey.

The officer asked a few questions, listened intently. He spoke into his walkie-talkie attached to his shoulder. It crackled. Voices rose from it. In the distance, sirens wailed.

Code Adam.

Danielle’s knees gave out. Garrett caught her, wrapped her in his arms. She clutched at him, using him as a lifeline.

“He’s not in the parking lot. He’s not there, Dani.”

Oh, God. Reid.

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THOSE FIRST FEW hours would prove the most critical. Arlen sprinted toward a city cruiser, still talking to the patrolman on Danielle's phone.

"You sure it's the same guy? A serial killer?" the younger man sounded skeptical.

Like Arlen would make up something so heinous. "Son, I've been doing this longer than you've been alive, I reckon, and I'm going to tell you right now to get your ass in gear and help me save that little boy. Yes, there's been a serial killer working in the region, murdering boys. Stabbing them. I've seen it and it's damn ugly. Ugliest thing you've ever seen."

"Um . . ."

"You listen to me, son. He's got mere minutes on us right now—he always drives an old pickup. Chevy or Ford. You get out an APB and shut down those games. Get those other kids with their parents pronto. Hear me?"

"Yeah." The patrolman swallowed in a loud, reflexive attempt to process Arlen's words. "Yeah, I heard you. I don't have that kind of authority. I have to get an okay from my boss, my precinct."

"I give you the goddamn permission, and I'll deal with the consequences," Arlen barked. He started the car and flipped on the flashers. The sirens wailed. "Get those kids safe and get more officers there. ASAP."

"Yes, sir."

“I’ll call Danielle back. You let her know I’m coming.”

“Yes, sir.”

Arlen hung up and tore out of the parking lot. Even with his lights and sirens, getting up the snarled, bumper-to-bumper highways would take too long. Way too long.

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THE KID SNIVELED. The boys always whined and cried and asked for their mamas. Hunter smirked. Never did them one lick of good, and it was such an unattractive quality in them. Made Hunter want to touch 'em less. Made killing them easier.

“Where are you taking me?” the boy asked.

“Somewhere fun,” Hunter answered as he turned onto Coit Road, which would take him north, farther outside this new city’s limits and into pasture land. Well, once he passed on through Prosper, the next new city in this area. Goddamn towns popping up faster than army barracks in the jungle.

After Prosper, he’d clear out of the populated area and turn on a back road. Always head toward the land—that’s what he’d been taught back in Nam. Away from potential threats. To the quiet.

Didn’t always work out so great back in that godforsaken jungle. He’d lost his lover there. Barely legal—some said years from being legally old enough to fight—young Jackson was supple and smooth, always quick to laugh and kiss. Hunter had loved him, felt free with him--planned to build a life with him.

Until that Viet Cong piece-of-shit blew Jackson out of the rice paddy and straight to hell for loving Hunter back.

Sick freak.

No, Hunter wasn't. He was a man. A real man—tough enough to slaughter the commie enemy and animals he killed. Tough enough to resist the urge to touch little boys.

"I don't wanna go," the boy responded. Hunter had heard the boy's mama scream his name as Hunter carried him, hand over the boy's mouth, to his car. Reid.

Cute name. He glanced over at the boy. Cute kid. Looked like her—rosy cheeks and bright hair. If he'd have liked girls, he'd have gone for one like Danielle Foster.

Would have made his father proud of him.

But he was a man. A strong man who never gave in to those urges.

"You'll like it. It's the woods."

"No. I don't want to," the boy screamed, his face turning such a bright red, Hunter felt the first inkling of concern.

Most of the time he was around kids, they feared him. At least stood in awe of him. From what he'd observed of this one, the boy was quiet, more of a follower.

"I don't want to be here!" Reid screamed again. He clawed at the door.

Hunter yelled, "Hey, now!" as he lunged toward Reid.

Taking his eyes off the road proved a mistake. An SUV slammed against the driver's side door, crumpling the old, damaged sheet metal and shoving the interior into Hunter's leg, pinning it between the edge of the vinyl bench seat and what was left of the door's interior.

A sharp pain was followed by a runnel of blood down his thigh. The hurt didn't dissipate. Hunter swerved away from the SUV, cursing.

Reid managed to get the door open. Hunter had slowed down some, not enough to make it safe, and the kid stared at the ground, his face once again pale, almost peaked. His red T-shirt was rumpled and tears streaked down his cheeks.

Hunter leaned over again, ignoring the pain in his thigh—not too deep, he’d bet. And yanked Reid’s blond hair, hard. The boy fell back onto the seat with a scream. Hunter couldn’t reach the door.

“Don’t—”

The SUV came at him again, faster and harder.

As metal ground against metal in a shrieking blast, Hunter gritted his teeth at the deepening wound just above his knee. Best guess, the old upholstery gave out and one of the rusted springs was now jammed deep into his thigh muscle.

