



"Gerritsen is a  
born storyteller."  
— LEE CHILD,  
#1 *New York Times*  
bestselling author

THE

SUMMER

GUESTS

A THRILLER

TESS

GERRITSEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

## PRAISE FOR *THE SPY COAST*

“Tess Gerritsen writes in a smoothly elegant style; it’s always a delight to read her. *The Spy Coast* is a marvelously plotted read with action-packed pages, g-force twists and turns, and a platoon of fascinating characters. I truly hope to see Maggie Bird and her team of silver-haired helpers on the pages again.”

—David Baldacci, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Master storyteller Tess Gerritsen has written an ingenious, spellbinding novel that moves from Bangkok to a small town in Maine, seductive settings where secrets are kept and lives upended . . . *The Spy Coast* is utterly thrilling, full of morally complex characters with deeply buried secrets and a life-and-death chase into the past and back again. It’s a great novel.”

—Luanne Rice, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Powerful, resonant, absorbing, freighted with menace and suspense . . . Gerritsen is a born storyteller, and this new series showcases her talents more than ever. Irresistible and highly recommended!”

—Lee Child, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“A riveting tale filled with engaging characters. I look forward to the rest of the series.”

—Kathy Reichs, author of the Temperance Brennan *Bones* series

“Tess Gerritsen is a brilliant, must-read novelist, and she’s done it again with *The Spy Coast*. Readers will want to follow the adventures of Maggie Bird and her band of Mainer compatriots for a long, long time.”

—C. J. Box, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Storm Watch*

“For decades, Midcoast Maine has enjoyed a reputation as a haven for spies living in anonymous retirement. Now bestselling author Tess Gerritsen has taken this apocryphal (or not!) premise and transformed it into a crackerjack thriller. *The Spy Coast* is my favorite kind of page-turner, rooted in relatable, if ruthless, characters and grounded in a meticulously observed sense of place.”

—Paul Doiron, bestselling author of the Mike Bowditch novels

“I loved it. A hugely entertaining read!”

—Ann Cleeves, creator of the Vera and Shetland series

“This is a nice take on retirement—five old spooks whose bones may ache but whose minds remain sharp. You can expect mystery, action, and bloodshed in this exciting thriller launched straight from the peaceful shores of Maine.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“The plot bustles along nicely, careening from Thailand to Italy and many points in between, but the real surprise is the richness of Gerritsen’s supporting cast, a cantankerous bunch whose love for one another runs deep.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Gerritsen . . . branches out into the world of espionage . . . expertly mixing spy drama with romance and wry comedy . . . Gerritsen fans and readers of Richard Osman’s Thursday Murder Club mysteries will love this.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Tess Gerritsen delivers a thrilling, endearing read.”

—Seattle Book Review

**THE  
SUMMER  
GUESTS**

## OTHER TITLES BY TESS GERRITSEN

*Choose Me* (with Gary Braver)

*The Shape of Night*

*Playing with Fire*

*The Bone Garden*

*Gravity*

*Bloodstream*

*Life Support*

*Harvest*

*Keeper of the Bride*

*Thief of Hearts*

*In Their Footsteps*

*Girl Missing* (Previous title: *Peggy Sue Got Murdered*)

*Presumed Guilty*

*Whistleblower*

*Never Say Die*

*Under the Knife*

*Call After Midnight*

**The Martini Club**

*The Spy Coast*

**Rizzoli & Isles**

*The Surgeon*

*The Apprentice*

*The Sinner*

*Body Double*

*Vanish*  
*The Mephisto Club*  
*The Keepsake*  
*Ice Cold*  
*The Silent Girl*  
*Last to Die*  
*Die Again*  
*I Know a Secret*  
*Listen to Me*

**THE  
SUMMER  
GUESTS**

**TESS  
GERRITSEN**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2025 by Tess Gerritsen, Inc. Short story “Over Easy” © 2024 by Lee Child and Tess Gerritsen, Inc.  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Thomas & Mercer are trademarks of [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781662515149 (hardcover)  
ISBN-13: 9781662515163 (paperback)  
ISBN-13: 9781662515156 (digital)

Cover design by Jarrod Taylor  
Cover image: © mustafaoncul, © Atila Yumusakkaya / Getty; © Designer things / Shutterstock

First edition



*To Jacob*

# CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 3: SUSAN](#)

[CHAPTER 4: REUBEN](#)

[CHAPTER 5: SUSAN](#)

[CHAPTER 6: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 11: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 12: SUSAN](#)

[CHAPTER 13: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 14: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 15: SUSAN](#)

[CHAPTER 16: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 17: SUSAN](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 20: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 21: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27: REUBEN](#)

[CHAPTER 28: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 29: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31: JO](#)

[CHAPTER 32: MAGGIE](#)

[CHAPTER 33: SUSAN](#)  
[CHAPTER 34: MAGGIE](#)  
[CHAPTER 35: JO](#)  
[CHAPTER 36: SUSAN](#)  
[CHAPTER 37: MAGGIE](#)  
[CHAPTER 38](#)  
[CHAPTER 39](#)  
[CHAPTER 40: JO](#)  
[CHAPTER 41](#)  
[CHAPTER 42: MAGGIE](#)  
[CHAPTER 43: SUSAN](#)  
[CHAPTER 44: MAGGIE](#)  
[CHAPTER 45: SUSAN](#)  
[CHAPTER 46: JO](#)  
[CHAPTER 47: REUBEN](#)  
[CHAPTER 48: MAGGIE](#)  
[CHAPTER 49: SUSAN](#)  
[CHAPTER 50: REUBEN](#)  
[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)  
[PREVIEW: \*OVER EASY\*](#)  
[Over Easy](#)  
[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

# CHAPTER 1

## *Purity, Maine, 1972*

On the last day of his life, Purity police officer Randy Pelletier ordered a cup of coffee and a blueberry muffin at the Marigold Café.

It was what he always ordered after getting off the night shift, his reward to himself for the lonely hours spent in his cruiser, keeping the streets and back roads of his town safe from drunk drivers, speeding tourists, and the occasional rabid raccoon. He sat at his usual corner table next to the window, where he could enjoy the warmth of the morning sun while keeping an eye on the activity on Main Street. A good cop never stopped being watchful, even while off duty. Just as important, people walking past the café could see him in the window, keeping an eye on things. Visibility was important to the community, and if any problems arose, the town knew exactly where to find their local peace officer: sitting right here, at the window table in the Marigold.

“Refill?” said the waitress, her coffeepot poised over his cup.

“Sure thing, Carla.”

“How was it last night?” she asked, pouring her usual rich, black brew.

“Pretty quiet.”

She laughed. “And we like it that way!”

“We sure do.”

“Why don’t I bring you another muffin? Fresh batch just came out of the oven.”

His waistline might not appreciate it, but his growling stomach would, so he didn’t refuse her. Who could refuse Carla, who kept the town well supplied with gossip and baked goods? As she went back to the kitchen, he unfolded his copy of the latest *Purity Weekly* and scanned the headlines on the front page: **Summer Reservations Hit Record High . . . Black Bear Sighted on Oak Street . . . Car Crash Sends Two to Hospital**. He turned the page to the local police blotter, on page three. Not that he needed to read it; he already knew the details of just about every traffic citation, every 911 call, over the past week.

*Cory, James, Boston, MA: speeding*

*Simpson, Richard, Purity, ME: expired registration*

*Allen, Jonathan, Augusta, ME: public drunkenness*

*Wiedemann, Scott, Albany, NY: public urination*

All in all, a typical week in July, when half the people in town were tourists from away, here on vacation, uninhibited and often drunk. Every summer they invaded, from Massachusetts and New York and beyond, streaming into Maine to escape the heat and stink of their cities. It was Randy's job to keep them from hurting themselves or others and then to wave them back home, hopefully with their wallets a little lighter.

The doorbell tinkled. Randy looked up to see two of those out-of-towners walk into the Marigold. He knew the two men weren't locals because they were both wearing black leather jackets when it was almost seventy degrees outside. They paused inside the door and scanned the café as if casing the room. They spotted Randy and momentarily froze.

That's right, gentlemen. Law enforcement was watching.

"Table for you boys?" said Carla. A fellow could be eighty years old, and not only would Carla still call him a boy, she wouldn't be above whacking him on the behind for bad behavior.

"Um, yeah," one of the men finally said.

Randy watched as Carla led them a few tables away, close enough for him to keep an eye on them. They both picked up plastic menus and studied the breakfast offerings a trifle too intently, as if trying to avoid Randy's gaze. Another detail that made him think these two bore closer watching. He was more accustomed to dealing with rowdy teenagers and drunk drivers, but he knew that big trouble sometimes found its way even to small towns, and he liked to think he was ready to handle it. He could even imagine the headline, splashed across the *Purity Weekly*. No, make that the *Boston Globe*:

### **Maine Police Officer Single-Handedly Captures Wanted Duo**

He didn't know if these men were armed, but it never hurt to be prepared, so he reached down and quietly unsnapped his holster. They were studying the menu, which was only a page long and offered nothing more exotic than French toast and fried eggs. It was yet another clue that something was not right about this pair.

The shorter man suddenly glanced over his menu at Randy. It was just a flick of his eyes, but in that instant, their gazes connected. Held. In the periphery of his vision, Randy saw Carla walking back toward their table, coffeepot in hand. Heard the roar of an engine on Main Street.

He was so focused on the two men that he did not see the white van streak past the window.

He heard the screech of tires, the sickening bang of metal slamming into metal, and he turned to the window. Saw shattered glass littering the street, and—sweet Jesus, was that a *body*?

“Oh my God!” cried Carla, still clutching the coffeepot as she stared out the window.

Randy scrambled to his feet and ran out of the Marigold. The first body lay only a few yards away in a spreading pool of blood. It was a man, his spine so grotesquely twisted that he looked like he’d been taken apart and reconstructed all wrong, his feet pointing backward. Across the street was another body, a woman, her pink blouse shorn open, one ripe breast indecently exposed for all to see. Randy dragged his attention away from the bodies and looked down the street, toward the sound of a blaring horn. A third body was splayed across the road—another woman, this one with her chest cage crushed almost flat, oranges and apples spilling from her shopping bag.

At the end of the block was a white van, its front end embedded in the side of a parked blue sedan.

The world around him seemed to halt on its axis. He moved past horrified pedestrians, their hands clapped over their mouths, past the two men in leather jackets, who’d followed him out of the café and now stood with mouths agape in horror. Through the freeze-frame of carnage, across shattered glass and blood-spattered pavement, Randy alone seemed to be in motion. As he drew closer to the crashed vehicles, he saw T<sub>ARKIN</sub> F<sub>INE</sub> C<sub>ARPENTRY</sub> printed on the white van. He knew this van. He knew the driver. Black smoke was rising from the engine, a terrifying harbinger of more disaster.

Through the driver’s window, he saw Sam Tarkin tilted forward, face down against the steering wheel. Randy yanked open the door. He couldn’t see any blood, any obvious injuries, but Sam was moaning, shaking.

Randy reached across Sam’s lap and released the seat belt. “You need to get out!” Randy yelled. “Sam? Sam!”

Suddenly Sam's head snapped up, and Randy stared at a man who *looked* like Sam Tarkin, with Sam's dark hair, Sam's angular face, but the eyes . . . what was wrong with his eyes? The pupils were dilated to black, bottomless pools. An alien's eyes. No, this sweating, shaking creature looked like someone else. *Something* else.

Randy glanced at the black smoke billowing out. He had to get him out, now. He grabbed Sam's arm and pulled.

"Get away!" Sam shrieked. "Get away from me!" He clawed at Randy, and his fingernails gouged flesh.

Face throbbing, Randy jerked away and felt blood trickle down his cheek. *What the hell, man?* Enraged now, he wrenched Sam out of the van, and they both went sprawling onto the pavement. Even then, Sam kept fighting him, thrashing. Desperate to control the man, Randy grabbed Sam's throat with both hands and squeezed. He squeezed so hard that Sam's eyes bugged out and his face darkened to a horrifying shade of purple.

"Stop it!" Randy yelled. "Stop fighting me!"

He did not feel Sam reach for his holster—the holster he'd already unsnapped. Suddenly there it was, staring at him: the barrel of his own gun.

"Don't," he said. "Sam, don't."

But it was not Sam Tarkin looking back at him.

And it was not Sam Tarkin who pulled the trigger.

# CHAPTER 2

## MAGGIE

### *The present*

It was the perfect summer evening: Maggie and her friends gathered around her picnic table, sipping martinis and bird-watching. Peering through binoculars as barn swallows dipped and swirled like bits of blue confetti over her freshly mowed field. Everyone relaxed and laughing and unarmed.

Although Maggie wasn't *entirely* certain about that last detail. She just assumed no one had felt the need to pack a firearm tonight, and really, what would be the point? They were all perfectly capable of unleashing mayhem with merely a shard of broken glass, and at the moment, they were each holding an easily shattered martini glass as they discussed this month's chosen title for their book group: *The Genius of Birds*. The book had been Maggie's selection, so it was her turn to host tonight's meeting of the Martini Club, the name they'd adopted for their pleasantly boozy get-togethers. Serving as host was not an onerous task, because dinner was always potluck, and Maggie's primary responsibility—indeed, the most important responsibility of these evenings—was having a sufficient selection of liquor on hand. For this group, *sufficient* meant three different brands of vodka, two brands of gin, dry vermouth, red and white wine, and, for after dinner, a selection of single-malt whiskys.

Today's weather was gloriously warm, so they'd carried the gin and vodka, vermouth and ice bucket outside to Maggie's picnic table to enjoy the view over her rolling fields. Three years ago, when Maggie had first come to Purity, this view was what had convinced her to buy Blackberry Farm and finally put down roots. Here, she'd found a measure of peace. During the summers, she collected fresh eggs from her flock of layer hens and sold them at the local farmers' market. During the winters, she

shoveled snow and nurtured her newly hatched chicks and perused the seed catalogs for her vegetable garden.

But no matter the season, these evenings with her four friends carried on. She'd known them for decades, since long before they'd all migrated to Purity, Maine, where they now quietly blended in with other retirees. Where people asked few questions about their previous careers and left them to their secrets. Secrets they felt free to share only among themselves.

Tonight, Ingrid Slocum had appointed herself the bartender, and she was already at work mixing a second batch of martinis, vigorously shaking ice cubes in the stainless steel cocktail shaker. The merry clatter brought back Maggie's days at Camp Peary, otherwise known as the Farm, where four of them—Maggie and Declan, Ben and Ingrid—had first bonded as clandestine officer trainees. Looking around at their faces, Maggie could still see them as they'd looked in their younger years: Ben Diamond, bull necked and muscular, with a glare that could freeze an assailant in his tracks. Eagle-eyed Ingrid Slocum, always the quickest to think her way out of any locked room. And Declan Rose, the dashing diplomat's son who could charm a stranger with just his smile. Four decades later, their hair was grayer—or, in Ben's case, shaved off entirely—and along with the passage of time had come the inevitable wrinkles and stiff joints and more than a few extra pounds. But the Farm veterans were still the Four Musketeers, undaunted by the encroaching years, eager for any challenge.

And a well-made martini.

"It's a shame they're dying off," said Declan as birds swooped overhead. "In another generation, there'll be no more barn swallows left in Maine." He handed his binoculars to Ben. "Here, these are better than yours. Take a look."

Ben, who was clearly not as much of an avian fan, halfheartedly peered up at the swallows. With his shaved head and faintly menacing scowl, he didn't much *look* like a bird-watcher either. "Where did you hear that? About the barn swallows dying off?"

"It was in last month's *Purity Weekly*. The bird-watching column."

"You actually read that column?"

"Bird-watching's an excellent cover for surveillance. If you're caught and need to bluff your way out, it's good to know the basics of the subject."

"Anyone else, another round?" asked Ingrid. "Lloyd's bringing out his antipasti tray, and it's all rather salty. You'll want to keep your whistles

wet.”

Ben raised his hand. “Hendrick’s, please, no vermouth. With all this talk about birds, my whistle’s already gone dry.”

“Snacks incoming!” Ingrid’s husband, Lloyd, announced cheerily as he came out of the house bearing one of the antipasti extravaganzas that he was so famous for: feta skewers and artichoke hearts, marinated mushrooms and paper-thin slices of salami. “Just don’t fill up on these,” he warned. “My braciolo’s warming up in the oven, and *that* deserves your hearty appetites.”

Ben looked at Ingrid as she handed him his freshly shaken martini. “With that man cooking for you, how are you not three hundred pounds?”

“Sheer discipline,” Ingrid said, and she settled into an Adirondack chair with her own drink.

“So are we all ready to discuss this month’s book selection?” said Declan.

Ben grunted. “If we have to.”

“Because I thought the book was absolutely brilliant.” Declan waved his new ZEISS binoculars. “It inspired me to upgrade to these beauties.”

“The book was far better than that ridiculous spy thriller we read last month,” added Lloyd, settling his generous bulk in the chair next to Ingrid’s. “Novelists never get it right.”

“What was everyone’s favorite chapter?” Declan asked.

“The chapter on sparrows,” said Maggie. “I love how most people ignore them because they seem so common, so ordinary. Yet sparrows have cleverly managed to infiltrate almost the entire globe.”

Ben snorted. “Are you talking about birds, or about us?”

“Well, there are parallels, don’t you think?” said Ingrid. “Sparrows are like the covert operatives of the avian world. Unobtrusive. Unnoticeable. They slip in everywhere yet rouse no attention.”

“Wait,” said Ben. “Could this be a first? Did we all actually *read* the book?”

They looked at each other.

“This *is* supposed to be a book group,” said Ingrid. “Even if we really come for the martinis.”

“And dinner,” added Lloyd. “Which, by the way, should be ready now.”

But no one moved. They were all too comfortable sitting in their Adirondack chairs, sipping their drinks and admiring the view. In the

distance, bells tinkled as Maggie's fourteen-year-old neighbor, Callie, just a twig of a girl in blue overalls, led her goats and her Jersey cow across the field, back to their barn. Callie waved at them; they all waved back. Crickets chirped and the swallows continued their aerobatic show overhead, flitting and swooping.

Ingrid sighed. "Does life get any better than this?"

*No. It does not*, thought Maggie. This was one of those rare perfect moments, with the tingle of vodka in her mouth and the scent of freshly mowed hay on the breeze. And dear Declan, sitting beside her, smiling. His once-black hair was now half-silver, but age had only deepened his Irish good looks, something she'd come to appreciate now, in the autumn of their lives.

She had spent her career on the edge of crises, never certain when everything might fall apart, so she knew how ephemeral moments like these could be, with everyone healthy and safe and no calamity in sight. But disaster could strike at any time, against any one of them: A car crash. A heart attack. A suspicious spot on an x-ray. Even on this perfect evening, surrounded by friends and with twilight settling gently over her fields, she knew that trouble was coming.

She just did not know when.

# CHAPTER 3

## SUSAN

They drove north to Maine with George Conover packed in the trunk.

Susan thought it more than a little disrespectful having her late father-in-law's cremated remains wedged in alongside their suitcases, but no one else in the family had objected, so why should she be bothered? She had scarcely known the man, had met him only three years ago, when Ethan first introduced Susan and her daughter, Zoe, to his parents. George had been polite enough, but he'd also been coolly distant, a blazer-and-boat-shoes Bostonian who seemed to be reserving judgment on these two new additions to his family until they could prove themselves worthy of the Conover name. When he'd died of a stroke three months ago, Susan felt no particular sense of grief. It might as well have been a stranger's burned bones and ashes in the urn—that's how little she'd known the man. Still, it struck her as unseemly to treat him like the rest of the luggage.

A sentiment that George's widow didn't seem to share. When they'd stopped in Brookline to pick up Ethan's mother, it was Elizabeth herself who wedged her late husband's remains in with her suitcase, Elizabeth who matter-of-factly closed the trunk. When Elizabeth decided an issue was settled, no discussion was needed.

Susan glanced over her shoulder at Zoe and Elizabeth in the back seat. Although they sat side by side, the two were not at all engaged with each other. Fifteen-year-old Zoe was focused on her smartphone, just a typical teenage girl isolated in her own virtual bubble where conversations consisted of clicks and swipes. Elizabeth, too, seemed to be in her own bubble, staring out the window at the scenery as they drove north up the Maine coast, through a chain of oddly named villages. Wiscasset. Damariscotta. Waldoboro. Thinking, perhaps, of past summers when she and George had driven this same highway to their summer home on Maiden Pond. After fifty-five years of marriage, this would be their last journey to Maine together, yet her face betrayed no grief. She sat ramrod straight, a

silver-haired stoic of a woman. That was Elizabeth, practical and unsentimental.

“Hey, Ethan?” Zoe said. “You told me the house is on Maiden Pond. Why is it called that?” *Ethan*, she still called him. How long would it take for Zoe to finally think of him as *Dad*? Susan looked at her husband, wondering if it bothered him, but Ethan seemed unperturbed, calmly gazing through his glasses at the traffic ahead.

“It’s called Maiden Pond because some girl drowned there ages ago,” Ethan said.

“Really? How long ago was that?”

“Um, Mom? Do you know?”

Elizabeth stirred from her reverie. “It was at least a hundred years ago. There was a group of schoolgirls who went out on a rowboat, and it capsized. That’s what I was told, anyway.”

“And the girl couldn’t swim?”

Susan glanced back at her daughter. “Not everyone’s a mermaid like you, sweetie.”

“And girls wore a lot more clothes back then,” said Elizabeth. “Petticoats, long dresses. Maybe boots. That may have dragged her down.”

“This website says Maiden Pond has a maximum depth of forty-two feet,” said Zoe, scrolling through her phone. “Does that sound right?”

“I have no idea,” Ethan said.

“But doesn’t your family go there every summer?”

“Mom and Colin do. I haven’t been back in a long time.” He glanced in the rearview mirror. “Mom, how deep is the pond?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Does it really matter?”

“As long as it’s deep enough,” said Zoe. “Is there anything in the water that bites?”

“Absolutely,” said Ethan. “You might get nibbled to death by ducks.”

“*Ethan.*”

“Seriously, there’s nothing in the pond that will hurt you, Zoe. Maine doesn’t even have any poisonous snakes.”

“That’s good, ’cause snakes are the one thing that *would* freak me out.”

“But I warn you, the water’s going to be cold. The lakes up here don’t really heat up till August.”

“Cold water doesn’t bother me. I want to do a polar bear plunge someday.”

“Better you than me.”

“I’m going to go swimming ten times a day here. I can’t *wait* to jump in!”

Ethan laughed. “And I can’t wait to hear you screech when you hit that cold water.”

It was good to hear Ethan laugh again. Susan hadn’t heard him laugh very much these last few months as he’d sat staring at his computer screen, waiting for inspiration. If only inspiration were something a novelist could just conjure up, he’d told her. If only there were a magic pill or an incantation that would make words appear on the page. Five years after his first novel was published, he had yet to deliver his second, and as the months passed, he’d grown more and more afraid that there never would be a second novel, that the words would never flow again. That he was merely an impostor, someone with the audacity to call himself an author. How could he tell his writing students at Boston College that he was any sort of authority on the craft when he himself could not produce a single satisfactory page? She’d watched defeat reshape his face, had watched the shadows deepen under his eyes and a perpetual frown etch its way into permanence. At night, she’d feel him tossing beside her, and she knew that it was the book keeping him awake. The book that refused to be written. She had no idea how a writer’s mind worked, but she imagined it was like a dozen different voices shouting in your head, demanding you tell their story *their* way. It seemed like a form of madness.

Maybe this would be good for him, being dragged away from his computer to attend his father’s memorial service, away from those constantly clamoring characters in his head. Even now, as Boston fell farther and farther behind them, she could see his neck muscles relax and his mouth tilt up as, mile by mile, he was shedding the layers of tension. He needed this trip to Maine. They both did. *Two weeks of vacation in a house on the water is exactly what we need.*

She turned to look at her mother-in-law, who was once again staring out the car window. “Everything okay back there, Elizabeth?”

“I’m just thinking about how much I’ll need to do when we get there.”

“Mom, it’s all taken care of,” said Ethan. “Colin texted me this morning. He and Brooke say the bedrooms are ready, so you won’t have to lift a finger. They’ve put Kit up in the attic, so Zoe can sleep in the bedroom next to ours. Oh, and Arthur and Hannah will join us tonight for cocktails.” He

looked at Susan. “You remember my parents’ friends, Hannah Greene and Arthur Fox, right? From the wedding. They have cottages on the pond too.”

“Yes, of course,” Susan said, although her memory of them was almost lost among all the other memories from their wedding day: Ethan beaming at her as they stood at the altar. Zoe, aglow in her yellow bridesmaid dress. And then the sudden thunderstorm that sent their drenched and laughing guests fleeing inside. She remembered Arthur, a tall and patrician man in his eighties, swapping stories at the bar with his old friend George. Similarly hazy was her memory of Hannah Greene, a buxom woman in her sixties, burbling stories about her misadventures while babysitting Ethan and his older brother Colin at the pond.

“There’ll be a few people you don’t know at the memorial service,” said Ethan. “The local minister’s presiding, and some of Dad’s buddies from the yacht club said they’d be there.” He glanced in the rearview mirror at Elizabeth. “It’ll be like old times, Mom!”

“Ethan, watch out!” said Susan.

Ethan suddenly slammed on the brakes, and their car screeched to a halt, jerking them all forward against their seat belts. “Jesus,” he muttered, staring at the line of cars that had abruptly stopped ahead of them. “You okay back there, Mom?”

“It’d be nice if we got there in one piece.”

“I didn’t count on all this traffic.”

“Well, you haven’t been back here in years. It’s changed.” Elizabeth sighed and said, softly: “Everything’s changed.”

The traffic was at a standstill. A long line of cars snaked ahead of them, curving around the bend and out of sight.

“There must be an accident,” said Susan.

The whine of a siren confirmed it. Susan turned and saw flashing lights moving toward them; then an ambulance swooped past the paralyzed traffic.

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” said Ethan.

The flashing lights vanished over the crest of the hill, and Susan thought of smashed cars and broken bodies. She’d trained as a nurse, and even though she no longer worked in a hospital but as a school nurse, she had not forgotten the panic of trying to save a life, and all the things that could go wrong. She looked back at her daughter, who was once again staring at her phone, oblivious to anything else. Elizabeth, too, seemed lost in her own

thoughts. Whatever drama was now playing out on the road ahead seemed to hold no interest for either of them.

Traffic began to move again. They crested the hill, and two crumpled cars came into view. Suitcases had been flung from a rooftop rack, and clothes were scattered across the road in a bright confetti of holiday wear. Lying in the ditch were an ice chest and a purple tennis shoe. *You came to Maine on vacation, never imagining this was what awaited you*, thought Susan. But who thought about such things when they were packing their shorts and sunscreen? They expected lazy days on a lake and lobster rolls on the seashore. They didn't imagine they would instead end up in a hospital bed.

Or never go home again.

\*

Her first glimpse of Maiden Pond was little more than flickers of gold through the tree branches, the reflection of sunlit water penetrating the smothering wall of spruce and pine. As they curved down Shoreline Road, she caught more glimpses but never a full view, only tantalizing flashes, bright as Christmas tinsel.

"Is that the pond down there?" said Zoe. At last, she'd set aside her phone and was looking out the window.

"Yep, that's Maiden Pond," said Ethan.

"I'm going to change straight into my bathing suit."

"How about waiting till morning, hmm?" said Susan. "We need to spend time with Colin's family first. You haven't seen Kit since the wedding."

"He didn't want to talk to me much, then."

"Oh, that's just Kit," said Ethan. "Your cousin's shy."

*That would be one word for it*, thought Susan, remembering the silent and slouching teenager who'd spent her entire wedding reception in tight orbit around his mother, Brooke. This year he'd be seventeen, old enough to start college in a few months. Maybe he'd acquired a few more social skills since then.

They bumped along a gravel road and stopped at a wooden sign nailed to a tree:

The forbidding sign was carved in simple block letters, unadorned by any flourishes, and it offered no hint of what waited at the bottom of the driveway.

“You need to get someone to cut back these trees, Mom,” said Ethan as they descended the narrow driveway, tree branches scraping the sides of their car.

“Your father let it go for too long. We’ve had other things to think about.”

“I’ll call around town, find out if we can hire someone to—”

“I’m sure your brother will take care of it.”

There was a silence. “Of course,” Ethan muttered. “Colin will take care of it.”

Suddenly the woods opened up, and a view of Maiden Pond bloomed into sight, its surface gilded by the afternoon sun. And there, looming above the water, was Moonview, the Conovers’ summer home. Elizabeth had called it *the cottage*, so Susan had expected something rustic, but this was no mere cottage. It was a sprawling house with multiple gables, four chimneys, and a wide deck with steps descending to a sweeping lawn. They pulled to a stop behind Colin’s parked BMW, and as Susan stepped out of the car, she took in a deep breath, inhaling the delicious scent of pine trees and grass and damp soil. Except for a bird that chattered in a tree branch overhead, it was utterly silent here, the pond as flat as glass, its surface undisturbed by a single ripple.

A screen door squealed open and banged shut. “Well, here you are at last!” called out Ethan’s older brother, Colin.

She turned to see Colin and his family come down the steps from the deck to greet them. *The golden couple*, Ethan had once called Colin and Brooke, not just because of their blond good looks, but also because of how easily they seemed to glide through life. Even here, in this rustic corner of Maine, Brooke looked as stylish as ever, her blond hair clipped in a gleaming pageboy, a pink sweater twinset hugging her slim waist. Behind them lurked their son Kit, his face half-hidden beneath shaggy blond hair, his shoulders slouched, as if he was trying to blend into the background. As everyone else shared hugs and hellos, Kit kept his distance, managing only an awkward wave of greeting.

“We expected you here hours ago,” said Colin as the two brothers pulled suitcases from the trunk.

“Traffic was bad,” said Ethan. “Plus, there was an accident.”

Colin paused, frowning into the trunk. “Is this box, um . . . Dad?”

“Oh, just give him to me,” Elizabeth said, and calmly plucked the box containing her husband’s ceramic urn out of the trunk. “I’ll be glad when I don’t have to worry about this anymore.”

Colin and Ethan watched as their mother carried their father’s remains into the house. The screen door slapped shut behind her.

“Well,” Colin said dryly, “Mom seems to be handling the loss very well.”

“It *has* been three months,” said Ethan.

“It’s not *that* long.”

Brooke said, “Everyone handles grief in their own way, Colin. And your mom’s never been the sentimental type.”

“I suppose.” He shut the trunk of the car. “As long as she doesn’t plant him on top of the toilet.”

They followed Elizabeth into the house, and two steps inside, Susan halted, staring in wonder at the spacious living room. Sunlight streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows and gleamed on polished hardwood floors. Open beams arched overhead in a cathedral ceiling. A gallery of family photographs covered one entire wall, documenting the Conover family through the decades.

Brooke leaned in and whispered to Susan: “And they call this place *just* a cottage.”

“It’s not at all what I expected,” said Susan.

“What *did* you expect?”

“I don’t know. A cabin on the lake. Bunk beds.”

Brooke laughed. “Trust me, the Conovers don’t do bunk beds. Thank God, or I wouldn’t have been coming here all these years.”

Susan turned her attention to the family photos on the wall. It was a pictorial history of the Conovers in Maine, dating back to an image of a young Elizabeth and George, standing beside the pond with a group of friends.

“These were all taken here?” said Susan.

“Right next to the same pine tree. The tree’s out there, by the canoes. You can see how much it’s grown over the years. Every summer, Elizabeth makes us stand under that tree for a photo. Here, that’s right after Colin was

born.” Brooke pointed to the cherubic blond baby in Elizabeth’s arms. She moved on to a different photo, of Elizabeth holding a different infant, this one with dark hair. Colin, now a sturdy toddler, scowled up at his new brother. “And here Ethan makes his first appearance.”

*Even as babies, the brothers were different,* thought Susan. As the years passed, the differences grew more apparent. She could already see her future husband in the lanky child with the glasses and the serious face. Even then, he had a book in his hand, while Colin, the taller and blonder brother, projected robust confidence. A confidence that no doubt served him well on Wall Street.

Footsteps pattered down the stairs. Susan turned to see her daughter, already dressed in her purple bathing suit, scampering through the living room. “Zoe?”

“Just a dip, Mom! Come on, come out with me!”

“We have to unpack!”

But Zoe had already pushed out through the screen door and was dashing down the deck stairs and across the lawn, toward the water. Of course she was; if there was a body of water nearby, Zoe could not resist plunging in.

Susan followed her daughter out of the house and was only halfway down the lawn when Zoe splashed into the pond and shrieked in delight.

“It’s like having a humongous swimming pool all to myself!” yelled Zoe.

Susan stepped onto the private dock and smiled down at her daughter, who was effortlessly treading water. “Not too cold?”

“Not for me!”

*The water’s never too cold for a mermaid,* Susan thought as she watched Zoe glide away across a surface that gleamed a brilliant red gold. Except for the haunting cry of a loon and the soft splash of Zoe’s strokes in the silky water, the afternoon was magically silent. There was only one other person in sight, a man gliding past in a kayak.

She waved to him, expecting him to wave back. That’s what people did in Maine, wasn’t it? They waved to each other.

The man did not return the wave. He merely stared back at her, his face a black cutout against the glare of the sunlit pond, then he paddled away.

“She just couldn’t wait, could she?” said Ethan, chuckling as he came down the lawn to join his family.

“Can you blame her? She’s been cooped up in the car all day.”

He wrapped his arm around Susan's waist, and for a moment they just stood together, watching Zoe's head bob in and out of the water, her dark hair slick and gleaming like a seal's.

"It's beautiful here," Susan sighed, leaning against her husband. "I'm surprised you waited so long to come back."

He shrugged. "It's a nice spot, I suppose."

"Not exactly a ringing endorsement."

"It's my parents' house. Not mine."

"But I thought the whole family was welcome here. Brooke and Colin come every summer, don't they?"

"Yeah."

She looked at him, but he was staring across the water, as if looking into a past that she could not see. One that had clearly not been happy. "You never told me much about this place. Is there a reason you haven't been back?"

He sighed and pointed up the slope to a tree with a massive trunk and spreading branches. "See that maple there?"

"What about it?"

"When I was seven, I spent most of an afternoon trapped up in that tree, afraid to come down because Colin was waiting below, throwing rocks. Hannah Greene had to come out and rescue me."

"My God, what a jerk."

"It's a stupid memory. You'd think I'd outgrow it, but that's how I remember all my summers here. Colin, king of the hill. Eventually, I just stopped joining them. It's been years since I was here. Now I feel like I'm just a summer guest."

"You're not just a guest. You're *family*."

"I know. I know."

"How about we make this summer different, okay?"

He smiled down at her. "It already is. I have you and Zoe."

"I think it's going to be good for us, being out of the city for a few weeks. This trip could actually be a gift from your father, making us all come to Maine to scatter his ashes. It's forced you to step away from your desk and take a deep breath. And maybe something about this place will inspire you. You'll see or hear something you can use. I'll never forget what you said when we met at your book signing. 'If you're a writer, no experience, good or bad, goes to waste.'"

“Ah, yes. I have the best pickup lines.”

“Well, it worked on me.”

He pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“For not being much fun lately. For being so distracted by this *stupid* novel and these *stupid* characters. I’m starting to hate them for taking me away from you.”

“As long as you come back to us.”

He smiled and pressed his lips to hers. “We should go unpack,” he murmured.

“We should.”

“The neighbors will show up any minute for cocktails . . .”

“And I promised to help with dinner,” she added.

But neither of them moved. It was too beautiful here, just the two of them, the pond a gleam like liquid fire, their daughter gliding across the water.

*A perfect summer evening, she thought. Let’s make it last a little longer.*

# CHAPTER 4

## REUBEN

The summer people were back.

As Reuben Tarkin paddled his kayak on Maiden Pond, he surveyed which of the seasonal cottages were now occupied and which still stood empty, awaiting the annual return of their owners. He had lived all his life on this pond, through sixty-five years of ice storms and mud seasons, through hot summer nights so suffocating he'd lie sweating and sleepless next to his rattling fan. He knew the rhythms and the seasons of the pond so well that he could predict when the first red-breasted robins would arrive in the spring, when the annual chorus of spring peepers would be succeeded by the croaks of bullfrogs, and when the newly hatched loon chicks would make their first appearance as bits of dark fluff, piggybacking atop their mothers.

He also knew, just as intimately, the annual comings and goings of Maiden Pond's human population.

Arthur Fox was usually the first to arrive for the season, sometimes as early as May, when the weather was still unsettled and the water far too cold to swim in. This year, Arthur had shown up the second week of June, pulling up at his cottage in a sleek blue Mercedes with New York plates. He'd wasted no time hauling out his deck furniture and dragging his canoe out of storage and down to the water's edge. Arthur was eighty-two years old, but he was still fit enough to haul his own wooden float into the pond, a strenuous task that summer people usually hired local muscle to attend to. He seemed to exult in the challenge of physical labor. The wealthy often liked to masquerade as common folk, and Maine was where they came to indulge that fantasy. This afternoon, Arthur had stripped off his shirt to play the part of rustic gardener as he enthusiastically lopped off the low-hanging branches that blocked his water view. As Reuben glided past in his kayak, Arthur spotted him and abruptly stopped cutting branches. He didn't say a word to Reuben, didn't smile or wave; no one ever waved at Reuben

Tarkin. Instead, Arthur just glared at him with a look that said: *I'm watching you.*

Reuben paddled toward the next cottage. Hannah Greene's.

Hannah was stretched out on a lounge chair, sunning herself on her back deck. At sixty-one, Hannah had grown plump, and with her winter-white skin she looked like a lump of bread dough left to rise in the heat. She'd inherited the cottage from her parents, the late Dr. and Mrs. Greene of Bethesda, and along with the cottage, she'd also inherited her parents' antipathy toward Reuben. Perhaps she sensed his gaze as he paddled closer, or perhaps she heard the splash of his paddle in the water, because she suddenly sat up in her lounge chair and looked at him. Like Arthur Fox, Hannah did not smile or wave. Instead, she got up from the chair, went into her house, and closed the door.

Reuben paddled on.

At the next cottage, he stopped paddling and simply let his kayak drift, past the private dock, past the wide lawn where two canoes rested on the grass. This was the largest house on Maiden Pond, the house they called Moonview because it faced east toward both the rising sun and the rising moon. Even before the Conovers arrived, he'd known they were coming because he'd seen the housekeepers and gardeners and the caretaker at work, preparing the house for their return. Reuben's modest little shack sat directly across the pond from Moonview, and over the years, through his living room window, he'd observed the comings and goings of the Conover family. He'd been nine years old when Elizabeth and George Conover, young marrieds then, bought the house on Maiden Pond. He'd watched as they'd expanded and updated the sprawling cottage to accommodate their growing family. He'd tangled more than once with their older son, Colin, a golden-haired, strapping boy who liked to stand with his arms crossed, always spoiling for a fight, unlike the younger boy, Ethan, who was forever hiding behind a book.

As the years passed, the house continued to expand to accommodate Colin and his ice-blond princess of a wife, and then their baby boy and their nanny. Of the entire Conover clan, the nanny was the only one who ever looked at Reuben as if he were human. As if he was worthy of a smile, a wave.

Until the family turned the nanny against Reuben too.

He dipped his paddle and stopped the kayak dead in the water. For a moment he merely bobbed in place, eyeing Moonview. A table and six chairs were outside on the deck, and upstairs, all the windows were open, airing out winter's stale air. He'd heard George Conover passed away a few months ago, but George's widow, Elizabeth, was back, as was her older son, Colin, and his family. Her younger son, Ethan, had not visited in years, which made Reuben think there'd been a falling-out, a rift in the family.

So he was surprised to see Ethan emerge from the house and walk down the lawn, toward Moonview's dock, where a woman was standing. He'd never seen this woman before. She was slim, with brown hair, and she waved at Reuben, a friendly gesture that so startled him that he was too paralyzed to wave back. *She doesn't know yet*, he thought. *She doesn't know she should be afraid of me.*

There was a teenage girl, too, a sprite in a purple bathing suit who was gliding through the pond like some water creature, half nymph, half fish. Another visitor he'd never seen before. He'd heard that Ethan Conover finally married, and when he saw Ethan put his arm around the woman, he realized this must be the new wife and stepdaughter. So the whole Conover family was back in Maine, presumably for George Conover's memorial service.

*May the bastard rot in hell.*

Reuben turned his kayak away from Moonview and began paddling toward the opposite shore. His sister would be awake from her nap by now, and she needed his help transferring from the bed to her wheelchair. She needed to be bathed; then there was dinner to prepare and the kitchen to tidy up and Abigail's pills to dispense. An evening of duties stretched before him, but this moment on the pond was his to savor, his kayak gliding across the sunset-gilded water, the dragonflies flitting on the surface.

Then he glanced back at Moonview, looming across the water, its chimneys like talons clawing the sky, and he shuddered. *Everything is about to change*, he thought. *The Conovers are back in town.*

# CHAPTER 5

## SUSAN

Susan woke up to the melody of a house finch singing its heart out. She was usually the first in the family to get up in the morning, so she was surprised to look at Ethan's side of the bed and find it was empty. In Boston, it wasn't birdsong that normally roused her awake but the early-morning roar of buses and trash trucks outside their apartment building. How luxurious it was to be lazing in bed at nine thirty, with nothing on her schedule except perhaps a swim in the pond, or a drive into the village of Purity. This was how every holiday *should* be, waking up late every morning to the tantalizing smell of coffee. Made, for once, by someone else in the household.

She pulled on jeans and a button-down shirt and followed the delicious scent downstairs to the kitchen. There she found Ethan sitting at the breakfast table, papers spread out in front of him, his pen scribbling furiously. He didn't even glance up as she walked barefoot into the room. Oh, she recognized that look of fierce concentration on his face. She didn't want to interrupt him, so she went to the coffeepot and quietly poured herself a cup. Only when she took out the cream and closed the refrigerator door did Ethan snap straight, suddenly aware that she was in the room.

"Hey," he said, pulling off his glasses.

"Hey, back. What's all this?" She nodded at the pages, which were covered with his hastily scribbled words.

"It's coming." He laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "It's finally coming!"

"That story you've been working on?"

"No, this is something entirely new. I don't know what happened. I woke up this morning, and it all just *clicked*. Like a switch suddenly got turned on, and the words started flowing. Maybe it's being back on the pond again after all these years. Remembering all the things that happened here, all the

stories I heard as a kid. Or maybe I just needed to get the hell out of Boston.”

Where a cloud of failure had hung over him like a depressing miasma, choking off his words. For the first time in months, she saw the Ethan she’d married, the happy Ethan, sitting before her.

“Now I wish I’d brought my laptop,” he said.

“You seem to be turning out pages just fine without it.” She picked up his empty coffee cup and refilled it for him. “Where *is* everyone?”

“Mom and Arthur went to meet the minister who’ll be leading the service. Colin and Brooke are off shopping, I think. Kit’s still in bed.” He shrugged. “Teenagers.”

“And Zoe?”

“Where else?”

She went to the kitchen window and looked out at the pond. Yes, that’s exactly where their daughter was, laughing and chattering with another girl as they treaded water together, their wet heads gleaming in the morning light.

“Who’s that girl with her?” she asked.

“Someone she just met. Local, I think.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m glad she’s found a new friend here. I was worried she’d have no one to talk to.”

“There’s always Kit.”

She turned to look at him. “Seriously? That boy hardly said ‘boo’ to her last night. He spent the whole evening glued to Brooke.”

“You know how shy he is. Only child.”

“He’s almost seventeen. He should have grown out of it by now.” She paused. “Is there something else going on with him?”

Ethan reached for a fresh sheet of paper. “He was really sick as a baby, in and out of the hospital. It’s no surprise Brooke went a little overboard, protecting him. If there’s a problem, I think it might be *her*.” He looked up. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Hannah’s driving to Bar Harbor to do some shopping. She wondered if you’d like to go with her.”

“What are you going to do all day?”

He gestured to the pages on the table. “It’s going so well, I don’t want to stop now.”

“No, of course not. You stay here and write.” She turned to the window and looked at her daughter, so happily splashing in the pond with the other

girl. Zoe had a new friend, and Ethan was writing again. Could she ask for a better start to the day?

“I’d like to see Bar Harbor,” she said. “I’ll give Hannah a call.”

\*

Hannah Greene liked to talk. She talked all the way to Bar Harbor, talked over their lunch of crab cakes and salad, talked as they browsed through the souvenir shops on Main Street. Not that Susan minded all the chatter. Hannah, who had never married and lived alone, seemed delighted to share her wealth of anecdotes about the Conover boys.

“Oh, they were a pair, those two!” Hannah said as they drove back to Purity. “Colin, he’s the one who caused most of the trouble. Always getting into scrapes with the local boys, and then refusing to apologize. Colin *never* apologizes for anything, because it’s *never* his fault. George had to pay more than a few visits to the other parents, just to smooth things over. But your Ethan, he was never in trouble. Always the quiet one. The daydreamer.”

Susan smiled. “He’s still the daydreamer. I think that’s why he ended up being a writer.”

“The thing is, I didn’t really *want* to babysit those boys, but Elizabeth talked me into it. Money was involved, of course.” Hannah winked. “Rather a lot, too, because I double-dipped. Elizabeth paid me, and so did my dad, just to get me out of the house. Grown-ups those days, they couldn’t be bothered with their kids. They’d just set us loose and go about their own lives. I was only eight years old, and the six of them would go off for cocktails every evening. Can you imagine?”

“Leaving you at home alone?”

“Well, I was right next door, but still. They always were a hard-drinking bunch. I suppose that’s where *I* got it from. And Colin. Wine at noon, highballs at five.” She looked at Susan. “Ethan never did, though. You married the sober one.”

“Was Arthur married then?”

“Arthur?” Hannah snorted. “No, he’s a confirmed bachelor. What woman would put up with him?”

“You said the six adults met for cocktails every evening. Who was the sixth person?”

“Oh, that was my father’s secretary.”

“He had a secretary here?”

“We were living here year round then, before Dad’s work got us transferred to Maryland. I *hated* leaving Maine, going to that school in Bethesda, where I didn’t know anyone. Every year, I couldn’t wait till August rolled around and we’d come back to the pond. It was like coming home again. And every year, those Conover boys would be taller and more handsome. Then Ethan went off to college, and I hardly saw him after that.” She looked at Susan. “I liked his novel, by the way. I read it right after it came out. I don’t think I ever told him.”

“You should definitely tell him. He’d be thrilled to hear it from you.”

“When is his second book coming out?” When Susan didn’t immediately answer, Hannah frowned at her. “There *is* a second one, isn’t there?”

“He’s been so busy, teaching at the college,” Susan finally said. “And you know how it is with second novels. There’s so much pressure, making it match up to the first.”

“Oh,” said Hannah. She must have realized she’d broached a sensitive subject, and for a moment she was silent. “Yes, it must be hard for him,” she said. “It’s hard being second in that family too. Always being compared to Colin.”

*The golden boy.* The son who only needed to point to his tailored suits and Upper West Side address as evidence he was the more successful brother. No wonder Ethan had avoided spending summers here with his family. Every time he looked at that maple tree in the yard, he’d remember the day he sat stranded up on the branch as his bigger, brawnier brother taunted him from below. *Colin might be the family’s golden boy,* she thought, *but I married the kinder brother.*

*The better brother.*

\*

She found Ethan upstairs, sitting at the desk in their bedroom, so focused on his work that he didn’t even notice she’d walked in. He wouldn’t have heard her anyway, with the headphones clamped over his ears. She tapped him on the shoulder, and he sat up straight in surprise.

“Still at it?” she said.

He pulled off the headphones, and the *Star Wars* soundtrack boomed from the earpieces. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“Well, no wonder, with that music blasting in your ears.” She glanced at the stack of handwritten pages on his desk. “Wow, you’ve been busy. Working upstairs, now?”

“Too many distractions downstairs. People walking in and out. And Brooke had the washing machine going . . .” He shut off the *Star Wars* music. “What time is it, anyway?”

“Almost four o’clock. Is everyone else still out?”

“I haven’t been keeping track. I think my mom’s still with Arthur.”

“And Zoe?”

“She’s off with that local girl. The one she met this morning.”

Susan looked out the window but did not see the girls. In fact, she did not see anyone on the pond. “Do you know where they went?”

“Something about a cow,” he said, arranging his pages in a neat stack.

“What?”

“The girl has a cow and goats. That’s what Zoe told me. She was going over to the girl’s house to see the animals. She seemed pretty excited about it.”

A cow. Well, *that* was refreshingly wholesome, and not something Zoe was likely to see in Boston.

“As long as she’s back in time for dinner,” said Susan.

\*

“You know how teenagers are,” said Arthur Fox as he dropped ice cubes into a glass, splashed in gin and tonic water, and added a slice of lime. “She’s probably having too good a time to come home yet.”

“And these summer days are so long,” added Elizabeth. “I’m sure Zoe has no idea how late it really is. She’ll probably show up at any minute.”

It was another calm summer evening on Maiden Pond, utterly windless, the water shimmering like liquid gold. Arthur and Hannah had once again joined the Conovers for cocktails and canapés, a summer ritual that last night Susan had found charming. This evening, it only irritated her. She looked around the living room at Brooke’s and Colin’s smiling faces, at Hannah pouring herself a second glass of wine. No one seemed at all concerned that it was seven o’clock and Zoe had not come home.

Susan frowned at her phone. “She’s usually good about letting me know if she’s going to be late.”

“How many bars do you have on your phone?” Brooke asked.

“One.”

“Well, that could be the problem. It’s like being in the wilderness here. She could be in a dead zone.”

Arthur snorted. “Half of Maine is a dead zone.”

“Remember that time Kit wandered off without telling anyone?” said Brooke. “I was so worried I called the police. Ten minutes later, Kit waltzed back into the house. What an embarrassment. He said he’d gone ‘exploring.’”

*But he’s a boy,* thought Susan. You worried more about girls because they were more vulnerable, more likely to catch a predator’s eye, and this town was unfamiliar to Zoe. In Boston, she and her friends could navigate the T from one end of the city to the other. They knew which neighborhoods were safe and which to avoid.

She glanced at her phone again, not really listening to the conversation. Not caring about the old stories now being trotted out, about capsized rowboats and the crashed floatplane and the year Arthur challenged Colin to a push-up contest, and Arthur won. She had no choice but to endure their stories, to keep nodding and smiling, as if she really cared.

There was still no text from Zoe.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” said Brooke, watching her slip the phone back into her pocket.

“And there’s plenty of daylight left,” said Arthur. “When these two were boys, they’d run around after dark like a wolf pack, raising a ruckus. It’s what kids do here in the summer.” He pointed to a photo on the wall, of Colin and Ethan clutching bows and arrows. “Look at those little savages! How old were they?”

“I was about eleven,” said Colin. “Ethan would’ve been eight.”

“And didn’t you try to hit someone’s cat with that bow and arrow? I remember quite a to-do with the neighbors.”

Colin laughed. “I plead the Fifth.”

“Let’s remember to take a photo this year,” said Elizabeth. “We haven’t done one in a while, and we should do it while the family’s all together again.”

*If only we were all together,* thought Susan. *Where are you, Zoe?*

She felt Ethan's arm come around her waist. "I'll take another look around the pond," he said quietly. "The local kids like to hang out at the boat ramp. Maybe she's there."

"Yes. Please."

The others didn't notice Ethan slip out of the house. They were all focused on the photos, the pictorial history of the family's summers on the pond, everyone indifferent to her fears. Or maybe she was misreading what seemed to her indifference. Maybe they were only trying to distract her and ease her anxiety by forcing her to focus on the photos, on old anecdotes from Maiden Pond. That would be the charitable spin, that they did not want to worry her, but it wasn't working. She *was* worried, and what she felt now was ignored. Dismissed.

"How young we all look here," said Arthur, pointing to the first image, with "1968" written on the bottom. It showed a youthful Elizabeth and George standing under the pine tree with Hannah Greene's parents and Arthur. He was strappingly handsome then, and he towered over the balding and bespectacled Dr. Greene. At the far edge was little Hannah, holding the disembodied hand of someone who'd been cropped out of the photo.

"God, I hate seeing myself get older," said Elizabeth as they regarded the photos of their summers on Maiden Pond. Colin and Ethan, growing taller every year. Hannah, ripening into middle age. "Just more wrinkles, more gray hair."

Arthur winked. "You're aging like a fine wine, Elizabeth."

"Or turning into vinegar."

"And look who *finally* arrives on the scene," said Colin, pointing to a photo of a blond infant cradled in the arms of a woman with lustrous black hair. In contrast to the young woman's dark skin, the infant looked pale, almost sickly. "There's our Kit, with his nanny."

Brooke wrapped her arm around Kit. "He's still my baby."

Susan tried to play along, tried to pretend she was interested in the photos of Kit as a baby, Kit maturing from anemic-looking toddler to anemic-looking teen. She didn't really want to hear how sick he'd been as a child or about all the doctors who'd failed to explain his stomachaches. When your own child is missing, you can't focus on the woes of another child, but they would not stop talking about how Brooke had made it her mission to keep her son healthy, and look at him now, as tall as his father! *Maybe he is as*

*tall as Colin, thought Susan, but it's hard to tell when the boy never stands straight but perpetually slouches like a human question mark.*

Now they were on to refills of their drinks, more rattling ice cubes, more gin and lime slices splashing into glasses. More stories trotted out, everyone looking calm and relaxed. Everyone except Kit, Brooke's precious Kit, who had clearly checked out of the conversation and was staring out the window.

She heard Ethan walk back into the house and felt a cruel stab of hope that he'd found Zoe, but when she turned to look at him, all he did was shake his head.

She looked once again at her phone. No new messages.

\*

Susan scarcely touched her dinner. While everyone helped themselves to roast chicken and mashed potatoes and salad, she kept glancing at her phone, willing it to ring, willing a text message to appear. She had already driven up and down Shoreline Road, had knocked on a few doors, asking if anyone had seen her daughter, but no one had.

"I know you're worried, but this is a safe little town," said Elizabeth. "When the boys were young, we never worried about them."

"They were boys."

"She's with a friend, isn't she? So she's not on her own."

"I'm sure she's just in a dead zone," said Colin. "There's lots of places up here where you can't get a signal. It's one of the annoyances of living in the woods."

*As if this is nothing more than an annoyance,* thought Susan, watching her brother-in-law calmly continue his meal, knife scraping across his plate, eyes on his food. That self-assurance no doubt served him well on Wall Street, but tonight she found it grating, even though she knew he was right. They *were* in the woods of Maine. There *were* dead spots where her phone didn't work. Zoe must still be at the house of her new friend, the one with the cow, and was probably having such a good time that she'd forgotten to call her mother. It was damn thoughtless of her. Oh, Susan would give her a stern lecture when she came home, about inconsiderate behavior, about how not to give your mother a nervous breakdown.

Ethan reached under the table to squeeze her hand. He, at least, looked worried. "I'll go into town and take another look at Main Street. Maybe

someone's seen her there."

"I'll go with you."

"No, you stay here. One of us should be here when she comes home," he murmured, and left the table.

She glanced again at her phone. Still no message.

Nor was there any after the dinner table was cleared and Arthur and Hannah left for the night. Elizabeth parked herself in an armchair with a book. Kit disappeared upstairs, to his roost in the attic. Brooke and Colin broke out the Scrabble board.

Susan went outside to the deck and stared across the water. It was a clear night, a magical night, the pond glittering with reflected starlight. On the opposite bank, she saw the silhouette of a man standing on his deck, his shoulders framed by the window behind him. Was it the same man she'd noticed yesterday, in the kayak? She could not see his face, but she could feel him watching her, just as she was watching him.

*Something is very wrong here*, she thought. The family might not feel it, but she did.

She pulled out her cell phone and called 911.

# CHAPTER 6

## JO

*It's going to be a wicked busy summer,* thought acting police chief Jo Thibodeau as she drove her patrol car down Purity's Main Street. The Marigold Café had been packed with customers all evening, and through the window, Jo saw two exhausted waitresses cleaning up for the night. Two doors down, even at 9:15 p.m., a line of people still trailed out the doors of the Sugar Cone, patiently waiting for ice cream. Cash registers had been ringing all around town, a merry sound to the ears of locals who counted on these summer visitors to keep their businesses alive through the lean and lonely months of winter. And this was still only June; come August, the streets would be packed shoulder to shoulder with tourists, and while Jo didn't look forward to dealing with the inevitable traffic jams and petty thefts and the occasional fistfight that these visitors brought to town, that was the price of living in a village whose lifeblood was tourism. Without it, Purity would be like too many struggling towns in Maine, with empty storefronts and crumbling sidewalks. Summer people brought money. They also brought trouble, which was why Jo would never be out of a job.

