

Amber Alert



Dan Lawton

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A novel by

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Dedication

This book is for Carol, who was vocal about her passion and encouragement for the project from the first draft—she'd said it was a “home run” from day one.

Chapter One

From a good distance away inside his mother's station wagon, Scott Baker's dark, jealous eyes study the driveway. Seeing her brings back the memories, the good times and the bad, and all those feelings: the hurt, the abandonment, the love. The love, even after all this time, has never wavered, despite everything.

In the driveway, Abby Janis approaches the mailbox with grace. She glides like a cloud, her toes barely touching the blacktop, almost hovering above it, as if floating. The sun gleams off her teeth as she smiles, and her skin sparkles with an undeniable happiness. It's been just over a decade since he's seen her last, and her beauty is just as he'd remembered.

Except now, she's actually happy.

Her unblemished skin shines like it never has before, her radiance warming Scott's insides, even from a distance. A gentle Pennsylvania breeze whirls Abby's silky blonde hair into a funnel at her back, her perfume hitting Scott's nose as if she were standing right next to him. Scott lets his eyes roll back in his head and enjoys it. It's been so long.

Scott opens his eyes and feels lighter, less tense. A tingle rushes through his body as if it were a thousand spiders, each of the tiny legs tickling him until his muscles convulse. A looming eruption develops underneath his skin. He digs the fingers on his free hand into his thigh to brace himself, his fingernails as sharp as needles. The physical pain is only temporary. It passes.

From where Scott sits, Abby appears to be living the dream. With the way she used to live, the woman she

used to be, Scott can't help but be surprised by that. She's come a long way since then, and, admittedly, he didn't think she'd make it this far. Part of him regrets she did. At her back is a two story colonial with an attached two car garage and golf-course-like green grass surrounding it. The dark shingles on the roof are free of peeling and cracking, and the shutters around the windows are a crisp red. A black sedan idling in the driveway is luxurious. There's everything except the white picket fence.

It pains Scott to see it all. The pain digs deep, so deep that he can't look. He shifts his eyes and allows himself to give in to the sadness for a moment.

Ten years ago, Abby would have never wanted this life. Fifteen years ago, she wouldn't have even dreamt about it. Scott remembers the real Abby—where she came from and who she used to be. Before her last name was Janis. Before the lies even began.

Scott turns back as the mailbox swallows Abby's arm, only to spit it back out with a stack of envelopes in her hand. The one from Scott is somewhere in the middle of stack, he knows, and it's only a matter of moments before Abby finds it. Scott pushes the sadness aside.

For Abby Janis, life is good. She and her husband, Kurt, are as affectionate and passionate toward each other as they were when they first met. The best part of her day is still when he comes home and kisses her, and the saddest part is when he leaves for the office in the morning. She misses him when he's gone, loves him more every day, and agonizes when he's not well. Abby has felt like a newlywed every single day of her marriage.

Their daughter, Chloe, has just finished the third grade at Mifflinburg Elementary School and she's already excited about starting fourth grade. She routinely receives high marks and has lots of friends, and for that, Abby

couldn't be happier. Everything Abby's ever wanted in life is resting in the palm of her hand, and her life, in many respects, is perfect.

At the end of the driveway with the sun at her back, Abby sorts through the stack of mail. The wind gust almost sends one of the envelopes from the stack sailing. The waft of fresh cut grass flies with it, tickling Abby's nose, threatening to make her sneeze.

The mail is mostly garbage — bills, junk, and local advertisements — but right in the middle of the stack, one of the envelopes catches Abby's attention. It's not like the others. It's solid white, unsecured, and missing a stamp from the upper right corner. There's no return address and Abby's name is handwritten in the center. It's out of place.

Abby opens that one first.

She moves it to the top of the stack and flips it over, then slices the back with the white tip of her nail. The seal breaks quickly, a sticky dampness transferring to Abby's fingertip. Inside the envelope is a single sheet of lined paper, torn and folded in half like that of a note one might pass around in junior high. Curiously, Abby unfolds the note and reads it.

FOUND YOU.

Abby nearly drops to the blacktop.

Oh, God.

The two words are written in uppercase letters and scribbled in pencil, much like Abby's name is on the front of the envelope. The handwriting is amateurish, childlike, like whomever wrote it hasn't written anything in a while.

Abby recognizes it. She's seen that handwriting before, and after a moment, she remembers from where. From whom.

A lump forms in her throat. Something heavy pounds inside her chest. She chokes as the wind is knocked out of her.

Abby looks up and frantically scans the neighborhood for an out of place jogger or a car that doesn't belong, but she sees nothing. Lawn mowers sound, dogs bark, and neighborhood children play, but nothing is out of the ordinary.

Where is he?

Abby looks back down and reads the note again. As she does, someone places a gentle hand on her lower back and wraps their fingers around her waist, making her muscles tense. She crinkles the note into a ball and gasps aloud, ready to attack, and drops the stack of envelopes to the pavement.

“Didn’t mean to scare you.” It’s her husband. Kurt pulls his hand away from Abby’s back and holds it up to show his surrender.

Abby puts a hand to her chest and breathes hard. Air pinches her lungs and a sharp pain stabs her side, making her wince. Quickly, Abby slides a hand down the side of her blouse and slips the note into her hip pocket, pushing it inside with her thumb, before Kurt sees it. Kurt crouches and scoops up the dropped mail from the driveway, then hands the stack back to her. He doesn’t seem to notice the empty envelope on top, so Abby grabs it and hides it underneath the others.

“You okay?” Kurt asks.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Abby says, her breath slowing. “You just scared me.”

“Sorry, babe.” Kurt rests his hand on Abby’s hip and pecks her cheek. “Are you ready to go? Chloe’s waiting.”

“Where is she?”

“In the car.”

Abby nods and allows Kurt to lead her back up the driveway. He looks at her and smiles, and mouths his affection for her. Abby returns the smile the best she can, and Kurt buys it. As they walk toward his Mercedes, Abby

slides her pinky into her jeans and pushes the note further into her pocket. She wishes it would go away.

Thinking of the note, she knew this day would come eventually, and it finally has. She's been dreading it for years. Even with all the time that's passed, she still isn't ready to face it yet—the truth. But here it is, hidden away deep in the pocket of her jeans, just waiting for the opportunity to tear her life apart.

Scott clenches his teeth and seethes as Abby's husband puts his hands all over her. Even though it's been so long, the pain of seeing it firsthand doesn't hurt any less. If anything, time makes it worse. Kurt caresses Abby's shoulder blade, moving his hand slowly downward until it rests on the small of her back. They walk arm in arm further away from Scott. Scott squeezes his fingers into a fist.

White exhaust from the idling sedan spits into the wind near the garage. Kurt disappears into the driver's side while Abby walks around to the passenger's. Before climbing in, she stops and glances over her shoulder as if looking for something or someone, and Scott gets a good look at her. The color has left her face, a white sheet now covering her features, and her eyes have sunken. Scott knows that look—it's the look of forfeiture, the loss of hope, the look of remembrance. It's the look of desperation.

Scott can tell by the blankness in Abby's eyes that she knows what's happening. She knows he's out and that he's come to find her. She knows her husband is finally going to learn the truth after all these years, and that the truth might devastate him. The truth might be unforgivable. The truth might remove her veil of years of deceit and reveal the woman underneath, the woman she's tried to conceal for so many years.

It's all on the verge of coming to an end.