Hurt bad now. Like a knife wound.

He chuckled darkly.

“The lawyer finally found his balls,” he growled.

He turned his wheel, trying to press back against Hank’s vehicle. Blood trickled from his thigh onto his jeans, widening into a sticky puddle. The wound, its discomfort, infuriated Hunter. With a grunt, he slammed his truck into Hank’s SUV.

He was in charge. Of his life and of Hank’s. Had been for thirty years and didn’t plan to stop now.

His tires squealed as he sped up, ignoring the open passenger’s side door flapping in the wind. Hunter managed to catch the edge of Hank’s front bumper with his own fender. The road curved up ahead, the trees only feet away from the asphalt of the road. Hunter smiled. Hank could try to turn his wheel, try to ram him, but Hunter owned control of Hank’s car.

“Teach you to fuck with me,” he muttered.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the little boy launch himself at the wheel.

No, not the wheel. The gear shift on the steering wheel.

Smart brat.

Hunter had underestimated this one.

Reid used both hands to shove the narrow black stick upward. The truck's engine ground and whined as it was thrown into lower gears and then reverse. Hunter slapped at the kid's hands with one of his, still trying to maintain his speed so he could slam Hank's vehicle into the approaching trees.

Reid shoved harder, screaming. The grinding noise turned to a shriek as the truck lurched, smoke belching out from the engine.

Hunter slapped harder at the kid's hands and arms but the boy hung on and screamed one word over and over: *no*.

No. No. No. No.

Hunter's truck lurched and shuddered, dropping speed and making steering damn near impossible. Hank yanked his wheel to the left, which allowed him to loosen his bumper with a mighty scream of plastic tearing loose from metal.

They hit the curve as the kid threw the car into park. The brat actually got to the gear shift again and put the car in park, destroying the engine. Hunter backhanded him, and the boy went flying into the front dash board. Hunter pulled out his knife.

Not the way he wanted to do this, but now he was angry.

In the next moment, the SUV slammed into the side of the truck again, sending Hunter, the boy and the truck hurtling into the trees.

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SHE TOOK the phone back from the officer, tears beginning to stream down her face.

Not Reid.

He must be here. He must.

“The guy must have grabbed him,” Garrett was saying. “I wasn’t . . . I wasn’t sure. It all happened so quickly. Big guy. Straw cowboy hat. Um, work overalls.”

“Straw cowboy hat?” Danielle caught her breath. Chief Hardesty had mentioned a straw hat. From her mother’s journal. Not many people wore them anymore. “Are you sure, Garrett?”

“Yeah. It looked old. Had a brown leather band with a silver buckled on the right side.”

Danielle pulled up her recent calls list and pressed the only number not associated with a name, hoping, hoping it was the man she needed.

“Trevor Dresden,” he said, his voice clipped.

“Was there anyone who wore a straw cowboy hat?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Danielle. I don’t have time. Straw cowboy hat. Who wore one?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“My son . . . Reid. Someone grabbed him.”

“Shit,” Trevor hissed. “Your son?”

“Yes. Focus, Trevor. He has my son. He wore a straw cowboy hat and work overalls. Boots. Old. Who wore that? Back in Mansfield.”

“What are you asking me?” Trevor sounded confused.

“When you were a kid. A straw hat with a brown leather band, maybe. A silver buckle. Who wore something like that? My mother wrote about it. I know there was a man, Trevor. Who could it be? I need to know *now*.”

“H-hunter,” Trevor stammered.

“Who the hell is Hunter?” Danielle nearly screamed in frustration. A crowd gathered around her. Well, let them look. Her son was missing and she was not going to mourn him for the rest of her life like her mother did Jonathan. She was going to find Reid.

No matter what.

“Leonard Framb. The rancher’s son. We called him Hunter. Not a thing he couldn’t kill.”

Danielle sank to her knees, the fight fading from her. She swallowed back the bile that shoved its way up her throat.

We almost always talk to the killer. Hardesty’s words. Leonard Framb. Jonathan was found in Framb’s back pasture.

Kevin ran up, a scowl darkening his face, his glove slapping against his thigh.

“Why’d you make them call my game? Why do I have to stand by you? I wanna be with Noah and Kenny.”

“Did you hear me, Danielle? Jonny and I called Leonard Framb Hunter. He came home in ’74. Pretty messed up. We—Jonny and me—asked him about killing people. Asked him if it was harder than shooting a deer.”

She managed to keep the bile down but her throat remained constricted, making it nearly impossible to push out the next words. “What did he say?”

“Nothing. He just stared at us, his lips curling into his mouth.”

“How long was it before Jonathan disappeared? That conversation with Hunter?”

“Couple of weeks. Maybe a month.”

“And you never told anyone about Leonard Framb?” she gasped.

“No.”