She slowed down as she approached the Whale Spout pub and eyed the parking lot. If there was going to be any disturbance tonight, here's where it would most likely start, fueled by too much alcohol and testosterone. Loitering among the parked cars was a pair of young ladies, their voices shrill with laughter, passing a cigarette back and forth. Jo knew them well. Local girls, both of them sporting hiked-up skirts and spindly high heels tonight. These girls were old enough to know better but young enough to get into trouble, and you couldn't run from trouble in shoes like that. As Jo's patrol car slowly cruised by, the girls stared back defiantly, then tottered off into the pub.

*Yes, I'm keeping an eye on you. Somebody has to.*

She cruised past the boatyard and down to the town landing, where half a dozen lobster boats were tied up at the docks. No trouble brewing down

here, just a few tourists, bundled up in sweaters, taking a late-night stroll along the water. This might be the first week of summer, but the wind from the harbor still had a chill to it, and the ocean itself was so cold it could shock a swimmer's heart to a standstill. Last autumn, they'd hauled a man's body out of the bay, a forty-year-old who'd fallen overboard just a few dozen yards offshore. He'd been a decent swimmer, but even a fit young man was no match for the frigid bay. Jo scanned the docks for anyone with an unsteady gait, anyone who might stumble into the water in an alcoholic daze, but she saw no one who needed rescuing. Not yet.

She proceeded on her evening patrol route, driving through the center of Purity village with its neatly kept Victorian and Cape and colonial-style houses, then continued past the feedstore and the gas station and headed west, away from the coast. Two miles inland, she reached the next likely trouble spot on her beat: Maiden Pond, where some of the seasonal cottages had recently been broken into. The items stolen had not been significant—a camera, assorted jewelry, a few hundred dollars in cash—but even minor crime was unnerving in a town where most people, including her own father, never bothered to lock their doors. Since the death last year of the previous police chief, Jo had served as acting chief of police—at least until the town's select board got around to making her role official—so she felt the weight of the community's safety resting entirely on her shoulders. *Purity* might sound like a town where you could let your kids ride their bikes unsupervised, where you could sleep at night with your windows unlatched, but in truth, this had never been as innocent a place as people wanted to believe. No town was. As a cop, she'd glimpsed the ugly things that went on inside some of the quaint houses, things that had always been going on, even if the outside world was blind to them.

Jo always locked her doors.

She drove down to the Maiden Pond boat ramp, turned off her engine, and sat for a few moments, enjoying the silence as she scanned the lights along the shore. The break-ins had been on the western side of Maiden Pond, where the seasonal homes stood. They belonged to people from away, people with bank accounts fat enough to afford second homes that stood empty for eight months of the year. On the opposite shore, where the pond turned to muddy shallows thick with cattails, were the far more modest cottages owned by local families, some for generations. Jo knew one of those cottages very well, because on its back deck, she had had her

very first kiss. She and Robbie Gordon were both fourteen that year, enjoying a midsummer party with two dozen schoolmates, all of them packed into that cramped little house. Somehow, she and Robbie managed to find a tiny pocket of privacy in the shadows to lock lips. The kiss was sweet but hardly earth shattering, memorable only because it was her first. They'd laughed in embarrassment, had known that it would be their one and only kiss together, and that was fine with both of them. They were far more comfortable just being friends, and that's what they'd remained over the years.

Robbie was a married electrician now, and prosperous, like most tradesmen in high demand. Whenever she spotted his work van around town, she wondered if he still remembered that night on the back porch, the pond a gleam in the moonlight, the sounds of music and laughter drifting from the party. She wondered if he sometimes thought about what might have been, had they chosen to be more than friends. Not that she regretted the choices she'd made, even though they had led to her sitting alone tonight in her patrol car. Even though it meant that tonight she would go home to find only her dog waiting for her.

A pair of headlights flickered in her rearview mirror. She watched as the vehicle approached, moving slowly as if searching for a place to pull over. Of course it didn't stop; even law-abiding citizens were spooked by the sight of a police cruiser. The vehicle turned around and drove back up Shoreline Road, staying scrupulously under the speed limit. Male at the wheel, female beside him, maybe in search of a private place to canoodle.

This would not be that place.

She jotted down the vehicle's plate number, along with the time, because you never knew when a detail might become relevant. She started the engine. Two hours left until the end of her shift. That gave her enough time to cruise again past Purity's usual trouble spots, back to Main Street and down to the wharf in search of mischief in the making. For the moment, though, all was peaceful.

Then her phone rang.

# CHAPTER 7

A missing teenager.

Jo had fielded similar calls from equally frantic parents, and almost always the wayward kid would turn up within a day or two after sulking in a friend's house or sleeping off a hangover, or stumbling out of the woods, bug bitten and hungry, after an ill-considered detour off a trail. If the kid was local, Jo would usually know some background, whether they'd been in trouble before and who their friends were, so she'd have an idea of where to start searching, and whether alarm was truly justified.

The Conovers, however, were summer people. She knew almost nothing about them.

She knew their name, of course. They owned Moonview, one of the largest cottages on Maiden Pond, and for the most part, they kept to themselves. She'd answered only one prior call to Moonview, but that was several summers ago, when George Conover complained that their canoe had been vandalized. It had been a cold and drizzly day, and Jo remembered standing at their door, expecting to be invited inside. Most people in Purity would have asked her to come in out of the rain and offered her a cup of tea or coffee, maybe even a slice of cake, but not George Conover. No, he'd simply pulled on his rain jacket and led her down the lawn to the water's edge, where he pointed to the canoe lying on the grass.

"You can see someone punched a hole in it."

"Do you have any idea who did this, sir?" Jo asked.

"Oh, I know exactly who did it." George glowered at the cottage across the pond. "It's always him, Reuben Tarkin. He's been doing things like this for years. Left rotting fish on our deck. Harassed my grandson's nanny. Threw a rock and broke our window. Expensive picture window too. I called the police for that one."

"When was that rock incident?"

"Years back, before your time. But the hole in the canoe, it could've been dangerous. My grandson could've taken it out on the water and gotten into trouble."

"Why would Mr. Tarkin be doing this to you?"

“The man’s insane, all right? And I assume you know what his father did. Those people he killed on Main Street.”

“That was a long time ago, sir. And that was his father, not Reuben.”

“But it’s the same family. Look, just file the report. I want this incident documented,” he said, and strode back into the house. He never did invite Jo inside.

Now she stood once again at the Conovers’ door, wondering what sort of reception she’d get this time. She wasn’t expecting coffee and cake, but a little respect would be appreciated. A woman answered the doorbell. She was in her midforties, slim in blue jeans, her shirtsleeves hastily shoved up to her elbows. One look at the woman’s taut face and panicked eyes told Jo: *This is the missing kid’s mother.*

“I’m Jo Thibodeau, Purity PD. Are you Susan Conover?”

“Come in. Please, come in!” The woman was so anxious she was practically vibrating, her hands shaking as she waved Jo into the house. Even before Jo could step in the door, Susan was talking, words tumbling over words. “My daughter Zoe is fifteen years old and she’s never done anything like this before. Never, ever. She hasn’t answered her phone in hours, she hasn’t answered any of my texts. I know something’s wrong. I can *feel* it, even if the rest of the family . . .” Susan stopped, as if she’d suddenly run out of air. She inhaled, and her breath came out in a sob. “I just want to know where she is.”

A man approached and wrapped his arm around Susan’s waist. Dark hair, glasses, a worried gaze. “Why don’t you sit down, sweetheart? Why don’t we all sit down? I’m sure she’ll want to talk to all of us.”

“Are you Zoe’s father?” Jo asked.

He nodded. “Ethan Conover.” He gestured to the living room. “Please, come in.”

Jo walked into the living room, where four other members of the family were seated. Having a police officer in one’s home was not an everyday occurrence, and they regarded her with uneasy gazes. The teenage boy didn’t look at her at all; he sat hunched between a handsome blond couple on the sofa, a forelock drooping over his brow as he stared down at his own lap.

“I think this panic might be premature,” said the silver-haired woman seated in an armchair. Her regal posture, her tone of authority, made it clear she was the matriarch of the family. She gazed unflinchingly at Jo.

“May I have all your names?” said Jo, pulling out a notebook.

“Elizabeth Conover,” said the older woman.

Jo nodded. “I met George Conover a few years ago. Your husband, I believe? He called about a damaged canoe.”

“George passed away in March. We’re back in Maine for his memorial service.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” *Even if the man was a jerk.* Jo began writing in the notebook. “And everyone else?”

“Colin Conover,” the blond man cut in. “I’m Ethan’s brother. I have to agree with my mother—I don’t see the reason for alarm yet. Zoe met a new friend, and they went off together. You know how kids are. The time probably got away from them.”

Jo looked him over. Sleek haircut, Brooks Brothers khakis, polished loafers. Everything screamed *yacht club*. An impressive watch gleamed on his wrist. Jo wasn’t familiar enough with watches to recognize the brand, but she had little doubt it cost more than her annual salary. This was the type of man who wouldn’t hesitate to interrupt a woman, even one wearing a badge.

Colin said, “This is my wife, Brooke. And our son, Kit.”

A man like Colin needed an equally sleek wife, and Brooke Conover, in her blue cashmere shell and pressed white slacks, certainly fit the bill. But the teenage boy slouched between them, wearing baggy jeans and a T-shirt, didn’t look like part of the same matched set. He’d folded himself deeply into the sofa, as if trying to disappear into the cushions.

“You’re all staying here, at the house?” asked Jo.

“We are,” said Colin.

“Who was the last person to see Zoe?”

There was a silence. Then Ethan said, quietly: “It would have been me.” He stood behind Susan’s chair, his hands resting on her shoulders. “It was around ten, ten thirty. She came upstairs, told me she was going to visit the home of a girl she’d just met. This is Zoe’s first time staying on the pond, so she doesn’t know anyone here. I think the girl’s local, not a visitor.”

“Did she tell you this girl’s name?”

He shook his head. “I know, I should have asked, but it all seemed perfectly fine to me. I mean, it was another *girl*, about Zoe’s age, and they’d just spent the morning swimming together. That’s what kids do here, on the pond. They meet other kids. They make friends.”

“What was your daughter wearing when you last saw her?”

“She’d changed into a dress. Something red and pink, I think.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t really pay much attention. If I’d only—”

“It has little puff sleeves,” Susan said, her voice barely a whisper. “I bought it for her a few years ago, and I’ve washed it so many times it’s almost falling apart now. She’s grown so much, the hem is up to her thighs, but it’s her favorite dress and she won’t let me . . . she won’t let me . . .” Susan’s voice faded.

Jo jotted the description of the dress in her notebook. Details that a father might not remember, but a mother would. A mother who’d repeatedly washed and folded that dress. Who’d paid attention to its rising hemline on her daughter’s lengthening legs. “So Zoe left home around ten, ten thirty. And then?”

Ethan exhaled, and all the air seemed to go out of him. “I lost track of the time,” he admitted quietly. “I was busy, working upstairs—”

“You were here all day?”

“No, I went into town around noon to buy more paper, and I stopped in at the Marigold for lunch. But I was back home by two.”

“And the rest of you? Anyone see her?” Jo asked the family, and was answered by a general shaking of heads. All except the teenage boy, whose gaze remained fixed on the floor, as if he was afraid to look at her.

“How about you?” Jo asked the boy. “Your name is Kit?”

“He was with me,” Brooke answered. “After Colin went out for a hike, Kit and I drove into town. We came home around two thirty, so I could change into more comfortable shoes, and then we went out again. We didn’t see Zoe at all.”

“Okay.” Jo closed her notebook. “Can I take a look at Zoe’s room?”

“Why?” said Elizabeth.

The question irritated Jo. As if she needed to justify every move she made. As if she, just a small-town cop, could not possibly handle this situation to Elizabeth’s satisfaction.

Susan stood up. “I’ll take you upstairs.”

The woman seemed so unsteady that Jo wondered if she could make it up the steps, but Susan doggedly led the way, gripping the handrail as she climbed to the second floor. It took only a glance at Zoe’s bedroom to know that a teenage girl was sleeping here. A suitcase lay open on the floor, spilling out panties and socks and a pink T-shirt, size extra small. The air

smelled like soap and suntan lotion, and on the dresser was a stack of young adult paperbacks. A series of fantasy novels, judging by the covers, which featured an aquatic heroine, her red hair swirling underwater.

“Does Zoe have a diary?” Jo asked.

“No. I mean, I don’t think so.” Susan paused. “God, that sounds like I don’t know my own daughter. But I do.”

“She’s fifteen years old, Mrs. Conover,” Jo said gently. “Girls that age, well, they don’t always tell their parents everything.”

“You don’t understand, Zoe isn’t *like* that! I’m a school nurse, so I *know* teenagers. I know how deceptive they can be. I know all the trouble they can get into. My daughter isn’t like that. She’s never been in trouble, never given me any reason to worry about her. She’s *not* a complicated girl.” Susan wobbled and sat down on the bed. “Oh God, I can’t believe this is happening . . .”

How many times had Jo heard that phrase, *I can’t believe this is happening?* She thought of the excruciating visits she’d paid to other households and the words she’d been forced to deliver. *I’m sorry, there’s been an accident. I’m sorry, we found your husband in the woods. I’m sorry, your son didn’t make it.* No family was ever really prepared to hear bad news from a uniformed officer. No one wanted to believe that their world had just imploded.

But they were not at that point yet. Zoe Conover could be alive and well and merely behaving like a thoughtless teenager who hadn’t a clue what her mother was going through. She still might walk in their door tonight.

“Does Zoe have a cell phone?” asked Jo.

Susan nodded. “Yes. An iPhone. But she hasn’t answered any of my calls or texts.”

“Have you tried locating her using the Find My iPhone app?”

“Ethan tried, but it says ‘No location found.’ I don’t know if that means it’s turned off, or she’s in a dead zone.”

“I’ll need her phone number and her Apple ID. It could help us locate the phone.”

“Of course.”

“Her Facebook page too. And any other social media she’s on.”

“She hasn’t even called me. Why would she be posting anything?”

“We need to check if maybe she’s met someone online. Someone who’s talked her into going away together.”

“That’s not possible.” Susan’s jaw jerked up, and she looked Jo in the eye. Up till that moment, fear had made the woman seem small and defeated. Now, mustering some hidden source of strength, Susan sat up straighter. In happier circumstances, she could be considered a handsome woman in a wholesome New England way, with her sturdy jaw, unplucked eyebrows, and freckled nose. Handsome, yes, but not a beauty like her sister-in-law downstairs. Certainly not tonight, with anxiety pinching her features.

“My daughter would *not* run away,” said Susan.

Jo nodded and sat down on the bed beside her. “Why don’t you tell me about your daughter. Tell me what kind of girl she is. Her friends. The things she’s interested in.”

Susan took a moment to consider her answer. “My Zoe, she’s beautiful. She’s sweet and she’s kind.” She lowered her head and whispered, “She’s perfect.”

So many parents believed that about their children. *They’re perfect. They’d never do anything wrong.* Jo was the one who sometimes had to open their eyes to the truth: that yes, Johnny really did steal that car. Yes, Billy really did set that barn on fire. Parents were so often blind to who and what their children really were. She wondered if Susan Conover was one of them.

“Does she have a boyfriend? Someone she might have—”

“No.”

“You’re certain?”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Mrs. Conover, we can’t always know what our children are up to.”

“You don’t understand.” Susan raised her head again. “Zoe and I are best friends. She was only eight years old when her father died of cancer, and for years, it was just the two of us. Zoe and me against the world. We trust each other. I trust her, because I *know* my daughter.”

“Then your husband, Ethan, he’s Zoe’s stepfather?”

Susan nodded. “We met a few years ago, at his book signing. He’s a writer. A novelist. We’ve been married for two years. Ethan formally adopted Zoe last year.”

So Susan and her daughter were new to the Conover family. Having seen the cool dispassion of Elizabeth Conover, the arrogance of Colin Conover, Jo didn’t envy any woman who married into this clan.

“You see, I *do* know my daughter,” said Susan. “I know she doesn’t have a secret boyfriend. I know she wouldn’t run away without telling me, because she knows how frantic I’d be. She loves school, and her swim team, and her fantasy books. She loves animals.” Susan shook her head. “That’s why she went off to visit that girl. All because of some stupid cow.”

It took a few seconds for Jo to register that last detail. “What cow? What’re you talking about?”

“That girl she went to visit, apparently she has a cow and some goats. Ethan said that’s why Zoe wanted to go home with her. To see the animals.”

“Did you meet this girl?”

“I only saw her from a distance.”

“What does she look like?”

“She’s about Zoe’s age. Light-brown hair. Just like Zoe.”

*And she has a cow.* Jo had a sudden, vivid memory of a brown-haired girl walking across a snowy field. A girl with a Jersey cow and eight goats trailing after her. Jo knew the farm where that girl lived because she had visited it several times this past winter, had stood in the girl’s house, where the air smelled like woodsmoke and burnt coffee. She felt her heart thump faster as she asked: “Was the girl’s name Callie Yount?”

“I never heard the girl’s . . .” Susan suddenly stopped. “Do you know who she is?”

“Excuse me.” Jo rose to her feet. “I need to make a phone call.”

# CHAPTER 8

## MAGGIE

A late-night intruder alert was almost never a good thing.

Maggie had spent so long working in the shadow of crisis that her nerves were permanently attuned to the first hint of trouble, and the beeping perimeter alarm made her surface straight from deep sleep into wakefulness. Moonlight glowed through the bedroom curtains. The digital clock on her nightstand read 12:07. The intruder alert kept beeping on her phone, set off by someone—or something—that had tripped her alarm. She sat up, her pulse already galloping, and reached for the cell phone to view the video feed from her surveillance camera.

Now the doorbell rang, the chime echoing throughout her farmhouse. Not a stealth attack after all, but someone openly announcing their arrival. Squinting at the video feed on her phone, she saw her neighbor Luther Yount standing at her front door, his hair a wild halo of silver, his face jittery with agitation. *Callie* was her first thought. *Oh no, something has happened to his granddaughter.*

Maggie had no children of her own, but she was as frantic as any parent as she scrambled out of bed. She didn't bother to pull a robe over her pajamas, but just shoved her feet into slippers and headed downstairs, flipping on lights as she went. By the time she reached the foyer, Luther was banging on the door, and when she yanked it open, his fist was still raised to bang it again. He was a giant of a man with an unkempt beard, and anyone who did not know him would find him a frightening sight, standing in the gloom of the porch.

"Luther, what's going on?" she said. "Is Callie all right?"

"She's fine, she's fine. I'm sorry it's so late, but I had to wait for her to go to sleep. I don't want her to know anything's wrong."

"Are *you* all right?"

"I'm okay, but . . ." He sighed. "Jesus, I think I'm in trouble."

Trouble, she could deal with. She'd spent her career responding to trouble. Relieved that nothing had happened to Callie, she stepped aside. "Come in. Let me get dressed, and I'll make coffee."

Ten minutes later, Luther was sitting at her kitchen table, and she was filling two mugs with industrial-strength Colombian. The kitchen always seemed like the safest space in a house, and Luther looked like he was in need of such safety. He might have been a retired MIT professor, but tonight he looked every bit the farmer, dressed in his usual baggy blue jeans and frayed flannel shirt. Anyone who encountered him on a dark city street might well assume he was a panhandler in need of spare change and a warm bed. They would only have to spend five minutes talking to the man to realize Luther was neither down on his luck nor in need of charity. He dressed this way because he simply didn't give a damn how he looked, or what strangers thought of him.

He rubbed his face and groaned, "This is a goddamn mess."

Maggie set the mugs on the table and sat down across from him. "Talk."

"There's this girl who's gone missing. She's one of the summer people staying on Maiden Pond."

"Yes, I heard about it."

"How?"

"My friend Ingrid Slocum monitors the police radio, and she alerted the rest of us." Maggie didn't have to explain who *the rest of us* meant, because Luther had met Maggie's tight little group of friends. He didn't know the details of *how* the Martini Club had become friends, or where they'd acquired their unusual set of skills—skills that had aided in rescuing his kidnapped granddaughter this past winter. There was a great deal Luther did not know about Maggie and her fellow retirees, and he was wise enough not to ask too many questions.

"The missing girl's name is Zoe Conover," said Luther. "She's fifteen years old." His voice wavered. "Just a year older than my Callie . . ."

"Ingrid told us the girl was last seen around noon."

He nodded. "That's when I dropped her off at the boat ramp."

Maggie stared at him. This information she had not heard. "How did *you* happen to drop her off?"

"Callie and the girl met at Maiden Pond this morning, when they were swimming. I guess they hit it off, because when I picked up Callie around

ten, both girls came home with me. They hung around the farm for a while, played with the animals. Then I drove Zoe back to the pond.”

“And what happened then?”

“That’s it. I drove on to Augusta to run a few errands; then I got home around seven. Callie and I were both getting ready for bed when Jo Thibodeau called. Asked if Zoe was with us.” He clawed fingers through his hair, shoving greasy strands off his face. “Oh, Maggie. I shouldn’t have done what I did next.”

“What did you do?”

“Callie was all upset that her friend was missing, and I—I just wanted to help. I kept thinking about last February, when Callie was taken. How I would’ve done *anything* to save her. I thought the family needed all the help they could get, so I went to see them. They’re staying in that big cottage on Maiden Pond. Moonview, they call it. I thought I should explain exactly what happened, what I did. But when I got there, it all went straight to hell.” He looked down at his dirt-stained fingernails. “I guess I should have cleaned up first, should have put on a fresh shirt, but I wasn’t thinking. That family, they took one look at me and . . .” He shook his head. “They didn’t much like the looks of me.”

No wonder. Even at sixty-nine, Luther Yount was big enough and strong enough to overpower most men, not to mention a teenage girl. She could guess what the owners of Moonview thought when they saw this bearded creature with his farm-stained clothes. *A savage. And he had Zoe in his truck.*

“I told them I dropped off the girl at the boat ramp. Since that’s the last place I saw her, I said they should start by searching the pond. It’s the logical place to look, isn’t it, when a kid goes missing near the water? But they didn’t want to hear me out. They just stared like I was some kind of monster. Then Jo Thibodeau, she asked if she could search my truck, and I gave her the keys. Told her to knock herself out, let the crime lab go over it with a goddamn microscope. I was trying to show them how cooperative I was, handing it over. Her officer, Mike Batchelder, had to give me a ride home.”

“That was not a good idea, Luther. Going to see the girl’s family.”

“I know that now.”

“You should stay away from them. Let the police handle this. Don’t give them any reason to think you’re a threat.”

“They *already* think that. And Callie, she’s all shaken up about her friend going missing. If she hears the police think I might have done something —”

“Jo Thibodeau won’t jump to conclusions. She’s a good cop, you know that.”

“Yes, but that family—the Conovers. They’ve got their eyes on me. If the girl isn’t found, I’m the one they’re going to blame.”

“Why? Just because you drove her back to the pond? It shouldn’t take long to prove you’re in the clear. The police just need to confirm your movements after you dropped off the girl. Establish that you have an alibi.”

He stared down at his coffee, which he had scarcely touched. In the silence that followed, the hum of the refrigerator seemed unnaturally loud. With every second that passed, her sense of alarm deepened.

“Luther? You *do* have an alibi, don’t you?”

He sighed. “Nothing that can be confirmed.”

“What happened after you left the girl at the pond? You said you had errands to attend to.”

“In Augusta.”

“Can anyone verify where you went in Augusta?”

“No.”

“What were you doing there?”

He stared at his coffee. “I, uh, checked out some new tractors. Farm equipment.”

“Did you talk to anyone? A salesman?”

“No. I just walked around the lot. Looked at what they had.”

“Did you go anywhere after that?”

“It’s not important.”

“It *is* important. You know you can trust me. Just tell me where you went.”

At last, he met her gaze. “Right now, Maggie, I’m asking you to trust *me*. When I left that girl at the boat ramp, she was alive and well. I don’t know what happened after that. All I know is, I didn’t touch her. Not a hair on her head.” He sat up straight. “And that’s the God’s honest truth.”

## CHAPTER 9

When a child goes missing in a small town, rumors fly, parents hug their children a little tighter, and an army of volunteers magically appears to help in the search. Too many volunteers, it seemed to Maggie, as she scanned the crowd milling around the parking lot of the Maiden Pond boat ramp. Most of these people were locals who had never even met Zoe Conover, yet here they all were, summoned overnight by one of the most powerful mobilization tools ever invented: the town's Facebook page. Maggie spotted familiar faces: Hank from the hardware store, Harold from the PO, and Janine from the Marigold Café. Amateurs all, but ready to help because a missing child was everyone's worst nightmare.

"Well, *this* is a bloody circus," said Ingrid.

Maggie and her four friends stood at the edge of the parking lot, surveying the disorganized crowd. They, at least, had come equipped for the day's task, with sun hats and water bottles, sunscreen and DEET. They'd also brought their own evidence bags, should they spot anything worth collecting. To anyone who saw them, they probably looked like five retirees out for a leisurely hike, but these retirees had come prepared to tackle a crime scene.

The same couldn't be said about the other volunteers. Well intentioned though they were, a crowd this undisciplined could easily destroy clues by trampling shoe prints or dropping litter or dislodging evidence. And there was always the chance that embedded within this group was someone who had not come to help, someone who was here instead to watch and listen and divert attention from the truth. Maggie looked at faces, many of them familiar, and she wondered: *How well do I really know any of you?*

"There's Jo," said Ben as a patrol car pulled into the parking lot. "Maybe she knows how to herd cats."

Jo Thibodeau stepped out of her vehicle, her jaw squared in determination, stray blond hairs spilling from her ponytail. Jo wasn't a big woman but she moved like one, with the determined stride of a warrior. She put her fingers to her lips, and her whistle was so piercing that everyone turned to look at her.

“Hey, people, I appreciate you being here,” yelled Jo. “But having you all beating the bushes is going to make my job harder.”

“We were told to meet up here at nine o’clock. They said you needed us!” a man yelled.

“Who told you that?”

“I saw it on Facebook!”

Even from across the parking lot, Maggie could see Jo’s pained expression.

“We just want to help,” said Janine from the Marigold. “If my kid went missing, you bet I’d want the whole damn town looking for her!”

Other voices chimed in: “So would I!”

“Me too!”

Jo held up her hands for silence. “My officers and I have already searched this area, all along the shoreline and up to the main road.”

“What if you missed something? What can it hurt, having us look too?”

“Okay.” Jo sighed. “Okay, if you really want to help, then at least break up into teams. If you find anything you think is significant, let us decide what to do with it . . .”

“Time to get moving, before these people trample everything,” said Ingrid. “Assuming Luther told the truth and this is where he left the girl, she’d walk in that direction to get home.” Ingrid pointed to the road that curved along the western shoreline. “So that’s where we should start.”

“‘Assuming’ he told the truth?” Maggie said.

“One must always entertain doubts. *Nullius in verba*. Take nobody’s word for it.”

“Well, I believe him.”

“Because he’s your neighbor?”

“Because he’s far too intelligent to commit such a clumsy crime.”

“Crimes of opportunity are, by definition, not well thought out,” said Ingrid. “Think about it. The girl’s sitting in his truck. They’re all alone, with no witnesses around. And he’s a big man, certainly powerful enough to—”

“Ingrid, please,” said Maggie. “This is Luther Yount we’re talking about.”

“But it’s something we need to consider, isn’t it? That we’ve miscalculated. That the man’s not who we thought he was.”

Maggie could hardly argue the point. Their prior careers had primed them to question everything and everyone. More than once in her life, Maggie

had been disappointed, even shocked, by people she *thought* she knew.

As they left the boat ramp and started up the road along the western shore, she wondered if the truth about Luther had eluded her as well. If their friendship had blinded her to a dark side he'd kept hidden from her.

They assumed search formation, staying five abreast as they walked, Declan and Maggie along one edge of the dirt road, Ingrid and Lloyd on the other edge, and Ben moving straight down the center. Brambles and tall grasses encroached on either side, and they had to move slowly, poking through the weeds for evidence. The day was already warm, and their movements stirred up clouds of gnats and mosquitoes. Anyone who came across them would think them an odd sight, five gray-haired hikers in their sun hats and boots, moving shoulder to shoulder with almost military precision, stooping to examine the occasional cigarette butt or some other bit of refuse. Every so often, Maggie caught sight of a waterfront cottage at the bottom of a driveway, but the curtain of evergreens allowed her only a glimpse of a gabled roof or a private dock. This was the desirable side of Maiden Pond, and the cottages along this shore were impressive enough to fetch equally impressive prices, even though they stood unoccupied for most of the year.

"You'd think people living on this road would be tidier," said Lloyd, exposing an empty beer bottle that had been hidden in the underbrush. He inserted a twig in the bottle's mouth and lifted it for a closer look. "Heineken. This label still looks fresh. It hasn't been lying here very long."

Ingrid pulled a paper bag from her backpack. "It's evidence."

"Of littering?" said Ben.

"There've been a few burglaries reported on this pond. Maybe the thief got thirsty." She held open the bag. "In it goes. With any luck, it will have some nice crisp fingerprints."

"There's the driveway," said Declan. He pointed to the sign nailed to a tree.

MOONVIEW  
ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING

For a moment they considered that forbidding notice as they stared down a tunnel of overhanging branches. The house itself was out of sight, hidden

by a thick curtain of evergreens. Except for the whine of mosquitoes swarming their faces, it was eerily silent here.

“If the girl made it this far, she would have walked down this driveway,” Maggie said.

Lloyd gestured to the sign. “Do you suppose they really mean it?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” sighed Ingrid. “When has a ‘No trespassing’ sign ever stopped any of us? Let’s go.”

They fanned out again, trying to move abreast as before, but the encroaching woods forced them to weave through saplings and blackberry thorns that clawed Maggie’s trouser legs. When the driveway at last opened up and the house loomed into view, they all halted, staring at the cottage known as Moonview. The owners might call their summer homes *cottages*, but this was a sprawling lakefront home, a house that might show up in tourist brochures with the caption *Maine: The way life should be*. From the house, a green lawn tumbled down to the pond, where a small private dock bobbed on the water.

The day had grown hot, the bugs more persistent, and Maggie eyed the water with longing, thinking how delicious it would be to plunge into the pond now, to float on her back and just drift, gazing up at the sky. Although her farm was only a mile away, she had not gone swimming this year because she’d been working such long hours. Soon summer would roar by and then there’d be a chill in the air, and her chance to float in a pond would have to be postponed until next year. *How many summers do I have left?*

The front door suddenly swung open, and a man emerged. He was in his late forties, with wheat-colored hair, dressed in crisp khakis and an oxford shirt. “Can I help you?” he asked. The words might be polite, but the tone of his voice conveyed an entirely different message: *What are you doing on our property?*

“We’re helping in the search for Zoe Conover,” said Ingrid.

“And you are?”

“Concerned citizens.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be meeting at the boat ramp?”

“The search teams already have that area covered. But if Zoe made it this far down the road—”

“Look,” he cut in. “Our whole family’s been up since dawn, searching for her, and we’re exhausted. We don’t need amateurs tramping all over the

yard. My wife's on the phone with the police right now, so if you don't mind leaving the property—"

"What on earth is going on out here, Colin?" A silver-haired woman appeared in the doorway. She might be the oldest among them, but this woman was no one's idea of a sedate senior. Her hair was cropped stylishly short, blue jeans hugged her trim waist, and she regarded the trespassers with steely authority.

"I'm taking care of it, Mom. I've just asked these people to leave."

"But we're here to help," said Ingrid. "You never know what a fresh set of eyes might find. And we do have some experience."

"No, this has gone far *enough*," the woman snapped. "We need our privacy."

Maggie heard the crackle of tires on the driveway, and she turned to see a Purity PD patrol car pull to a stop. Jo Thibodeau stepped out of the vehicle and frowned at the group, no doubt wondering how Maggie and her friends had once again managed to insert themselves into the middle of an investigation.

"These people are trespassing," Colin said.

"Yes, I can see that," said Jo.

"I've asked them to leave. They're not complying."

"We only offered our assistance," Ingrid said.

"Is it normal procedure in this town for the police to enlist amateurs?" the older woman asked.

"Mrs. Conover," Jo said, her patience clearly strained, "why don't you and Colin go inside? I'll talk to them."

Jo held her silence until the woman and her son reentered the house. The instant the door swung shut, she turned to Maggie. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Zoe Conover."

"That's my job, not yours."

"And we're here to assist."

"Don't you have a farm to run?"

"I do."

"And the rest of you." Jo looked at Maggie's friends. "Don't you have other hobbies? Maybe take up golf or something?"

"Hardly challenging enough," said Ingrid.

"I know you want to help. I know retirement might be boring."

“That’s not why we’re here,” said Maggie.

“Why *are* you here?”

“Because Luther Yount asked for my help.”

Jo paused. “What did Mr. Yount tell you, exactly?”

“That you towed his truck to the crime lab. That he’s now a suspect. We both know he didn’t hurt that girl, Jo.”

“That’s yet to be determined. Now if you could all please leave and let me do my job?”

“Apropos of your *job*, this might prove relevant,” said Ingrid, thrusting the paper evidence bag at Jo.

“What is this?” Jo asked.

“An empty beer bottle we found near the top of this driveway. Heineken, Original. It appears recently discarded, and you can probably pull off usable fingerprints and DNA. That’s what *I’d* do, anyway.” Ingrid looked at her husband. “Come along, dear. It appears we’re being evicted from the crime scene. I’ve thought of other avenues we can pursue.”

As her four friends walked back up the driveway, Maggie lingered behind. She had first encountered Jo Thibodeau earlier that year, after a body was dumped in Maggie’s driveway, and during that inquiry, Jo had proved herself to be a dogged investigator. In Jo, Maggie had seen a younger version of herself, with the same determination, the same streak of stubbornness, and being challenged by all five of them had forced Jo to dig in her heels. Perhaps a quiet conversation, between just the two of them, would prove more effective.

“We really *can* help,” said Maggie. “You know we have a few tricks up our sleeves.”

Jo shook her head. “With this family, I need to dot every i and cross every t. You heard what Elizabeth Conover said, about working with amateurs.”

“She doesn’t have to know we’re involved.”

“If she finds out, she’ll raise bloody hell.”

“We’re very good at not being seen.”

“Please, Maggie. Don’t make my job more complicated than . . .” Jo paused. Took out her ringing cell phone. “Thibodeau,” she answered. Seconds later, her head snapped up. “Where was it found? And it was *just* turned in? Okay, send me the photo. I’ll show it to them.” Jo hung up and pivoted toward the house. Whatever news she’d just heard on the phone

was so urgent it had made her temporarily forget Maggie was there. Jo straightened and took a breath before knocking on the door.

This time a younger woman appeared. Brown haired, disheveled, as if she had not slept in days. Exhaustion had hollowed her cheeks and drained the color from her face, and she looked at Jo with a mixture of fear and hope. *The girl's mother*, thought Maggie.

"Susan," said Jo quietly, "I need to show you something. A photo."

"Oh God, have you found—"

"No, we haven't found Zoe. This is something that was found yesterday afternoon, on Route One. It was at the side of the road. The driver turned it in to the Belfast Police Department this morning. It's a backpack."

Maggie edged closer, to listen in. Close enough to watch Susan Conover's face as Jo pulled up the photo on her cell phone and showed it to her. Susan pressed her hand to her mouth, but it was not enough to muffle the keening from her throat. The sob was loud enough to bring a man out of the house, a man Maggie assumed was Susan's husband, because he immediately wrapped his arms around her. She sagged against him, shaking, her face pressed to his shoulder.

"Ethan?" said Jo. "Is this Zoe's backpack?"

He glanced at the photo and nodded. "Where was it?"

"A driver noticed it yesterday afternoon lying on Route One, about sixteen miles south of here. He stopped to pick it up. He assumed it fell off a bike or a motorcycle, and he didn't get around to turning it in to the police until this morning." Jo paused. "There's a wallet with Zoe's student ID in it, along with twenty-two dollars in cash."

"And her phone? What about her phone?"

"There was no phone in the backpack."

"Then she might still have it. If you can just locate the phone—"

"We don't know where it is," said Jo. "It hasn't pinged off any cell towers since yesterday, around noon."

"Where?"

"Gurney Road. That places it somewhere in this area."

The conversation had drawn other members of the family out of the house. Now Elizabeth Conover stepped outside, followed by her son Colin and a blond woman.

"What about that man who said he dropped her off?" Colin asked. "That farmer with the truck. Did you ask *him* about the phone?"

“Mr. Yount has been cooperative,” said Jo.

“What does that even mean?”

“He voluntarily surrendered his vehicle. The crime lab is examining it.”

“But what do you know about *him*? Does he have a criminal record? Has he ever done anything like—”

“I know Mr. Yount,” Maggie said. They all turned to look at her, suddenly registering the fact that she was there. “I know him very well, in fact. I have no doubt he’s telling the truth.”

“We have no idea who *you* are,” Colin said. “We’re supposed to take your word for it?”

The blond grasped Colin’s arm. “Let it go.”

“Nothing ever changes around here, does it? These locals, they always protect their own.”

“Colin!” his mother snapped. “This isn’t helping. Please, let’s all go inside. We need to talk about this in private.”

Maggie waited until the family retreated into the house, then turned to Jo.

“You said the phone last pinged around noon yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“And there’s been nothing since?”

“No. Either it’s turned off or it’s been damaged.”

Maggie’s gaze shifted to Maiden Pond, its surface shimmering under the midday sun. *Or it’s underwater*, she thought. Without a word, she headed down the sloping lawn, past a pair of canoes resting in the shade of a pine tree, past a trio of white Adirondack chairs. She stepped onto Moonview’s private dock and looked across the pond, at the far more modest camps on the opposite shore. In another month, all these houses would be occupied and people would be sunning on their decks and splashing in the water. But this was still early in the season, and most of the homes stood vacant. No one had been here to see the girl climb out of Luther’s truck. To witness what happened to her next.

She heard boards creak as Jo stepped onto the dock to join her.

“So it was an abduction,” said Maggie.

“It certainly looks like it now,” said Jo. “I thought maybe she’d gone off the rails like teenagers do. Ran away and hid out with a friend somewhere. Or maybe it was an accident. She jumped into the water and drowned, and we’re just waiting for the body to pop up. But the backpack, that changes everything.”

“You said it was found on Route One, southbound lane?”

“Yes. Probably tossed out a car window. The perp discarding the evidence.”

“From there, he could’ve taken her to Portland, Boston. Or beyond.”

“Where we’ll never find her.”

“Luther didn’t do this, Jo.”

“I know that’s what you believe.”

“He has a granddaughter. You’ve seen how much he adores Callie. The idea he’d hurt any girl Callie’s age—”

“I know it’s unlikely, but I have to consider him a suspect. The Conovers certainly do.”

“They don’t know him.”

“They know he had the girl in his truck. They know he’s the last person who saw her alive. And Jesus, *look* at the man! He’s like some hairy old Bigfoot who just walked out of the woods. To people like them, he’s *exactly* what a killer might look like.”

“‘People like them’? What does that mean?”

“You can see they have money. And they probably think we’re just country idiots, so they’re going to second-guess every decision I make.”

Maggie turned to look at Moonview, and she glimpsed movement in the top window. A face stared down at them. Not one of the family members she’d seen earlier, but a shaggy-haired young man. “Who’s the boy?” she asked.

Jo turned to the house, and the boy in the window quickly ducked out of sight. “That’s the grandson, Kit. Colin’s boy. Odd duck.”

“Meaning?”

“Hardly said a word to me last night. Like he’s mute or something. His mother did all the talking for him.”

“Maybe you scared him.”

Jo glanced down at herself. “*I’m* scary?”

“Not you, but your uniform. Maybe he’s had a bad experience with the police. Something worth checking out, don’t you think?” Maggie turned back to the pond, where a rising wind raked the surface into ripples. “Keep us in the loop, Jo.”

“Have you heard a word I said? I don’t want *any* of you involved in this.”

Maggie thought about Luther, scared and shaken, sitting at her kitchen table. Luther, who’d always been there for her, always ready to help,

whether it was pulling her truck out of a snowbank or lumbering to her rescue when she'd dodged an assassin's bullets this past winter. During their years as neighbors, Luther had demonstrated his loyalty again and again. Now it was her turn.

"I'm afraid we already are involved," said Maggie. "Whether you like it or not."

# CHAPTER 10

## JO

Jo pulled up in Luther Yount's driveway, turned off the engine, and sat for a moment, thinking about how she'd approach this. Connecting with kids had never been her strong suit. She'd dealt with too many wayward teenagers, reckless because of their immature brains and surging hormones and the general stupidity of youth. Too often, her warnings to straighten up fell on deaf ears, which led to the predictable consequences: smashed cars, broken bones, shocked parents who could not believe their Johnny would do such a thing. Jo herself had never gone through any such wayward phase, and she had little patience for kids who did.

Callie Yount was not one of them. The girl was homeschooled, and her most frequent companions were of the four-legged kind, not the sort of bad influence that can lead a girl astray. It was Callie's innocence that now posed a problem for Jo: How to sensitively question a girl whose closest relative—in fact, her only living relative—was a suspect in a probable abduction?

She climbed out of the cruiser and caught a whiff of farm smells: Manure. Hay. The scent of sun-warmed fields of clover and timothy. Luther's cabin, which he'd built himself, was modest but sturdy, designed with an engineer's eye to withstand heavy snowfalls and ice storms. She'd visited the house this past winter, and she remembered it as dusty and cluttered with books and hanging bundles of herbs. On that visit, Luther had not been particularly welcoming; she doubted he'd be any friendlier this time.

She knocked on the door and Luther appeared, wearing his usual scowl and baggy overalls. At once he stepped out of the house, closing the door behind him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Yount," she said. "I'm here to—"

"You finished with my truck? Can I have it back?"

"It's still at the state lab."

“I have a farm to run, and I need it. How long’s it going to be there?”

“As long as it takes. I’m not here about your truck. I’d like to speak to your granddaughter.”

He glanced back at the closed door, then at Jo. Said, softly: “Why?”

“She spent the morning with Zoe. Maybe Callie knows something or heard something that could help us.”

“If you talk to my granddaughter, someone else has to be there. It can’t be just you.”

“Of course. That’s standard procedure when we question children.”

“Then I can stay?”

After a pause, Jo nodded. “You can stay.”

He opened the door, waved her in. “She’s doing her homework.”

On this beautiful afternoon, homework was the last thing most teenagers would want to be doing. Certainly not the excruciating-looking homework that Jo saw spread out across the kitchen table where Callie was sitting. The textbook, *Introduction to Calculus*, lay open to a page filled with incomprehensible symbols. Who on earth made a fourteen-year-old kid study calculus on a summer’s day?

*An engineering professor. That’s who.*

Callie saw Jo and immediately put down her pencil. “Did you find her?”

“No. Not yet. That’s why I need to talk to you.” Jo pulled out a chair and sat down at the table, facing the girl. “Tell me about your morning with Zoe, beginning to end. Everything she said. Everything you remember.”

“Maggie already asked me about it.”

“Maggie? When?”

Luther said, “Hours ago. Right after she got back from Maiden Pond.”

“I told her everything I could remember,” said Callie. “She and her friends are going to find Zoe.”

“She and her friends are not police officers.”

Luther grunted. “Maybe they should be.”

Jo paused to rein in her irritation. Managed to say, in a civil tone: “Maggie Bird means well, Mr. Yount. But she has no role in this investigation.”

“Seems to me she’s a step ahead of you here. Just like she was back in February.”

That stung because it was true. It wasn’t Jo who’d rescued Callie from the abandoned farmhouse where she’d been held prisoner. It was Maggie

who'd swooped in and freed the girl, Maggie who'd delivered her to the hospital.

Jo took a calming breath. "All right, Callie. How about you just tell me what you told Maggie?"

"You could ask her."

*And she'd never let me forget it.*

"No, I want to hear it from you. Tell me how you met Zoe Conover."

Callie nodded. "It was real hot yesterday. I got done with my chores early, so I asked Grandpa if he'd drop me off at the pond, where a lot of the kids hang out. Usually I ride my bike there, but my chain's broken and Grandpa was going to the post office anyway. I figured I'd just go with him."

"So you got to the pond, and . . . ?"

"I saw this girl there, swimming. She went underwater for a *really* long time, and I got worried that maybe she'd drowned, so I swam out to her and she popped right up. Told me she was training herself to hold her breath for three whole minutes, and could I hold mine that long? We had this contest, and she beat me every time. She said she took the lifeguard test and she passed it, but they won't let her work as a lifeguard because she's not sixteen yet. She wants to go to the Olympics, and that means she has to train every single day."

This was now getting into the weeds. "Tell me how she came home with you. Whose idea was it?"

"Both of us, I think. I told her I had goats and a cow, and would she like to see them, and she said she'd ask her dad. Then Grandpa came back from the PO and drove us home."

"How did she seem yesterday? Happy, unhappy?"

"She was fine," said Luther.

"Callie?" asked Jo.

"She was fine," Callie echoed. "Just like Grandpa says. Not moody, not upset. She didn't talk about running away. She didn't say anything was wrong in her family. She likes her new dad. She doesn't have a boyfriend. She isn't talking online with anyone who wants her to go away with him. She just talked about swimming and how she's learning to dive and whether she could come back another day to watch me milk the goats."

These must be all the questions Maggie had asked, and here were the answers, recited in one convenient package. It made Jo feel superfluous,

following in Maggie's much quicker footsteps. How the hell did the woman always manage that?

"Okay," sighed Jo. "What time did Zoe leave the farm?"

"It was getting close to lunchtime," said Luther. "I told her I had to leave for Augusta, so I'd drop her off at the pond."

"Callie? Is that how you remember it?"

"Just like Grandpa said."

Jo looked at Luther, then at the girl. Their stories were perfectly aligned, maybe too perfectly. The downside of allowing Luther to listen in.

"And 'cause Maggie asked, you'll probably want to know this too," said Callie. "Zoe had her backpack with her when she left. She was wearing a red-and-pink dress and sandals. I remember the sandals, 'cause I was worried Rosie might step on her feet, and that would hurt."

"Rosie?"

"My cow." Callie gave a sigh of exasperation. "You could talk to Maggie. She knows all this, and she could help you."

"I'm sure she could," Jo muttered.

"Zoe likes it in Maine. She wouldn't run away."

"Then where do you think she is, Callie?"

The girl fell silent for a moment, then looked at her grandfather, as if he had the answers. Luther gave a sad shake of his head.

"That's not something we want to think about," said Luther.

*Neither do I,* thought Jo.

Back outside, Jo paused by her cruiser and looked across the field toward Blackberry Farm, but did not see Maggie's truck. What was the woman up to now? For that matter, what were all five of those retirees up to? The Martini Club, they called themselves, which sounded so droll, so flippant. But Jo knew enough about them to know that *harmless* was not a word that applied to them. They were not people she ever wanted to cross swords with, and, fortunately for Jo, they were all working on the same side.

For now.

# CHAPTER 11

## MAGGIE

James Bond might drive an Aston Martin, but Declan drove a Volvo. Not the newest model, but an eight-year-old gasoline-powered sedan, a *classic*, he called it, a bit like Declan himself. It might not be a sports car, but it was sturdy and safe—also like Declan. His late father the diplomat had favored Volvos as well, and Declan was a man who followed tradition, who appreciated medieval churches and barrel-aged scotch. It was why he now lived in an 1820s sea captain’s house with a widow’s walk and the original woodwork, which he’d refinished himself. Declan simply liked old things.

*Which is probably why he spends so much time with me,* thought Maggie.

They drove south together on Route 1, traveling at a stately pace because speeding invariably drew too much attention. In that way they were alike, because of either their training or their innate personalities: they instinctively avoided being noticed. Anyone who saw them now would assume they were just an old married couple driving down the coast, perhaps to tour a lighthouse or enjoy fried clams at a seaside restaurant. Sometimes, Maggie felt as if they *were* an old married couple because they’d known each other for so long, ever since they trained together at the Farm. Among their group of four, Declan had been the quiet one, with a doctorate in history and charmingly old-world manners. He was also the strikingly handsome one, with jet-black hair and a twinkle in his eye. The years had streaked that hair with silver and added creases to his face, but age had only improved him. Or maybe now that they’d reunited, she had simply learned to appreciate him the way she should have decades ago, before they all scattered to their postings in different corners of the world. *Better late than never.*

“I wish we had a more detailed timeline,” he said as they left behind the town of Bucksport and continued down Route 1, toward Searsport. “We know the backpack was first noticed in the late afternoon, but how long was it lying there? When was it left in the road?”

This part of the highway was posted at fifty-five miles per hour, but of course no one adhered to the speed limit, and even safety-conscious Declan was driving at a daring sixty-two-mile-per-hour clip. Moving at this speed, few drivers would have a chance to even notice a discarded backpack lying at the side of the road, much less pull over to retrieve it. Everyone was in a hurry to get somewhere, their minds on their destinations, their eyes focused straight ahead.

Maggie studied the paper map that Lloyd Slocum had prepared, highlighting in bright yellow all the possible routes that led south from Purity. As an analyst at Langley, Lloyd had spent years studying satellite images, identifying every dirt road, every cow track that an enemy might utilize, and he had lost none of his obsessive-compulsive attention to geographic details.

“We’re getting close to the spot,” she said, and glanced at her phone. Jo Thibodeau had reluctantly shared the approximate GPS coordinates, and they were now within a quarter mile of where the backpack was found. There were no landmarks here to help them identify the exact spot, because this stretch of highway featured mostly woods and weeds, with the occasional drift of bright-purple lupine blooming at the side of the road. “Okay, let’s stop here.”

Declan pulled over onto the shoulder, and they both climbed out of the Volvo. For a moment they just stood on the roadside, watching the traffic whiz by. There were occasional gaps between passing cars, periods when someone could easily toss litter out their window and not be seen.

“No security cameras in sight,” he observed, scanning the highway.

“I spotted a camera on that restaurant we passed about four miles back. According to Lloyd’s map, there’s also a feeder road that could bring you here without being caught on that camera.”

“Luther’s going to show up on that footage. He would have driven right past it on the way to Augusta.” Declan shook his head. “So that camera’s not going to help him, Mags.”

No, it would hurt him. The last person who saw Zoe alive would also be caught on camera driving toward the spot where her backpack was discarded.

She walked along the road scanning the weeds, the pavement. The police had already searched this area, so she didn’t expect to find anything significant, but they still needed to visit this place, if only to see it from the

abductor's point of view. Assuming this really was an abduction, and not the rebellious flight of a teenage girl. They still hadn't ruled out that possibility, and Ingrid was now combing through Zoe's social media posts, hunting for any hints of trouble with her family. Maggie thought of her own teenage years, being raised by an alcoholic father who could scarcely hold down a job or pay the bills. She remembered how many times she'd wanted to escape. Jump on a bus, take it as far as it would go. Alaska, she'd thought, the land of grizzlies and freedom. Was that what Zoe did? Was she sitting on a bus at that moment, watching the miles fly by, exhilarated that she'd made her escape?

As Declan took photos of their surroundings, capturing every angle of this perfectly insignificant stretch of road to share with their friends, Maggie was still thinking about Zoe's state of mind. Fifteen was a complicated age for a girl. She had a new stepfather, one who came with an extended family she probably didn't know well. And there they all were, living under one roof, seven people, including a steely-eyed grandmother. Oh yes, Maggie could imagine a girl wanting to escape that house, that situation.

But why leave behind her backpack? To confuse her parents and make it look like an abduction? No, that would make no sense, not from the point of view of a fifteen-year-old. Maggie had spent too many years in the intelligence business, and she was accustomed to seeing a world filled with mirrors, where nothing was as it seemed. But this was just a teenage girl, and Maggie was no doubt conjuring up complications that did not exist.

The simplest answer was that the girl was abducted. Then her abductor drove south, down this road, and discarded the girl's backpack here. But surely, he knew the backpack was likely to be found, that the police would comb it for his fingerprints. That by discarding it, he was leaving behind evidence. It made no sense.

*None of this does.*

Declan had finished taking photos, and he looked at Maggie. "I hope Ingrid's having better luck. We should stop at that restaurant and see if they'll share their video with us."

Maggie nodded. "And then we need to talk to Jo."

They hadn't told their friends they were headed to the police department, but when Declan and Maggie pulled into Purity's public services parking lot, they saw the Slocums' white SUV, shiny and spotless as always, parked a few stalls away. Whether it was because Ingrid constantly monitored the police radio or she had some sort of ESP for crises, she always seemed to be a step ahead of everyone else.

They found Ingrid standing at Jo's desk, engaged in one of her legendary interrogations, while Lloyd was helping himself to the police station coffeepot. He gave Maggie a wink and a nod, looking as relaxed as if he were standing in his own kitchen. The Slocums were shameless that way.

"I don't have anything else to tell you people," Jo insisted. "Except that Zoe Conover is still missing, the state police have joined the search, and there've been no tips or sightings so far." Jo looked at Maggie and Declan and she sighed. "What is this? All of you ganging up on me at once?"

"An uncoordinated ambush," Maggie said.

"And what do *you* want to know?"

"The girl's backpack. Can we examine it?"

"No."

"We just want to see the contents."

"I can't show you because the crime lab has it."

"What about her phone?" said Lloyd, stirring sugar into his coffee. "Has that turned up yet?"

"No."

"You have a geofence warrant?"

"Yes, but we don't have any call data from the provider yet."

"And Fog?" asked Ingrid. "Has her phone shown up there?"

"How do you know about Fog?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No, Mrs. Slocum. Everyone does *not* know about Fog."

But Ingrid was not everyone. Of course she knew about the tracking tool used by law enforcement agencies to collect location data from mobile apps. If Zoe had used her phone to access any of hundreds of apps, her location would have popped up on Fog.

"So the girl's phone hasn't been active at all?" Maggie asked.

"No," Jo said. "Either it's turned off or it's been destroyed. And that's where we are."

“Well, she hasn’t been active on social media either,” said Ingrid. “No new posts from her in the last thirty-six hours.”

Jo frowned at her. “You’ve been going through her accounts?”

Lloyd patted his wife on the shoulder. “She gets bored easily. It keeps her occupied.”

“I must say, the girl seems a perfectly wholesome sort,” Ingrid admitted. “No dark secrets that I could dig up. It’s all about school and her swim team and fantasy novels about mermaids. Not the sort of girl you’d think would get into trouble.”

Jo nodded. “That’s what her mother said.”

“I also checked into the girl’s stepfather, Ethan Conover.”

“Why?”

“A new stepfather in the picture? A teenage girl who suddenly runs away from home? It makes you think. But the man does seem like a straight arrow—on paper, anyway. Forty-five years old, no criminal history, not even an unpaid parking ticket. He’s a published author and a writing instructor at Boston College.”

“Has anyone here read his books?” Declan asked.

They all shook their heads.

Ingrid said, “He has only one published novel, and that came out five years ago. *The Woman in Green*, a murder mystery.”

“Oh, maybe that should be our next book club selection, don’t you think?” Lloyd suggested. “Maybe we could use green as the theme for dinner. I’ve been wanting to try my hand at making saag paneer.”

Jo gave an impatient sigh. “People, this is not one of your book club meetings, okay? If you could all just move along—”

“First, you might want to check your email,” said Maggie. “For the video file we sent you.”

“What video file?”

“From the Bluefin restaurant’s security camera. It’s four miles north of where the backpack was left, and it has a partial view of Route One traffic. You might find it useful.”

“I’ll add it to the thousand other things I need to review.” Jo glanced up as one of her officers walked into the room. “Mike, could you show these visitors out of the building?”

Mike took two steps toward them and froze as the visitors all turned to face him. He might have been armed with a weapon and a badge, but four

gray-haired citizens were more than he was trained to deal with.

“We’ll show ourselves out, thank you,” Ingrid said with a smile. “But we’ll be back.”

