



# TENDER ECHOES

REILY  
GARRETT  
McAllister Justice Series



# Tender Echoes

By  
Reily Garrett

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## Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Darius, Leyna, and Raptor, the incredible trio, loyal, kind, and energetic. Three incredible beings who don't understand the words "give up." To Faith, whose love and compassion changed my life.

Special thanks to beta readers Graham from Fading Street Publishing, Siobhan Caughey, Lori Sickles. I appreciate your time and insights. To my readers, each one of you who selects and reads one of my books, thank you for the opportunity to share my work.

# Table of Contents

[Tender Echoes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Reily's Books](#)

[About Reily](#)

[Copyright](#)

## Chapter One

“Jesus, Charlie. Hold on. I’ll get you to a hospital.” Lexi swallowed hard against the rising tide of acid degrading her throat’s lining as the unfolding scene corrupted her sanity. Pressure against the makeshift bandage on Charlie’s belly wound yielded a deeper crimson soaking her jacket, the provisional dressing secured by fingers encased in a thickening, sticky glove. So much blood.

This could’ve been Lexi’s fate—stabbed, slashed, disfigured for all time, blood forming rivulets pooling in the alley’s filth. Maroon puddles mingled with body fluids common to alleys sheltering the homeless as if destined to couple in a macabre, virulent concoction.

“R-run, Lexi. D-don’t let him make you a w-whore. I wasn’t—strong enough. Y-you were never p-part of the street life.” Trash and other filth from the narrow passageway cushioned Charlie’s bruised and battered head. One front tooth was missing, probably swallowed, while blood seeped from jagged slashes on her cheeks and brow, both career enders in the event she survived. “You shouldn’t be here. It was a mistake to text you, but the cops wouldn’t believe us girls.”

“Did your pimp do this, Charlie? What’s his real name? Tell me so I can help you.”

Beside them, remnants of a cardboard box, a vagabond’s homemade privy, retained odors of the dispossessed and rivaled the excrement saturating every molecule of thickened air drawn into her lungs. This was no place and no way to die.

“Yeah—said I stole from a customer. But I didn’t. The b-bastard just wanted a freebie.” Otherworldly pain glazed eyes forecasting a nonexistent future while icy wind leached color from a once-beautiful face now smeared with crimson streaks and pain. “Won’t tell you his name. I didn’t want to die alone. You’re f-free. You made it.”

“No, Charlie. I’ll get help. Lie still while I secure a pressure dressing.” This late at night, there’d be few cars to flag down and no foot traffic from which to enlist help. She was forced to rely on emergency personnel who’d classify the incident as NHI, no human involved.

Terror-induced flashbacks spewed forth of a stranger offering refuge to a teenager standing on a precipice, a choice. She’d first thought him relatively handsome, not understanding the slimy base of his character. She’d had no experience with his ilk. Still, something inside steered her

away from his pleasant façade. Perhaps she'd sensed his underlying character. Instinct had directed her to the unknown where a small group of prostitutes offered shelter and nurtured her mind.

With one hand, Lexi freed her belt and maneuvered it under the fallen girl's tiny waist amid groans and mewling cries. Youth and a livelihood from flatbacking necessitated Charlie's svelte figure, which facilitated the effort to cinch the leather strap tight. Lexi reached for the cell clutched in Charlie's hand, knowing the late hour meant a longer wait for help. Her fingers, covered in sticky crimson ropes of blood, tangled briefly with Charlie's, a squishy squeeze to lend encouragement. Another bolus of acid rose in her throat.

"No." One word spoken from the disembodied voice behind her could flash freeze hell and instigate the formation of ice crystals in any world, under any circumstance.

The cold, hard scrape of death filled her mind. Slowly, her gaze turned, lifted. At the head of the alley and backlit by dingy sodium-vapor light, the corpulent flesh-peddler stalked forward.

"I knew we'd meet again, Lexi. Remember me? I've dreamed of this day for years." Moonglow shimmered off his blade, which weaved a figure-eight motion, the steely threat weaker than his words. "I always wondered how you've managed to elude me...Now I know."

"And I always wondered if the perverted lunatic my friends feared was you since they kept your identity a secret. Now I have a face to put to their terror."

In twenty yards, she'd either breathe her last as a human shish kabob or replace Charlie in the hustler's stable. He stopped and tilted his head to the side as if inventing a new and horrific way to terrorize before he began his sociopathic playtime.

"I need to call an ambulance or she'll die." The chill shimmying down her spine spread outward to encase every nerve and muscle with the knowledge of his intentions. No one should die in a filthy alley.

He shrugged.

His feral grin logged an accounting of past and intended atrocities, declaring her future better off in the hands of Hades. "There's only one way you get to make that call."

"I'm not part of your harem and never will be." Lexi considered the street girls who'd sheltered her just as much her family as the parents who'd given birth and nurtured her for thirteen years. Instead, they were bonded by fate, stronger than any blood tie.

“Run, Lexi. You know these streets.” Charlie’s gasping breath faded into a choking sob. “Go. Get help.”

In the distance, the fleeting drone of tires equaled the harsh vocal in nature’s death metal song, every sound magnified by her fear. Behind him, a vehicle’s lights flickered across the alley’s entrance yet didn’t penetrate deep enough to illuminate predator or prey.

“Try it, and you’ll die with your friend after I screw you senseless.” His tone embodied anticipation of both as he grabbed his crotch.

“Sorry, I don’t carry tweezers.” Mouthing off was neither smart nor intentional, just natural. This was her second face-to-face with the hustler, familiarity breeding a hatred that seethed and twined in her gut while squeezing her chest.

“So, you want to die painfully. That’s fine. I know many ways to make you suffer while maintaining consciousness. I’ve been practicing for years on other stables’ girls.”

Three years had passed since she’d renounced street life, keeping a low profile and using her tech skills to electronically wipe her existence. When she’d arrived at another crucial juncture in life, Frannie, a hospital administrator, had rescued her from her own pride and helped set her on another path.

The following hard work and education had reaped a decent job and the moniker, Blue Angel, one of the best in the digital world. Since Lexi had started walking the path of the straight and narrow, her old friends refused to let her shadow their world and shunned her help, insisting she have no contact with the city’s underbelly. She was their poster child for success, a beacon of hope they didn’t want tainted by association.

Fate’s inevitability proved her point with the intermittent gleam of metal daring her to move. Once a gutter rat, always a gutter rat. If she stayed, death would find her in one form or another. If she escaped, she might save Charlie and turn those admired tech skills into a new form of vanilla hacking.

Whether the stalker saw the intent in her gaze, grew tired of dithering, or sensed the car stopping near the mouth of the alley, she’d never know. His moment of distraction provided the impetus for action. Lexi bolted in the opposite direction that led down a narrow corridor and into the maze of alleys and passageways. Growled threats trailed each step. Thunderous footfalls splashing behind her grew dim with her greater speed through the homeless byways.

Guilt intensified the restriction in her throat and impeded her ability to



gulp necessary oxygen into her starved lungs. Avoiding the barren streets, dead-end passages, and open lots, she chased an invisible trail until assured death couldn't catch her. Buttons on Charlie's phone created imprints on her palm from the punishing grip.

Distant echoes of city life passed in a meaningless tide of horns, sirens, and the low thump of distant music. Each step taken breathed new rounds of recriminations for leaving her friend to face her assailant alone. Logic dictated the only way for them both to survive was for Lexi to enlist help, the kind that would make the dirtball retreat.

From the girls' prior descriptions, the bastard was smart enough not to finish Charlie with the slip of his blade until he'd tied off loose ends, but that wouldn't prevent Charlie from bleeding out. Would this be the impetus for the other girls to accept help?

What felt like miles passed in a matter of minutes before she stopped long enough to call 911 and wipe her hands on the back of her jeans. If only she'd brought her dog tonight, maybe the odds for survival would've swung in Charlie's favor.

Desperation to save her friend from the age-old profession drove Lexi to circle wide until standing among the few gawking rubberneckerers at the alley's mouth. Each craned their neck, trying to catch a glimpse of the action, confounded by the yellow police tape barring their way. Flickering red and blue revolving lights sweeping across their faces offered an otherworldly design. When the stretcher passed, she sobbed her relief to see emergency personnel working to save her friend.

Murmured interpretations of the circumstances cycled through the crowd in an all too familiar demonstration of low morals and expected but deserved outcomes. Because she didn't intend to tangle with the police, and because she couldn't turn away from her friend in need, Lexi backed from the spectators while a plan formed in her mind.

*I can damn well get involved now that I've connected Charlie to her dirtball employer.* In the guise of tying her tennis shoe, she used dirt to scrub dried blood from her hands before soaking Charlie's cell phone in a puddle of rainwater. *It hasn't rained for several days—ugh.*

Disabling the cell was a double-edged sword. Forensics wouldn't gain access to Charlie's friends, but they also couldn't use it to find her assailant. Now that Lexi had confirmed his identity, she could lead the cops to his door.

At the police tape once again, she caught a uniformed officer's attention. "Hey, sergeant, lieutenant, or...whatever. I found this phone

over there.” Lexi’s vague gesture referenced a vehicle parked nearby. “Do you think it belonged to the victim?”

“It’s just corporal. Thanks. Hand it over, and I’ll take it to the detective in charge.” Boredom shadowed the officer’s eyes as if he’d been in the exact scenario many times and had better things to do.

Behind him, two plainclothes cops murmured, their measured steps walking an unseen grid over the area.

“Um, I can do it. I know one of them.” Both detectives were tall and easily distinguished as opposite ends of a spectrum, one suited, the other appearing a country hick in a plaid flannel shirt and jeans. A name, a starting point for the plan taking form would expedite her work; otherwise, she’d find the most competent officer and slip him enough clues to implicate Charlie’s employer.

“Which one, McAllister or Robertson?” The officer’s hand hesitated in reaching for the phone in waiting for her response.

“Oh, sorry, my mistake. I thought he was someone else. Here.” Depositing the useless piece of technology in the corporal’s hand, Lexi took a step back to avoid his scrutiny.

“Hey, I need your name. Hold on a sec.” Naïve enough to think she’d follow his order, the officer turned and headed toward the closest detective.

As soon as the broad expanse of blue uniform faced away, Lexi eased back from the onlookers before bolting down the next side street. From there, she raced shadows and imagined demons in the labyrinth of back streets until reaching the safety of her warehouse-converted loft. Considering its original use as an industrial warehouse, most would have considered it coarse and unsophisticated. After modification, it was a huge, open living space with a good-sized back yard and no close neighbors.

Adjacent, long-term storage buildings meant she rarely saw other people and never at night. The fact it sat near the outskirts of a small development gave her the perfect location. Again, she had the hospital administrator named Frannie to thank in knowing her needs and facilitating the purchase.

Two locks and a steel bar sliding into place secured the front door behind her while high-set windows foiled the common burglar’s ability to easily break in. The sense of security served to encourage a normal sleep pattern.

“Hoover, wish I’d had you with me tonight, girl.” Her canine companion

received reports on all her dreams, aspirations, and fears, thumping her tail against the kitchen cabinets in excited greeting. Instead of their usual hug and snuggle reception, Hoover sniffed and whined at the remnants of a stranger's blood. "Jesus. Poor Charlie. We'll snoop through digital records and make sure she's gonna be okay but wait 'till tomorrow to visit her in the hospital."

Satisfied her master was uninjured, the dog chuffed and licked, lending reassurance that their world remained intact. A status subject to change if the pimp found them before she could enact countermeasures.

The veggie brush failed to clean the vestiges of clotted blood from her knuckles and nails, for in her mind's eye, it still coated her hands with guilt for abandoning a friend in need. Lightly tanned skin rouged with hot water and scrubbing but shielded her life's essence from spilling, spreading, and draining her soul. Would Charlie forgive her for running, if in fact she survived? Charlie had told her to run, but no one would want to face that nutcase alone.

"Even if you wouldn't have gone berserk on that prick's ass, your size would've scared the piss out of him." Part German shepherd and some version of longhaired giant breed produced a dog standing waist high with blue eyes. "And to think you're just a baby." Another brief cuddle session on the floor allowed for some deep, calming breaths to clear the fog clouding her thoughts.

Lexi's minimalist standard of living translated to one used sofa, one easy chair, and a TV rarely watched, the pieces anchored in her living room by a thick, soft rug. Adjacent, the long, concrete-topped island provided ample prep space in the kitchen as well as doubling as her workspace. Once seated at the counter with her laptop rallying through the low purr of its fan, Lexi settled in while mentally dissecting tonight's actions and responses.