Once Abby climbs into the sedan with a halo of dishonesty surrounding her, Scott lowers his binoculars and tosses them on the seat beside him. He huffs as he relaxes his fingers. With the flick of a wrist, he starts up the wagon and winces when the drive belt squeals, the screech ricocheting off the bay windows and enclosed grand foyers that surround him. The colonials in the neighborhood are enormous, and Scott is using them to his advantage. Abby couldn't find his location even if she tried.

Scott hasn't formulated a specific plan yet and will wait to see where the Janis's are headed before doing so. Part of him wasn't actually expecting to find her so soon. Plan or not, its flawless execution is imperative. Anything less will send him back to where he came from, and Abby will vanish from his life once again.

Then it'll remain a mystery forever.

The Benz cruises around the corner, noiseless, and makes a right at the stop sign at the end of the street. Scott lowers his head, just in case, but keeps his eyes locked firmly on the Mercedes. It eventually fades away beyond the hill without incident, merely becoming a speck of black, until it disappears out of sight. Scott holds back for a few extra seconds, breathing heavily, before pulling out into the street, making a right at the same stop sign, following them.

Chapter Two

With a strange intensity, Scott follows the Mercedes for ten miles. He keeps his distance in the wagon. Although the sights are mostly the same, some things have changed in ten years. Seeing only barbed wire and steel bars makes someone forget what it's like to be on the outside, and Scott is no exception. The back roads are still familiar to him, but the trees are overgrown and there are a bunch of new houses that he doesn't recognize. Even some of the houses that he does recognize look different in a way—many of them with worn out roofs or faded paint or cracked foundations. It all reminds him of how much he's missed.

When the Benz makes a left at Sunapee Drive, Scott thinks he has an idea where they're headed. If he's right, it will complicate matters, so he'll have to pick his spot carefully if he's going to get this done today. Now that Abby has seen the note, the longer he waits, the higher the risk is that the police get involved. And if that happens, he'll never get the opportunity to do what he needs to do.

The mall looks the same as it always has. It's a little rundown and sits back from the street a bit, and the parking lot is jammed with cars and trucks and buses. Scott almost loses the Janis's while he searches for and eventually finds an open spot in the back, close to the edge of the parking lot. He spots them walking inside, so he runs to catch up to them, and eventually does when he tracks them down near the food court.

Inside and out of breath, Scott falls in behind the threesome. Abby and Kurt stand on either side of the little one as they walk in a line, not talking much. Even from behind, Scott can see the difference in Abby already—her

slow movement and lack of grace—and he wonders how long it'll take her husband to realize it, too.

The little girl has long dark hair, jet black, which reminds Scott of his own, and it's held together in a tight braid. She's thin and has long legs, and from the back, she looks like a girl approaching her teenage years. Jitters take over as the anticipation of seeing her face is eating at Scott, but he's able to restrain himself. He reminds himself how important it is to do this right, how critical it is not to make a careless mistake. Patience, after all, is a virtue.

Abby is on the left, Kurt on the right, and they each walk in stride with Chloe in between them. Abby is still troubled by the note that's in her pocket and what it means, although she tries to put on a smile that doesn't look phony. She fears she's failing at it, though, as she notices Kurt continuously gazing over to her in her peripheral vision. She refuses to look at him for fear he might see right through her.

“Look! Can we go in there?” Chloe asks, pointing to the pet store. She takes off in that direction before her parents even have a chance to respond.

Abby yells after her, “Slow down, Chloe! Stay close!”

Chloe ignores her mother as she cuts between strangers and rushes into the pet store. She heads directly for the puppies behind the glass.

“Will you watch her, please?” Abby says to Kurt as she watches Chloe from across the corridor. Her abdomen grumbles as the all too familiar feeling approaches from somewhere deep inside. She stops on a dime, beads of sweat forming on her neck, and heads back in the direction they originally came from.

“Where are you going?” Kurt asks.

“Bathroom.” Abby starts to walk in that direction, but Kurt grabs her hand and spins her back toward him.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Abby offers a frail smile, hoping to fool him. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Abby suddenly notices the corner of the note in her pocket jamming into her thigh. It feels like a knife slowly carving out a chunk of flesh, leaving a trail of damaged goods in its wake. “I’m okay, really.”

Kurt raises an eyebrow, but pushes no further. He pulls her toward him and kisses her on the cheek, then releases her hand. Abby smiles, glad it was her cheek and not her lips that he’d kissed, and backtracks toward the ladies’ room. She swallows hard to keep the bile down.

Scott is like a hawk, his talons out, waiting for just the right moment, ready to attack. In front of him, the Janis’s are his prey. The jitters in his hands are bad, the tightness of his chest worse. He’s starting to doubt if he has what it takes to go through with this.

Suddenly, the tables are turned; the predator becomes the prey.

Abby stops, turns, and starts back toward him. Her head starts to turn, her eyes mere moments from finding Scott’s. Scott searches for an escape. Lines of men, women, and children walk in groups in the corridor; employees pick their fingernails in the painted tiles in the front of empty storefronts; a nearby security officer twirls a keyring. Scott’s wheels spin, his surroundings blur, his legs and feet frozen and unmoving. He tries to move, searching for somewhere to hide, but the tiles beneath his feet morph into quicksand. He pulls and twists until his joints hurt, but his feet only sink deeper. The harder he tries, the more it hurts.

Then something happens.

Kurt stops Abby and pulls her in close, giving Scott a second chance. Whatever its purpose, the quicksand relinquishes to the universe and Scott breaks free, turning quickly and rushing into the closest store before Abby spots him.

Scott crouches behind a mannequin wearing a visor and a tank top and a pair of shorts so short he'd never let his own child wear them. The saleswoman greets him, smiling, friendly, completely unaware of Scott's intentions. He ignores her and keeps his head down as he watches Abby rush past the store with a hand over her mouth. Once she passes fully, Scott exhales and moves out of the mannequin's shadow and past the dejected saleswoman. He rests a hand against a wall and catches his breath, once again questioning his ability to go through with this. Before he talks himself out of it, he slips in line with the crowd, keeping Abby at a safe distance, but still in his sight, and follows her down the corridor.

Behind the food court is a long passageway that wraps around the fast food booths and comes out on the other side. As far as Scott can remember, there are bathrooms and the mall management office and the security office in the corridor, and not much else. Abby disappears into the darkness, her legs almost at a run. Scott considers going in after her, but then thinks of what his goal is by being here and what he wants to accomplish, so he doesn't. Instead, with Abby temporarily preoccupied, he turns back and heads for the pet store.

Dismayed by her coldness, Kurt watches Abby scamper away, almost running. Something is off with her today, he admits, but he can't pinpoint what it is. There's a bit of an edge to her, a startle factor that he's never seen from her before, the culprit of which makes him curious. But it's Chloe's day today, so he brushes it off for now. Summer

break from school has just begun, and Kurt is looking forward to spending some quality time with his daughter over the next couple of months. He crosses the corridor, dodging rowdy teens and tense parents, and joins Chloe inside the pet shop.

“Look how cute he is, Daddy,” Chloe says to him when he enters, a smile on her face. An energetic yellow lab leaps toward them, a glass enclosure separating man from animal, with its tongue saturating and smearing the glass. “Can I keep him?”

“Your mother doesn’t want a puppy around the house, sweetheart.”

“I’ll take care of him, I swear! I’m nine-years-old now, you know. You won’t even have to do anything, I promise. I’ll do everything by myself. I’ll feed him, I’ll—”

“We’ll see. Maybe for your birthday.”