# CHAPTER 12

## SUSAN

She could hear them talking downstairs, their voices somber and muffled, trying not to disturb her. On her dresser was the lunch tray that Elizabeth had brought up hours earlier, still untouched. A chicken sandwich and a bowl of tomato soup, neither of which she could stomach. Certainly not the soup, so bright red, like blood. She heard someone knocking on the door downstairs, and then a new voice joined the others. Arthur Fox. Oh God, more people in the house. She knew they were all trying to be supportive, trying to ease her pain, but their efforts only irritated her. Their sideways, pitying looks. Their repeated attempts to feed her, ply her with repetitive cups of tea. She didn't want tea; she wanted her daughter. She wanted to smell Zoe's hair, hear her laugh, feel that silky cheek against hers.

"Horrible business," she heard Arthur say downstairs, before his voice dropped back to a murmur. Arthur had assumed command over the situation, as if it was his usual place in any pyramid. He'd called friends he knew in the Maine State Police and asked about Jo Thibodeau and whether she was up to the task. He'd inquired about access to tracker dogs. Dogs trained to find the living, not the dead, he'd assured her, although she knew dogs were used for both purposes. No one had mentioned cadaver dogs, not to Susan. They wouldn't dare.

She thought about their first night here at Moonview, how Zoe had come out of the shower with her skin flushed and sweet smelling and had curled up beside Susan in bed. A good night cuddle, the kind they used to have when Zoe was eight years old and they were still raw with grief over Matthew's death. That first day here, with the Conover family and their neighbors, had felt overwhelming, and both Susan and Zoe wanted the quiet comfort of a familiar embrace. Now, sitting on the bed and hugging only herself, she could still feel Zoe in her arms.

*You must be alive. I'd feel it if you weren't. Wouldn't I?*

There was a soft rap on the door. She looked up to see Brooke standing in the doorway. “Susan? Is it okay to come in?”

Susan nodded. Sat up straighter.

“I wanted to show you the poster design, to make sure it’s okay with you before we print them. Ethan thinks they look fine, but I thought you should take a look too.” Brooke held out a sheet of paper.

Susan stared at a photo of Zoe smiling from the page.

### MISSING

ZOE HELLMAN CONOVER, AGE 15, BROWN HAIR, BROWN EYES, 5 FEET, 3 INCHES, 105 POUNDS

LAST SEEN JUNE 21 IN PURITY, MAINE

“A reward,” said Susan. “There should be a reward.”

“That’s what Kit thinks, too, but Elizabeth says any decent person would respond, reward or not. And Colin said we’d then have to decide how big a reward, and it would all just delay getting these printed.”

Of course Colin the money man *would* be the one to focus on numbers and logistics. Her brother-in-law was all about efficiency.

“We think we should print maybe fifty to start,” said Brooke. “We’ll fan out tomorrow and post them all over town.”

“And up and down the coast too?”

“Of course.” Brooke sighed. “I wish there was something more I could do, besides putting up posters. I can’t imagine how I’d feel if Kit went missing. How I’d be able to cope.” She sat down on the bed next to Susan. “God, it all seems pointless now. This stupid ceremony.”

“What?”

“George’s memorial service. It’s still set for Thursday, as if it matters. But all these people are planning to come, and Elizabeth says it’s too late to call it off.”

Susan had completely forgotten about her father-in-law’s memorial service. That was the reason they’d all come to Maine in the first place, to honor George Conover’s wish to have his ashes scattered here. If not for George, they’d be safely home in Boston. *It’s his fault this has happened*, she thought, although she knew it was unreasonable to blame a dead man.

“You don’t have to go to the service,” said Brooke. “We’d understand if you choose not to.”

“I can’t go. I need to stay here, in case the police . . .”

“Of course. Do you want me to stay here with you?”

“You don’t have to.”

“Because I wouldn’t mind, not at all. I’m not really that keen to go anyway. I mean, I liked George well enough. He was always kind to me, but he was a hard man to really get close to. Twenty years in this family, and I’m *still* trying to figure them out.” She gave Susan’s hand a sympathetic squeeze. “I’m sorry we haven’t had the chance to spend much time together, with you and Ethan in Boston and our family in Manhattan. I was hoping these two weeks would be that chance. And Colin was really looking forward to spending time with Ethan. But now . . .” Brooke sighed.

“Colin was looking forward to it?”

“Of course. He hardly gets a chance to see Ethan. And they had so many happy times on this pond.”

That was not the way Ethan had described their boyhood summers here. How different the past looked through another pair of eyes. Could Colin really be that blind to all the ways he’d tormented his younger brother? But then, Susan had to admit she had her own blind spots. When she’d first met Brooke, with her designer dresses and her Upper West Side address, she’d seen a woman who had everything. Now she noticed the cracks in that flawless facade: The brusque and arrogant husband. The pathologically shy son. No one’s life was perfect, and Brooke, for all her earlier aloofness, really was trying to be a friend.

“Thank you,” Susan said. “For the posters. For everything.”

“I’m happy to do it.” Brooke stood up. “I’ll go call the print shop. First thing in the morning, we’ll start putting up these posters.”

She heard Brooke descend the stairs, heard Arthur’s voice rumbling above the others, something about the state police. She couldn’t hide in this bedroom forever, but there were too many people in the house right now, and she couldn’t face them, couldn’t bear the looks they gave her, their murmurs of sympathy, however sincere. She couldn’t even bear the proximity of her own husband. As much as Ethan might care about Zoe, he’d been her stepfather for only two years; he couldn’t possibly know the pain Susan was going through.

She rose from the bed and opened the door, and the voices downstairs became clearer. Colin, asking if he should pick up pizzas for dinner. Elizabeth responding yes, since no one had the energy to cook tonight. For them, life went on. Her daughter was missing, and these people were

discussing their next meal. She left her bedroom, stepped into Zoe's room, and closed the door behind her, shutting out the voices and their trivial conversation. Sinking onto the bed, she took a deep breath. Inhaled the same air that Zoe had breathed. Beside her on the bed was a laundry basket with freshly washed towels and clothes that had not been here this morning. Brooke must have taken them out of the dryer and brought them upstairs. On top was Zoe's T-shirt, the one she'd worn on the drive to Maine. She took it out of the basket and pressed it to her face, but it smelled only of laundry soap, not her daughter. Just anonymous cotton, with no trace of Zoe's scent. She set it back in the basket and suddenly glimpsed a sliver of red peeking out from beneath the mound of laundry. A shade of red that was alarmingly familiar. She dug into the pile and pulled out a red-and-pink dress with puff sleeves, gauzy and almost see-through from too many washings. She stared at it, remembering what Ethan had said when Jo Thibodeau asked what Zoe was wearing the last time he saw her.

*A dress. Something red and pink, I think.*

This made no sense. If Zoe had been wearing this dress when she was abducted, why was it here in the laundry basket, freshly washed? She thought back to the afternoon when she'd returned from Bar Harbor with Hannah. Remembered that the dryer had been rumbling when she walked into the house, a detail that suddenly seemed important. If Zoe had taken off this dress and added it to the dirty laundry, what had she changed into next? What had she been wearing when she vanished?

She jumped up, went to Zoe's open suitcase, and began pulling out clothing. Out came underwear and bras, T-shirts and shorts and jeans. Zoe's swimsuit wasn't in the suitcase. She thought of the last time she'd seen Zoe wearing it, swimming with that local girl. Splashing, laughing. And then what? Zoe would have hung up the swimsuit to dry.

Susan ran to the bathroom and glanced at the shower rod, the towel racks. The bathing suit wasn't there.

She ran downstairs, ignoring the alarmed looks from Elizabeth and Arthur, and darted straight to the laundry room. In the washing machine were damp towels and two of Kit's dirty T-shirts, but she did not see Zoe's purple bathing suit. She remembered the day they'd bought it. Remembered that Zoe insisted it had to be a chlorine-resistant Speedo, because she spent so many hours training in the pool. And her goggles—where were Zoe's swim goggles?

“Susan?” said Ethan, frowning at her from the doorway.

She sagged backward, against the dryer. No, this wasn't possible. Her daughter was too good a swimmer. She could hold her breath for two and a half minutes, could free dive deeper than any of her classmates. She was practically a mermaid. How could she . . .

“What's going on?” said Ethan.

“The pond.” Susan pressed her hand to her mouth, but the sob spilled out anyway. “They have to search the pond.”

# CHAPTER 13

## JO

“I looked for it everywhere,” said Susan. She stood hugging herself in a corner of Zoe’s bedroom, and even though her husband Ethan stood beside her, supporting her, she seemed wrapped in her own cocoon of grief, beyond the reach of any comforting touch. “All the bathrooms, the laundry room. The deck. It’s gone. Her bathing suit’s gone.”

Jo surveyed the aftermath of Susan’s frantic search. The empty suitcase lay open on the floor, every compartment unzipped, and Zoe’s clothing was strewn across the bed and floor. Susan had turned over every inch of this room as thoroughly as any crack team of federal agents, and Jo had no doubt the girl’s bathing suit was nowhere in this house.

“Let’s go downstairs, darling,” said Ethan. “Let Chief Thibodeau search the room. Brooke’s made a pot of tea.”

“I don’t want tea.”

“We’ll just get in the way up here.”

Susan wrenched away from him. “This doesn’t make any sense! She passed the lifeguard test. She can *swim*.”

“Why don’t we all go downstairs?” said Jo. “We need to talk.”

The rest of the family was gathered in the living room, along with two of their neighbors, Arthur Fox and Hannah Greene. It was nearly 6:00 p.m. now, and although this latest development had disrupted their evening meal, it clearly had not kept them from dipping into the liquor cabinet. Both Arthur and Hannah, as well as Colin, had drinks in hand. Except for the clatter of ice cubes in Colin’s drink, the room was silent as Jo came down the stairs with Susan and Ethan.

“Couldn’t her bathing suit have just blown off the dock?” said Brooke. “She might have left it out there to dry.”

“Her swim goggles are missing too,” said Ethan. “Those wouldn’t have blown off the dock.”

There was a pause as they all considered this detail. As they all came to the obvious conclusion.

Jo turned to Ethan. “You said that when you last saw Zoe, she was wearing that red-and-pink dress. Yet the dress is here, in the house.”

Brooke said, “I did a load of laundry when we got home. The dress must already have been in the washing machine when I added our clothes.”

“What time did you start the washing machine?”

“It was around two thirty, when Kit and I came home so I could change shoes.”

“Luther Yount said he dropped off Zoe at the boat ramp a little before noon,” said Jo. “So she must have come home and changed out of the dress. Was *anyone* here at noon?” She looked around the room and saw heads shaking.

“At noon, Elizabeth and I were meeting with the minister,” said Arthur.

“I was out hiking,” said Colin.

Jo looked at Ethan. “And you said you went into town to buy paper?”

Ethan, looking miserable, said: “I wish I’d been here. *Someone* should have been here.”

“Does it really matter now?” Elizabeth said. “Who was home and who wasn’t?”

*No*, thought Jo. It really didn’t matter, because the sequence of events now seemed clear. Zoe Conover walked home from the boat ramp, took off her dress, and put it in the washing machine. Then she changed into her bathing suit . . .

*And went swimming.*

Through the window, Jo saw the afternoon sunlight gleaming on the pond. She imagined Zoe’s body drifting beneath that mirrored surface, the first stages of decomposition setting in, her skin wrinkling, her eyes open to the ravages of hungry fish and amphibians. In days or weeks, if the body remained undisturbed, bacteria would feed and multiply, bloating her gut with their gases. Those gases would send her body rising to the surface like a grotesque balloon of decaying flesh, to drift on tranquil water.

“But how could she drown?” said Kit.

Jo turned to the boy. He seemed to shrink from her gaze, like a nocturnal animal suddenly exposed to bright light.

“I mean—she’s a good swimmer, isn’t she?” He looked at Susan. “You said she was on the swim team. You said she won awards.”

“Even good swimmers can get into trouble,” said Jo.

“But what about her backpack?” Brooke asked. “It ended up miles away from here. How does that make sense?”

Jo had no answer. Brooke was right; this *didn't* make sense. She could feel them all watching her, judging her. Doubting the small-town cop who was clearly in over her head.

“And what about her phone?” said Arthur. “She wouldn't have gone into the water with it. So where is it?”

“Arthur has a good point,” said Elizabeth. “There are too many unanswered questions. We shouldn't assume anything, not yet.” She looked at Susan. “Don't you think?”

“I don't know.” Susan dropped her head in her hands. “I don't know anything anymore!”

“I'm going to make some calls. Excuse me,” said Jo, and she stepped out of the house, onto the back deck. She didn't want the family to overhear her, so she kept walking, down the lawn, to the water's edge. The afternoon had gone still and the pond looked like liquid silk, its golden sheen unmarred by a single ripple. Zoe Conover might have been a champion swimmer, but even good swimmers could drown. She might have blacked out from an arrhythmia, or had her leg seize up from a cramp. Jo thought of the fourteen-year-old boy whose body they'd recovered from Pitcher Pond last summer, a boy who everyone said could swim. Because it was an inland body of water, the Maine Warden Service dive team had been called to recover the boy. She remembered how tenderly the diver had lifted the body bag out of the boat after they'd brought it ashore. Jo did not look forward to seeing Zoe Conover's body dragged out of the water, but that's where she probably was right now, lying beneath this satiny surface. Not a kidnapping, not a murder, but a tragic accident. It was time to bring in the warden service.

She pulled out her cell phone and called her brother Finn.

# CHAPTER 14

## MAGGIE

From their perch on a knoll above Maiden Pond, Maggie and her friends watched the Maine Warden Service dive boat as it motored back and forth across the water. They had brought a picnic lunch to sustain them for their surveillance: a platter of Turkish mezes, cucumber sandwiches, and Thai summer rolls, fragrant with herbs. A rather uncoordinated menu, but that was the nature of potlucks.

Lloyd had brought wine, of course. Two bottles of sparkling rosé, thoroughly chilled in a cooler packed with ice, the perfect beverage for a hot summer day. “If one must be on surveillance, one should make the best of it,” he said, pouring the wine into plastic cups. Not that Lloyd had ever engaged in surveillance, but he’d heard enough of their war stories to know that actually serving in the field would not have been his cup of tea. “And it’s such a fine day for this,” he said, handing Maggie a cup.

“I’ve had far worse assignments,” she said, setting down her binoculars to take a sip of rosé. Wine wasn’t the best choice of beverage for the situation, as her companions were already looking a bit lethargic in the heat. Ben was stretched out like a lizard on a rock, his Tilley hat pulled over his face. Declan was doing knee bends, trying to work out the stiffness in his joints. At the moment, Ingrid was the only one keeping an eagle eye on the activity below, her Swarovski binoculars trained on the warden service boat.

“Anything happening down there?” asked Lloyd.

“They’re just following the search grid,” she said. “It doesn’t look like they’ve picked up anything on sonar yet.”

“Oh look,” said Declan, pointing up at a tree. “There’s a pileated woodpecker.”

Ingrid’s binoculars whipped upward to focus on the magnificent bird hammering away on a dying oak. Lloyd raised his binoculars as well, and even Ben stirred from his heat-induced stupor to squint up at the bird. What

was it about growing older that turned you into a bird-watcher and made you invest in expensive optical equipment? In their earlier lives, they'd trained their attention on dangerous members of their own species; now they focused on species with beaks and feathers, observing them with the same fierce concentration, and a great deal more pleasure.

"Oh, and here comes the mate!" said Lloyd.

Now all of them had their binoculars trained on the second woodpecker as it swooped in, its head a brilliant scarlet against the tree trunk. Their surveillance mission had been hijacked by a pair of birds.

*Enough. Time to get back to business,* thought Maggie, and she redirected her attention to the pond. If this were August, there would be kayaks and swimmers and a motorboat or two on the water, but today, the only boat she saw belonged to the Maine Warden Service, towing a side-scan sonar unit as if trolling for fish. The wardens had begun their grid search an hour ago, starting at the boat ramp, the downwind end of the pond, where an object in the water would be most likely to drift. Since then, the boat had slowly worked its way upwind, zigzagging back and forth as it scanned the bottom for anomalies. This was the first time Maggie had observed such an operation, and she'd already lost interest. All there was to see was a twenty-four-foot dive boat pattering back and forth across the surface. A good thing they had brought a picnic—they might be here for a while, but at least they would not go hungry.

The search had clearly lost its appeal to the general public as well. This morning, when the dive boat first put in to the water, people were standing along the shoreline on both sides of the pond, waiting for something exciting to happen. For the town of Purity, this was a real-life crime show, like the ones they watched on television, and it was playing out in their own backyard. But real life was not like television, and searches didn't conclude with a jump cut to a dead body. This was painstaking work, and most of the spectators had drifted away, back to their cars. Susan and Ethan Conover, however, still remained at the water's edge. Through binoculars, Maggie could see the couple, their arms around each other, their attention fixed on the dive boat. The rest of the Conover family was nowhere in sight.

The engine suddenly roared in reverse and throttled down.

Maggie whipped her binoculars across the water and focused on the dive boat, which had come to a stop a few dozen yards offshore, opposite Moonview.

“They’re dropping anchor,” said Ben.

Now all five of them had their binoculars focused on the pond, the pileated woodpeckers forgotten. Aboard the boat, the wardens huddled over their equipment. With their motor now silent, the only sound was the chirp of birds, the rapping of the woodpeckers against the oak tree. A drop of sweat slid down Maggie’s back, but she no longer felt the heat or the dulling effect of the wine she’d drunk. She was fully alert now, watching and waiting for what happened next.

Two of the wardens began donning scuba gear.

They’d found something.

# CHAPTER 15

## SUSAN

*Oh my God. Oh my God.*

Susan felt the ground sway beneath her, and she reached out to grasp Ethan's hand. She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Jo Thibodeau walking toward them, radio in hand, her face somber. Jo approached quietly, as if not to spook them.

"It may be nothing," said Jo.

"Why are the divers going down?" said Ethan. "What did they find?"

"There's an irregularity, on the lake bed. They're just going down to take a look. Why don't you both go into the house? This could take a while. I think you'd be more comfortable inside."

"No," said Susan.

"Please, Mrs. Conover."

"*No!*" The word came out so shrill that Susan scarcely recognized it as her own voice. What frightened her most was the dead calmness of Jo Thibodeau's words. As if she already knew what the boat had found. As if she was preparing Susan for the worst.

Susan looked at the pond, where the second diver had just splashed in. "What does that mean, an 'irregularity'? What did they see?"

"Go inside. I promise, I'll tell you as soon as I know more."

How could the woman sound so cool, so collected? The sheer ordinariness of this day enraged Susan. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping in the trees, while her own world was about to collapse around her.

"Susan," Ethan said quietly, "let's go inside." He took her arm. "Please."

She let him walk her back up the path, let him lead her up the deck steps into the house. The rest of the family was in the dining room, where lunch was spread out on the table. Cold cuts and fruit salad and potato chips, which Kit was devouring with noisy crunches. How could they sit there, gorging, while outside, on the water . . .

Elizabeth saw Ethan's face and immediately asked: "What's happened? Did they find something?"

"We're not sure," said Ethan. "The divers have just gone down."

"Oh, no." Elizabeth stood up and went to the living room window.

"The police want us to stay inside the house," said Ethan.

"Why?"

"To keep us out of their way, I guess."

"We're not prisoners," said Colin. He stood up and joined Elizabeth at the window. The rest of the family migrated there as well, all of them looking out at the pond, where the anchored dive boat was gently bobbing.

"It could be nothing," said Brooke.

Ethan nodded. "That's what the policewoman said. An 'irregularity,' on the lake bed. That could mean a tree branch, a rock. We should all just sit down."

But no one moved. They remained at the window, staring at the water. Jo Thibodeau had told Susan the pond was only forty-two feet at its deepest, but that was deep enough to swallow a body, to hide any number of tragedies. She thought of lying at the bottom of that pond, sunlight filtering through the water above. She thought of swimmers splashing on the surface, never realizing what lay beneath them. She sagged against the window, her hand pressed on the glass, and wondered how long she could take this without screaming.

"The divers are back up," said Colin.

Two heads had just bobbed to the surface. One of the divers reached up to pass a line to the helmsman aboard the boat, and the helmsman began pulling on the rope, hand over hand. Something surfaced from the water, something that was a bright, alarming yellow, in the shape of . . .

A body bag.

*No*, thought Susan. *No, no, no.*

She bolted out of the house. She heard Ethan yelling her name, heard the screen door slap shut and footsteps pounding down the deck stairs. Jo Thibodeau swooped in, seemingly out of nowhere, and caught Susan's arm just as she reached the water's edge.

"Mrs. Conover! Susan!"

"Is it her? Is it my baby?"

The two divers had clambered back on board. The engine kicked to life, and the boat started motoring toward the ramp.

Jo ordered Ethan: "Take your wife back to the house."

Ethan took Susan's arm. "Come on, darling."

Susan yanked away and began to run up the driveway, toward the road. Through the trees, she could hear the growl of the motor, the sound reflecting off the water and up the hillside. She was racing that boat, desperate to get to the ramp first. She kept running and running, along the same road that Zoe would have walked on the day she vanished, the same road that should have brought her home.

The boat engine throttled down.

She sprinted around the final curve, toward the ramp. Reached the parking lot just as the warden service boat slid ashore. The two divers jumped out, splashing into knee-deep water. They looked up, startled, as Susan sprinted toward them.

"Is it her? Tell me!" Susan cried.

"Ma'am," one of them said. "You need to stay back—"

She shoved past him and splashed into the water. Grabbing the dive ladder, she hauled herself up, onto the boat.

"Whoa!" the helmsman yelled. "You can't come aboard!"

But she would not be stopped. Even as she heard Jo Thibodeau shouting at her from the parking lot, even as the warden tried to block her. *My baby. My baby is in there.*

She dropped down beside the yellow body bag. Water was still trickling through the mesh, and brown puddles had collected beneath it. With shaking hands, she yanked on the zipper pull and peeled open the bag. She stared in shock at what lay inside.

"Finn, get her out of the boat!" Jo yelled.

Hands hauled Susan backward, but even as she was dragged away, her eyes were fixed on the contents of that bag. On the human skull, its sockets empty and staring.

Bones. There were only bones inside.

It was not her daughter.

# CHAPTER 16

## JO

“It never gets any easier,” said her younger brother, Finn. “Recovering a body.”

They were in Jo’s car, headed to the ME’s office in Augusta, with Jo at the wheel. Since the Maine Warden Service had transferred Finn up to Aroostook County in the north, they hadn’t been able to spend as much time together the way they used to, pitching their tents in the backwoods or clambering up mountains with their dogs. He’d always been her best friend, and really, how could anyone *not* like Finn? He was a taller, skinnier version of their father, Owen, with the same goofy laugh and ambling gait. But unlike Owen, Finn was more than a little terrified of conversing with women his age, which might explain his state of eternal bachelorhood.

With his sister, though, Finn never *stopped* talking.

“At least this recovery was easy. Not like that one in February,” he said. “I hate having to dive under the ice. And that lake was full of tannins, murky as hell.”

“That was the kid on the snowmobile?”

“Yeah. Windchill was like twenty below, wicked hard day to be in the water. And his dad and mom were *right there*, standing by the lake, watching. They must have known their kid was already dead, but they were hanging on. Hoping they were wrong. When I brought it up in the bag, Jesus, the screams. Like wild animals. That’s what I never get used to, Jo. I can deal with the bodies, even the messed-up ones. But I’m no good at dealing with parents.”

“No. That’d be the hardest.”

“So I was really glad it wasn’t that girl’s body we pulled up, with her mother there and all. As it was, she seemed kinda crazy.”

*Yes she did*, Jo thought. Susan Conover had been unstoppable, clambering aboard the dive boat, clawing open the body bag. But what mother wouldn’t be half-insane, trying to reach her child?

“So where do you think that missing girl is?” asked Finn.

“I don’t know.”

“At least we know she’s not in that pond. It was a nice gravel bottom, easy to search. We didn’t spot any other anomalies on side-scan.”

“Instead, you handed me another mystery.” Jo sighed. “Thanks a lot.”

“Well, it *is* called Maiden Pond. We know at least one girl has drowned there.”

“That was a hundred years ago. And she’s buried at Mountain View Cemetery.”

“So who’s the skeleton?” He looked at her. “You have any idea?”

“Whoever it is, he—or she—has been down there a long time.”

“How long, you think?”

“Months? Years?” Jo turned onto the driveway for the medical examiner’s office and pulled into a parking stall. “Let’s hope we get some answers.”

\*

“Why, if it isn’t the Thibodeaus,” said Dr. Wass, greeting Jo and Finn with a smile as they walked into the morgue. Jo had met the chief medical examiner years ago, when she had viewed her first autopsy as a student at the Maine Criminal Justice Academy. Until that day, she’d never seen a dead human up close, and certainly had never looked *inside* one. With the rest of her class, she’d stood at the morgue table and watched Dr. Wass make the first incision. That had been the worst part, seeing the blade slice into skin, followed by the horror of hearing the ribs being cracked open. But once the chest cavity was open and the organs bared, what she saw looked very much like the insides of the deer that she and Finn used to hunt and gut in the field. On the inside, humans were scarcely different from animals, she’d thought, and that had made the rest of the autopsy easier to watch. But watching the first incision still made her cringe, because the skin being sliced open was clearly human, and very much like her own.

She was glad that today’s visit would not involve scalpels or skin. Instead, what lay on the table were bones, arranged in their approximate anatomical positions. Bending over those bones now was the state’s forensic anthropologist, Dr. Julie Volberding, whose lectures at the academy on body decomposition were legendary because of her stomach-turning

slideshow. For a woman who spent her workdays boiling down human bones and collecting maggots from rotting flesh, Dr. V. always seemed as serene as a silver-haired grandmother happily puttering around in her kitchen.

“Julie, you remember Jo Thibodeau and her brother Finn?” said Wass. “Jo’s now the acting police chief in Purity. And Finn’s with the warden service. He brought up the remains.”

“Sister and brother? Keeping it all in the family, eh?” said Volberding.

“I enjoyed your lectures at the academy,” said Jo.

“Now let’s see how much you remember.” Volberding nodded at the bones on the table. “There’ll be a quiz afterward.”

“We should wait for Detective Alfond,” said Wass. “He ought to be here any minute.”

Jo winced at the mention of Alfond’s name. Because this death was a possible homicide, a state police detective would routinely be assigned to the case, but why did it have to be Alfond? She’d already tangled with him once, back in February, when a woman’s body was found in Maggie Bird’s driveway. Even though it had happened in her town, on her beat, Alfond had effectively locked Jo out of that investigation.

She felt an ominous sense of *déjà vu* when the morgue door opened and Robert Alfond walked in. He took one look at her, and it was clear, by the expression on his face, that he was no happier than she was about them being thrown together again.

“You remember Jo Thibodeau, don’t you?” Wass said.

Alfond gave a grudging nod. “Of course.”

“And this is her brother, Finn.”

Alfond laughed. “What is this, Take Your Family to Work Day?”

“I’m with the Maine Warden Service, *sir*,” Finn said, and he took a step toward his sister to form a united front. The Thibodeaus always stuck together. “I’m the diver who brought up the remains.”

“Let’s get down to business, shall we?” said Volberding, and she looked at Finn. “Tell us about the recovery. Describe the location.”

“Maiden Pond,” said Finn. “The pond has a maximum depth of around forty-two feet, but these remains were lying at a depth of twenty-one feet, about fifty feet off the western shore. We were about two hours into our search grid when we spotted the irregularity on side-scan. The bottom there

is mixed gravel and sediment. The water clarity was fair. Not much of a current, and the wind was from the south.”

“And this was a surprise discovery? I’m told you were actually looking for a missing girl.”

Jo nodded. “A fifteen-year-old visitor who went missing on Monday. Her family’s staying in their summer home on Maiden Pond.”

“Well, these certainly aren’t her bones,” said Volberding. “These have been in the water for quite some time.”

“How long?” asked Alford.

“I don’t have an easy answer for you.” With gloved hands, Volberding picked up the skull. “In fresh water, in the summer, a body could skeletonize within a month.”

“So this death could be as recent as a month ago?”

“Slow down, I’m just getting started. You can see, there isn’t even a trace of adipocere on these bones. That’s what we used to call ‘grave wax,’ or decomposed fatty tissue. In submerged bodies, adipocere can linger on a corpse for years. The lack of it here argues for a much longer submersion than just a month. Also, there’s complete disarticulation of the joints, plus we’re missing a few of the carpals. The hand bones. Which means we’re not talking mere months, but most likely years of immersion.” Volberding looked at Finn. “You’re sure you recovered everything?”

“Yes, ma’am. And we scooped up some of the surrounding rocks and debris, because I thought they might be relevant. They were in that bag, there.” He pointed to a yellow plastic pouch on the steel tray.

“Good for you, because that debris *is* relevant. It’s just a pity it didn’t include anything to help identify her.”

“Her?” said Jo.

“Oh, yes.” Volberding pointed to the pelvis. “Remember my lecture at the academy, about the skeletal clues that tell you an individual’s sex? Look at the shape of this pubic arch, the pelvic inlet. And look at the contours of the iliac crests. This individual is clearly a female. And using the length of the femur as a guide . . .” She pulled out a tape measure and held it against the thigh bone. “I’d say her height was between five foot three to five foot five. Which again supports the conclusion this is a female.”

“An adult?” said Jo. “Or someone not fully grown?”

“She has all four wisdom teeth, so she’s at least eighteen years old. And the epiphyses have closed.”

“The what?” said Finn.

Wass explained, “That’s the cartilage plate at the end of the long bones. When you stop growing, that plate closes over, and the bone fuses.”

“Which again tells us she was an adult,” said Volberding. She picked up one of the spinal bones. “There’s no lipping of the vertebral bodies, no osteoporotic changes, so she wasn’t particularly old.” Volberding reached for the skull and rotated it to view the underside. “And the basilar suture is not quite fused.”

“What does that mean?” asked Finn.

“A newborn’s skull needs to be a little flexible, to help it pass through the birth canal. The cranium’s actually made up of separate bones, which are loosely connected. Over the years, the sutures between those bones begin to fuse together, and that makes the adult skull rigid. One of the last sutures to fill in is here, at the bottom. The basilar suture.” She held out the skull to show them. “Do you see how this suture is not completely filled in with bone?”

“Which makes her how old?” asked Jo.

“No older than her midthirties.” Gently Dr. Volberding set the skull down on the morgue table.

*A young woman. Maybe my age,* thought Jo, staring at that skull. For years, this woman had been lying at the bottom of Maiden Pond as the seasons passed. The water above her froze and thawed and froze again, peeling away skin and flesh until all that remained was what now lay on this table.

“Do you have any open missing persons cases?” Alfond asked Jo.

Jo shook her head. “Nothing I could find. I grew up in Purity, and I don’t recall hearing about any missing women.”

Alfond said to Volberding: “It’d help if you narrowed down the time frame. How long ago are we talking about? Decades? A century?”

“I wish I *could* narrow it down, but these remains are completely skeletonized.”

“What about clothing?” Alfond looked at Finn. “Did you see any fragments down there?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Finn. “Like I said, I scooped up everything I thought might be relevant.”

“Yeah. Rocks.”

Jo saw her brother flush at Alfond's dismissive tone, and her protective instincts kicked in. Finn was the one who'd strapped on a tank and jumped into the water. He was the one who'd done the hard work of collecting these bones and hauling them to the surface. "Maybe you'd like to suit up and check the pond for yourself, Detective?" she said to Alfond. "I'm sure the warden service can give you the exact coordinates."

"The clothing would have decayed by now," Volberding cut in. "Especially if she was wearing cotton or rayon. There's a study out of Cornell University demonstrating that within a year, cotton textiles biodegrade almost a hundred percent in fresh water. She was submerged at least that long, and then you have to factor in scavenger activity. It's no surprise the clothing's gone."

"Then you have *no* idea how long she was down there," said Alfond.

"Oh, I'm not done yet. I know you're a busy man, Detective, but do try a little patience."

Volberding picked up the detached mandible, which had been separated from the skull by the forces of decay. "Here's where we find some answers. She has excellent dentition, and an amalgam filling in the right third molar."

"She has a dental filling?" said Jo.

"Yes, but dental amalgams have been in use for quite some time. In fact, the first amalgams were used way back in the fifteen hundreds. But over the last hundred years, amalgam composition has changed. The metallic composition will help us narrow down which decade the work was done."

"So we're only down to decades now," Alfond scoffed. "At least it's better than centuries."

Volberding peered at him over her glasses. "If you have more important business to attend to, Detective, I'd be happy to send you the final report."

"There are cottages all around that pond," said Finn. "After a few days, a submerged body would fill up with gases and pop to the surface. It's strange that no one noticed a body floating on the water."

"Maybe it happened off season, but while there's still open water," said Dr. Wass. "In the early spring or late fall, most of those cottages would have been empty."

"But Finn brings up a good point," said Volberding. "If she died during the summer, her body *would* have floated to the surface. Unless something held her down. And that brings us to the manner of her death." She turned the skull onto its side. "I almost missed it at first, but if you look closely,

you'll notice a hairline fracture in the left temporal bone. While it probably didn't kill her, it would have stunned her."

"Maybe she fell in a boat, hit her head, and went overboard," said Jo. "An accident."

"Except it doesn't explain *this*." Volberding crossed to the morgue sink and returned with a specimen tray. "When our excellent diver here scooped up the gravel and sediment around the bones, he also collected *this*." She held up a fragment of green nylon cord. "I think this was used to tie something to the body. A bag of rocks, maybe, to keep her from surfacing."

"I didn't see any bag down there," said Finn.

"If it was made of cotton, it would have decomposed, just like her clothing. But nylon rope like this, even though it becomes brittle and discolored over time, will last for decades."

"You can't narrow it down any further?" said Alford.

"That's where good police work comes in. This appears to be a homicide, so the ball's in your court, Detective Alford. I've given you enough information to start looking. Female, age eighteen to thirty-five. Five foot three to five foot five. Excellent dentition, with one amalgam filling in the second right lower molar. In the meantime . . ." She looked at Jo. "This happened in your hometown, Chief Thibodeau. If someone went missing in Purity and was never found, that report should still be somewhere in your case files. Find us a name."

# CHAPTER 17

## SUSAN

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay with you?” Ethan asked. He stood in the doorway, half in and half out of the bedroom, torn between remaining at home with his wife or joining the rest of his family. The others were all downstairs waiting, equipped for the day with hats and water bottles and sunscreen and a folding chair, should Elizabeth get tired during the ceremony. And they had the urn with George’s ashes, of course. *He* was the reason they’d all come to Maine, the reason they’d congregated in this accursed place. Today, George’s friends and family would drive up to Cameron Mountain to say their farewells and scatter his ashes, leaving what remained of George Conover to enrich the soil and find new life in a blade of grass or a wisp of dandelion fluff. In his last will and testament, George had laid out every detail of this ceremony, from the songs they would sing to the poems they would read, and now the family was about to honor his final request.

A request that Susan no longer gave a damn about. She remained sitting on the bed, her hands clasped in her lap, wishing that Ethan would just leave the room. That they would *all* just leave and grant her the privacy to suffer in solitude.

“I don’t have to go,” said Ethan. “I’ll stay here with you.”

“Of course you have to go. Your father wanted you there.”

“But I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“Ethan!” Colin called from downstairs. “Are you coming?”

Ethan glanced over his shoulder, then looked at Susan. “It might be good for you to get out of the house. This will only be for a few hours.”

“What if the police need to reach me?”

“They’ll call.”

“What if there’s no cell service up on the mountain? What if Zoe comes home and there’s no one here? Someone has to be here.”

“You’re right.” He sighed. “I should stay with you.”

“No, I’d rather you didn’t. Go, Ethan. It’s what you all came to do. It’s what your father wanted. I’ll be fine. I just need to be alone.”

“Ethan?” It was his mother this time, calling from downstairs.

“Go,” Susan said, waving her husband out of the bedroom.

She was relieved when he finally walked out of the room and down the stairs. She heard car doors slam shut, then tires crackling across gravel as the family drove away. Only then did she feel she could take a deep breath. For too many hours, she’d had to endure being closed up in this house with the Conovers, forced to tolerate their attempts at sympathy, their useless advice, their uneasy glances. Yes, they might mean well, but she felt suffocated by so much closeness.

Once again, she looked at her cell phone. It was practically grafted to her hand, this tenuous lifeline to her daughter, but she saw no new texts, no new voicemails. She couldn’t help herself; she called Zoe’s phone yet again, only to hear the same recording. How many messages had she left? The voice mailbox must be full by now. Was Zoe hearing any of them? *Could she hear them?*

Suddenly desperate for fresh air, she headed downstairs and left the house. Walked down the sloping lawn to the dock. It was another heartbreakingly beautiful day, the sun shining, the water as flat as mirrored glass. *Where are you, baby?* Not in this pond; they knew that now. No, Zoe the mermaid would *never* drown in water so calm, so benign; she could easily swim ten times the length of Maiden Pond. Instead, the bones of some other poor soul had been dragged up, someone who must have been in the water for a long time, long enough to be forgotten. *Here is where people come to disappear.*

Staring across the sun-gilded water, she suddenly noticed the man facing her from the opposite bank. On the evening Zoe vanished, Susan had seen that same man’s shoulders silhouetted in the window across the pond. And yesterday, when the warden service divers were searching the water, he’d been there again. Watching. As they stared at each other, she felt rooted to the spot, unable to break off her gaze. Then a loon suddenly took off, wings flapping as it cut across the water between them, and the spell was broken. She backed away from the pond, away from the man’s stare.

She hurried up the lawn and back into the house. The door slammed shut behind her, and the gust sent papers flying off the coffee table. It was Ethan’s handwritten manuscript, now scattered across the floor. That

*goddamn* novel. If he had not been so focused on his writing, if he hadn't left the house to buy more paper, he would have been home when Zoe returned. He would have paid better attention to her. Who she was with, where she had gone. God, how she wanted to scoop up these pages and set them all on fire. She took a breath and swallowed back her rage. Bent down to collect them, not bothering to put them back in order. She plucked up the last scattered sheet and was about to place it on the stack of pages when her gaze landed on the sentence at the top of the page.

*This is where it began. And this is where it all came to its bloody and inevitable end, in this poisonous house on Maiden Pond.*

He'd never told her his novel was about Moonview.

She shuffled the pages back in proper order. Thank God he'd numbered them, or she'd never be able to reconstitute the manuscript. Another sentence caught her eye. She saw the names Corcoran and Connor and Nathan. Character names so close to Conover and Colin and Ethan that it was glaringly apparent he was writing about his own family, including their neighbors. The Groens next door were obviously the real-life Greenes, with a daughter named Helen, not Hannah. Here was where reality veered wildly into fantasy, with raven-haired, beautiful Helen described as dangerously tempting, the spark that would ignite the firestorm to come.

Hannah as temptress. That much, at least, was clearly fiction. But the setting on Maiden Pond, the two brothers at odds with each other, and the iron-willed mother all felt uncomfortably close to reality, but a far darker, more sinister reality.

She flipped back to the first page of Ethan's manuscript, when the fictional Corcoran family arrives at Moonview.

*This is where it began. And this is where it all came to its bloody and inevitable end.*

Someone rapped on the door. Startled, she snapped up straight in her chair. *Zoe*, she thought. *Someone's here about Zoe.*

She jumped up and ran to answer the door, expecting to find Jo Thibodeau standing outside. Instead, a man loomed on the porch, a man with unsmiling eyes and a face weathered by a lifetime of hard winters. *It's him*, she thought. *The man from across the pond. The man who's been watching our house.*

"You're Ethan's new wife," he said.

She swallowed, glanced past him, at the pond. Wondered if anyone would hear her if she called for help. “If you’re here to see the Conovers, I’ll tell them you came by.” She started to close the door, but he put up his hand to stop it.

“You didn’t even ask my name,” he said.

She took a breath and stood straighter. “What name should I give them?”

“Tarkin. Reuben. That’s my camp over there.” He pointed across the pond, to his ramshackle cottage. “My father used to work for the Conovers.”

“I’ll let Elizabeth know—”

“I’ve seen the family here every summer, watched those boys grow up. But I’ve never seen you before.” His gaze was so steady it unnerved her. As if his blue eyes were lasers, piercing straight into her skull. “Have they found your girl?”

She was so startled by his question, she just stared at him for a moment. “No,” she whispered.

“But they found someone in the pond. I saw them bring up the bag.”

“It wasn’t Zoe. It wasn’t my daughter.” She released a shaky breath. “I’ll tell the family you were here.” Again, she started to close the door.

“Tell them I haven’t forgotten. Tell that to Arthur Fox too.”

“Haven’t forgotten what?”

“Just tell them I haven’t forgotten what they did,” he said. Then he tipped his head and added, quietly: “I hope they find your girl, ma’am.”

She watched him walk away, down the lawn toward Moonview’s dock, where his blue kayak was tied up. Shaken, she closed the door and locked it. The encounter had unsettled her so deeply that for a moment she stood paralyzed, his words echoing in her head.

*Tell them I haven’t forgotten what they did.*

She looked at the coffee table, at Ethan’s handwritten pages, which now took on new significance. *What they did.* She pictured the family standing at this moment on Cameron Mountain, singing George’s praises. A memorial service was not the place to speak of a person’s flaws or misdeeds. No, they would release his ashes with words of praise. A fine man, a generous man. A good husband and father and grandfather. Whether truth or fiction, the accolades would be spoken, and then they would all come down the mountain again. Mission accomplished. George’s last wishes fulfilled.

She went to the window and gazed across the water to the opposite bank, where Reuben Tarkin was already pulling his kayak ashore. *What hasn't he forgotten?* she wondered.

*What did the Conovers do to you?*

## CHAPTER 18

She'd hoped to bring up the subject of Tarkin's visit in private, but Elizabeth had invited Arthur and Hannah back to the house and all of them invaded at once, sun-flushed and sweating and smelling of bug spray. George Conover's ashes had been scattered among the rocks and wildflowers of Cameron Mountain, and now it was time for lunch. Out came a buffet of cold cuts and French cheeses and potato salad that Brooke had bought from the deli in town. Arthur Fox opened bottles of chardonnay, and even the usually reclusive Kit pitched in, setting out plates and silverware and wineglasses. It might have been George's final send-off, but life went on and they might as well enjoy a decent lunch. How obscenely normal it seemed to Susan, watching them fill their plates with food.

She couldn't stomach the thought of cold meat, so she took only a few carrot and celery sticks, just to satisfy Ethan that she was eating. She had nothing to contribute to the conversation, so she merely sat and listened to them talk about how much George had loved the view from that mountain, and how pleased he'd be that they'd all been there to honor him. Susan kept glancing at the clock, wondering when the hell the neighbors would leave so she could ask about Reuben Tarkin and his cryptic comment, but Arthur and Hannah seemed to have planted themselves here for the afternoon. Then Brooke asked if anyone wanted coffee, and Hannah said "Yes, please," and Susan couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Who is Reuben Tarkin?" she said.

She might as well have tossed a bomb into the room. Arthur, in the middle of a sentence, abruptly went silent. So did the others, as they all turned to look at Susan.

It was Kit who broke the spell. "Isn't that the old guy across the lake?" he asked, but no one seemed to hear him; they were all focused on Susan.

"Why are you asking about that man?" Elizabeth said.

"He came to see me this morning. While you were all out."

"Wait. He came *here*?" Colin set down his glass with a loud thud. "Of all the fucking nerve."

Brooke touched her husband's arm. "Colin."

“How many times has he been warned to stay away from us? After all the trouble he’s caused?”

“What has he done?” asked Susan.

Ethan said, “The man’s just a troublemaker. He’s been harassing our family for years.” He looked at Colin. “Remember the summer he left the bag of rotting fish on our deck?”

“Damn right I remember,” said Colin. “And Dad kept letting him get away with that stuff.” He rose from his chair and went to the window to glare across the pond. “That was just *one* of the incidents.”

“And he stalked Anna,” said Elizabeth. “Frightened her so much she quit with no notice. Just packed up and left overnight.”

“Who’s Anna?” Susan asked.

“Kit’s nanny. A sweet girl from Mexico. Reuben was obsessed with her. Followed her into town, kept harassing her on our dock. Even brought her flowers. He was old enough to be her father, but he had some insane notion that she was romantically interested in him.”

“In *Reuben*?” Hannah laughed. “That’s delusional!”

“One night, he showed up at the door with a baseball bat,” said Elizabeth. “Colin and I were out of town, but George told us the man scared Anna so badly she quit on the spot. Brooke helped her pack, and George drove her to the airport. He called her a week later, trying to get her to return, but she refused.”

“And that’s our madman across the pond,” said Colin. “I don’t know why Dad didn’t call the police that night. If I’d been here—”

“You would’ve made things worse,” said Elizabeth.

Susan looked around the table. “And that’s what the man’s angry about?”

“Oh, he’s angry about more than Anna,” said Colin. “It’s the same old story, the have-nots against the haves. Look at the state of the shack he lives in. And here we are, in Moonview. It’s sheer envy.”

“But he made it sound like you did something to him.”

“To *him*?”

“He said, ‘Tell them I haven’t forgotten what they did.’ What does that mean?”

“We’ve never done anything to him. He’s just a crazy old man.”

“He’s always been that way,” said Hannah. “He used to harass my parents too. And Arthur, didn’t he leave a dead raccoon on your doorstep?”

“You remember that?”

“I was eight years old, and it made a big impression on me. Plus, there was that horrible business about his father, and what he did.”

Susan frowned at Hannah. “What did he do?”

“It happened way back, before Colin and Ethan were even born. Reuben’s father went bonkers one day and killed these people on Main Street. I remember the other kids talking about it.” Hannah looked at Arthur. “How many people died?”

“That was a long time ago,” Arthur said. “Let’s not bring up that subject, okay?”

“Please, can we all stop talking about Reuben Tarkin?” said Elizabeth. “I’m tired of hearing about him.”

“I agree,” said Arthur. “He’s just a sad reminder that the locals always consider us outsiders, no matter how many summers we spend here. We’re forced to get along because we need them to fix our houses, keep up the roads.”

“And they need our money,” said Colin.

Susan’s cell phone rang, and conversation instantly ceased. Susan looked at the name displayed on her screen and felt her breath catch.

It was Jo Thibodeau. *Zoe. There’s news about Zoe.*

Her hand was trembling as she answered: “Hello?”

“Are you home right now, Susan?” said Jo.

“Yes. Why? What’s happened?”

“I need to come by and collect a swab of your mouth. I’ll be right over.”

“Wait, a swab? You mean for DNA?”

“Yes.”

She felt Ethan reach out to grasp her arm. Felt everyone at the table watching her. “Why?” Her voice rose, shrill with fear. “Have you found her?”

“No,” said Jo. “But we have found something else.”

# CHAPTER 19

## MAGGIE

“Do you think she’s alive?” asked Callie.

Maggie let the question hang unanswered for a moment as she poured grain into the chicken feeder, as she emptied a bucket of water into the dome of the stainless steel poultry waterer. She wondered if she should be perfectly honest with Callie and tell her what she really thought: That Zoe Conover was most likely dead. That she’d been abducted and brutalized and discarded. That for girls like Callie and Zoe, the world was not a safe place, and they must pay attention to even the faintest whisper of alarm in their heads. It was something that Callie already knew; only a few months ago, she herself had experienced the terror of being abducted. No one had to convince her that the world was a dangerous place.

Maggie decided that a nonanswer was the best. “I don’t know,” she said.

“But what do you *think*, Maggie?” asked Callie.

“Does it matter what I think?”

“You *know* about these things.”

“The police know a lot more than I do.”

“That’s not what Grandpa says.”

*What the hell is Luther saying about me?* she wondered. Things he probably shouldn’t say. While Luther did not know the specifics about Maggie’s former career, the bloody events over the winter—the sniper in the woods, the abduction of Callie—made it obvious that Maggie had a dangerous past, one she wanted to put behind her.

She opened the henhouse door and out came her girls, clucking, heads bobbing as they flounced down the ramp and flocked around the feed basins. “Good morning, ladies. And gentleman,” she added as the lone rooster strutted through his harem. He was a good-natured boy who’d never given Maggie any trouble, unlike his predecessor, who once planted a razor-sharp spur into her boot.

That rooster had ended up in the stewpot.

She did a quick head count of the flock and was happy to see she hadn't lost any hens overnight. Earlier that year, more than a dozen of her birds were taken by raccoons and bobcats and one particularly clever fox, who'd treated the henhouse like the local diner. She looked up at the sky and spotted no eagles soaring overhead. They were yet another predator that was always circling, always waiting for the chance to feast. That was the downside of owning chickens: one must grow accustomed to losing them.

She lifted the side panel of the henhouse, exposing the top row of nesting boxes. Here was her favorite task of the day, collecting the gifts her girls left for her. It was like a treasure hunt, plucking up the brown, white, and blue eggs, some of them so fresh they were still warm. The long summer days had boosted the hens' production, and today she collected a bounty of eggs, which she would spot-clean and arrange in cartons to sell at the weekly farmers' market, where she and Callie shared a booth. This was the part of being a farmer that she loved, the reward for rising every morning at dawn to haul water and feed, for the weekly chore of moving the mobile henhouse to fresh pasture and replanting the electric fences. She would never get rich owning chickens, but the work of keeping them healthy and fed and safe from predators was a welcome distraction from thoughts of missing girls and nameless skeletons and her own haunted past.

"Grandpa says you're smarter than the police," said Callie, who had picked up one of the Araucana hens and now cradled it in her arms, brushing her cheek against its head feathers. The bird seemed to know it was in safe hands, and it nestled against Callie, clucking softly.

"Your grandpa says a lot of things."

"When the police couldn't find me, you did."

Maggie set down the basket of eggs and turned to Callie. "Sweetie, I wish I *could* help the police, but I don't know any more than they do. I'm afraid we need to be prepared for the worst. If Zoe didn't run away, then the chances are—"

"She didn't run away. She was going to come back to the farm. She wanted to try milking the goats."

Yet another reason to fear the worst. Another reason to believe the girl had been abducted.

"She could still be alive, couldn't she?" said Callie.

"Of course." *But not likely.*

“Then you should tell them where to look. You could . . .” Callie paused, her gaze suddenly riveted elsewhere.

Maggie turned to look at what had caught Callie’s eye and saw the flashing blue lights of a police vehicle. It was parked outside Callie’s house.

“Grandpa. Something’s happened to him,” said Callie. She dropped the chicken and took off at a sprint.

“Callie? Callie, wait!”

But the girl was already dashing across the field, hair flying behind her.

Maggie scrambled into her farm RTV and chased after the girl, her wheels jouncing across woodchuck holes and hummocks of grass. A police cruiser with flashing lights. Not a casual visit. *This is not good.* She rolled onto the driveway just as Jo Thibodeau put Luther, his hands in cuffs, into the back seat of her patrol car.

“What the hell is going on, Jo?” Maggie demanded.

“I’m just doing my job.” Jo closed the car door. “And I could use your help. Can the girl stay with you?”

Maggie looked at Callie, who was pressed up against the cruiser window, crying as she stared in at her grandfather. “How long are you going to hold him?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Just take care of the girl, okay?”

As Jo drove away with Luther, Maggie took Callie in her arms. Felt her heart beating as fast as a bird’s, her body electric with panic.

“Why did they take him? What did he do?” Callie sobbed.

“I don’t know, sweetie.” As much as Maggie wanted to keep holding the girl, she had calls to make, questions that needed answering. She pulled back and took Callie by the shoulders. Looked her in the eye. “I need you to do something for me. Will you?”

Callie rubbed away tears. Nodded.

“I need you to go back to my henhouse and take care of my flock today.”

“But what about Grandpa?”

“Finish watering them and arm the fence. Collect the rest of the eggs and get them into cartons.”

“What are *you* going to do?”

Maggie took a breath and straightened. “I’m going to go help your grandpa.”

# CHAPTER 20

## JO

If anyone looked the part of a dangerous man, it was Luther Yount. When they'd arrested him, he'd been laying out fresh bedding in his barn, and strands of straw, along with a few stray chicken feathers, were now snagged in his beard and his perpetually unkempt hair. He smelled like a barn as well, his baggy clothes ripe with the odors of cows and manure and freshly mowed hay. It wasn't a terrible smell, Jo thought, but it had thoroughly permeated the small interview room where she and State Police Detective Robert Alfond sat, facing Yount across the table. She could tell by Alfond's look of distaste that he was not as sanguine as Jo about barnyard odors. She had last interviewed Yount back in February, when she'd needed information on his neighbor, Maggie Bird. He had been defiant then, fiercely protective of Maggie, and unafraid to butt heads with the police.

He did not look so defiant today. This Luther was visibly shaken, his hands clasped tightly, his gaze fixed on the table, where a lone white chicken feather lay trembling in the current from the air-conditioning vent. She had not thought this man was capable of violence, but yesterday's report from the crime lab, and his downcast demeanor, forced her to reconsider her opinion of Luther Yount.

"Tell us how the blood got into your truck, Mr. Yount," said Alfond.

"I don't know about any blood."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true. I *don't* know. There has to be a mistake."

"Not according to the crime lab."

"Is this some kind of mind game? A way to get me to admit something I didn't do?" Luther glared at Alfond. "It's a technique with you people, isn't it?"

"Why would you think that? Have you been in trouble with the police before?"

"I'm not an ignorant man. I know how this works."

Alfond leaned back in his chair and gave Luther a cynical once-over. “No, you certainly aren’t an ignorant man. In fact, you appear to be quite brilliant. A full professor at MIT. Mechanical engineering, is that right?”

Luther’s answer was a sullen stare.

“You had a tenured position. A sabbatical every seven years. A nice office at the university. I can’t imagine why anyone would give up that job. I know I certainly wouldn’t.”

“You aren’t me.”

“So explain, Mr. Yount—or should I say *Professor* Yount—why you’re now living in Maine, shoveling cow shit?”

“Cows are likable animals.”

“Unlike people?”

“You said it.”

“What went wrong in Boston? Obviously, something did go wrong. Did you get yourself in some kind of trouble? Maybe got a little fresh with a coed or two?”

“We don’t call them ‘coeds’ anymore. It’s sexist.”

“Oh, excuse me. Let me rephrase. Did you get caught with some juicy female student?”

“Now you’re just making up crap. You people dragged me off my property, in full view of my granddaughter. I want to know why.”

“We told you why,” said Alfond. “The crime lab found blood on the passenger seat of your truck.”

“That’s no surprise. I have a farm. Sometimes we sell lamb or goat meat, and I haul it home from the slaughterhouse. That’s probably why there’s blood on the seat.”

“This particular blood is human. And it just happens to be the same blood type as Zoe Conover’s.”

Luther froze. He looked at Jo. “That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid not,” Jo said. “The blood matches Zoe’s.”

“No.” Luther pushed away from the table. “That can’t be right. I *told* you, I dropped her off at the boat ramp!”

“Around noon, you said,” said Alfond.

“Yes.”

“And then what happened?”

“She walked away. She was perfectly fine.”

“I’m talking about *you*, Mr. Yount. What did *you* do next?”

Luther looked down at his hands, which were clenched even more tightly on the table. Those few seconds of silence caught Jo's attention, and she leaned in. Just the fact he had to think before speaking was a red flag.

"I had errands to run," he said. "I already told Chief Thibodeau about it."

"Where were these errands?" said Alfond.

"Augusta."

"And what did you do in Augusta?"

"I checked out some tractor parts. Picked up fresh straw, for animal bedding."

"You drive all the way to Augusta for that? It's an hour-and-a-half drive."

"I know the store."

"And then?"

"I got home that evening around seven, seven thirty. My granddaughter can tell you what time exactly. We made pork chops for dinner. Mashed potatoes, applesauce—"

"I don't care what you had for dinner. I want to know what you did with Zoe Conover."

"I dropped her off at the boat ramp."

"Or did you take her elsewhere? Maybe took her on a drive out of town?"

"I went to Augusta."

"Found a convenient turnoff to some quiet spot in the woods, someplace you wouldn't be seen or heard? A lot of spots like that around here. A lot of places to take advantage of a girl. She was only a hundred and five pounds. Wouldn't take much of a struggle to make her do what you want."

"For God's sake, I have a granddaughter! You think I'd hurt a girl, *any* girl?"

"Maybe we should check on the welfare of your granddaughter. Callie, isn't that her name? Fourteen years old?"