"Hoover, let's find out more about those cops before we give them a helping hand, just to make sure they're up for the task." Charlie's damaged phone, used as a ploy to learn the detectives' names, wouldn't reveal any personal information but had served its purpose, the fastest route to selecting the recipient for anonymous tips.

"What do you think, Hoover, do we pick the hottie or the redneck?"

Hoover whined.

"He most certainly was a swamp Yankee. You should've seen his checkered flannel shirt and belt buckle big enough to herniate a disc. Damn thing was bigger than my ass." The striking difference between the

two came by virtue of a well-fitting suit and tie, completed not with boots but instead, shined shoes as they walked an invisible grid.

“Look, see these photos in their personnel files?” Two windows on her screen proved her point. “Definitely the hottie. Looks like his name is Ethan McAllister, works homicide.” Why were homicide cops at the scene? “Let’s learn a little more before we hack his phone records.” Straight-laced or not, the detective would have to act on the tips she’d send.

An hour later, Lexi compiled her information and sent Ethan an anonymous text. “For shits and giggles, let’s let him think it came from the loony bin. From what I see of his service record, he won’t be able to ignore the tip, but it’ll drive him wild when he can’t trace it.”

Though Lexi’s body had long since stopped shaking, the mere thought of Charlie’s blood prickled her skin with flecks remaining on the ridges of her knuckles and valleys adjoining her digits. *Time for a shower.*

## Chapter Two

Lexi guided her four-legged ambassador through the automatic doors to the hospital amid tail wagging, smiles, and visitors asking to pet the dog. Several nurses recognized Hoover's service vest and stopped for an introduction.

After last night, there was no way in hell she'd go anywhere without her dog. Friendly with nearly everyone she met, her canine companion would turn protective if the need arose.

"Lexi, hold up." Frannie's voice, coming from the ER wing, was strong and soothing but held a familiar edge. So much more than an overseer of health services, she cared for all within and functioned as a patient advocate.

"Hi, Ms. Carmody," Lexi answered her mentor's frown with a grin. The distance between them buffered and protected the administrator in the event Lexi's electronic endeavors ever came under fire.

"You know..." The older woman's voice faltered, and she tilted her head to the side as if unsure how to proceed.

"Yes, I do," Lexi murmured, keeping her voice low to avoid eavesdroppers. "But considering all you've done for me, I don't want our association public—just in case." Those affiliated with Lexi in any way would be questioned if her undertakings went south.

"Still keeping your nose clean?" The gaze under those arched brows could delve deeper than a surgical probe.

Lexi's widened smile delivered her answer. "You know me. I believe in right and wrong, black and white, and avoiding the grays in between."

"Oh, Lexi. The world is full of grays, yes. However, be careful, for many either don't recognize or can't interpret them as the slippery slope into a shadowy world. You have to tread the line very carefully."

The reference alluded to Lexi's hacking tendencies. Though never used for illicit, monetary gain, her unique skills kept her up to date and provided their own reward. Life had taught her the frivolousness of greed, the wisdom to save money, and the patience to intervene when the timing was right.

"I thought Hoover and I would make our rounds today, visit the children's ward, oncology, et cetera." She saw no reason to refer to Charlie, her last stop for the morning. Always well informed, her mentor would anticipate the visit.



Frannie had helped Lexi find a job and at the same time widened the distance from a life of prostitution, a world that existed as a foreign entity to her now. Months of the older woman's unwavering determination had earned trust while life's lessons belabored the point that certain individuals weren't meant to survive street life. It wasn't always the assailant's hand that delivered a death sentence. Ravages materialized in psychological as well as physical form, devastating and withering the spirit in preparation of harsh reality slaughtering the corporeal remains.

"Sure, okay." Frannie's smile faltered if only a bit. Perceptive knowledge scoured from an unfathomable well of experience kept the older woman in the loop, if not with specifics, at least general directions. "I'll call the wings and let them know you two are coming." Bending over to pet Hoover, she added, "Your friend made it through surgery and is recovering in room 345. I'm glad you're wearing a hat and have your hair up. I smell trouble coming. Call me if I can help."

With all her advanced computer skills, Lexi couldn't hold a candle to this woman's uncanny ability to just *know* when trouble embroiled one of her old friends. "I'll be careful. Always am."

Occasional visits to the wards provided a way for Lexi to pay it forward after meeting Frannie and the subsequent rescue from street life. Giving false ID to obtain therapy dog certification meant little when witnessing Hoover's ability to bring joy to the young and old alike, but anonymity was a glove she never wanted to lose. "I'll call you later."

With the beginning of visiting hours, early arrivals sauntered by in muted tones of hope and optimism, several stopping to greet the four-footed symbol of compassion. One such little girl couldn't contain her excitement and threw her arms around the dog's neck before her father could pull her back.

"We're going to see my new baby sister." The young girl's proud declaration as she hugged Hoover validated hope for the future.

"Congratulations." Lexi smiled at the middle-aged man beaming from ear to ear. "Now comes the easy part—loving them."

"Thank you, and I definitely will. My girl is as healthy as she is beautiful. We're bringing her home today." Pride and something more indefinable radiated in warm waves of confidence and assurance from the father. The connection formed in that split second carried the weight of understanding, a kinship to appreciate and enjoy life as experienced in the innocence of a gentle smile, the squeal of a newborn baby, or the acceptance of a stranger's encouragement. No doubt this man would

cherish his family, love them, and accept love in return.

Several children in the oncology wing brought tears to her eyes, surreptitiously swiped away as various IV pumps, monitors, and unknown devices beeped, blipped, and buzzed. Still, machines failed to dampen the spirits of the brave little fighters. Hoover nuzzled and chuffed over each one, front paws on the mattress to rain pup kisses on one little boy unable to move anything but his right hand. A smile filled his face as his small fingers sifted through the soft fur. His parents looked on with tear-brimmed eyes, unable to voice their gratitude.

She had so much for which to be thankful—a safe refuge, companionship, and a job that honed and utilized her programming skills yet allowed her to work at home. Developing software games had been a childhood dream, now fulfilled, as she passed rooms oozing the expected scents of antiseptic, hints of excrement, and other body odors. She no longer had a family but still had many reasons to give thanks.

En route to Charlie's room, she passed through the maternity ward and couldn't help but stop in front of the neonatal unit. Through the glass partition, nurses measured, weighed, and examined babies while a young mother sat in a rocker, garbed in scrubs, feeding her newborn. Despite the fact Lexi had sworn to never bear children, lacking the confidence even if she ever did find the right man, she loved observing the bond between mother and child. A bond she well remembered as safe and warm-hearted, but like life, all too fragile and snapped in the blink of a car accident.

"Are you here to see a baby?" The same little girl who'd stopped her in the lobby now pressed her nose to the window and waved to the mother in the rocker. "That's my baby sister." Beside her, the father smiled, conveying a timeless love, returned by the young mother.

"No. I don't have any family. But I love seeing the little ones, so well cared for with so much love." A wistfulness tore through her heart for something she could never have. How could she bring life into the world only to face the possibility of her fate? "It's so quiet here."

As if drawing on their earlier connection, the father's sad gaze zeroed in on her pain. "You're still young, which means there are so many possibilities before you. I hope you don't close yourself off from the best part of life."

She couldn't accept the pity he radiated, not when she was alive and well while Charlie lay in a hospital bed, mutilated and surely skeptical of surviving the week. Lethal animosity had emanated from the dirtball in

the alley. He wouldn't stop.

"I have rounds to make. Take care of your family." Fighting back a tide of emotions intent on sweeping her into a vortex of pain, Lexi struggled to curve her trembling lips, her best imitation of a smile before turning away.

"Come on, Hoover. We have one more stop to cheer up a very special young lady."

Modern, larger hospitals secluded the obstetrics wing from all others, but here the next ward opened up behind a set of heavy, swinging doors. Room 345 lay two rooms farther on the left, past the linen supply closet and a good distance from the nurses' station.

An unseen shadow raised pinpricks of trepidation across her shoulders that grew with each step. A glance at Hoover revealed her usual calm, smiling expression edged with a slight tightness around her mouth. The dog always sensed and reacted to Lexi's anxiety.

Her momentum faltered in front of the room while her sixth sense screamed for her to run. As if absorbing her companion's swelling fear, Hoover nudged her knee and whined.

Soundless steps carried them into the room, in case Charlie was asleep. She closed the door behind her to afford them a little more privacy with the forthcoming conversation. The lights remained off with the hanging curtain pulled around the cubicle to create a false sense of privacy, and no one occupied the closest bed. *Thank you, Frannie.*

Sudden squeaking like wet sneakers on tile floors combined with a muffled, weak cry to accelerate the adrenaline surging through her system. Electronic hospital records indicated Charlie's return from the recovery room had occurred in the wee hours of the morning, so she shouldn't be out of bed yet.

Hoover whined.

Bolting forward and sliding the curtain back revealed a new nightmare. "Charlie—shit!" On the other side of the bed and smothering her friend with a pillow, evil incarnate smiled while Charlie's hands scrabbled for purchase in her bid to gain precious oxygen. Frantic, ineffective movements failed to dislodge the killer's suffocating clutch.

"I'll be with you next, bitch." The bastard's mouth and throat worked to ooze malevolence in whispery syllables of hatred, disdain, and hubris. Flaring nostrils and bared teeth defined his fury. The shark at the top of the food chain adorned himself with a layer of gold around his neck and sparkling jewels on several fingers. From across the bed, his greasy breath fouled the air with its stench.

For a heartbeat, shock held her in its ephemeral grasp before reality intervened with his intended scenario. *He's going to kill me.* Lexi was no match for his strength. Her dog had never experienced this scenario but would undoubtedly protect without hesitation. Even together, they were no match for this freak of nature.

Without conscious thought, she yanked the pillow down far enough for Charlie to take a deep breath before pulling back from the pimp's grasping reach. Hoover lunged at the assailant's hand, who snapped his arm back with a split second to spare.

With a growled threat, the dirtball again covered Charlie's face. Paralyzing rage coursed through Lexi's veins, her breath coming in short gasps as her mind worked out how to best the dirtball who held equal determination but greater strength.

On the wall behind every bed was a little plastic knob, known as the code red button. Its activation would bring a dozen emergency personnel to resuscitate a patient.

Charlie's hands flailed wildly in her attempt to scratch, hit, or blind her attacker. The ineffective struggle seemed to inflame her aggressor's delight.

Lexi slammed her hand on the toggle switch that would flood the room with immediate help, each person bearing assorted equipment or pushing the crash cart.

In the next heartbeat, an announcement over the hospital's PA system startled her. "Code red, room 345. Code red, room 345." Three more times, the announcement blared its urgent warning in a calm, monotone voice.

Stunned surprise etched his features, the momentary indecision giving way to fury. That second of doubt prompted a weakening of his resolve, culminating in a snarl of rage.

Hoover continued her low growl while baring teeth at the same time Lexi snatched the pillow from Charlie's face. Follow through saw the pillow arcing behind her to land halfway on the other bed before dropping to the floor. Charlie's immediate gasping breath signaled good timing and Lexi having trumped deadly intentions.

"Hoover, out. We gotta go." She prayed it was enough. As the prick circled the foot of the bed, Lexi and Hoover bolted out the door and back toward the maternity wing. Keeping her head down, she shoved on the double doors. Fear-induced adrenaline enhanced her strength but included a backbite in reducing coordination. Her entire body shook.

Still standing in front of the window, the father and daughter she'd met in the lobby looked up, the father's frown and head tilt indicative of a puzzle solver.

"He's after me." As soon as she'd forced the words past the fist-sized lump in her throat, a harsh noise from behind indicated she'd misjudged the killer's speed.

Lexi froze. If she'd stayed on the other wing, the rush of people would've ensured her temporary safety despite forfeiting her anonymity. There was no room to circumvent the maniac, and calling for help might see innocent people hurt.

Rage encompassed his face, the need to murder written in his furrowed brow and curled lip. Two strides closed the distance as the prick reached for her. He stood at least a head taller and carried a good hundred pounds more on his thickly muscled frame. His height and form carried the strength to snap her neck with ease.

Her canine friend retained her own ideas with raised hackles and stiff body posture, the low growls rumbling in her chest obtaining the desired effect.

A split second of hesitation.

"No, Hoover." A dog bite would bring people, and questions, and police.

The snatch master froze and then smiled. "He's not gonna bite me in a hospital. You're coming with me, bitch."

As the smug lout reached for her, a hand from behind latched on to the hustler's wrist, twisting enough to throw the predator off balance.

"Leave her alone." Strength and determination radiated from a face turned granite hard. Though equal in height, the father was a powerhouse of determination. A flick of his gaze and he murmured, "Are you all right, hon?"