“I just had my birthday like two months ago!”

“Maybe for your next birthday, then.”

“But, Dad—”

Kurt raises an eyebrow at her, cutting her off. More than anything, he hates it when Chloe whines, and she’s dangerously close to approaching that territory. Chloe understands her dad’s expression and says nothing further. She crosses her arms and turns her back to him, sighing dramatically. Kurt knows he’ll be getting the silent treatment for a while now.

“Chloe—”

“Kurt Janis, is that you?” an excited male voice says from somewhere behind Kurt.

Kurt turns and searches for the voice that sounded somewhat familiar. When he finds his old neighbor’s smiling face across the way, he waves. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart,” he says to Chloe, then walks out of the pet shop to say hello to his old friend.

Chloe is left alone.

Back in front of the pet store, the firmness of a wooden bench digs into Scott's rear. It's sticky with warmth, with chipped paint and a split down the middle, and it separates the two sides of the corridor. In Scott's hands is a slushy, once chilled, now warm, that he'd found sitting on top of a trash can. He thought it might help him blend in to the crowd, but no one has even looked at him, so he's starting to doubt that. Or maybe that means it's working.

The little Janis girl and her father seem to be having some sort of disagreement inside the pet shop. Scott shields his face behind the jumbo plastic cup, a huge grin on his face. He's hopeful something will break in his favor soon, before Abby returns.

Behind him, a man's voice calls out Kurt Janis's name, making Scott leap, his heartbeat fluttering. Kurt Janis looks into the hallway, searching for the voice, and seems to locate it directly behind Scott. Scott doesn't know if Abby has ever told her husband about him; he bets not, but he can't take that chance. Scott pushes the cup higher, completely blocking his vision, doing all he can to ensure Kurt doesn't recognize him.

Kurt walks out of the pet store, head up, chin high, his bright teeth showing, and makes his way toward the bench. Scott curls his shoulders, making like a turtle hiding in its shell, and tries to shrink himself down to nothing. The jitters in his hands start up again, causing the melted ice to slosh around. The strong smell of sugar and plastic chemicals overpowers him, but he keeps his face covered until Kurt passes.

Kurt moves past the bench and engages in a friendly banter with the man who'd called his name. The little hairs on the back of Scott's neck rise as he feels Kurt's stale breath on his skin. The physical closeness of the two men—both in proximity to one another and in their connection to Abby, which, Scott suspects Kurt doesn't

know about—makes Scott uneasy. There are so many secrets, yet, so much time has passed. So many questions still need to be answered, and so many uncertainties still hang in the balance. The meter in Scott's brain has redlined; he's overloaded.

Anxious, Scott pushes to his feet and sucks in a deep breath of whatever chemicals invade his airspace. He tosses the once icy beverage into the waste bin and heads into the pet store, not looking back, unsure what he'll say if confronted by Kurt Janis or anyone else.

Scott keeps his head down, his hands in his pockets, and makes his way around the perimeter of the pet shop. The girl's back is facing him, her attention directed to a handsome pup behind the glass. Scott stops in front of all the cages and glass habitats, checking out the tarantulas and ferrets and guinea pigs. One of the iguanas stares at him, taunting with his tongue, as if it knows what Scott is up to. Scott stares back, but ultimately ignores it and pushes on. The iguana wouldn't understand, he thinks, nor would any of the other four or eight-legged creatures out there. Scott doesn't think a two-legged creature would understand the pain he's been through, either.

Scott passes a hamster on a wheel as it trains for a marathon, the metal squeaking like a rusted hinge with each rotation, and makes his way closer to the girl. Every so often, he shoots a glance to the hallway, where he finds Kurt still engaged in a deep and animated conversation behind the bench, still distracted. Scott can sense the window of opportunity starting to open for him, but the hardest part, he fears, will be crawling through it.

Upon approach, Scott refuses to look directly at the girl, but he does sneak a glimpse out of the corner of his eye a few times. The voyeurism makes him feel uneasy, like he's doing something he shouldn't be, but he can't help himself. He needs answers.

The pattering in his chest is like a drum roll, the pleasure signals being sent throughout his body like an orchestra. Music plays in his ears—soft music, gentle music, with violins and a choir and a mandolin. Then it gets louder. There's a marching band and heavy, thumping bass and an electric guitar riff. Scott's world spins. Vertigo comes and goes, his knees weaken, his head wobbles on his neck as if it were too heavy and disproportionate like a mushroom. Fainting seems like a real possibility.

"Hi." It's a girl's voice, a young girl. The Janis girl.

Scott plants his feet firmly against the tile and steadies himself. He closes his eyes until the spinning stops, then opens them and looks back at the girl, who's facing the glass case. "Hi," he says. "Cute puppy."

"Yeah," the girl says, smiling. "My dad won't let me get him, but I think he really wants to come home with me."

Scott nods and wipes a dab of sweat from his brow. "Why not?"

The girl stops smiling and crosses her arms. She faces him. "Because he's stupid."

For the first time, Scott looks at the girl's face and into her eyes. They're dark and thick, and they complement her hair almost perfectly, as if her features were hand-picked. They almost take his breath away. Scott hasn't been around girls of her age since he was her age himself, and he wasn't expecting her to look so grown up. It makes him realize how much things have changed in the past ten years. Despite the dark hair and eyes, he sees a young Abby on the girl's face. The same high cheekbone structure is present, along with the same symmetry that Scott had once been so drawn into himself. She's already beautiful like her mother, and Scott wonders if Kurt treats her like the princess she is. Her reaction about the puppy makes Scott believe otherwise, and the thought makes his heart ache.

“Why is he stupid?” Scott asks as he tries to hold back a smile. He really just wants to listen to her talk.

The girl does talk. She tells him about the way her parents treat her— too many rules and not enough freedom—and how they won’t even let her get a puppy, even though she promises to take care of it. Scott nods occasionally and frequently looks into the hallway to check on Kurt, who’s still oblivious to what’s happening inside the pet store.

“My name’s Scott, by the way,” Scott says once the girl stops talking. “I’m a friend of your mom’s, actually.”

“You are? I don’t remember a Scott.”

“I don’t live around here, so I haven’t seen your mom in a while. That’s probably why.”

The girl nods.

“What’s your name?”

“Chloe.”

Scott’s cheeks burn, hardly able to hold back a smile. Abby had always liked the name Chloe, him too, but listening to the girl actually identify herself in her own voice is a whole different experience. The softening of his heart applies a stinging pressure in his chest.

Chloe glances out into the hallway for her dad, then Scott does too. Kurt now has his back facing them and is using the bench as a crutch, howling with laughter. The window, Scott realizes, is wide open now. The light on the other side is blinding. The draft chills his skin.

“I have a puppy just like this, you know,” he says.

“You do! What’s his name?”

“Benny. I actually have him with me in the car, if you want to go meet him.”

Chloe bites her lip, suddenly looking uncomfortable. “I don’t think my parents would like that.”

Thinking fast, Scott says, “I saw your mom just a few minutes ago, actually. She was heading to the bathroom and she told me where I could find you and your

dad. She said you might like to meet Benny since you love dogs.”

“I don’t know. I should go ask my dad first.”

“Really, your mom said it was okay. She said to meet her back in the store in a few minutes, so we’ll be coming right back. It’ll just be for a minute.”

Chloe looks at her dad again, but his attentiveness has long since been gone. She shrugs. “Well, if my mom said it was okay, then I guess I’ll go meet him. But just for a minute.”

