

After

I found her amidst the drifts of dirty snow, somewhere near the silenced creek. She was cocooned in rough wool blankets, which hid the sharpness of her bones.

I stopped short, watching her.

From my right came the distant scent of horseflesh, a bit of warmth on the bitter wind. The smell was life, and it was a good reminder. It got me moving.

She was watching the jaundiced sky, perhaps searching for birds. But of course, the sky was empty.

"You must be cold." The words puffed around my face and drifted off into the silence.

She shrugged within her blankets, but her nose was red and weeping. I wanted to tell her to eat, but who was I to tell her to do anything?

"I don't understand any of this."

It was the first time she had spoken in days. Or was it weeks? I eased down next to her, and the cold gnawed at my thighs.

"Do you blame me?"

She blinked, but didn't answer. It was answer enough. Rather than jump in to fill the silence that followed, I decided to wait her out.

One small hand made it out of the tangle of blankets. She passed me a grimy piece of paper, crumpled and damp from her hand. I pulled off my gloves and opened it. It was part of a sermon, a page ripped from a book. I scanned the page quickly, anxiety tightening my chest. No need to read it, I could have spoken the words from memory.

"Humankind isn't *at* war, humankind *is* war. They rape and pillage our sacred mother earth, call their own brothers 'enemy' and kill in the name of a God who long ago turned His back.

"They are blind to the enemy that walks amongst them, to the deity hiding inside human skin. They move about our earth like an infestation of cockroaches, oblivious to the coming extermination!

"But the time of Judgment is upon them. The time of Brimstone and Fire. The time of Extinction.

"Day Zero approaches, my children. We must walk the straight path, and remain faithful."

With trembling hands, I folded the paper. Then, in a flash of anger, I crumpled it into a tight ball and hurled it toward the trees. It landed on the dirty snow. A dirty page full of dirty teachings.

"Where did you get that?"

She shrugged. "Where do you think?"

There was a long silence.

"I'm old enough for the truth," she said.

I searched the trees, looking for some sign of life. "I don't know everything. The others-"

"They've told you. You know a lot."

"Inside, then. Where it's warm."

"No."

"It's their story, too."

"No. Just you. I want to hear it out here, in the ashes."

I swallowed past the barbed wire in my throat. "Will you share the blankets?"

She opened them silently. I tucked us deep within their depths, using my good arm and moving quickly before what little warmth there was could escape.

She waited, keeping her eyes on the trees, while I struggled to find the right words to start. The words that would make her understand.

"I suppose the best place to begin is with Ryanne Jervis," I said. "A little girl who disappeared from Elkhorn, Nebraska on the last day of school before summer vacation."

Suppressing the desire to stroke the hair that tangled beneath her wool cap, I closed my eyes and let that long ago Nebraska sun prickle my roughened skin.

She was so clear now, the little girl with the red hair.

"Her mother liked to say Ryanne was a comet pulling a tail of trouble, and she was right. Because Ryanne knew things and saw things others didn't."

Beside me, she let out a gusty sigh.

"She was always passing on information no one wanted to hear. She was awkward, skinny and pale. Her classmates would have told you she was just plain *weird*." I pulled the blankets tighter, snuggling her up against my side. I was glad when she didn't pull away.

"They might have left it at that, unable to explain why they were so uncomfortable when she was around. They sensed she was different, but they didn't understand how or why.

"Only a few kids could have said more. Like Jimmy Fairchild, who, in Kindergarten, bumped her arm in the cloakroom while reaching for his coat. Ryanne had gasped, and then blurted out she was sorry about his dad. She left him there with his coat puddled at his feet.

"His mind had probably returned to that moment again and again, like a tongue to a loose tooth, after his father died of an aneurysm three weeks later. He never spoke to Ryanne again, but every once in awhile she caught him looking at her, as though wondering if his dad's death was somehow her fault.

"And there was Teresa Hernandez, who made the mistake of taking Ryanne's butterfly hair clip. Ryanne had stood before the whole class, red faced but determined, and accused Teresa of stealing it.

"She listed, one by one, all the items Teresa had stolen: Penny Marsh's sparkle pen, Colin Purdue's Garbage Pail Kid cards, Jennifer Morrow's yellow scarf. In the span of five minutes, Teresa became the most hated girl in the school. Well, aside from Ryanne.

"Of course, after that day Teresa hated Ryanne most of all. She stalked her on her way home from school, pulled her hair when no one was looking, and dropped Ryanne's art project in a mud puddle.

"None of her classmates ever tried to be her friend, or stepped forward to help her. Once she was gone, I bet most of them tried to forget her. But I hope her memory haunted them instead.

"I hope the sound of her lonely weeping stalked her tormentors on the playground. I hope the kids who had spit wads of paper at her head found themselves transfixed by the shadow-space of her empty chair. I hope they saw her face in the dull gleam of their desks, or her tattered pink coat hanging from the vacant hook in the cloakroom."

I paused to catch my breath. I could feel her now, she was right there with me. The little lost girl on whom I had turned my back.

"Of course the years passed, and the world moved on, as it does. But I'd like to believe, to *hope*, she wasn't so easily forgotten..."

Chapter One

June 25th 1988

“Ryenne Elizabeth Jervis. For Christ’s sake, Phil, you know who she is!” Sherry Jervis plucked a cigarette from the crumpled pack in her purse, but her hands were trembling too violently to light it. The Sheriff leaned over and did the job for her.

Josh guessed there were times when the new No Smoking regulation in the County Sheriff’s Office simply did not apply.