Trevor’s voice held tears. She wondered in a distant I-don’t-give-a-shit way if he was crying. Let him cry. Reid was missing.

“I didn’t think it was a big deal. It was just a name Jonny and I called him . . . it wasn’t a big deal.”

But even as he said the words, Trevor’s voice trailed off. Realization slammed into them both, a tidal wave and a Mack truck and exactly what the knife must feel like as it pierced deep into the skin, muscle, organs: he’d had the answer all these years. If Trevor had told someone then, they might have caught Leonard, stopped other murders.

“It mattered. He just kidnapped my son!” she screamed.

Trevor’s vicious cursing was drowned out by Kevin’s keening cry.

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DANIELLE'S frantic voice bit into his ears, swarming through his head. Who could he call? He didn't know anyone in the Frisco department to help him to get in front of this—fast as possible. Each moment Danielle's boy remained missing, the greater the likelihood the police would miss talking to a witness—something who caught something key: a license plate, a visual, a name.

Critical details faded from people's minds with frightening alacrity.

Granted, everyone would try to help find Reid Patterson. *Just make the next call, Hardesty. Focus on the case.*

He called his office. The line went to voice mail.

After hours. He maneuvered around the next set of vehicles and managed to press the right buttons to get him to the main dispatch at the Mansfield PD.

He had the gal working the phones patch him through to Frisco PD, detective unit.

"Detective Morales," the woman said.

Arlen took a deep breath. "I'm Arlen Hardesty, chief of police in Mansfield. I got a bit of a story to tell you, and I need your help. First you need to get as many officers as you can out near that baseball tournament. We got an active killer in the area."

“Hold your horses, Chief. I need some more identification and a lot more to this story before I ask my boss to send resources to the ball fields.”

Arlen launched into the story, keeping the details short and fact-based.

Detective Morales listened, breaking in every once in a while to ask for clarification in Arlen’s story.

His phone beeped, signaling another call coming through. He almost didn’t take it, but then he remembered Danielle. He’d promised to call her back.

“Hang on, Detective.”

“You can’t leave me there, Chief! I need to know why the guy’s up here in—”

The damn sirens were making his head pound. Or maybe it was Morales yelling at him. He wove between two cars as he glanced down at the screen and pressed “Accept Call.”

Goddamn stupid way to drive but he wasn’t going to stop.

“Danielle?”

“It’s Leonard Framb!” she yelled and sobbed all at once.

“What?” Arlen clutched the steering wheel. The world tilted. Righted. *Leonard Framb.* “What?”

“Leonard Framb. He’s Hunter. Trevor,” she stuttered. “Trevor and Jonathan. They called him that. You have to find Reid. Leonard Framb has Reid.”

“How the hell do you know that?” Arlen gasped.

Talk to Trevor, Nancy had said. He was there. He knows something.

Goddamn him to hell. Arlen should have listened to her.

HE CLICKED BACK to Morales and gave her the information. He whipped up the Tollway, making better time in the emergency vehicle lane. The little sedan shook as he pushed the gas pedal harder.

He called his wife. She needed to know what was happening.

“Arlen, you going to make it home for dinner tonight?”

“No, Reenie. But I got a favor to ask.”

“What’s doing?” she said on a sigh.

“I need you to get on the phone. Up to the Dallas PD. Talk to Jim Kondren. Tell them I got a missing boy up in Frisco related to a serial killer cold case. I need all hands on deck, full scale search. You do that for me, sweetie?”

“Yes, of course. A missing boy?” She sniffled.

“Call Jim. Tell him we know who we’re looking for. Finally.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. Tell him. I promised to let him know soon’s I knew. Tell him I’ll touch base soon. Soon’s I can.”

“What are you going to do, Arlen?” Irene asked, her voice shaking.

“Don’t you worry about me, sweetheart. I’m heading up thataway now. I called in the local detective and working with Frisco while you get in touch with Dallas for me.”

Arlen hung up, mumbled a prayer and took a hard right exit, his wheels slipping as the car shuddered harder.

He stared out the windshield, remembering the boys' fascination with Leonard, a POW.

Hadn't talked much. Quiet. Liked to hunt. But then so did most of that group of boys. Pig hunting was popular in those parts as well as deer.

Put meat in folks' fridges.

His phone rang.

"Chief?" Detective Morales barked into the phone. Sirens screamed through the earpiece, reverberating through Arlen's already-aching head.

"Yep." He squinted, trying to ignore his pounding head. He focused on weaving between the rush-hour commuters.

"We received a 911 call."

Arlen's heart sank. He bit his lip, his eyes beginning to tear.

"Already?" he rasped.

"I'm on my way there now. Coit Road. Northern edge of our city, almost in Prosper."

"Yep. Got it pulled up. My ETA is . . . too goddamn long," Arlen grumbled.

"I'll be there in ten," Detective Morales said. "Seven if I push this Ford."