To Jo's shock, Luther suddenly lunged across the table at Alfond. "Don't you fucking go near my—"

"*Luther!*" Jo yelled.

The two men glared at each other; then Luther sank back into his chair, his face fligid, his hands shaking. He'd already looked like a wild man when they started this interview, and now he looked truly deranged. She still did not believe Luther capable of hurting the girl, but Alfond had just witnessed Luther's violent reaction to some well-honed provocation. Then

again, Alfond could provoke a reaction from anyone. Just being in the same room with this man set Jo's teeth on edge.

"Again," said Alfond, "where did you take Zoe?"

"The pond. I dropped her off at Maiden Pond, and then I went to Augusta."

"Ah yes, to check out tractor parts. Do you have any sales receipts?"

"Didn't buy anything."

"What about that straw bedding you said you picked up?"

"Paid cash. No receipt."

"Would anyone remember you?"

A beat. "Probably not."

"You're a pretty memorable man, Mr. Yount. Big fellow like you. Surely someone can confirm you went to Augusta."

Luther dropped his head and focused on the table. This was not looking good. The man whom Jo considered harmless, who'd never caused even a whisper of trouble in Purity, now looked more and more deceptive. He could not explain Zoe's blood in his truck. Nor could he confirm his whereabouts after he dropped her off.

"It looks like you're going to be staying here for a while, Mr. Yount," said Alfond. "Maybe a lot longer than just a while."

"My granddaughter's at home. I can't leave her alone."

"It's beginning to sound like she'd be safer *without* you around."

"I need to talk to her. Explain."

"The person you really need to talk to is your lawyer."

"I don't have one."

"Then maybe it's time you got one. And think about how much easier this would be for you, and for Zoe Conover's family, if you just came right out and told the truth."

There was a knock on the door. Jo's officer, Mike Batchelder, stuck his head into the room. "Jo? Maggie Bird's here. She insists on talking to you."

"We're still interviewing Mr. Yount," said Jo.

"No, we're all done here," Alfond said, and rose to his feet. He gave Jo a satisfied nod. "We just have to wait until Mr. Yount's ready to tell us the truth."

# CHAPTER 21

## MAGGIE

She had first encountered State Police Detective Robert Alfond after a young woman was found murdered on Maggie's property. She had not warmed to him then, and she liked him even less now as she watched how dismissively he treated Jo Thibodeau. He was sitting at Jo's desk, in Jo's territory, yet he expected her to fetch him coffee and print him some documents, as if she were his secretary and not the town's acting chief of police. In Maggie's previous career, she'd gone head to head with men like him, and while their dismissive attitude was a perpetual annoyance, sometimes it came in useful because being discounted also meant being overlooked. When you can work unseen, much can be accomplished.

At the moment, though, Jo just looked pissed off. She returned to her desk with the sugar and cream that Alfond had asked her to fetch; then she sat down facing him, her lips pressed together as though to suppress any impolitic comments. She waited as he stirred cream and sugar into his coffee, as he took a sip and grimaced at the taste. True, the coffee was probably bitter after sitting on the warmer for hours, but he'd be courting real trouble if he dared ask her to make him a fresh pot.

He set down his cup and finally deigned to look at Maggie. "Now tell us why you think your neighbor is innocent," he said.

"I've known him for a few years now," said Maggie. "He's a good man, a reliable man. A man you can always count on for help."

"What sort of help?"

"We're both farmers, and that's what farmers do. We help each other round up stray livestock, repair fences, pool our eggs for sale. I have never seen him lash out in violence, against people or animals. He adores his granddaughter, and she adores him."

"And that's why you believe he's innocent."

"Yes, I do." Maggie looked at Jo, who sat stiffly in her chair. "You know Luther, too, Jo. Do you really believe he hurt that girl?"

“It doesn’t matter what she believes,” said Alfond. “Zoe’s blood was found on the passenger seat in his truck.”

“How much blood?”

“Enough to show up when they sprayed it with luminol.”

“So only trace amounts.”

“Because he probably tried to clean it up. We also have surveillance video from the Bluefin restaurant. It showed his truck going down the same stretch of Route One where the girl’s backpack was found.”

He was talking about the footage that Declan and Maggie had shared with Jo. And now they were using it against Luther.

“That footage doesn’t prove anything,” Maggie said. “Hundreds of other vehicles drive that same stretch of road every day. And Luther *said* he went to Augusta. That’s the road he would have taken.”

“Then there’s the issue of where he actually *did* go. His cell phone data tells us he only passed through Augusta. But then he kept going. All the way to Lewiston.”

This Maggie didn’t know. She looked at Jo, who gave a resigned nod.

“So you see why I’m not inclined to rely on your judgment regarding the character of Mr. Yount,” said Alfond. “We know he lied about where he went. What else did he lie about?” Alfond glanced at his watch and stood up. “Call me if he decides to talk,” he said to Jo.

Maggie was silent as Alfond walked out of the building. His nearly full coffee cup was still on Jo’s desk, waiting for someone else to throw it away. How nice to go through life assuming your messes would be cleaned up by someone else.

“It doesn’t look good,” Jo admitted.

“Let me talk to Luther.”

“You know I can’t do that, Maggie.”

“Alfond never needs to know. Give me just a few minutes alone with him. He trusts me. Maybe I can shake out the truth.”

Jo tapped her fingers on her desk as she considered Maggie’s request. While Jo did not know all the details about Maggie’s previous career, she did know it involved human intel, and she knew Maggie had a particular set of skills that might prove useful in this situation. She also knew that discretion was built into Maggie’s DNA and that this little breach of protocol would never reach Alfond’s ears.

“Empty your pockets,” Jo said. “Your phone stays here with me. Your watch too.”

“Seriously?”

“Do you want to see him or not?”

Sighing, Maggie took off her watch and laid it on the desk with her phone. She turned her pants pockets inside out, emptying them of two quarters and a wadded tissue. She even stood up and let Jo pat her down. Jo might be breaking the rules, but she was bloody well going to do it by the book. After confirming that Maggie had no dangerous weapons, nothing with which to commit a prison break, Jo walked her to the door leading to the detention area and unlocked it.

Maggie had never set foot in this section of the Purity Police Department, and her first impression was *needs paint*, but that was no surprise. When it came to apportioning funds from the town budget, updating the jail’s appearance was on no one’s priority list, especially when that jail consisted of only two cells. The walls were a sickly institutional green, and the paint had been chipped off and scuffed over the past half century. In a town as quiet as Purity, with so few serious crimes, these cells were probably vacant for most of the year, occupied only occasionally by a hell-raising tourist or a drunk driver. Seldom would they hold anything as exotic as a kidnapping suspect.

It was unfortunate that Luther *looked* the part. He was as unkempt as always, with his wiry nest of hair and dirty fingernails. They had not allowed him to change his clothes when they arrested him, so he was still wearing his farm boots and baggy jeans. When Jo unlocked the cell, he didn’t even look up but stayed slumped on the cot, his head bowed and his shoulders sagging. As Maggie stepped into the cell, Jo swung the door shut and locked it behind her.

“You have ten minutes,” Jo said.

“That’s not long enough.”

“I’m already doing you a favor, Maggie. I’ll be back when your time’s up.”

Jo walked out of the detention area, and Maggie heard the door thud shut. With two locked doors to get through, she and Luther were certainly not going to be breaking out anytime soon. She looked around the cell for a chair, saw none, and sat down on the cot beside Luther.

“Callie’s fine,” Maggie said. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

He released a shuddering sigh. "Thank you."

"You need to call a lawyer. Ingrid and Lloyd know a good one in Portland."

"But I didn't *do* anything."

"They found blood in your truck, Luther. On the passenger seat. It's a match for Zoe Conover's."

"I don't know how it got there."

"You didn't notice any blood?"

"You know what my truck's like. It's a goddamn mess! Chicken feathers, farm tools. And the upholstery's black. How would I see any blood?"

He was certainly right about the state of his truck. It was, after all, a farm vehicle, and the last time Maggie rode with him, she'd ended up with straw and animal dander clinging to her clothes.

"Tell me what happened after you dropped off Zoe," Maggie said.

"I left town."

"You told the police you went to Augusta."

"Yeah."

"Why Augusta?"

"It's not relevant."

"It is to the police." Maggie paused. "Luther, they tracked your cell phone. They know you didn't stop in Augusta. You kept going, all the way to Lewiston."

He said nothing.

"If it goes to trial, it's all going to come out anyway. So you might as well tell me what you were doing there."

He sighed. "I don't want you to think badly of me, Maggie."

"I need the truth. Good or bad."

"It's not good."

"What did you do in Lewiston?"

"Nothing. I didn't do anything."

"Then why are you so secretive about this?"

"Because of what I was *planning* to do. What I *would* have done, if I'd had the nerve to go through with it."

"And what was that?"

At last he met her gaze. "Kill a man."

For a moment, Maggie thought he couldn't possibly be serious. That his answer was merely flippant, in the vein of: *If I tell you, I'll have to kill you.*

But looking into his eyes, she realized he meant what he'd said. And she actually believed him. He might be a peaceable man, but if the situation called for it, Luther Yount would not hesitate to pull a trigger.

"Who were you going to kill?" she asked.

The clank of the door being unlocked cut off his answer. He went silent as Jo walked into the detention area, keys rattling in her hand. "Sorry, Maggie." She opened the cell door. "You have to leave."

"We aren't finished talking."

"I've bent the rules enough. Alford's headed back here, and if he finds you, he'll have my head on a platter."

Reluctantly, Maggie rose to her feet. "We'll stay on this, Luther. My friends and I. Just hang in there."

Jo walked Maggie out of the cellblock and swung the door shut behind them.

"Well?" said Jo. "Did you get anything out of him?"

"Possibly."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll get back to you later."

"Why can't you *ever* give me a simple answer?"

"Because answers aren't always simple, Jo." Maggie headed to the exit, then stopped. "I do have one more question. It's about Zoe's backpack."

"What about it?"

"You have a list of what it contained, right?"

"Yeah."

"Were there any feminine hygiene products?"

Jo frowned. "Why are you asking?"

"It's just something to think about," said Maggie, and she walked out the door.

Outside, she paused beside her truck, feeling the weight of Luther's precarious situation as heavily as a physical burden. In the two and a half years she'd known the man, she'd seen his kindness and his courage and his utter devotion to Callie. The Luther she knew—or *thought* she knew—would never lay a hand on a girl. Or had she lost her sharp edge as she'd grown older? Had retirement made her too trusting and gullible, just another silver-haired mark for hucksters and get-rich schemes?

No. On this, she was certain: Luther Yount did not hurt the girl. Now she had to prove it.

She opened her truck door and was about to slide in when she spotted a familiar figure walking past, on Main Street. Susan Conover moved like a woman on a mission, her gait pressured, her gaze fiercely focused on her destination. This was Maggie's chance to pull the woman aside, to convince her that Luther was not the monster the Conover family believed he was.

Susan walked into the town library.

Maggie followed her.

It might be tiny, but the local library was a source of pride for the town of Purity. The 1920s brick building served as more than just a repository for books; it was also the meeting place for knitting groups and book clubs and children's story hours, and it hosted evening lectures on topics ranging from rose gardening to astronomy. It was also where tourists and locals alike could count on reliable internet access, and against the back wall was a row of public computers.

That's where Susan was now sitting, her hands tapping on a keyboard.

Instead of approaching her, Maggie opted to just observe her for a moment, so she picked up a copy of *Birds & Blooms* from the magazine rack and settled into a nearby chair. From there, she could look over Susan's shoulder at the computer screen. Susan wasn't perusing any of the usual websites that someone from out of town might visit, featuring local restaurants or tourist hot spots. Instead, she was reading a digitized newspaper page, and Maggie could just make out the masthead name at the top: the *Purity Weekly*. Susan hit print. The linked printer whirred to life, and pages rolled out.

Maggie abandoned her plan to approach her about Luther and instead shifted to surveillance mode. Another page from the *Purity Weekly* appeared on Susan's screen. More pages rolled off the printer. Why was she so intently searching the local newspaper? What was she hoping to find in those old articles?

Abruptly Susan stood up and grabbed the pages from the printer. Maggie ducked behind her birding magazine as Susan walked out. A quick glance at the computer told her Susan had logged out, and the library's home page was back on the screen.

By the time Maggie emerged from the building, Susan was half a block away and unlocking her car door. Before the woman could slide in behind the wheel, Maggie called out: "Susan?"

Susan turned and frowned at her. Her hair was uncombed, and her blouse was a map of wrinkles. In her haggard face, Maggie saw the ravages of fear and sleepless nights.

“We met a few days ago, at Moonview. My name’s Maggie Bird.”

She nodded in recognition. “You were helping with the search.”

“Yes, my friends and I.” She needed to win this woman’s trust, and a small lie might well serve that purpose. “We work with the local police from time to time. Whenever Chief Thibodeau needs assistance.” *Which she certainly needs now.* “We’re the eyes and ears of the community, and we’re doing everything we can to help find your daughter.”

“Thank you,” Susan said softly. She looked toward the police station. “They’re saying he did it. The farmer. That he just hasn’t confessed yet.”

“Who’s saying that?”

“My family. They’re all convinced it was him.”

“Are you convinced?”

“He’s been arrested, hasn’t he?” In the eyes of most people, that fact alone was evidence enough of guilt.

“But do *you* believe Mr. Yount is guilty?”

“I don’t know.” She glanced skyward, as if looking for divine help. The sunlight glared down on her face, cruelly illuminating every wrinkle. Nothing aged a person faster than grief, and in that unsparing light, the loss of her daughter could be seen etched into every line of her face. “God, I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

What Maggie said next could destroy any chance of gaining this woman’s trust, but she needed to say it, and this might be her only chance. “I know Mr. Yount, Susan. In fact, I know him very well. I don’t believe he took your daughter.”

Susan frowned at her. This might have been a mistake. By coming to Luther’s defense, perhaps that would make Maggie the enemy.

“You said you’re the eyes and ears of the community,” Susan said.

“Yes. We are.”

“Then tell me about the man who lives in the house across the pond from us. His name is Reuben Tarkin.”

“Why are you asking about him?”

“Because he has a grudge against my husband’s family. I don’t know why, but I know it goes back years. I know he’s been watching us ever since we arrived. Not just watching us, *studying* us. And yesterday, when

everyone else was at the memorial service, when I was home alone, that man came to the house. And he wasn't friendly."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No. But something happened long ago between him and the Conovers, and he still holds it against them. He's vandalized their property. Frightened off one of their employees. I can't help wondering if he's the one who . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she looked at the police station. "When Chief Thibodeau came to get my DNA swab, I told her about it, and she said she'd talk to him. But then I heard they arrested Mr. Yount this morning. So maybe Reuben Tarkin's not important, after all. Maybe he's just an angry old man."

"Every town has one."

Susan gave a sad shake of the head. "Or two."

Maggie looked down the street at the Marigold Café. "Would you like to have a cup of coffee with me?"

Susan thought about it for a moment, as if weighing a momentous decision. Events had so cruelly battered this woman that she seemed unable to make even the simple decision of whether or not to have a cup of coffee with a friendly face.

At last, she nodded. "I'd like that."

\*

Although the café was half-empty, Maggie chose a booth in the far corner, instinctively opting for the spot that would afford them the most privacy, as well as the best spot from which to monitor their surroundings. Whether the conversation was about murder or meringues, she had an aversion to being overheard. The Marigold was not a place for fine dining or cappuccino, but it was comfortingly familiar, and she knew the rear exit opened directly into the public parking lot, a convenient feature if one needed to make a quick escape.

Their coffees arrived in the same institutional white mugs one could find in diners and truck stops across the country, built to survive tumbles to the floor and thousands of cycles in the dishwasher. Not the most elegant of vessels, but in the Marigold, the brew was reliably hot and strong, and Susan sipped hers with a look of quiet gratitude.

“God, I’m glad to be out of the house,” she murmured, inhaling the fragrant steam from her mug. “To have time away from the family.”

“Families can be complicated,” Maggie said. It was a Rorschach statement, open to interpretation. A prompt to make the woman continue, and she did.

“They’re not even *my* family. Ethan’s the one I married, not *them*. But for better or worse, they came with the package, and I’m still feeling my way around them.”

“They must seem practically like strangers, then.”

“There’s no ‘practically’ about it. It’s like I’ve walked into a room where a conversation’s been going on for the last fifty years, and I’m just trying to catch up. Of course I can’t. I don’t know all the obscure references, the names they throw around. With Zoe missing, I’m just trying to hold on to my sanity. I can’t deal with *them* too. I feel like I can’t breathe, with all of us in the same house. Plus, those two neighbors always trooping in and out, as if they’re part of the family.” She dragged her fingers through her hair. “I just want to find my daughter and go home.”

The woman’s distress was so palpable that Maggie wanted to reach out and take her hand, but after what Susan had just said about feeling smothered, it seemed like that simple gesture would be an invasion of the woman’s personal space. She did not touch her at all, merely murmured in sympathy.

“You mentioned this man, Reuben Tarkin,” said Maggie. “What does your family say about him?”

“They said he’s been causing trouble for years. Trespassing. Vandalism.”

“Against the Conovers in particular?”

“He’s also harassed their neighbor, Arthur Fox. Elizabeth thinks it’s just the usual tension between locals and summer people, but this man has a family history of violence. Arthur and Elizabeth wouldn’t tell me much about it. It’s as if they don’t want to talk about it. So I went to the library to look up the name Tarkin.” She reached into her purse and pulled out the pages that she’d printed in the library. She handed them to Maggie. “This was in the local newspaper archives.”

The first page was from the front page of the *Purity Weekly*, dated July 1972. The headline was so prominent it practically shouted from above the masthead, in a font size usually reserved for global catastrophes.

# MASSACRE ON MAIN STREET

## Five Dead, Including Purity Police Officer

**A van driven by a local man careened down Main Street on Wednesday morning, mowing down three people before crashing into a parked car. The driver, 36-year-old Samuel Tarkin of Purity, Maine, was then confronted by Purity police officer Randy Pelletier, and in the struggle that followed, Pelletier was fatally shot with his own weapon. Tarkin was later shot and killed by Police Chief Donald Warren . . .**

Such a tragedy would leave deep scars in a small town, even half a century later, and Maggie was surprised she had not heard about this incident. She looked at Susan. “This killer, Sam Tarkin—”

“Was Reuben’s father.”

Maggie flipped to the next article. It was the front page of the following week’s edition, and the massacre on Main Street was still the top story. Three of the dead, including the killer, were from Purity, and two of the victims were identified as tourists from out of town, both complete strangers to the killer. The motive for the massacre remained a mystery.

“Samuel Tarkin murdered four people,” said Susan. “He was a violent man. What does that tell us about his son?”

“I’m not sure it tells us anything about Reuben.”

“His father deliberately mowed down three people with his van and then shot a policeman in cold blood. The article describes Tarkin as berserk, screaming about monsters. Clearly, he was insane. What if mental illness runs in the family? And his son lives right across the pond from us.”

Maggie turned to the next photocopied page. Once again, it was from the *Purity Weekly*, but dated three weeks later. The massacre by Sam Tarkin was still on the front page, but the typeface was smaller, reflecting the receding horror. Even the most traumatizing events inevitably faded into memory.

**Gunman Had No History of Violence; Motive Remains Unknown**

“Can you believe people described him as a caring father and husband?” Susan shook her head and said, with a bitter laugh, “A caring father and husband who just wakes up one day and decides to slaughter four people.”

But Maggie’s attention was not on the article about Sam Tarkin and his bloody assault on Main Street. Instead, she stared at an unrelated article printed just beneath it.

### **Woman Missing**

**Purity PD is asking the public for information on the whereabouts of Miss Vivian Stillwater, 27 years old. She was last seen Friday morning at her rental cottage on Maiden Pond. She had planned to drive to Boston that afternoon, but when she failed to arrive, she was reported missing by her sister, Catherine Stillwater . . .**

The rest of the article was cut off by the bottom of the page.

“He looked so ordinary,” said Susan, pointing to the photo of Sam Tarkin.

It was an image of Tarkin and his wife, standing in front of their house on Maiden Pond. The man had a blandly pleasant face and smiling eyes, and Susan was right: there was nothing in that photo to indicate that he would one day mow down three pedestrians with his van. That he would execute a police officer, using the officer’s own weapon.

“Violence sometimes runs in families,” Susan said.

“It can.”

“And Reuben lives right across the pond from us. He watches us. He would have seen Zoe swimming. He would have known she’s a Conover, part of the family he hates so much.”

Maggie’s attention was back instead on the article about Vivian Stillwater. On the photo of a young woman with wide eyes and thick lashes and a curtain of hair tumbling to her shoulders. She thought about the skeleton dredged up from Maiden Pond, the bones of a young woman, still unidentified. Fifty-three years ago, Vivian Stillwater had gone missing from that same pond. Had she ever been found?

“Given his family history, and the fact he’s living *right there*, don’t you think the police should be asking questions about him?” said Susan.

“Yes, they should be,” said Maggie, her gaze still on the photo of Vivian Stillwater. *About her, as well.*

## CHAPTER 22

This wasn't their usual day of the month for potluck and martinis, but with so many new developments in the investigation, they'd called an emergency meeting at Ben Diamond's house, on the edge of Purity village. Maggie had spent the afternoon getting Callie settled into her guest bedroom, so she'd brought no dish for tonight's potluck. Instead, she'd come with the most valuable contribution of all: information.

Her four friends were already there, standing in Ben's walled garden with drinks in hand.

Beyond those brick walls was a protective acre of woods, all part of Ben's property, so they had little fear of their conversation being overheard. The garden had been designed and planted by Ben's late wife, Evelyn, who'd passed away only a year after she and Ben moved to Maine, and it remained a living memorial to her horticultural talents. Evelyn had been a civilian, never part of the intelligence community, so Maggie had not known her well, but judging by the lushness of these plantings, Evelyn had possessed something Maggie would never have: a green thumb.

"Here you go, Mags," said Declan, handing her a chilled martini. "Belvedere, extra dry, lemon twist."

Maggie took a sip and sighed with satisfaction. "Why are you still single?"

"Because you keep turning me down."

"Have I heard a proposal?"

"Enough flirting, you two," growled Ben. "Maggie, you said you have new intel?"

Maggie set down the deliciously smooth martini on Ben's wrought iron garden table. "It took some delicacy. Callie's only fourteen, and she's still shy about bodily functions. But I believe we're on the right track about why that blood was in Luther's truck. Now we just have to wait for the police to catch up."

"Do they need a helpful push?" asked Ben.

Maggie shook her head. "Jo's a proud woman. Let's not make her feel inadequate. I'm pretty sure she got my hint, and I expect she'll have confirmation from the crime lab by the time she gets here." Maggie looked

at Ingrid. “Your turn. What did you learn about that missing woman, Vivian Stillwater?”

Ingrid sighed, and that was not a good sign. Instead of her usual triumphant smile, Ingrid shook her head, which for her was an admission of abject defeat. “Vivian Stillwater,” she said, “is an enigma.”

“Now *this* is getting interesting,” said Ben.

“And it’s made her *very* frustrated,” said Lloyd, dropping ice cubes into the cocktail shaker. He didn’t bother measuring the gin but simply poured in a generous slug straight from the bottle. “She’s usually on top of things. And when she isn’t on top of things, well, that’s not pleasant to live with.”

“I can imagine.” Ben laughed. “Her being Ingrid and all.”

“No, this really is worrying,” said Ingrid. “Aside from that lone article in the *Purity Weekly* archives, I can’t find any other reference to the woman’s disappearance. There was no follow-up article, no mention of the woman in any other regional newspapers.”

“Did you locate the reporter who wrote it?” Declan asked.

“Deceased. This article was written fifty-three years ago, after all.”

“Could Vivian Stillwater be dead, as well?”

“I searched for her death certificate. Couldn’t find one,” said Ingrid. “In fact, I couldn’t find *anything* about the woman after 1972. It’s as if she sailed off and disappeared into the sunset. It shouldn’t be this hard to find people. And that’s what bothers me the most. There should be a paper trail. There should be *records*.”

“What *do* we know about Vivian Stillwater?” Ben asked.

“Not much more than what was written in that *Purity Weekly* article. It said Vivian was living on Maiden Pond, that she’d planned to drive down to Boston for the weekend to visit her sister, Catherine Stillwater. When Vivian didn’t show up as scheduled, the sister called the Purity police and reported her missing.”

“So a woman vanishes from Maiden Pond in 1972,” said Ben. “Fifty-three years later, a woman’s skeleton gets pulled out of that same pond.” He looked around at his friends. “Shouldn’t the police have made the connection? Assuming her missing persons file is still open?”

“It has been half a century,” Maggie pointed out. “Files can get lost.”

“Maybe. But I’ll tell you what *really* puzzles me,” said Ingrid. “Why can’t I find any documents related to Vivian after 1972? *There’s* the mystery. She goes missing, and so does any official record of her fate. All

we have is that one article, in our piddly little town newspaper. And then, complete silence.” Ingrid paused. “*That* gets my juices flowing.”

“Oh boy,” said Lloyd, taking a gulp of martini. “Here we go.”

Indeed, it got the juices flowing in all of them. Careless misplacement of information was one thing; a mysterious *lack* of information was something entirely different. Now they were thinking about the possibility of deliberate redaction, which made Vivian Stillwater far more interesting.

“What about that sister in Boston?” Declan asked. “Have you tracked her down?”

“I’m trying to track her down, too, but without much luck so far. Again, it’s been fifty-three years. She may have changed her name. She may have passed on. Once I put it all together, I’ll hand it to Jo, wrapped up in a pretty ribbon.”

Ben’s doorbell chimed. “Speak of the devil,” he said.

As Ben went to answer the door, Lloyd filled the cocktail shaker with more ice and gin and was happily rattling the cubes when Jo walked onto the patio with Ben. The poor girl looked like she could use a stiff drink, and she cast a hungry look at the tray of antipasti on the wrought iron table—or what was left of it, now that the five of them had ravaged the array of cheeses and cured meats. “Another meeting of the Martini Club?”

“Of which you are now an honorary member,” said Lloyd. He emptied the contents of the cocktail shaker into a perfectly chilled martini glass and handed her the drink.

She grimaced. “I’m on duty. And I don’t much care for these.”

“Maybe because you’ve never had a decent one. Everyone has their preferred concoction, and that’s mine. Boodles gin, just a whisper of vermouth. A lemon twist, freshly peeled.”

She held it at arm’s length, as if it contained strychnine, and gingerly set it down, untasted. This evening Jo seemed subdued, even deferential, and she looked at the group as if she was seeing them—really *seeing* them—for the first time. She turned to Maggie. “You already guessed it, didn’t you?”

“About the blood in Luther’s truck?” Maggie nodded. “I had a hunch. And after I spoke to Callie this afternoon, I knew I was on the right track.”

“So the PMB test came back?” said Ingrid.

Jo turned to her. “What do *you* know about the test?”

“It detects D-dimer proteins. Distinguishes between menstrual and peripheral blood. I assume the lab confirmed the blood was menstrual? It

probably seeped through Zoe's underwear, and Luther's truck is so filthy, he didn't even notice the stain on the seat."

Maggie said, "And she was having cramps."

"How do you know that?" said Jo.

"Callie told me. I asked her."

Jo looked skyward and groaned. "You people just *love* being smarter than me, don't you?"

"But you do always manage to catch up, Chief Thibodeau," said Lloyd. He raised his drink to her. "We knew you'd do it this time, as well. So let's drink a toast to you!"

"Is there anything you people *won't* toast?"

"Life is short. We celebrate while we can."

Jo looked at the martini that she'd just set down on the table. She picked it up, took a sip, and winced. Put it right back down again. "I should have realized," she said, shaking her head. "It's so obvious now, why she did it."

"Did what?" asked Maggie.

"Put her dress in the washing machine." Jo had missed an important clue, and she was now kicking herself for it. "At the time, I didn't realize the significance of that detail. Then this morning, when you mentioned feminine hygiene products, it suddenly hit me *why* she washed the dress. *Why* there was blood on the truck seat. She got back to Moonview, discovered that her dress and underwear were stained, and she put them straight into the machine. But getting her period didn't stop her from diving back in the pond."

"You *did* reach the right conclusion," said Maggie.

"But first I let myself get talked into jumping the gun and arresting Luther. Alfond *insisted* the blood was enough."

"I'm not faulting you, Jo. Yes, it seemed perfectly logical at the time, with Zoe's blood in the truck. Just learn from it and move on. And have something to eat." She pushed the antipasti tray toward Jo.

Unable to resist the temptation, Jo snatched up a slice of mortadella and devoured it in a few quick bites. No delicate nibbling for her; the girl really must have been starved.

"Now that your case against Luther Yount looks shaky, perhaps it's time to consider an alternate suspect: Reuben Tarkin."

"Susan Conover's already asked me about him," Jo mumbled around a mouthful of salami. "The man's had a long-standing grudge against the

Conover family.”

“Do you know the nature of that grudge?” asked Ingrid.

“No idea.” Jo bit into a slice of Parmesan. “Wow, this is really good.”

“I’ll make you a doggie bag later,” said Lloyd, who loved nothing more than feeding people. “I brought way too much food tonight.”

“You always do, dear,” said Ingrid, and she smiled at the others. “Lloyd’s biggest fear is that people will go hungry.”

“About Reuben Tarkin,” said Maggie. “I assume Susan showed you these articles from the *Purity Weekly*?” She handed Jo a stack of photocopied pages. “The Tarkin family has a troubled history.”

Jo glanced at the headline: **MASSACRE ON MAIN STREET**. “1972?”

“I hadn’t heard about this incident before. But you must know about it.”

“Yeah, sure. My dad remembers it pretty well. But this was over fifty years ago. It’s ancient news.”

“Fifty years is ancient?” said Ingrid, and she looked at her husband. “What does that make us?”

“When his father killed those people, Reuben was only twelve years old,” said Maggie. “What kind of family did he have? Was he ever in trouble?”

“Reuben got into some minor scrapes,” said Jo. “Trespassing, vandalism.”

“Directed at the Conovers?”

“And a few of their neighbors.”

“Which neighbors?”

“Arthur Fox. And the Greenes, when they were still alive.”

“You should take a closer look at this man.”

Jo sighed. “Yeah. Okay.”

“And here’s another person you should look into. A woman named Vivian Stillwater. In 1972, she was twenty-seven years old and living on Maiden Pond.”

“Why is she of interest?”

“Because a few weeks after Sam Tarkin went berserk on Main Street, Vivian vanished. There’s an article about her, also in the *Purity Weekly*.” Maggie pointed to the photocopies in Jo’s hand.

“What?” Jo flipped through the pages to the story about Vivian Stillwater.

“You didn’t know about her?” Ben asked.

“No.”

“The skeleton from the pond still hasn’t been identified. Didn’t Vivian’s name come up as a possibility?”

“I combed through all our open missing persons files. There’s no unsolved case with her name.” Jo looked up. “Which means she must have been found.”

“Are you absolutely certain of that, Jo?” Maggie asked quietly.

The tenor of the question seemed to make Jo hesitate. By now, she should know that Maggie and her friends would demand confirmation, and there was always the possibility she’d overlooked something. She looked around at the five people watching her. *Dissecting* her. They couldn’t help it; they’d spent their careers scrutinizing people, and old habits died hard.

Jo’s cell phone rang. She looked almost relieved for the excuse to break away from the conversation and answer the call.

“Hey, Mike,” she said. Her head suddenly jerked up. Her neck muscles snapped taut. “Stay right there. Don’t do a thing!” she ordered. “I’m on my way.”

“What is it?” asked Maggie. “What’s happened?”

Jo hung up and turned to her. “Zoe Conover’s cell phone was just turned on.”

## CHAPTER 23

“I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” said Lloyd as they careened around a corner in pursuit of Jo’s patrol car. All five of them had piled into the Slocums’ Mercedes SUV, the vehicle that had been positioned to make the quickest getaway. This was the first time Maggie had ridden in a car with Lloyd at the wheel, and as she scrambled to buckle her seat belt, she wondered if they would survive the experience. Lloyd had never trained on the slalom course at the Farm, yet he expertly maneuvered his SUV as if the entire Russian army were in hot pursuit. He might be a maestro in the kitchen, a talented putterer in the garden, but this? This was utterly reckless, the way he squealed around corners and briefly swerved into the opposite lane to pass another car.

“You’re going to get a ticket, dear,” Ingrid said, maddeningly calm.

“Who’s going to give it to me? Our fearless police chief is right in front of us.”

Declan, sitting beside Maggie in the back seat, whispered in her ear: “And we thought the days of risking our lives were behind us.”

An oncoming car blasted its horn, and Lloyd scooted back into his lane just in time. “Damn tourists,” Lloyd grumbled.

“You know,” said Ben, “if you slow down, we might actually make it there alive.”

“And miss the action? I don’t want to lose her.”

Ingrid turned to look at the three back seat passengers. “He always regretted never working in the field.”

“My whole career, stuck behind a desk,” Lloyd muttered.

“You would have made a fine NOC,” said Ingrid. “But we just got these wheels aligned. If you hit another pothole, you’ll throw it all out of whack again.”

Jo turned west.

Lloyd did, too, swerving around the same corner so fast that he sent his passengers lurching sideways. “Where the blazes is she going?”

They were headed away from the coast, and traffic melted away behind them. The occasional house gave way to trees and more trees, the forest closing in like an encircling legion. They bounced down a road that had

turned into an obstacle course of cracked pavement and frost heaves, the inevitable casualty of harsh winters and invading tree roots. Maggie looked out at the ever-thickening woods and thought: *Out here, a body might never be found. Is this where he brought her?*

“She’s stopping,” said Ingrid.

Jo pulled over to the side of the road and parked right behind another cruiser. Officer Mike Batchelder, wearing a Kevlar vest, stood waiting for her. It was the first time Maggie had ever seen Batchelder wearing Kevlar, and now Jo was donning her body armor, too, a visual shout of *This is serious. This could end in bloodshed.*

Lloyd braked to a stop.

Jo stormed toward them and leaned into the car window, her eyes narrowed, her face tight with fury. “What the *hell* are you doing here?”

“Backup,” said Ben.

“No. No way! You will leave *now*.”

“This is where the phone was turned on?” said Ingrid, eyeing the rural mailbox atop the crooked wooden post. The name on the box, WADE, was barely legible against the splotchy background of rust. Beyond it, a dirt driveway trailed into the woods and curved out of sight. “Someone actually lives down there?”

“I don’t see a house,” said Lloyd. “Too many trees.”

“If we can’t see him, then he can’t see us, so we still have the element of surprise.”

“Did *any* of you hear me?” said Jo.

“How do you plan to proceed?” asked Ben.

“Proceed? First, I’m going to get you people to leave.”

“But we can help,” said Lloyd.

Jo glared at him. “I doubt it.”

“And this *is* a public road, isn’t it? Don’t we have a right to park here?”

Jo huffed out a breath and pulled herself straight. “Okay. Okay.” She shoved back the strands of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail. “You will stay *right here*, in your vehicle. Don’t leave the road, don’t try to interfere, or I swear I’ll have you all in handcuffs.” She turned and stalked away.

“I don’t think she’s serious,” said Lloyd. “Who carries five pairs of handcuffs?”

“For now, let’s cooperate,” said Declan. “Stand by and see what happens.”

From the SUV, they watched as Jo and Mike proceeded on foot past the rural mailbox and down the dirt driveway, only to vanish from sight into the woods. For a moment no one in the vehicle said a word; they were straining too hard to hear what was happening beyond that curtain of trees. Maggie glanced at her watch and wondered how much daylight they had left. It was gloomy here on this overgrown road, with twilight thickening around them. She felt her pulse throb faster, her muscles tighten.

“The owner’s name is Farley Wade,” said Ingrid, staring at her phone. “I’m looking at the satellite image of his property now.”

“And?” said Ben.

“Almost completely forested, except for a small clearing with what looks like a mobile home. There are no houses nearby, just woods. If that’s where he’s holding the girl, no one would hear her. No one would ever know she’s there.”

Maggie stared at the darkening woods and wondered: *What are you walking into, Jo?*

# CHAPTER 24

## JO

Daylight was fading, which could be either an advantage or a disadvantage. It meant she and Mike would not be easily seen as they approached the residence. It also meant that if Farley Wade decided to make a run for it, they'd have a hard time tracking him down in these woods.

Farley was the kind of man who *would* try to run. She'd known him since the fourth grade, when he'd first barreled his way to her attention after he shoved Leon LaCroix on the playground. Jo had responded by shoving Farley back, twice as hard. Their relationship had gone downhill ever since. Over the years, either Jo or one of her colleagues had arrested Farley for a variety of offenses, from driving under the influence to petty theft to stalking his ex-girlfriend. While stalking a woman was a long way from abducting a girl, the general trajectory of his behavior was undeniably ominous.

This wasn't the first time she had visited this driveway, although she'd always driven down it in her cruiser, past the same sagging mailbox, past Farley's rusting pickup truck, which he left parked in a turnout carved into the woods. He'd inherited this land, along with the double-wide trailer, from his grandmother. Judging by the deteriorating condition of the property, he had not made a single improvement since she died. The saplings along the driveway had not been kept at bay, and the overhanging branches were now close enough to snare any car that dared come down this dirt road.

Gunfire cracked nearby.

Instantly Jo dropped to the ground.

Mike ducked to a crouch right beside her. "What the hell?" he whispered. "Is he shooting at *us*?"

Three more shots rang out. *Pop pop pop.*

Frantically she peered through the trees, trying to sight the double-wide she knew was just ahead. She could see lights glowing, could hear a dog

barking—a big dog, by the sound of it. Another complication.

Five more gunshots rang out, but she didn't think the bullets were aimed at them. So who the hell was he shooting at?

*The girl.*

She sprang up and began to run toward the gunfire. She didn't remember reaching for her weapon, but it seemed to magically materialize in her hands as she emerged into the clearing, her barrel raised to return fire.

But there was no fire. All she found was Farley Wade, who was so shocked by her sudden appearance that he stood frozen with his mouth agape, the gun clutched in his hand.

"Drop it!" she yelled.

He didn't move. Couldn't *seem* to move. In that twilight gloom, he looked like a cardboard cutout, as easy to bring down as a paper target at the gun range, but she didn't fire. Mike moved in beside her, his weapon drawn, but he held his fire as well. In the double-wide, the dog's barking turned to frantic howls. Time slowed down, and as the seconds dragged past, Jo registered the multiple soda pop cans, punched with bullet holes, lying on the ground. Three more cans were lined up on a sawhorse, and the yard was littered with brass bullet casings.

"Come on, Farley," she said. "Don't be stupid. Drop the weapon."

He let his gun fall to the ground. "What the fuck, Jo? What is this?"

"We just want to talk to you."

"Yeah, like you were ever one for just talking. I'm minding my own business here. On my own fucking property."

"Where's her phone?"

"What?"

"The girl's cell phone. We know you have it. It pinged off the cell tower when you turned it on."

"I don't know anything about any girl."

She looked at Mike. "Cuff him. Then we'll search the place."

Farley backed away. "Now wait a minute. Don't you need a warrant?"

"Not if we think someone's in imminent danger."

"Who? Who's in danger?"

"You tell us, Farley." She glanced at Mike and nodded.

Mike pulled out his handcuffs.

Farley bolted into the woods.

"You've *got* to be kidding me," Jo groaned, and she sprinted after him.

Farley led her into underbrush so thick that it snagged her ankles, clawed her pants. He was only a few paces ahead, making no better headway through these brambles. Then he pivoted to the left and headed toward his driveway. Toward his pickup truck.

Behind her, Mike stumbled and crashed to the ground. Yelled out an uncharacteristic oath. Farley wasn't wearing any body armor, didn't have a radio weighing him down, and he was pulling ahead. If he made it to his truck, if he got the engine started . . .

She slammed through a tangle of vines and stumbled onto the driveway. Any second now, she expected to hear his truck roar to life, see his taillights flicker off into the distance, but all she heard was her own breathing, hard and fast. Where was he? Had he doubled back into the woods?

Then she saw the figures moving toward her. In the fading twilight, they were faceless silhouettes, an ominous platoon marching in formation. The figure in the lead stepped forward. Locked in his grasp was a squirming, cursing Farley Wade.

"I take it you wanted this gentleman returned to you?" said Ben.

She'd always thought that Ben Diamond, with his perpetual glower and his shaved head, had a strong streak of thug in him. Now he lived up to that image by dropping Farley at Jo's feet with the ease of a seasoned bouncer.

Farley moaned. "This is police brutality!"

"We're not the police," Ben growled.

"Then who are you?"

Jo snapped handcuffs around Farley's wrists and whispered into his ear: "You don't want to know."

\*

She locked Farley in the back of Mike's cruiser, now parked in Farley's yard, then she and Mike stood outside the double-wide, considering what to do about their next problem: the dog. Jo had only to reach for the doorknob when the barking started inside, loud and deep. This was not a dog she wanted to tangle with.

Mike pulled out his weapon.

*Oh no.* Jo thought about her own dog and how it would break her heart if anyone ever harmed Lucy. No, they were not going to shoot the animal. It wasn't the dog's fault its owner was a jerk.

“Let’s think about this,” she said.

“The girl could be in there. We’ve got to get inside.”

“I know, I know.” She went to Mike’s cruiser and leaned in. “Want to call off your dog?” she said to Farley.

“No.”

“It’d save everyone a lot of trouble if you cooperated.”

“That’s why I’m not gonna cooperate.”

“Look, Farley, I don’t want to have to shoot it.”

“I don’t care. He’s not my dog. He was my grandmother’s.”

“And you don’t have *any* sentimental attachment?”

“Dog food’s expensive.”

She felt a tap on her shoulder. “Excuse me,” said Lloyd Slocum.

“Not now.” She kept her gaze on Farley. “So for the record, you’re telling me you don’t care if your dog gets shot?”

“I don’t care.”

“Excuse me,” Lloyd repeated.

She turned. “*What?*”

“I have half a pastrami sandwich. When I heard the barking, I thought it might come in useful, so I got it from the car.” He handed her the sandwich, wrapped in plastic.

“You just happen to have a sandwich around?”

“I always pack an emergency sandwich, in case I get stranded someplace without food.” Which, judging by the man’s girth, did not happen very often.

She looked at Mike, who still had his weapon out, and then at the sandwich. God, she hoped this worked. She did not want a dead dog on her conscience.

She peeled off the plastic wrap, releasing the aroma of pastrami and mustard, and her stomach gave a loud rumble. She’d missed dinner, and all she’d eaten this evening were those few delicious tidbits from the Martini Club’s antipasti tray. This sandwich was just what she craved, and now she had to feed it to the dog. Cautiously, she pushed the trailer door open an inch. The dog lunged toward her, growling, teeth bared. She could feel Mike move in close behind her, knew his finger was already on the trigger. She waved him back.

“Hey,” Jo said to the dog. “Hey, sweetie. Are you hungry? Look what I have for you.” She tore off a corner of the sandwich and pushed it through

the crack in the door. In an instant the dog snatched it up, and she heard the noisy chomp of jaws devouring the morsel. “Want more?” She pushed the door open a little wider. This time the dog didn’t lunge but simply peered out, a line of drool hanging from his tongue. She held out another scrap of sandwich. He devoured it and stared at her, whining for more. A black Labrador. Huge, yes, but not aggressive, just hungry, poor thing. She wondered how long it had been since Farley had last fed him. Cautiously, she reached in and gave him a pat on the head.

He licked her hand. Okay, then.

She fed him the rest of the sandwich, then turned to Mike. “I think it’s safe to let him out.”

She opened the door, and the dog came trotting out of the trailer, tail wagging. Jo was the one who’d fed him, petted him, but to her annoyance, he headed straight toward the glowering Ben Diamond, of all people.

To her surprise, Ben immediately dropped to his knees and wrapped his burly arms around the dog. “Oh, you are a good boy, aren’t you? Who’s a good boy?” he gushed, and was rewarded with a slobbery lick on the face.

So much for Ben’s gangster act. All it took was a dog to unmask him.

She pushed the trailer door wide open and glanced at Mike, and they both pulled on latex gloves. Hoping there weren’t other dogs inside to deal with, she stepped into the double-wide and confronted the stench of a filthy trailer. She flipped on the lights.

“Jesus” was all Mike could say.

Along with inheriting his grandmother’s double-wide, it appeared Farley had also inherited her nicotine stains and her rubbish. The walls and ceiling were tinged a sickly yellow, and the odor from decades of cigarette smoke had permeated the plaid sofa and the worn green carpet. The trash can overflowed with empty tin cans and beer bottles, and in the sink were plates crusted with the remains of Farley’s last meal. It appeared that no one had vacuumed or dusted in months, maybe years, and black dog hair was everywhere. If Zoe Conover had been in this trailer, the forensic traces of her would certainly still be here.

As Mike headed toward the bedroom, Jo ducked into the bathroom. There she scanned the floor and sink, looking for any evidence of a female presence. She saw plenty of short brown hair strands—either Farley was prematurely losing his hair, or he’d never bothered to sweep the room—but nothing that would match Zoe’s long brown hair. She opened the medicine

cabinet and saw shelves filled with prescription pill bottles, not his, most of them long expired. Grandma had been a pill popper.

Mike came out of the bedroom. “The girl’s not here. But I found this,” he said, holding up an iPhone in a neon-pink case. “And come look at what else I found.”

She followed him into the bedroom, where he pointed to the closet, its door hanging open. Stacked inside were a dozen plastic bins. Mike lifted off one of the lids to show her the contents.

“Voilà!” he said.

She stared at the jumble of jewelry, purses, and watches. “Holy cow.”

Mike nodded. “Someone’s been a busy boy.”

## CHAPTER 25

“Come on, Farley,” said Jo, pointing to the iPhone on the dining table. “Tell us how you got this.”

She and Mike had brought Farley inside the double-wide, where there was enough light to properly question him, and where they could escape the inevitable swarm of biting insects that materialized every nightfall in the summer. Maggie and her friends had wormed their way into the trailer as well, but they’d retreated into the corners of the room, wisely staying silent. After they’d so helpfully delivered Farley into her custody, Jo could hardly kick them out, especially since Ben Diamond was the only person who seemed capable of keeping the dog from howling.

Jo leaned across the table, trying to get Farley to look at her, but his gaze ping-ponged everywhere else. “The phone, Farley,” she said.

“How do you know it’s not mine?”

“With a pink case? I didn’t think that was your color.”

“What’s the deal with this phone, anyway? Who cares?”

“We most definitely care. Now let’s start over. How did you get it?”

A pause. “I found it.”

“Where?”

“Bed of my pickup, underneath some trash I was hauling. I don’t know how it got there. I just noticed it today.”

“And it just magically ended up in your truck?”

“Hey.” He shoved his chair back from the table and stood up. “I don’t need that snark from you, Thibodeau.”

“Sit down.”

“You haven’t changed one bit since high school, have you? Still a bitch. No wonder there’s no ring on your finger.”

“Sit down, Mr. Wade,” said Mike, rising to his feet.

“Or what?”

“Or I get to try out my new Taser.”

The two men eyed each other. Farley sat down.

“Again,” said Jo. “How did you get this phone?”

“*Again*, I found it in my truck.”

“You know who it belongs to?”

“No idea. I turned it on, but it has a passcode. I left it to charge and went out to shoot a few rounds.”

“What were you doing at Maiden Pond on Monday?”

Farley paused, obviously thrown off by the abrupt change in subject. “What?”

“Just answer the question.”

“What makes you think I was there?”

Jo pointed to the green beer bottles on his counter. “Heineken, Original. You left one at the side of the road.”

“How do you know it was me?”

Jo glanced at Ingrid Slocum, who’d handed in the bottle. Jo had no idea yet whose fingerprints were on it, but Farley didn’t have to know that. She looked him straight in the eye. “It has your fingerprints.”

He swallowed and looked away, clearly rattled. *Gotcha.*

“Again. What were you doing at Maiden Pond?”

“Why does it matter?”

“It matters because you’ve got stolen goods in your bedroom closet. Some of those items were reported missing from cottages on Maiden Pond, as well as Lake Cameron. At the very least, Farley, you’re going to be charged with multiple burglaries. Now tell me again—what were you doing at Maiden Pond on Monday?”

He wouldn’t meet her gaze. He knew he was in trouble. “I go there sometimes. To fish.”

“What do you fish for?”

“Trout.”

“Maiden Pond doesn’t have any trout.”

“I mean bass. I fish for bass.”

She held up the phone, encased in a plastic evidence bag. “And you caught this instead?”

“I told you, I found it in my truck. It was underneath a pile of trash I was planning to haul to the dump. Why do you keep asking about the phone?”

Jo pulled up an image of Zoe Conover on her own phone and slid it across to Farley. It was a photo taken on a happy day, the girl posed in a Speedo bathing suit with a blue ribbon around her neck. The champion swimmer, celebrating her triumph. “Do you know this girl?”

“No. Why?”

“That cell phone, the one you ‘found’ in your truck, belongs to her. Her name’s Zoe Conover, and she was staying with her family at Maiden Pond. Maybe you’ve read the news online, or you’ve seen the posters all over town. She’s been missing since Monday.”

He went very still. At last, he understood how much trouble he was in, and it had nothing to do with the cottages he’d broken into, or the stolen items in his closet.

“You know we’re going to search your trailer from top to bottom, as well as every inch of your woods. The crime lab’s going to go over this place and your pickup truck with a microscope. If they find one hair from that girl, one *eyelash*, it’s all over for you. So you might as well tell us where she is.”

All the air seemed to go out of him. He sank back in his chair, a sad and deflated version of Farley Wade. “I don’t know,” he said, and took in a shaky breath. “I don’t know anything about her. The evening I was there at the pond, I didn’t see any girl. And I’d never kidnap one. I swear it, Jo!” He looked her in the eye. “I swear it.”

She watched him shaking in his chair, and a memory came back to her, of Farley in the schoolyard, sprawled at her feet after she’d shoved him. He’d had no fight in him then, and he had none now. He was that boy again, caught out for his misbehavior, ready to admit defeat.

“Okay.” She rose from the chair. “We’ll continue this down at the station.”

“I didn’t hurt any girl!”

Mike tugged Farley to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“I didn’t, Jo!” Farley yelled as he was dragged out to Mike’s cruiser. “You know I didn’t!”

Jo picked up the cell phone and turned to look at the five members of the Martini Club, who had witnessed the whole thing. “Well?”

“Anyone could have planted that phone in his truck,” said Maggie, and her four friends all nodded in agreement. “I don’t think he’s your man.”

“I don’t think he is either.” Jo sighed. “It looks like I’m back to zero suspects.”

“Not entirely,” said Maggie.

## CHAPTER 26

In her eleven years as a Purity police officer, Jo had been called to the Tarkin residence three times, twice because Reuben had gotten into scrapes with the Conovers. Jo was aware that Reuben and the Conovers had some sort of long-term feud going on, the genesis of which she did not know, but so far it had not advanced to the violence of the Hatfields and McCoys. It had just been Reuben throwing trash on their deck, or punching a hole in their canoe, a feud that sometimes extended to Arthur Fox's property as well. Whatever the cause of the rift, the solution, as Jo once said to Reuben, was simple: *Just stay the hell away from those people.*

Which wasn't so easy when their homes faced each other directly across the pond.

Her most recent visit to the Tarkin residence was a year ago, when Reuben's mother passed away in her sleep. According to their family doctor, old Mrs. Tarkin's death had not come as a surprise because the woman was eighty-nine, and for years she had suffered from what he called *the dwindles*, a slow and inexorable retreat into the grave. He'd been impressed that she had hung on as long as she did, which he'd credited to Reuben's devoted care. On the day Jo had last visited the Tarkins, she'd seen the evidence of Reuben's devotion in the multiple vases of wildflowers that he had set on his mother's windowsill, and the tray of food—spaghetti and steamed carrots—that was still on her nightstand. His sister, Abigail, also lived in the house, but Abigail was confined to a wheelchair. Only Reuben could have picked those flowers. Only Reuben could have prepared his mother's meals.

Jo parked on the dirt road fronting the Tarkin residence, and from her cruiser, she eyed the sagging roof, furry with green moss. It was little more than a shack, the clapboards silvered with lichen and age. Only the wheelchair ramp to the front door looked relatively new, a replacement since the last one rotted away. Just the two siblings lived there now, Reuben and Abigail, both in their sixties. Jo didn't know why Abigail was in a wheelchair, only that she'd been unable to walk since childhood, and Reuben was her sole caregiver. No wonder he'd never had regular employment. No wonder he often seemed in a foul mood, and who

wouldn't be? Trapped all these years in that wreck of a house with an elderly mother and a disabled sister.

But was he angry enough to take it out on a fifteen-year-old girl?

Jo stepped out of her vehicle and climbed the steps to the porch. Outside the front door, she paused and patted the weapon at her hip. Just a reflex, to assure herself it was there. While Reuben himself had no record of violence, Jo was well aware of what his father had done. And because this was Maine, she had to proceed as if there were firearms in this house. Through the kitchen window she saw movement inside. They'd probably heard her tires on the road, the creak of her weight on the porch steps; they had to know someone was at their door.

She didn't have a chance to knock. The door opened and Reuben stood scowling at her, blocking her entry into his house. Inside, a commercial was playing on the television, and Abigail called out: "Reuben, who is it?"

"The police," he said.

"What'd you do now?"

"Nothing! I haven't done a damn thing!" He glowered at Jo. "So why're you here?"

"I just want to talk," said Jo.

"Yeah, that's how it always begins, doesn't it?"

"It's about your visit to Moonview the other day. You scared Mrs. Conover, you know."

"Didn't mean to. I don't have anything against *her*."

"Still, she was rattled. And with her daughter missing, she can't help wondering—"

"If I had something to do with it?" He scoffed. "Of course they pointed their finger at me. Who else they gonna blame?"

"Can I come in?"

"Can I stop you?"

"We can talk here, or we can talk down at the station. Which would you prefer?"

"Reuben!" his sister called out. "For heaven's sake, just let her come in!"

After a moment, he finally stepped aside, and Jo eased past him, into the house. Unlike the ramshackle exterior, the interior of the house was neatly kept. The kitchen countertops were uncluttered, not a single dirty dish was in the sink, and the linoleum floor, although yellow with age, was swept clean.

Wordlessly, Reuben led her through the kitchen and into the living room, where she saw the same tired furniture that was here during her previous visit: A faded sofa, its worn upholstery prettied up by hand-quilted throw pillows. An armchair with a seat cushion that years of use had left permanently imprinted with the contours of someone's backside. Through the large picture window facing the pond, Jo could see stately Moonview directly across the water. The object of Reuben's hatred was always in full view.

Jo heard the squeak of a wheelchair, and she turned to see Abigail in the bedroom doorway. Abigail had to be close to seventy, but she still wore her silver hair in a long and girlish braid that trailed over her shoulder, onto her pink polyester blouse. Abigail gave Reuben a questioning look. He merely shrugged, sank into the armchair, and stared at the window.

"Hello, Ms. Tarkin," said Jo. "I just want to have a few words with your brother. You may not remember me, but—"

"You're the new chief now, aren't you? You took over from Glen Cooney."

"Yes, ma'am. Acting chief, for now."

"Glen was a decent man. He always tried to be fair to Reuben."

Jo heard the unspoken message in that sentence: *Will you be as fair as Glen was?*

"Yes, he left me awfully big shoes to fill. I'm trying my best." She looked at Reuben, who refused to return her gaze and sat with his arms stubbornly crossed. The house was too small to conduct the interview with any semblance of privacy, so Jo simply sat down on the sofa, among all those throw pillows, and allowed Abigail to remain in the bedroom doorway. She'd probably hear everything they said, anyway.

Jo said to Reuben, "What is this feud between you and the Conovers, anyway?"

"No one's business but mine," he said.

"Actually, it is my business. Now that we've got a missing girl."

"Don't know a thing about that. My beef is with the family."

"And what is that beef about? Money?"

"No."

"What did they do to you, Reuben?"

"It's not what they did to *me*."

"To whom, then?"

“Reuben,” Abigail cut in.

Her brother’s jaw clamped shut, and he turned his gaze back to the window. Something strange had just happened between the siblings, something Jo didn’t understand. What were they hiding?

“You asked about the girl, and I told you. I don’t know anything about her, or what happened to her,” he said. “I feel sorry for her mother, though. She seems like a nice lady. Too bad she got caught up in that family.”