“We have to fill out these forms right, Ms. Jervis, or something might get missed. Now, do you have any recent pictures of her?” the Sheriff asked.

“Not on me, no.” She plucked a fleck of tobacco off her lip and eyed him through the haze of smoke. “Does that make me a bad mother?”

Sheriff Lagrudo leaned back in his chair, the one that squeaked, and regarded her with weary eyes. “Of course not. But we’ll need to get one from your house as soon as possible. I can have Officer Metcalf go over.” He nodded in Josh’s direction and she shrugged.

“Where can he find the photo?”

“In the top drawer of my dresser. Under my bras,” she said.

Josh felt the heat creep up his neck. He nodded, keeping his eyes averted from the deep “V” of exposed cleavage.

The Sheriff cleared his throat and glanced at the chair in the corner. Josh was so new to the force his belt still creaked when he walked, but he’d already learned enough about his boss to pick up on the silent order. Josh sat.

Sherry Jervis had been six years ahead of Josh in school, and by the time he attended Elkhorn High the stories about her had become legend. If even half of them were true, the Sheriff was wise to keep Josh in the room. Even under the current circumstances.

Sherry got pregnant at eighteen. Although she remained tight-lipped, rumors over the baby’s father had spread like wildfire. The general consensus around town was it was either Mayor George Buerle (and did you notice how much Mrs. Buerle started drinking right around that time?) or Thomas Bussini, the high school science teacher who packed up and moved to California halfway through the school year.

She slouched against the corner of the desk, and her denim skirt rode up alarmingly. The Sheriff’s chair squeaked, but Lagrudo managed to stare earnestly at the forms in front of him, pointedly ignoring the bare thigh that thrummed with life mere inches from his face.

Sherry had that effect on men. Josh doubted she meant half of what she did; it was just an innate part of who she was. A perfect example was calling his boss Phil, rather than addressing him more properly as Sheriff Lagrudo. It put them on equal footing, which somehow implied they were potential bed partners.

The Sheriff cleared his throat. “OK, Ms. Jervis. Run through this with me again. She would have biked home from school?”

“Right. She always does that. I work the dinner shift at Max’s.”

“And she usually gets home at what time?”

She bounced up and began pacing. "Jesus Christ, didn't you hear me? I *work*, Phil. I don't know. She's home when I get there, OK?"

"And what time is that, normally?"

"What's it matter?" Her eyes were red and puffed with tears.

The Sheriff waited, pen poised.

"My shift ends at nine, OK?"

"So you usually get home at what? Nine-fifteen, nine-thirty?"

She stabbed out her cigarette on the Sheriff's Coke can. Josh found himself leaning forward.

"Ms. Jervis?" The Sheriff asked.

"Does this matter, really? My kid is *missing*! Shouldn't you be out there looking for her instead of questioning me like I've done something wrong?"

"We *are* looking for her, and no one is accusing you of anything. But I do need to know what time you got home."

"Ten." She would no longer meet the Sheriff's eyes. Her skin was mottled pink.

Sheriff Lagrudo put down the pen. "Ten last night?"

Her shoulders slumped. "This morning, OK? I got home and everything was locked up like when I left. No lights on, nothing. No dishes in the sink. Her bed wasn't slept in. Her bike's gone. Her backpack." Strands of red hair had come loose and were sticking to the wetness on her cheeks.

"Dammit, you've gotta find her! She's my baby. She's *all I've got*." She clapped her hands over her eyes and began to wail. Her knees gave out and she crumpled to the floor.

The Sheriff met Josh's eye and gave him a small nod. Without a sound, Josh stood and left the office.

The Jervis home was located where Chancellor Road formed a T-Junction with Skyline Road. The house was small, pale blue with purple trim. It might once have been cheery, but the decade old paint was peeling, exposing the rust colored paint underneath like traces of dried blood.

Josh pulled off his sunglasses and dumped them on the seat next to him. The overgrowth surrounding the property put it in permanent shade. The only neighbors were the corpses quietly rotting in Mt. Calvary Cemetery across the street.

The house was two miles south of the school where the girl was last seen, perhaps a fifteen-minute trip by bicycle for a girl her size. Officers had been dispatched to walk the route, retracing Ryanne's trip from school to home.

As the newest member of the force Josh had been issued a 1978 Ford Fairmont. It rattled and moaned when pushed beyond forty miles an hour, and its shocks were no match for the gaping potholes in the Jervis's side yard. He cracked his skull on the roof as he bounced to a stop at the edge of the property.

He grabbed his radio and exited the car into the cloud of dust stirred up by his arrival. It stuck to his damp skin as he crossed around the tail of Sergeant Nicholson's Crown Vic.

The Sergeant exited the front door and met Josh on the sagging porch. His face was red and bathed in sweat. Large wet patches were visible under his arms, and in a half moon underneath his belly.

In comparison Josh was taut and trim with youth, a fact he knew got under the older man's skin like a tic. Josh also had a full head of glossy black hair, and he ran his fingers through it in a semi-conscious dig at the balding Sergeant.

Nicholson spat a stream of chaw off the edge of the porch; just missing Josh's neatly pressed uniform pants. "Whatcha doing here, wet-ears? Come to monkey with my crime scene?"

Josh sidestepped around the notion that the house was a crime scene; or that if it was, there was any chance Nicholson would be running the investigation. "Sheriff sent me to get a photo of Ryanne." This had the desired effect and Nicholson stepped away from the open door to let him pass.

"Don't touch nothing," he admonished, watching Josh with a gimlet eye.