"Yes. I didn't do anything wrong..." Desperation blurted the truth in a way nothing else could. "He was going to kill Charlie."

"Go. I've seen his type before. He won't follow you, for now." Without another word, Lexi darted for the stairway at the end of the hall with Hoover by her side.



## Chapter Three

“C’mon, Larrick. Let’s interview the victim, and I’ll buy you a donut.” Ethan smiled at the RNs who showed more than casual interest as they passed the nurses’ station. “Which floor did you say your friend worked?” While his backwoods yet obviously fascinating partner appreciated the speculative gleams encountered, Ethan wanted more from a relationship than representing someone’s eye candy, preferring to wait and build an emotional and intellectual connection from mutual respect and trust.

“ICU, fourth floor.” Larrick greeted some of the women by name. “Did the vic give up her name, at least? Hell, if some asshole’s dumb enough to try and kill her in the middle of a hospital, he must be desperate.”

“Yeah. When I called for a report this morning, the night nurse said she goes by Charlie but won’t give up her last name. I got the same information from an anonymous text. That and...her pimp cut her up.” A stout, elderly nurse assessed them before continuing her rounds. “It’s going to be difficult to tie this to the other murders.”

“So someone who knows you and this victim sent you a text message?”

“Yeah, but I’ve no idea who. I’ll ask our IT department to trace it.”

“Maybe you should unleash some of that famous Ethan McAllister charm. It wouldn’t hurt you to practice, you know. I hear unused things shrivel over time.”

“I’m not looking for a fling. Besides, you could do the same if you lost the chew, the camo, and the big-ass truck.” Ethan grunted with his partner’s half-hearted biceps punch. Past the doors of the neonatal unit, they entered another world full of bustling energy, stretchers bearing desperate patients bound for X-rays, various scans, or surgery. An older gentleman balanced himself with a rolling IV pole.

A nod to the security guard stationed outside room 345 was Larrick’s only acknowledgment before heading toward the central counter to ascertain if they’d learned anything new on the street girl.

Ethan pushed his jacket aside to reveal the badge clipped to his belt. “All quiet?”

“Yep. Only ones in are the nurses and aides. I recognize ’em all.” No doubt the watchman had taken up employment when the hospital had opened its doors and had earned every gray hair and wrinkle. His slightly rounded belly strained at the buttons of his white, uniform shirt while vague yellow stains blotted its front.

After three years in homicide, Ethan should've pretty much seen everything, but one glimpse of the prostitute scraped the insides of his chest raw. A once-beautiful face now carried a permanent reminder of her ordeal, the dozens of tiny stitches making a patchwork quilt of her flesh.

"Charlie, I'm Detective McAllister." He moved to the foot of the bed but maintained three feet of distance when fear crossed her expression. "I'm not going to hurt you, Charlie. I just want to ask you a few questions so we can catch the man who did this to you. Was it your... employer?"

Twenty-seven years of existence didn't produce adequate armor to insulate his spirit against mankind's capacity to destroy beauty.

"I-I didn't see who did it. He hit me from behind. And I was asleep when someone tried to smother me."

The fact that stark fear shone from her eyes and emanated from every pore, a widened gaze frequently darted to the door left ajar, and her recent survival of a second murder attempt forced Ethan to tread carefully.

"Are they controlling your pain adequately?" *Jesus. It never gets easier.*

"I'm fine. They say I'll be here for a week because of the colostomy—well—to see if they can close it back up. But I don't have a fever, so that's good." Pain etched tiny lines around her eyes and mouth that probably pulled at scar tissue beginning to form.

"All right. Why don't you give me the name of your boss and we'll go have a chat with him?"

"No!" If fear had held her in thrall before, stark terror doused her frame to lend weight to her crumbling demeanor.

"Look, he can't get to you in here again. But how long do you think it's going to take him to track you once you're released?"

"I'm leaving the city when I get out of here."

Okay, so it was her pimp, change tact.

"We understand that when they brought you in, someone had belted a jacket around your abdomen. Certainly wouldn't have been your attacker. Who did the jacket belong to? You know we'll take it into evidence and find traces of DNA." He hated playing hardball with a victim but saw no other way to ensure her safety.

"I-I don't know. I was unconscious." Hands fisting at her sides and a gaze that rested anywhere but on him negated her words.

Larrick's entrance preceded a thin mewl from her trembling lips. His halting farther away betrayed his experience in dealing with assault victims. "Ma'am, I'm Detective Robertson. I'm only here to help."

“I don’t need any.” An underlying fierceness declared her will intact.

“Because you can take care of yourself?” Ethan’s raised brow and pointed stare refuted the efficacy of her words.

“Good morning, Detectives.” Confidence and a firm tone paired with a stiff posture detailed the newcomer striding with purpose into the room. Tall and thin in a finely tailored skirt suit, she didn’t hesitate to approach the patient’s bedside, her smile warm and self-assured. “Hello, Charlie. My name is Francine Carmody, but you can call me Frannie. I’m the hospital administrator. How are you feeling this morning?”

“I, um, fine.” Mistrust was all-inclusive yet with a few murmured words from another woman, Charlie’s fists loosened at her sides.

“Don’t be alarmed. I merely want to help you in any way I can.” Sincerity radiated in her tone. Turning back to the officers, she took control of the situation as well as any drill sergeant working with new recruits.

“Detectives, as you know, Charlie here underwent a long and painful surgery last night into the wee hours of the morning. She’s exhausted and has no information to give you.” An encouraging smile in Charlie’s direction received a dropped jaw from the patient. “As such, I insist you allow her time to rest. I will be more than happy to fill you in on what information she’s given us so far.” With her speech finished, she smiled and winked at Charlie before ushering the men out.

Never in his life had anyone dismissed Ethan so thoroughly, efficiently, or pleasantly. He’d gain nothing with a confrontation in front of a patient in desperate need of finding peace.

Out in the hallway, Ethan stood toe to toe with the administrator and got straight to the point. “She knows who attacked her.”

“Maybe she does, and maybe she doesn’t. However, number one, she’s recovering from surgery and needs rest in order to heal. Number two, you will not badger my patients. Finally, you cannot compel her to give information. It doesn’t work that way.”

“And you know the latter because...” Ethan said.

“Because I’m old enough and have the experience to know.” Narrowed eyes and lips forming a straight line denied any crack in her resolve while declaring each detective adolescents in need of life experience before tackling sensitive issues.

“She came in with a jacket belted around her abdomen. I want it.” Ethan couldn’t determine if the administrator ran blocker for the patient’s protection or for some other reason.

Behind him, Larrick cleared his throat. “Frannie—”

“You can call me Ms. Carmody. As for any other items, I’ve no idea where they are. I noted the overnight logs and went to look for them, but they weren’t with her clothing. I’m sorry, but in the heat of saving lives, clothing just isn’t a high priority. If they turn up, I will call your precinct and leave a message.”

In one fell swoop, their investigation was neatly stalled before it had begun. Ethan glanced at Larrick, who was more experienced in dealing with hospital types. Larrick simply shrugged.

“I would think that since *your* patient was just attacked in *your* hospital, you’d have a greater interest in catching the assailant.” Ethan’s emphasis in stressing the hospital’s vulnerability had no apparent effect.

“Of course I want to protect the hospital as well. You may come with me to look over the report of this morning’s incident before you talk to the emergency responders who entered her room. However, I already have, and none reported seeing another person in the room. Since it happened during visiting hours and you can see how busy we are...”

“Maybe the cameras in the corridor will help us.” Ethan regarded the angle that encompassed the hall, noting it would be a simple matter to avoid digital detection with a hat and looking away.

“I know where the security office is located. We’ll head on down,” Larrick murmured.

“I will have the tapes sent to your station. Good day, Detectives.” Her frank dismissal came as no surprise while noteworthy glances from nearby nurses prepared him for an impending brick wall in seeking information. Yet he’d detected respect, not caution, in their gazes. *This administrator is definitely someone to have in your corner.*

“Well, that was a waste of time.” Disgust laced Ethan’s tone. “Why in the hell is a prostitute protecting the man who tried to kill her?” Stepping outside in the sunshine allowed the cool breeze to clear the scents of hospital odors from his sinuses.

“Probably protecting her friends. If she talks, he might work on her fellow compatriots.” Larrick fished his keys from his jacket pocket. “By the way, I want my donut.”

“I don’t think they make sweet corn donuts on this side of town. We need to get closer to the mud racers sector where folks sit on their front porches practicing with their turkey calls.” Ethan settled into the passenger seat of the sedan and buckled his seatbelt.

“Smartass. There’s nothing wrong with being a redneck.”

“True, but how the hell did you end up in Oregon? This isn’t a hillbilly state.”

“I wanted a more temperate climate. Now, before you make fun of my fresh-cut corn air freshener, let me say this—it’s three miles back to the station.” Modified under Larrick’s possessive touch, the car purred to life. “Hmm, sounds almost as good as my truck.”

“Fine. I can run off a bagel tonight,” Ethan grumbled.

“You can’t outrun a bad diet. Best to just enjoy it like I do.”

“How the hell do you stay so thin?” Ethan worked diligently to stay in shape, dreading the day some thug got the upper hand because he was too slow.

“All night cervix server.” A wide grin denoted his anticipation to more exercise. “After which, she filled me in on our administrator, who is very protective of the staff and patients.”

“Well, that was fast. I thought you were just friends. Back to the problem at hand—we need to track down the girl’s boss. Not that it’ll do a lot of good if she won’t press charges.”

“What I want to know is, who in the hell triggered the code red button? Certainly not the twat pusher.”

“Most likely the same person who helped her last night, someone who disrupted our psycho’s plans and owns the jacket we can’t locate. If it had been a nurse calling the code, we would’ve picked up the vibes during the interviews. I’m sure none of them walked in on an attempted murder and tried to cover it up.” Larrick swung the vehicle onto the highway.

“Maybe another prostitute.”

“Maybe. Which means we’ll be identifying her body soon.”



## Chapter Four

Slamming the steel bar in its slot allowed Lexi to take a deep breath before trembling legs, refusing another wobbly step, dropped her to the cold concrete floor.

The warmth of Hoover's fur twining around her fingers along with the rough pad of the canine's tongue bathing her cheek imbued some desperately needed warmth and security. "Thank God you were with me. Maybe he'll think twice about confronting us next time. I'm sure all that growling and showing those pearly whites helped." The steady beat of her protector's heart under her palm imparted a soothing balm to her tumultuous spirit.

"C'mon, girl. Let's call Frannie then do some light hacking. The time has come to break a most sacred rule and develop open communications with a cop." Wariness of police came naturally after living on the street with prostitutes. The makeshift family they'd formed had kept her secreted from the one they called Ghetto Beast—never another name, a bastard as mean as he was crazy. She'd seen the truth of it in the prick's gaze earlier.

After closing her eyes and dragging in a lungful of warm air, she realized staying busy would stave off the terror waiting to crush her spirit with two deadly encounters in less than twenty-four hours. "Time to get this madman behind bars." She'd suspected the stranger she'd dodged when first hitting the street was the same prick who made the girls cower, but her makeshift family had feared him to the point of eliciting her promise to never interfere. Now that she had proof and a well-developed set of skills, she was no longer powerless.

Lexi realized long ago that her computer was every bit the weapon as Ethan McAllister's gun. Instead of wounding with bullets, she could use her skills to subtly direct the police to clues leading to arrests. She'd previously sent anonymous tips to the narcotics division but never to anyone in homicide. Rather than bowing to society's term of hacker, she considered herself a *social engineer* or *white hat*.

"Frannie always encourages me to do good, but I haven't saved enough money to get my friends off the street, which leaves them vulnerable. Now that I've seen his face, I'll damn well find where he lives, get some evidence against him, and lead the cops to his door."

A quick call to Frannie verified Charlie's continued recovery and safety.

Digital medical records estimated the hospital stay would last about a week. *Thank God, we arrived in time.* The hospital administrator would ensure security stayed tight around the clock, which allowed for a calming breath. Lexi could search through police records and put a name to the pimp. Surely that psychotic prick had been a customer of the city PD at one time or another, unless he was either smart or lucky. The former didn't seem likely.

"So, Hoover, we have seven days to find this prick and maneuver him behind bars. He said he'd been practicing on other stables, which I hope means he's got evidence at his house, research on names and areas worked." If action followed plan, she'd break into the prick's crib and distribute his stash among the girls before the police raided his nest and confiscated his assets.

It was the least she could do. Whatever the girls had seen in her and deemed worthy of their protection had flourished and would now benefit them. Perhaps they'd seen the same potential as Frannie, who'd helped her find this niche in life.