Without saying anything further, Scott leads Chloe out of the store before she comes to her senses. His heart is pounding, his head aching with tension, the flowing adrenaline making him shiver. His hands again tremble with jitters. He and Chloe exit to the left. Scott pushes Chloe to the inside and against the wall, using his body to hide her. He keeps his eyes straight ahead, his head down, with sweat oozing from his pores, and pushes onward. An exit sign glows orange just up ahead.

“Should we tell my dad?” Chloe asks.

“I don’t think we need to. Your mom will be here in a minute and she’ll tell him.”

Scott gently puts his arm around Chloe’s shoulder and leads her down the busy walkway. They reach the illumination and push through. The door to the outside is at the end of a long, dark, and slightly eerie hallway. Scott doesn’t exhale until they step outside and the dimly lit corridor is at their backs.

Once outside, Scott leads Chloe to his mother’s station wagon at the far end of the parking lot. “Here we are,” he says as they arrive at the wagon, the breeze still gusting, albeit not quite as hard as it had been earlier. It offers him much needed relief.

“Where’s Benny?” Chloe asks as she looks through the rear windows of the station wagon, ignoring the hole of

rust on the frame. She falls back on her heels and throws her hands on her hips.

Scott unlocks the door, slides his head into the back seat, and pretends to look for the puppy. “I don’t know,” he says. “He was in here when I left.”

He pulls away from the car and faces Chloe to gauge her reaction. Her lips are pursed and she makes a clicking sound with her tongue; she doesn’t buy it.

“You don’t really have a puppy, do you?” she says. Then she takes a step back.

A nervous sweat covers Scott’s back, drenching his shirt like a sponge. He should have had a plan.

Now what?

Chloe shifts her eyes to the side, drops her arms, and starts to twist her torso. But Scott recognizes what she’s about to do, and he’s quick too. He does the only thing he can think to do.

He panics.

In one smooth motion, Scott wraps his arms around Chloe’s waist and lifts her off the ground, holding her parallel to the tarmac. Chloe kicks her feet and screams piercing screams at the top of her lungs, arms flailing, midriff showing. Her voice vibrates through the desolation of the parking lot. Bracing her torso and upper body between his thigh and rib cage, Scott stretches her legs out with his free hand and forces her into the back seat. She fights and squirms, but eventually loses the battle of strength and slips onto the floor between the front and back seats, still screaming, now crying. Scott slams the door and rushes around to the other side of the wagon. His entire body trembles from the shot of adrenaline. His eyes widen, scanning the parking lot to see if there are any witnesses. As far as he can see, miraculously, there are none.

He hops in and starts the station wagon as quickly as he can.

Chloe gathers herself and pushes from the floor onto the back seat, all kinds of thoughts running through her mind like scavengers. Her muscles tense and her breaths are short, but she's not hurt, only stunned. Once she comes to, the heavy burden of her own stupidity suffocates her.

As the old station wagon speeds away with its tires squealing, the momentum tossing Chloe back and forth on the back seat, she reaches for the door handle behind Scott's seat and yanks on it. It won't budge. She goes with the momentum of the vehicle and reaches for the handle on the other door, but that's locked from the outside too. As the car steadies and the hot smell of burning rubber starts to fade, Chloe realizes there's no way out. For the first time, she recognizes her life might be in danger. The noises around her are deafening.

Abby rushes into the bathroom and vomits into the toilet in one of the empty stalls. The combination of being in her first trimester and the shock of the delivery in her mailbox this morning has made her stomach churn. When emptied, she sits on the toilet bowl and rests her face in her hands, shaking and groaning from the pain of her aching guts. She wasn't ready to deal with this yet, not like this. She can't believe it's been ten years already.

Once she settles, Abby gathers herself and rinses out her mouth in the sink, spitting the acid against faded porcelain. Then she leaves the bathroom and heads back out to find Kurt and Chloe. She hasn't told Kurt about the pregnancy yet, and she's not sure why. They'd tried for a second child for years after Chloe was born, but after losing two fetuses around the eight-week mark, they stopped for a while. The pain simply hurt too much. Part of her is afraid she might jinx it. Or maybe she's afraid Kurt won't want

another one after all these years. She'll tell him when the time is right.

In front of the pet store, Abby finds Kurt laughing with his old friend and neighbor, Fred. They haven't seen him and his wife in two or three years probably, despite living in the same town. Life tends to get in the way sometimes.

"There you are, Abby," Fred says as Abby approaches. "How are you?"

Abby leans in and accepts his polite embrace. "Good to see you, Fred. Where's Caroline?"

"Oh, she's down the hall looking for shoes, as always."

"Some things never change, I guess," Abby says, smiling half-heartedly.

"You got that right."

Noticing that Chloe isn't with Kurt, Abby peers into the pet store. She doesn't see her in there either, so she turns to Kurt with curiosity and says, "Where's Chloe?"

"She's looking at puppies," Kurt says.

"No, she's not."

"Of course she is, she's right over there." Kurt turns and points into the pet store. Except, there's no one there.

Panic sets in.

Abby rushes around a wooden bench that separates one side of the corridor from the other and hurries into the pet store, pushing past a group of teenage girls. A loud, repetitive pounding drums in her ears. She makes the rounds in the store and finds no one, no Chloe, so she yells out for the employee. Abby paces anxiously until a youthful looking woman appears from the back. She can't be any older than her early twenties.

"Can I help you?" the woman asks.

Abby is frantic. "Did you see a little girl in here? Dark hair, brown eyes, wearing denim shorts."

Kurt joins Abby in the store just as she finishes asking the question.

“There was a girl in here a few minutes ago. Why?”

“So, she left then?” Abby says.

“Yeah, she left with a guy.”

“What!”

“What? What’s the matter?”

“How old was this guy?” Kurt interjects.

“I don’t know, about your age probably. He looked kind of like you, actually,” the woman says, pointing to Kurt. “But I only got a quick glimpse. I was in the back.”

“Oh, God,” Abby says, now pacing more quickly.

“What? What’s wrong?” the woman says, her face scrunched, her lips puckered. “It looked like he was her dad or something.”

Stars spin, forcing Abby to grab a hold of the side of the counter to keep herself from falling. She squares up her feet so she has better support, and when she does, she can feel the note once again poking into her thigh through her jeans. It seems to have gotten sharper. She wants to scream, but knows she can’t.

Still next to her and seeming oblivious to her pain, Kurt says to the store clerk, “That wasn’t her dad.”

“How do you know?” the woman asks, her voice quaking.

Abby glances up and notices how completely pale the woman’s face has become.

“Because I am.”

Chapter Three

With Chloe sitting quietly in the back, Scott keeps his hands on the wheel and drives along the back roads that parallel the high-traffic areas. The jitters in his hands have disappeared, the sweats subsided, but he still senses his fuse could burst at any moment. He patters his thumbs on the faded leather wheel to try to distract himself, but he fears it's only making him more anxious. His mother's cabin is thirty-five miles from the mall and on the edge of the Tiadaghton State Forest. They're not even halfway there.

Although he knows it had to be done, Scott's struggling to comprehend what he's gotten himself into. He'd thought it was going to be easy to get the girl to agree to go with him, and initially, it was, but he hadn't really thought the whole thing through. That, he realizes, was his biggest mistake. But, in the end, he got the girl, and that's all that mattered, although it didn't make any of this easier.