"Push it," Arlen said, also pressing his foot against the gas until it could go no farther. "He kills fast."

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THE DOOR on the other side of the truck was yanked open. Must've swung shut in the crash. Did the kid fly out? Hunter grunted, frustrated. He wanted to kill the boy—teach Hank another necessary lesson.

His head. Ouch. Felt too big for his skull. He lifted his head, blinking back the blackness. Hank Foster, in his fancy lawyer duds, swam in and out of focus.

Hank lifted a small, limp body into his arms, hunching protectively over the child.

Hunter lunged, leading with the buck knife in his hand. But Hank stumbled back, out of range as the seatbelt stymied Hunter's efforts. He struggled to unbuckle the lap belt and slammed his shoulder against the driver's side door. Hank's SUV did more of a number on it than Hunter expected because the door creaked and groaned but didn't open. He scrambled across the bench seat and out the other side.

By the time he limped his way around the hood of the smoking truck, gravel spat into his face and the taillights of Hank's damaged SUV slid around the curve in the road.

Hunter stared down at the buck knife in his fist.

Hank had a cell phone. He'd call the police. Hunter looked back at the truck, black smoke oozing out from under the old gal's dented, rusted grate.

He spat into the grass, pulled out a cigarette. He lit the end and sucked in a deep drag. “Fuck you, Hank Foster. Asked me to make an easy buck. Grab a kid, hold him for a bit. That’d get everyone in a tizzy. Let him open that foundation of his.”

Sirens. Distant but getting louder. Coming for him.

Hunter smiled, the knife’s sharp blade glinting in the sun. “Smart man like Hank. Shoulda done his research, known who he was dealing with.”

He pressed the tip of the blade into his chest, hard.

The sting of his flesh parting made him reconsider for a moment. That hurt a shit-ton more than he’d expected. As bad as the bullet wound in his leg that had sliced through his femur. He remembered that pain, gasping from the stunning viciousness of it.

He tried again, pressing harder even as his hand shook, fighting with his desire to end his life. He’d done this to boys. Many boys.

He’d heard what prison folk did to kid killers. Not for him. He pressed harder, mouth wide like a trout out of water as the pain made his eyes burn and tear.

The sirens were right on him. A woman in a suit was out of the car, gun drawn, telling him to drop the blade, to put his hands up.

No damn way he was going to jail.

He was a man, a war veteran.

He had to make his father proud.

He lifted the blade from his chest, his lungs convulsing. He’d stabbed those boys more’n he’d just done to himself. It shouldn’t hurt like this.

“Drop the weapon.”

He smiled at the woman. Another car pulled in behind her, painted the black-and-white of the Mansfield police department.

Arlen Hardesty jumped out, his pistol in hand, his eyes hard as he stared at Hunter.

“You fucking bastard,” Arlen roared. “Drop that knife right now.”

“Don’t think I will, Chief.”

Hunter raised it, watching his blood drip down the blade.

The first bullet caught him in the shoulder.

He screamed, bowing back.

The second hit him in the same leg as the Viet Cong’s soldier’s had, low in his thigh. He dropped the knife, falling into a fetal position, unable to bear his own weight.

He blubbered, tears and snot mixing as he realized they hadn’t shot to kill.

He wasn’t going to be that lucky.

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EVEN AS SHE raged against Trevor and Leonard Framb, she had another running just underneath the horror: thank god he didn't kill Reid. Thank god, thank god, thank god.

Her baby lay in the hospital, his small face bruised and he had a fractured cheek. His lip was swollen to more than twice its normal size.

But Reid was alive.

Because of her father.

Danielle didn't know what to do with that information.

Hank was in the ER, getting glass removed from his left hand, forearm, and cheek. His window had shattered, he said.

Danielle kept her fingers wrapped around Reid's, unwilling to even make a call to find out if her father would be okay.

"I'm okay, Mommy," Reid said. "I was scared but I remembered what the police officer told us. Yell real loud and do whatever we can to get away."

The officer who was sent into the schools on a grant from her father's foundation. Danielle struggled to breathe through the emotions. She leaned down and gently kissed Reid's forehead, one of the only undamaged spots on his face. He'd come out of this experience with way too many bruises as well as the fractured facial bone. His nose had bled profusely, soaking his shirt. Danielle was almost thankful she missed that part.

Almost.

“I’m so proud of you, sweetie,” Danielle murmured. “I’ll be right here with you. I won’t leave. You can go to sleep.”

“Okay, Mommy. I’m glad Granddad found me. He was a hero. He saved me.”

Danielle gritted her teeth. No, Hank Foster was not a hero—he was a selfish, spineless man . . . who’d saved her son’s life.

Danielle struggled with those dueling realities.

Damn Hank Foster for his cowardice then.

Thank god he’d saved her son now.