"Ms. Jervis said there was a photo in her dresser drawer." Josh could feel the heat creep up his neck. Again.

"*Ms. Jervis*," Nicholson snorted. "Son, no woman who spreads her legs as well or as often as that whore deserves to be called *Ms.*"

Josh pushed through the cluttered galley kitchen and into the hall beyond, eager to get away from the Sergeant before his tongue got the better of him.

He paused at the open doorway of what must have been Ryanne's bedroom. A Care Bears quilt was hanging slightly askew on the twin bed. Pink wallpaper with a rainbow border lined the walls, and a white princess desk was tucked under the only small window. The window was sealed shut with a wooden stick to prevent anyone from sliding it open from the outside.

With a guilty glance toward the front of the house, Josh stepped across the threshold. There was a ragged doll propped against the pillow. The desk held a small pile of children's library books about space and the solar system, and a pink hairbrush matted with red hair.

Her smell permeated the small space, a heady combination of strawberry ChapStick and Pears shampoo that caused an ache in his chest. The room looked abandoned, like a photograph beginning to curl at the edges with age and neglect. Josh touched the doll's hair, as though in apology, and left.

The call came over the radio as Josh was exiting Sherry Jervis's cluttered bedroom. The room was strewn with lacy underthings and the rumpled sheets smelled like sex. He had barely dared to breathe while searching her dresser.

His stomach cramped at the first burst of static over the radio, and he paused to listen. One of the Officers was calling it in, voice crackling with urgency. They had found the girl's bike.

The bike had been found some twenty feet off North Main Street. It was half hidden in the scrub bordering Papillion Creek, a small stream that cut between the gravel lot of Enfield's Tree Services and the train tracks to the north.

Officers had cordoned off the area and were clustered around the yellow tape, antsy and eager to take action. Any kind of action. Josh stood off to the side, trying not to transfer the sweat from his palms onto the photo of Ryanne Jervis.

"What's the deal?" the Sheriff asked, placing his duffle bag on the ground at his feet.

Officer Lahoya stepped forward. "Pink bike, child's size, white basket with a pink flower. Matches the description Ms. Jervis gave us. There's a Care Bear on the ground about 5 feet away." The officer swallowed hard. "I don't have a good feeling about this, Boss."

The Sheriff pinched the bridge of his nose, wincing as though he was in pain. "OK, people. Listen up! We're looking for Ryanne Jervis, age seven. She's three feet ten inches tall and weighs about forty-seven pounds. Red hair, green eyes. Her mom's not sure what she's wearing, but she has a pink Hello Kitty backpack. Officer Metcalf, you find that photo?"

"Right here, Boss." Josh handed it over.

The other Officers pressed forward to get a look. It was a glossy eight-by-ten school photo. Ryanne sat perched awkwardly on a stool, her hands clutched in her lap. Red hair flamed in a cloud around her pale face. Her denim dress was several sizes too big and had a red strawberry on the breast pocket. Scabbed, bony knees poked out from the hem of her dress, and dingy lace socks circled her ankles above

scuffed black patent shoes. Most notable were her eyes, which seemed to take up half her face. They were Coke-bottle green and rimmed with dark circles. She looked like a girl who didn't get much sleep.

Sheriff Lagrudo took a deep breath and launched into action. "OK folks, we're going to spread out. Detective Smythe, canvass the businesses along North Main, see if anyone remembers seeing her after school. Start with Enfield's and move north.

"Sergeant Grant, get ahold of the school administration. I want to talk to her teacher, and as many of the faculty as possible. I want to know everything that was going on with Rianne, and if anyone suspicious has been hanging around the school.

"Officers Lahoya and Perkins, I want a grid search done of the surrounding neighborhoods.

"Sergeant Nicholson, head back to the office. Issue a 'be on the lookout' to the surrounding counties. Contact the state police in Iowa and Kansas, too. I want everyone on red alert.

"OK, let's stay in contact; I want to hear any news *immediately*. Got it?" They all nodded.

The Sheriff picked up his duffel bag and turned to Josh. "Come with me, Rookie. We're going to have a look at that bike, and then we're going to cover every square inch of the area around it." He lifted the tape and stepped underneath, and Josh followed.

The bike was on its side, the rear tire sticking out of the scrub. The Sheriff pulled a Nikon out of his bag and took some shots, explaining what he was doing as he went. Josh listened with solemn intensity.

Once the Sheriff was satisfied, they slapped on gloves and pulled the bike out gently, trying not to scrape it more than necessary on the tangle of vegetation. They wrapped the bike in a large plastic sheet for transport back to the office.

There was a dirt-covered teddy bear face down on the hard pack half a dozen feet from the bike. Sheriff Lagrudo took several shots, and then slid the bear into an evidence bag.

When both pieces of evidence were stowed in his Ford Econoline, they split up and began a grid-search of the brush surrounding Papillion Creek.

It was Josh who spotted it. "Boss!"

"You all right there, Officer?" the Sheriff called from somewhere upstream.

"You'd...you'd better come see this."

He listened to the rustle of the Sheriff's progress through the brush, unable to move.

"What is it?" Sheriff Lagrudo's voice had a hitch in it. Josh couldn't find his at all, so instead he pointed toward the water.

The Sheriff slid down the embankment, and with shaking legs Josh followed.

A Hello Kitty backpack was tangled in the vegetation at the creek's edge, bobbing gently in the current. It might once have been pink; it was hard to tell. Now it was streaked and splattered with red, like a Rorschach made with blood.