Not only had the girls protected her from their employer, but also they'd nurtured her in other ways, insisting she read and study. After realizing her knack with all things electronic, they'd begged or borrowed books to advance her skills and encouraged her to learn. Still, they shielded her from the worst of their world and kept even their boss' identity a secret.

Once Frannie had finagled her a job interview, Lexi focused her energy with the results affording her a place of her own and complete independence. Even so, her friends refused to risk her safety and take refuge within her home, shunning her world altogether. It didn't matter that they were trying to insulate her from their harsh life. It still hurt. They were the only ones she'd called family since orphan status had destroyed her world.

Now she stood a chance to help them all. The ones indoctrinated into prostitution early might prove resistant to change and succumb only when the cops arrested their boss, but she'd find a way to ease them back into society.

Slipping into police records like an invisible breeze, Lexi spent two hours searching mugshots. One bleary-eyed degenerate after another flicked across her screen in a never-ending parade of murderers, rapists, and other social garbage. She'd never imagined her education would expand to such degrees of depravity.

"Whoa! Hoover, I found him." His name was Otis Cabersom, street

name, *Ghetto Beast*. “No wonder he adopted the moniker. Hell, I would, too.” Her skin crawled just from viewing the picture. Hatred and a thirst for vengeance radiated from the screen in ghostly waves seeking like-minded perspectives. In cataloging his arrests, she reaffirmed this man had no fear of anything. Assault victims disappeared each time police charged him with a crime while witnesses refused to testify. Nothing ever *stuck*.

Further digging led to the discovery that he owned a house on Vine Street. *How appropriate, since he chokes the life out of women*. She knew of the neighborhood. Middle-class, well-kept homes sat on moderately sized lots.

Thanks to the extracurricular skills she’d picked up, she could break in tonight. Safes proved more of a barrier than door locks, but she’d give it her best shot. Otherwise, Charlie had everything to lose.

The rest of the afternoon entailed formulating a plan. Timing would be crucial. As soon as she got her hands on his money and anything incriminating, she’d sic the police on his monstrous ass. The evidence would have to be irrefutable considering its anonymous donation.

Several area shelters existed where the soon-to-be jobless women could take refuge if they wouldn’t share her digs, but if their boss kept significant cash at home, the girls would have enough for a fresh start in a place of their choosing.

The memory of his beady eyes, hooked nose, and square jaw, constricted her throat. Evil emanating from the screen only hinted at the multidimensional terror Lexi had experienced when standing in front of death itself. Instinctively, she’d known what lurked in that gaze, mingled with an arrogance that denied the possibility of failure. If he ever got his hands on her, she’d wish for an instant demise.

A full-body shudder forced her to close the laptop after gathering the necessary information. “I do need to work for a bit, Hoover, but first, how about a play and training session in the back yard?”

Exercising her dog’s mind and body provided a reprieve from the overwhelming stress and horrific images of Charlie’s ordeal. Each obstacle in Hoover’s agility course equaled something they might encounter in real life; various jumps, a small ladder, and a slanted wall. Successfully navigated stations ended with a treat or short game of tug as a reward, the final triumph being a ball-throwing session.

Increasing wind and a setting sun compelled her to submit to reality despite her need for fresh air. The darkening clouds that capped the

earth denoted one of two impending storms on her horizon. Her plan was both ballsy and dangerous with freedom for her family on one end and mutilation by a lunatic on the other.

Once inside, keeping her mind on developing her new graphics program provided an exercise in futility. To delve within the ones and zeroes arena normally captured her full attention, yet now her traitorous thoughts ventured back to Charlie and the possibility of ending up beside her in the hospital. When she finally closed her laptop, a tapestry of lacework shadows in muted forms dappled the countertop from the diminishing afternoon light. She couldn't hide in the digital world yet would soon seek refuge in the obscurity of night, a place where the predator thrived.

Her body remained too hyped up to take a nap in preparation for tonight's excursion and as much as she longed to talk to Frannie, she couldn't risk her mentor throwing a wrench in the works. Except for Frannie and the street girls whom she couldn't contact, her friends consisted of online acquaintances, separate from the physical world and safe behind firewalls where nothing was real and nothing could cause her pain.

Dinner consisted of a simple stew for herself and a raw chicken leg quarter for the dog after several cups of chamomile tea soothed Lexi's blooming anxiety. Hoover matched her nonverbal tension with constant motion, leg nudges, and the occasional whine; restlessness had always been contagious between them. The quiet crunching of bones brought images of several murder victims to mind as described in the police reports. Since the stew held the tasteless consistency of a mud pie, Hoover received the leftovers before she set her dish in the sink.

Street friends had given her the mongrel pup as a goodbye present, knowing she'd need companionship in the coming months. The duo had become partners, almost always together, sensing each other's needs and providing without conditions. She couldn't help but liken that to memories of her parents' close-knit relationship, something only dreamed about after fate's cruel reality tarnished the first blush of adolescence with their demise.

When Lexi sat on the floor, Hoover lay next to her, resting her broad head on her companion's jean-clad legs. Tonight's plan would be dangerous, deadly if caught, and Hoover's presence would negate the idea of stealth, not to mention Lexi couldn't lift her through a window. Considering events of the past twenty-four hours, she realized the dog's presence might increase her chances of survival. Thanks to training, her

canine friend would remain hidden down the block or in the back yard of her target's house. Few took offense of stray dogs, especially one lying quietly.

Life on the streets carried certain risks; a working girl's death rarely caused public outrage. Several prostitutes had been killed in the past three years in other sections of the city, which made her wonder at whose hand they perished. Had her friends understood the monster in their boss' soul and obeyed his every command out of terror? Thank God, Hoover would be her backup tonight. Though not trained in protection, the dog had proven she wouldn't hesitate if the need arose.

Since exacting vengeance on Charlie was not an option for now, what form would the hustler's hatred take? The police had no witnesses who'd talk and no evidence, yet fate rarely tolerated a stalemate.

"We'd better check the police bands and logs to see if anything has changed before we leave." Life had taught her to be prepared and always stack the deck in her favor whenever possible.

Otis might anticipate her intent since the girls had described him as a paranoid prick. Paranoia bested street smarts at every turn with its unpredictability. Those going up against the likes of this creep had to be demented, desperate, or just plain stupid. She'd selected door number two.

The familiar nuzzles and nudges from Hoover calmed her more than the clicking of her laptop's keyboard until a new horror bloomed in black and white on her screen. "Oh, shit, Hoover. Pauly's dead. Oh my God! The detectives have already identified her body. Why would he do this?"

Anguish and anger shoehorned a maelstrom of memories and lesser emotions into the unchecked moisture coursing down her cheeks with long-ago memories of how the girls used to sit together. Pauly had been one of Lexi's most determined advocates for a better life. Conversations had ranged over a sunnier future where they'd sit near their cottage garden and read their favorite books.

Grief eventually morphed into frustration, then the quiet of her grief transformed into harsh breathing and cracking knuckles of rage. An hour had passed as Lexi absorbed the pain of loss and strengthened her resolve. *No one else is gonna die.*

Dispatch had called for the coroner's wagon an hour ago to the same neighborhood where Charlie was nearly killed. "That cretin went straight to another girl to send Charlie a message." *Or maybe the message is for me.* Who knew what transpired in the mind of a deranged killer?

“Shit. Shit. Shit. He’s probably gonna lay low for now.” In addition, arrogance and a developed hatred for police would preclude him from running. The asswipe was probably laid back with his feet kicked up and guzzling beer.

“We can’t go out tonight, girl and we can’t send Detective McAllister there without any evidence. But we can send the cop a text and let him know this attack is connected to Charlie. That way, they’ll give him this case, and we’ll only have one cop to deal with. Who knows, they may dig up enough evidence for a warrant all by themselves.” Sending a message that would help his investigation but lead their tech department on a wild goose chase carried some small measure of satisfaction. Without previous, direct interaction, she had no reason to hate cops but no reason to trust them, either.

There was no way to contact the other girls without putting them at risk. It had been so long since they’d interacted and their lives had probably changed. If anyone reported seeing her in the area, the lunatic would kill again. He’d probably already collected their cell phones.

“He won’t stay home two nights in a row with his girls out working. We’ll nail his ass tomorrow night.” At least she hoped they would.

\* \* \* \*

“Hell. It’s sick enough to kill a woman but this damn mutilation? Is he trying to win an award for demented creativity?” Ethan stared at the spot where the prostitute had lain.

Warm blood had dissolved clumps of dirt and then cooled to reshape the forms in a macabre picture of death, written in a language best understood by the homeless. Beside the overturned trashcan where she’d been found lay a wad of trash. The gag, made of the street’s detritus, had probably muffled the girl’s screams while giving further testimony of mankind’s inhumanity.

“Takes all kinds, partner.” Larrick nodded to the crime scene techs packing up the rest of the evidence and their gear. “Thanks, guys.”

“Two women in as many days. I don’t think it’s some kind of fundamentalist off his meds. That’s assuming the naked girl tonight was in the same line of work.” The narrow alley, normally home to several of the dispossessed, now held only the legacy of their nightmares, memories of death and mutilation. “I’m thinking he wanted to narrow his warning. Stripping the flesh from her fingers while still alive might warn

others not to steal from him.”

“What about the old-fashioned, curved corn knife shoved up between her legs and exiting her abdomen?” Larrick’s complexion paled slightly as he spoke.

“Shit. I have no idea.” Ethan held up one finger when his cell vibrated on his hip.

“Maybe our girl in the hospital caught wind of this and has miraculously remembered everything that happened to her.” Larrick edged closer to read Ethan’s text message.

“Hmm, seems I have a combination of secret admirer and amateur sleuth wanting to play in the big leagues. Says the same bastard perpetrated this girl’s attack as on our hospital vic. Perpetrated. We might have a fairly educated person sending the text...Probably not from someone in these ranks.”

“Or...Hell. The body’s only been in the morgue for what, half an hour?” Larrick checked his watch. “Do you think it’s our killer playing with us?”

“Doubt it’s the killer. Unless this is his idea of an advanced warning. Sides, if my *fan* can hack my phone, why not also slip into police records?” Ethan whistled low, a habit indicating extreme concentration.

“What?”

“I have three other names here, the next possible targets. Somebody’s trying to protect the prostitutes, probably in the same stable.” Ethan turned his phone to show the list of names on his screen.

“Girls who are not normally known for advanced tech skills. So maybe it’s someone who’s sweet on one of the girls,” Larrick murmured. “Or perhaps one of Charlie’s comrades crossed into another pimp’s territory and these girls are the message.”

“Either way, we have another player trying to intervene. Someone on the outside looking in,” Ethan added. “I’ll stop by our IT department tomorrow morning and see if they can trace this message back to the source.” *Not many would care enough to look out for these lost souls.*

## Chapter Five

Faint shafts of moon glow stole across Lexi's kitchen counter, the visual incentive urging her to close the laptop. She'd spent most of the day confirming research on her target, the neighbors, and the street. A second look never hurt. "If we can locate his books detailing his income and help our friends get out of town, at least that'll be something."

Showtime.

Once outside, she prayed for a safe return.

Tiny frost crystals laid a thin, sparkling carpet on grass tips and bare tree branches, the ethereal picture an evolving denial of man's brutality. Clouds were thickening along heaven's floor, scuttling in the light breeze and solidifying her dappled shadow. Few were the times she regretted not owning a car, tonight being one of them.

Though the temperature was mild enough for mid-March, she didn't want to spend any more time than necessary in the neighborhood. Ticking off items on her mental checklist added a gossamer-type layer of security to widen the chasm between anxiety and unmitigated panic. Maintaining her wits was the most important component of the night's endeavor. Hoover's modified backpack held a lap blanket for breaking in should her lock-picking skills prove rusty, which meant she'd hopefully thought of everything necessary.

As if sensing the need for contemplation and strength, her canine padded silently by her side, ever watchful of their surroundings while sniffing the air. *At a little after ten o'clock, he should be checking on his girls by now, and I should be able to sneak in and out before he returns.*

Lexi padded down side roads and back alleys, preferring small streets and less traffic. For the hundredth time, she questioned the sanity of breaking into a psychopath's house with no gun, no weapon of any kind, just the determination to keep her friends safe and help them find a new life. *If I just called the police, they might not find any evidence, or not enough to keep him from making bail.* When he got out, he'd kill them all for the hell of it. Hoover's soft chuffing commiserated her concerns.

Thirty minutes after crossing the little bridge separating residential from quasi-commercial districts, the atmosphere thickened with tension as she closed in on the target house. Dodging light traffic on Vine Street had led her to Dutchman's Lane, a sleepy-looking, middle-class neighborhood. Large oak trees lined the wide street, their graceful limbs interlocking to



enclose the road in a living trellis. The closer she got, the more her legs trembled.