Scott peers in his rearview mirror every so often to check in on Chloe. She's stone-faced and sitting tight against the door, as far away from Scott as she can be. He hates that she's afraid of him, although he can't blame her. He's given her no choice. Her back is pressed against the edge of the seat, her eyes scanning everything around her with a concentrated precision. Her fingers fidget with something in her lap, but even when adjusting the mirror to get a better look, Scott can't tell what it is.

"You should put your seat belt on," Scott says in the most harmless voice he can.

Without saying anything in protest, Chloe obliges. Scott readjusts the mirror again so he can see the full reflection of her face.

“I’m sorry about all this,” he says as he switches his eyes between the mirror and the road. “You don’t have to be scared.”

Chloe’s bottom lip starts to quiver, but she quickly stops it. She strong for her age, Scott can tell, and he’s glad Abby has taught her how to be that way. Woman and girls, especially, must be strong.

“Where are you taking me?” Her voice is weak, innocent.

Scott smiles but ignores the question. “I really do know your mom, you know. She and I go way back. Way before you were even born, actually.”

Chloe says nothing.

“Before even your dad knew her. We’ve known each other forever practically. We basically grew up together.”

Chloe’s lip starts up again, but this time, she doesn’t fight it. Tears as thick as molasses begin to stream down her face.

Sensing he can say nothing that will help the current situation from the front seat, Scott lowers his eyes from the mirror and keeps them straight ahead. Seeing Chloe like this makes him feel terrible about what’s happened. He can only imagine what she’s thinking, and he wishes he could explain to her what’s going on.

Except, he can’t. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Scott sighs, questioning, but hoping he’s doing the right thing. “We’ll be there soon,” he says. “Then you get to meet someone very special. I think you’ll really like her.”

Detectives Hank Berger and Melanie Chase have been assigned to the Janis case. Hank knows very little about what awaits him and his partner as they cross through the yellow crime scene tape, but he's ready to get to it. There's another missing girl, he's heard, and it makes his skin crawl with endless possibilities. He doesn't have the best track record with this type of situation, and everyone knows it.

He and Melanie approach the scene. There's an aura of anxiousness that surrounds the area, and Hank feels the pressure right away. The tie around his neck chokes him as if it were a python, forcing him to loosen his collar. Everyone, it seems, is on edge. The local cops already on the scene unfold their arms and jump to attention as he approaches, Melanie a step behind. The men put up a façade of being desensitized and unaffected by what's happened, but Hank knows better. He can tell by their slouched shoulders and moistened foreheads that they're glad to see him, thankful the situation at hand is no longer their problem. Hank's seen everything once and most things twice, and at his age, he didn't think he'd have to go through this again.

But, it turns out, he was wrong.

"What's going on here?" he asks.

After some initial stumbling from the locals, Hank and Melanie are debriefed on the situation. There's really not much to learn, which Hank was afraid of. In situations like these, things can get ugly fast—he, of all people, knows that firsthand. He and Melanie are pointed in the direction of the girl's parents.

"You the parents?" Hank asks as he approaches them from behind. He already knows the answer and their names from the debriefing, but it's a quick way to break the ice. Offering his sympathy for the situation they're in isn't his strength.

Kurt and Abby Janis turn around at the sound of Hank's voice, facing him and Melanie. Abby's face is saturated with dried tears, mascara smeared on her cheeks, her eyes puffy. Kurt is visually disheveled, his hair out of place, his fingernails bitten to nubs, and is clearly shaken by what's happened.

"Yes, we're the parents," Kurt says. "You are?"

Hank opens his badge open and flashes it. "I'm Detective Berger and this is Detective Chase. We're going to be the lead investigators on the case."

They all shake hands.

"Tell me what happened," Hank says. "Start from the beginning."

"We already told the other guys. You want us to tell you too?" Kurt says.

"They're just locals. I'd like to hear it from you in your own words."

Kurt looks to Abby for support, but she's unable to provide much of anything. She just stares blankly into space, her cheeks penetrated with a deep red flush that's reminiscent of overripe tomatoes. "Okay then," Kurt begins. "I was with my daughter—our daughter—in the pet shop—"

"And where were you?" Hank asks, looking in Abby's direction.

She makes eye contact with him, and the first thing Hank notices after the tomatoes on her face is the glazed look in her eyes. It's as if a pane of glass has burrowed inside her eye sockets, waiting to shatter at any time. Right away, it worries him.

"Bathroom," Abby says.

Hank turns back to Kurt. "Okay. Continue."

"Chloe, our daughter, was looking at the puppies. I ran into an old friend who was walking by and we were just talking, then the next thing I know, Chloe's gone."

"What were you are your friend talking about?"

“Just catching up. I hadn’t seen him for a while.”

“Must have been pretty important for you to leave your daughter alone like that.”

Kurt raises an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

Melanie clears her throat and steps in. “What my partner is trying to say is that it’s really important you tell us everything. Anything and everything may help.” She places a hand on Abby’s wrist and offers a partial smile. “I know it’s difficult.”

Hank admires how caring and genuine Melanie seems, and he wishes he had the same way with people. Even in his younger days, he was never like that with the victims. But with only six months left until retirement, he’s not motivated enough to learn a new skill, either.

Kurt looks to Melanie and says, “Come to think of it, we did have a bit of a disagreement.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Melanie says.

“Chloe. Me and Chloe.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Abby interjects, the glass in her eyes thinning.

“I didn’t think it was important. It was nothing, really. She just asked about getting a dog, that’s all.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her I’d think about it. I said you didn’t really want a dog around the house.”

“So you made me out to be the bad guy?”

“It’s not that, it’s just—”

Melanie clears her throat again, which halts the banter for now.

“Sorry,” Kurt offers, sheepishly.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Melanie tries.

Kurt looks to his wife for approval, then says, “I think we told you everything.”

Melanie nods and reaches inside her coat and fetches out a business card. She hands it to Kurt, who takes

and reads it. “If you remember anything else, please call me. Okay?”

“That’s it?” Abby says. “You’re not going to do anything?”

Melanie looks to Hank briefly, then says, “No, that’s not it. We’re going to do some work around here—talk to some people, look at some tape—then we’ll see where to go from there. There’s nothing else you can do at this point, though. We don’t even know what we’re dealing with yet.”

“My baby is missing!” Abby says. “She was taken!”

“Mrs. Janis, I can’t fully understand what you’re going through as a mother, because I’m not one myself, but we don’t even know what’s happened yet. We’ll find out, though, I can promise you that. We’ll call you when we know something.”

“I’m not leaving. No chance in hell.”

Hank studies Abby hard. He gets a strange vibe coming from her, but he’s unable to pinpoint where it’s coming from. To him, it seems like she’s forcing it. He says, “Do you have something else to contribute to the investigation? Something that maybe you’ve left out?”

Abby pauses and her face turns pale. “No. Nothing we haven’t said to you or the other guys or the lady on the phone already.”

Hank keeps his eyes on her for a second longer. Something definitely feels off; she’s too defensive. “Okay, then. You don’t have to leave, but stay out of our way. We have work to do.”

“He’s right, Mrs. Janis,” Melanie says. “You’re more than welcome to stick around. But, if you don’t mind...”

Kurt nods. He gets it. He wraps his arm around his wife and moves her toward the bench.

“Thank you,” Melanie says. “We’ll be right over here if you need anything.” She and Hank head toward the pet store.