“Susan Conover told me you went to see her. Why?”

“She doesn’t know what she’s gotten herself into. She doesn’t know those people.”

“So you went to warn her?”

“Someone should.”

“That’s funny, Reuben, because the Conovers think *you’re* the one who poses a danger. You’ve trespassed repeatedly. Vandalized their property.”

“Maybe.”

“You scared off one of their employees. Stalked the poor girl, made her so frightened she quit.”

“What? Who?”

“Their nanny. A girl from Mexico.”

“Anna didn’t resign because of *me*. It was *them*. They made her miserable. I just tried to be kind.”

“That’s not how they saw it.”

“What did they say?”

“They told Susan you followed the nanny around town. That you’d paddle over and harass her whenever she was on their dock.”

“Harass her?” He shook his head. “I just tried to be her friend.”

“Even after she left town, you wouldn’t give up. The family says you went over there and demanded to know where she went.”

“The old woman said that, didn’t she?” He snorted. “Of course she did. Nothing’s ever *their* fault. It’s always *us*, always the locals who get blamed. We fix their roofs, mow their grass, scrub their toilets. *We’re* the reason those pretty houses are still standing. Those people, they use us, and when we’re no longer any good to them, they toss us away.” He eyed Jo. “You’re a Maine girl. You know exactly what I mean.”

“Excuse me,” said Abigail. “What does any of this have to do with that missing girl?”

Jo turned to Reuben's sister. "There's a prior pattern of behavior with your brother. The Conovers said he stalked their nanny. Brought her gifts, wouldn't leave her alone."

"But Reuben would never hurt anyone. He certainly didn't hurt the Conover girl."

"But you can understand why I have to ask him these questions." Jo looked at Reuben. "Where were you on Monday, between ten a.m. and four p.m.?"

"Is that when she disappeared?" he asked.

"Just answer the question, Reuben."

"I would've been out. Doing errands."

"Where?"

Abigail said, "He took me to the hospital for some medical tests. I had a ten o'clock appointment, and we were there until two. Afterward, we went to the grocery store, and then to Walgreens to pick up my pills."

"He was with you the entire time?"

"Of course. I can hardly get around on my own, because of *this* thing." She tapped the arm of her wheelchair. "Isn't that right, Reuben?"

Her brother grunted.

"Okay," Jo said, and rose to her feet. Their statement should be easy enough to verify. A phone call to the hospital, to the pharmacy, would confirm what Abigail had just said. "I guess that's all for now. If I have any other questions, I'll be back."

"And we'll be right here. Where else are we going to go?" said Abigail. "Oh, and please say hello to Owen for me."

Jo turned back. "You know my dad?"

"From high school. I always liked your father. He was one of the good ones. The other kids wouldn't even look at me, sitting in this wheelchair, but Owen, he used to help push me up the ramp and into the building. I never forgot that. A real decent man."

Yes, thought Jo. *Yes, he is.*

Back in her patrol car, she sat staring for a moment at the Tarkins' residence. She was still imagining what it was like for Abigail, living in that tiny house, confined to a wheelchair and relying on her brother to keep her alive and fed. As far as she knew, Reuben was not gainfully employed. *What a sad household*, she thought. A disabled sister, a bitter and angry

brother, both of them recluses. A lifetime of self-imposed exile, set off by the atrocities their father committed half a century ago.

*The four people who perished in the massacre on Main Street were not Sam Tarkin's only victims, thought Jo. In that house are two more.*

# CHAPTER 27

## REUBEN

“It will be all right,” said Abigail. “Everything will be fine.”

“You always say that.”

“Because it’s true, as long as we don’t talk about it. We *can’t* talk about it.”

He turned to his sister. “And look where that’s gotten us.”

“What it’s gotten us is a roof over our heads and food on the table. That’s worth something, don’t you think?”

“Not anymore.” He turned to look out the window. *So that’s the lie they’re spreading about me*, he thought. That *he’d* been the one who drove away Anna. That he’d scared her, pursued her, when all he’d done was try to be her friend.

Gazing across the pond at Moonview’s dock, he could still picture her sitting there, as she had been the first time he’d seen her, her head bowed as if in prayer, her bare feet dipping into the water. It was a morning in June, with mist curling over the pond and the water streaked with gold from the first rays of dawn. Few people were awake at that hour, and as he’d kayaked across the pond, the only sounds were the occasional cry of a loon and the splash of his paddle as his bow cut through the water. Dawn was his favorite time of day, when he could avoid the stares, the whispers behind his back. He knew what people were saying about him. They were afraid of him. They knew what his father did.

But Anna was not afraid.

The first morning he saw her, she was wearing a thin cotton nightgown, and her black hair was in glorious disarray, as if she’d just climbed out of bed and wandered barefoot to the water. Glimpsed through the mist, clothed in her white, diaphanous garment, her black hair tumbling across her shoulders, she had not looked real. No, this was a vision he’d conjured up from the morning vapor, and he’d wondered if all the years of loneliness and longing had finally driven him insane, like his father. He blinked, half

expecting the girl to vanish. But there she still was, gazing down at the water and so deep in thought that she did not notice him drifting closer. Suddenly, she looked up and saw him, and for a moment, they stared at each other across the dissipating curls of mist. He expected her to react like everyone else did when they saw Reuben Tarkin. That she'd scramble to her feet and retreat into the house. But the girl did not retreat, did not shrink away. Instead, she raised her hand and waved. And she smiled. She smiled at *him*, the monster's son.

"They can't blame you for that missing girl," said Abigail. The sound of his sister's voice was like a stone, dropped into the mirrored surface of that memory. The image of Anna dissipated like ripples in the water, pulling him back to this joyless present. "All Jo Thibodeau has to do is call the hospital. She'll know we told the truth."

Reuben turned to his sister. "When has the truth ever helped us?"

"She's Owen's girl," said Abigail. "I have to believe she'll do the right thing."

# CHAPTER 28

## JO

Jo always looked forward to her weekly dinner with her father, because it was their chance to catch up with the latest news, and because Owen was a far better cook than she would ever be. When she arrived at his house that evening, she found his front door unlocked, as usual. That unlocked door never failed to irritate her, but Owen Thibodeau grew up in an era when nobody in town locked their doors because bad things just didn't happen here, or so he claimed. She could give him a list of all the bad things that *did* happen nowadays, but she knew it wouldn't shake Owen's naive faith. He trusted his neighbors, his town, and so far, no one *had* broken into Owen's house.

Probably because they knew his daughter was a cop.

She walked into the kitchen, where Owen was standing at the stove, mashing potatoes in a pot.

"There you are," he said, without turning to look at her.

"You know, I could've been a burglar sneaking up behind you."

"But you aren't."

She lifted the lid of another pot and inhaled the savory steam of simmering sauerkraut and Polish sausages—four huge ones. "Which army are you feeding tonight?"

"I'm going to freeze some for Finn. He's coming to visit for a few days, and you know how your brother likes to eat. There's beer in the fridge, if you want one."

She grabbed a bottle of Shipyard Summer Ale and popped off the top. Leaning against the kitchen counter, she watched her dad drop a whole stick of butter into the mashed potatoes. So much for watching her diet tonight; dinner with her dad meant calories and more calories, almost always delicious ones. Even when her mother was still alive, it was Owen who'd get up early in the morning to cook the kids' breakfast, Owen who gave them their first taste of coffee, although well diluted with milk.

“I spoke to someone you knew in high school,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Abigail Tarkin. She said to say hello. Said you were nice to her back then.”

“I try to be nice to everyone.” He scooped sauerkraut and sausages onto two plates and carried them to the kitchen table. “Especially to Abigail. Kids that age, they’re heartless. They showed her no mercy.”

“Because she was in a wheelchair?”

“That’s one of the reasons.”

“Why does she need it?”

“She had some kind of tumor in her spine when she was a kid. As long as I’ve known her, she’s been in that wheelchair.” He placed the pot of mashed potatoes on the table, and they both sat down. “Then after that thing happened—oh, Abigail went through some rough times. Both those kids did. For months, no one would talk to them. No one would even look at them.”

“You mean after what their father did.”

Owen nodded. “Abigail was old enough and levelheaded enough to deal with the aftermath, and she managed to carry on with her life. But Reuben, the kid was only twelve years old. That’s a tender age, especially for a boy. Having to deal with the shame, the humiliation. The out-and-out *hatred*.” Owen sighed. “The kid just retreated into his shell and never came out again. You hardly ever see him around town. He and his sister just hide out in that shack on Maiden Pond.”

“God, it must have been awful for them,” said Jo as she scooped potatoes onto her plate. “Having a crazy father.”

“Sam Tarkin wasn’t crazy.”

“He killed four people.”

“Well, that’s true. He did.”

“If he wasn’t crazy, then what was he? Evil?”

Her father didn’t answer right away, but sliced off a piece of sausage and chewed it as he considered his next words. “Not everyone fits into a nice, neat category. Sam certainly didn’t.”

She looked up from her plate. “You knew him?”

“Yes, I did.”

“How well?”

“Sam Tarkin helped my father build this house. He worked side by side with your grandpa, putting on this roof, laying down this oak floor. I saw that man here almost every day for nearly a year, hammering and sawing with my dad. He was always friendly, always reliable. Never a bad word out of his mouth. Your grandma, she wasn’t one to warm up to people easily, but she liked Sam Tarkin. Liked him well enough to feed him lunch whenever he was working here. And that’s about as high a recommendation as a man could have.”

“You never saw *any* warning of what he’d do?”

“Not a one. Sam worked with builders and contractors up and down the coast, and no one ever complained. He was a fine carpenter too. Built that cabinet right over there.” Owen pointed to the kitchen cupboard, something she’d probably opened and closed a thousand times. Now she looked at the cabinet door and thought: *A killer’s hands built that.*

“So why did he do it? Why kill those people?” she asked. “Something must have made him snap.”

“We all asked ourselves that question. Everyone who knew him, especially your grandma. Two of the people he ran over were complete strangers to him. Just tourists, here on a nice summer day, strolling down the street. He’d have no reason to kill them. He did know two of the victims, including the police officer, but he’d never had a problem with them.”

“What about his wife? Did she have any idea he’d do this?”

“She said she didn’t. Sure, money was tight in their family, with Abigail’s medical bills and all. But money’s tight for a lot of people around here. Maybe the stress caught up with him. Maybe something just tipped him over the edge. People who saw it happen said that after he shot the police officer, he was waving the gun around, yelling about monsters. He might have shot more people if he hadn’t been killed first.”

“That sounds to me like he had a psychotic break.”

“That’s what they said later, some sort of psychiatric crisis. Maybe money troubles finally got to him. Those medical bills for Abigail. Plus, his old van had just died, and he had to take out a loan to buy the new one. All that pressure, it could have set him off.”

Jo looked at the kitchen cabinet again and imagined Sam Tarkin’s hands sanding and varnishing that maple. *He stood in this kitchen. He ate the lunches my grandmother prepared for him.*

“Tell me about his kids,” she said.

“What about them?”

“I was at their house today.”

“Why?”

“To ask Reuben about Zoe Conover.”

Owen frowned at her. “Reuben’s not a suspect, is he?”

“Not now. He has a solid alibi for the day she disappeared, spent it at the hospital with his sister. But he does have a grudge against the Conovers. Do you know why?”

Owen shrugged. “They’ve got money, plus that big summerhouse. People like that, they tend to throw their weight around. That’s going to rile up people like Reuben and Abigail, who have almost nothing.”

She thought of Abigail’s medical bills and the burden of property taxes for a waterfront home, even one as derelict as theirs. “How do they manage? It doesn’t seem like Reuben has any steady job. And Abigail’s never worked, so she wouldn’t have any pension.”

“I have no idea. Maybe there was insurance.”

“There’s something else that bothers me about those two,” she said. “I felt like they weren’t completely honest. That they were holding back. Hiding something.”

“Oh, Jo. It must be hard for you, going through life like that. Thinking that everyone’s hiding something, everyone’s a suspect.”

“Yeah, well, I could use a suspect right now. I’ve run out of them.”

“I heard you arrested Luther Yount.”

“I had to release him. Not enough evidence.”

“Well, I never thought he was guilty. So where are you with the case?”

She sagged back against the chair and sighed. “Absolutely nowhere.”

# CHAPTER 29

## MAGGIE

“You saved my bacon, Maggie. I don’t know how to thank you,” said Luther.

They sat at his kitchen table, sipping his bitterly strong coffee, which Maggie had made palatable with sugar and a generous pour of cream from Callie’s Jersey cow. The scent of freshly mowed hay drifted in with the evening breeze, and through the window, Maggie saw Callie leading her herd of goats across the field, back to the barn for the night.

“I’m glad she’s got you back home again,” Maggie said.

“But it shook her up pretty bad, seeing me hauled away in handcuffs. Not knowing what the hell was happening. It’s a good thing she’s got her animals to look after. It keeps her busy.”

“And what about you? How are *you* doing?”

He shook his head. “It’s like I have this big warning sign pasted on my forehead: ‘Beware. Kidnapper.’ I see the way folks look at me. How they edge away, or cross the street to avoid me. They think I must have done *something* wrong, or why else would the police arrest me? Every time I look out that window, I half expect to see a police car coming up my driveway again. I’m just glad *you* never doubted me.”

She took a sip of coffee, preparing herself to bring up a delicate subject. “And now I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

She set down the mug and looked at him. “Tell me the truth.”

“I’ve never lied to you.”

“But you haven’t been entirely honest either. About where you went after you left Zoe Conover at the pond. You told me you planned to kill a man.”

He broke off his gaze and looked instead at the window. “I didn’t mean it. It’s just something I said. Anyway, it’s not relevant.”

“It’s relevant to me. You haven’t given me a straight answer. You’ve even lied to your own granddaughter about where you went. If you won’t be

straight about this, how can I believe anything you tell me?”

He let out a breath, heavy with regret. At that moment, he appeared older, wearier, than she'd ever seen him. “Really, Maggie? After everything we've been through, you don't trust me?”

“You told the police you drove to Augusta to look at tractor parts. That's what you told Callie too. But my friends and I checked every farm equipment store in the area, and no one remembers seeing you that day.”

He was silent.

“The police know you drove straight through Augusta and continued to Lewiston. What was in Lewiston?”

“There's a man there. I owe him money.”

“Why not just mail him a check?”

“I don't want it to show up in my bank records.”

“You pay him in cash?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“It's not important.”

“Tell me his name, Luther.”

He stared at the table. At his hands, mottled and worn from years of farmwork and harsh weather. “His name is Jesse Bass.”

“What does this man have on you?”

“On me? Nothing.”

“If it looks like blackmail and it quacks like blackmail—”

“It's not blackmail! It's . . .” He sighed. “It's to make him stay away. To keep him from ruining our lives.”

“How can he ruin your lives?”

“He's Callie's father.”

Maggie stared back at him in shock. “Her *father*?”

“Sometimes, I think it really *would* be easier just to kill him,” said Luther. “Yeah, I've thought about it. Ever since he showed up on my doorstep in Boston, demanding money. It was the year after my daughter died. He'd just gotten out of prison for dealing drugs. The same drugs that killed my Daphne. Callie was only three years old then. She was my whole life, and here was this piece of—of *filth* threatening to take her from me.”

“The courts would never give him custody.”

“That's what you would think, but he *is* her father. He could have caused no end of trouble. He's the reason I lost my daughter, and I didn't want him

anywhere near Callie. So I paid him off and told him to stay away.”

“And then you moved to Maine.”

He nodded. “I walked away from the university. Bought this property, built this cabin. Made it a home. I thought we’d made our escape. I thought that was it, we were done with him. Then last year, he found us again. He wanted more money, of course.”

“He can’t take her, Luther, not now. She’s old enough to decide where she wants to live.”

“But she’s still too young to deal with the truth about who her father is. *What* he is. Maybe when she turns eighteen, when she’s ready to handle the truth, I’ll tell her. But not now. Now I have to keep him away from her.”

“By paying him off?”

“It’s worth it.” He paused. “Although I still think it’d be easier to kill him. Who’s going to miss him? The world would be a better place with him dead.”

“I’m going to pretend I never heard you say that.”

“And will you bring the shovel?”

They looked at each other, and suddenly both of them laughed. Yes, this was the Luther she knew, the man who’d once saved her life on a snowy field. The man with whom her secrets were safe, just as his were safe with her.

“I don’t need to bring a shovel,” she said. “I have a better idea.”

## CHAPTER 30

Jesse Bass lived on Lewiston's Oxford Street, in an apartment building that was over a hundred years old and looked every bit its age. The white paint was peeling, the wooden balconies sagged, and the units probably featured threadbare carpets and rust-stained toilets. It was just the sort of place a man like Bass would end up in.

It had not taken long for Maggie and her friends to compile an extensive dossier on Bass. They knew he was a thirty-eight-year-old white male with light-brown hair and blue eyes, five foot ten and 160 pounds. At least, that's how much he weighed when he was released from the MCI-Concord prison two years ago. For such a young man, he had already racked up a rap sheet that included criminal possession and trafficking of class B drugs, battery, burglary, and illegal firearms possession. Those charges had resulted in several stints in prison, which should have inspired him to consider one or more legitimate occupations. But no, Jesse Bass had not been reformed by the justice system; instead, he'd simply moved on to blackmail.

From their parked car across the street from Bass's apartment building, Declan and Maggie monitored the front entrance, waiting for their subject to emerge. On Maggie's lap was a mug shot of Bass, and it unsettled her to see the resemblance to Callie, who had inherited her father's narrow jaw and high forehead and pronounced widow's peak. While Callie bore the physical evidence of their shared genetics, Maggie did not see the sweetness, the kindness, of the girl she'd come to care about in Bass's cold-eyed stare. This man could poison the girl's life, and like Luther, Maggie didn't want Jesse Bass anywhere near Callie, who deserved a few more years of innocence. She was too young to learn about her father and how he'd contributed to the death of her mother. In time, perhaps, she'd be able to handle it, but not now. Not if Maggie could help it. Which was why she was now sitting in a car on a sweltering afternoon, watching a ramshackle apartment building.

"There. That's him," said Declan.

Jesse Bass had just stepped out of the building. He was dressed in a gray T-shirt and sagging blue jeans, and he looked like he hadn't shaved in a few

days. He paused outside on the sidewalk, squinted up at the glaring sun, and slipped on dark glasses.

Maggie pulled on her headset microphone and said: “Ben, our boy just stepped out of the building. He’s now moving north, on Oxford Street. Heading straight toward you.”

Bass sauntered away from them, clearly in no hurry, walking down the center of the sidewalk as if he owned it. A woman in a hijab, pushing a toddler in a stroller, approached from the other direction, but Bass just kept hogging the sidewalk, forcing the woman to move aside.

Through the earpiece, Maggie heard Ben say: “I see him. On him now.”

With Bass out of the building, it was time for Maggie to move. She donned a ball cap, pulled the brim low over her forehead, and reached for the red DoorDash delivery bag.

“I’m not sure about this,” said Declan.

“We all agreed it has to be me.”

“I didn’t agree. Let me go in.”

“They’d remember someone like *you*. But me, they won’t even notice. It’s my superpower, Declan.”

She stepped out of the air-conditioned car, into heat so thick it felt like she was wading through molasses. She slung the delivery bag over her shoulder and gave her shirt a tug, to make sure it covered the Walther that was tucked into her waistband. She hadn’t planned to carry a weapon, but Declan had insisted. A gun sometimes complicated things. It could set off metal detectors, alarmed anyone who spotted it, and made you memorable when you were trying to fade into the woodwork. It also made you overconfident, and that might be the most dangerous complication of all.

She felt Declan’s gaze on her as she walked to the front door. She had several strategies to breach the entrance, from randomly pressing the door buzzers to waving her DoorDash bag at any tenant who was exiting or entering the building. They’d look at her and no doubt assume she was just a clueless granny hard up for cash, earning a few bucks toward her retirement. None of these strategies turned out to be necessary, because the door was conveniently propped open with a rock.

So much for security.

There was no one in the lobby to ask her questions, no one to witness her clueless-granny act. It was almost a letdown, how easy this was. She kept her head dipped, to avoid having her face recorded by any surveillance

camera, but judging by the O<sub>UT OF S</sub><sub>ERVICE</sub> sign on the elevator, any cameras she did encounter would probably be out of service as well.

She climbed the stairs to the third floor.

On this suffocatingly hot day, many of the tenants had propped open their doors, hoping for a cross breeze to cool their stifling apartments, and the sounds of private lives spilled into the hallway: whining children and blaring televisions and running water. She arrived at Apartment 3F. Glanced up and down the hallway. No one was in sight.

The door was cheaply constructed, probably flimsy enough to give way with a few hard kicks, but the lock was surprisingly sturdy. It took her a full minute to pick it open. Either she was losing her touch, or Jesse Bass had invested in a far more expensive lock than his neighbors had. She slipped inside and closed the door behind her.

“I’m in,” she said into her headset. Both Ben and Declan were listening in on the channel. “Where’s our boy now?”

Ben answered, “He’s in a park by the river. It’s about a half mile from you.”

“Doing what?”

“Just sitting there. You’re good for now.”

Declan’s voice came over her earpiece. “Just make it quick, okay?”

She set down the DoorDash bag containing a sacrificial hamburger, which by now was probably cold and inedible, and quickly scanned the apartment. It was as depressing inside as she’d imagined. The living room was littered with pizza boxes and beer cans, and under the coffee table was a clump of dirty socks. He was a criminally horrible housekeeper, but so far, she didn’t see anything that could be used against him in a court of law. She snatched up a discarded pair of jeans from the sofa and combed through the pockets for contraband, but found only a half-smoked joint. Legal, these days. There had to be more here. A leopard didn’t change its spots, and she doubted Bass had transformed into a law-abiding citizen.

She moved into the grease-splattered kitchen and opened the refrigerator. In the freezer, she found a brick of cash, wrapped in multiple layers of plastic. Now it was getting interesting. Was this the money Luther had paid him? She was tempted to steal it back, but she was not a thief. She placed the cash back in the freezer.

“Maggie?” It was Declan’s voice in her earpiece.

“Nothing yet. What’s our boy up to?”

Ben answered her question: “He’s meeting someone in the park. Male, shaved head, about Bass’s age. They’re making an exchange.”

“Sounds promising.”

“Got it all on camera.”

She moved out of the kitchen and headed into the bedroom. There she found a toxic waste dump of dirty underwear and socks on the floor. The place reeked of cigarette smoke and old shoes. She went to the closet and quickly pawed through the shirts and jackets on the hangers, then reached up to the top shelf and pulled down a box of ammo, nine millimeter. Naughty boy. While gun laws might be lax in Maine, convicted felons like Bass weren’t allowed to own firearms. Still, this wasn’t enough to put him away for very long. They needed something more serious.

She reached farther back on the shelf and pulled down a plastic bag. At first it seemed empty, but then she noticed the residue of blue powder inside. More interesting. Could it be from contraband drugs, or was it just excipient, the inactive binder used to manufacture pills? Either way, it was a clue that she was on the right track. She turned to the bed and sighed. God knew what filthy surprises she’d find under there. She dropped to her knees, peered under the box spring, and gave a laugh of triumph when she saw what was hidden there.

It was a pill press, for making counterfeit tablets.

She pulled on gloves to avoid exposing herself to whatever chemicals might be on the press, and as she took photos, she noticed that the same blue residue was coating the machine. Fentanyl? MDMA? Whatever the drug, there was a good chance it would put Jesse Bass back behind bars for a very long time.

A sound in the next room made her snap to attention. Someone had just entered the apartment. She heard the door swing shut. Heart banging, she sprang to her feet.

“Hey, Jesse?” a man called out. “You back yet?”

Frantically she scanned the bedroom for an escape route. There was no way out, and there was not enough room for her to squeeze under the bed. She had only one option: hide in the closet. She slipped inside and closed the door, huddling beneath the hanging shirts. In the kitchen, the refrigerator door thudded shut, and a beer can popped open.

Footsteps moved toward the bedroom.

Over her earpiece came Declan's voice: "Mags, time to leave. Bass is on his way back from the park."

She didn't dare answer him because the visitor was now in the bedroom, close enough to hear her voice. She shrank smaller and clapped her hand over the earpiece to block any noise that might escape from it.

"Mags, do you copy?" said Declan. "Leave now."

*I can't. I'm trapped.*

The footsteps walked by the closet door, passing only a few feet from where she was crouching, and the man moved into the adjoining bathroom. The walls were so damn thin she could hear him grunt. Urine splashed into the toilet.

"Mags, do you copy?" Declan repeated, urgency now in his voice. "You've got about two minutes. Get out of there *now*."

She heard the man's fly zip shut before he emerged from the bathroom. Of course he didn't wash his hands; he didn't even bother to flush the toilet. What delightful friends Jesse Bass had. He walked out of the bedroom and back into the living room. That's when she remembered the red DoorDash delivery bag she'd left on the floor. If Jesse saw it, he'd realize someone had been in the apartment, someone who hadn't left.

In the living room, the TV turned on. She heard men shouting, gunfire, the screeching tires of a car chase. Enough noise to mask her voice.

"Declan," she whispered. "I can't get out."

"Situation?" he snapped.

"Someone else just walked into the apartment. I'm in a closet. Need a diversion . . ."

In the living room, a key grated in the lock, and the apartment door thudded shut. Jesse Bass was back.

"Got it," Bass said to his visitor.

"How much?"

"Enough for another run. What're you watching?"

"I dunno. It's lame."

The TV shut off, and in the sudden quiet, she could hear the blood rushing through her ears. She was trapped in an apartment with two men, and at least one of them was most likely armed. So was she, but a gun battle was not the way she wanted this to go down. Someone would get hurt, and there'd be consequences that would go beyond mere bloodshed.

And she would have blown the mission and failed Luther.

She thought of all the times in her career when she'd stood on the edge of catastrophe, but she never imagined that this was how she would finally fail, in a battle with two losers in a run-down apartment.

"You ready to head out?" said the other man.

"Let me change my shirt," said Bass. "It's like a fucking oven outside, and I'm drenched."

And here it would end. Her muscles tensed. The one advantage she had against these two young men was the element of surprise. *Leap out of the closet, dart for the door.* If she was quick enough, she could be out of the apartment before they reacted. Before anyone managed to fire a shot. But would she be able to stay ahead of them down two flights of stairs?

Bass's footsteps paced into the bedroom, moved toward the closet. She heard the doorknob turn. She raised her weapon.

Somewhere, a fire alarm screeched.

"Now what the fuck?" Bass said.

A fist pounded on the apartment door, loud and insistent. She heard a shout: "There's a fire on this floor! Everyone get out now!" *Declan.*

"Hey, man," Bass's friend yelled. "We better get outta here!"

Bass's footsteps retreated from the bedroom. The apartment door slammed shut.

She waited ten seconds for the men to clear the hallway; then she was out of the closet and crossing the living room. Her DoorDash delivery bag was still on the floor where she'd left it, apparently unnoticed by the brilliant duo who'd just exited. She grabbed it and slipped out of the apartment.

In the hallway, she joined the other tenants migrating toward the stairs and down to the exit. By the time she stepped outside, there was enough of a crowd to camouflage her retreat. Not that anyone would notice her; she was just the granny in the blue ball cap. Bass and his buddy didn't even glance her way as she walked past them and climbed into the car, where Declan was waiting.

"That was fun," she said.

"You scared the bejesus out of me."

"Thank you for the diversion. I wouldn't have gotten out of there without a firefight."

"I can't handle this kind of stress anymore. Next time, I'm the one who goes in, and *you* run backup."

"Is there a next time?"

“If we live long enough.”

She gave him a triumphant grin. “We’ve got him, Declan.”

He looked at her. “Do we?”

“They’ll have him on class A possession and sale. The evidence was under his bed. I’ve got the photos.” She looked out the car window at Jesse Bass and saw the distinct bulge of a firearm tucked in his belt. “Toss in a firearms charge, and he won’t be bothering Luther for a long time.” She pulled out her phone to call Ingrid. By that evening, an anonymous tip, accompanied by incriminating photos, would find its way to the Lewiston PD and the Maine State Police. It was time to get the ball rolling.

But before Maggie could dial, Ingrid called her first.

“It just came over the police radio,” Ingrid said.

“What did? What’s happening?”

“They found Zoe Conover.”

# CHAPTER 31

## JO

A wild-eyed Susan Conover came flying into the emergency room followed by her family, her whole damn family, and she barreled straight toward Jo.

“Where is she? *Where is she?*”

Jo held up both hands, trying to calm an already chaotic situation. The hospital waiting room was crowded with patients, a baby was screaming, and the arrival of the Conovers, all six of them at once, only added to the noise and confusion.

“They just took Zoe to the operating room,” said Jo.

“Why are they operating? What happened to her?”

“You need to talk to the doctors. I really can’t—”

“Just *tell me!*” Susan cried.

Jo glanced around the waiting room, where all other conversation had suddenly ceased. The only sound was the baby’s relentless screams. Temporarily distracted from their own aches and maladies, everyone was now staring at Jo and Susan and this unfolding drama.

Jo took Susan’s arm and led her away to a corner where they could speak without being overheard.

“A pair of hikers found your daughter at the bottom of a ravine,” Jo said quietly. “We don’t know how Zoe ended up there, but she sustained multiple fractures from the fall. Her skull, her pelvis. Plus a few broken ribs.”

“But she’s alive?” The breath whooshed out of Susan, and she reeled back against the wall, sobbing. “Oh, thank God. She’s alive. She’s alive . . .”

*For now*, thought Jo, but that could change at any moment. It felt almost cruel to raise Susan’s hopes, to subject her to a roller-coaster plunge into despair if the girl didn’t survive, which seemed all too possible. Jo had glimpsed the broken body as rescuers loaded the stretcher into the ambulance, had seen the blood-matted hair and lifeless limbs. Yes, the girl’s

heart was still beating, but inside that fractured skull, what remained of the girl known as Zoe Conover?

Ethan wrapped his arms around his wife, and as Susan sagged against him, he said to Jo: “You said a pair of hikers found her?”

“Yes. Zoe was lying a few dozen yards off the trail they were on. They probably wouldn’t have found her at all if their dog hadn’t taken off into the woods. He must have smelled something, heard something. They ran after him and found your daughter lying in a shallow streambed. That may be why she’s survived this long. She had water to drink, while she was still conscious, anyway. And temperatures have been mild these last few nights.”

The rest of the Conover family had moved in to hear the details, and they formed a protective circle against the eyes and ears of everyone else in the waiting room.

“Which hiking trail was this?” asked Colin.

“Stony Creek. The trailhead’s about eight miles west of Maiden Pond. She was found at the bottom of a forty-foot ravine, just below the Indian Head lookout.”

“How the hell did she end up way out there?”

“We don’t know.”

The hospital doors whooshed open. Jo almost groaned when she saw Ingrid and Lloyd Slocum stride into the ER waiting room, looking like a couple on a mission. But of course that’s exactly why they were there. The Slocums were always on a mission.

“Chief Thibodeau,” said Ingrid. “May we have a word?”

“I can’t talk to you right now.”

“We heard the girl was found—”

“Stop. *Enough.*” Jo herded the pair away from the Conovers and steered them toward the exit.

“And she was wearing only a bathing suit,” said Lloyd.

*How the hell do they know that?* “Not here. *Outside,*” Jo ordered.

They stepped through the whooshing ER doors and stood beside the empty ambulance bay. This regional hospital, which served the entire county, was where tourists and locals alike came for their heart attacks, broken bones, and food poisoning. On this busy summer day, the parking lot was almost full, and Jo could hear the wail of an ambulance speeding away.

“How did you know she was wearing a bathing suit?” said Jo.

“We have our sources,” said Ingrid.

“The first responders? Did they tell you?”

“It’s a small town. People talk. The girl was found wearing a purple Speedo, am I right?”

Jo glared at them. “Yes.”

“But when Luther Yount dropped her off at the boat ramp, the girl was wearing a dress.”

“According to Mr. Yount.”

“We believe him,” said Lloyd. “Why don’t you?”

“Because Mr. Yount hasn’t told the whole truth. He’s been hiding something.”

“But not *this*. He said she was wearing a dress when he left her at Maiden Pond. The same dress that ended up in their washing machine. Six days later, the girl’s found in a ravine wearing a bathing suit. Did you find her shoes, by the way?”

Jo sighed. “One sandal. The other one’s probably somewhere in the ravine. We haven’t had a chance to go back for a more thorough search.”

“Oh, we’re already on that,” said Ingrid.

“What?”

“Our people are down there, looking.”

*Our people.* Meaning the other members of the Martini Club. “It’s a crime scene, Mrs. Slocum. You and your friends have no business being there.”

“We have no doubt it *is* a crime scene,” said Ingrid. “But back to the question, why does a girl in a bathing suit end up in a ravine that’s miles from the pond where she was last seen? You know, this changes everything.”

“Explain.”

“It gives us a completely different reason for the abduction. It explains why her backpack was left on Route One. Why her cell phone was planted in Farley Wade’s truck. Yes, it all makes sense now, unless . . .” Ingrid paused. “Is there evidence of sexual assault?”

Jo stared at her, taken aback by the shocking change in subject. “The doctors are trying to save her life. They’re not in there collecting evidence!”

“Was the bathing suit intact?”

Jo swallowed back her anger at the questions. “Yes, her bathing suit was intact, but we don’t know if there was any sexual assault,” she said evenly. “We don’t even know how she ended up in the ravine.”

“She hasn’t been able to tell you anything?”

“She was unconscious when they found her. The doctors think she’s bleeding inside her skull, and that’s why they’re operating now, to relieve the pressure on her brain.” Jo glanced at the ER doors. “It’s a miracle she survived at all.”

“She is an athlete,” said Lloyd. “Young and fit. If anyone could survive this much trauma, it would be someone like her.”

“But in what condition?” said Ingrid. “She may not be able to tell us what happened.”

“And that’s why I need to get back to work,” said Jo.

Ingrid nodded. “So do we.”

# CHAPTER 32

## MAGGIE

She stood with Declan and Ben at the edge of the road, gazing across the valley at the cliff whose distinctive shape had given it the name Indian Head. With the afternoon sunlight slanting across the crags, it did indeed look like a face in profile, with a noble forehead and a prominent jaw. It was a striking landmark, worthy of a visit if one had the time, but this scenic overlook was nowhere near the coastal routes that most tourists traveled. Even at the height of summer, this was not a busy road, which made it a convenient location to dispose of a body. It would not require too much effort. Just stop at this turnout and pop open the trunk, and in under a minute, one could drag out the body and roll it over the edge of the lookout. Beneath it was a forty-foot ravine, with shrubbery so dense it would completely swallow the body. Anyone who later stopped here to admire the view would never see what was lying far below, hidden among the bushes. In days or weeks, the stench of the decaying corpse might waft up toward the road, but in the wild, dead things were everywhere, and who could distinguish between the smell of a dead deer and a dead girl? If not for the pair of hikers and their wayward dog, Zoe Conover would still be lying down there, never to be found, her remains known only to hungry scavengers that would strip away her flesh and scatter her bones.

“I should’ve brought the dog,” said Ben. “He’d enjoy a good long walk like this.”

“Funny, I never took you for a dog person,” said Maggie.

“I didn’t think I was.” Then Ben met Farley Wade’s black Labrador, and it had been love at first sight for both man and canine. “Evelyn never let me have one, anyway. Now I’m going to be royally pissed off if that asshole Wade decides he wants his dog back.”

“So what’s the quickest way down to the Stony Creek Trail?” Declan asked.

“There’s a connecting path just to the west of us,” said Ben, studying the map on his phone. “That should take us down to the trail.”

They left Ben’s car parked at the shoulder and walked west down the road until they came to a sign: ACCESS TO STONY CREEK TRAIL, .75 MILES. The footpath was almost invisible, just a pin scratch through the overgrown weeds. Maggie shifted the weight of her backpack and tightened the chest strap. They hadn’t even started their hike, and she was already sweating. “Gentlemen?”

“My knees aren’t going to like this,” muttered Ben.

The path descended a series of switchbacks that were so littered with loose stones and tree roots that every step was a fall or an ankle sprain waiting to happen. And going down would be the easy part; she didn’t look forward to scrambling back up the incline on this hot and buggy afternoon.

They descended into the intermittent shade of spruce and oak trees, past thickets of blackberry bushes that reached out with thorny canes to snag her trousers. From the stream far below came the faint rush of moving water. Mosquitoes buzzed and swarmed around her face, undeterred by the oily layer of DEET she’d sprayed on. She had always been insects’ preferred source of blood. On any hike, they invariably ignored her male colleagues and came straight for her. Age, alas, had not made her any less tempting a meal.

The group splashed into a puddle at the bottom of the ravine, where the mosquitoes were even more ravenous, and a thick cloud of them orbited her head. Here was the main trail, which ran alongside Stony Creek. They turned east, toward the location where Zoe Conover had been found.

And where any remaining evidence should be.

A few hundred yards later, they knew they were getting close when they saw multiple fresh boot prints on the creek’s edge, left behind by emergency responders. Trampled into the dirt was a torn bandage wrapping and the plastic cap of a syringe.

Declan pointed to paw prints in the mud. “This must be where the dog left the trail.” How miraculous a dog’s nose was, able to detect countless chemical signals in the air that humans were oblivious to. Or was it a noise the dog heard, a whimper or moan or some high-pitched keening from the injured girl? Something had drawn the dog’s attention, had made it leave its owners and burrow through this underbrush. And here, in the damp soil, its paw prints were a record of its passage. Now they saw more boot prints, left by those who had followed the dog into what was largely a bog. The clouds

of mosquitoes thickened, and mud sucked her boots as they pressed forward. She could hear Declan walking right behind her, his boots snapping twigs, and it brought back the days when she was still young, still in the field, silently moving through the Burmese jungle, where the air smelled like rotting vegetation. She'd moved quicker in those days, unbothered by the heat and the mud, because it was still an adventure, with a heady dose of fear in the mix. The fear of capture, and what would inevitably follow: Interrogation. Torture. Possible execution. Today it was just a summer hike with two good friends and a full water bottle in her backpack, but she could feel that old jolt of adrenaline. This well-worn body wasn't ready to give up the ghost yet.

At last, they reached the spot they'd been searching for. She looked down at all the broken branches, the confusing jumble of boot prints. She heard Ben breathing hard beside her.

"There's the viewpoint, just above us," he said, looking up through the trees, toward the road where his car was parked.

"And here's where she landed," said Maggie, pointing to the churned-up mud and medical debris, evidence of the frantic efforts to stabilize the girl. The first responders had been focused on saving a life, not on evidence collection, and they would not have worried about preserving the scene or searching for clues left by the assailant. Such clues would not be in this ravine anyway, because whoever abducted Zoe was probably never down here. He had been on the road forty feet above and from there had tipped her body over the edge. Perhaps he thought she was already dead, or if she wasn't, such a fall would certainly finish her. What he hadn't counted on was the cushioning effect of all those tree branches and bushes as she'd plummeted, softening her impact.

And here, in the ravine, Zoe Conover had had a second stroke of good luck: she'd landed on the edge of a stream. She might have been too broken to crawl her way out of here, but among these puddles of water, she could slake her thirst.

"A convenient spot for a body dump," said Ben.

"But why bring her here? She was wearing a bathing suit, which means she was probably abducted near the pond. He could have disposed of her body right there. Drowned her in the water."

"What if she wasn't taken from the pond? The ocean's only two miles away from Moonview. Maybe she caught a ride to the beach and was

snatched there.”

“That still doesn’t explain why he dumped her body *here*, and then disposed of her backpack miles away, on Route One. And why plant the cell phone in Farley Wade’s truck?” Ben shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe that’s the whole point,” Maggie said. “To cause confusion.”

They fanned out and started searching the area for . . . what? They didn’t know yet. An article of clothing, perhaps, or some item that had been touched and discarded by the abductor, hopefully bearing a fingerprint or DNA. She spied broken glass, but it was thickly coated in crusted dirt and had probably been lying there for years. Here and there were scraps of weathered paper, and Ben plucked up an empty sunscreen tube. None of it looked recent. It was merely the detritus of careless visitors who’d tossed their litter from the overlook above.

“Here!” Declan called out.

She tramped back through brambles and underbrush to where he was standing, at the foot of a towering white pine. He wasn’t focused on the ground but was looking up, at the branches arching overhead.

Ben joined them, red faced and sweating. “What is it?”

“Take a look.” Declan pointed upward.

Only then did she see what was snagged on one of the branches: a pair of swim goggles. “How the hell did you spot that?”

“I thought I heard an eastern towhee singing up there. I looked up, and instead of a bird, I saw *that* dangling on the branch.” He handed Maggie his binoculars.

“Well spotted, indeed,” said Ben, impressed.

“You see? Bird-watching isn’t an *entirely* useless hobby.”

“I stand corrected. Now how do we get them down?”

“Give me a leg up, Ben. I’ll get them,” said Declan.

“Or we could call Jo Thibodeau,” Maggie said, pulling out her cell phone.

“We’re right here. Let’s just do this.”

“That’s a long way up, Declan. Leave this to the police.”

But Ben had already boosted Declan up onto the first branch. Declan had always been the most athletic of their group, outpacing them all on the obstacle course at the Farm, where he’d easily scrambled up its ropes and over barriers. He might be forty years older and grayer now, but he was still

athletic enough to scale a tree. He pulled himself up from branch to branch until he was just beneath the one where the goggles were snagged. He yanked on the branch overhead, again and again, trying to shake the goggles loose.

“Here they come!” he yelled.

Maggie heard a loud *crack* and looked up in horror as the branch holding Declan suddenly snapped.

The goggles tumbled down. So did Declan.

# CHAPTER 33

## SUSAN

When Zoe was two years old, she was admitted to the hospital for pneumonia. For three days, Susan had hovered over her daughter's bedside, watching her chest rise and fall, alert to any changes in her breathing. Susan had trained as a nurse, yet her own baby was ill, and she couldn't stop blaming herself. Did she not dress her warmly enough for that winter walk the week before? Had she allowed someone with an incubating virus to come too close to her daughter? While other children sailed through infancy with only a few sniffles, Susan's had landed in a hospital bed, and Zoe's every wheeze and cough was like an accusation that she'd failed a mother's most important job: protecting her baby.

Now once again she sat at her daughter's bedside, watching Zoe's chest rise and fall with each ventilator whoosh. Once again, she felt as if she'd failed. She should have protected her. She should have kept her safe and fought off the monsters who were always circling young girls. And because she hadn't been there, one of those monsters had done this to her daughter.

A daughter Susan could scarcely recognize now. The right side of Zoe's face was grotesquely bloated, and her eye was swollen shut. Half of her beautiful brown hair had been shaved off so the neurosurgeon could drill into her skull and drain the blood pressing on her brain. The doctor had told Susan about all of Zoe's fractures, and the list was so long that she could scarcely remember them all: the skull, the pelvis. The collarbone, two ribs. The forty-foot plummet into the ravine would have killed almost anyone else. It was a miracle that Zoe had survived not only that fall, but also the days that followed.

"Your girl's a fighter," the doctor had said.

*Please keep fighting, darling. Please come back to me.*

She heard the ICU curtain slide open and turned, expecting to see Ethan returning from the cafeteria. Instead, it was Elizabeth who stepped into the cubicle, holding two cups of coffee. "They only allow two visitors at a time

in the ICU,” said Elizabeth. “I told Ethan to go home. I’d like to sit with you for a while.” She handed one of the cups to Susan. “I thought you’d need a pick-me-up.”

“Thank you.” Susan lifted the plastic lid and inhaled the delicious steam rising from the cup of coffee. Sugar and caffeine were exactly what she needed now.

“Do you mind?” said Elizabeth, pointing to the other chair. “May I stay?”

“Of course.” What else could she say? *No, I want to be alone with my daughter?* While Elizabeth had always been cordial to her, there was a coolness to the woman, an impenetrable layer of New England stoicism that always seemed to keep Susan at arm’s length. Now they sat side by side, trapped together in the cramped cubicle, and Susan could not think of a single thing to say.

“Has she said anything?” Elizabeth asked.

“No. They gave her barbiturates to put her in a medically induced coma. It’s to protect her brain, give it time to heal while the swelling goes down. Once they taper off the drugs, she should start to wake up, but right now, we don’t know what she remembers. We just have to wait.”

“I’m so sorry, Susan.”

“At least there’s a chance she *will* wake up.”

“She’s young, strong. We just have to be patient.”

There was another pause as the ventilator cycled, filling Zoe’s lungs. It had been decades since Susan attended nursing school, since she’d worked with endotracheal tubes and ventilators. If something went awry now—a sudden power outage or her daughter’s lung collapsing from a pneumothorax—would she remember how to respond? Just the thought of that responsibility made her hands sweat.

“I wish I’d had the chance to know her better,” Elizabeth said, looking at Zoe. “When you and Ethan got married, I thought that we had all the time in the world to be together. To be a family. But things keep getting in the way.”

Susan sighed. “Life.”

“Yes. Life gets in the way. George’s health. Ethan and that novel he can never seem to finish. And Zoe, always so busy at school. I confess, I’m not good at dealing with teenagers. I never could, even when my boys were young. But I will try harder. Now that I have a grandchild.”

“You have Kit.”

Elizabeth merely shrugged. As the silence stretched on, it seemed more and more weighted with significance.

“Is Kit . . . is there something I should know about him?”

“He’s a complicated child.”

“I heard he was sick a lot, as a baby.”

“In and out of hospitals. The pediatricians never could pinpoint why Kit had so many digestive issues. He improved for a bit, after they hired the nanny. But a year later she quit, and the boy seemed to get worse. At one point, he was so thin he looked like a little skeleton. That’s probably why Brooke can’t stop hovering over him. Why she refused to let Colin hire another nanny. She didn’t trust anyone else to take care of him. Now he’s grown so attached to his mother, I don’t know how he’ll manage going to college.” She looked at Zoe. “But your daughter, she’s just so . . . *normal*.”

*Or she was.*

They sat quietly for a moment, sipping their coffees. Listening to the ventilator.

“Have they told you anything new?” said Elizabeth.

“No. Only what you’ve already heard.” Susan drooped forward, rubbing her temples. “God, I wish I could figure out how this happened. I wish it made sense.”

“That’s their job, not yours. Your job is to stay strong and healthy for your daughter.” Elizabeth stood up. “Come, let me take you home.”

“I need to be here.”

“Just for a few hours. If you want to stay healthy, you need dinner. Maybe a change of clothes.”

*And a shower,* thought Susan, looking down at her wrinkled shirt. Elizabeth was right; she needed to stay strong, stay healthy, for Zoe.

She nodded, and stood up as well. “Just for a while.”

\*

At home she took a shower, buttoned on a fresh shirt, and packed a bag with the essentials she’d need for a night of sitting at Zoe’s bedside. The ICU allowed only one visitor to stay overnight, and if Zoe woke up tonight, it was her mother’s face she’d want to see at her bedside. So that’s where Susan would be.

She'd have to spend the night sitting in a chair, which meant she'd get little sleep, but she might as well make herself as comfortable as possible. Into her overnight bag went her slippers and socks and a sweatshirt, because hospitals were always chilly. She doubted she'd have the energy to read anything, but she packed a book anyway, a lighthearted novel about three sisters on vacation in Italy. A place she promised herself she would take Zoe someday. She had to hold on to that image: her and Zoe and Ethan lounging on a beach in Italy, everyone healthy and happy and whole. If she couldn't imagine it, then it couldn't happen, and she needed *some* vision of the future. Something to look forward to.

Her phone charger. Mustn't forget that.

She went to the desk, where she'd left it plugged into the wall socket. That's when she noticed the pages, covered with Ethan's handwriting. New pages, ones she hadn't read before.

She frowned at the last paragraph.

*It was summertime when she vanished from the pond, a disappearance so sudden it seemed as if she'd simply stepped off the edge of the earth. The police were called, of course, but no one seemed to know a thing. Then the questions just . . . stopped. That was the peculiar part. Had she been found? Was it all a hoax? Nobody would say. Nobody wanted to talk about it. In time, the mystery faded from memory, without answers. Without a body. It's as if the girl never existed.*

Susan sank onto the bed, stunned. A missing girl. A pond. Dear God, was he writing about Zoe? Had he turned their daughter, *her* daughter, into nothing more than a character in his novel?

She could hear the family talking and setting the table downstairs, could smell the savory aroma of a dinner casserole, but she'd lost any semblance of an appetite. She thought of Ethan, holed away up here, furtively scribbling these sentences. While other men might cheat on their wives with mistresses, Ethan had cheated on Susan by hiding upstairs with this novel. Like a cannibal feeding on his own family, he had used Susan's anguish to nourish his story.

"Susan?" Ethan called from downstairs. "Dinner's ready!"

Susan didn't answer, didn't move. Even when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Even when Ethan walked into the bedroom.

"Don't you want to eat?" he said.

"I'm not hungry."

“But you need to eat, at least something. And you’ve hardly slept these past few days. Why don’t we take turns at the hospital? Let me spend tonight with her.”

“That should be good for another plot twist.”

“What?”

She looked up at him. “How could you write about her, Ethan? Is *everything* in our lives just material for your novel?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about *this*.” She held up the page from the desk and shook it at him. “A missing girl? Really?”

He frowned at the page, then at her. “You think that’s about Zoe?”

“Isn’t it? I can’t believe you’d write about this nightmare we’re going through. No, the nightmare *I’m* going through, because I don’t think you and your family have actually *felt* any of this. Not when Zoe went missing. Not now, with her fighting for her life. I’m terrified I’m going to lose my baby, and you have the gall to *write* about it.”

“That’s not true, Susan.”

“It’s right here, in these pages. The girl who goes missing. The family in their summer cottage.”

“It’s not about Zoe.”

“You didn’t even bother to change the name of the house. Moonview. Really?”

“I swear, it isn’t about Zoe.”

“How does that saying go? ‘Good writers borrow, great writers steal’?”

“I keep telling you, this story isn’t about Zoe! Those are just notes I jotted down, about something that happened years ago, before I was even born. It’s about that woman who went missing in 1972, the one in the newspaper article you brought home. Hannah was eight years old, and she remembers the case. I just wrote down what she told me. She remembers the police came to her house and questioned her father.”

“Why her father?”

“Because the missing woman worked for Dr. Greene. She was his secretary or something, and they asked him if he knew where she went. There was talk about sending divers into the pond, but they never did, because Hannah thinks the woman eventually turned up. Susan, I wasn’t writing about Zoe.” He nodded at the page she was holding. “I was writing about *her*.”

“This mysterious missing woman.”

“I swear, that’s the truth.”

She sagged forward on the bed and ran her hands through her hair, which was still damp and sweet smelling from the shower. “God, I’m so tired. I just want us all to go home. I want everything to be back the way it was.”

“So do I.” He sat down beside her and took her hand. “I love you,” he said. “And I love our daughter. *Our* daughter. Nothing else matters more than you two, nothing. You believe me, don’t you?”

She said nothing.

“Susan?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

Abruptly he stood up, went to the desk, and picked up the page with his notes. To her shock, he ripped it in half, then ripped it again. Now he attacked the other pages with such violence that when he finished, there was nothing left but shreds. He threw it all into the trash can and sagged back, exhausted, against the desk. “I wish we’d never come here,” he said. “To this place. To this *fucking* house. I didn’t want to come back. Everyone else might have good memories here, but I don’t. It’s where my parents were always fighting. Where Colin lorded it over me. Where I could never match up because he was bigger, faster. More brilliant. Maybe that’s why I became a writer. So I could create endings that turn out happy.” He looked at her. “*You* were my happy ending, Susan. Now I think I’ve lost you, and it’s my fault. My fault that Zoe got taken. I should have been here. I should have known *exactly* where she was, and now . . .” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She stood up and went to him. When she touched his shoulder, she could feel anguish rippling through his body. They wrapped their arms around each other and held on tightly, fiercely, as though steadying each other against roaring, battering waves that threatened to drag them under.

“What I wrote had nothing to do with Zoe,” he said. “I need you to believe that. You believe me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. But what she really thought was: *I don’t know.*

# CHAPTER 34

## MAGGIE

Declan reclined on her living room sofa, his fractured left ankle propped up on cushions, and he looked supremely embarrassed about his predicament. He bloody well should be. He'd been an idiot to climb that tree, an opinion she'd not hesitated to share as she and Ben had half dragged him back up the trail to Ben's car. *Don't you dare call an ambulance. It's not that bad*, he kept insisting. Men and their ridiculous pride. By the time they'd arrived at the hospital, he was pale and clammy from the pain, yet even then, he'd balked at the idea of a wheelchair.

That's when she'd decided she'd had enough of his nonsense and had practically shoved him into the wheelchair. An injection of morphine and one fiberglass cast later, here he was, parked in her living room, looking sheepish about his current situation.

"I hate to impose on you, Mags," he said. "I really *can* manage at home."

"No, you can't."

"It's just my left leg, so I can still drive. I have plenty of food in the freezer. And I'll sleep on my living room sofa."

"No, you won't."

"Have you always been this bossy?"

"Have you never paid attention?"

"Obviously, I missed this aspect of your personality."

"You're going to stay here with me, at least for tonight. You're still pumped up with drugs, and I don't want you falling at home, where there's no one around to pick you up. Besides, I owe you."

"For what?"

"For February. When I needed a place to hide, you took me in. Then you came with me, all the way to Bangkok." She sat down on the ottoman and faced him. "You were there for me, Declan. Now I'm here for you. That's just the way it's going to be."

"I should have listened to you."

“It’s generally a good idea.”

“About climbing that tree, I mean.”

“I know.”

“I thought it’d be an easy climb.”

“It was an easy climb. The hard part was coming down.”

“But I did retrieve those swim goggles.”

“Yes, you did. And Jo is going to be annoyed.”

“Why? It’s evidence, isn’t it?”

“Which she and her officers missed. That’s going to sting.” She stood up.  
“Now, let me start dinner. Roast chicken?”

“Yes, please. And a glass of whisky, if you don’t mind sharing your stash.”

“On top of the morphine?”

“My liver’s been through far worse.”

She eyed him for a moment, wavering between indulging him and nannying him. He might have been battered and in pain, but Declan was not a man who liked to be coddled. In his position, she would be calling for whisky too.

In the kitchen, she slid potatoes and a chicken into the oven, then poured a generous splash of her sixteen-year-old single malt into two glasses. One for him, one for her. She carried the drinks and the bottle to the living room, handed him a glass, and sat down in the armchair. They sipped in silence, not looking at each other. They’d been friends for four decades, yet at this moment, words seemed to elude them. Perhaps it was the awkwardly intimate circumstances in which they now found themselves. They had never been lovers. Their assignments in different countries had kept them apart for most of their careers, and her brief and tragic marriage to Danny had left her wary of emotional entanglements. That’s what her marriage had taught her: the more fiercely you loved someone, the deeper the pain when you lost them.

But she wasn’t blind. She’d seen the way Declan looked at her, and also the way he quickly avoided her gaze when he knew she was watching him. For a man who so confidently knew how to navigate the world, around Maggie, he seemed unmoored.

“Why don’t I bring out the chess set after dinner? It’ll be like old times,” she said. “You, me, and a whisky bottle.”

“You make us sound like a pair of alcoholics.”

“Well, a pair of something, anyway.”

“And are we?” he asked quietly. “A pair?”

She heard the plaintive note in his voice, and she finally looked at him. This time, he didn’t look away. “Declan, you know you’re my dearest friend.”

“Ah, the ‘friend’ word. And you don’t want to ruin that friendship. I think that’s what you’re trying to tell me.”

“No. What I’m *trying* to say is, I haven’t been ready to fall in love, with anyone. After Danny, I’ve been terrified at the thought. All the ways it could go wrong, all the ways I could be hurt again.”

“And now, Mags?”

She regarded the face she knew so well. The passing decades had deepened the wrinkles around his eyes and streaked his once-black hair with silver, but those changes had only made him more appealing than when they were both young and smooth skinned, their bodies not yet scarred by battles and heartache.

“Now,” she said quietly, “I think it would be a shame to waste any more time. Don’t you?”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. It was awkward, that first kiss, with him immobilized on her sofa, unable to maneuver his body for a proper embrace. And yet it also felt strangely comfortable, because she was kissing her best friend. This was the man who’d always been waiting for her, even when she did not know it. Their joints might be stiff, their hair turning gray, but lust was suddenly back in their lives. She could feel that familiar heat flushing her cheeks, could feel his hands on her blouse, unfastening the buttons. She didn’t know how far they could get on the sofa, with his leg in a cast, but they’d dealt with thornier challenges before. This was one they were both eager to conquer.