On any other day, she might have found it beautiful, but now the ominous quality of her goal mobilized her mind and body in preparation of what might come. Did the surrounding neighbors know about the murderer squatting in their midst?

Each house appeared well kept with neatly trimmed lawns bordered by flowerbeds, whose occupants would soon bloom in an array of soothing colors. House numbers arranged neatly on each mailbox brought to mind an idyllic neighborhood and made her search simple and direct. With a hand sifting through Hoover's fur, she guided them toward the registered address with a prayer for fate's help. If Otis owned other residences that stored the evidence she sought, perhaps she'd find some reference to them inside.

The large oak behind which she now stood blocked the cool breeze while allowing her to study the target building. Super spy, she was not. Her black hoodie, pulled over a black turtleneck, accompanied her dark jeans and tennis shoes. Occasional ducking behind shrubbery to avoid a vehicle's passing headlights led to wet sneakers, but it wouldn't matter if she located his stash. He'd probably know she'd been there even if she removed her shoes. *I'm a comic book hero*. If she failed to find conclusive evidence, the butcher would kill anyone with damning knowledge if he wasn't already doing so.

A conspicuously plain, wraparound porch contradicted the obvious structural intent of the large Victorian house. Though it lacked turrets, the painted lady bore three different colors to highlight architectural details: colored patterns designed in the brickwork, stained-glass windows, and slate roof. No light poured through any of the front, latticed panes.

Afraid if she hesitated any longer, a neighbor would spot her under the large oak, she padded beside the evergreen hedge bordering the property with Hoover by her side. Soaked tennis shoes slipped and squished on the wet grass while fear thrust her cunning imagination into overdrive. Yet the all-encompassing quiet challenged her mind to calm in the face of her impending perilous endeavor.

The back of the home offered no visual evidence of a presence inside, only large shade trees that blocked out most of the ambient light. "Okay, girl. You have to stay here. I should be back soon." Withdrawing her lap blanket and a small pen light from Hoover's backpack, she bent and gave the dog a hug before sneaking to the back door. Stealthy moves in pitch-

blackness should've lent a sense of comfort. Her heart raced. Her breathing quickened. Sour liquid rose in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard.

*It's unlikely he set up an alarm system.* They were usually tied to a security company and he wouldn't want anyone answering an alarm if he had anything to hide.

A simple lockset proved no barrier to the breaking and entering skills learned long ago. She hadn't needed to smash a window after all. With sweaty palms and trembling fingers, it took a minute to find the button on her pen light and then quietly open the back door.

The small swath of illumination granted glimpses of the killer's lair. A large kitchen with clean stone countertops bore several ceramic containers in graduating sizes along with a knife block set. A six-pack of beer sat near the end of the bar.

Keeping the beam of her flashlight low, she erected a mental template of the open floor plan should the need of a hasty retreat arise. Her friends had taught her well.

To the left of the living room, an open stairway led to the second floor. Farther left were several doors, perhaps a study and office. On the right, gaudy furniture bordering on ostentatious—a sofa and two wing chairs—made a sleazy grouping in front of the massive stone fireplace.

Her heart rate doubled with the tick of an imaginary clock urging her to hurry as she made her way to the first door on the left, the quiet peal of rubber soles on hardwood reminding her she'd not wiped her feet. *Shit. I'll wipe the floor on my way out.*

The first room appeared to be a den, probably meant for relaxation as if the owner held a high-stress job. Dark maroon paint added gloom on top of the oversized, heavy furniture. A large plasma screen took center stage on the far wall. *No desk.* Leaving it for later, she moved forward into the small hallway. Gloves should've been a higher priority, but for now she'd used her lap blanket to wipe fingerprints from the doorknobs.

Opening the second door, the slight, musty odor of books offered insight to the room's use before she moved inside. A large desk positioned in front of the double window and framed by floor-length velvet curtains conceded its own revelations about the owner. Intermittent beams of moonlight filtered through the stained-glass window to highlight a wooden desktop uncluttered by books, papers, or pictures of loved ones.

*Who could love him?* Pauly had once said he grew up on the streets.

Beside the desk lamp, a small silver laptop provided the only deviation

from a stagnant-appearing lifestyle. *Bingo*. Doubt niggled at the back of her mind. Was he the type to store sensitive information on a computer?

The massive chair in which she sat could've held two her size with the soft black leather appearing decadent and out of place for the psycho. While the machine went through the boot and root checks, she opened one drawer after another but found nothing.

*Surely he keeps something to track each girl's profits.* Didn't killers keep some type of souvenir? Her eureka moment came with finding an eight-by-ten, hardbound notebook. Each page listed a girl's name with tallies of earnings and a list of johns, probably the more influential clients each one serviced.

With that discovery temporarily set aside, she turned her attention back to the laptop. Maybe arrogance or laziness prevented him from password protecting its contents. Either way, she was grateful as she began inspecting the files.

A cursory look revealed no family photos or emails to friends, nothing to give insight into his past. What she did find chilled her to the bone, two videos whose contents would give her nightmares for weeks if not months to come. In each, a woman lay bound and gagged, remaining helpless as a masked man beat her with a whip. She recognized Otis' form and couldn't stomach watching them long enough to try to discover the women's identity. That was a job for the police. In her heart, she realized the low quality of the video denoted its authenticity. She wondered what kind of twisted background produced such a monster.

After retrieving a flash drive from her jeans pocket, she quickly installed a malware keylogger that would grant her access and give its location from the safety of her home. Considering his admission of past murders combined with the way he'd cut Charlie's face, the dirtbag would no doubt own vomit-worthy videos of mutilation and other filth. She almost dreaded the thought of rooting through his downloaded digital files. What kind of family could've bred such hatred and careless disregard for humanity?

A thorough wipe down of all surfaces would remove her fingerprints from everything she'd touched—not that he'd call the police or be savvy enough to track her in that fashion, but she'd learned long ago to be thorough. *Except for remembering gloves.*

A long middle drawer doubled as a wrist rest for those preferring the use of a keyboard tray, its padded bar allowing the user a more comfortable working position. The drawer's contents yielded no other clues she might

exploit. Before closing it, a swipe along the underside of the desktop generated a triple-hammer heartbeat when her fingertips caught on a plastic sleeve haphazardly taped to the bottom.

Ripping the treasured find away, she used her penlight to read the paper listing names and dates, some bearing letters beside them, others with monetary amounts. At the top, a series of numbers gave her the likely key to a combination lock. *Where's the safe?* She figured most people just memorized the combination to their safes unless perhaps he had more than one. Maybe he owned more than one house, too.

So far, she was two for two. Even if she didn't understand the significance of the names, Ethan probably would. Tucking the coveted discovery in the ledger, she still needed to find his cash to distribute among the women he'd abused for so long. Despite the dirtbag's moderately decent looks when not radiating hatred, he'd never pass for a nerd or techie type.

Sudden tapping followed by a long squeak at the window induced a momentary hell where her colon threatened to leave an anal signature. Her gaze whipped around to see a holly tree, its pointed leaves screeching along the mullioned window. *I am not cut out for this shit.* In her mind's eye, her darkly shrewd imagination conjured horrific images of disemboweled women from a horror show recently watched. "No more of that crap." Mumbled words filled the darkened room as she tried to ease the vise squeezing her chest.

Pinpricks of icy dread washed up her spine, raising the hair on her nape and hampering her steps to search for his cache of money. Paranoid men wouldn't file taxes on ill-gotten gains, hence paid cash to hide their income from the legal system. *Where would he hide it?*

Years of running a stable meant he'd probably collected quite a bit. Whether he kept it here or another location remained to be determined. Her silent search led her room-to-room checking books in the den, potted plants in the living room, and the kitchen for false drawers or compartments in cabinets. No plastic bottles floated in the tank on the back of the toilet, or bags of money stacked in the freezer, or loose floorboards.

The passage of precious time increased her desperation. Back in the room where she'd started her search, a glance around revealed several massive framed pictures bordering a wall cabinet, one bearing a blank expression, the other, some impressionistic hodgepodge only the artist could decipher and love. Her now clammy grip slipped twice when

checking for envelopes taped to the backs of wall-mounted pictures.

She gasped when a tug at the corner of the inscrutable man's frame swung the picture on quiet hinges to reveal a combination safe that surely held more explicit and incriminating confirmation of the owner's corrupt mind. It was the last place she could think to look. Padding back to the desk, she retrieved the paper with its numbers.

A worried glance at her digital watch confirmed she'd spent too much time in the house. Her trembling fingers had taken two tries before the final click unlocked the thick steel door, but the result proved worth the effort when she found the beast's treasure.

Inside the safe, a black metal box rested. About fifteen inches cubed and hinged on one long side, it rested innocently inside. Flipping the clasp open revealed stacks of money underneath a sheaf of loose papers.

After closing the safe and swinging the picture frame back, she retrieved the ledger and stuffed it in the box. She'd take her time deciphering the materials once she got home.

A long squeak signaled a screen door opening.

*Oh God.*

## Chapter Six

The front door's groan induced grotesque images of entrails strewn on the floor and her heart being cut from her chest. The wad of acid bolting up her throat burned her mouth, but she didn't make a sound. *Fuck, I'm dead meat.* Taking the box and tucking it under her arm, she looked around. No place to hide.

The room contained no closet and the desk might be the first place he sat. As the cliché reverberated in her mind, she darted behind the heavy fall of red velvet curtains and prayed for a bit of luck. If he went to bed, maybe she could sneak out. *Why is he home so early?*

A loud crash followed by his thunderous expletives defied her hopes of survival. It sounded like glass breaking—in the kitchen. *Oh shit, my wet footprints.*

"Where are you, bitch? I know it's you! I had a nice chat with Pauly before she bled out."

The voice bellowed threats that curdled the acid in her stomach. A wave of nausea followed by lightheadedness warned of the likelihood of fainting. Meanwhile, the curtains probably shook in time with her frame.

"If you come out now, I'll make it quick and relatively painless. If I have to hunt you down, I'll keep you in the basement for weeks."

Tears coursed down her cheeks, flashbacks of Frannie's warning to keep her nose clean bringing a fresh flood of guilt.

The office door opened. He grunted in satisfaction. "Ah, so you thought you could hide? You'll never be a good burglar."

Stark terror paralyzed her, choking her thoughts as she imagined him jamming a knife deep in her belly, slicing through each organ and pulling out her intestines before shock delivered oblivion.

Booted footsteps sounded louder with each heartbeat.

"You forgot to dry your shoes, bitch. Looks like we'll do this my way. Not that it was ever a choice."

A vicious yank tore the curtains from the wall to expose her hiding place. The look of glee on his face would be imprinted in her mind for the rest of her very short life.

"I figured you'd try something like this. Think you're a clever one, do you?"

The thrust of his meaty fist restored her ability to move. She dodged the brunt of the blow in sidestepping as pain exploded in her shoulder and

spun her ninety degrees. He'd never stop until she was dead. Using the only thing available, she slammed the metal box against his head, the loud thunk satisfying but temporary.

Terror bred speed as she raced for the door. Out of the office, she turned toward the front of the house, the closer exit. If she got to the street, surely her screams and Hoover barking would bring out the neighbors. Even if he followed, she was faster. Haste and terror disrupted her equilibrium, causing her to grasp the stair-rail spindles in her bid to remain upright. From behind, he growled as his heavy steps pounded forward.

The locked front door foiled her speedy escape. *Shit, should've gone out the back.* Sensing him directly behind, she turned, avoiding his next swing but felt the breeze of its passing. She screamed.

Outside, Hoover barked.

Ducking under his outstretched arms, she sidestepped. He still blocked her path to the back door, but the stairway to her right offered another option. She raced up the steps two at a time.

"Ha. I've got you now, twat. Wanna know what kind of fun we're gonna have?"

At the top of the stairs, one door stood ajar to her left. The wide hall contained three doors to her right. She bolted toward the last of the three. *Hoover's waiting by the hedge on this side of the house while I'm trapped in the home from hell with a wraparound porch.* A halting breath came after dashing through the doorway at the end of the hall and slamming the weak barrier shut. Turning on the light, she found what she'd prayed to see. She'd never appreciated gaudy, old furniture so much.

After tossing her blanket over her shoulder then tucking the box under her arm, she made good use of the wooden, slat-back chair. It made a perfect wedge after kicking the edge of the rug up. With its slide into place came a beefy fist slamming against the other side of the door that shook it in its frame.

Dry heaves signaled the beginning of a panic attack. *Numbers. Recite odd, non-sequential numbers.* A trick she'd learned long ago staved off the blackness encroaching on her vision's periphery.