She would make sure Reid and her older son remained safe. Having lived with her mother through her depressive episodes, Danielle thought she understood that some of Reid’s trauma wouldn’t present itself for a while. Who knew when or how it would?

But she did know she and Garrett would help him, anyway they could. Hopefully, that would be enough.

She blew out a deep, painful breath and smiled at Reid. He snuggled into his pillow, his eyes opening owlshly on hers before shutting softly as he slid into sleep.

Her precious boy. She looked over, making sure her other baby was where he should be.

Kevin was sprawled across the single chair, having fallen asleep to some inane TV show—a rare treat Danielle hoped not to have to repeat ever again. He was draped in one of the white hospital blankets, snoring softly.

Garrett sat on Reid’s other side, weeping softly.

“It happened so fast,” Garrett said once he was sure Reid was asleep. The horror built between them.

“I was watching. Ten feet away. At first I didn’t realize . . . it was so crowded . . . I couldn’t get to my son in time.”

Ten feet. Her mother said five feet from her station wagon.

Danielle closed her eyes, trying to wait out the dizziness that slammed into her at the realization.

Mere feet.

A single moment.

Reid, lying in a hospital bed, bruised and battered, probably scarred emotionally, but alive.

“You didn’t know,” Danielle said. She could also be talking to her mother. “You didn’t know a serial killer was there. It’s not your fault.”

“Dani?” Garrett said, his voice quiet, hesitant even.

“Yeah?”

“You figured it out. You saved Reid.”

Danielle shook her head.

Her father stepped forward. Danielle wasn’t sure yet why. But he was the one who’d saved her son.

She’d have to talk to him. Soon. But not now.

“I love you,” Danielle said, her voice low and full of emotion. “I love you so much, Garrett. My family’s hurt you—Reid . . .” She couldn’t get out any more words. The sobs wracked her body.

Garrett got up and walked to her side before he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and she pressed her cheek against his chest, as she’d always done when in need of comfort.

“I love you, too. It’s not your fault either.” Garrett’s conviction wrapped around her, a sumptuous and warm blanket of security. “You saved him. When I couldn’t, you saved our son.”

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CLEANING up the mess on the side of Coit Road took hours. It was late, going on ten p.m., when he and Detective Morales left the crash site.

He called Danielle, as he'd promised. She sounded both wound up and exhausted—matching his mood perfectly.

He asked to meet in the cafeteria. She hesitated but he was persistent. A man—probably her husband—spoke in the background, telling her he'd be in the room with Reid, that his parents were coming to pick up Kevin.

"If you feel comfortable with doing so, we can get one of the hospital sitters or an officer to stay in the room with your little boy so you can both hear what I got to tell you."

Danielle's swallow was thick and pressed against Hardesty's eardrum. "I'll think about it."

Arlen then called Jim Kondren.

"It's been all over the news, Arlen. Not the serial killer part—that'll come out later, once it's ascertained." Jim huffed a breath. "You nailed the SOB. All these years . . . Jesus, you never forget a case like that one, huh?"

Jim had been there, one of the officers who'd come down to help with the search. He and Arlen worked their search quadrant and hit up a friendship, solidified by viewing Jonathan Foster's body in that ditch.

"Never," Arlen averred. "Thanks for the help on the stakeouts in Highland Park."

“That’s related?”

“Yeah,” Arlen said. “We’re still collecting information, but yeah. It is.”

“As explosive as you thought it’d be?”

Arlen considered Hank’s involvement as he knew it to be. The fact that he’d been the face of AMEAC as well as its founder. “Prolly more so.”

“Well, shit.”

Arlen nodded, understanding the sageness of Jim’s words. “I’ll buy you a beer and we can talk it over. Once I got the whole story.”

“I’ll expect it,” Jim said. “Good work on this one, Chief. You never dropped the ball.”

Arlen disagreed but now wasn’t the time for long chats on how he should have done better. They rung off. Arlen called Irene again, let her know he wouldn’t be coming home just yet.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Arlen. Lordy, the news . . . it’s scary. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Love you, Reenie.” Words that needed to be said. “If you wanna go to bed, I’ll sleep in the guest room.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Arlen Hardesty. You just cracked the case of your career—the one that’s haunted it anyway. You come on home when you’re ready and we’ll drink tea on the porch.”

“And cross off another day on the calendar,” Arlen said, the ghost of a smile perking up the corners of his lips.

“You betcha. Drive safe.”



Both Danielle and Garrett met Arlen and Detective Morales in the white and bright cafeteria that night. Danielle’s clothes were covered in dust, the knees of her jeans ripped. Garrett looked haunted, his curly hair standing on end and his eyes filled with shadows.

Arlen sighed, wishing he could have done more for them, sooner.

“Thanks for meeting with us,” Arlen rumbled. He gestured to Detective Morales, who looked crisp in her dark pantsuit, her thick black hair pulled back in a low ponytail. If he hadn’t seen her fire her weapon with such precision and steadiness just hours before, he’d worry she was too young for her position—and he would have been wrong. Cynthia Morales was an asset to her department and the city she worked for.