Then her doorbell rang.

They pulled apart, breathing hard as they stared at each other in wonder. She burst out laughing, and so did he. She was still laughing as she buttoned up her blouse, as she headed to the front door. She expected to find the rest of the Martini Club waiting outside, showing up with their usual impeccable sense of timing. But when she opened the door, it was Jo Thibodeau standing on her porch.

“How is Declan doing?” Jo asked.

“Oh, he’s fine.” *He’s more than fine.* “He’s in my living room, if you’d like to talk to him.”

Jo nodded. “I wanted to thank him. To thank all of you, really.”

Well, this was a change. Usually when Jo wanted to talk to them, it was to warn them to stay in their lane and out of hers. “Why don’t you come in? I’m sure he’d appreciate hearing it straight from you.”

Jo stepped into the house and paused in the foyer, sniffing the air. “Something smells awfully good.”

“It’s just chicken.”

Jo cast a longing glance at the kitchen. *Does no one ever feed this woman?* Maggie thought as she led Jo into the living room.

“Ah, if it isn’t Purity’s finest,” Declan said, and gave Jo a jaunty salute.

“You’re looking pretty chipper for a man who just broke his ankle.” Jo eyed the whisky glass in his hand. “Is that a good idea?”

“Whisky is always a good idea. This is purely medicinal.”

“How is the ankle, anyway?”

“Two months in a cast. It will give me a chance to catch up on my reading.” He cocked his head. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

She paused. Looked down at her feet, and said quietly: “I wanted to thank you. And, I guess, apologize.”

“For?”

“Underestimating you.” She looked at Maggie. “All of you. I swear, my officers and I combed that ravine, all four of us. We completely missed those swim goggles.”

“Did you find any fingerprints on them?” Maggie asked.

“Unfortunately, no. We got nothing.”

“Except even more questions that need answering.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it.”

“Oh, I will. So will my friends when they get here.”

“Another meeting of your, um, ‘book club’?”

“You know, sometimes we meet just to talk.”

She looked at Declan’s whisky glass. “Among other things.”

“Would you like one?” Declan asked.

Jo hesitated, eyeing the whisky. “No, thank you.” She sighed. “On duty.”

“Please sit down,” said Maggie. “We need to review the Conover situation.”

To her surprise, Jo sat down. Either they were beginning to earn her trust or she was so frustrated by the case, she was finally willing to listen to them.

Maggie splashed more whisky into her own glass and sat down, facing her. “Let’s review the facts. First, the girl was found barely alive at the bottom of a ravine, wearing a bathing suit. Correct?”

Jo nodded. “A purple Speedo. We also found one of her sandals lying nearby. I don’t know where the other one went.”

“What else was she wearing, besides the bathing suit?”

“Nothing. I mean, except for an elastic hair tie and a gold earring stud.”

“Only one earring?”

“In the right ear. The left one’s missing. If it got lost in the ravine, we’ll never find it, it’s so small.”

“So here’s what we know,” said Maggie. “Luther Yount said he left the girl at the Maiden Pond boat ramp. We know she made it back to Moonview, because she took off her dress, which was probably stained with menstrual blood, and put it in the washing machine. Since she put on a bathing suit, I assume she either went swimming or planned to go swimming. Six days later, she’s found eight miles away, at the bottom of a ravine, wearing only her bathing suit. Correct, so far?”

“So far,” said Jo.

“But now we come to two puzzling details: the backpack and the cell phone. Why weren’t they thrown in the ravine as well? I think the cell phone was *deliberately* planted in Farley Wade’s truck. When he found it, he did what you’d expect him to do: he turned it on. It pinged off the cell towers and turned him into a suspect. I assume he’s actually a dead end?”

Jo snorted. “In more ways than one. We know he’s been breaking into houses on the pond. We know he’s guilty of burglary. But there are no forensic traces of the girl in his truck or in his double-wide. I just don’t see him as our kidnapper.”

“Neither do I.”

The doorbell rang again, and Maggie shot Declan a regretful look. So much for their intimate evening together.

She opened the door to find Ingrid and Lloyd on her porch. Lloyd held a foil-covered casserole dish, and Ingrid clutched two bottles of pinot noir.

“We’re here to check on the patient,” said Ingrid.

“And deliver sustenance.” Lloyd held up his casserole. “Manicotti. We’ve already delivered some to Ben.”

“He’s not coming?”

“He’s still at the hospital, helping them set up the video cams. Now they’ll be able to monitor every visitor who goes in and out of that ICU. He convinced the hospital their security system is completely inadequate.”

“When did Jo Thibodeau get here?” said Ingrid, noting the Purity PD patrol car parked in front. “Have we missed anything?”

*Ingrid miss something? Not a chance,* thought Maggie as she waved the couple into her house.

The evening had morphed into an impromptu potluck dinner of manicotti and roast chicken and potatoes. As Maggie brought plates and silverware to the dining table, Ingrid uncorked the pinot noir and filled glasses.

“Lloyd and I were just at the grocery store,” said Ingrid, as they all sat down. “There’s a lot of chatter about Zoe Conover. That she’s been found.”

“No surprise,” said Jo, spearing a chicken leg from the platter. “News travels fast.”

“But it presents a problem.”

“What problem?” Jo mumbled around the drumstick she was eating. *Judging by the way she’s attacking her food, the girl must be starving,* thought Maggie. She was glad to see Jo polish off her chicken and reach for a helping of manicotti. They knew Jo lived alone, in a two-bedroom bungalow on Simonton Road, and when did a single working woman have time to cook? A girl could not live on frozen pizza alone. This was one way to support their local police.

It was also an excellent opportunity to extract some information.

“The word’s out that Zoe’s alive,” said Lloyd. “If her attacker hears about it . . .”

“Hospital security is on the alert,” said Jo. “The ICU has her monitored around the clock. There’s just one way in or out of the unit, and only her family is allowed to visit.”

“But what happens when she’s moved out of the ICU and into a regular room?” said Ingrid. “Now that Declan’s laid up, there’s only the four of us. That’s not enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“Surveillance,” said Lloyd.

“You people are running surveillance now?”

“*Somebody* has to. Although a twenty-four-hour guard would be preferable,” said Lloyd. “Seeing as our energy isn’t what it used to be.”

“The Conovers can well afford a private security guard. I’ve already spoken to Elizabeth about hiring one after the girl’s moved out of the ICU.”

“A police guard would be preferable. Someone who answers to *your* authority, not theirs.”

“And where do I find the budget for a twenty-four-hour police guard? We have only six full-time police officers, including me. We’re approaching the height of summer, the tourists are invading, and not all of them are well behaved. Which, by the way, is why I need to get back to work now. For my *second* shift of the day.” Jo stood up. “Anyway, whoever attacked her is probably long gone.”

“On what do you base that opinion?” asked Ingrid.

“The backpack on Route One. The perp probably tossed it there as he was headed out of town.”

“What if it wasn’t just discarded, but deliberately *planted* there?”

Jo looked at Maggie, then at Declan. It was starting to dawn on her that the Martini Club had already united behind a theory, and she had no choice but to hear it.

“Zoe’s abductor dumped the girl in a ravine that’s eight miles west of Maiden Pond,” said Ingrid. “Then he left the backpack sixteen miles *south* of the pond.”

“On busy Route One,” added Maggie. “Where it was certain to be noticed.”

It took a moment for Jo to consider what Maggie had just said. To come to the same conclusion. “The backpack was meant to be found.”

“To throw us off the track,” said Maggie. “To make us believe the girl had been transported south.”

“You mean, to lead us away from the body,” Jo said, also using the collective *us*. That was encouraging.

“No, it wasn’t the body he was leading us away from. The girl was already well concealed in that ravine. It was only chance that those hikers and their dog found her.”

“Then what was he leading us away *from*?”

“Maiden Pond.”

Jo frowned, trying to make sense of Maggie’s answer.

It was Ingrid who explained. “When a child disappears near a body of water, what’s the first thing people assume? That the child drowned. That would make authorities automatically search the water for the body. But you let two days go by before you did that.”

“Because of the backpack. Because I assumed . . .” Jo groaned. “Oh, *fuck*. Excuse my French.”

“Oh, we know even better words in French,” said Lloyd.

“The abductor led us to believe Zoe was taken elsewhere,” said Maggie. “He left the backpack on Route One, making you think Zoe had been taken south. And then there was her phone, planted in Farley Wade’s truck. Yet another distraction, because Mr. Wade made a very good suspect.”

“And his fingerprints *were* on that beer bottle you gave me,” Jo said, looking at Ingrid.

“We know he’s a thief. And we know he’s been loitering around Maiden Pond. His truck would have been parked there, making it a convenient place to plant Zoe’s phone. Then Farley Wade drives away with that phone—a phone he eventually turned on—again making it look like Zoe was taken elsewhere. Another way to distract you from searching the pond. And keep you from finding what was down there.”

“The skeleton,” said Jo.

Maggie nodded. “We think *she*’s the key. The lady in the lake. We need to find out who she was.”

“We?”

“Or have you managed to do that on your own?” said Ingrid.

“Not yet,” Jo admitted.

“Then we should work together, don’t you think?”

“Okay.” Jo sighed. “Tell me how *we* should proceed.”

Maggie said, “Let’s start with Vivian Stillwater, the woman who went missing from the pond in 1972. Did you ever locate her file?”

“Oh, that.” Jo shrugged. “Her case was closed within forty-eight hours. I had to dig through dozens of boxes in the basement to find it. It was misfiled.”

“So Vivian Stillwater *was* located?”

“I assume so.”

“You don’t know for certain?”

“The last entry in her file simply said the case was resolved and the woman was no longer missing.”

Maggie looked at her friends. She could see they were as dissatisfied as she was about this vague resolution. “And there were no other details?”

“I can show you the file, but there’s not much in it. Just the initial report from the sister’s phone call. Look, I don’t know why you’re fixated on this Vivian Stillwater case. It was half a century ago, and it sounds like the woman was found.”

“We have a theory,” said Ingrid. “About what brought Vivian to Maine. What brought all of them to Maine.”

“What do you mean, *all* of them?”

“The Conovers. The Greenes. Arthur Fox. They all showed up here within a year of each other, which made us think there’s a connection between them.”

“Maybe they knew each other before they came here.”

“That’s possible, but we have no evidence of it. There *is* something that could link at least two of them. Dr. Greene was a research pharmacologist. And George Conover worked in pharmaceutical sales.”

“And Arthur Fox?”

“We’re still digging into his background. His reported occupation was ‘energy consultant,’ but prior to that, he was with the US Army, stationed at Fort Holabird, Maryland. Which is, in itself, quite interesting.”

Jo shook her head. “I’m not seeing the connection.”

“Why don’t you just send us the Vivian Stillwater file,” said Maggie. “We’ll take it from there.”

“In the meantime,” said Ingrid, “I suggest you take a look at Zoe’s Facebook page.”

“I already have,” said Jo. “I didn’t see anything significant.”

“Look again.”

# CHAPTER 35

## JO

No one could put away food the way her brother Finn could. Jo watched in disbelief as he polished off his fifth slice of sausage pizza, washed it down with a third bottle of Shipyard ale, and then reached for the plate of chocolate chip cookies that their father had just pulled out of the oven.

“Whoa, boy, slow down,” said Jo. “You give me a stomachache just watching you.”

“Missed lunch,” said Finn. “Making up for it.”

“By cleaning out Dad’s refrigerator?”

Their father laughed. “He’s just helping me defrost it. That pizza was probably ten years old.”

“Still tasted fine,” Finn mumbled around a mouthful of cookie.

To Finn, everything tasted fine. He had the most indiscriminating palate of anyone Jo knew, and over the years she’d watched her brother eat moldy cheese and green luncheon meat without suffering even a twinge of heartburn. Nor did he ever pack on extra pounds. While Jo had to count every calorie she ate, her wiry brother devoured doughnuts and cheeseburgers without gaining an ounce. She eyed the tempting plate of cookies, thought *Oh, what the hell*, and grabbed one.

“You said you had questions about diving?” Finn asked Jo.

Owen frowned at his daughter. “You thinking of taking up scuba? I thought you hated the water.”

“I do hate the water. This is about the skeleton Finn pulled out of Maiden Pond.”

“You ID her yet?”

“No. But we’re starting to think that skeleton might have something to do with the abduction of Zoe Conover.”

“How do you figure that? I heard the girl was dumped miles away from the pond.”

“And there may be a reason for that.” She looked at Finn. “Tell me about apnea diving.”

Finn laughed. “Now there’s an abrupt change in subject. How does that come in?”

“It’s from Zoe’s Facebook page. She posted on that page a lot, so I had to scroll way back through all the stuff she wrote about her classes and her girlfriends and clothes, blah blah blah. There was also a lot about her being on the swim team. Apparently, she and the other girls on the team were into something called ‘apnea diving.’ I didn’t realize it might be significant until Maggie Bird told me—”

“Hey, is she the spook?” said Finn.

She looked at her father. “You told him?”

“That they’re spooks? It’s not like it’s a big secret, is it?” said Owen. “You told me back in February you thought they were CIA.”

“Even *I*’m not supposed to know that.”

Owen shrugged. “So they’ll just have to kill us all.”

“It stays within these walls, okay?” said Jo, and she fixed Finn with a warning look.

Her brother raised his hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“Now tell me about apnea diving. According to YouTube, it’s a hot thing these days.”

“Yeah. The ultimate free diving experience.”

“Meaning?”

“No scuba gear, no fins, no weights. Just you and the water.”

“That sounds like plain old swimming to me,” said Owen.

“It’s way more than that. You’re not just swimming—you’re diving really deep, without an air supply.”

“How deep?” said Jo.

“There are records of divers going eighty, a hundred feet. And that’s without wearing weights, so divers have to fight their own natural buoyancy just to get beneath the surface.”

“That’s insane.”

“But it’s true. Those depths are on the record.”

Jo shuddered. “No, thank you.”

“Apnea,” said Owen, getting up to pour coffee. “Now, I was just a high school biology teacher, but I know that’s not usually considered a good thing.”

“In a medical sense, it’s not good, because it means you’re not breathing,” said Finn. “But we’re talking about diving, where you consciously don’t breathe. It’s an ancient skill, and humans have been doing it for thousands of years. Think of those women pearl divers in Japan. They can go sixty feet, even deeper, on one breath of air.”

*Sixty feet, thought Jo. That would have been more than deep enough.*

Owen filled their coffee cups and sat back down to face his daughter. “You going to tell us what this has to do with your case?”

“I’m trying to explain *why* someone tried to kill Zoe,” said Jo. “I don’t think it was for the usual reasons. She wasn’t robbed. There’s no evidence she was sexually assaulted. She was just abducted and left for dead miles away from the pond. And she was found wearing her bathing suit.”

“So she’d been swimming,” said Finn.

“That’s my guess. How deep was the water where you found that skeleton?”

“About twenty-one feet.”

“If Zoe was practicing apnea dives, she could have made it to that depth.”

“Oh yeah. Plus, it’s fresh water, which makes it easier to dive, because she’d be less buoyant.”

“You think that’s what happened?” said Owen. “She found a skeleton when she was diving?”

“A skeleton that someone didn’t want anyone to find. Which meant Zoe had to be silenced before she could tell someone what she saw. And he used her backpack and her cell phone to draw our attention away from the pond, so we wouldn’t search it.”

“But you did search it,” said Owen.

“And we found the bones. I think this is all about *her*,” said Jo. “The lady in the lake.”

\*

Through the cubicle window, Jo saw Susan Conover slumped in a chair at her daughter’s bedside, her head lolling forward, her eyes closed. She hated to wake the woman, but she had questions that only Susan could answer, so she stepped into the cubicle and softly called her name.

Susan jerked awake and dazedly blinked at her visitor.

“You’re still here,” said Jo.

“Where else would I be?”

“At home, in bed?”

“I couldn’t stand it anymore, being in that house. With those people.”

“Your family, you mean?”

“Not my family. Not really.” Susan gave a sad shake of the head. “That sounds awful, doesn’t it? But even Ethan doesn’t feel like part of that family. He said he feels like just a summer guest in that house. Oh, they’re polite enough, and they try to be sympathetic, but it all comes out as . . . forced. I guess I understand it. Zoe’s not really one of them. Not a blood Conover. Just like I’m not.”

Jo pulled over another chair and sat down. “How is she doing?”

“They started tapering the drugs, and she’s breathing on her own. They’ve taken her off the ventilator, so that’s good. But the doctor said we won’t know the extent of any brain damage until she wakes up.”

“She’s young. And strong enough to make it this far.”

“But will she remember what happened? Will she even remember that I’m her mother?” Susan ran her hand through her hair, pushing it off her face, and strands of silver glinted in the harsh cubicle light. Jo had not noticed those gray hairs before; it seemed the past few days had aged this woman, silvering her hair, engraving new lines in her face. “I wish you’d met her, before this happened.” Susan looked at her daughter. “She was so full of life. Ready to do anything, try anything. And give it a thousand percent.”

“Like swimming?”

Susan smiled. “Yes. My little mermaid.”

“I wanted to ask you about that. Zoe and swimming. I went back through her Facebook page and saw that she and her friends shared several articles about something called apnea diving. Do you know anything about that?”

“You mean free diving?” Susan nodded. “She took lessons last year, when we were in Florida.”

“How deep could she dive?”

“I think she made it to thirty feet.”

“This was in salt water?”

“Yes. Why are you asking?”

“The skeleton that the warden service recovered wasn’t far offshore from Moonview, at a depth of twenty-one feet. If Zoe was diving there, she might

have seen something at the bottom of the pond. Something that's been down there for a long time."

The revelation made Susan sit up straighter. "You think this is all about that skeleton?"

"It's just a theory. We still don't know who the woman was. All we know is, she was young, probably in her twenties. We have to wait for the crime lab to finish the facial reconstruction and analyze her dental work. That could help us narrow down the decade of her death, but it still won't tell us her name. Or who put her down there."

"'Put her down there'?" Susan rocked forward. "Are you saying . . ."

"It's a homicide. The state police are now investigating."

Susan took another moment to absorb this revelation as well. "How long ago? How long has she been down there?"

"It could have been decades. I've reviewed all our missing persons files, looking for any case that matches, but so far, we haven't found one. Which makes me think the victim was from out of town, someone whose absence wouldn't be noticed by our local community. Someone who could be easily disposed of, and never missed."

"And then my daughter went swimming," Susan murmured.

Jo nodded. "If not for Zoe, we never would have searched the pond. And the skeleton would still be down there."

Susan fell silent, and no wonder; it must have been difficult for her to take in all of this at once, and the woman was exhausted, wrung out by the seesawing between hope and despair during these last few days. Now Jo had jolted her with yet another shock.

"A woman from out of town," Susan said softly. She looked at Jo. "Hannah Greene was only eight years old when the woman vanished, but she still remembers it. Which means Elizabeth would remember it too. And so would Arthur Fox."

"Remember what?"

Susan reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. "You need to talk to my mother-in-law."

# CHAPTER 36

## SUSAN

“Dragging me into a *murder* investigation?” said Elizabeth. “Really, Susan, I wish you’d thought this through before talking to that policewoman. Making her think I know something about those bones.”

“You can’t blame this on Susan,” said Ethan. “She only shared what I told her. If you’re going to blame anyone, you should blame me, Mom. I’m the one writing the novel. I’m the one who asked Hannah for the details.”

Elizabeth turned to her son with a look that could sear flesh, but Ethan didn’t flinch. He faced her with a resoluteness that Susan had not seen before. Certainly not in the face of his mother’s fury. Everyone else in the room seemed cowed by Elizabeth, no one daring to challenge the family matriarch. Brooke and Kit sat side by side on the sofa, mother and son shrinking against each other, as though to disappear from view. Colin stood off in a corner, his attention fixed on his cell phone. Even the usually jovial Arthur Fox was silent, his expression unreadable as he stood backlit against the window. Outside, the afternoon sky had turned gray and threatening, matching the mood inside the house.

“What, exactly, is this novel about?” Elizabeth asked.

“It’s just fiction, Mother.”

“You were writing about Vivian Stillwater? That’s not fiction.”

“No, my story’s only *inspired* by her disappearance. I didn’t even know the woman existed until Susan brought home that old newspaper article. Then Hannah told me she remembered Vivian, because the woman worked for Dr. Greene, and the police interviewed him after the woman went missing. I thought it would make a good story. A vanished woman. A group of summer people.”

“And you put our family in this novel,” said Elizabeth.

“No. I mean, there are similarities, but—”

“What similarities?”

“It’s about a family, living on a pond in Maine.”

“And who is this family?”

“I call them the Corcorans. A couple with two sons.”

“Like us.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And you gave them the name Corcoran? How much closer could you get?”

“The names are just temporary placeholders! I haven’t even decided what happens to them all.”

Colin said, “Is my name in there?”

“These are *fictional* characters, for God’s sake.” Ethan looked around at his family. “Jesus, I’m a *writer*. I make things up!”

“Well,” said Elizabeth, “this may be fiction, but your novel sounds uncomfortably close to reality. Right down to the missing woman.”

“Then your book isn’t about Zoe?” said Kit.

They all looked at him. As usual the boy had been silent through the whole conversation, as inert as a stone gargoyle. No one had expected him to suddenly speak.

“No, Kit, it’s *not* about Zoe,” said Ethan. “It’s about something that happened before I was even born. There was a young woman named Vivian Stillwater who worked as Dr. Greene’s secretary. And one day, she just vanished. That’s what my book’s about. What *might* have happened to her.” Ethan looked at Elizabeth. “You must remember Vivian, Mom. The summer she disappeared, you and Dad would’ve been living here. Arthur too.”

Elizabeth groaned and turned away. “God, this is a mess. Hannah never should have told you about it. And you shouldn’t be writing about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ve invaded our privacy!”

“What does this have to do with *us*?”

“Do you know how hard I’ve worked to keep us all together? How many times have I told you that family *always* comes first?”

“Constantly,” Ethan muttered.

Elizabeth turned to Susan. “And *you* shouldn’t have brought the police into it.”

“But they *needed* to know,” said Susan. “This could have something to do with Zoe’s abduction.”

“You should have spoken to *me* first. Asked *me* before getting the police involved. In our family, loyalty always comes before everything else. But I

wouldn't expect *you* to understand that."

"No," Susan said quietly. "I don't understand that. But then, I'm not really part of this family, am I?" She stood up and went to the door.

"Susan," said Ethan. "Where are you going?"

"I need some air."

"Please, let's talk about this."

"There's nothing to say. The rules have been spelled out to me."

"Let me go with you."

"I just want to take a walk, okay? I want to be *alone*." She pulled her jacket off the coat hook, grabbed her purse, and stepped out of the house.

The afternoon had turned damp and windblown. A summer storm was brewing, and the weather matched her mood, angry and turbulent. She thought about jumping in the car and driving back to the hospital, but Ethan had the car keys, and the last thing she wanted to do was go back in that house. She couldn't face the family, not now, so she just kept walking at a furious pace along Shoreline Road. She longed to pack her bags and return to Boston, but how could she, when her daughter was here in the hospital? How could she escape these Conovers, with their secrets and their closed faces and their loyalty oaths?

And now it was raining.

She reached the boat ramp, deserted except for one parked car. There she stood, her head bowed as raindrops splattered the hood of her jacket. Wind whipped across the lake, pelting her face with rain. Her shoes and socks were soaked, but the thought of returning to the house, to that family, seemed a far more miserable prospect.

Through the clatter of falling rain, she heard the growl of an engine, and she turned to see Arthur's blue Mercedes approaching. It rolled closer and closer, then braked to a stop right beside her.

"We need to talk," he said. "Why don't you get in the car?"

"I don't want to talk."

"For heaven's sake, Susan. You're getting drenched, and you can't stand out here forever or you'll catch a cold. There's something I need to tell you. Just get in the car. I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

She hesitated, rain streaming off her jacket and seeping into her jeans. Already her feet were numb from the chill, and she was shivering. There was no one else in sight, no nearby shelter from the rain. Her only alternative was to return to Moonview and face the family again.

“The hospital,” she said. “I want to be with my daughter.”

“Of course. Climb in.”

She opened the passenger door and slid in beside him. Her jeans were wet, and as they drove away from the pond, she shifted uncomfortably, worried that she'd leave stains on these buttery leather seats. Just a glance at the Mercedes's immaculate interior told her Arthur Fox was a man who did not tolerate disorder, even if it was only water stains on his upholstery.

“I've known Elizabeth a very long time,” he said. “I met her and George when they first came to Purity, more than half a century ago. That was the same year the Greenes came here too. We were all just renting then, giving Maine a try, seeing if we liked it enough to stay. Oh, we were a jolly bunch! Cocktails every evening. Cruises on my sailboat when the weather was good. Except for Mrs. Greene, who got seasick just standing on the dock. But Dr. Greene, he'd grown up on the water, and he was an excellent sailor. So was George.”

She didn't know where he was going with this, and she didn't much care. She just wanted to get to the hospital. To dry out her wet socks and get warm again.

“The thing is, Susan, there are things you don't know about the Conover family. Things Elizabeth wouldn't want you to know. But I think it's time someone told you, so you understand why Elizabeth reacted the way she did.”

*Does it really matter now?* she thought. It was over between her and the Conovers, because she'd broken their rule: loyalty to family, above everything else.

“Even the boys don't know about this,” he added.

She looked at him. “The boys?”

He gave a wry chuckle. “Sorry, I can't stop thinking of Colin and Ethan as ‘the boys,’ because I watched them grow up. I've known them since they were babies. Watched Elizabeth set them loose on the lawn to crawl around naked. Back then, we didn't worry about ticks or sunscreen or skin cancer. But then, we didn't imagine we'd ever get old either.”

She looked at him, really *looked* at him. Arthur had the rough, weathered skin of a yachtsman who'd enjoyed too many summers under the sun, and even though he still had his sharp-eyed intellect, his eighty-two years were clearly etched in his face. He would have been handsome when he was

young, tall and strapping and confident. That young man was still there, but gazing out of an older face.

“I just want you to understand,” he said, “that there’s a reason why any mention of Vivian Stillwater is so upsetting to Elizabeth.”

“What reason would that be?”

“It’s a sensitive subject.”

“It doesn’t justify what she said to me. Or to Ethan.”

“No, it doesn’t. But if you put yourself in her place, you’ll see why she overreacted. You just have to promise me you won’t tell Ethan or Colin what I’m about to say.”

“This is something they don’t know?”

“Elizabeth and I are the only people still alive who do know. Maybe Hannah had an inkling, but she was just a kid, and her parents were discreet enough not to talk about it around her. If this ever gets back to the boys, it will change the way they think about their parents. About their father. You’re new to the family, so there’s a great deal you don’t know about the Conovers. But the thing they value above all is discretion. I hope you’ll keep that in mind.”

She waited for him to continue, but he paused, as if reconsidering his impulse to tell her. For a moment the only sound was the rain beating down on the car and the windshield wipers slashing back and forth. Through the veil of rain sheeting the windows, she could barely see the passing landscape. It was true, she didn’t really know the Conover family. It was also true she didn’t know Arthur Fox, either, and here she was in his car, her location unknown to anyone else.

He looked at her with a gaze so penetrating she felt it sear straight to her brain.

She swallowed. “I understand. Discretion.”

“Good.” He looked at the road again, and she exhaled, relieved his gaze was no longer on her. “Now, about Vivian. The woman who disappeared.”

“Hannah said she was her father’s secretary.”

“You could call her that. More like a full-fledged associate. Brilliant mind. Green eyes, flame-red hair.” He paused. “You put a woman like her with three men, two of them married, and, well . . .” He shook his head. “That was not a stable situation.”

It was becoming clear to her, now. Why Elizabeth was upset by the mention of Vivian Stillwater’s name. Why she didn’t want her sons to hear

about the woman's very existence.

"Vivian became involved with one of them," said Susan.

Arthur sighed. "Correct."

"George Conover?"

He looked at her. "And Elizabeth found out. A situation that obviously couldn't continue. The wife and the mistress, both living here on Maiden Pond, both hovering around George. It fractured our tight-knit little circle. Mrs. Greene was appalled, of course, and she told her husband to fire Vivian. I agreed with her. So one morning, Vivian was just gone. She left no note, gave no warning, just packed up and left. We assumed she'd gone to stay with her sister in Boston, but she never showed up there. The sister called the police, and they spoke to Dr. Greene, asking where Vivian was. He didn't know; none of us did."

"The sister was the only one who reported her missing?"

"Yes."

"You didn't think to call the police yourself? *Any* of you?"

"Given the circumstances, we saw no reason to be alarmed. She'd left Purity under a dark cloud. She was the *other woman* who'd almost destroyed George's marriage. That's what we told the police when they interviewed us, that Vivian was probably off somewhere licking her wounds, too ashamed to show her face. There was some talk of searching the pond, that maybe she'd drowned herself, but that didn't make sense, with her clothes and car gone."

"And then?"

"The inquiries just stopped. The police never came back to talk to us, so I assume they located her and closed the file."

"You *assume*? You didn't ask?"

"We didn't want to know. In truth, we were all relieved she was gone. Certainly, Elizabeth was. Oh, there were a few rough months between her and George, but as she said, she held that family together. And George, he was committed to repairing things. 'The fixer,' we called him. In any crisis, he was the one who'd take care of things, who'd mop up any mess. Then the boys were born, the family moved on, and the past was the past. But now it's all come roaring back. Vivian Stillwater. George's infidelity. You can understand why Elizabeth was upset to have this all dredged up again, half a century later."

Yes, Susan *could* understand that. She could imagine Elizabeth's pain, her rage. Yet the Conovers' marriage had survived the blow and gone on to produce two sons. Elizabeth had somehow come to terms with her husband's infidelity, and in the end, it was death that finally parted them. Now that old wound had been ripped open again, and Susan had been the one to do it.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I had no idea."

"This is why the boys can't know about this. It would humiliate their mother. And it would destroy the memory of their father."

"Don't you think they already know? Hannah must have said something to them."

"She was only eight at the time. All she remembers is that her father's secretary disappeared, and the police came to the house. But she wouldn't have known about the affair. At least, I hope she doesn't."

He turned into the hospital driveway and pulled up in front of the building. There they sat for a moment, the rain still beating down, the wipers scraping back and forth. Only a short time ago, she'd been angry at Elizabeth; now she felt sorry for the woman, and oddly respectful as well. Elizabeth had stoically lived by her own creed and suffered for it. *Loyalty to family, above everything else*. In the end, the Conovers had indeed endured.

"It would be kind of you, Susan, if you said nothing about this to Ethan. For his mother's sake." Arthur looked at her, his gaze so direct that she could not look away, could not defy his request.

"I won't tell him. I promise."

"Good." He smiled. "Some family secrets are best left buried. This is one of them."

She stepped out of the car and walked into the hospital. But just inside the entrance, she turned and watched through the window as Arthur drove away.

*Some family secrets are best left buried. This is one of them.*

She wondered how many more secrets there were.

# CHAPTER 37

## MAGGIE

Vivian Stillwater might have dropped off the face of the earth, but her sister had not.

Catherine Wedge (previously Stillwater, then Duguay, then Harrington) now lived in the Fair Winds Retirement Community outside Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The woman's turbulent marital history, combined with her restless tendency to move frequently, between multiple houses in multiple states, had made locating her a complicated task. But locating people who didn't want to be found was the sort of challenge that Ingrid relished, and she could always be counted on to find her man. Or, in this case, woman.

After a four-hour drive through the sheeting rain, Maggie and Declan found themselves in the parking lot of the Fair Winds complex. Like so many upscale senior developments, this one was designed to look more like a country club than an institution where guests checked in and seldom checked out—alive, anyway. They sat in Declan's Volvo, contemplating the building and picturing what their future might be like, residing in a place like this. Such a future would not be far off for them, something painful to accept, although Maggie was not oblivious to the inevitable.

"Do you think they have martini nights here?" Declan asked.

"We could always start them."

"If it's allowed."

"If martinis are not allowed, I'd rather be dead."

He smiled at her. "Ah. We agree on the important things in life."

"On the upside, I wouldn't have to mow my fields anymore. Or shovel snow."

"There's that."

"And the next time you break your leg, there'd be some sweet young nurse to pamper you."

"Why would I want a sweet young thing?" He leaned toward her and pressed a kiss to her lips. "You are all I can handle."

They watched a Fair Winds van pull up under the porte cochere. Half a dozen silver-haired residents slowly emerged and shuffled into the building. “Seriously, Declan. Is that our future?”

“No, Mags. We’re both going to go down fighting. And they’ll have to pry my martini glass out of my cold, dead hands.” He opened his door, letting in a gust of rain. “Let’s get on with the mission.”

His leg might have been in a cast, but even on crutches, Declan moved quickly and gracefully across the rainswept parking lot, his long, lean body swinging like a human metronome. Maggie had to hurry to keep up with him.

Inside, the receptionist greeted them with a smile when they introduced themselves. “Yes, I heard Cathy was expecting visitors today. She’s in Apartment 319.” She looked them up and down, and Maggie knew what the woman was thinking: *Older couple, prime candidates*. “Would you like a brochure about Fair Winds? You’re very welcome to stay for a meal and sample our chef’s wonderful cooking. I think duckling in orange sauce is the special tonight.”

“Do you serve martinis?” Declan asked.

“Maybe another time, thank you,” Maggie cut in, and nudged Declan toward the elevator.

“It was a perfectly reasonable question,” he said as they rode up to the third floor.

“For a committed alcoholic.”

“Should I ever move into a facility like this, I’d insist on a well-stocked bar and convivial fellow inmates.”

“I don’t think they’re called ‘inmates,’ Declan.”

They stepped out of the elevator, into a hallway that was decorated with pale-rose walls and a beige carpet. Pretty pastels to keep the mood serene. It was quiet here, so quiet, and the only sound was the *thump* of Declan’s crutches on the carpet. They reached #319 and rang the doorbell. They already knew that Cathy Wedge, née Stillwater, was seventy-nine years old, which Maggie once would have considered elderly. Now she thought of it as the prime of life—health permitting, of course. One could be a young seventy-nine or an old seventy-nine, and she wondered which version would answer the bell.

The door opened, and she saw neither version of Cathy Wedge, but a smiling young man dressed in blue nurse’s scrubs. “Hey, you’re here to see

Cathy?” he asked.

“Maggie and Declan. We called yesterday,” she said.

“Come in, come in! Cathy’s been talking about it all morning. She’s been so bored, stuck inside after her little accident.”

“Accident?”

“She tripped on the curb and broke a toe last week, so she’ll be laid up for a while.” He glanced at the cast on Declan’s leg. “And what happened to you?”

“I fell out of a tree.”

The man laughed. “Ooh, that’s a much better story.”

Declan didn’t bother to tell the young man that it was true, that he really did fall out of a tree, because it was just another item in a long list of things that people would not believe about them. They followed the man into the living room, where Cathy Wedge sat with her bandaged foot propped up on a stool. She was a handsome woman, her thick silver hair swept back and fastened with tortoiseshell clips. She might have been temporarily disabled, but judging by her alert gaze, there was a lively mind behind those dark eyes. Outside the rain had intensified, the drops noisily pelting the window, and the light cast a watery halo around her head.

“So you’re here about Vivian,” she said. “I wondered when someone would finally ask me about her.”

“No one else has?” Maggie said.

“You’re the first, outside of my own family.” She looked at the young man. “And Bertie here. But he’s like family.”

Bertie smiled. “We fight like family, anyway. Shall I bring some tea, Cathy?”

“Yes. And the butter cookies. No one ever turns down butter cookies.” She looked at her visitors. “Please, sit down.”

As Bertie headed into the kitchen, Declan and Maggie settled into chairs. For a moment, the only noise was the kettle being filled with water and the clink of chinaware. Cathy was studying them with her head cocked, as though peering at some unfamiliar species that had suddenly landed in her living room. “Tell me why you want to know about my sister. How did you even hear about her?”

“There was a news article in the *Purity Weekly*, 1972,” Maggie said. “It was about your sister, who went missing. It said you were the one who alerted the police.”

Cathy nodded. “Vivian planned to drive down to Boston and stay with me for a few days, before going on to Washington. That night, I expected her at my house in time for dinner. I had the guest room all made up, a roast in the oven. I waited and waited, but she didn’t show up, didn’t call. That wasn’t like her, not at all. If Vivian said she’d be somewhere, you could count on it. At midnight, when she still hadn’t arrived, I *knew* something had happened to her. So I called the police.”

“In Purity? Or in Boston?”

“Both. For all the good it did,” she added bitterly. “They told me that she hadn’t been missing long enough. That she’d probably gotten tired and pulled off the road to take a nap. Or maybe she’d just changed her mind, as if she was some silly woman who couldn’t stick to a plan. I told them Vivian wasn’t like that, but I don’t think they believed me. It took them two whole days before they finally took me seriously.” She turned to look at the photos on her wall. “By then, my sister was lying comatose in a hospital in New Hampshire.”

“*New Hampshire?*” Maggie stared at her. “So she *did* make it out of Maine.”

“Barely. She was just this side of the New Hampshire border when she had her accident. She lasted three long years in a coma, before . . .” Cathy’s voice faded.

“Then your sister—she’s deceased?” said Maggie.

Cathy nodded. “I scattered her ashes in the sea, off Nantucket.”

## CHAPTER 38

Vivian Stillwater was not the lady in the lake.

Maggie looked at Declan and saw that he was just as taken aback as she was by this new information. Ingrid's search for Vivian's fate had turned up no record of any hospitalization or cremation, no death certificate. The woman had effectively been erased from all official records.

"How did she end up in the hospital?" Declan asked. "You said she had an accident."

Cathy nodded. "It's a strange thing. We know she managed to drive all the way from Purity, because her car was later found abandoned in a ditch on the New Hampshire side. She must have gotten confused or lost, because the police said she was walking barefoot on a road a few miles away when she was hit by a car. At the time she had no purse, nothing to identify her, so she was admitted to the hospital under the name Jane Doe. I didn't find out where she was until days later." Cathy paused, said quietly: "She never woke up from her coma."

Maggie looked at the photos on the wall and focused on an image of two young women, their red hair windblown, their eyes crinkled in midlaugh. "Is that you and your sister?"

"Yes. Our girl trip to the Grand Canyon. She was a big hiker. Me, not so much. But she talked me into going down the Bright Angel Trail. It turned out to be the best day of my life."

Bertie returned to the living room, carrying a tray of teacups and a plate of Danish butter cookies. The tragic story of Cathy's sister had cast such a dark shadow over the room that the plate of cookies sat untouched. They were silent as Bertie poured the tea, fragrant with an exotic blend of jasmine and coconut, and handed out the cups.

"It is a sad story, isn't it?" said Bertie. "I'm sorry I never met Vivian."

"Oh, she would've loved you, Bertie," said Cathy. "She adored saucy young men, almost as much as I do." She gave a rueful shake of the head. "Which probably explains why I've been married three times."

"After she was admitted to the hospital," Maggie said gently, "who came to visit her?"

“Not a soul. Only me. When it became clear she wouldn’t improve, she was moved to a long-term care facility. Her health insurance covered all the expenses, thank God, because I certainly couldn’t afford it. And that’s where my beautiful sister ended up. Lying in a coma for three years, shriveling away to this—this *mummified* version of Vivian. It upset me to see her like that, but I never stopped visiting her. Every weekend, I’d sit by her bed, hoping she’d respond to my voice. Squeeze my hand, blink her eyes, *something*.” Cathy sighed. “Then one morning, they called to say she’d passed away during the night. Three years in a coma, and she was gone. My beautiful, brilliant sister.”

Bertie took her hand. It was clear from the way they looked at each other that he was more than just a nurse’s aide; he was family, and they were comfortable, simply sitting together and not saying a word.

“You said your sister had health insurance,” said Declan. “Was this from her job?”

“Yes. Some government research institute in Washington.”

“Washington? Where she was planning to drive, after visiting you.”

“Yes. I think she was going to meet someone about a new job. I know she wasn’t happy about the work she was doing in Maine. There’d been disagreements with her colleagues, especially the man in charge.”

“Would that be Dr. Greene?” said Maggie.

“Oh, Vivian never told me any of their names. Or much about their research project, for that matter. It was government stuff, you know, hush hush. She said I’d find it all boring anyway, and she was probably right. I never had a head for math and science, but Vivian, that’s what she loved. Even if she didn’t much care for the people she was working with.”

“What was the problem with these colleagues?”

“They made her feel unappreciated, unheard. She was probably smarter than any of them, but that’s how it was in those days, if you were a woman. You could work twice as hard as any of the men, but you weren’t valued or listened to. Even if you had an advanced degree in neurochemistry, like she did.”

“Neurochemistry?” Declan said, glancing at Maggie.

“I have no idea what that really means. But it got her a job right out of graduate school.”

Outside, the rain had turned to a drizzle and mist clouded the window, blurring the landscape to gauzy shades of gray. The tea in Maggie’s cup was

lukewarm, its aroma now dissipated, but she continued to cradle the cup in her hands as she considered what they had just learned. Vivian Stillwater had been a neurochemist, a woman known for her reliability. *If Vivian said she'd be somewhere, you could count on it*, Cathy had said. Yet brilliant, reliable Vivian had somehow driven her car into a ditch and wandered, barefoot and confused, onto a highway.

“This project in Maine that she was working on,” said Maggie. “Did it have something to do with testing pharmaceuticals?”

Cathy looked up from her teacup, her eyebrow raised. “How did you know?”

\*

By the time they drove home that evening, the fog had rolled in, a curtain so thick that it felt like the rest of the world had fallen away, that she and Declan were traveling through a spectral landscape that headlights could not penetrate.

“Her records were deliberately wiped,” said Maggie. “That’s why Ingrid couldn’t find out what happened to Vivian Stillwater. It was all redacted—her death certificate, her hospital stay, the police report of her accident. Someone went to a lot of trouble to hide that information.”

“But they didn’t erase the news archives of the good old *Purity Weekly*,” said Declan.

“A small-town newspaper with a whopping circulation of a thousand?” Maggie shook her head and laughed. “They probably thought it wasn’t worth the effort. Still, they managed to erase her in almost every other way. Twenty, thirty years from now, there’ll be no one left alive who remembers how Vivian died. Or what she was doing in Maine.”

“Now we’re back to our original mystery. If that wasn’t Vivian’s skeleton in the pond, who *do* those bones belong to?”

“I have no idea, but it *feels* like it’s all connected. Vivian Stillwater. The lady in the lake. The attack on Zoe Conover.” She peered ahead, into the fog. Darkness had fallen, and the weak beams of their headlights illuminated a shifting landscape of mist curling over pavement. “At least now, we have a pretty good idea who Vivian was working for. Who they were *all* working for.”

## CHAPTER 39

A new storm front had moved in overnight, and under dark clouds, the surface of Maiden Pond was black and wind churned. Maggie and Declan sat in Declan's Volvo in the boat ramp parking lot, peering through binoculars at the cottages along the shore. Only two days ago, it had been sunny and warm, but Maine weather was famously fickle, and judging by the ominous clouds overhead, thunder and rain were imminent.

"Nasty weather ahead," said Declan. "I think they'll all be staying indoors for the day. Which, come to think of it, sounds like quite a nice idea. Sit by the fireplace, sip some Irish coffee . . ."

She focused her binoculars on the figure who'd just emerged from one of the cottages. "Hannah Greene's not staying inside. She's getting in her car. I wonder where she's off to."

Declan pulled out his pocket notebook. "Hannah Greene inherited the cottage from her parents, Dr. and Mrs. Harold Greene. According to our friend Betty Jones, Dr. Greene purchased their house in 1968, initially planning to live here year round. Nine months later, George and Elizabeth Conover bought the house next door to the Greens. Cash purchases, both of them. Since then, the homes have been extensively updated. They're now used only as summer residences."

She shot him an amused glance. "You got all that information out of Betty?"

"All it takes is a box of cranberry nut muffins from the Marigold. What can I say, our Betty the Realtor has a sweet tooth."

"Or a taste for charming gentlemen."

He gave a modest shrug. "I have my talents."

"Go, tiger." She refocused on Hannah's car as it drove away. "And she's sixty-one?"

"Which means she would have been eight years old when Vivian Stillwater quit and left. A girl that young probably had no inkling of what her father's job really entailed."

Maggie lowered her binoculars. "I wonder what she'd think of her father now, if she learned the truth about him. About the work he was doing."

“People can justify almost anything, Maggie. That’s why history keeps repeating itself.”

She thought of the choices she, too, had been forced to justify during her career, choices she now regretted. In the line of duty, yes, people could defend almost any action, but there was usually a price to be paid. For Maggie, the price had been unbearably tragic.

She wondered if Dr. Harold Greene had ever regretted his choices.

“There’s Arthur Fox,” said Declan.

She raised her binoculars again and watched as Fox descended the steps from his back deck and headed down the lawn toward the water. “He’s really eighty-two? He looks very fit for his age,” she noted.

“Two days ago, *I* was fit for my age.”

She snorted. “Two days ago, you were young and foolish. You climbed that tree.”

“Does our *very fit* Mr. Fox look capable of tossing a fifteen-year-old girl into a ravine?”

She watched Fox drag his kayak away from the water’s edge and haul it uphill, to a more secure spot on the grass. “I’d say so.”

Declan flipped through his notebook again. “As Ingrid discovered, Mr. Fox calls himself a ‘retired energy consultant.’”

“As if *that’s* not a giveaway.”

“He’s never been married, has no children as far as we know. His early stint with the US Army is where it gets interesting. We know he was stationed at Fort Holabird, Maryland.”

“US Army Intelligence.”

“And here’s another interesting detail. Ten years ago, he became an ordained Universalist minister. Maybe he had a crisis of conscience.”

“Assuming he has a conscience.”

Fox vanished back into his cottage, and she turned her attention to Moonview. Both the Conover vehicles were parked at the house, so she assumed the entire family must be at home. Someone moved past a downstairs window, then paced back again, but no one stepped outside. It was too chilly and damp to be outdoors today, and she thought of Susan, trapped inside the house amid all the tensions swirling between her and her in-laws.

Maggie could not think of a more miserable situation.

She turned her attention to the opposite shore, and focused her binoculars on the sad little house where Reuben and Abigail Tarkin lived. Unlike the Conovers, who were merely summer residents, Reuben and his sister lived year round on Maiden Pond. For true Mainers like the Tarkins, hard winters and spring mud seasons were the price one paid to deserve these few precious months of summer.

She lowered her binoculars. “What did Betty Jones tell you about the Tarkins?” she asked.

“She said the property’s been in their family for generations. That’s the undesirable side of the pond, marshy, lots of mosquitoes. Their house is so old, it’s probably still on the original well and septic.”

“I mean, aside from the value of their real estate. What did she say about the Tarkins themselves?”

“Their mother died just last year, left the house to Reuben and his sister Abigail. Neither one’s ever been married. Betty says the family’s been pretty much shunned by the town, ever since Sam Tarkin killed those people on Main Street.”

Maggie lowered her binoculars. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Where?”

“It’s time to hear the real reason why Reuben Tarkin hates the Conovers.”

\*

Reuben stood in his doorway, as unyielding as a praetorian guarding his palace, although this palace was little more than a shack with a moss-covered roof. He was not a tall man, and his hair had gone almost entirely gray, but at age sixty-five, he was still solid and muscular and powerful enough to be a problem should he decide to be. She’d ordered Declan to stay in the car because she thought a lone woman would seem less threatening to Reuben. Now she wondered if she’d miscalculated, if Reuben would consider a lone woman as simply easier to overcome.

“Mr. Tarkin, my name is Maggie Bird,” she said. “I’m working with Jo Thibodeau to find out who abducted Zoe Conover.”

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“I know that.”

“Then why are you talking to *me*?”

“Because you may be able to help us. We need information about the people across the pond.”

“The Conovers, you mean.”

“And Arthur Fox. And the late Dr. Greene. They were all working together, weren’t they?”

His next move was so sudden she had no time to react. He lurched toward her, and she almost expected a blow or a shove. Instead, he pulled the door shut behind him and moved in so close they were almost nose to nose.

“My sister’s sleeping. I don’t want her to hear this.”

“We’ll go somewhere else, then. Somewhere we can talk.”

He considered this for a moment, then shook his head. “No, it’s better if I just take you there.”

“Take me where?”

“Come with me.”

He headed up his driveway, toward where the Volvo was parked. Abruptly he halted, staring at Declan, who had just climbed out of the car and now stood ready to spring into action, or whatever qualified as action for a man on crutches.

“This is Declan Rose,” she said to Reuben. “He’s my friend. You can trust him.”

“He can’t come with us.”

“If Maggie’s going with you, so am I,” said Declan, swinging toward them on his crutches.

Reuben snorted. “You’ll never make it. Not on those things.”

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Reuben pointed up the road. “The trail starts down that way, and it climbs halfway up the mountain. It’s all overgrown now, can’t bring a car up anymore. Which means we have to walk.” He looked at Declan’s cast. “You’d just slow us down.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said to Declan. “Please, just wait here.”

Declan was clearly uneasy about the situation, but even he had to concede that he couldn’t hike up a hill on crutches. He gave Reuben a hard look. “I’ll be waiting right here until you get back. *Both* of you.”

Reuben nodded and started walking up the road. She followed him.

It was soon apparent why this was the less desirable side of Maiden Pond. The shore here was largely marshland, and the water was spiky with

cattails and sedge. There were also biting clouds of mosquitoes and blackflies that bred on this boggy shore, and they tormented her, swarming up from the puddles left by two days of rain. The bugs did not seem to bother Reuben. He didn't even wave them away but just tramped ahead, undeterred by such minor irritants. She had studied the dossier that Ingrid and Lloyd compiled on Reuben Tarkin, so she knew a great deal about him, on paper, anyway—his birth date, family tree, school transcripts, and arrest records—but those were cold data points, lacking texture. She knew he was descended from a long line of Mainers. She knew his sister, Abigail, had spent most of her life in a wheelchair because of a spinal astrocytoma that required surgery when she was a child, and their father, Samuel, had been a well-regarded carpenter in town.

Until the day he massacred four people on Main Street before being shot to death by a Purity police officer.

Data points, that's all they were, mere details she could read on a page. Human beings, though, were not so easy to read, and the silent man striding ahead of her was little more than a featureless figure in the gloom, leading her to an undisclosed destination.

They reached the remains of a gravel road that sloped up a hill overlooking Maiden Pond. Clearly, no car had climbed this slope in years, and the path was now overgrown with saplings. Soon it would be swallowed up entirely by the forest, nature's relentless invader. Reuben started up the hill.

He moved at the pace of a far younger man, not pausing to catch his breath, or to glance back to see if she was still behind him. She struggled to keep pace as they kept climbing, past a storage shed, past a sagging chain-link fence. There was nothing to indicate where this gravel road might lead, but a faded No T<sub>RESPASSING</sub> sign and a coil of rusting barbed wire told her this had been forbidden property. Now that the fence had fallen, there was nothing to stop any trespassers, except for this demanding climb.

Reuben came to a halt, and she stopped beside him. Only then could she see, through the trees ahead, why they had trekked into these dark and claustrophobic woods. It was starting to rain again, not a heavy downpour, just a steady drip, drip onto the fallen leaves.

"They called it the Lodge," Reuben said.

He pointed to what must have originally served as a rustic retreat, before time and termites took their toll on the structure. Now the roof sagged and

the porch railings had rotted and collapsed. The porch faced west, and the panoramic vista once would have included Maiden Pond, all the way to the mountains and beyond, but the trees had since grown too tall, smothering the view.

“What is this place?” Maggie asked.

“This is where they brought the people. ‘Want to make fifty bucks? Come up to the Lodge,’ they’d say.” He pointed to the porch. “My dad repaired those steps, built that railing for them. He made it good and solid, better than it ever was. Look at it now.” He shook his head. “Nothing lasts. Nothing stays the same.”

“Your father worked for them?”

Reuben nodded. “Fixed up their houses, down on the pond. If you needed someone to swing a hammer, he was the first man they’d call. He installed their cabinets, replaced their skylights, built their decks. Worked seven days a week, just to pay the bills. All the operations my sister needed. So when they asked him if he wanted to earn a little extra, of course he said yes. And this is where he came.”

She’d already guessed what Sam Tarkin agreed to, but she said nothing. She allowed Reuben to fill the silence, in his own time. Instead of saying more, he climbed the disintegrating stairs to the porch and stepped gingerly over a gap left by a collapsed plank. Although the door was not locked, summer humidity had swelled it in place, and it took him two hard kicks to dislodge the door. It swung open with a bang.

She followed him inside.

The building smelled like dust and mold and half a century’s accumulation of mouse droppings. One of the windows was shattered, and dead leaves lay scattered across the pine floor. The planks creaked under her weight as she crossed to the stone fireplace. There she saw a mound of cold ashes, as well as half a dozen cigarette butts. There had been trespassers, of course; teenagers were always quick to find and exploit any abandoned building, and the evidence was all around them, in the empty beer cans littering the floor and the graffiti scrawled on the walls.

“They’d sit in a circle, around that fireplace,” Reuben said. “My dad said they had cushions on the floor, so everyone would be comfortable. Said it was like they were throwing a party, passing out favors, while Dr. Greene and his people watched and took notes. They told my dad that as long as he kept coming, so would the money. They told him it was all perfectly safe,

that the drugs had all been tested by the government, and he believed them. Oh, she was convincing.”

*She.* “So it was Vivian Stillwater who recruited him?”

“No.” He turned and looked at Maggie. “It was Elizabeth Conover.”

She stared at him. This was a surprise, although she should have considered that possibility. A married team had advantages. They could work in tandem, without the need to keep secrets from each other. If Elizabeth also worked in the project, if she was the one who’d actually recruited Sam Tarkin for their experiments, it would explain Reuben’s rage against the Conovers.

“After it happened, the police came to talk to my mother. They made it seem like it was all *her* fault. They said she must have known he was going insane, but how could she? She didn’t know that what they were giving him was dangerous. But *they* must have known. The Conovers, Dr. Greene. And they never said a word, never warned us. We had no idea what could happen, until the day my father—the day he—” His voice broke. He turned and strode out of the building.

She emerged to find him standing a dozen paces away, a lone, lost figure among the trees. Rain fell on his bare head, but he didn’t seem to notice it dripping down his face, sliding onto the collar of his shirt.

“Why haven’t you told anyone about this?”

“I couldn’t. I wasn’t allowed to.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was part of the agreement they made with my mother.”

“Who made this agreement?”

“Dr. Greene and his people. He said that if we kept it to ourselves, if we never told anyone about the experiments, the government would keep the checks coming. Enough money to pay for all the care my sister needed. To cover the taxes on the house, put food on the table. We were paid to stay silent. All these years, I *wanted* to talk, I *wanted* to shout the truth, but I couldn’t. My mother and my sister wouldn’t let me.”

“Then why are you telling me now?”

“Because it isn’t *fucking worth it* anymore! Selling our souls. Selling out our father.” He let out a deep breath, and with that breath he seemed to release his pent-up rage. “It doesn’t matter now, anyway,” he said quietly, and turned to look at her. “The doctor said Abigail’s got cancer. In six months, she won’t need that money anymore.”

As the rain fell in a steady drip on their heads, Maggie thought of the damage that had been done to ordinary people like the Tarkins and to others whose names would never be known. For half a century, Reuben had lived in shame and suffered in silence. No wonder he was angry. No wonder he despised people like the Conovers, who'd shattered his life and then blithely sailed into a comfortable government-paid retirement. Every morning, when Reuben looked across Maiden Pond at Moonview, he'd be reminded that life was not fair. Not to people like the Tarkin family.

"If we expose them now, Mr. Tarkin, if they find out you gave me this information, there could be consequences for you. For your settlement. The money might stop coming."

"I've lived with the consequences for fifty-three years." He looked at Maggie. "Now it's their turn."

# CHAPTER 40

## JO

They were there, all five of them, positioned in front of her desk like an encircling army. Jo turned and glanced across the squad room at Mike, but he just gave a helpless shrug as he walked out the door to start his patrol, and what else could he do? When the Martini Club demanded your attention, you had no choice but to yield.

“There’s a reason these people all knew each other,” said Maggie. “The Conovers. The Greenes. Arthur Fox.”