Behind her, two windows led to the porch roof. Fumbling steps, impaired by the maniac pounding on the door, closed the distance to freedom.

Shoving at each window in turn with all her strength, she discovered them painted shut. *Of course. Plan B.*

A heavy thud from behind her snapped her gaze over her shoulder. It

sounded as though he rammed the door with his shoulder. *With his considerable bulk, it won't last long.* The wooden chair shook under the attack.

The window pane shattered with the strike of her stolen box but left jagged edges she didn't have time to clear. Laying her blanket over the sill, she lifted one leg out and ducked her head under the meeting rail.

The deep, intermittent scrape of wood on wood signaled the chair's begrudging slide and urged her to hurry. The bastard had opened the door enough to reach inside, trying to maneuver the chair out of the way.

"Get back here, bitch!"

"Not fucking likely, asshole." Meant as a retort, her whisper probably didn't reach his ears.

In her haste to hop out and over the sharp edges, she stumbled then gasped as pain sliced through her hand from a protruding glass shard. *Shit. More DNA left behind.* That was something she'd have to sort out later. Sudden quiet from behind made her pause. A glance over her shoulder, she expected to see him filling the doorway, but it wasn't open enough for him to pass.

Below, Hoover barked.

Fickle nature hampered her sight with thickening cloud cover and increasing wind while a slight drizzle had slickened the metal roofing. She landed on her ass with her feet sprawling for traction. The inevitable glide toward the edge was something she should've predicted considering the way her misbegotten endeavor had progressed. She couldn't determine the drop to the ground until she was in freefall, not that she had a choice in the matter. Her personal descent into hell was quiet and riddled with a lifetime's worth of what ifs.

Contact corresponded with a painful thud followed by an instinctive roll to her feet. Ambient light gilded the metal box several feet away, still locked. A quick retrieval saw it held football style while her blanket remained impaled on the window shard above.

*Hell.* It wasn't as if he'd call the cops.

"Hoover?" Where is she?

Barking from the front of the house indicated her dog held the killer at bay while the screen door clearly granted access to his vulgar threats.

"Fucking dog, I'll kill you, too."

The door slammed. No doubt, the hunter retraced his steps to retrieve a gun.

"Hoover, come." Testing her ankles, nothing felt broken or strained. By



the time she'd reached the hedge, Hoover nudged her leg.

The distant rumble of thunder coincided with fat raindrops sluicing down her cheeks and gluing hair to her face and neck. Heavier rain would decrease visibility and help conceal her escape by washing away footprints, but thick grass made balance treacherous.

Hoover followed her through the prickly evergreen wall which snagged the backpack in the process. She prayed the hedge's density and flexible branches would disguise her exit. If not, she'd have to rely on greater speed. If she headed toward the back, she'd have a straighter shot home while avoiding streetlights.

The neighbor's lot boasted a larger two-story house with glass making up most of the back first floor and light pouring through several of the windows. Lights came on upstairs, but she didn't stop or consider asking for help. Otis would either shoot them all or call on the neighbor to help track her.

Breath sawed in and out of her lungs, now on fire, the fine trail of vapor barely visible. Shaking legs negated good balance, but the adrenaline rush kept her moving. The box clutched tight in her hand repeatedly slipped, kept in her grip by sheer dint of will and perhaps the prayer she offered for a safe return home. Hoover, as if sensing her panic, whined and then romped forward as if to say, "*Stop dawdling.*"

Large trees shaded the neighbor's extensive yard, their thick, tentacled shadows grasping for the thieves. Staying close to the hedge, the duo made their way to the back to find that no fence waited to curtail their desperate flight. No heavy breathing or footfalls denoted the predator bearing down on them. No spray of lead or beam of light cut them. She prayed he couldn't detect which direction they'd gone, though tracking skills probably weren't his long suit.

At the back of the yard, they navigated their way down a small ravine filled with thick roots, tall grass, and a fallen tree sporting many broken limbs protruding at odd angles. Using a large branch to aid in climbing up the other side proved a mistake as it broke off and she tumbled backward. Mud, leaves, and unknown vermin now coated her wet clothes.

Nausea and fear strangled her voice to a whisper as she crawled up the slope on hands and knees. "Home, Hoover. Take us home." With panic attached to her spine, she didn't trust her intuition to find a different course. A canine's natural instincts always proved better. The general direction felt right, even if it wasn't a crow's path traveled.

Cutting right, they raced across another yard before darting between two houses. Even if he guessed which direction they'd initially gone, he wouldn't be able to see them now. Yet, she didn't ease her pace. Across well-tended yards, circumventing fences, and utilizing side streets, she listened for telltale signs of pursuit.

No hint of Otis.

With Hoover guiding the way, they made good time despite the heavier rainfall that now drenched her clothes and plastered her braid against her body. Occasional lightning speared the horizon, whether in defiance or aiding her mission, she could no longer determine. Several times, she slipped and face-planted in dirt or grass to leave her wet, filthy, and cold.

The small river winding its way behind the warehouse district provided another insulating layer between them and anyone who tried to follow, yet instead of crossing the bridge, Lexi urged Hoover into the water's edge and slogged through the last half-mile in hopes of foiling possible trackers. "I doubt the prick knows anyone with a Search and Rescue dog, but in case he does hire someone, *they* won't be able to track us."

Shivering and clumsy from the cold soaking into her frame, Lexi concentrated on maintaining balance while listening to her teeth chattering. Rocks and other debris meant difficult footing, but the end result was worth the risk of injury. All the while, she expected to hear the dire threats or feel a heavy hand shoving her face down into the water.

With nearly frozen fingers, she finally struggled up the narrow bank. Her sneakers squished with every freezing step.

When at last they wound their way among the familiar storage buildings, she allowed herself to believe they might reach home in one piece. The pessimist in her expected to see the monster leaning against her door, but her Machiavellian imagination proved more prolific than reality's determination to see her fail. No one waited.

When the steel bar fell into place behind her, she leaned against the door and slid to the concrete, the metal box falling onto its side. For long minutes, Hoover licked her face and nuzzled her neck.

"We made it, girl." After her heart rate and breathing had come under control, she hugged her protector, thanking whatever force had set Hoover's path on a collision course with a young, desperate teen.

Toweling her canine friend dry and making a nest of blankets on her bed gave Lexi time to consider all that had happened before a hot shower allowed time to sort her options. Timing would prove critical in that she'd just backed a wild animal into a corner. Making a wrong move would be

deadly. He couldn't get to Charlie, and none of the girls had ever wanted to know where she lived, for her own protection. Yet he wouldn't believe their denials, preferring to torture them just the same. Would he kill his girls with such damning material in the wind?

Twenty minutes under the hot water spray stopped the constant shivering and relaxed her tense muscles enough that she felt as normal as she suspected she'd get. Outside the shower, Hoover waited patiently by the door as if knowing she needed the dog's presence.

*Damn, I'm lucky.*

Once dry and garbed in jeans and a turtleneck, it was time to set her plan in motion. Back to the metal box. Collecting it, she padded to the kitchen then started some hot tea.

To be in the safe, the contents must have held tremendous importance. A snug clip holding the lid in place snapped open with a flick of her thumb. Bright pendant lighting illuminated the bulk of the contents after removing the ledger. Stacks of hundred-dollar bills had slid from side to side with each step during her bid for freedom. Taped together, they'd add up to thousands of dollars earned through a painful line of work. It was time for redistribution.

As she removed the bundles, shock stole her breath. Underneath was an assortment of jewelry in various states of disrepair. To the side, one necklace, a small mother-of-pearl nestled in the eye of a silver tiger, its giant paw raised in warning. Charlie had worn the same necklace since childhood. Various rings and other souvenirs were scattered in the box, bringing to mind the thug's words. *"I've been playing with girls around the city for years."*

"Time for some cyber-snooping."

A few keystrokes on her computer gained her entrance into a fresh horror—a twisted collection of private photos and videos stored on her mark's computer. He'd filmed his deadly playtime. She barely made it to the trashcan after discerning the files' homemade origin and recognizing one of the landmarks as local.

With the ledger containing an accounting of the stable's earnings, the balance of her findings held enough evidence to tie Otis to his illegal gains and Charlie's attempted murder. If the rest of the jewelry came from other murder victims, the killer should never see the light of day again. All she needed was to get this into Ethan McAllister's hands. If it convinced him to raid the house tonight, perhaps he'd find further evidence. The next steps required careful maneuvering: removing the cash, wiping her

fingerprints from the box's exterior and ledger, and persuading the detective to move fast. As much as she'd have rather waited until daylight, she had no choice but to immediately set her plan in motion.

Ethan's address, found during her earlier snooping, was about an hour's ride by bicycle even if she took the most direct route that included a short ride on a main thoroughfare. Since the roads traveled would lead away from the city streets and because time was critical, she had little choice but to strap the box to her bike and go.

"C'mon, Hoover, it's time we take a ride." It was a fairly long trek, but Hoover was accustomed to the degree of exercise, and she'd take it slowly. There was no way in hell she'd travel without her dog after what she'd survived.

Outside, the skies were clearing as she secured the box to her bike. Though rarely did they go out at night, the sooner the police arrested the butcher, the sooner her friends would be safe. It was worth the trip.

The stiff breeze would dry things up by morning after the rain had washed the streets temporarily clean. She welcomed the fresh, earthy smell as Hoover trotted beside her bike along back roads containing little traffic.

The lifestyle she'd chosen and the need to remain off the pimp's radar negated the option of owning a vehicle, which would've provided too many opportunities for tracking. In the back of her mind, fear of running into him had influenced her decisions since first hitting the streets and thrived until it had overseen her actions. After the police nailed his ass, she'd inherit the freedom to expand her life and maybe buy a car. The thought had merit.

## Chapter Seven

“Jesus, what now?” Ethan flicked on the bedside lamp that spilled its soft glow out to bathe the hardwood in warm tones of honeyed light. His cell dinged again as if the sender overrode the phone’s normal timing in his impatience. Having left it on the dresser instead of the bedside table meant he stumbled over his dog, Diego, whose chest rumbled in commiseration.

*Charlie’s assailant is Otis Cabersom, AKA Ghetto Beast. Look up his sheet. If you hurry, you might find more evidence in his house. I left you a present on your front doorstep. You’re welcome.*

“Damn. Why should I be surprised my cyber stalker knows where I live?”

A message this late forewarned of little sleep in his future, so after pulling on jeans, a shirt, and stuffing his feet in tennis shoes, he headed for the front door. Tonight, his simple rancher in the country failed to provide the peace and quiet intended, which brought to mind his brothers’ jokes about Larrick’s redneck ways rubbing off.

Without turning on other lights, he quietly opened the door and realized he should’ve first grabbed his gun. Though no one had declared it open season on cops, someone wanted to leave him a *present* yet remain anonymous.

*This feels too elaborate to have been orchestrated by another prostitute...*

Outside, all remained still and quiet with the normal night sounds. The earlier storm had dwindled to a dry breeze sifting through new buds defying last week’s snow flurries. Several whip-poor-wills vocalized their soothing balm in the still night, yet a prickly-legged trepidation crept across his shoulders.

On the brick stoop sat a gray metal container with a block-printed note taped to the top. Open immediately. Property of Otis Cabersom. His computer has snuff films. Check on Charlie’s security.

“What the hell?” Ethan flipped on the porch light while his shepherd bolted through the door and toward the north woods shielding his property from the main road.

“Diego, come.”

Immediate obedience didn’t prevent low grumbles rumbling from the dog’s chest.

With a sigh, he retrieved a pair of gloves from the foyer closet and stepped outside. In the event his admirer doubled as a sick prankster, he'd open the box outdoors.

No doubt that whatever was inside, the sender held a strong grudge and intended this as a smoking gun. Ethan prayed it wouldn't blow up in his face. If it were from a prostitute, then perhaps they'd get another set of prints to strengthen the case.

Swaths of mutating shadows ghosted the contents until he tilted the metal container and revealed a ledger underneath a cache of jewelry. Smears of crimson camouflaged details of a ring to prompt images of a psychotic killer severing a finger to obtain the prize. Until now, they'd made little headway in the case. Present contents could be a game changer, the first hard evidence obtained despite the circumstances of its arrival. Since Charlie had refused to give up her assailant, her boss, or her colleagues, their case had effectively reached a dead end. Now, in one fell swoop, someone was trying to hand him the entire case wrapped up in a neat, unexpected present.

He generally hated surprises.

The ledger contained tables with dates and amounts, each under a woman's code name, no doubt the women considered as property. Some of the clients were names Ethan recognized, which meant the shit would hit the fan even though said *evidence* wouldn't be admitted in court. *Apparently my helper is not legal minded when it comes to chain of custody.*

"Looks like it's gonna be a long night."