The store is clean and tidy, but it’s loud and smells like a zoo. Puppies bark, kittens whine, and some caged critter makes a high pitched squeal that Hank doesn’t recognize. Strong fluorescent lights reflect off the cages, forcing Hank to look away for a moment. A young woman who’s teary-eyed and very pretty greets them as she stands behind the counter with her hands folded. Dark bags under her eyes tell Hank all he needs to know about her credibility as a possible witness. Ignoring the overhead lights, Hank scans the ceiling and quickly finds two cameras on opposite ends of the room, both mounted in a corner. He suspects their angles might suffice.

“Can you make a copy of the VHS for me?” Hank asks the woman as he points to one of the cameras.

The girl behind the counter lowers her eyebrows, almost frowning. “I’m sorry, officer, I don’t know what that is.”

“Detective.”

“Sorry. Detective, I don’t know what you mean.”

“How old are you?” Hank asks.

“Nineteen. Why?”

“You’re nineteen and you don’t know what a VHS cassette is?”

The girl shrugs.

“A VHS, Hank?” Melanie says. “What is this, 1995?” She turns to the girl behind the counter. “Sweetie, the security cameras—do they work?”

“Yeah, they work.”

“Do they record?”

“There’s a DVD recorder out back.”

“Will you grab the DVD for us, please? We’ll need a copy.”

The girl nods and disappears into the back.

Melanie turns to Hank again and puts her hands on her hips. “A VHS, Hank?”

“What?” Hank says, then he shrugs.

A moment passes. Hank stands with Melanie, anxiously shifting his weight from one foot to the other, while they wait for the girl to return. He whistles softly, tapping his toes on the tile under his feet. The noises from the animals have softened.

“So, what are you thinking, Hank?”

“I don’t trust her.”

“Who?”

“The mother.”

“Mrs. Janis? Why not?”

Hank faces his partner. “Because she’s lying to us, Chase. I have a feeling she knows more than she’s letting on.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I just do, Chase. I just have that feeling.”

Chapter Four

After being forced to abandon the back roads and merge onto a two-lane highway, Scott pulls off the main strip and detours down a dead-end road. The station wagon is old and rusted underneath and isn't built for the off-road conditions, so he lets off the gas as he makes his way over exposed tree roots and around broken limbs. Despite the day being at its brightest, the thick forest eliminates all of the sunlight to give it a feel of nightfall. It heightens the intensity.

Scott's mother's cabin appears after a half mile of maneuvering around the uneven terrain. It's a log cabin made of a dark red oak and it sits surrounded by a bevy of shade-loving plants and shrubbery. It's well-kept and welcoming, even in spite of the eerie entrance. Scott proudly calls it home.

And now, Chloe can too.

Scott pulls the wagon in front of the cabin and kills the engine. It spits out an exhausted whirl as it comes to a stop, a layering of black smoke forming a cloud in the rear. Scott slides out of the wagon, his shirt pulling on the seat as if it were stuck with gum, and takes in the scents and sounds of nature: flowers blooming, woodpeckers pecking, trout jumping in the pond in the back.

So peaceful. So isolated. So perfect.

With rocks scrabbling beneath his feet, Scott makes his way around the front of the wagon and looks through the glass at Chloe. Her eyes shift from side to side, scanning her surroundings, trying to gauge where she is and why. Scott can see the wheels spinning in her head, and he's impressed with her sense of awareness at such a young

age. Abby really has done well. He leaves Chloe alone and heads into the cabin.

“Mother, I’m home,” Scott yells out as he enters, the door scraping the tile behind him. He holds his position and waits for a response, but gets nothing. Only crickets.

A moment later, the floor creaks from down the hall, the sound of shuffling feet nearing. Just then, his mother appears, wearing her apron that’s covered with black, charred holes from years of use. She’s had the same one for as long as Scott can remember, and it reminds him of his childhood whenever she wears it. The warm aroma of freshly cooked blueberries fills the cabin, Scott tasting them as he licks his lips.

“Is she here?” Scott’s mother, Diane, asks as she enters. She dries her hands on the belly of her apron using the same circular motion that she has thousands of times over the years. Her eyes widen and sparkle the way the pond does when the sun hits it just right, her face glowing with anticipation.

“In the car,” Scott says.

Diane smiles a little, wipes it away, then covers her mouth to keep it hidden. “Okay, so what do we do now?” she asks.

“That’s the same exact question I was going to ask you,” Scott says. “I thought you knew.”

Inside one of the offices of the local precinct, Hank sits with Melanie while they review the security tapes from the mall, frustration building. Unfortunately, despite the many angles, there’s not much to work with.

Melanie controls the remote and rewinds and fast forwards at Hank’s instruction. Hank rocks in place. They use the time stamp at the bottom to narrow down their search, but even with the targeted sections of video, they’re practically worthless. The one thing the tapes do reveal,

though, is that the man who has Chloe Janis might be a professional. The way he maneuvered around the pet store, looking so casual and carefully avoiding looking directly into the cameras, it's like he knew what he was doing. Either that, or he's one lucky son of a bitch. But no one can possibly be that lucky, Hank thinks. Bottom line, the footage is a dead end.

"Stop the tape," Hank says as he tosses a pen onto the table, huffing.

"See something?"

"Nothing to see, Chase."

Melanie nods in agreement. "What do we do now?"

Hank gets to his feet, slowly, as if it pains him to do so, and starts for the door. "Let's go talk to them."

Melanie grabs her steaming mug, the usual scent of roasted coconut and marshmallows following her. She slips a small bag, half gone, of extra marshmallows in her hip pocket, and follows Hank. They join the Janis's in the interrogation room down the hall, where they've been waiting since they insisted on following the detectives to the station.

Abby and Kurt both stand when the door opens and the detectives walk in, looking anxious and eager for some good news. Hank sits across from them, Melanie too, and wastes no time in getting down to it. There's no easy way to tell them what he and Melanie have found.

"Okay, so we've reviewed the tapes," Hank begins, "and I've got to tell you, there's nothing suspicious that jumps out at us."

"Nothing suspicious?" Abby says. "How could that be?" Her eyes are still red, but she seems more alert than she had been at the mall. The shields of glass have disappeared from her pupils.

"We still have to take a closer look, but all signs point to your daughter knowing the person she left with."

"That's impossible."

“Why do you say that? Is there something else should know?”

“Of course not,” Abby says, looking away.

“Well, alright then,” Hank says. He glares at her as a tense silence fills the room.

“But like Detective Berger said,” Melanie interjects, “we still have to look at the tapes a little closer. We still don’t know much right now.”

“Do you have anything?” Kurt pleads. “Anything at all?”

“We do have a visual of the man in question,” Melanie admits. “And we can confirm that your daughter did leave with him.”

Kurt is wide-eyed and almost excited about this. “That’s good news then, right?”

“It’s a step in the right direction,” Melanie agrees.

Kurt looks between the detectives and his wife, his sunken eyes showing his apprehension. “Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

Melanie looks to Hank, who gives her a subtle nod. “Well, it’s just that...”

“What?” Abby says. “What is it?”

Melanie looks to Hank again, and this time, he fills in the rest. “Based on the criteria developed by the state of Pennsylvania, there’s nothing else we can do right now.”

Abby jumps to her feet, frantic, the legs of the chair scraping the floor underneath her. “What do you mean there’s nothing else you can do? My daughter has been abducted!”

“According to what we can tell from the tapes, your daughter didn’t appear to be in any kind of danger. They left the pet store together. She was just walking next to the man and he didn’t appear to be threatening her in any way. Quite frankly, it seems as if your daughter went willingly.”