Chapter Two

The last leg of Sumner's journey back to hell began with a Great Lakes flight from Denver to Cheyenne. The flight itself was uneventful and over way too quickly. He spent the forty-five minutes nursing the one glass of Jim Beam he had allowed himself, monitoring his alarmingly unsettled intestines, and wishing for an in-flight emergency of the crash and burn variety.

Sumner shook his head and swallowed the last trickle of courage, letting it sear his throat and tickle his nostrils. He was a chicken shit patsy. They called for him and he came running, like a good little soldier.

Crunching some ice between his molars, he ignored the raised eyebrow of his seatmate. She was blonde and frighteningly thin, buffed smooth by expensive surgery. She smelled like oranges and had no sense of humor.

When she pulled a lipstick pink book out of her Dolce and Gabbana purse and he noted the title, *How To Snag A Husband In Ten Simple Steps*, he found his mouth opening against his will; a not uncommon occurrence.

"Any woman who devotes herself to making one man miserable instead of a lot of men happy, don't get my vote."

Her cool blue eyes focused on him, causing him to stammer.

"It's John Wayne...in *North to Alaska*."

She obviously didn't share his obsession with late night TV. Perhaps she had better things to do between midnight and four AM. Like sleep.

Without reply, she flipped open the book. For the rest of the flight she pointedly ignored his existence.

As the plane angled down for its final approach he took the last few chunks of ice into his mouth and crunched hard, ignoring her sharp glance and trying to ignore the churning anxiety tightening his gut.

But his intestinal distress was becoming alarming. Like a freight train roaring toward its destination, there was no stopping it. By the time the plane touched down and began its roll toward the airport, he was in a sweaty stew of agony.

Thunderous noises were coming from his belly, causing his seatmate to wrinkle her nose in disgust. The plane eased to a stop and he watched in desperation as the flight attendant moved to the exit door. The moment the seatbelt sign went out he grabbed his satchel and plunged forward. He knocked a hip into his seatmate on the way by, but ignored her chirp of annoyance. He pushed past a couple of old biddies, paying no heed to their angry squawking, and threw himself through the doorway and down the stairs to the tarmac.

Like Jerry Rice on his way to a touchdown, he clutched his satchel against his chest and weaved around the slower passengers. Pushing his way into the airport, he said a silent prayer that he would find the men's room before he soiled himself.

And there it was! Twenty feet ahead, the man/woman sign beckoned him to safety. Moaning with relief, he crashed through the door and barricaded himself in the only stall.

Some time later Sumner emerged, shaky and bathed in sweat. His belly was still rumbling threats. Placing his satchel on the counter, he splashed cold water on his face and neck, soaking the front of his t-shirt. He scooped several handfuls into his mouth, washing away the bitter taste of bile and booze.

His temples were pounding in time to his heartbeat, but the cool water flowing over his wrists calmed him. Eventually, he turned off the tap and scrubbed his face with a rough paper towel.

A nervous glance at the smudged mirror, and he let out a shaky breath. He was alone. There were no silent grinners, no bloodied soldiers, and none of his *Familiars*.

Good. That was good.

His bowels unclenched a bit. Nothing but his grey face, hollow cheeks, and red eyes. Come to that, he didn't look much better than the mirror visitors.

Sumner had aged twenty years in the six months since his awakening, since that seemingly innocuous note found its way into his mailbox. His sandy hair had gone silver, and fifteen pounds had dropped off an already slender frame. His clothes were hanging on him. He'd always considered his eyes to be his best feature, with their intense crystal blue clarity. But they were foggy, bloodshot and bruised looking.

You look like a corpse, he thought. *Walking Dead*, eat your heart out.

And right on cue his ears started ringing. A *Familiar* was approaching. His teeth clenched convulsively.

Dammit, not now!

Which one was it? Was it *Coach*? Or *Loretta*? Or worst of all, *Soapy*?

"Not now!" Sumner growled.

It was *Soapy*, he was sure of it. *Soapy*, with his oily counsel and intrusive good cheer. *Soapy* was trouble, and Sumner already had that in spades. But the ringing grew louder, drowning out any other noise. *Soapy* could not be stopped. Sumner curled over the sink, groaning and clutching at his ears.

"No! Not now!"

And then a miracle happened. *Soapy* disappeared. He didn't fade away, or ease back into the blackness from which he had come. Poof! He was simply gone. Sumner blinked, letting his hands drop as he processed the inexplicable, deafening silence.

"Dude, you OK?"

Sumner screamed like a fifties housewife who has just discovered a dead mouse in the flour canister. The teenage boy near the hand dryer screamed with him, showing off a mouth full of metal. Something about that flash of braces made Sumner realize the kid was real. He was wearing a Denver Broncos hat and his skin was pink and pimpled. Sumner couldn't help but stare. He was perfect in his gawky, stork-like pre-manhood. He was gloriously *alive*.

But for how long?

That thought pushed Sumner over the precipice upon which he'd been teetering, and into a decision. His shoulders squared and his stomach unclenched. The boy was frozen against the garbage bin, probably scared that any movement might set the crazy dude off into a murderous rampage. Sumner was equally scared. Not of the boy, of course, but of what he was about to do. After all, it was likely to get him killed.

"Sorry," Sumner muttered. Grabbing his satchel, he moved around the boy, giving him as wide a berth as possible. He could almost hear the kid's sigh of relief as the door closed between them.

With renewed urgency, Sumner entered the main part of the airport. He spied a UPS drop-box thirty feet away and moved toward it.