He was damn glad he got her on the phone.

“What can you tell us?” Danielle asked, wrapping her hands around her elbows and leaning against her husband for support. Their marriage would be tested before all the shit in the creek cleared away. He cleared his throat.

“Hank has a concussion and a broken arm. And I guess there were a lot of glass fragments to clean out of his hand and arm.”

Danielle looked startled but then she nodded. “Reid said Hank was the one who pulled him from the truck. That Hunter had a knife in his hand.” She shut her eyes, unable to continue the thought. She shivered, no doubt trying to shed what could have been.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s all true.”

“Leonard Framb is in custody as well, Mrs. Patterson,” Detective Morales said. “He’s currently in surgery in this hospital, under armed escort.”

Garrett turned pale, his lips leeching all color. “The doctor said Reid can leave in the morning. Will he be safe here?”

“Yes,” Detective Morales said with conviction. “I plan to stay on the pediatric floor housing your son, while I coordinate the Frisco PD’s response. I’ll touch base with you before I leave tonight and let you know the current situation. But . . .” She narrowed her eyes. “The suspect sustained multiple injuries. Lots of blood loss. I don’t think he’ll be conscious, let alone out of that bed before you can pack up and leave.”

Danielle swayed a little as she took in Morales's words. "Will he be able to stand trial? Will he go to jail for kidnapping Reid?" She turned to face Arlen, those green eyes of hers almost identical replicas of Nancy's when he'd looked into them the first time thirty years ago. "For Jonathan? For the other boys?"

"We're going to do our best to make that happen," Hardesty said. "I wanted to get you up to speed on this—let you know how we couldn't have cracked the case without you talking to Trevor. He and I are going to sit down tomorrow, first thing."

Arlen shook his head, anger and adrenaline still pumping through his veins. "Goddammit! The boys called him Hunter. We never knew. Your mama told me to talk to Trevor again. She damn well told me."

Morales leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "We got him now, and we'll do everything in our power to keep him locked away. To keep the communities safe."

"You understand that the publicity may be severe," Arlen said. "Because of your father's involvement in the case—in his foundation. I'm worried for your family." Arlen swept his hand to include Garrett.

Danielle swallowed hard. Garrett's jaw was leaping—a sprinter's mad dash as he tried to keep his emotions under control.

"What is Hank's involvement?" Danielle asked.

"Well, right now, we know he's the one who called 911 and told us where to go," Detective Morales said. "We know he's the one who rescued your son."

Danielle and Garrett shared a long look, one that ended with Garrett clearing his throat and saying, "Okay. If you find out it's more, we'd appreciate the heads-up."

There'd be more to Hank's part in this; Danielle and Garrett seemed to be bracing for the fall-out. Arlen hoped Garrett would continue to stick by Danielle when the media came a-calling. He glanced out the glass-plated

doors into the quiet, calm hospital. Tonight, he'd done what he could, but tomorrow, next week? Danielle and Garrett would find a path forward. He met Danielle's gaze and held it.

"Some kinds of justice need to be measured," Arlen said. "I get that. Just ate me up that I couldn't do more for y'all."

"Thank you for not forgetting Jonathan. For not giving up on us with Reid tonight," Danielle said as she gripped her husband's hand. The words were slow, measured. Arlen understood that they needed to be said. For Garrett but for her, too. Maybe even Trevor—who desperately needed some type of closure for the friend he still mourned.

Hardesty nodded. "Never did understand why they added a mulligan in golf. Can't get a do-over anywhere else in life."

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SHE HAD one more visit to make that night. She knocked on the thin hospital door in trepidation, unsure of how Hank would look or what, even, she should say.

“Come in,” Hank said, his voice thinner and older than she remembered.

With one last inhalation of hospital-tinted air, Danielle pushed into the room.

“Danielle,” he said on a sigh. “How’s Reid?”

“He’s okay,” Danielle said as she stepped cautiously toward her father’s hospital bed. He wore one of those faded gowns, the pattern indistinguishable from the white cotton background due to the number of washings. His legs were covered in a white blanket, also thin from washings.

Déjà vu slammed into Danielle. She’d been here—was it really about a week ago? Different hospital but looking at her other parent as she discussed Jonathan’s death. What had Nancy said?

Trevor. That’s wrong. Need to stop that mess. The bastard.

Danielle placed a hand to her stomach. Oh. Her mother meant her father was the bastard. Her father could have stopped this mess—not that she could have foreseen Reid’s abduction. But Nancy understood Hank’s

weakness, his inability to let his reputation take the hit, which was why Nancy wanted Danielle to talk to Trevor.

Trevor's childhood memory, the silly child's name proved the linchpin to uncovering Leonard Framb but also to Hank Foster's duplicity.