Ethan's car rounded the corner of Sycamore Ave. The vehicle's tires skidding on loose stones preceded Larrick's frame tightening.

"I'd really like to arrive at the same time as you and the car, partner." Larrick's snark was common when tired and agitated.

"They're called seatbelts for a reason, *partner*," Ethan replied.

Considering the wee hour, Larrick would probably grumble all day, despite the way his right heel bounced on the floorboard in anticipation.

"If this turns into a wild goose chase, my girlfriend is going to fry our nuts for breakfast." Larrick's complaints failed to cover the excitement in his voice. "Ya know, if you'd put some cameras around your house, we'd discover the identity of your secret admirer."

"Maybe that's why I received the package and not you." All of Ethan's brothers had complained at one point or another about his careless

disregard for personal security. He would never concede their point.

“Right now, I’d settle for nailing this dirtball, regardless of who’s helping us.” Larrick rubbed his hands on his jeans. “What if the DNA on the jewelry doesn’t come back to Otis?”

“Then we’ll work harder on tracking my anonymous tipster. However, I’m betting it will. You think one of his girls broke into his house and stole his stash?”

“Dunno, it just doesn’t seem to fit considering the tech skills needed to hack police files and your personal information. On the other hand, it would explain the request for Charlie’s security check. Getting those girls to talk will be impossible until he’s behind bars without bail.”

“It’d be harder to make a case with no witnesses unless we can tie the jewelry to the other murders.” Ethan turned off Dutchman’s Lane and checked house numbers. “Should be third on the right.”

“No lights on. Either this is bogus and he’s asleep, or our man’s in the wind.” Larrick checked his weapon then holstered it in his shoulder rig.

“Or he doesn’t know his stuff is missing.” Ethan cut the lights and engine. “Considering his line of work, either way is a recipe for hostility.”

“Yeah. And it’s my turn to go first.” Larrick brushed stray locks of hair from his forehead as if removing the tension he now radiated. No noise betrayed their exit from the vehicle.

Serrated dandelion leaves poked through cracks in the brick walkway leading to the front door while interlocking branches overhead provided stippled moonlight in ever-changing shapes. The storm earlier had left a tinge of ozone that seemed to thicken the air with apprehension. A broken streetlamp in front of the home added to the unwelcome malevolence. “Vandalism in prep for breaking and entering?” Ethan asked.

“Remind me why we’re not waiting for backup?” Larrick murmured as each man palmed his weapon.

“I’ve called it in. ‘Sides, you’re a tough guy and I’m bulletproof.” Ethan climbed the steps to the porch after his age-old retort.

Each stood sideways by the door, their unspoken ritual of taking a deep breath the only mental preparation necessary.

Larrick pulled the screen door open, wedging his foot to maintain the space while he knocked on the door. It inched open with the slightest tap. “Hmm, door’s ajar, and I smell beer.”

“It’s not time for a break.”

“Smartass.” Larrick grinned before continuing, “Otis Cabersom. Open

up. Police.”

“I don’t think the spiders hiding in the porch ceiling heard you, much less anyone inside.” From the hinged side, Ethan yanked the screen door wide.

“Door’s ajar. Looks like our resident might need help.” Ethan shrugged. “We’d be remiss if we didn’t check on him.”

“Ready? Let’s go see if the dipshit needs help drinking his suds.” Larrick shoved the metal door wide then waited. Silence lingered as stale air drifted from the inside. Dim light illuminated the interior after Larrick fumbled for the switch.

“Compassion just emanates from your soul.” Ethan’s quip was answered with a smirk.

Larrick entered quickly and moved right. Ethan followed and rushed left.

“Anybody home?” Ethan stepped around the two loose floorboards lying crossways in his path. An overturned chair revealed where the boards had originated. The gaping hole equaled a moderate-sized storage compartment set between the floor joists. “Empty.”

“Maybe he’s suffered a B&E... could be injured. Let’s check the house and see if he needs help.” Ethan continued to the kitchen, noting the trash and broken glass scattered on the tile floor in a space smelling like cheap brew.

“Got something.” From what appeared to be a study, Larrick motioned to a wall safe. “Also empty.”

“Bastard had two stashes. Not unusual,” Ethan said. After clearing the last room on the ground floor, they moved up the stairway. “I got the single room on the left.”

Larrick waited while Ethan searched the first room, then paced to the right. “This door’s wedged. Give me a hand.” A few minutes of maneuvering saw the door open. “Well hell. Imagine that.”

Noting the broken window across the room, he continued. “Huh. Glass is on the outside,” Larrick murmured.

“Like someone broke in elsewhere but didn’t leave the same way?” Ethan surmised.

“Got caught in the study and made it up here? Broke the window, used the blanket for protection, and jumped from the porch.” Larrick continued, “But didn’t take their blanket...”

“Damn, do you think Otis got ’em?” Ethan asked.

“Dunno. Let’s get forensics up here. At least we have some DNA.” Larrick pointed to the crimson drips on a glass shard.



“This guy’s a piece of work.” Ethan used his flashlight to scan the area outside.

“I’m sure he gets called a lot of things.”

“Most of the time, ‘defendant’, I imagine.” Without disturbing anything, Ethan led the way out. “Let’s check around the outside. We’ve got to find him before he tracks down our informant.”

“According to his sheet, he eliminates witnesses, quickly and efficiently.”

“If he hasn’t already. Hell, I hope we don’t find another mutilated body.”

Down the steps and out the door, Ethan searched for signs of struggle, a torn bit of clothing, drops of blood, anything. According to their records, the beast was big and vicious. “Rained earlier, but we could get lucky.”

Once outside, they walked the perimeter. “I’m guessing our homeowner isn’t a gardener,” Larrick quipped. Except for the few unkempt bushes along the front porch, no other shrubs hugged the dwelling. Patches of grass formed a bizarre ground map, interspersed with mud. “Hey, I got two sets of prints leading...through the hedge. There’s a set of canine impressions beside the smaller footprints. Looks like our girl, guessing by the print size, got away from him.” Ethan prayed the resident was as slow as he was evil. “I didn’t see muddy paw prints *in* the house. Why would someone bring their dog to a break-in?”

“Yeah, the dog just waited here? Not many animals would hold a sit-stay like that.” The more Ethan pondered the situation, the more of a headache he got. “Sides, how many prostitutes do you know have canine companions *and* are hackers.”

“None that I know...” Larrick murmured.

“Maybe someone who has a therapy dog? They are well trained. Hospital security reported Charlie had a visitor, a girl with a service dog.” Ethan wondered if the girl was their anonymous tipster.

“Possibly, but the damn tapes didn’t give us a clear visual of her face,” Larrick muttered.

“Yeah, but how many girls own therapy dogs *and* visit prostitutes in the hospital. The footage did show us she wasn’t dressed like a working girl.” Ethan grinned as a picture formed in his mind. “Hospitals have to have records of visitation of that nature, if for nothing else, insurance purposes.”

“Which means there might be a way to track her down.”

“Bingo.”

## Chapter Eight

“Hi, Ms. Carmody. I figured you’d somehow know we’d be visiting today. You seem to have a sixth sense where we’re concerned.” Lexi sighed at Frannie’s unnerving ability to anticipate her moves.

“I just talked with Charlie earlier. Her virtual armor is every bit as tough as the shell you’d woven.” Frannie knelt to take Hoover’s offered paw. “And good morning to you, too. Care to tell me how your mom got injured and perhaps is in need of medical care?”

“Um, nothing to worry about...But it was for a good cause.” Lexi pulled her jacket sleeve down to hide the gauze covering her palm.

“The fact you say it without making eye contact *makes me worry.*” Frannie sighed. “I spoke with a detective this morning who said they were stepping up Charlie’s security. They should be here within a half hour to talk to her again. You don’t have much time.”

The indirect inquisition was standard from one accustomed to taking in strays. It was only a matter of time before Frannie’s calm determination breached Charlie’s defenses, seeking out her strengths and helping her find a new path. It was just her way.

“Um, Charlie’s *employer* is on a rampage.”

“Great. Do you need a different place to stay?” Frannie stood, the expression on her face revealing so much more than her words.

Of the few people Lexi interacted with since leaving the streets, Frannie was the most welcome. “No, I’m safe. I just need to see Charlie for a second before heading home. I’ll go out the back.”

Employing the stairs lent two advantages. Not only did she benefit from the exercise, but it also allowed her to see anyone approach, unlike standing in an enclosed elevator.

On the third floor, all appeared quiet. As usual, she stopped at the window to view the newborns. The memory of the little girl whose father had protected her made her smile with the realization that close family units could exist and that not all people were evil. Redemption came on the strangest paths. Her faith in humanity restored, Lexi smiled when seeing only several babies present. It appeared the baby she sought had been discharged to a loving family.

Her pace hitched slightly at seeing the police officer beside Charlie’s door instead of the security guard who was previously there. His smile radiated no malice on her approach and gave no evidence of recognition

or moving to retrieve cuffs, both good signs. Her prior night's break-in must've remained safe from legal scrutiny. She desperately needed to update Charlie before the detectives arrived. After finding and turning over the evidence, maybe she could convince Charlie to testify.

"Hi, this patient wanted to see Hoover, my therapy dog, again."

Tentative steps closed the distance as the officer waved her in, his bored expression a welcome passport. The close proximity made her itch.

"Go ahead, you're cleared. The hospital administrator said she'd asked you to visit again."

*Thank you, Frannie.* She hadn't realized she'd held on to the lungful of air until she was closing the door behind her. It seemed fear would be her unshakable shadow until Ethan caught up with his quarry.

"Hey." Relief at seeing a friend who'd protected her in another age loosened anxiety's grip on her shoulders. Charlie rested in bed, watching TV.

"Hey, Lexi. I didn't know if I'd see you again. As much as I love you, you shouldn't be here."

The tearful reunion of hugs and summary of events proceeded in a rush of words, bound with hope and courage yet shaded with skepticism, fear, and grief. Charlie gasped and then stared, open-mouthed, after Lexi concluded explanations of her late-night exploits.

"Lexi, he's gonna kill you for stealing from him!"

"Like he hadn't already planned on it? As I said, the police have evidence now. The prick was keeping souvenirs from his victims. I recognized your necklace."

"He'll really go to jail?"

"I checked this morning. They have an ATL, Attempt to Locate, on his ass. They'll find him if I have to track him down myself."

"Everything really is going to change—for the better." Something akin to amazement graced her face as a single tear trailed down her cheek.

"And you'll have the cash to start over, anywhere you want."

"I've dreamed of going to see my family in Virginia, driving a decent car, and going back to school."

"And now you can."

"As soon as the police connect the dots with DNA on my necklace, they'll be back to see me. You need to steer clear of all us girls."

"I know. That's why I'm here now. Your share will be waiting for you, via Frannie, after you're discharged. You can trust her."

This time, instead of receiving a puppy and uncertainty, optimism and

providing a cash settlement punctuated their farewells. “You can finally have a life, do anything you choose. We all can.” The possibilities lifted her spirits as she turned to leave. Sometimes, life did go her way.

When Lexi opened the door, the officer knelt to greet Hoover, who always loved attention. “I’ve never seen a blue-eyed shepherd—and what else is in the mix?”

Something about the officer’s expression, narrowed eyes and curled lower lip, presaged trouble. Since anxiety traveled faster than lightning down a leash, Hoover backed away from the cop, a combination of whine-growl deep in her throat.

“It’s alright, girl. I’m not a bad guy.” The officer’s gaze climbed Lexi’s frame to study her face. “Nice dog. What’s your name, ma’am?”

Last night, Lexi had left blood and a blanket behind at the thug’s home. With all the commotion, she hadn’t had time to screw with the digital records and hence cause the destruction of any DNA evidence. Though they wouldn’t have test results back yet, they could’ve found both her and Hoover’s prints leaving the scene. Hacking the records to switch test results would be easy. Wiping Ethan’s mind and his determination to get to the bottom of the nightmare, not so much.

Did Frannie give them my name? Would she do that?

Without another word, Lexi bolted for the back stairway with Hoover by her side. The officer wouldn’t pursue and leave Charlie unprotected, but even she couldn’t outrun a radio.

*Shit.*

Down the exit stairs she flew, two and three steps at a time, then jumping the last five of each flight. A deep and terrifying suspicion yawned in her mind, tightening the figurative noose around her throat. Until last night, her *under the table* activities had involved light hacking. If they tied her to this mess in any way, they’d take her laptop and discover the string of *helpful* hints she’d given to the police and the extent of what she could hack.