“Of course they know each other. They’re neighbors. They spend every summer on the same pond.”

“But what brought them to Purity in the first place?”

“Probably the same reason other people come here. The same reason *you* all moved here. It’s quiet, it’s beautiful, and come on, it’s Maine.” Jo paused and added pointedly: “Where *most* people mind their own business.”

Ingrid smiled at her four colleagues. “She’s getting a bit warmer.”

“*What* am I supposed to be getting?” Jo asked.

Ben said, “Consider all the advantages of our fair state. In particular, the advantages of a remote little village like Purity, far from prying eyes. A place where people are known to respect your privacy, where they don’t ask too many questions about why you’re here and what you do for a living.”

“There’s also the ready availability of lobster,” added Lloyd.

“Don’t you find it a bit coincidental how the Greenes, the Conovers, and Arthur Fox all showed up in Purity the same year, 1967?” said Ingrid.

“How do you know that?”

Declan Rose raised his hand. “That bit of intelligence would be my modest contribution, courtesy of our local Realtor, Miss Betty Jones. She keeps excellent records of every property transaction that’s gone through her office, whether it’s a sale or a rental agreement. She said all three parties signed rental agreements in 1967.”

“And using the county tax maps, I confirmed the dates they later purchased their properties on Maiden Pond,” said Ingrid. “It was all within two years of each other.”

“Maybe that was a good time to buy real estate.”

“1967 was also the year Vivian Stillwater moved here,” said Declan. “She never purchased any property, but she did rent a cottage. On Maiden Pond.”

“How did you get Betty Jones to tell you all this?”

He leaned over Jo’s desk and whispered: “Baked goods.”

“The point is,” said Maggie, “in 1972, all these people were living year round on the pond. The Greenes, the Conovers, Arthur Fox, and Vivian Stillwater. They knew each other very well. Then Vivian suddenly packs up and leaves, and no one knows where she went. No one asks any questions. It seems like no one *wants* to know what happened to her.”

“You told me she got hit by a car in New Hampshire. Died in a long-term care facility,” said Jo.

“And *that’s* where this gets interesting,” said Ingrid. “Why was her fate so hard to track down? It’s because everything about Vivian Stillwater’s death has been scrubbed from official documents. The accident report. Her hospitalization. Her death certificate. It’s as if someone tried to erase the evidence of what happened to her. And believe me, I *looked*.”

Yes, Jo certainly did believe her. She believed that if Ingrid Slocum put her mind to it, she could locate a missing cat in Timbuktu.

“Okay.” Jo sighed. “You’ve just told me why Vivian Stillwater is not our skeleton in the pond. So how is she relevant to this case? Why are we talking about her at all? About any of them?”

“Because there’s a reason why all these people came to Maine in the first place. And it has nothing to do with our fine summer weather.”

“Have you tried just asking them?”

“You can’t believe anything Elizabeth or Arthur tells you. They know how to conceal the truth, even under duress. They’ve been trained to do just that.” Ingrid glanced around at her friends. “Trust me, we should know.”

*We should know.* Jo knew what that meant. They were adept at concealing their emotions, and the five faces gazed back at her with impenetrable expressions. “I take it you’re now going to tell me all the things I’ve missed.”

“To be fair,” said Maggie, “we haven’t been at the top of our game either. We should have been quicker to learn who Vivian Stillwater worked for, and why she was headed to Washington, DC. These are things you couldn’t have found out.”

“Because I’m just a small-town cop.”

“A very good cop, Jo. But this involves a matter outside any normal police investigation, and it happened before you were even born. It’s a part of history we’re not proud of, even though the five of us were not personally involved. People were hurt because of it. People like the Tarkins.”

Jo was confused. A moment ago, they’d been talking about Vivian Stillwater. Now suddenly they’d swerved to a completely different topic. She eyed the five people facing her, all of them with backgrounds they’d kept hidden from her. They knew how to guard their secrets. They also knew how to ferret out the secrets of others, and they were about to bring Jo into their circle of trust.

“Have you ever heard of MKUltra?” said Declan.

“Isn’t that, like, some superhero’s name?”

Declan smiled. “No. Project MKUltra was a human experimentation program that our government conducted from the 1950s to the 1970s. It was during the Cold War, and we were in a weapons race against the Russians. By ‘weapons,’ I’m talking about more than just guns and bombs. We were also trying to master mind control. Was there a way to manipulate the human brain through drugs or hypnosis to make enemy spies give up their secrets? Or to help our own agents sharpen their extrasensory abilities?”

“What do you mean by ‘extrasensory’?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. ESP. Telekinesis. Clairvoyance. We knew the Russians were deep in such research, and we didn’t want to be left behind. It all sounds absurd now, but at the time, our government actually thought those things might be possible. They began testing a variety of mind-altering drugs and chemicals and observing their effects on people. Some of these test subjects were volunteers, paid to take part. But some people never knew they were being used as guinea pigs by our own government.”

“What kind of drugs are we talking about?”

“It ranged from LSD to barbiturates, mescaline, and psilocybin. A whole gamut of psychoactive chemicals, some of them not legal. Anything that

might prove useful against the enemy.”

“And some of these people didn’t even know they were getting the drugs? That sounds pretty damn unethical.”

“It *was* unethical. But consider the era. Project MKUltra was launched at a time when paranoia about the Soviets was running rampant. We needed to stay ahead of the enemy. We needed new weapons to help us uncover their secrets. That’s how the program was justified, at the time.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed. “I’m going to take a wild guess. *Your Agency* was running the show?”

Declan winced. “This all happened before our time.”

“Still, it *was* the CIA?”

“And we’re not proud of it. Warfare’s never pretty. Ethical lines sometimes get blurred. But we try to learn from our mistakes, and after a few . . . unfortunate events, Project MKUltra was halted.”

“‘Unfortunate events’? What does that mean?”

“People died.”

Jo stared at Declan. “How many people are we talking about?”

“We’ll never know the answer. CIA Director Helms ordered all the Project MKUltra records destroyed to protect the Agency.”

“How the hell did he get away with that?”

“It was a scandal, of course. Congress held hearings, trying to expose the truth, but they didn’t get very far. Still, some details leaked out. We know the drugs were tested in sites around the world, as well as in this country. On Americans.”

“Where?”

“San Francisco. New York . . .”

“And Purity,” said Maggie.

Jo stared at her. “*Here?*”

“Consider the advantages. It’s a place where people respect your privacy and don’t ask too many questions. A remote village, surrounded by woods, far from prying eyes.”

“It would have been just a small branch of the operation,” said Declan. “We believe that’s what brought the Conovers, Dr. Greene, Arthur Fox, and Vivian Stillwater to Maine. Vivian Stillwater had a master’s degree in neurochemistry. Dr. Greene, Hannah’s father, was a pharmacologist with US military connections. Arthur Fox was also military, attached to Army Intelligence, although he claimed he was merely an energy consultant.”

“You’d think he could come up with something more creative,” said Ingrid.

“And then there’s the Conovers,” said Maggie. “George Conover was supposedly in pharmaceutical sales, yet the company he worked for no longer exists. If in fact it ever did.”

“Okay,” said Jo. “So there were four old spooks. Three of them are now dead, leaving just Arthur Fox.”

“There’s one more,” said Maggie.

“Who else besides Arthur Fox?”

“Elizabeth Conover.”

“*She* was CIA?”

“It’s not all that unusual for the Agency to employ married couples. It’s a convenient arrangement for everyone involved. They’re free to share classified information with each other. It helps cement their cover stories.”

“And I, for one, highly recommend it,” said Lloyd, winking at his wife.

“Whoa, back up,” said Jo. “You’ve overwhelmed me with all this stuff about MKUltra, but what does it have to do with the skeleton in the lake? We know it doesn’t belong to Vivian, because she died in a care facility.”

“But *why* did she end up in that care facility?” said Maggie. “What put her into a coma?”

“You said she ran into traffic. Got hit by a car.”

“Think about it, Jo. An intelligent, accomplished woman abandons her car in a ditch. Then she runs barefoot for several miles before dashing into traffic.”

“Maybe she was running from someone?”

“Someone who might have been only in her head.”

Jo could feel them watching her, patiently waiting for her to catch up. Why did it seem she was always a dozen steps behind these people?

“MKUltra,” Jo finally said. “Those drugs they were testing . . .”

Maggie nodded. “They can lead to temporary psychosis. Hallucinations, delusions, memory loss. We don’t know how many test subjects this happened to, because those files were destroyed, but we do know the drugs led to the death of at least one man. His name became part of the public record, and you can look him up on Google. The man was Frank Olson, and he was a biological warfare expert who worked for the CIA. His family believes he became disillusioned with Project MKUltra, and he planned to resign. Someone—probably one of his colleagues—spiked his drink with

LSD. Nine days later, Olson jumped—or was pushed—out of the tenth-floor window of the Hotel Statler in New York. The timing of his death was blatantly convenient. Was he given the drug to silence him? To stop him from turning whistleblower?”

Now Jo understood why Project MKUltra was relevant. Why Vivian Stillwater’s death might have been more than an accident.

“I think Vivian also had moral qualms about the project and wanted out,” said Maggie. “We know she planned to meet someone in DC. Her sister thought it was about a new job, but I think Vivian planned to expose the program, and she was on her way to do just that.”

“But her colleagues made sure she never got there,” said Jo.

“Maybe they didn’t intend to kill her. But whatever drug they gave her caused a mental breakdown. Even if she’d survived, how reliable would she be as a witness? Would Congress, would anyone, trust the testimony of a woman who’d gone briefly insane?” Maggie leaned over Jo’s desk, and her gaze was fierce enough to make Jo edge back in her chair. “The question is, *why* did Vivian suddenly turn against the project, against her colleagues, even against the Agency? What made her decide to expose MKUltra at that particular time? It had to be something that happened here, in Purity. Something that went very wrong.”

“The skeleton in the lake,” said Jo. “Was *she* what went wrong?”

“That’s one possibility. A death they had to cover up, a victim they had to dispose of. But there was something else that went wrong here, something so public, so catastrophic, it couldn’t be simply disposed of in a pond.”

Jo didn’t need any hints, any prompting, to know the answer. She thought about her visit to that ramshackle house on Maiden Pond. She thought about Reuben and his sister and how their future was destroyed by what their father did. Not because he was evil or insane, but because his brain was on fire from the chemicals that had been fed to him.

“Sam Tarkin,” said Jo.

Maggie nodded. “A man who’d never been in trouble before. Who had a wife and two kids to support, one of them in a wheelchair. A man who one day, without warning, went berserk and killed four people on Main Street.”

“And no one ever knew why he did it.”

“Because the Agency quietly made a deal with Tarkin’s wife. They promised her and her children a lifetime of financial support, enough money to pay for Abigail’s medical bills. But the family had to remain

silent. That's one of the ways Project MKUltra managed to keep its secrets. Payoffs. Settlements. We'll never know how many people were harmed because the Agency made sure those secrets would never be revealed."

"Unless they get dredged up from a pond in Maine," said Ben.

*The lady in the lake*, thought Jo. She rose to her feet and went to the filing cabinet to retrieve a folder. "I just got the report from the ME's office, about the skeleton's dentition. The victim had a dental filling in one of her upper molars, and there's a preliminary analysis of the amalgam. It's called Dispersalloy, a product that was first introduced in 1962." Jo handed the folder to Maggie. "So the timing would fit."

Maggie nodded. "MKUltra was in operation."

Jo paced over to the county map hanging on the wall and focused on Maiden Pond. Such a modest little body of water, just a tiny blue smudge on the map, yet tragedy kept finding its way to that pond, like light sucked into a black hole. Even the name itself was tragic, commemorating a girl's drowning a century ago. A place where bad things happened. Where they kept happening.

"If this is all to cover up MKUltra," said Jo, "there are only two people still alive who were part of it."

"Elizabeth Conover and Arthur Fox," said Maggie.

Jo turned to look at her. "Would Elizabeth really hurt her granddaughter to keep this secret?"

"If they put that body in the pond, this could send both Elizabeth and Arthur Fox to prison."

"Yes, but to hurt her own *granddaughter*?"

"*Step*-granddaughter. You've met Elizabeth. You tell us."

Jo thought about the first night she'd encountered Elizabeth Conover. Recalled the woman's cool-eyed authority, her unquestioned command over her family. Zoe was not a blood relative but a recent addition through marriage. A girl Elizabeth would not have had the chance to bond with. A girl she might consider disposable, given the stakes.

"I'll bring her in for questioning," said Jo. "Arthur Fox too."

"Good luck with that," said Ingrid. "You know they're going to deny everything. And you have no proof."

"It might all come down to Zoe," said Maggie. "And what she remembers when she wakes up."

*Zoe.*

“They’ve just moved her out of the ICU,” said Jo. “The hospital’s keeping her room number strictly secret from the public, but the family knows it. *Elizabeth* knows it.” Jo picked up the phone. “Zoe’s a sitting duck.”

“She’s also an opportunity,” said Ben.

That made Jo pause. She put down the phone and looked at him. “I’m not sure I like where this is going.”

“You can try investigating them, but we can almost guarantee you won’t get anything useful out of Elizabeth or Arthur,” said Ben. “Which means we need a different strategy. It requires the hospital’s cooperation.”

“I take it you have a plan?”

Ben looked at his friends, and they all nodded. “We have a plan.”

# CHAPTER 41

This was starting to feel like a mistake. A very bad mistake.

Elizabeth Conover sat facing Jo across the interview table, her lips in a perpetual half smile, clearly unruffled by any of the questions Jo had asked her. If indeed Elizabeth had once worked for the Agency, then she'd been trained to resist even the harshest of interrogation techniques. No wonder Jo was finding it so difficult to drag the truth out of her. They'd been at this for half an hour, and while Elizabeth had been cordial and seemingly cooperative, she'd denied knowing anything about the identity of the lady in the lake. Jo wondered if Detective Alford, who was interviewing Arthur Fox in the room next door, was having any better luck.

"Really, Chief Thibodeau," said Elizabeth. "I have absolutely no idea who those bones belong to. I don't know why you think I *would* know anything."

"You spend every summer on Maiden Pond."

"So do any number of other people."

"In a house that you and your husband have owned since 1968."

Elizabeth smiled. "To you, that probably seems like the Stone Age."

"The woman's bones were found just a few dozen yards offshore from Moonview."

"It doesn't mean I know who she was, or how she got there."

Jo sat for a moment, tapping her fingers on the table. Decided, what the hell, just hit her with it and see how she reacts.

"It's interesting, that you and your husband came to Purity the same year that Arthur Fox and Dr. and Mrs. Greene did."

"Is it? Interesting?"

"That's also the same year that Vivian Stillwater moved here."

A beat. "Is that so?"

"You know it's so, Mrs. Conover. Because you were all part of the same team."

Elizabeth's lip twitched. At last, a visible reaction. The air in the room suddenly seemed charged with tension. Surely Elizabeth realized her past was about to surface.

“In fact,” said Jo, “you all came to Purity for a specific reason. Didn’t you?”

“The same reason a thousand other tourists come every summer.”

“But you weren’t tourists. Neither were Arthur Fox or Dr. Greene. Or, for that matter, Vivian Stillwater. Within a year or two, you and the Greens and Arthur Fox all bought property in Purity. And you weren’t here just for the summer. Those first few years, you stayed year round, because you weren’t here just to enjoy our fine summer weather. You were here to work.”

Elizabeth’s face tightened, and she broke off eye contact. Instead, she seemed to focus on a point above Jo’s shoulder. It appeared the Martini Club had indeed reached the correct conclusion.

“You were an interesting collection of people. Dr. Greene was a pharmacologist. Vivian Stillwater was a neurochemist. Then there was your husband, George, who claimed to work for a pharmaceutical company, which never really existed. All of you living quietly and privately in our little town.”

“Where are you going with this?” Elizabeth looked down pointedly at her wristwatch. “This has taken far too long already. Over the phone, you said this would take just a few minutes. While you ask all these irrelevant questions, my son Ethan’s been sitting out there, waiting to drive me home. You’ve disrupted the evening for my whole family.”

“Just answer my questions, Mrs. Conover.”

“No.” Elizabeth straightened in her chair. Only a moment ago, she’d played the part of the cooperative grandmother, ready to assist in the investigation. Now a different Elizabeth stared back at Jo, cool and unyielding. “We’re finished here. I don’t know why you’re asking these questions, or what you think you know about me, but you have clearly been given some wrong information. Unless I’m under arrest, I would like to go now.” She stood up and turned toward the door.

“Tell me about Project MKUltra.”

Elizabeth froze.

“Surely you know all about it,” said Jo. “Since that’s the reason you came to Maine.”

Slowly, Elizabeth turned to face Jo. “You are *way* out of your depth.”

“You and your husband were part of it. So were Arthur Fox and Dr. Greene. So was Vivian Stillwater.”

Silence.

“But Vivian became a problem, didn’t she? She developed a conscience after what happened to Sam Tarkin. Five people dead. What a disaster for your group, if the truth ever came out. Which drug did you feed him, LSD? Or was it some other hallucinogen that broke his mind and made him so paranoid he saw monsters on Main Street? That’s why he killed those people. Not because he was evil or deranged, as everyone thought, but because your little experiment went awry. You couldn’t afford to expose yourselves, so you let the whole world believe that Sam Tarkin was simply a madman. Easy enough to sweep this unfortunate incident under the rug and pretend it had nothing to do with you or your project. But unlike you, Vivian must have had a conscience. She decided she wanted out. She was ready to expose you, blow it all wide open, and she planned to meet someone in Washington, DC. You and your colleagues must have panicked. You needed to ruin Vivian’s credibility, and what better way to make that happen than to induce a convenient psychotic break? Who gave her the drug, Mrs. Conover? Who’s responsible for what happened to her next?”

Elizabeth didn’t say a word.

“Was it your husband? Or Arthur Fox? Or did *you* slip her the drug? Drop it into a glass of wine, maybe. Or a nice gin and tonic?”

Jo had laid it all out in the open now, what their group had done, and who was really responsible for the massacre on Main Street. Judging by Elizabeth’s reaction, Jo had hit a vein of truth.

Shoulders drooping, Elizabeth returned to the table and slowly sank back into the chair. “It wasn’t me,” she murmured.

“Then who was it?”

“Dr. Greene. He was in charge of the project. He made all the decisions.”

At last, an answer from her. It might not have been the entire truth, but it confirmed what Jo had just said.

“And the rest of you? Did you all agree this was how to deal with Vivian Stillwater?”

“As I said, *he* was in charge. He called the shots.” She looked at Jo. “How did you even know MKUltra had a local connection?”

“I have my sources.”

A raised eyebrow. “Really?”

“I know you think I’m just a small-town cop. But even I can put two and two together. I know Vivian Stillwater was a problem for you and your

colleagues. She was going to expose what went wrong, so you slipped her a drug that took care of that problem. Did the fact it left her in a coma bother any of you? Did it bother you that a beautiful, accomplished woman's life was ruined? 'Too bad, so sad.' Is that how you looked at it?"

"We weren't heartless."

"But your project was. You tinkered with people's minds. You destroyed lives. Is that who the lady in the lake was, another Vivian who had to be disposed of? Did you make that particular problem disappear by weighing her down with rocks and dumping her in the pond?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Who was the woman, Mrs. Conover?"

"I have no idea."

"Some local girl you recruited for your study? Or did you talk some summer visitor into getting high on her vacation, only to have it go terribly wrong?"

"I know nothing about those bones."

"Bones that your granddaughter Zoe discovered when she went swimming that second day, after her visit with Callie Yount. She would have raised the alarm. You knew those bones would expose your secrets. That's why you had to dispose of Zoe, as well."

"Wait. You think that I—that I'd even dream of—" She gave a disbelieving laugh. "You're insane if you think I'd hurt my own *granddaughter*."

"We'll let Zoe fill in the gaps. She should be waking up soon, and when she does . . ." Jo paused to let Elizabeth reach the obvious conclusion: that Zoe would reveal who attacked her. Jo didn't know if Zoe would remember a single damn thing, but the mere *possibility* could prove useful. It might be enough to force Elizabeth's hand. "Eventually we *will* identify that skeleton," said Jo. "Maybe then, you'll remember whose bones they are."

"There's nothing wrong with my memory," Elizabeth shot back. "And you, *Chief* Thibodeau, are going to regret this harassment. You have no idea who and what you're dealing with."

"Oh, I know who I'm dealing with, Mrs. Conover. I know you worked for the Agency. Or are you going to deny that too?"

"No, I'm not going to deny it. Yes, I served my country. Yes, in retrospect, what we did may have caused some harm, but remember, we were at *war*. You're too young to know the global threats we faced back

then—nuclear war hanging over us, the enemy infiltrating our government, our military. It's easy for you to feel morally superior now, but unless you were there, fighting to protect our country, you have no right to judge us."

There was a sharp rap on the door. Jo turned as Detective Alfond stuck his head in the room.

"Chief Thibodeau, we need to talk."

"I'm still in the middle of—"

"Now."

That one word, and the look he gave her, told Jo her evening was about to get much worse. Reluctantly, she stood up and followed him into the hallway, leaving Elizabeth sitting at the table. She shut the door behind her, so they could speak without being overheard.

"This is a *total* fuckup," said Alfond.

"Why? What's going on?"

"You've wasted my time and theirs. These are not insignificant people. They have friends in high places, and probably high-priced lawyers too. I've already sent Mr. Fox home, and you should let Mrs. Conover go as well, along with a big apology. These people had nothing to do with the bones in the pond."

"Is that what Arthur Fox told you? Of course he'd say that. They're not going to come right out and confess."

"Mr. Fox didn't have to say a word. The updated crime lab report says it all." He shoved a sheet of paper at her. "This just came back, along with the facial reconstruction of the skull."

Jo frowned at the page. "This is about her dental filling?"

"Look at the final analysis."

Jo skimmed down to the bottom of the page and focused on a paragraph with words so obscure they might have been written in hieroglyphs. She frowned at the words *amalgam restorations* and *polycarboxylate-adhesive liners* and *composite resins*. "What does this mean?"

"Read the conclusion. The other side."

She flipped over the paper, where the conclusion was printed.

*The presence of composite resins used to bind the amalgam on the deceased's etched tooth structure indicates this dental work was performed sometime after such resins were first introduced for amalgam restorations. Therefore, the estimate of the postmortem interval must be revised. This places the time of death to the mid-1980s or later.*

“That blows your whole theory out of the water,” said Alfond. “Jane Doe, whoever she was, died at least a decade after you thought she did. Years after Project MKUltra ended. Who the hell gave you the crazy idea these two old people had anything to do with killing her?”

Jo’s attention was still fixed on the report. *How could I have been so wrong?*

“Chief Thibodeau? What was your source?”

“Someone with, um, inside information.”

“Their information’s obviously wrong.”

“But they didn’t know about this lab report. They didn’t know the time-of-death estimate was off by at least a decade. This changes everything.”

“Have you been sharing information with this source? Then I need to know who it is.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Excuse me?”

She looked up at him. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. It’s a confidential source who needs to stay out of the limelight.” *And out of trouble*, she thought. *Leaving me to take the heat.*

“Are they with a state agency?”

“No.”

“Are they with law enforcement?”

Jo sighed. “No.”

“So they’re *amateurs?*” He threw back his head. “Jesus, I’m in a goddamn episode of *Murder, She Wrote!*”

The interview room door swung open. They both turned as Elizabeth Conover stepped into the hallway.

“I would like to go home,” she said. “*If you’re quite finished with me.*”

“Of course, Mrs. Conover,” said Alfond, his demeanor instantly transforming to that of the polite public servant. “And I want to apologize for this misunderstanding.”

“Is that what harassment is called these days?”

“We were operating on incomplete information. New details have just come in from the crime lab, and it’s clear this young woman’s death happened in a completely different time frame than we thought. Come, let me walk you out. Maybe I can get you a cup of coffee?”

It irritated Jo to see how deferentially he escorted the woman through the connecting door, into the front office. Elizabeth was hiding something—Jo

felt certain of it—but the woman had *friends in high places*, as Alfond had said. Of course she did. People like the Conovers and Arthur Fox were bound to have friends and lawyers to bail them out of trouble. She followed the pair into the front office, where Ethan had been waiting for his mother.

“We’re done here,” Elizabeth said to her son. “Let’s go home.”

“What was this all about?” he asked.

“The skeleton in the pond.” Elizabeth shook her head and laughed. “They thought I might know something about it.”

“Why you?”

Alfond said, “We were operating on incomplete forensic information. The latest crime lab report says the woman’s death was more recent than we thought. Now it’s just a matter of putting a name to her face. Hoping someone recognizes her.”

“Recognizes her?” Elizabeth looked at Alfond. “You know what she looked like?”

“Roughly. Based on a facial reconstruction from her skull.”

“May I see it?”

Alfond pulled out his phone and scrolled through his emails to the crime lab report. “These facial reconstruction programs have really improved over the last few years. We’ll be sharing the image with the public, and hopefully someone will know who she was.” He handed his phone to Elizabeth.

She went stock still. Didn’t say a word, didn’t react in any way. Not a frown, not a gasp, but those few seconds of frozen silence caught Jo’s attention. Elizabeth handed the phone back to Alfond. “That could be anyone,” she said, then turned to Ethan. “Let’s go home.”

Jo watched mother and son walk out of the building. “Did you see how she reacted to the face?” she said to Alfond. “She knows something.”

“I didn’t see any reaction.”

“Because she was trained that way. To show nothing, reveal nothing.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, leave those people alone.” Alfond turned to the door. “And maybe return to what you do best. Go write a few tickets.”

Jo watched him walk out of the building and wondered if she’d ever live down this evening’s humiliation. She couldn’t blame this all on the Martini Club because *she’d* been the one to buy into their theories. *She’d* been the one to bring in Arthur Fox and Elizabeth Conover for questioning. As it turned out, the Martini Club had been correct about one thing: Elizabeth

*had* worked for the Agency, but it was an irrelevant detail that had nothing to do with the bones in the lake.

Or was it irrelevant?

She pulled up the crime lab report on her computer, and the image of Jane Doe's facial reconstruction appeared on her screen. The face was bland and expressionless, as were most computer-generated reconstructions, yet something about the woman's features was distinct enough to make Elizabeth momentarily freeze at the sight of the image.

*She recognized this woman, thought Jo. Elizabeth knows who she is.*

*But does she know who killed her?*

# CHAPTER 42

## MAGGIE

Declan's Volvo was like a royal barge, with a ride so smooth it felt like they were gliding on water, not blacktop. She was used to driving her farm truck, which had shock absorbers that were so stiff she felt every bump on the road, so she appreciated the chance to drive a well-appointed sedan for a change, even if she was too focused on the vehicle ahead of them to really savor the experience. They'd been following Ethan and his mother since they left the Purity police station, discreetly keeping two vehicles between them, although Maggie doubted there was a need for such precautions when tailing a civilian driver like Ethan. It was Elizabeth who concerned her, Elizabeth who'd probably retained a few tricks of the trade to avoid being followed. But in this fading light, even she would have trouble noticing that a blue Volvo was tailing them.

"Interesting," said Declan. "They're not going home."

Indeed, Ethan's car had driven past the turnoff that would take them to Maiden Pond. Instead, it stayed on Route 1 and continued across the town line, heading north.

Maggie's phone rang. She put the caller on speakerphone.

"You were right about one thing," said Jo Thibodeau.

"Only one thing?"

"They *were* here for Project MKUltra. But that skeleton—you were wrong about that. It has nothing to do with them."

"Is that what she told you?"

"It's what the crime lab says. The analysis of Jane Doe's dental amalgam dates her death to sometime *after* the mideighties. That's years after MKUltra ended."

Maggie glanced at Declan and saw by his raised eyebrow that he was just as surprised as she was about this new information.

"And now I'm in one giant lobster pot of hot water," said Jo. "Alfond's pissed off at me, and Elizabeth's threatening to send her attack lawyers. I

have no choice. I've got to back off. So do you."

Maggie drove for a moment, thinking about what this meant. Was their theory about the motive behind Zoe's attack built on a house of cards? Had they outsmarted themselves, fashioning an elegant plot, when this was just a sad and all-too-common case of a predator and a girl in the wrong place, at the wrong time?

"Hey, are you still listening?" said Jo.

"We are."

"Then tell your friends to leave the Conovers alone. Go back to your book club, drink a few martinis. Enjoy retirement."

"This *is* how we enjoy retirement." She peered at the road ahead and spotted Ethan's car turning off toward the hospital.

"Just stay away from them. Got it?"

"Got it," Maggie said, and followed Ethan and Elizabeth down the hospital driveway.

She pulled into a parking stall and watched as Ethan drove up to the hospital's main entrance. Elizabeth stepped out and walked into the building.

Maggie watched Ethan drive away. "What is she doing here?"

"Visiting her granddaughter?"

"That's what I'm afraid of." She pulled out her phone and called Ben. "Heads up. Elizabeth's just entered the building."

There was a pause, then Ben answered: "Just got her on visual, stepping off the elevator. Moving past the nurses' station."

"She's headed to Zoe's room. I'm on my way. Keep an eye on her."

"That's what I'm here for," said Ben.

Maggie unbuckled her seat belt. "Wait here," she told Declan.

He sighed. "So much for staying away from the Conovers."

Maggie followed Elizabeth into the hospital and took the stairs to the second floor. It was eight o'clock, visiting hours for the general ward had just ended, and there was no one else in sight—the perfect time for a would-be killer to slip in unnoticed. But in this corridor, nothing tonight would go unnoticed because Ben had been hard at work. Maggie spotted one of his cameras mounted over a doorframe, and another one positioned across the hall from Room 242. Zoe's room.

She walked past 242 and stepped instead into Room 243.

In the darkened room, Ben's face was lit by the glow from his computer monitor, where the feed from six cameras was on display, two of them focused on the hospital bed where Zoe Conover now lay asleep. Maggie leaned in to watch the video feed over Ben's shoulder.

In Zoe's shadowy room, Elizabeth stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at her granddaughter. Over the microphone, they heard Elizabeth release a deep sigh.

"She's just standing there," said Ben.

At last Elizabeth took a step forward. *Here it comes*, thought Maggie, half expecting the woman to move to Zoe's head, or to reach for the IV line that gleamed faintly in the light from the bedside lamp. If she made the slightest move to harm the girl, Maggie was ready to storm the room to stop her. Then Elizabeth did something Maggie did not expect, something that made her reassess the entire situation.

Elizabeth pulled up a chair and sat down. As the minutes ticked by, she didn't move, didn't speak.

"What's she waiting for?" Ben said.

Maggie shook her head. "I have no idea."

# CHAPTER 43

## SUSAN

*Where is everyone?* thought Susan. She looked out the window again, hoping to see approaching headlights, but neither car had returned yet. Elizabeth and Ethan had left for the police station hours ago, a visit Elizabeth had assured her would be brief, just a quick visit to answer a few questions. Colin and Brooke had made a run into town to pick up groceries for dinner. *Won't take long, we'll be right back*, Brooke had assured her. Now it was getting dark, no one had returned, and Susan was stranded alone in the house with Kit, who, as usual, was holed up in his attic lair.

She hovered by the window, wondering if she should just call Hannah for a ride to the hospital. Now that Zoe was out of intensive care and the drugs were being tapered, she could emerge from her coma at any time. When her daughter opened her eyes, Susan wanted to be there. She *had* to be there.

She checked her phone for any messages from the hospital. She'd spent so many hours in that building that she now knew its daily rhythms, and at this hour, volunteers would be collecting patients' dinner trays, sliding them into the dietary cart. Phones would be ringing in the nurses' station, and the medications nurse would soon roll her cart down the hall to deliver the evening pills. And in Room 242, Zoe would be sleeping, waiting for her mother.

*I'll be there, darling. As soon as I can get there.*

She texted Ethan: **Where are you?** Paced through the living room, moving past the gallery of photos on the wall, a pictorial history of the Conovers on Maiden Pond. Elizabeth and George with their toddler sons. Colin and Brooke with baby Kit and his dark-haired nanny. Now Susan paced back and the sequence of years reversed, back to when George and Elizabeth were still young and vigorous, as were their neighbors, Arthur and the Greenes. For the first time, she focused on the disembodied arm near little Hannah—a woman's arm, with the rest of her body excised from the photo. Vivian Stillwater. Of course Elizabeth had slashed Vivian out of

the photo. No wife wanted to see her husband's mistress eternally smiling from the wall.

She heard a car pull up to the house. *At last Ethan's back*, she thought, but when she looked out the window, she saw it was Brooke and Colin's car. She stepped outside as they were unloading the trunk.

"Mom's not back yet?" Colin asked.

"They're still at the police station, I think."

"I can't imagine why it's taking so long. I mean, what can they possibly think she knows?" He reached into the trunk and hauled out a box filled with wine bottles. No wonder their shopping trip had taken so long; they must have paid a visit to the local wine merchant, because supermarket cabernet was not up to Colin's standards.

"Let me help you," she said.

"If you could just get the watermelon, that's all that's left," he said, and carried the box into the house.

She reached into the trunk to scoop up the watermelon. Under the glow of the trunk light, something metallic glinted back at her. It was at the very edge of the liner carpet, just a pinprick of a reflection, but it stood out brightly against the dark-blue background. She peeled aside the edge of the carpet and frowned at what was lying at the edge.

It was a small gold ear stud. Nothing particularly unique or distinctive, yet the sight of it made her freeze, because it was instantly, disturbingly familiar.

"Susan, you okay out there?" Colin called out.

She jerked straight and saw him watching her from the doorway. "Yes. Yes!" She slipped the ear stud into her pocket and scooped up the watermelon. "I was just making sure there's nothing else in the trunk."

"Could you close it?"

"Of course." She shut the trunk and carried the watermelon into the house.

In the kitchen, Brooke was unpacking the groceries, efficiently sliding milk and eggs into the refrigerator. Kit ambled into the kitchen, the reclusive vampire at last emerging from his attic hideaway, to pour himself a bowl of Cap'n Crunch cereal.

"You'll ruin your appetite," Brooke said.

"It's just a snack."

"Only one bowl, okay?"

Kit grunted an unintelligible answer and kept eating.

They seemed so normal, Brooke and Colin, going about their tasks. Opening and shutting the refrigerator, sliding boxes into cabinets while their son crunched on cereal. *An ordinary family, doing ordinary things*, thought Susan, watching them from the doorway.

The ear stud felt like a hand grenade in her pocket, waiting to explode.

She left the kitchen, retreated upstairs to her bedroom, and shut the door. She turned on the bedside lamp and took the ear stud out of her pocket. It was missing the back clasp, which was how it had fallen free. She remembered the day she and Zoe had gone to the jewelry store and bought ear studs just like this one. *I don't want anything flashy, Mom*, Zoe had said. No, it had to be something simple that wouldn't snag on her swim goggles. Susan turned the stud over and over, searching for any clue that would tie this particular piece of jewelry to her daughter, but it was like countless other studs, just an anonymous nubbin of gold. Had she seen Brooke wearing something just like it? Women lost earrings all the time. It could easily happen as you unloaded your car. Bend down, lift a suitcase from the trunk, and an earring could slip off your ear, unnoticed. Yes, that's what most likely happened, and this must belong to Brooke.

*But what if it's not hers? What if it's Zoe's?*

She pulled out her phone to call Jo Thibodeau, then stopped. Considered what she would say, and how it would come across to the family. *I think someone in this house tried to kill my daughter*. Things were already tense between her and the Conovers; this would be like launching a nuclear war.

As evening deepened, Susan paced the room, trying to decide what to do next. Call Ethan? Call the police?

Downstairs, a phone was ringing.

She stopped, straining to listen, but heard only the indistinct rumble of Colin's voice. A moment later, an engine growled to life, and she looked out the window to see their car driving away. They hadn't told her they were leaving again, even though they must have known she needed a ride back to the hospital.

*The hospital. Zoe.*

She looked at the gold ear stud, so small, so ordinary. Where was its mate?

She stepped out into the hallway, where she could hear muffled electronic gunfire coming from upstairs. Kit was back at his video games in the attic,

so focused on shooting the enemy hordes that he wouldn't notice anything else happening in the house.

She moved down the hall, to Brooke and Colin's room.

Their bedroom door hung open, and she could see the bed was nicely made up, the cover smooth and the shams propped against the headboard. Brooke the neatnik. Susan crossed straight to the dresser and slid open the top drawer. It was a likely place for a woman to keep her jewelry. She rifled through both drawers but found only lingerie, all of it expensive and meticulously folded. Who bothered to fold their underwear these days? Who had the time?

She turned and crossed to their bathroom, where Brooke's quilted pink toiletry case sat beside the sink. She unzipped it, revealing a jumble of makeup, and dug through lipsticks and eyeliner, blusher and mascara. Not here either.

But when she opened the top drawer of the bathroom cabinet, she found a satin pouch, just large enough to hold the few pieces of jewelry a woman might bring on a rustic vacation in Maine. She emptied the contents onto the bathroom counter.

Out spilled wrist bangles and hoop earrings, a pendant necklace and a sapphire ring.

And a pair of gold ear studs. Both were still attached to their back clips.

She looked at the lone stud she'd found in the trunk of their car. *Where is your mate? If Brooke isn't missing one, then this must belong to . . .*

"What are you doing in my room?"

Susan spun around. Brooke was standing in the doorway.

# CHAPTER 44

## MAGGIE

Elizabeth Conover had yet to make a move.

For the past twenty minutes, the woman had not stirred from the chair but seemed to have fallen into a trance, as if hypnotized by the sight of her granddaughter sleeping so soundly in the bed.

“Strange,” said Maggie. “It’s as if she’s keeping watch.”

“This is not what we expected,” Ben said.

Not what they’d expected at all. While Jo Thibodeau had balked at the idea of using Zoe as bait, the Martini Club had had no such qualms. It would be routine surveillance, they’d told her, just a camera feed to assess if hospital security was adequate, now that Zoe was no longer under the watchful eyes of the ICU staff. They hadn’t told her there’d be a multiple-channel feed, including audio, to alert them when to move in. When Elizabeth had walked into the hospital, it seemed as if their trap was about to be sprung, that Elizabeth would finally make her move.

Instead, the woman just sat there, watching. *Waiting for what?*

Her phone buzzed. It was Declan, calling from the car. “Guess who just walked into the hospital?” he said. “Colin.”

This *was* a surprise. She looked at the video feed from the second-floor hallway, and a moment later she spotted Colin stepping out of the elevator. Walking toward Zoe’s room.

“Now what?” said Ben.

Colin opened the door and stepped into Zoe’s hospital room. The door shut behind him as he stood in the gloom, facing his mother.

“What is this all about, Mom?” Colin asked. “I thought you were with Ethan.”

“I told him to go home.”

“You said this was important.”

“It is. We need to talk. Just you and me.”

“Couldn’t we do this at home? Why drag me to the hospital? What are you even doing here?”

“I had to be sure she’s safe. I can’t let anything else happen to this girl.”

“That’s what the police are for. You should just let them do their—”

“Let them do *what*?” Elizabeth snapped back. “Catch you in the act?”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m trying to protect *you*. Keep *you* from making things worse.”

“Mom, you’re making no sense.”

“I know, Colin. I know what happened to Anna.”

There was a long silence. Colin stood frozen, staring at his mother. “Why are you talking about Anna?” he said softly.

“Those bones in the pond? They’re hers. The police showed me the facial reconstruction of her skull. They plan to share it with the public, and I’m not the only one who’ll recognize her. Arthur will too. And Hannah. They’ll see her face, and it won’t take long for them to put it all together. How long before her family in Mexico gets wind of it? All these years, they’ve been asking where she went, and I kept telling them we had no idea, that she just quit her job and left. When the truth is, she never *did* leave. She’s been there, the whole time. In the pond.”

Colin shook his head. “No, that can’t be true. Dad said he drove her to the airport. He said he gave her money, a lot of money, to help her go away —”

“And why did she need to go away?”

“God, this was years ago. What does it matter now? Why are you suddenly—”

“*Why did she need to go away?*”

He went silent. Stared down at the ground and sighed. “I never—I never *wanted* it to happen. It just—it just did.”

“You and Anna.”

“The baby was sick all the time. Brooke was spiraling down and down, so depressed she was barely speaking to me. It’s like our house was a fucking morgue. But Anna, she was always ready to listen. Always ready to . . .”

“You had an affair with the *nanny*?” Elizabeth looked up at the ceiling and laughed. “How stupid could you be? How *ordinary*.”

“Who else could I turn to? Brooke was completely—”

“Don’t fucking blame this on Brooke! *You’re* the one who had the affair.” She gave a snort of derision. “Oh God, you’re just like your father.”

“What?”

“Just like him, you thought you’d skate away, didn’t you? And your father helped you, didn’t he? Oh, George always excelled at cleanup. That was his superpower, making problems go away. Of course he’d clean up after your mess as well. When Conover men get into trouble, they always manage to walk away, none the worse for wear. But *killing* her, Colin?”

“What are you accusing me of?”

“Anna was murdered.”

“I had nothing to do with it!”

“You’re denying it to my face? Denying that you and Anna . . .”

“No, I’m not denying the affair.” He sank into a chair and groaned. “I’m not proud of it. But it just happened.”

“Where have I heard *that* before?”

“Then it all got complicated. After she became . . .”

“Pregnant?” Elizabeth stared at him. “Is that what happened?”

He gave a miserable nod.

“Yes. That *would* have been a complication.” She shook her head. “You should have told me. If I’d known . . .”

“There was no point telling you, not after she left. Dad told me he’d paid her in cash, asked her not to contact us again, and then he sent her on her way. I was in Boston for a meeting, and when I got back here, Anna was already gone. I thought the problem had been resolved. Dad said he took care of everything, that Anna was going back to Mexico.”

“But she never left, Colin. She’s been dead and rotting in that pond all these years. Are you going to blame *that* on your father?”

“No.”

“But he helped you get rid of her. Is that how it went? You needed your mess cleaned up, so you turned to the man who excelled at it?”

“You don’t really believe Dad would cover up something like this?”

“Oh, your father was capable of many things.”

“Hiding a murder?”

A long pause. “I don’t know,” Elizabeth murmured. “The older I get, the less I seem to know anyone. Even my own sons.” She slumped forward and rubbed her temples. “All I ever wanted was to hold this family together. I went through hell with your father. His lies, *his* affair.”

“I didn’t know, Mom.”

“Of course you didn’t. That’s *my* superpower—keeping secrets. But this is one secret I can’t keep hidden. The police will eventually identify the bones as Anna’s. And when Zoe wakes up, if she remembers you attacked her, I can’t protect you. I *won’t* protect you.”

“Have you been listening to me *at all*? I had no reason to hurt Zoe! And I had no idea Anna was dead. Father told me he paid her to go away. Brooke said she helped Anna pack her things, and . . .” He stopped.

“Brooke,” Elizabeth said quietly.

The room was silent as mother and son stared at each other.

Maggie reached for her cell phone.

# CHAPTER 45

## SUSAN

“I repeat, what are you doing in my room?” said Brooke.

Susan had no excuse, no ready explanation that could justify her rummaging in Brooke’s room. And here she was, with Brooke’s jewelry spread out across the bathroom counter, caught with the glaring evidence of her guilt.

“I thought you and Colin had left—I didn’t know—”

Brooke looked at the jewelry and gave a disbelieving laugh. “Are you trying to *steal* something?”

“No! No, I—”

“Then what, Susan? What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to find out if this belongs to you.” Susan held out the gold ear stud.

Brooke frowned. “Where did you find that?”

“In the trunk of your car. I found it when we were unloading the groceries.”

“Oh.” Brooke paused, then managed a careless laugh. “So that’s where I lost it.”

“No. Yours are here.” Susan pointed to the pair of Brooke’s studs on the countertop. “Both of them.”

“Then I don’t know where that one came from.”

“Zoe has a pair just like these. When they found her in the ravine, one of them was missing.” She held out the nubbin of gold. “How did this end up in the trunk of your car?”

Susan watched as Brooke processed this information. As its significance slowly dawned on her.

Brooke shook her head. Said softly, “This can’t be happening.”

“*Think* about it, Brooke. My daughter’s missing ear stud ends up in your car. How did it get there?”

“Colin would never—”

“Put my daughter in the trunk? Drive her to that lookout and throw her into the ravine? Who else was strong enough to do all that? Not you.”

“You’re wrong. You’ve *got* to be wrong!” Legs suddenly wobbling, Brooke stumbled backward and sank onto the bed.

“I’m sorry, Brooke,” Susan said quietly. “I have to call the police.”

Brooke took a shuddering breath and dropped her head in her hands. “God, I don’t understand. Why would he do this? Why would he hurt her?”

“That’s something for the police to find out,” said Susan, and she walked out of the room.

In the hallway, she paused to take a deep breath, to calm her racing heart. She pulled out her cell phone. What she was about to do would set off an irreversible chain of events: The police swarming in to search Colin’s car, the entire house. The high-and-mighty Colin, arrested and thrust into the glare of publicity. She thought of Elizabeth’s words: *Loyalty to family, above everything else*. To hell with that. *My daughter comes first*. She’d go downstairs, out of Brooke’s earshot, and call Jo Thibodeau. Then she’d get out of this house, away from the Conovers. Away from Elizabeth, the family puppeteer, the one whose every word must be obeyed. She headed to the landing, took the first step down.

That’s when two hands slammed into her back, a shove so powerful it pitched her forward. Arms flailing, like a bird with broken wings, she fought to slow her descent, but she could not resist the relentless pull of gravity. The stairs dropped away before her, and she was falling, falling, an impossibly long plunge toward the bottom of the stairs. *Brooke*, was her last thought. *Why?*

\*

The first thing to penetrate the darkness was Kit’s voice, pleading, desperate: “I don’t want to do this again, Mom. Please don’t make me do this.”

Then the pain exploded in her head, like a hammer pounding again and again against her skull. Between the cruel blows of that hammer, the voices faded in and out.

“We have to, darling,” said Brooke.

“Why? She doesn’t *know* anything.”

“Yes, she does, and she’ll tell the police. She’s not family, not really. Remember what Grandma always says. *Family comes first*. Now, hurry!”

Hands closed around Susan’s wrists and pulled, dragging her across the floor. That pitiless hammer kept pounding, pounding against her head. She opened her eyes, struggling to focus on the faces above her, but the light only made the pain pierce deeper into her skull.

“Where are we taking her?” said Kit. “Dad has the car.”

“We’ll put her in the pond.”

“You mean, *drown* her?”

“It’s the *water* that will do it, not us. That’s not murder, Kit, not when the *water* does it.”

Kit suddenly released Susan’s wrist. “I can’t do this.”

“Yes, you can. Remember our promise? I protect you, you protect me. *Remember?*”

A whisper: “Yes.”

“Now let’s *do* it.”

Light faded to shadow as Susan was dragged outside and down the back steps. She felt the chill of the night air on her face, heard Brooke’s breathing, labored from the effort. Groaning, she struggled to wrench her hand free.

“She’s waking up!” said Kit.

“It doesn’t matter. *Pull.*”

The grip around her wrists tightened, as overpowering as steel bands. She was being dragged across the lawn now, dampness from the grass soaking into her blouse. Down the slope they pulled her, closer and closer to the pond. She could hear water lapping against the shore, the creak of the floating dock. Brooke’s breathing had turned harsh, frantic.

Their shoes thumped onto wood.

Panic sent new strength coursing into Susan’s limbs. She fought them, her arms thrashing, feet kicking, but there were two of them, and she was still stunned and half blinded by pain.

With one brutal shove, they tipped her onto her side and rolled her off the dock.

The cold water shocked her fully awake. She splashed to the surface and gasped in a breath of air. Looming above, Brooke and Kit stared down at her, two black cutouts against the background of a starry night sky.

“Please, Kit!” she gasped. “Don’t do this!”

“Hold her down,” Brooke ordered.

Kit remained frozen, crouching at the edge of the dock.

Desperate, Susan reached up to grasp the dock. Began pulling herself up.

“*Kit!*” his mother ordered, but her son did not move. Brooke stood up, raised her foot, and slammed her shoe down on Susan’s hand.

Susan screamed and lost her grip. Down she went again into the water, so cold. So dark. Once again, she surfaced, took another breath.

*Swim away. Get away from them.*

Across the pond, lights glowed in Reuben Tarkin’s house. If she could just reach him, if she could scream for his help—

Brooke grabbed her hair and yanked her head back so brutally that Susan’s skull thudded against the dock. She had time for only one last breath before her head was shoved underwater. This she could not fight. The woman forcing her down was as unforgiving as stone, as merciless as the stones that had dragged Jane Doe to her grave at the bottom of the pond. Wildly, Susan clawed at the hands that were holding her underwater, but those hands were unyielding. Her heart thrashed. Her lungs shrieked for air. She could hold her breath no longer.

*Zoe. I love you.*

She opened her mouth and water rushed into her throat.

# CHAPTER 46

## JO

Somewhere inside the house, a phone was ringing.

Jo paused on the threshold, gazing through the open doorway. That detail alone was alarming, that someone had left the door wide open. More alarming was the red drag mark on the floor. *Blood?*

“Hello?” she called out. “Susan?”

There was no answer. She stepped into the house, avoiding the blood smear. All the lights were on inside, as if the occupants had just stepped out and would return any minute. She glanced into the kitchen, then made a rapid sweep of the downstairs—living room, bathroom, Elizabeth’s bedroom. No one. She moved to the staircase and saw more blood, at the bottom of the steps.

The phantom phone, wherever it was, had stopped ringing. In the silence, she could hear her own heartbeat whooshing through her ears.

There could be a perfectly innocent explanation for the blood. An accident, perhaps. Someone tumbled down the stairs, slammed their head against the floor, and had to be rushed to the hospital. Such a mishap could happen in any home in America, but . . .

Instinctively she drew her weapon. Called out, again: “Susan?”

She’d already called Mike for backup, but the blood on the floor told her she needed to move, now. Pulse quickening, she climbed the stairs.

At the second-floor landing, she glanced both ways. Glanced first into Zoe’s room, then Susan’s. No one here. She moved into Brooke and Colin’s room.

There she paused, eyeing the dresser, where a top drawer hung open, a bra spilling out. It was a jarring note in a room where everything else was neat and orderly. In the bathroom she found yet another jarring note of disorder. Jewelry lay glittering across the sink counter, not laid out neatly but spilled haphazardly.

She heard footsteps thud into the house and thought: *Mike’s here.*

But it was Ethan's voice she heard, calling out: "Susan? Susan, where are you?"

Jo emerged from the bedroom and saw him standing at the bottom of the stairs. He was staring at the floor. At the blood. "She's not here," said Jo.

His head snapped up to stare at her. "What's going on? Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"I've been calling her, but she doesn't pick up."

"Do you know where Brooke is?"

"Brooke?" He shook his head. "I just want to find my wife. I need to know if she's—" He stopped, spun around to face the open doorway. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what? Ethan?"

But he was already out the door.

She scrambled down the stairs and ran out onto the deck. There she halted, straining to see into the night. There was only a sliver of moon in the sky, and the lights from the house had washed out her night vision. Where had Ethan gone? Then, from somewhere in the darkness, she heard a cry. A shout.

*The pond?*

Plunging blindly into the night, she made her way down the sloping lawn, stumbling through shadows toward the water's edge. She could make out more and more details in the gloom: The distant sparkle of starlight reflected on the pond. The silhouette of the pine tree looming to her right. Just ahead, something was moving.

From the darkness, a figure emerged and staggered toward her, weighed down by the burden in his arms. A burden he was struggling to carry up the slope.

"Help," Ethan pleaded. He wobbled, dropped to his knees. Gently he laid the body on the grass. "Help her."

In the faint glow from the house, Susan's face looked as lifeless as stone, her skin a milky white beneath a tangle of wet hair. *Too late*, Jo thought, but when she bent down and pressed fingers to Susan's neck, she felt a quiver of a pulse. Or was she just imagining it?

She took a breath, bent down, and pressed her mouth to Susan's. The lips were so cold, it was like kissing a block of ice. She blew, forcing air into the lifeless lungs. Repeated it again, then a third time.

Susan lay motionless, water trickling from her hair.

“No. No.” Ethan pushed Jo aside and pressed his mouth to Susan’s. Breathed for his wife, again and again. “Please, darling,” he begged. He grasped her face in his hands and forced another breath into her lungs. “Come back. Come back . . .”

Even as Jo called for an ambulance, she knew it was too late. No matter how desperately Ethan pleaded, how many times he breathed for his wife, Susan was already gone. This ambulance ride would not be to the hospital, but to the morgue.

With a sense of resignation, Jo knelt down and once again pressed her fingers to Susan’s neck, expecting to feel nothing. But something throbbed there, faintly, beneath her fingers. Not her imagination. This was a pulse. A steady pulse.

Suddenly Susan shuddered. Coughed.

“Yes!” Ethan sobbed.

Together, they rolled Susan onto her side. Jo slapped her between the shoulder blades, slapped her with desperate, almost brutal blows. Susan coughed again, this time so violently that water splattered out of her mouth. She began to claw the air, as if still struggling to stay afloat in the pond, still fighting toward the surface. Her eyes flew open, and she looked around wildly.

“It’s me! I’m here!” said Ethan. “Darling, I’m here!” He trapped her face, forcing her to look at him. Only then did her thrashing stop. He pulled her into his arms and rocked her against his chest. “It’s okay,” he murmured. “It’s okay now . . .”

“Where’s Brooke?” said Jo, but Ethan was so focused on his wife that he wasn’t listening. “Ethan, where is Brooke?” she repeated.

“By the water,” he finally managed to say. “They’re all down there.”

“All? What happened?”

“Talk to Reuben.”

Jo stood up and headed down the lawn, toward the pond. The sliver of moon had now risen above the trees, and in the dim glow, she could just make out Reuben Tarkin’s silhouette, looming above two huddled figures at the water’s edge. And she heard a keening, so faint it might have been only the whisper of the wind.

It was Brooke, murmuring: “It’s *her* fault. It’s all *her* fault.”

Brooke did not look up as Jo approached, even as Jo came to stand right beside the trio. She just kept rocking back and forth, murmuring. Water

lapped and splashed against the dock. From somewhere on the pond came the haunting cry of a loon.

“She was trying to drown the woman,” said Reuben. “I saw them, dragging her out of the house. When I got here, they had her head pushed under the water. I tried to stop it, and this one, she fought me like a damn crazy woman. Then the boy, he came after me too.” Reuben shook his head. “I might’ve gotten a little rough with him, knocked out a few teeth. Oh, they’ll blame me for it. The Conovers, they always blame me.”

“Not this time,” said Jo. This time, the Conovers would finally face the consequences. She looked down at the huddled figures. “Brooke?”

Brooke did not seem to hear her. She had her arms wrapped around her son and was rocking him back and forth as she kept murmuring, “It’s all her fault.”

“How is this Susan’s fault?” asked Jo.

“Not Susan. *Hers!* The whore. And her baby. She said there was a *baby*. I thought we were done with her, but she couldn’t stay away. She had to come back and ruin everything.”

*She’s talking about the lady in the lake*, thought Jo. The woman who’d been lying at the bottom of Maiden Pond all these years.

“I think your son’s been hurt,” said Jo. “Let me take a look at him.”

“No.”

“He needs attention.”

“No.” Brooke’s head snapped up and her teeth gleamed in the moonlight, white and feral. “He’s *my* son. *I* take care of him, only *me*.”

Jo glanced up to see flashing lights pulsating through the trees; Mike had arrived, and in the distance was the wail of the approaching ambulance. She would need Mike’s help to pull this woman away from her son, to book them both into the jail. And that would be only the beginning of the ordeals to come. There’d be reports to write and the Conovers’ lawyers to battle and courtrooms to navigate. But for a woman named Anna, justice would finally be served. For sixteen long years, through the cycling of the seasons, through hard freezes and spring thaws, Anna had lain hidden at the bottom of Maiden Pond, waiting to be found. Waiting for the moment a teenage girl, swimming on a warm summer’s day, would dive deep enough to glimpse the whiteness of bones.

Anna had waited long enough.

Jo took out her handcuffs.

# CHAPTER 47

## REUBEN

Abigail was dying.