Keeping his gait loose and his eyes straight ahead, he surreptitiously scanned the people around him. They would be nearby, but for the moment he couldn't spot them. He was feverishly hoping to avoid their scrutiny for the next couple of minutes.

Along with a BIC pen, Sumner slid the envelope out of his satchel. His hands were shaking as he found the appropriate label and filled out the address and payment information. As he stuck the label to the envelope and watched it drop out of sight, the noose tightened around his neck.

He spotted her on his way to the Hertz counter. She was sipping from a takeout coffee cup at a two-person table beside the Peaks Café. Blonde and voluptuous, she had tanned legs that took an impossibly long journey from the edge of her frayed denim skirt to the rim of her high-heeled cowboy boots.

Her cowgirl-gone-whore ensemble was attracting plenty of notice, but she seemed immune to the ogling of the barista behind the counter, or to the suits who hovered hopefully around her. Her eyes were fixed on Sumner above the rim of her newspaper.

There was no mistaking her. Even dressed in the uniform of American youth — it was like the entire generation was experiencing a critical fabric shortage — to Sumner she might as well have had *I Fidele* stamped on her forehead.

He took a deep breath. All right, he thought; game on, Cowgirl.

Doing his best to ignore her surveillance, Sumner moved casually toward the Hertz sign. At the same time, he took stock of his mental defenses and bricked up the imaginary wall inside his head. The last thing he needed was her picking up on his thoughts. That would be a death sentence.

There were no customers at the kiosk, and he was served immediately. He chose a Ford Edge for its four-wheel drive capabilities, paying the extra for it without a second thought. October in the mountain passes was unpredictable.

Grabbing the keys, he managed to laugh almost naturally at a joke the attendant made, and left the counter.

A casual whistle as he passed her. She was standing at a tourist rack, feigning interest in a brochure on trail riding. He passed so close he could smell her skin, an intoxicating mix of soap and musk.

She was green and wide open and it was impossible to resist a small peek, despite the risk. He picked up her name, Ora, and a few other tidbits. Most interesting was her preference for female companionship. That almost stopped him in his tracks.

I Fidele doctrine preached against homosexuality. It was considered an abomination, a strict bit of religious philosophy Sumner figured was actually based on pragmatism; those unwilling to reproduce weren't of much use for populating the New World.

But if she was so easy for him to read, how had she hidden her sexuality from the Fathers? It seemed impossible, when he had effortlessly snatched that little nugget from her defenseless mind. He was under no illusion about his limitations.

With some effort he avoided her gaze and made his way to the glass exit doors and the parking lot beyond. She followed too closely behind him, and he repressed a nervous laugh. She may have been smoking hot, but she made a terrible secret agent.

She watched him from the other side of the glass doors as he drove out of the parking lot. He tightened his grip on the wheel, fighting the urge to give her a cheerful wave as he passed; or maybe a flip of the bird. As he moved toward the exit he congratulated himself on a brief moment of self-control.

The Ford Edge had less than a hundred miles on it, and it drove like a solid, boxy dream. He fiddled with the satellite radio until he found the E Street Station. Springsteen's bravado washed over him — damn that dude could rock! — and he cracked the window so the crisp fall breeze could tickle his face. "Thunder Road" was playing, and Sumner joined in at full volume.

He caught the grin on his face in the wing mirror. It erased at least a decade. If today were the last day of his miserable life, at least he was going into battle with The Boss by his side.

"Bring it!" he shouted into the wind, feeling young and strong and alive for the first time in forever.

But his rush of confidence was short lived. By the time he reached the town of Encampment, Sumner was filled with quiet dread. The dark fingers of *I Fidele* were scrabbling at him, trying to hook in

their claws and reel him in. It would take another hour and a quarter to reach The Ranch, and dusk would be setting in.

Like a kid afraid of the dark, he was overwhelmed with fear at the notion of being stuck at The Ranch overnight. He was kicking himself for his lack of foresight. An earlier flight could have gotten him to The Ranch in the early afternoon, giving him a chance to get out of there before nightfall.

He briefly fantasized about finding a hotel in Encampment. About ensconcing himself in motel blankets, six-pack at his side, the room dark save the flicker of the TV. He would lose himself in a cult classic on Turner Classic Movies, or maybe he would escape into John Wayne's swagger in *True Grit* or *McLintock*. The Duke was never afraid of anything.

But the weather was fair and dry. The forest road that led to The Ranch would be clear. It would do no good to delay. Other than living to see another sunrise, which would be nice. His best chance of survival was to follow orders. And pray that Cowgirl hadn't seen him put that letter in the drop-box.

There was a Conoco on Sixth Street, and Sumner stopped to fill up the Ford. While it was filling, he went inside to use the facilities and buy a huge cup of bitter coffee, to which he added four creamers and three sugar packets. He glanced longingly at the Coors on display in the fridge, but drinking was considered a weakness at *I Fidele*. There had been plenty of weakness in the last six months. Perhaps it was best if he didn't show up with beer on his breath.

He paid cash for the gas and coffee and climbed back into the Ford Edge. Route 70 cut west through the grasslands of southern Wyoming before hacking an endless, rugged path through the Routt National Forest. It was the perfect place to disappear into the wilderness of another time, especially since Route 70 was closed during winter months.

Six miles past Encampment, he slowed for the cut-off onto Forest Service Road 550, a gravel road that eased south and west into the belly of the forest. Sumner gritted his teeth and slowed to a crawl.