Hoover’s nails clicked on each tread, echoing Lexi’s heart rate as fear rippled down her back. When the exit sign came into view, she stumbled and landed in a heap against the door. Pushing to her feet, she gasped at the pain shooting through her right ankle. Hoover whined.

*Fuck me sideways.*

Limping through the emergency exit portrayed the least of her sins as fresh air dried the cold sweat breaking out on her nape. The snick of the door latching behind her sealed her fate in moving ahead. Forward,

always forward.

The moderate-sized lot she entered contained dozens of employees' cars, some shaded by oaks bordering the property. Thick woods beyond would obscure her presence while Hoover escorted her home.

"Let's go, girl. We need to move it." Past the back edge of the asphalt, trampled grass denoted several paths to the woods made by employees taking smoke breaks. She'd traveled this way several times to allow for different exits if necessary. Some habits were hard to break.

At the last row of cars, Hoover suddenly stood stiffly with hackles raised and tail up.

"What's up?" She hadn't seen or heard anything to cause alarm.

"About time you came out, bitch. I've been waiting here all morning. Knew you'd go see your whore friend." Filtered light through quivering oak leaves glimmered off the blade in Otis' hand. Mere feet separated her from the bedlamite who loved cutting women to shreds.

Risking a glance over her shoulder, at least fifty yards stretched between them and the building. A locked door denied sanctuary.

Hoover barked and lunged to the end of her leash.

"I've never cut a dog before. Guess there's a first time for everything. I tell you what. I'm a generous man, and I'll make the same offer as before. Give me back what you stole, and I'll make your death quick and painless." He stepped forward in a show of fearless bravado, the crazed gleam in his eyes reminiscent of what she'd seen in the alley and by Charlie's bed.

"Hoover, no. Sit." Following her command didn't stop the canine from straining for freedom while matching the killer's anger in deep, rumbled warnings.

Standing up to the bastard now would not end well, even if he hadn't wielded a knife. Her injured ankle negated the possibility of outrunning his wrath.

Hoover's next lunge ripped the leash from her grip. Brief satisfaction filled her as the dog clamped down on Otis' wrist. The bastard's roar coincided with him dropping the knife as he instinctively yanked his hand back. Torn flesh and a small crimson stream proved a momentary distraction as he used his other hand to apply pressure.

"Hey! What's going on?" The deep intonation from behind signaled the arrival of more trouble. At the other end of the lot and rushing through the aisles of cars, Ethan and his redneck partner each drew their weapons as a spark of recognition lit their faces. "Both of you—halt."

“Hoover, come on, girl. Leave him.” Lexi snatched up the leather strap to force the dog’s compliance. With her attacker momentarily undecided, she kicked his knife under the car, further confounding him. Her action prevented him from stabbing her but also divided his options. He could flee and hope the cops didn’t get his knife or take precious time to retrieve it. *Did he use it to stab Charlie?*

“Police. Stop, Otis. You’re under arrest.” Ethan glanced from the killer to her and then back, his expression hardening. His partner branched out sideways in his forward move as if to narrow her route of escape.

A split second of indecision crossed her attacker’s face before he bolted toward the woods in the direction of the city. “I’ll deal with you later, whore.”

“Fuck you.” Pain filled her hobble-step run. Her sanctuary lay toward the east, twenty yards before sliding through wooded cover.

At the head of the deer trail leading through thick underbrush, Lexi turned and shouted to Ethan. “His knife is under the car.” Divulging the information ensured Ethan’s partner wouldn’t chase her since they couldn’t leave evidence unattended. Gritted teeth and a fierce glare denoted his frustration.

She grinned.

“Home, girl. Take us home.” Adrenaline diluted pain and furnished speed while briars tore at her clothes, hands, and face. The convoluted path they’d take, through woods and sloshing down the middle of a stream, would ensure no one could track them.

## Epilogue

Never had such satisfaction consumed her spirit. With the cash distributed and her old friends safe, perhaps a small vacation was in order, not that she'd go anywhere. A half-gallon of chunky chocolate chip and Hoover enjoying her homemade treats would give them hours of relaxed downtime on their comfortable sofa.

Cyber-snooping through police records had revealed the reports from her break-in filed under the date and labeled *Jane Doe*. They did in fact get DNA samples, which were mysteriously mislabeled and destroyed due to a computer glitch. They'd also connected Otis to a string of murders with the evidence from the box she'd left on Ethan's stoop.

Each of the prostitutes had stepped forward after learning of their employer's arrest and corroborated the details listed in the ledger bearing his prints in exchange for no prosecution. With the malware she'd installed on the murderer's computer, Lexi directed Detective McAllister to its location and discovery of the pimp's snuff films.

Despite her innate mistrust of all things police, she found herself data surfing to learn more about the man whom she'd evaded on a sunny morning. In her mind's eye, the frustrated look he'd flashed her as she disappeared into the woods spoke volumes, a picture-worthy moment she'd love to hang on her wall. He'd search for her, and he wasn't the type to give up. She could erase any digital evidence found, but his memory was another matter. *Looks like I'll be laying low for a while.*

"Good luck with your search, buddy." The thought of sending a well-meaning joke, a beautiful bouquet of flowers to his workplace as a *thank you* would surely provide a constant source of ribbing from his cohorts *and* frustrate him for months to come when he couldn't trace its origin back to her. Perhaps she'd include a pair of fur-lined handcuffs for good measure. In her mind's eye, she curled her tongue around the sharp censure for baiting a cop; the girls would surely berate her efforts. Yet a deep well of humor and appreciation of life found its outlet in innocent pranks. Reality might bite her in the ass eventually, but messing with him just a little was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

At the end of the day, her mind would review, edit, and censure the scenes of her adventure, conjuring and deleting those that didn't coincide with her current perspective in continuing her idyllic life. She'd risked everything for the women who long ago had seen something special in a

young runaway, nurturing and sheltering her from their harsh reality. Her studying and hard work had finally paid off. Now they were free to live their lives on their own terms.

Hoover rubbed her head against Lexi's chest. Everything they needed was at her fingertips.

## **The End**

Scroll further for an exciting excerpt from Digital Velocity and to view my other books.

Happy reading!



## Digital Velocity

I move frequently—but gain no distance.  
I am warm, moist, and dark but give no comfort.  
I can stretch and shrink, giving or taking at will, bringing both pain and  
pleasure with each.

“If God wanted you to tie the knot, he’d give you a near-death experience to better appreciate life, along with a craving for procreation. Then he’d smother your soul with the essence of venison, squirrel, frog legs, taters, or beer, to attract a likely counterpart from the sticks. No, wait. The latter has already happened, hasn’t it? Sorry.” Ethan narrowly kept his balance on the green-slicked, handmade bricks leading up the two-story, mauve-colored Victorian. If his 210-pound mass ended up sprawled on the steps, no doubt the picture would be splashed all over the precinct by noon with various unsavory captions.

“Maybe you should try it. The stick up your ass has to cause at least minor discomfort.” Larrick’s early-morning snark was a common greeting.

“Hey, I’m a *normal* guy.” Ethan glared over his shoulder.

Larrick snorted.

“Still wet from our early-morning storm. Watch your step, it’s slippery.” Scanning the myriad amorphous shadows lurking in the wood line, realization struck that he and his partner were sitting ducks if a sniper perched among the loblolly pine and oak trees lining the front and side yards.

Larrick’s reply came in equal measure of soft tones. “Either that or a large flock of birds dropped in recently to help her redecorate. Great detective work.”

“Bird droppings are—”

“Sought after for facials. Especially the Japanese Nightingale shit.” Larrick grinned.

“Only you would know that.” Ethan adjusted his tie, an acknowledgment of the apprehension filling his mind.

“Are we whispering because your paranoid gut can’t assimilate food well enough to distinguish indigestion from an outside threat? This woman lives alone, gonna think we’re a couple of perverts and liable to shoot us.”

“Word has it she’s a pacifist.”

“Fine. You’re one to talk about signs—dragging my ass to a stranger’s house at this ungodly morning hour. I love knocking on a stranger’s door and asking, ‘Lady, are you all right? We’re police detectives who received an anonymous tip that you might have a hangnail. Perhaps we could lend you a pair of nail clippers...’ then ask if she needs the gutters cleaned.” Derision and humor warred for dominance in Larrick’s tone, yet his sharp gaze continually scanned the perimeter in consideration of his partner’s unarticulated hunch. Yin and yang, they fit together, a clean-cut detective and his partner whose hair length had passed regulation specs weeks ago.

“You know this isn’t the first tip we’ve gotten, not to mention the fact that the other leads were solid and led to arrests. And while we’re at it, why don’t you step to the side? Standard police procedure when approaching an unknown situation.” Ethan turned sideways, standing by the door with his hand poised to knock on the solid oak. He hesitated. Moisture coated his palms, a rare occurrence. Scrutinizing the interior through the narrow sidelights yielded nothing more than expected. Elegantly upholstered furniture, gleaming hardwood floors, and delicate bric-a-brac adorning the thick mantle and each side table completed the sophisticated picture. “Don’t see any problem. Maybe she’s fallen and can’t get to a phone.”

“You expected an old lady brandishing her curling iron? As for leads, I get *mine* from three-dimensional people while you get yours from a bunch of ones and zeroes. Why can’t our IT department trace your anonymous texts further than the loony bin? Though that’s probably appropriate since your secret admirer’s last present consisted of a flower basket bigger than my TV along with fur-lined cuffs. I’ve never laughed so hard I pissed myself. I thought that was hogwash, a myth made up by old ladies.” Larrick leaned over the iron railing to peer through the window. “Can’t see squat, bottom sill’s too high.”

“As my partner, you’re supposed to have my back, not stab me in the back. You didn’t have to broadcast it through the whole department by hanging the cuffs from the sprinkler system with a bunch of roses twined in them. Now my brothers won’t let up, and I’ve been subscribed to every kinky magazine known to the publishing world. You think *I* should know why some whacko chose me for their personal marionette?” Ethan suppressed a shudder before his partner gained more verbal ammunition. If his suspicions were correct, his informant was in fact a beautiful enigma with waist-length, chestnut hair and an emerald gaze

capable of melting steel.

“Maybe because you were the youngest to make detective? Rising star, golden boy, and all that shit.”

“No. Probably afraid your redneck ways would rub off on them, or maybe because I’m the biggest sap.” Ethan’s gut rumbled, more of a warning sign from a well-heeled intuition than hunger. “Larrick, this doesn’t feel right.” Behind him, the slide of metal on leather let him know his partner just palmed his Glock. Three years of working together circumvented the formality of dissecting gut reactions.

A creak of leather sole betrayed Larrick’s backtracking to scrutinize the surroundings. “Side windows are lower. I’ll take a look.”

“Hood of her BMW is cold. Didn’t go anywhere recently.” Larrick’s harsh whisper halted a nearby squirrel scampering up a tree, its head cocked to one side while studying the strange human interlopers.

Sunshine warmed the first spring buds on the low shrubbery bordering the walkway to complete the idyllic setting. Nothing but peace and serenity, yet Ethan’s heart hammered against his ribcage like an aggressive punk drummer. With his partner disappearing around the corner, he again scanned the perimeter while the morning’s corrupted equanimity formed a sour wad in his chest. A lazy March breeze combed its cool fingers through his short hair while the deep foreboding received with the initial text message blossomed into multiple horrific scenarios, leaving one of them a corpse, their life’s essence forming macabre shapes on gleaming hardwood floors.

“I see bare feet beyond the kitchen island. Toes up. Probably female.” Larrick’s disembodied whisper just provided probable cause. “Backup?”

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## About Reily

Reily is a West Coast girl transplanted to the opposite shore. Past employments as an ICU nurse, private investigator, and work in the military police has given her countless experiences in a host of different environments to add a real world feel to her fiction.

Over time and several careers, many incidents have flavored the plots of her stories as man's cruelty and ingenuity for torment and torture are boundless, not contained by an infinite imagination. Witnessing the after-effects of a teenager mugged at knifepoint for a pair of tennis shoes, or an elderly woman repeatedly stabbed with a screwdriver for no apparent reason, left an indelible impression that will forever haunt her subconscious. In counterpoint, she has observed a woman stop her vehicle in severe, snowy weather to offer her own winter coat to a stranger, a teenager wearing a threadbare hoodie. Life's diversities are endless.

Though her kids are her life, writing is Reily's life after. The one enjoyed after the kids are in bed or after they're in school and the house is quiet. This is the time she kicks back with laptop and lapdog to give her imagination free rein.

In reading, take pleasure in a mental pause as you root for your favorite hero/heroine and bask in their accomplishments, then share your opinions of them over coffee with your best friend (even if he's four-legged). Life is short. Cherish your time.

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