It would not happen this month, or next month, but the end was in sight and inevitable, as it was for everyone who walked the earth. Abigail, stoic as always, had accepted the diagnosis without hysterics, without tears, and even though she'd dreaded this first day of chemotherapy and knew she'd soon lose the long, luxuriant hair she'd always been so proud of, she had kept her head high as he'd wheeled her into the hospital. She'd even managed a smile and a wave when the nurse took her into the infusion room.

Reuben was the one who'd wiped away tears. Who'd needed to flee outside to pull himself together.

He sat on a bench in the small hospital garden, under the shade of a dogwood tree. It was a sweet little garden, maintained by hospital volunteers who kept it weeded and mulched, and on this day in June, the rugosa roses were in full bloom, spilling their fragrance into the air. He thought about what life would be like without Abigail. For him it would be easier, of course, something he felt ashamed to acknowledge, even though it was true. So much of his life had been spent caring for her—bathing her, cooking for her, driving her to her appointments—and he felt at a loss, wondering how he'd fill those hours once she was gone. No, he wouldn't allow himself to think of that future just yet. It was disrespectful. And also unimaginable. He'd spent so much of his life caring for Abigail's needs, and before that for their mother's as well, that he scarcely knew how to attend to his own. Now everything in his life was about to change.

Just as it was changing for the Conovers.

He looked toward the hospital, wondering how Susan Conover was faring. That's when he saw Jo Thibodeau stride out of the building. They spotted each other at the same time, and because of his many unfortunate

brushes with the law, he automatically tensed up at the sight of her. Instead of climbing into her patrol car, she headed straight toward him.

“Mr. Tarkin?” she said. “Are you okay?”

Her question took him aback. So did the genuine look of concern in her eyes. Bewildered, he simply nodded.

“I just wondered. Seeing that you’re here, at the hospital.”

Now he understood the reason for her question. “I brought my sister. She’s getting her first chemo today.”

“Oh.” An uncomfortable pause. That’s what cancer did to a conversation; it made everyone nervous about saying the wrong thing. “She’s lucky to have such a good brother.”

He shrugged. “I could have been better.” *It’s a universal truth*, he thought. When it comes to the people you love, we all could be better. “How is Mrs. Conover?”

“They’re treating Susan for pneumonia. She got it from inhaling the pond water. But the doctor said she should be able to go home in a few days.”

“And her girl?”

“Zoe’s awake. She’s got months of rehab ahead of her, but she’s young. Those broken bones should heal up just fine.”

“I’m glad for them.” It felt strange, to be saying that about two members of the Conover family. For so long, he’d clung to his bitterness, had used it as a protective shield against the world. To let go of that bitterness now made him feel vulnerable. Adrift.

To his surprise, Jo sat down beside him on the garden bench. “Zoe doesn’t remember who attacked her,” said Jo. “The doctor said it’s retrograde amnesia. That can happen after severe trauma to the head. The first thing she remembers is waking up in the streambed.”

“Is she ever going to remember the attack?”

“Probably not. But aside from the amnesia, she *is* going to recover. And that’s good news.”

He nodded. Said the words again, the words he never thought he’d say about a Conover. “I’m glad.”

“I wanted to thank you, Reuben,” said Jo. “You saved Susan’s life.”

He found her steadfast gaze unsettling, and he turned away. He focused instead on the rosebushes with their sweet, extravagant blossoms. “What else could I do?” he said. “I saw them drag her out of the house. I heard her crying.”

“If you hadn’t stepped in, we might never know what happened to her. Even now, we’re still putting together the pieces. We think it all has to do with the bones. With the woman Brooke killed sixteen years ago.”

“Anna,” he said softly.

“You remember her.”

His vision suddenly blurred, and he swiped a hand across his eyes. “They said *I’m* the reason she quit. They said I scared her away. When all I ever did was bring her flowers.”

“Why?”

He finally managed to meet Jo’s gaze. “Because she was kind to me.”

For Reuben, that was enough, that a woman would look at him without recoiling, as everyone else in town did. That Anna’s smile was real, even though he also saw sadness there, a sadness that would lift, however briefly, whenever he brought her a gift of wild daisies or buttercups or Queen Anne’s lace. Every morning there she’d be, sitting on Moonview’s dock, waiting for him.

Until the morning she wasn’t.

“You didn’t scare her away, Mr. Tarkin,” Jo said. “In fact, you may have been the only friend she really had here.”

Until now, he’d been afraid to really look at Jo Thibodeau because of who she was, and what her uniform meant. But now he dared to face her, and he saw a woman who looked back at him with respect. A woman with a square jaw and a direct gaze and the unadorned face of a sturdy Maine girl.

“I see someone who wants to talk to you,” she said.

“What?”

She pointed to Ethan Conover, who’d just stepped out the hospital doors. “He was worried you wouldn’t want to talk to *him*. Maybe it’s time for you two to bury the hatchet?”

As Ethan crossed toward them, Reuben rose to his feet, prepared for . . . what? He didn’t know. For too many years, the Conovers and Reuben had warily faced each other across Maiden Pond. Now Reuben and Ethan stood close enough for their fists to connect.

“I want to say, I’m sorry,” said Ethan. “I didn’t know, Reuben. I never knew, about your father and what really happened to him. About what my parents did to . . .” He swallowed. “I understand, now. Why you hated us.”

Reuben was silent.

“I also want to thank you, for saving Susan. For being there, when I wasn’t. When I should have been . . .” Ethan’s voice broke, and he couldn’t seem to say anything else. Instead, he reached out and placed his hand on Reuben’s shoulder.

Reuben stood frozen, feeling the weight of that hand, not knowing what to do with this gesture. He was relieved when Ethan pulled away, and he took a step back, as if to once again put a safe distance between them.

“When Susan’s better, when she’s out of the hospital, she’d like to come over and thank you in person,” said Ethan. “If that would be all right with you, Mr. Tarkin?”

Reuben looked at Jo, who cocked her head, waiting for his answer. “I suppose,” he finally said.

“And if you ever come to Boston, you’re always welcome in our home. I’m not just saying this. Please, come visit us.”

Although Reuben nodded, he knew this would never happen. They were summer people, and he was a local, and some chasms were too wide to reach across, no matter how well intentioned the invitation might be.

As Ethan walked away, Jo said to Reuben: “Maybe your feud with the Conovers is finally over?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“At least you’re talking. That’s a start.”

But the start of what? He didn’t know. He was glad that Susan would recover, and he’d decided that Ethan seemed a decent man. Maybe he should give these two a chance. Everyone, after all, deserved a second chance.

Even a Conover.

# CHAPTER 48

## MAGGIE

“It’s embarrassing to admit,” said Lloyd, “but we couldn’t see the forest for the trees. Or in this case, we let the forest get in the way of seeing the all-important tree.”

“Any way you put it, dear, it *is* embarrassing,” said Ingrid. “We should have done better.”

The five of them had assembled at Maggie’s house for a postmission debriefing and a potluck dinner of Ben’s paella, Lloyd’s ratatouille, and the Stouffer’s Spinach Soufflé that Maggie had hastily pulled out of her freezer. Frozen food was a lazy shortcut, and she wasn’t proud of it, but she’d spent the afternoon mowing her fields, moving the mobile chicken coop, and reassembling the electric fencing. While a spy might be able to take a day off, a farmer could not. Declan, with his broken ankle, had been excused from contributing a dish to their potluck, but tonight he’d produced the real treat: a bottle of thirty-year-old Lowland single malt, which helped take the sting out of their communal sense of failure. They’d already passed the bottle once around the farm table, and when it came her way again, Maggie splashed a refill into her glass and passed the bottle to Declan. He was looking particularly dashing tonight, a silver-streaked forelock drooping rakishly over his eyebrow. He’d become so adept at navigating on crutches that he could easily return home to his own bed, but Maggie rather liked having him around to spar with.

Among other things.

“It’s not as if we were entirely off base,” said Ben. “We did conclude, correctly as it turns out, that Zoe’s backpack was deliberately left on the roadside. That it was planted there to make the police think she’d been abducted and carried south. All to keep them from searching the pond.”

“All right, so we were right about that detail,” said Ingrid. “But after they found the skeleton in the pond, that’s when we let ourselves be lured into the weeds. We overthought it. We started chasing conspiracy theories.”

Lloyd patted his wife on the knee. "Because that's what you do, dear. And you do it so well."

"It's no wonder, though," Maggie pointed out, "that our minds did go straight to conspiracies, once we realized the Conovers were part of MKUltra. When you turn over a rock and find a nest of spies, it's natural to think they're up to no good."

Declan laughed. "Now why would we think *that*?"

"We should take this as a cautionary tale," said Ingrid. "Yes, conspiracies exist. Yes, we've been trained to always look for the bigger picture, to assume there's a larger organism with tentacles reaching in multiple directions. Governments, crime syndicates. But this time it wasn't a big picture. It was a small one, a very human one. A marriage. An affair."

"This *was* a conspiracy, in a way, though," Maggie said.

"Between Brooke and her son, you mean?"

"And between Brooke and her father-in-law, George Conover. As Elizabeth said, her late husband's superpower was cleanup. Whenever things went wrong, he was adept at mopping up the mess, whether it was covering up MKUltra's role in the Main Street massacre, or silencing Vivian Stillwater. He helped cover up Anna's death as well, because Brooke couldn't have managed that on her own. There he was, faced with a scandal in his own family: A pregnant nanny, pushed down the stairs by his son's enraged wife. Brooke, dragged off to prison for murder. The publicity could have blown open all the family secrets, including their work with the Agency and MKUltra. I think he decided the best course of action was just to cover up the murder and dispose of Anna's body in the pond. It would protect Brooke. It would keep the family together. And it would protect all their secrets." Maggie looked around at her friends. "People like us, we're good at burying secrets. Too good, sometimes."

"And it almost worked," said Ben. "For sixteen years, anyway."

Ingrid shook her head. "That poor girl, Anna. All these years, her family never knew what happened to her."

"In George Conover's mind, Anna was probably expendable," said Maggie. "Just a girl from Mexico, whose family had no idea how to find her in this country." She shook her head. "Yes, George Conover *was* an expert at cleanup."

They fell silent for a moment, and Maggie thought of Anna, doubly a victim. First, she'd been seduced by her married employer, and then she'd

been punished for that affair by the berserk wife, who'd shoved her down the same stairs where Susan Conover fell, fracturing Anna's skull. Perhaps Brooke hadn't *intended* to kill her. Perhaps it was just a split second's fury, an uncontrollable impulse that drove Brooke's attack, but the result was a dead body and a crisis that had to be reckoned with.

Enter George Conover, who took care of the problem. Both Elizabeth and Colin were out of town that night, so no one else in the family needed to know what had happened. With his usual efficiency, George set about protecting his daughter-in-law, his family, and his own secrets.

For sixteen years, those secrets stayed buried. Until the day Zoe dove into the water and spotted what lay at the bottom of the pond. Maggie imagined the girl frantically swimming to shore, climbing out of the water. She pictured her scrambling up the lawn and blurting out *There's a skeleton in the pond!* to the first person she encountered.

Brooke.

This time, there was no George Conover to pull Brooke out of the fire and help her neutralize this witness. Panicked, Brooke had dealt with the problem herself, with a blow to Zoe's head. Now she had a new problem: How to load the unconscious body into the trunk of her car? For that, she turned to someone strong enough to lift the girl, someone she knew would do her bidding and would never betray her: her son, Kit.

While they'd been chasing the phantoms of MKUltra, the real killer was in that household the whole time, sleeping under the same roof, sitting at the Conovers' dinner table.

"Do you think we're slipping?" Ingrid asked quietly. "The fact we were so wrong about this one, well, it makes me wonder."

The question unnerved Maggie; no doubt it unnerved them all, the possibility that they'd lost their edge and that what lay ahead was an inexorable decline into senility. They may have accepted that their joints were not as limber, that they could not run as far or as fast as they could in their youth, but one could always adjust to those physical changes, or find ways to compensate.

But a sharp mind was central to what they did and who they were, and to feel their well-honed skills beginning to recede would be a death all its own.

"Even if we *are* slipping," said Ben, "we were still ahead of the police."

"Rather a low bar," sniffed Ingrid.

“Still, that thought should buck us up.”

“And we can learn something from this,” Maggie added. “A lesson we should remember in the future.”

“What lesson?” Ingrid asked.

Maggie looked around at her friends, fellow travelers on this journey into the twilight of life. Her gaze fell on Declan, and she smiled. “Never overlook the human heart as a source of mischief.”

They heard a knock on the door, and she rose from her chair. They all knew who this would be.

Jo was out of uniform, dressed in blue jeans and a fleece on this cool summer night, and as she walked into the house, it struck Maggie how rarely she saw the young woman in civilian clothing. That was sad. Dedication to a career was a fine thing, but youth was fleeting, and she wished more for Jo than endless patrols and 911 responses.

“You just missed dinner,” Maggie said.

“Any chance you have leftovers?” she asked.

“Doesn’t anyone ever feed you?”

“Not the way you people feed me.”

“Paella and ratatouille.”

“What?”

“That’s what’s for dinner. We saved you some. They’re all in the dining room, feeling sorry for themselves.”

“Why?”

“We should have done better. We apologize for leading you astray, when the killer was right there in front of us. As Lloyd says, we didn’t see the forest for the trees.”

“Because there were too many damn trees in the way.”

They had already set a place for Jo at the table, and as she sat down, Lloyd slid her a plate of food and Declan poured her a whisky. When they’d first met Jo, she was not a fan of scotch, but now she happily took a sip. That’s what happened when one spent too much time with this group; one got corrupted by shady habits and excellent booze. Jo seemed happy tonight, almost celebratory, not the uptight Jo Thibodeau that they’d tangled with in the past.

“So I hear you folks are kicking yourselves,” she said, a trifle too cheerfully.

“We lost the thread,” said Ingrid. “We became distracted by irrelevant issues like MKUltra and Vivian Stillwater.”

“Those issues weren’t irrelevant to Reuben Tarkin.”

“Well, no.”

“And if not for Reuben, Susan Conover would be dead.”

“True,” Ingrid admitted.

“So in a way, it’s *all* relevant.” Jo looked around the table. “This case has been one big machine with multiple moving parts. Reuben. The Conovers. Project MKUltra. And the damage your Agency did here.”

“Which we were *not* involved in, may I remind you,” said Ben.

“Right. Pure as the driven snow, you people.”

They were hardly in a position to claim sainthood, so they let her comment slide.

“This should change things for Reuben, and the way the town looks at him,” said Maggie. “I hope people will be kinder.”

“It definitely changes things for Elizabeth and Arthur,” said Jo. “You should hear what folks are saying about them. No wonder they fled town so fast.” She raised her whisky glass. “*That’s* worth celebrating.”

“You seem in an especially fine mood tonight,” observed Declan.

“I am.”

“Any reason for that?”

Jo looked around at their faces and sighed. “You’ve already heard the news, haven’t you? God, I can never surprise you people.”

“Tell us anyway.”

“I just got the call from the town manager. I’m no longer acting police chief. I’m now, officially, *the* police chief of Purity, Maine.” She put down her glass. “Oh, come on. You can at least *try* to act surprised.”

Maggie glanced at Ingrid. Ingrid glanced at Ben. None of them knew about this decision, but they were too proud to admit it. They really *must* be slipping.

Declan raised his glass. “To our new police chief. The youngest ever, I assume? And the first woman?”

“Right on both counts,” said Jo. “And I have all of you to thank.”

“For what?” Maggie asked.

“For pushing me to dig deeper. For making me look beyond the obvious. For being, basically, a giant pain in my ass.”

“That does not sound like gratitude,” said Ben.

“You made my job both easier and harder. By introducing MKUltra into the equation, you got me into trouble with Detective Alfond. But then you got me out of it by pointing me to Brooke Conover.” She looked around the table. “I appreciate what you did for me. And for the town.”

“It’s our town, too, Jo,” Maggie said. “And if you need our help again, we’re here.”

“*Unofficially*,” interjected Jo.

“*Unofficially*,” Maggie concurred. She looked around at her friends, who’d spent their careers living undercover. Their lives once depended on hiding the truth, on pretending to be who they were not. Even though retirement had allowed them to cautiously venture a bit into the light, they would never truly be able to shake that old habit of adhering to the shadows. “As long as we agree to keep this just between us,” Maggie said, “the Martini Club is always here to help.”

“I can keep a secret,” Jo assured them.

Maggie smiled. “So can we.”

# CHAPTER 49

## SUSAN

Susan stood at the edge of the pond where she had almost died, and she gazed at water that shimmered like gold silk in the morning light.

“Do you think we’ll ever come back, Mom?” asked Zoe.

“After what happened here? I don’t think so.” She turned to her daughter, who was finally starting to look like herself again. Zoe still had the bald spot where the surgeon had shaved her scalp, and she needed to use a walker until her hip fracture healed, but with every day that passed, as her bruises faded and her bones mended, she was more and more like the old, fearless Zoe.

“It wasn’t the pond’s fault,” said Zoe.

“What do you mean?”

“The pond didn’t try to kill us. *People* did.” Zoe looked at the water and sighed. “I wish I could go swimming.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m a mermaid, remember?”

Laughing, Susan pulled Zoe into a hug. “Of course you are, darling.” The little mermaid who refused to die. Who, even after all that had happened, was eager to plunge back into the water. Holding her close, Susan was grateful for every breath her daughter took, for the warm flush of her skin. For the fact she was in her arms, and alive.

“Hey, girls, you about ready to go?” Ethan called from the driveway. He’d just finished loading their suitcases in the trunk, and he stood by the car, waiting for them.

“We’re coming!” Susan said.

Even using a walker, Zoe was easily able to make it up the sloping lawn to the driveway. Ethan opened the door and eased Zoe into the car, where the parting gift from Callie Yount sat on the back seat: a stuffed brown cow with a purple ribbon around its neck. *So you won’t forget me*, Callie had said.

As if that were even possible.

“Just a minute,” Susan said. “I want to check the house one more time.”

She climbed the stairs to the deck, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. For a moment she stood in the living room, where she had spent so many frantic hours, terrified that her daughter might be dead. The echoes of that panic still seemed to linger in the room. She walked past the wall where the Conover family photos used to hang. The wall was empty now, the photos taken down and shipped home by Elizabeth, who never planned to return. But Susan could still see where the frames had once hung, their outlines burned into the wall by years of sunlight. *The ghosts of Conovers past.*

That happy family was gone, replaced by a new version of the Conovers, tainted by scandal. By murder. It was not a family she wanted to be part of, but that was the problem with families: you couldn't choose your own. What you *could* choose was whom to love, and Susan had chosen Ethan, just as he had chosen her.

Which meant that Elizabeth, for better or for worse, would remain a part of their lives. A troubled part, but they would learn to deal with her.

She walked through the kitchen to make sure the stove was turned off and all the electrical cords were unplugged. There were still echoes of panic in this room, as well. She remembered standing here after she'd found Zoe's ear stud in the car trunk, watching as Brooke and Colin calmly unloaded groceries. Wondering if one of them had tried to kill her daughter.

She went upstairs for a last check of their bedrooms and the bathroom. The closets were empty, the dresser drawers cleaned out. *Must leave nothing behind*, she thought, *because I am never coming back.*

She walked out of the house and locked the door, leaving the ghosts behind.

“All set?” said Ethan.

“Let's go,” she said. But as she was about to slide into the car, she couldn't help looking one last time across the pond. This morning Reuben was at the hospital with his sister, so there was no one on the opposite bank waving goodbye. Although she and Reuben had already said their farewells, she wished she could have another chance to thank him, another chance to atone for what had been done to him. She might not have caused his suffering, but because her name was Conover, she felt responsible all the same.

She slid into the car beside Ethan. “It really *is* beautiful here,” she admitted. “The pond, the trees. But . . .”

“But?”

“I never want to see this goddamn place again.”

“Neither do I.” He grasped her hand and pressed it to his lips. “Let’s go home.”

# CHAPTER 50

## REUBEN

The summer people were gone.

Last night there had been a hard frost, and this morning as Reuben paddled his kayak on the pond, he saw delicate panes of ice, as translucent as glass, drifting by. By noon the ice would melt away, but this morning it was a harbinger of the long, cold weeks ahead, as was the flame-red maple leaf that floated past. How quickly summer rushed by, like a northeaster blowing in, here and gone again.

Like the summer people themselves.

Their homes stood empty now, the windows shuttered, the deck furniture and canoes stored away for the season. He paddled past Arthur Fox's house, its lawn already littered with fallen leaves, and then past Hannah Greene's house. A broken tree branch had toppled onto the back deck where Hannah, that pale dumpling of a woman, liked to sun herself.

He paddled on, toward Moonview.

Like the other houses, it, too, stood empty. The dock had been pulled out of the water, and with all the shutters closed, it seemed as if the house had retracted into itself, its tentacles now withdrawn behind protective walls. Once, Moonview's presence on the pond had seemed like a wound that festered and never healed, but now when he looked at it, he saw a house, nothing more. A house that he'd heard was now for sale.

And no wonder. Soon after the arrest of Brooke and her son, the glare of publicity and the whispers and stares of the locals had forced Elizabeth and Colin to flee Purity. While Reuben was happy to see the last of those two, he was sorry that Ethan and his family had also departed and would not be returning. And really, why would they want to return? Purity was where Susan and Zoe almost lost their lives; for them this would always be a cursed place. Soon the house would be covered in a cloak of fallen leaves, and later by a velvety blanket of snow. When the sun arched higher again, and new leaves unfurled on the trees, perhaps another owner would move

into Moonview. Someone with children, he hoped. He would like to see children in that house, children who'd happily wave to him, who weren't poisoned by fear against him.

Until then, Moonview was just an empty house, haunted by the ghost of a woman named Anna.

He reached into the kayak for the bouquet he'd picked this morning. It was too late in the season to find daisies or buttercups, so he'd gathered purple asters from the roadside and bound the stems with twine. A sad and scraggly offering, but Anna would not have minded. She would have accepted it, as always, with a smile. He set the bouquet on the pond and watched it slowly float away, a clutch of purple blossoms adrift on the sun-gilded water.

Squinting against the morning glare, he could almost see her standing on the dock, ethereal in her white nightgown. Then he blinked, and although her image vanished, she was not gone, not really. As long as he did not forget her, she would be there, smiling. Waving.

He raised his hand and waved back.

Then he dipped his paddle in the water and turned the kayak toward the opposite shore, where the trees were ablaze in autumn colors. This morning, he could smell a change in the weather. It was time to put up the storm windows, get the snow shovel out of the shed, and bring in another load of firewood. Time to gird himself for the long, dark nights ahead.

Winter was coming. Reuben Tarkin, as always, would be ready for it.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Three decades ago, I moved to Maine, where I discovered frigid winters, snow boots, and seemingly endless mud seasons. I also found the little corner of paradise that I now call home, with its community of engaged and globally aware citizens who make this such an intellectually vibrant place to live. *The Spy Coast*, my first novel featuring the Martini Club, was partly based on this community, and I thank the town of Camden, Maine, for being an unending source of inspiration.

Throughout most of my years as a writer, one woman has guided and nurtured my career: my peerless literary agent, Meg Ruley, who is always ready with advice, wisdom, and comfort. Thank you, Meg, and here's to the bonus years! Thanks also to Rebecca Scherer, Jane Berkey, Chris Prestia, Jack McIntyre, and the entire team at the Jane Rotrosen Agency. How lucky I am to have landed with the best.

It takes a great editor to make a book shine, and I'm fortunate to work with Gracie Doyle at Thomas & Mercer, as well as Sarah Adams and Ola Olatunji-Bello at Transworld Books (UK), who helped me refine and deepen the story in so many ways. Thanks also to my sharp-eyed copyeditor Bill Siever, who can spot my factual and grammatical errors from a mile away, and to Jarrod Taylor, for his arresting cover designs.

Finally, I thank my husband, Jacob. It's not easy being married to a writer. My thoughts are often elsewhere, and I don't always listen because I'm busy having imaginary conversations with nonexistent people. He's been with me for every step of this adventure, and I look forward to all our adventures to come.

REACHER MEETS HIS MATCH IN . . .  
*OVER EASY.*

Read on for an exclusive short story from Lee Child and Tess Gerritsen.

# *Over Easy*

## ***Reacher***

Reacher's bus ticket involved a change in Chicago, which in turn triggered a permanent when-you're-in-town promise to visit with Frances Neagley, his old sergeant, the closest thing he had to a friend. She had tried the private security sector when they got out of the military police. She had done well. Some kind of new computer stuff. Half the time he had no idea what she was talking about. He didn't tell her he was coming. He never did. He just showed up at her office, a surprise, like always.

Except this time she was already waiting for him in the lobby. Next to a guy with a laptop computer, who said, 'This is him? He's early.'

'He walks fast,' Neagley said.

'Then we need a new variable. How fast does he walk?'

'How fast do you walk, Reacher?'

Reacher stopped at the counter they were behind.

'Depends if I'm in a hurry,' he said.

'Suppose you're visiting with me?'

'I could do five miles an hour, probably.'

The guy with the computer said, 'What about a normal person?'

'Some of them don't walk more than half that.'

'That's a two-to-one variable. We can't have a two-to-one variable.'

'You need more than that,' Reacher said. 'Environment alone could be a twenty-to-one variable. Rush hour and the dead of night are pretty different. It's not how fast you can walk. It's how fast the crowd lets you walk. Why are you checking me out?'

'Artificial intelligence,' Neagley said. 'We need to test it against extreme cases.'

'So now I'm a test subject?'

'I thought you wouldn't mind.'

'I don't, really. Knowing where I go doesn't mean knowing what I do.'

'I know what you buy. Such as the bus ticket. The machine said you'd be here a minute and twenty-three seconds after you arrived. Everything is

predictive software now. We're way ahead of the curve. We have a whole new department. Revenue is through the roof.'

'Hello, Neagley,' Reacher said.

'Hello, Reacher,' she said. 'There is one little thing. We should talk.'

'Now?'

'Probably now. No big deal. Nothing to worry about. But knowing you, you might want to turn right around and walk back to the bus depot, a minute and twenty-three seconds faster than a normal person.'

'What is it?'

'I made you a test subject because you have a lower digital profile than almost anyone. I monitor what goes on. Recently there were multiple searches. But not for you. For your brother, Joe.'

'He died years ago.'

'The searches were around a period well before that. Before he was with Treasury, even. Back when he was still with Military Intelligence.'

Reacher asked the obvious question. Intelligence matters had their own protocol. He said, 'Who's searching?'

'Either someone very well disguised, or someone a bit unexpected. We have emails from the same IP, same sessions, same computer almost certainly.'

'Emails about what?'

'Online orders for a particular kind of grain.'

'Sent from where?'

'A small town called Purity, Maine.'

'Is there a brewery there? Or a distillery?'

'Not that kind of grain. Or amount.'

'Then what?'

'We think it's a small-time chicken farmer. Free-range egg-laying hens, maybe a hundred or so altogether.'

'You can tell that from grain?'

'The machine can. Turns out that kind of grain makes the eggshells stronger and the yolks yellower, and doesn't get soggy if it's scattered on wet or muddy dirt. Hence the egg-laying part, and the free-range part. And if we assume it's a monthly order, it would feed about a hundred hens.'

'So the machine thinks a small-time chicken farmer in a small town called Purity, Maine, is interested in something my brother did in Military Intelligence, back when God's dog was still a puppy?'

‘Unless it’s someone else very well disguised.’

‘You’re right,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m going to Maine. I got to be somewhere. Catch you next time. We’ll have dinner.’

‘Bye, Reacher,’ she said.

## ***Maggie***

Unless they found one on their dinner plate, most people didn’t spend much time thinking about chickens, or about the farmers who raised them, fed them, and collected their eggs. Which made it unlikely that the man standing at Maggie Bird’s front door was there to ask about her flock of laying hens. He didn’t just stand in her doorway – he *filled* it, a muscular slab of a man whose size alone would intimidate most people, but there was a reassuring stillness to him, as if he were waiting for her to make the first move. Looking past him, she saw no car in her driveway, which meant he’d walked to her farmhouse, a good long trek from the main road. Odd, she thought.

Odder still were the first words he said: ‘Did you order chicken feed?’

‘Why? Are you delivering?’

‘Then you *were* the one who placed the order.’

‘I own a hundred and fifteen layer hens, give or take a few, depending on the neighbourhood fox. So yes, I go through a lot of grain. But I’ve never had a feed salesman make a house call.’

‘Not a salesman.’ He held out his hand. ‘My name is Jack Reacher.’

She regarded the hand, which looked powerful enough to crush bones, then she focused on his face. Why hadn’t she seen it before? The resemblance. Plus the sheer size of the man.

‘You’re Joe’s brother,’ she said.

His gaze sharpened. Up till that moment, he’d probably seen only what most people saw when they looked at Maggie: a grey-haired woman in her sixties, trim and fit, but not particularly memorable. Now, because she’d said the name *Joe*, he was taking a closer look at her.

‘It seems you have questions,’ she said. ‘Would you like some breakfast?’

Half an hour later, they sat in her kitchen drinking coffee, the remains of their meal still on the table. Eggs, of course; when you owned a hundred

and fifteen (more or less) laying hens, eggs were always on the menu.

‘You do know Joe is dead,’ he said.

‘I do. Margrave, Georgia. A terrible loss for you, and for the country.’

‘He never mentioned any Maggie Bird.’

‘That wasn’t my name back then. And our contact was brief, hardly worth mentioning. He was working Military Intelligence at the time, and he passed some crucial info to our Bangkok station. We acted on it.’

‘Bangkok? You’re Central Intelligence?’

‘Retired. Now a happy chicken-farmer, in a town where people don’t ask too many questions.’ She smiled. ‘I now know all about the Reacher boys. So I feel safe sharing this with you.’

‘Joe’s been dead a long time. Why are you digging up info on him now?’

‘I did it on behalf of someone else.’

‘Who?’

‘The daughter of a former colleague from Bangkok station, Helen Kimura. A few weeks ago, Josephine informed me her mother was dead. An accidental fall during a cliff hike on Oahu. At least, it *looked* like an accident.’

‘You have doubts.’

‘Helen was an experienced backpacker, so I find it hard to believe she just fell off a cliff. But it was four days before they found her body, and by then, the scavengers had been at her. Wild boar, they eat everything. Calling her death *accidental* was the simplest conclusion.’

‘Is that why the daughter contacted you? Does she have doubts as well?’

‘No, Josephine’s just reaching out to people who knew her mother. She’s only a freshman in college, with no living relatives, and she wants to find connections.’ Maggie paused and gave Reacher a searching look. ‘Some people need connections, you know.’

‘And some people don’t.’

‘Until they suddenly realize how alone they are. Which is the case with Josephine. I met her only once, years ago. She was about eight years old, already stubbornly independent. Fearless and scarily smart, just like Helen. I think there’s a streak of samurai in that family. She’s studying linguistics at Harvard and she speaks six languages, thanks to all those foreign postings with her mother.’

‘I’m still waiting,’ he said.

‘For what?’

‘For the reason you’re telling me all this.’

‘Josephine knew I worked with Helen in Bangkok twenty years ago, and she asked me what I knew about Joe Reacher. That’s what got me searching online.’

‘Why does this girl want to know about him?’

Maggie paused, anticipating the impact of her next words. ‘She thinks Joe might be her father.’

That sent him rocking back in his chair, as if she’d delivered a physical blow. In the silence that followed, she saw shock, then disbelief register on his face.

‘It couldn’t be Joe,’ he finally said.

‘Why not?’

‘My brother would never walk away from a child.’

‘What if he never knew she existed?’

‘The mother never told him?’

‘Helen kept a lot to herself. A penchant for secrecy comes with our profession, and this may be one of those details she shared only on a need-to-know basis. She certainly never shared it with me. Or, it seems, with her own daughter. But consider the facts. She and Joe were both in Bangkok around the time the child was conceived. And then there’s the girl’s name.’

‘Josephine.’

‘The female version of Joseph. Not exactly a common name for a girl.’

‘Joe was just Joe. That’s what was on his birth certificate. Three letters. Joanne or Joanna would make more sense from your colleague’s point of view.’

‘Possibly,’ Maggie said.

‘But our mother’s name was Josephine.’

‘I see,’ Maggie said.

He was still struggling, still not willing to accept the possibility.

‘Look,’ said Maggie, ‘I don’t have to tell her you were ever here. She knows there could be an uncle drifting around in the world, almost impossible to find. We could leave it at that. Like Helen, I’m good at keeping secrets.’

‘No, I need to know.’ He looked at Maggie. ‘I need to meet her.’

‘Then you couldn’t have timed it better.’ Maggie glanced up at her kitchen clock. ‘Her bus arrives in Purity in two hours.’

## ***Reacher***

Reacher walked back the way he had come, to Purity's bus depot, which wasn't really a depot at all. Just a wide spot in the road, with a centre island. Old school. Charming, like the town itself. It looked like Maine's flinty version of prosperous. There were all kinds of small stores. Books, cheese, coffee, outdoor clothing, walking shoes. Hobby ventures, Reacher thought, owned by people with pensions. The owners themselves looked welcoming enough, behind a standard-issue layer of Yankee reserve. And behind something else too, perhaps. *A town where people don't ask too many questions*, Maggie Bird had said.

Which matched the preconceptions Reacher had formed before his arrival from Chicago. A chicken farmer with an interest in military intelligence two decades earlier? Had to be a retired something. With a government pension. Some kind of three-letter agent, used up, burned out, finally come to rest. He knew of several towns like Purity. Maybe there had been survival training in the woods nearby. Maybe it had been a safe-house location. Whatever, it was lodged in memory, and when it came to retirement it might have seemed like a comforting choice. For more than one agent, almost certainly. Usually there was a small cluster. A little community, self-policing. *People don't ask too many questions*.

Which had made finding the chicken farmer moderately difficult. There was a bunch of small food stores, and all of them sold eggs, presented and packaged like small-scale local produce. No brand names. Nothing industrial. He knew he couldn't just walk in and ask: *Which of your suppliers would you peg as a retired secret agent?* He knew that would be unproductive. So he represented himself as a man with a restaurant in New Hampshire looking for a quality source of free-range eggs. He asked who in the area would be worth talking to. He steered the conversations by using words like *professional, reliable, competent, organized, on top of it all*. He knew that three-letter habits were hard to break.

Every answer was Maggie Bird.

And now every question was Josephine Kimura.

He got to the bus stop forty minutes ahead of her arrival and took a seat at a sidewalk table outside a coffee shop about a hundred feet away. A clear line of sight. Only one other table was occupied, by an old guy reading a newspaper. Reacher ordered coffee, black, large, but no food. He was still

full of Maggie Bird's eggs. He had enjoyed them. He figured if he really had a restaurant, he would make her his supplier.

He sipped coffee, and waited.

\*

The bus rolled in right on time, rumbling and hissing, intrusive in the small-town calm. From Boston, Reacher figured. A regional service. Stopping everywhere. Probably it would roll on north to Presque Isle, and then turn back.

Two people got out. First was a thin man about sixty, no luggage, black raincoat, black porkpie hat. He walked away, toward the shopping street. Second out was a young woman, maybe twenty, maybe five seven, slender, maybe a hundred-some pounds. She was Asian, or part. She had a messenger bag over one shoulder and a duffle over the other. She stepped down to the sidewalk and stood still. The bus moved off behind her.

Reacher waited. The woman looked left, looked right, into the distance, and behind her. She was expecting someone to meet her. Maggie Bird, probably, in whatever kind of truck an egg farmer drove. One with a soft suspension, presumably.

He got up and walked the hundred feet. He stopped at a nonthreatening distance and said, 'Josephine Kimura?'

'Who are you?' she said back.

'Maggie Bird sent me. My name is Jack Reacher. You were asking after my brother, Joe.'

'You're Joe Reacher's brother?'

'I would be happy to answer your questions.'

'You don't look anything like him.'

'How do you know what he looked like?'

'My mother kept a photograph.' She dropped the duffle and hauled the messenger bag around to the front. She dug inside and came out with a page protector, with two sheets of paper in it.

'Copies,' she said. 'Front and back.'

The back copy showed the white side of a sheet of eight-by-ten photographic paper. On it was handwritten *Joe Reacher*. Likely a woman's writing, likely a government ballpoint pen.

The front copy showed a guy Reacher had never seen before. Small, narrow-shouldered, slightly built. A shock of big jet-black curls above a high forehead. Maybe forty years old. An odd pose, as if caught by surprise.

‘This is not Joe,’ he said. ‘Joe was an inch taller than me. We were never confused with each other exactly, but it was plain as day we were brothers. This is someone else completely.’

‘Then why would my mother write his name on it?’

‘Is that her writing?’

‘Definitely.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘I understand you’re a freshman at Harvard and you speak six languages. So you ain’t dumb. So you can think of a dozen reasons why I could be lying to you. We need to talk to Maggie Bird. She actually met Joe. She saw the resemblance in me. She can tell you.’

‘She lives way out of town. I’m not driving through the woods with you.’

‘I don’t have a car.’

‘Well, I’m sure as hell not *walking* through the woods with you.’

‘No need,’ Reacher said. ‘My guess is she’s about a minute away. Wait here.’

He walked the hundred feet back to the coffee shop. The old guy with the newspaper was still at his table. Reacher said, ‘Tell Maggie we’re good to go.’

The old guy said, ‘What?’

‘She called you two hours ago and asked you to watch the bus stop. I’m sure the *Kennebec Journal* is fascinating, but it ain’t two hours’ worth of fascinating. So tell her to come around the corner. We need to see her.’

The guy took out his phone. *A small cluster. A little community, self-policing.* Reacher walked back to Josephine Kimura, but before he got there Maggie Bird pulled up next to her in an old crew-cab pick-up truck. Reacher hung back a minute. He let them greet each other. They looked awkward. The retired agent and her dead colleague’s daughter, face to face for the first time in a dozen years. With the putative uncle watching. Not easy.

Reacher climbed in the back and said, ‘Show her the photograph.’

Josephine did, and Maggie said, ‘This is not Joe Reacher. He was twice that size, fair hair not dark, straight not curly, blue eyes not brown.’

Reacher asked, ‘Do you know who it is?’

‘Yes,’ Maggie said. ‘It’s the one who got away.’

\*

Maggie drove them back to the chicken farm. En route she ran through the history of her time at Bangkok station, twenty years before. Cautious, redacted, need-to-know. *Three-letter habits were hard to break.* She and Helen Kimura and a couple others were getting nowhere with a big job. Drug-related financing of terrorism, Reacher figured, from the unspoken clues between the words. Likely some kind of ISIS or Al Qaeda affiliate in the east. Two cousins ran the operation from deep underground. CIA had their names, but no practical way to determine their locations. The cousins kept solid comms discipline, and their last traitor had been skinned alive and then set on fire. Therefore electronic eavesdropping wasn't helping, and recruitment of an informant was deemed unlikely. Stalemate.

Until late one night Helen Kimura took a random phone call from an intelligence major named Joe Reacher, US army. He was in Bangkok too. A six-week temporary detachment. He had a snippet of information unrelated to his own work. Too sensitive to commit to paper or the ether. He said he would drop by the next day. The result was a conclusive breakthrough. The operation was comprehensively smashed. One of the cousins was shot dead during the arrest. No doubt deliberately, Reacher thought. He knew how such things worked.

The other cousin escaped, never to be seen again.

\*

Maggie parked her truck in her driveway and they went inside and sat at the kitchen table. Reacher took the copied photograph from Josephine and held it in both hands and stared at it. He said to her, 'This is how Joe's name got on the back. This is what investigators do. When they're stuck, they sit and stare at the suspect's picture and muse, obsessively. Where are you, what are you doing now, what are you going to do next? Hours and hours, sometimes. Just thinking. Then eventually your mom put this one face down and picked up the next one. The other cousin. Same thing. Where are you? What are you doing? Hours and hours, maybe. Then the phone rang. A surprise. A ray of light. She was startled. She jotted the caller's name on the nearest piece of paper, which was this picture, face down in front of her.

With the nearest pen, which was an Agency-issued ballpoint, right there on her desk.'

Maggie said, 'I'm sure you're right. That's how it happens. As if we can break cases by willpower alone.'

Josephine asked her, 'Who was he? The one who got away?'

'His name was Ivan.'

'What happened with him?'

'I don't know. We couldn't find him. We didn't expect to. But we knew he was neutralized, which was as close to a win as we could get. Nothing was ever a hundred percent.'

'Do you think he's still alive?'

'Possibly. Possibly not. We have no way of knowing.'

'Where would he be?'

'Anywhere.'

'Why would my mom keep his picture?'

'She was a samurai. A real warrior. She hated ninety percent. She always wanted a hundred. I suppose she kept the picture to keep herself hungry.'

Reacher was still staring at the picture. The hair. The black curls, piled high on the guy's head. He said, 'Could I borrow a phone?'

Maggie slid hers across the table. Reacher dialed Neagley in Chicago. He said, 'Do you guys have software that can age a photograph twenty years?'

Neagley said, 'Of course we do.'

'I'm going to send you a picture. Get back to me, OK?'

'You got it, boss. Give me ten minutes.'

Maggie did the tech work for him. Reacher was behind the curve and all fingers and thumbs. She photographed the photograph and texted it. The kitchen went quiet. Reacher looked at Josephine and said, 'You asked four questions about the guy who got away. Who was he, what happened with him, is he still alive, and where is he now?'

'OK,' Josephine said, unsure.

'You asked no questions about Joe. Not what was he like, his favourite music, his favourite colour, was he good with languages too, did he like dogs?'

'So?'

'I went to West Point,' Reacher said. 'It's not Harvard, I know, but it's a college of sorts. Then I was an army cop. I learned to listen to what people *don't* say.'

‘So?’ Josephine said again.

‘You were a smart kid. You picked up family scuttlebutt and put it together. You knew your mom had bust open a big case due to a random stranger named Joe Reacher. You knew one of the big dogs had gotten away.’

‘OK,’ Josephine said, still unsure.

‘I also learned to use my imagination. Plus a bit of guessing. Nowadays they call it lateral thinking. Which says there’s an alternate theory.’

Maggie Bird looked at him, and Josephine looked away.

Reacher said, ‘Your mom was tough. Physically and mentally totally capable, even as she got older. Look at Ms. Bird here. I wouldn’t mess with her. Plus your mom was an experienced backpacker. She’d been on cliffs before. I figure you must have thought all those same thoughts yourself. Why wouldn’t you? You knew her. You have a logical mind. You’re accustomed to turning a problem this way and that, looking for the angles. I think you concluded it wasn’t an accident. She didn’t fall. She was pushed.’

He stopped for a moment. Josephine Kimura turned her head and looked even further away. Right into the corner of the room. Maggie Bird looked straight at him. He saw the woman she must have been, back in the day, powered up, alert, thinking hard, her mind racing through probabilities and possibilities faster than a mainframe computer.

He said, to the back of Josephine Kimura’s head, ‘So the question became who pushed her. You’re a samurai too. You couldn’t let someone get away with that. You became a detective. You took a logical approach. The obvious suspect was the one who got away. Your mom and her friends killed his cousin. Now he’s seeking revenge. Because probably all kinds of blood oaths and tribal loyalties are involved. But you didn’t know who he was. You knew the big break was the tip Joe brought in. You needed to ask him what it was. Simple as that. Then you could identify your suspect. That was your only interest in Joe. You never thought he was your father.’

Josephine turned back, and said, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. It was a smart move. Talking about CIA ops from twenty years ago would have gotten you precisely nowhere. Whereas the long-lost-dad thing gets you the warm and fuzzies everywhere and pretty much guarantees cooperation from everyone. Like me. I came all the way from Chicago. But now you know. Your mom already had the names. All Joe brought her was where they were.’

Josephine said, 'I want justice for my mom, of course. But I felt I should warn the others, too. If this is what I think it is, they're in danger. Maggie is the only one I knew. That's partly why I'm here.'

'Thank you,' Maggie said. 'I mean it. I take these things seriously. But please don't worry. I'm a hard woman to find.'

Her phone dinged. An incoming text. She glanced at it and slid the phone to Reacher. Neagley's response. The aged photograph. Subtly softened and slackened and stooped. He was thinner, and his face was lined. His hair had retreated higher, to a still-thick topknot, growing backward at a jaunty angle.

Reacher said, 'We have a problem.'

The kind of jaunty angle that would fit perfectly under a porkpie hat.

Reacher said, 'Maggie Bird might be a hard woman to find, but sadly Josephine wasn't a hard woman to follow. This guy got off the bus with her.'

## *Maggie*

'Time to share that photo,' said Maggie. She took back her phone and quickly typed a text.

'Not the police,' said Reacher.

'Definitely not. What happens next stays between you, me, and a few close friends.'

'And me,' said Josephine.

Maggie and Reacher answered, simultaneously: 'No.'

'Look, I had no idea I was being followed,' said Josephine. 'I'm responsible for this mess, and I'm going to make it right.'

'You should have started by telling me the truth and not plucking on my goddamn heartstrings.' Maggie got up and went into the living room, where she swung open the false bookshelf, revealing the hidden niche where she stored her toys. She returned to the kitchen with a loaded SIG Sauer, which she placed in front of Reacher.

'Got something bigger?' he said.

'Ben Diamond owns a spare Heckler and Koch rifle. I'm sure he'd be happy to lend it to you.'

'Was that the old guy in the café?'

She nodded. 'It's good to have friends.'

'What about me?' said Josephine. 'What can I do?'

'You are going to stay next door with my neighbour, Luther. Let us sort this out.'

'You trust this neighbour?' Reacher asked.

'One of the few people I do trust.'

'I can handle a gun,' said Josephine.

'I don't care,' said Maggie. 'You've caused enough trouble, and I want you out of the line of fire. If Reacher's right, and this is all about revenge, then I'm the one Ivan wants. By now, he's asked around town, so he knows it was my truck you climbed into. He may already be hunkered down in those woods, waiting to get his shot.'

'He didn't have any luggage with him,' said Reacher.

Maggie looked at him. Understood the significance. 'Not even a backpack?'

'Nothing. Just a raincoat.'

So Ivan wasn't planning a long-distance kill shot. That would not be his style, anyway. He and his cousin liked to do it up close, where they could watch the victim's face contort and the eyes roll back in agony. She went to the window and looked across her field, toward the tree line. 'The cousins, they liked to take their time,' she said. 'Especially Ivan. If this is really him, he won't be satisfied unless there's a lot of screaming.' She turned to Josephine. 'Do you know how long it takes to skin a person alive?'

'No,' Josephine said softly.

'As long as you *want* it to take. There are no vital organs in the skin, but there are a hell of a lot of nerve endings.'

'Do you – do you think that's what he did to my mother?'

'I don't know. But I *do* know what to expect if he gets his hands on me.'

'That's not going to happen, Maggie,' said Reacher.

'I beg to differ. It needs to happen. So let's make sure it does.'

\*

The simplest solution would be to track Ivan down and take him out first. She owned a hundred acres of fields and woods, with plenty of places to dispose of an out-of-towner's body, and she had four friends in town who were always ready and willing to dig a hole. But there was the nagging

possibility that Reacher was mistaken. That the man on the bus *wasn't* Ivan but some poor lookalike schlub who'd come just to enjoy a summer's day in Maine. She had no moral qualms about killing Ivan, who'd delivered so much grief and bloodshed in the world, but the death of an innocent man would weigh heavily on her conscience. Before she pulled a trigger – or allowed anyone else to pull a trigger – she needed to be certain the man on the bus really *was* here to kill her. Which meant letting Ivan make the first move. It meant playing the part of clueless prey, unaware she was being hunted. So she went about her afternoon as if nothing were wrong, feeding and watering her chickens, closing up the henhouse at sunset, and eating dinner alone in the kitchen. If Ivan did make a move, he would do it under cover of darkness.

She climbed the stairs to her bedroom, turned off the lights, and waited. One hour. Two.

*Let's get this over with. Make your move.*

Her cellphone buzzed. It was her neighbour, Luther.

'Maggie, she took off!'

'Josephine?'

'She spent so long in the bathroom I sent Callie to check on her. Found the window wide open.'

'How long has she been gone?'

'Twenty minutes, maybe a half hour. I'm sorry, I should have kept my eye on her. I never expected her to do this.'

But Maggie should have expected it. Josephine had already deceived her once, with that convincing sob story about finding her father. She *was* Helen's kid, after all. Like mother like daughter, both of them fierce and focused on the goal, methods be damned. Josephine was the troublesome Z factor Maggie always worried about. You could plan your op with every move, every possibility, mapped out on an XY grid, and then along came the unexpected variable. A child wandering into the target area, or a cop blundering on to the scene, leading to an added dimension of trouble.

Josephine was their surprise variable.

'Maggie.' Reacher's voice suddenly came over her comm link. 'Figure approaching from the east. About fifty yards from your house. I have him in my scope.'

'So do I,' said another voice. It was Ben Diamond, stationed on the barn roof. 'Take him out now?'

‘No, wait!’ said Maggie. ‘Our girl’s out there in the wild. Double-check the target!’

An alarm beeped on her phone. Perimeter breach. Someone moving in.

She pulled up the security system on her phone and scanned the feeds from the eight cameras mounted on her barn and farmhouse. South side clear. East side clear. Front yard . . .

Shit. Ivan was standing *right there*, looking up at her camera, as brazen as could be. He could afford to be brazen because he held Josephine in front of him and the barrel of his pistol was pressed to her temple.

‘He’s at my front door,’ she said into the comm link. ‘And he has Josephine.’

‘We’re moving in,’ said Ben.

‘Hold off. He’s here to negotiate.’

A jumble of voices clamoured over her earpiece. Reacher and the four friends she’d mobilized tonight, all of them saying the same thing: *No!* But she had no choice, not with Josephine’s life at stake.

She went downstairs and walked out the front door.

‘Hello, Maggie Porter,’ said Ivan. It was her old name, before she’d become Maggie Bird. Before she’d walked away from the job that almost destroyed her. Before she’d left behind that bloodstained world of Ivans and monsters like him. He was two decades older, his face now gaunt, the cheeks hollowed out, but the eyes were the same. Cold and black as a snake’s. Josephine seemed strangely detached, even with a gun at her head. A samurai like her mother, calmly prepared for her fate.

‘She has nothing to do with this,’ said Maggie. ‘Let her go.’

‘First, tell the big guy to come out,’ Ivan said. ‘The one I saw climbing into your truck.’

‘He’s gone. Bought his eggs and left.’

‘I’ll count to three.’ Ivan shoved the gun barrel harder against Josephine’s temple.

‘Kill her and you lose your only bargaining chip.’

‘I’m all out of chips anyway.’

She stared at his cadaverous face and suddenly realized: *Ivan’s dying*. Maybe cancer. He was here only to settle unfinished business, and he didn’t care whether it killed him. Another unexpected complication.

‘One,’ he counted. ‘Where is he?’

‘I told you, he left.’

‘Two.’

‘She’s just a kid. I’m the one you want.’

‘Three . . .’

‘I’m right here,’ said Reacher.

He stepped out of the darkness, the sniper rifle pointed down, the strap looped over his shoulder. For such a big man, Reacher moved so silently they hadn’t heard his approach. Now he stood only a few yards away, an unmissable target.

Ivan released Josephine. She stumbled away, fell to a crouch.

*Target’s clear, Ben! Take your shot.*

‘I don’t even know who you are,’ Ivan said to Reacher. ‘Wrong place, wrong time, buddy.’ He aimed at Reacher’s chest.

Just as Josephine sprang to her feet and lunged.

Ivan howled, an agonized scream that shocked the night into silence. Writhing, he twisted around and aimed at Josephine.

Reacher raised the rifle and fired. One shot was all it took, a well-placed bullet into the back of Ivan’s skull. The front of Ivan’s skull hit the farmhouse wall.

In the stillness that followed, the sounds of the night slowly returned. The chirping of crickets. The rustle of wind in the grass. Maggie and Reacher stared down at the handle of the knife protruding from Ivan’s body. The knife that Josephine had plunged into his back.

From the darkness, four figures materialized, converging from different directions: Declan and Ben, Lloyd and Ingrid. Maggie’s old friends from the Agency. They might be retired, but none of them had forgotten their special set of skills.

Declan pointed to the knife. ‘We must have missed the memo about that particular detail.’

‘He was mine to take down,’ said Josephine. ‘So I did.’

‘You could have gotten us killed,’ said Maggie. ‘We had a plan.’

‘I changed the plan. I owed it to my mother.’ Josephine looked at Ivan’s body and made a sound of disgust. ‘Harmless little me. He never imagined I came with a sting.’

The advantage of being underestimated, thought Maggie. Young Josephine had already learned its value.

‘We brought shovels,’ said Ben. ‘Shall we?’

‘But first a round of scotch, don’t you think?’ said Lloyd. ‘Loosen up the old joints before we start digging. You still have that bottle of thirty-year Speyside, Maggie?’

‘You know where to find it,’ she said.

Ingrid took Josephine’s arm. ‘Come along, dear. If you’ve never tasted good whisky, this is the time to start.’

As the others walked into the house, Reacher and Maggie lingered outside in the night among the chirping crickets and the winking fireflies. They watched the lights come on in the kitchen, where Maggie’s precious bottle of thirty-year scotch would soon be passed around, a well-deserved reward for a hard night’s work. She wished she could offer Reacher more than just a glass of good whisky for all that he’d done. If not for him, she wouldn’t have known that Ivan was in town. She wouldn’t have survived this night.

‘Thank you, Reacher,’ she said.

He stared at her house, where the windows were now cheerily aglow. From the kitchen came the sound of laughter and a collective chant of *Cin cin!* Before the night was over there’d be more rounds and more toasts, and then off they would tramp into the woods, shovels in hand.

Reacher smiled.

‘I like your friends,’ he said.

She smiled back. ‘Then let’s join them.’

## ***Reacher***

Dawn came up four hours after Ivan’s impromptu grave had been stamped flat and strewn with leaves and branches. Declan and Ben and Lloyd and Ingrid had all drifted home. Reacher and Maggie had stayed up with Josephine, watching over her. Sometimes first kills were hard to process, once adrenaline had washed away and reality had settled in. They pretended to speculate about the exact cause of death. Had the knife been lethal and the rifle merely insurance? Or had the knife been merely a life-saving distraction and the rifle the actual kill shot? They wanted to give Josephine an off-ramp if she needed one.

She didn’t. She took the on-ramp instead. She chose the first option. She claimed it. She was the daughter of a warrior, and a warrior herself. Reacher

figured in times gone by, Maggie might have made a mental note to call Langley and recommend future recruitment. A Harvard grad, six languages, a mother in the business, an ice-cold temperament. A natural. But those days were gone. Instead Maggie showed her to the guest room, and then went out and filled a bucket with grain for the morning feed.

Reacher carried it to the henhouse for her, unnecessarily, because she did it herself every other morning, but he wanted to make a gesture, of something, maybe fellowship, or solidarity, or acknowledgement of a kindred spirit. When they got there they found one hen dead. Maybe locked out unnoticed at sunset, and found by the fox. It was all torn up, bloody and dismembered. Neither one of them said anything, but Reacher thought *could have been her*, and he had no doubt Maggie was thinking *could have been me*.

Reacher set the bucket down and said goodbye and walked away, back to town again. He planned to get south of the bus stop and wait on the shoulder with his thumb out. A ride to Portsmouth in New Hampshire would work for him. He could get a Trailways there and head onward to the next random destination, richer by one more bittersweet memory, of a woman he would like to meet again, but probably wouldn't.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © Josh Gerritsen*

International bestselling author Tess Gerritsen took an unusual route to a writing career. A graduate of Stanford University, she later earned her MD at the University of California, San Francisco. While on maternity leave as a physician, she began to write fiction, publishing her first novel in 1987. She has since sold over forty million books in forty countries, winning both the Nero and RITA awards.

Gerritsen's novels have been major bestsellers around the world. Critics praise her books as “pulse-pounding fun” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), “scary and brilliant” (Toronto's *Globe and Mail*), and “polished, riveting prose” (*Chicago Tribune*). *Publishers Weekly* dubbed her the “medical suspense queen.”

Gerritsen's series featuring homicide detective Jane Rizzoli and medical examiner Maura Isles inspired the TNT television series *Rizzoli & Isles*.

Now retired from medicine, Gerritsen lives in Maine and writes full time.

# zlibrary

*Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.*



[z-library.sk](http://z-library.sk)

[z-lib.gs](http://z-lib.gs)

[z-lib.fm](http://z-lib.fm)

[go-to-library.sk](http://go-to-library.sk)



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>