Chapter Three

As soon as Sumner was out of sight, Ora pulled her iPhone out of the back pocket of her skirt and punched in the code to unlock it. She dialed from memory; there were no numbers stored in her phone.

Father Narda answered, voice rough as gravel, before the first ring was complete.

"He's on his way. Driving a grey Ford Edge," she said, dumping her tepid coffee in a bin by the automatic door.

"How does he look?"

"Like shit. Like he hasn't slept in the last six months."

"Do you think he's fighting against his programming?"

"How should I know? He came off the plane like his ass was on fire. Went straight to the john. He was in there for almost twenty minutes."

"And then?"

"And then nothing. He came out looking like a man who'd just dropped a huge load. He rented a car and took off."

"Hmm." His voice was so rough she could feel its vibration through the phone, and she instinctively pulled her ear away from the receiver.

"Do you think he made you?"

Ora snorted. "Are you crazy?"

Well, it wasn't really a lie, just not a direct answer. Sumner most certainly *had* made her, just as she intended. But her dad didn't need to know that.

"OK." The line went dead. No thank you, no good-bye.

"Where's the love, fucker?" she muttered, deleting the call history and tucking the phone into her back pocket. She reached into her cleavage, glaring at the trucker who slowed to catch a peek, and pulled out a pre-paid Samsung. As it powered up, she moved back to the Peaks Café.

"Hey, it's me. I'm on my way back. I've just got to lift a letter out of a UPS drop-box."

Chapter Four

I awoke in a flood of tears and sour sweat, clawing my way out of the same damned dream I had been having since my early twenties. Occupational hazard. I should have been used to the dreams by now.

They occurred in many different ways, yet they were always the same. Whether I was sheltered amongst the red cliffs of Bryce Canyon, or running through a corn maze, or fleeing on horseback through a crisp pine forest, or trapped a thousand feet up in the Willis Tower, or stumbling up the Oregon Dunes in a hopeless quest for higher ground, it always ended in the same way.

New York had sponsored the latest version of the dream. The Big Apple. Also known as The Big Melting Pot. Ironical, indeed, since New York was definitely melting.

The smell of warm urine and unwashed bodies slithered up the stairs from the subway platform. The humid air clawed at my skin, and my damp t-shirt clung to me like the eager hands of a teenage boy.

In my dream state it seemed perfectly logical to be walking barefoot through the swirling litter, moving around the fetid air blasting out of the subway vents.

Ahead of me a woman was walking, also barefoot, her pale arms stretching toward the sky. Her red hair was a dirty tangle, hanging in limp ropes down the back of her grubby dress.

Perhaps that's what caused my urgency. That red hair. I was desperate to catch up with her, desperate to see her face.

I labored forward through an endless swarm of angry New Yorkers. Again and again the crowds tripped me up, shoved me back, battered me with sharp elbows. I pushed and fought my way through them.

Eventually the damp bodies gave way to a blistering wind. I leaned in, my hands sheltering my eyes. The wind assaulted me. It sucked the breath out of my lungs and clobbered me with Coke cans, empty candy wrappers and cigarette butts.

Bit by bit, I closed the gap.

"It's coming!" she screeched, "It's coming!"

What was coming? What?

And then I saw it. A blue-white ball of fire. A raining inferno. It tore a path across the sky, unzipping the heavens.

The sonic boom ruptured my eardrums, and the world went silent. The ground rocked and trembled. The city shattered, showering glass and metal.

She turned to me. The she that was not me, after all. She was older. Wider in the hips and chest. Her eyes were muddy brown instead of my green. But she shared my red hair and pale skin, and the same high cheekbones and delicate curve of the mouth. It was like seeing myself in a carnival mirror. Familiar and yet different. And of course she was familiar. She was a frequent visitor to my land of dreams.

Shards of glass rained down upon her, opening up gash after bloody red gash on her face, her arms, her chest. She pointed one long, trembling finger at me. And though I couldn't hear her, I understood.

"See...what...you've...done!"

On the last word the world exploded. The woman went rag doll, flying up toward the boiling sky.

Impact.

The bedside clock read 3:12 PM.

Perfect.

There would be no more sleep for me that afternoon, and I would be dog-tired when I reported for work at eight. I pulled myself out of bed with a groan, tossing the twisted sheets aside, and pulled open the blackout curtains.

The stark New Mexico daylight slapped me in the face. It was a good start, and a pot of coffee would do the rest. But first I needed a shower. A long, hot, use-up-the-entire-tank, kind of shower.

I ignored the image of my naked body in the bathroom mirror as I crossed the cold tiles. As a general rule I avoided mirrors. Vanity wasn't worth the risk of facing the other people I often found staring back at me.

If I didn't look, I wouldn't know there was a bloody-haired little boy reaching for me, or some creepy dude ogling my breasts, or a woman trying to untangle the noose from around her neck so she could talk to me. Definitely not a conversation I wanted to have.

The first thing I did after buying the house was remove the mirrored tiles from around the living room fireplace. I also replaced the mirrored closet doors with shuttered ones, and changed out the large bathroom mirrors for small oval ones. They were just big enough to make sure there wasn't greenery stuck in my teeth.

The second thing I did was purchase some extra lamps. Lamps were important; they did battle against shadows and dark corners.

The shower was restorative, and I trooped into the kitchen in flannel lounge pants and an old Kiss t-shirt, my hair hanging to the small of my back in a heavy wet sheet. While the coffee brewed, I cleaned up the empty ice cream container and box of Oreos, embarrassing evidence of my nutritionally deficient dinner-slash-breakfast some six hours before.