Danielle must have hesitated too long as these realizations cascaded over her because Hank said, "I know you're angry."

True. But so much more than just anger warred within Danielle right now. Mainly relief.

For now, she'd go with that. She stepped all the way into the room.

Hank's left arm was in an air cast and his face was covered in a series of small cuts. From the glass, Danielle bet.

"Thank you. For saving his life."

Hank dropped his gaze, his brows tugged tight over his nose. "I should have told Hardesty what I knew back then. About Jonny's death."

Danielle stopped at the foot of his bed, unsure whether to move around to his side, rooted to the spot with his words.

"Yes, you should have."

He glanced up at her—a fleeting look—before he resumed staring at his lap. "I was afraid."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No."

The room grew quiet. A couple of people laughed in the hall, their voices fading as they moved away from the door.

"Do you remember when I was sixteen," Danielle asked suddenly, "I asked you about AMEAC. Why you started it?"

Hank shook his head slowly. "No."

"You told me it was because you promised God. It was penance. You meant for your part in Jonathan's death. Didn't you?"

Hank's breath hissed through his clenched teeth. "What do you want me to say, Danielle?"

“Tell me about Hunter. Tell me your part in it.”

The pause grew. Hank’s knuckles turned white and his face tensed.

“Fucking Hunter.” Hank’s voice cut through the quiet with the same sharpness of the knife used on Jonathan. Even though she expected an outburst, Danielle flinched back.

“Couldn’t follow simple instructions. *Hold* a kid for a few hours. Get the locals in a furor. We need an agency that helps kids, I’d say. That was the plan. Move to Dallas to be nearer funding and where there was a bigger need. Put assholes like that piece of shit Leonard Framb in jail. A kidnapping charge to bring that no-account in. Simple, brilliant.”

“It cost Jonny his life. My mother hers, too, really.”

Hank raised his head, his mouth twisted in an attempt to keep the sobs inside. “I didn’t know about the other kids.”

Hank closed his eyes, misery etched deep around his eyes and mouth. “I figured that out later when that boy was killed fifty miles from your grandmother’s place that weekend I went to get her. Hunter followed me there. He’s been following me for years. That’s why I didn’t come to see you or my grandsons.”

Danielle cleared her throat. She waited until he opened his bloodshot eyes and met her gaze to speak. “You were culpable. You might not have known then what he’d brought about, but even in asking for a child to be kidnapped . . .”

Hank dipped his head. “Accessory to a crime,” he said. “That’s what it’s called.”

Danielle breathed in deep, exhaled. “I don’t know what to say. What to wish for. Except . . . except that I know my son wouldn’t have been in that truck tonight if you’d been brave enough to step forward then.”

Hank didn’t respond. Tears dripped from the end of his nose and splashed onto the blanket.

Danielle didn’t look back before she walked out.

THE NEXT MORNING blazed hot and fine—the cloud cover burned off before seven. Arlen hadn't slept much but he felt peaceful as he stood near Jonathan's grave. He took a knee and placed his hand over Nancy's marker, right next to Jonathan's. Hers was smaller, a cremation plot, and the dirt still freshly-turned and baking slowly in the rising Texas heat.

"We finally got him, Nancy. I'm so sorry it took us so long. I hope you're resting easy now."

Arlen stood with a grunt. These damn pounds made upping and downing a right pain. Irene had been nudging him, but Arlen made the decision there, knowing he'd keep it: Part of retirement meant getting into shape. Or at least out of such bad shape.

Trevor walked up to the grave, carrying flowers and a battered, yellowing Yankees' pennant.

"I can't believe this is over," Trevor said.

"Mostly. Not yet, though." Arlen paused. "The trial might well prove sensational."

"Probably will," Trevor added. "I called my wife last night—spilled this all on her. We've been separated." Trevor's smile was self-deprecating. "I never told her about Jonny. Never shared that with Sophie and she was hurt and angry I hadn't wanted kids. She understands now, at least a little. Think she might even forgive me. I . . . I need her to. For my part in this."

Arlen nodded. He rocked back on his heels as he shoved his hands into his pockets. Marking the date down with Irene last night proved cathartic for him, too. Thirty years today—Jonathan Foster’s death took thirty years to find justice.

But they’d done it.

And in a month, Arlen would sit on the beach and be able to breathe calmly as he stared over the waves. He’d know, deep in his bones, that one fewer criminal ran free. One he’d wanted to catch for most of his career was locked up and would stay that way—at least that’s what the DA in Frisco said on the conference call with Detective Morales this morning.

“I’m going to stay at the foundation,” Trevor said.

“Might be rough for a time.”

Trevor dipped his head. “Might be. But the work, saving kids like Jonny or Reid . . . any of them . . . it’s good work.”