Abby slams her hands on the table and leans across it with rage boiling in her eyes. “You son of a bitch!”

Kurt reacts quickly and wraps his arms around Abby's waist, pulling her back as if she were a toddler having a meltdown. Melanie jumps to her feet and puts a hand on her weapon, backing away a step. Hank stays seated and stares back at Abby, wondering where her outburst came from. He's been through this type of thing once or twice, and her overreaction seems out of line. Admittedly, and maybe foolishly, he wasn't expecting it. Her unpredictability is something to pay attention to already, he notes, and the investigation has only just begun.

When the dust settles and everyone sits back down in their seats, emotions in check, Hank clears his throat. Very calmly, he says, "I don't know what you think we're doing here, Mrs. Janis, but we're on your side, okay? We're doing everything we can, but you're not making our jobs any easier."

Abby breathes fire at him with her eyes, but says nothing. Kurt caresses her forearm to try to coax her back to reality. A bead of sweat on his forehead starts to move south, but Kurt refuses to address it. The pulsating veins in his neck tell Hank that Kurt's taken aback by Abby's abruptness, too.

"Our daughter wouldn't have run off with some guy, okay?" Kurt says. "She wouldn't do that."

"I've heard that before," Melanie says. "And in all honesty, we do believe that to be the case. It doesn't make much sense that a nine-year-old girl would run off with a guy like that."

Hank keeps a close eye on Abby, studying her, trying to determine who she really is. Her husband seems to have her adequately restrained.

"I don't understand then," Kurt says. "Why can't you do anything if you don't think she went willingly?"

With his eyes still locked on Abby, Hank says, "In order to file a missing person's report at this stage, the child must be in imminent danger, which she doesn't appear to

be. Or she has to have been abducted, which she also doesn't appear to have been. And considering it's only been a couple of hours—"

"But, she just said—"

Hank holds up a hand to stop him. "Listen, I know. I get it. But since your daughter doesn't meet any of the criteria right now, we just have to wait it out."

"For how long?" Kurt asks, the defeat obvious in the softness of his voice.

"Twenty-four hours."

Abby jumps to her feet again and lunges at Hank. Kurt is slower to react this time, having let his guard down just a little, but he's able to pull her back before she does anything she might regret. Melanie is back on the defensive, quickly on her feet again, her hand back on her weapon. Hank only flinches and sighs heavily. He's starting to get annoyed at the whole scene developing in front of him for a second time.

"Twenty-four hours!" Abby exclaims. "She could be dead in twenty-four hours!"

"Listen, lady," Hank says with a fiery tone. He points a somewhat unsteady finger in Abby's direction and holds it there. "If you can't control your outbursts, then I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I'm sympathetic to how you feel, I really am, but there's nothing we can do right now. If your daughter doesn't return home in twenty-four hours, we'll be ready to go, full steam ahead." Hank lowers his finger, but keeps his hard eyes on Abby. "I'm sorry, but I don't make the laws, I just enforce them."

Chapter Five

Chloe doesn't try anything while Scott leaves her alone in the station wagon. He'd locked his door from the outside before he went inside the cabin, so Chloe realizes there's no way out. Each of the windows are rolled up tight and sealed, and Chloe has no intentions of trying to break a window either. Even if she did, where would she go? She has no idea where she is. It's probably best if she waits and does what Scott tells her to do, she decides, so she stays buckled.

Scott reemerges from the cabin in a matter of minutes and walks back toward the wagon. The warmth is trapped behind the seals, making the air heavy inside the wagon, forcing Chloe to break out in a sweat. She tenses up as Scott approaches, a casual smile on his face, and she wraps her sticky palms around the seat belt over her chest. Outside the door, Scott fumbles with the keys on his keyring, eventually finding the one that fits. When he finds it, he opens Chloe's door, letting fresh air rush inside the wagon and invigorating her lungs. Chloe breathes it in and gets some relief.

Without saying anything, Scott leans across her chest and reaches for something near her waist. Chloe pushes herself back against the seat and clenches her teeth together, frightened, waiting for something to happen. The sweat on his neck tickles her nose, his aftershave making her eyes water. She steadies herself and holds her breath, unsure what to expect, and braces for pain.

But the pain never comes.

A click of metal and plastic pops and the seat belt loosens in front of Chloe. She stays unmoving, letting it be

as it twists its way around her shoulder and slides back into its stationary resting position. Her tensed core muscles relax and she exhales, suddenly realizing how trapped she'd felt buckled in.

Scott backs out of the wagon, and holds his hand out for Chloe. She looks at him with apprehension, unsure what to think, unsure if she can trust him. He smiles at her again and pushes his hand closer. With the same degree of uncertainty, Chloe gives in and takes Scott's hand, not knowing what other option she has. She lets him pull her to her feet, thankful to have flat ground underneath her. Together, they walk hand in hand toward the cabin. The moistness of Scott's hand threatens to allow Chloe to slip away.

But, regretfully, she doesn't.

Scott leads Chloe into the cabin and closes the door behind them. They enter into a small kitchen, complete with a rectangular table close to the middle of the room and old patternless tiles under foot. On the other side of the kitchen, wearing an old apron covered with streaks of grease and small tears and what looks like writing from a child's marker, an older woman is waiting. She's older than Scott, but not quite old enough to be a grandmother. She does have a motherly look to her, Chloe thinks, and Chloe wonders if she might be Scott's mother. The resemblance isn't immediately clear to her, but Chloe never has been very good at that type of thing. The woman stands halfway across the room with her hands over her mouth and tears in her eyes. Her eyelids are sunken and her cheeks are thinner than they should be, but she looks otherwise happy.

"Mother," Scott says, his voice shaking. "I'd like you to meet Chloe."

A hollow, muffled squeal protrudes from underneath the cupped hands over the woman's mouth. It's the recognizable sound of joyousness.

Scott turns to Chloe and says, “And Chloe, I’d like you to meet my mother. You can call her—”

“Didi,” the woman says tearfully. “I’d like you to call me Didi.” She clutches her hands to her chest and slowly makes her way across the room, tiptoeing like she’s approaching a wild animal. She makes her way toward Chloe and stands in front of her, studying her, searching for approval. Chloe doesn’t react as the woman crouches down, her arthritic joints making it visibly painful to watch, and gazes directly into Chloe’s eyes. “You are so beautiful. You are absolutely perfect.” Didi gently places her hands on Chloe’s bare arms and slides them up and down.

The hairs stand up on Chloe’s forearms, receptive to Didi’s gentle touch. Chloe stares down at the strange woman, confused, unsure what to think. The woman has a warm and welcoming presence about her, which Chloe is drawn to, but it all feels so wrong. Part of her wants to give the woman a hug to find out if the spinning is real or not, but even just the thought feels inappropriate. Because she’s never been so confused in her entire life, Chloe starts to cry too.

“Don’t cry, Chloe,” Didi says, wiping her own tears away. She pulls Chloe into her chest and squeezes her. “Everything will be okay. I promise. Everything will be fine.”

Chloe just stands in place with her arms dangling at her sides, feeling mostly bones, as the woman’s soft breath tickles her ear. She doesn’t offer up any resistance when Didi rubs her back, but she doesn’t give her anything in return either. She just lets the warmth tingle all throughout her body. She closes her eyes and pictures her mom, imagining it was her pressed against her chest instead of this stranger. It makes her cry even more.

Didi releases Chloe after a generous thirty seconds of awkward embracing, and she pushes to her feet, wincing. She wipes away the tears from Chloe’s cheek with her

thumb and washes them away on her apron. “Are you hungry, Chloe? I bet you’re hungry.”