As part of my daily routine, I vowed to start doing better. To eat more salads, and cut back on the coffee and ice cream. I would even exercise. Start jogging again or something. Just as soon as I unearthed my expensive Nikes from the shoe mountain piled on my closet floor.

In my weeklong attempt to become a runner I had learned a few things. Blisters hurt. Chafing happens in the most embarrassing places. Jogging is incredibly mind numbing, and really hard work. Maybe I would take up yoga instead.

Not to be dissuaded from healthy pursuits, I chose the strawberry pop tarts instead of the S'mores.

"Fruit!"

"Rowan, I think we've got a fast mover," Dan said as I pushed into the trailer balancing two take-out coffee cups and a box of donuts. As usual, his belongings were scattered from door to desk chair, eager to trip me up. I kicked his gym bag out of my path and dumped the coffee and donuts on the desk, pushing aside a pile of paperwork with my arm.

"What's the velocity?" I asked, moving to the bank of monitors.

"It's looking like 0.5 degrees a day."

"Whoa. OK, convert it to MPC format and send it off with an NEO flag on it."

Finding an NEO, or Near Earth Object, with that kind of speed was not a nightly occurrence. It would be processed at the Minor Planet Center as a high priority. The slower velocity asteroids were observed for several nights before they were sent to MPC for categorization.

“You got it, Boss.” Dan turned back to his computer and started pecking away at the keyboard.

Standing in front of Bertha, our largest computer monitor, I tracked the fast mover and sipped coffee. After several minutes the newest CCD images of the night sky came in, demanding my attention.

They went through the standard detection algorithm, which included registering the images, suppressing the background, and clustering and filtering by velocity.

Once the newest detection list was ready, I went through the star catalogue match and made my final observations. The nightly results would be sent to Hanscom AFB Lincoln Laboratory at the end of shift.

I left the trailer to check on the two GEODSS, or ground-based electro-optical deep-space surveillance telescopes. The night air was silky against my skin, and I paused to take a few deep breaths. The sky was completely clear, stars twinkling above my head. It was a perfect night for capturing CCD images.

The GEODSS were owned by the US Air Force, and as such were located behind the security checkpoint on the White Sands Missile Range. It was a quiet place to work, when they weren’t testing missiles.

M.I.T.’s LINEAR program, or Lincoln Near-Earth Asteroid Research program, was charged with doing large coverage searches for earth-crossing and main belt asteroids. In other words, we searched for near and deep space asteroids that posed a risk to life on earth. We were funded through NASA and the US Air Force.

Both GEODSS were functioning well inside their metal domes, so I headed back to the trailer. A chocolate cupcake with a single lit candle was waiting for me on the desk.

“What’s this?”

Dan turned away from his computer and smiled. His hair was a tangled mess of curls in which brown and silver fought for supremacy. He had docile brown eyes surrounded by smile lines, and charmingly crooked teeth flashed white inside his bushy beard.

“Don’t you think we should celebrate, *Doctor*?”

To my dismay I felt the prickle of tears, and my words clogged in my throat.

He sighed theatrically. “Don’t get all girly on me, Red. Blow out the candle!”

I giggled and wiped a fist across my wet cheeks, then did just that.

“Dan...thanks. Really,” I managed.

“Are you kidding? I’ve been waiting for this day *forever*. Please tell me I’ll never have to hear another word about the *Phenomenology Analysis of Experimental Prototype ISR Systems*? Talk about a buzz kill.” He rolled his eyes, and I laughed.

“OK, I promise.” I pulled out the candle and licked the icing off the bottom. “Share it with me?”

“What? Take chocolate away from you? I’m not suicidal.” He turned back to his keyboard, and then grinned over his shoulder at me. “There are five more in the fridge. By my count you’ve only had two donuts tonight. Gotta keep those sugar counts up.”

I had just shoved the last bite into my mouth when my eyes fell on a small envelope with a Hallmark logo. It was half-hidden within a mountain of paperwork, and I wondered how long it had been there.

“What’s this?”

Dan glanced in my direction. “A card from Lincoln Labs, I guess.”

“They sent flowers to my home.”

“Dr. Rowan J Wilson” was typed across the front. No address, nothing else. Had it been delivered by hand? Who had made it past the armed guards?

I slipped a fingernail under the seal and pulled the card free. It was a simple piece of white cardstock. In bold black letters were two words:

RICORDARE

RITORNARE

“What in the world is that?” I hadn’t heard Dan come up behind me.

The card fell from my trembling fingers. It floated and flipped in elegant circles, a butterfly testing its wings. I watched it land at my feet.

“It’s Italian.” My voice sounded very far away. “It means ‘Remember, Return’.” My vision was going dark. I watched in astonishment as the floor thundered up to meet me.

Chapter Five

The morning his son went missing started in the usual way. It began with Keaton's head in the toilet.

Jim Beam had become a frequent visitor over the last eight months. At first he came knocking a few times a week, a friendly neighbor who didn't overstay his welcome. Then he became more insistent, staying late and ignoring the cue to leave when the night was done. Before Keaton knew it, good old Jimmy Beam had moved in, and brought all his brash and destructive relatives with him.

Gin, rum and Budweiser made themselves at home. Even Tequila showed up, and it took several agonizing mornings for Keaton to realize what most college students learn by graduation: nothing good happens when Senor Tequila comes a-calling.

Keaton staggered into the shower and turned the lukewarm spray directly onto his face. His temples were throbbing with each painful heartbeat, his eyes were burning and his mouth was dry as cotton and tasted like bile.