If they could get past Hank Foster’s tainted decision-making and nasty past, sure. But Arlen didn’t voice those concerns. Trevor was a grown man and deserved the opportunity to make his decisions as such.

“Nancy told me to talk to you,” Arlen said instead. “I should have listened.”

“I should have realized even the tiniest detail might prove pivotal,” Trevor responded. “I work in law. I know this.”

They stood quietly beside Jonathan Foster’s grave.

A woman opened the door to her white Lexus, her dark hair glinting in the bright sunlight.

“That’s Sophie. I’m going to go,” Trevor said.

Arlen nodded. “I’ll keep you posted on Hank’s trial. Leonard’s, too.”

Trevor shook his head. He eased the negation by clapping Arlen on the back. “Focus on your retirement. This”—Trevor spread his arms to encompass the cemetery—“this is all in the past.”

He turned on his heel and walked toward his wife. Arlen wondered idly if they'd work through their issues.

He turned back toward his car, moseying down the path.

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EPILOGUE

Danielle

GARRETT OFFERED to come with Danielle, and she wondered if she should have said no. She touched his cheek, tenderly, as she spoke.

“This is my messed up family. I want you there because you’ve kept me going through all this, but I feel like I need to focus on *us*.”

He searched her eyes. “Do you know what *us* means yet? They’ve always been there—the ghost of Jonathan, your mother, hell, even your father, though we didn’t know the why.”

She took a shaky breath “I don’t. Not really. Except to say . . . this is over. Whatever comes next, Jonathan’s death, his justice is complete. Reid and Kevin are safe.”

Garrett’s eyes crinkled, though the darkness from Reid’s abduction remained. Danielle understood. They would all need time to process what had happened.

“They’re enjoying being spoiled by my folks,” Garrett said. “I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Garrett. For . . . just thank you.”

He nodded before he leaned in and touched his lips to hers, gently. Garrett was almost always subtle, easy, loving.

They drove to the cemetery, Danielle too nervous to speak. Garrett drove the car through the gates tipped with white stone angels, the grounds were dotted with flowers and flags, zigzagged with granite monuments and low markers. All the while, she thought about Kevin and Reid.

Hardesty and Trevor stood by Jonathan's grave. Danielle sat in the car, unsure if she should give them privacy.

Trevor turned onto the path and walked toward a beautiful brunette in casual linen slacks and a turquoise silk blouse. She stepped away from the car, and Trevor pulled her into his arms. She wrapped her arms tight around him as his shoulders shook.

A small smile fluttering across Danielle's lips. "She's pretty."

"Not as pretty as you," Garrett said, clasping her hand.

Even if AMEAC imploded, if it never moved past the black mark of its founder's part in his own son's abduction, Trevor would be okay. He'd found the justice he needed—and the ability to lay his friend to rest at last.

Hardesty wandered down another path and went to his sedan. He saluted Danielle and Garrett but didn't come over, for which Danielle was thankful. She needed to do this with just Garrett.

She needed to tell her big brother goodbye.



Eventually, Danielle and Garrett exited the car. They walked hand-in-hand to the grave markers.

The soft breeze fluttered a strand of hair across Danielle's cheek, reminding her that she was indeed alive. She took a deep breath of the spring air, lilies and roses, fresh cut grass. A little rain.

Renewal. Just maybe.

She could hear the traffic, the buzzing grind of a lawn tractor. She glanced back down at the two graves huddled together. A family, but not hers.

“My name is Danielle Foster Patterson.” She closed her eyes as she squeezed Garrett’s fingers. He returned the gesture. “No. I’m Danielle *Patterson*.”

The wind picked up, riffling the low grass at each of the graves, some of the headstones, like her brother’s, donned little plastic flags sprinkled among the plastic bouquets. She brought wildflowers to add to both her mother’s flat grave marker and her brother’s white marble stone. She tucked her hair back behind her ear.

“I didn’t know you, neither of you,” she whispered as she stood there, her mother on one side, her brother on the other. She laid the flowers first on Nancy’s marker, then on Jonathan’s headstone, not thinking, just acting on instinct. She placed her hands there for a moment before she stood.

“I’m so sorry this happened. I’m so glad we ended it.”

With the first truly deep, restorative breath she’d taken since she was a child, Danielle nodded to Garrett. Together, they turned and walked away.

The End



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J. J. Cagney is the mystery/thriller pen name of USA Today bestselling author Alexa Padgett. Her debut mystery, *A Pilgrimage of Death*, was named to Kirkus Reviews' 100 Best Books of 2018 and Goodreads Best Mysteries of 2010s.

Cagney holds a bachelor's in international marketing and spent part of her twenties as the marketing director for an elite sports management firm. And, yes, she did her requisite stint with a dotcom back in the that early 2000s, first as a marketing coordinator and then as a content manager. She's penned work for a variety of websites and magazines, and she worked as a literary agent for Irene Webb Literary.

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