Chloe shrugs.

“I’ve made a fresh blueberry pie. Handpicked blueberries. We have our own bush in the back near the pond, you know. Maybe we can do that together sometime—pick some berries, that is. Do you like blueberries?”

Chloe nods.

Didi exhales a bit and smiles. “Good. Now, let’s go get us a piece of pie, shall we? It’s still warm even, and that’s the best part.” Didi puts her arm around Chloe’s shoulder and leads her toward the giant rectangle across the kitchen.

Jordan Huff wanders around the walkways of the mall in Mifflinburg, alone, with his hands in his pockets, twirling a loose thread between his fingers, enjoying his freedom. He’s been willingly sober for thirteen months, two weeks, and five days. That’s also how long he’s been out of prison for.

He doesn’t often make the trip from the double-wide he shares with his girlfriend in Montgomery to Mifflinburg, but something inside him told him to get out of the house for a while today. So he did. He could use a new pair of steel-toed boots for work, so it gave him an excuse to make the trek. Mindy, his live-in girlfriend, works all day on Saturday’s and half days on Sunday’s, so Jordan spends a lot of time by himself. He often gets tired of cleaning the trailer and preparing meals, so he thought some exercise to clear his mind might help to break up the monotony.

He just wasn’t expecting the mall to be a crime scene.

Jordan's generally reserved. The daily pressures of prison life were of high-intensity and stressful, and since he's been out, he's mellowed. He learned what life was like on the inside — the struggle to stay alive, the struggle to trust your surroundings enough to get a good night's sleep - and now that he's out, he's doing all he can to keep a low profile. He just wants to keep his head down and stay out of trouble.

Drugs are what did him in, got him, put him away. It got out of hand so quickly. One day he was sixteen and smoking a little pot with his friends, and the next day he was twenty-seven and hooked on the hard stuff. Although he hated it at the time, him going to prison was the best thing that'd ever happened in his life. It got him sober. Rehab failed twice prior to that, so he's thankful he's getting a second chance at life. And now, he's determined to make the best of it.

The yellow crime scene tape that creates a barrier from one part of the mall to the other was not something Jordan had expected to see today. He hasn't been inside a mall very many times in the last ten years, but he'd always remembered them as being safe havens for teenage girls and single moms. The police tape tells him otherwise now. Things, apparently, have changed.

A young police officer with a baby face and huge biceps stops him as he approaches the tape. "You can't come any further than that," the officer says.

Jordan looks past the strange-looking man and sees a swarm of officers moving in and out of the pet store further down the corridor, some carrying black duffel bags, others holding their hats. "I just wanted to get some new boots," Jordan says, motioning to the men's shoe store that sits adjacent to the pet store.

"Sorry, no can do. Come back another time. We'll be busy here for a while."

"What's going on?"

“I can’t really say. Police business.”

“Did something happen?”

“Like I said, I can’t really say anything at this time.

An investigation is ongoing.”

Jordan nods, feeling unsatisfied.

“Sorry about your boots,” the officer says, “but you’ll have to come back another time.”

Jordan bobs his head up and down for a while and turns his back to the officer. The mystery intrigues him, and he wonders what’s being hidden that the public can’t know about. He figures it’ll be public knowledge soon enough; everything always is.

With his hands still jammed deep in his pockets, the loose thread being stubborn, Jordan makes his way back toward where he came from. He’ll gladly save the money for now.

Mindy Jacobs owns her own business—a hair salon—so most of their disposable income is reinvested back into it. Jordan doesn’t mind. Mindy accepted him for who he was and what he’d gone through early in his life, and he’s forever grateful for that. Without her taking a chance on him and seeing the good, there’s no telling where he’d be. Probably still in Pittsburg with his old friends and old temptations.

Aside from his imprisonment, which was responsible for his sobriety, Mindy moving from the city to the more affordable town of Montgomery to open her salon was the best thing that’d ever happened to Jordan. He jumped on the opportunity to move in with her, and everything’s been great. It’s been over a year already. Jordan found employment at a steel factory almost immediately after moving to Montgomery, and although he works with other released convicts, he hasn’t once been tempted to relapse. Mindy has made it clear to him that if he ever did, he’s out. No exceptions. That motivation alone has been enough to keep him straight. And for all she’s

done for him, for her acceptance of him and his wrongdoings in his past, he's going to make it up to her one day. He's slowly saving his pennies, and once he gets enough saved to do it properly, he's going to buy her a ring. He's had his eye on one for quite a while, and he's never met a woman more deserving than Mindy. When the day comes for him to cash in, Jordan just hopes she'll say yes.

“I’m going to kill him,” Abby says to Kurt, his Benz hugging the road that leads them back home. She’s still steaming from the results of their conversation with the detectives, and Kurt doesn’t blame her. He feels the same way. He’s just more understanding than his well-meaning wife; the detectives’ hands are tied.

“I know,” he says.

“Can you believe they’re making us wait for twenty-four hours before doing anything?”

“I know.”

“What is this world coming to?”

Kurt doesn’t know how to respond, so he says nothing. He knows Abby won’t understand the position the detectives are in, as a mother. A hostile silence overwhelms the Mercedes that’s already without a vital cog. Kurt peeks in his rearview mirror to where his baby girl should be sitting in the back, but she’s not there. Her absence makes his heart ache, the guilt strangling him like a noose. As he looks back to the road, pain everywhere, he can suddenly feel the elephant in the car with them. As much as he tries to ignore it, its burden is crushing him, suffocating him, sucking the life right out of him. He can’t help but think this is all his fault.

“Listen, Abby, about what happened—”

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“I know, but if I was paying more attention—”

“It could have happened to anyone.”

“Will you give me more than that, please? You can’t possibly understand the guilt I feel about what happened.”

“What do you want me to say, Kurt?” Abby shuffles around in her seat and faces him. “Do you want me to tell you it’s all your fault and that if you weren’t ignoring her and talking to Fred that this wouldn’t have happened? Is that what you want?”

Kurt lets the words sink in. He’s not sure what he’d been expecting, but he doesn’t feel any better having heard it aloud. He sighs. “I guess you’re right. I don’t know what I was hoping to accomplish.” He takes Abby’s hand in his own and massages a knuckle with his finger. “I’m sorry.”

Abby squeezes Kurt’s hand and drops her head slightly. “I’m sorry too,” she says.

“We’ll get through this. We’ll find out who took Chloe and we’ll get her back. Whatever it takes.”

Abby nods in agreement, but looks away.

“We just have to stay by the phone,” Kurt says. “If the detectives find something else on the tapes, maybe we can file the report sooner.”

Abby nods again, keeping her eyes averted.

“And if not, twenty-four hours from now we’ll hit the ground running—just like they said. We’ll find out who did this and what they want. We’ll get our baby back.”

Abby doesn’t respond, but Kurt can hear her sniffing as she stares out the window. He’s failed her more than he thought possible, and it’s out of his hands to fix it. Relinquishing control of the situation is going to be difficult, he knows. But he also knows if he doesn’t empower the detectives to do their jobs, he may never see his baby girl again. He wishes there was something more he could do.

About Dan Lawton

Dan Lawton is an adult crime thriller, suspense, and mystery writer from New England. He studied Communications in college and is a Technical Writer by day.

His first two novels were self-published, and he signed his first book deal for his third novel the day before his twenty-seventh birthday.

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