The warm water in the tank ran out in three minutes, and he twisted the tap closed and scrubbed himself down with a rough towel. He emerged dressed in yesterday's sweat pants, his bare chest gleaming.

Jack looked up from his Cheerios when Keaton entered the kitchen. It hurt Keaton's heart to see the quick once-over his nine year old gave him. His eyes were too old, and it struck Keaton like a guilt-knife through the solar plexus. He shoved the previous night's empty bottle and pizza box into the garbage bin and closed the lid.

"So, what's on tap for today?" His attempt at cheeriness fell flat.

Jack got up from the table and carried the remnants of his breakfast to the sink. He shoved the Costco bottle of Ibuprofen across the counter and poured three fingers of water into a glass, which he then handed over.

Keaton was briefly tempted to pretend he didn't need the pain meds, but his temples were throbbing and he clearly wasn't fooling anyone anymore. He swallowed two tablets, finished the water and poured himself another glass. Rehydration was key.

"Any thoughts on the day, buddy?" The silence stretched, and Keaton wondered if they'd reached the point where his son would simply stop speaking to him.

But then Jack spoke. "It's the last weekend for the Cyclocross races at the Clatsop County Fair." Cyclocross was Jack's latest obsession. As far as Keaton could tell, it involved a bunch of people racing their bicycles over crazy obstacle courses.

"Is it really? Then maybe we should go." It was guilt that made Keaton say it, but the look of boyish delight on his son's face made him feel good.

"For real? You mean it, Dad?"

"Sure," he said with feigned enthusiasm. "Why don't you go get ready and I'll brew myself some coffee for the road."

Jack was jumping up and down like a contestant on *The Price Is Right*. "I can't believe it! This is going to be *so...awesome!*"

He raced back to his room, and Keaton could hear him rummaging through his closet. Keaton leaned over the sink and retched as quietly as he could. Then he let the water run and started a pot of coffee brewing.

It had been way too long since Jack had behaved like a nine year old. Or smiled. Or laughed.

Keaton's first mistake was marrying Emma, eight years his junior, when she was just out of high school. But her girl-next-door beauty had been intoxicating, and he had found it impossible to keep his hands off her.

His widowed mother had been a dour woman whose idea of decorating was the enormous wooden cross in the living room. She'd hounded him through his childhood with a rosary clutched in one hand and a wooden beating spoon in the other.

There had been no choice but to propose marriage. And he'd loved Emma. He'd loved her deliriously, and blindly, and with his whole heart. He still did.

She'd been so young, and he vowed to be her patient guide into adulthood. He worked at the sawmill while she darted from one college major to another. Eventually she graduated with a BFA and found work in an art gallery in Cannon Beach. She seemed happy, and that made Keaton happy. And if he had a bit too much to drink on occasion, well, in the early years it was under control.

But as the years passed Emma remained unpredictable and emotionally volatile. One minute she was joyously trying to start a family, the next she was talking about moving to an Ashram in India, or joining some artists' colony in the Ozark Mountains, or buying a home in the Nevada desert so they could live "off the grid". His drinking slowly increased.

And then she started disappearing. She would go for groceries, or to have dinner with a girlfriend, or to a movie, and she wouldn't return for days. The first couple of times he was out of his mind with worry. He called the police, filed missing person reports, and scoured the streets and coves up and down the rugged Oregon coastline.

Then without warning, she would be back. Her eyes would be bottomless, haunted. Her skin would be bruised. When he questioned her she would shut down. She wouldn't speak for days. But he'd keep hounding her, demanding an explanation. An apology.

Eventually she would use the only defense she could. She would crawl naked into bed and press against him, touching him in all the secret ways she knew he liked. And he would succumb, losing himself in her sad brown eyes and her sultry lips and her promises.

He drowned the one question he was too afraid to ask— *Are you sleeping with another man?*— in booze.

And then she got pregnant. As her body swelled she spiraled into depression. He would come home from the sawmill to find her wallowing in the dark. Keaton decorated the nursery without her.

In her ninth month he came home one day to find her in the nursery, sitting in the rocking chair. She was gently stroking her swollen belly, her gaze turned toward the yellow curtains he had hung in the window.

Keaton froze in the doorway, his heart fluttering. It was like gazing upon a scene from one of his dreams. A dream of what he wished for his life to be.

Except for the dark circles under her eyes.

"Are you OK?"

Tears were streaming down her cheeks in tiny rivers. "I'm trapped."

That night his son was born. He came into the world with a caul helmeting his head, and Emma wept. Apparently it was a sign of good luck.

To his surprise and delight she threw herself into motherhood with fierce dedication. She nursed Jack, and changed his diapers, and wore him in a sling against her heart.

As he grew she mashed organic fruits and vegetables for his meals. She attended “Mommy and Me” classes and organized play dates. Once Jack was in school she became involved with the PTA. She carpooled Jack and his friends to soccer and swimming and Cub Scouts.

For a time the bottles disappeared. Keaton worked while Emma painted. She proved to be a talented artist with both oils and acrylics, and her paintings were displayed in art galleries from Astoria to Crescent City.

Aching to have a daughter with Emma’s silky blonde hair and brown eyes, he pushed for more children. But she seemed content with their triad.

He couldn’t have said when his wife became a stranger to him. It didn’t happen overnight. It was a slow straining of their binding ties, until one day it occurred to him they were roommates, living under the same roof as a matter of convenience. He tried to reach across the chasm that divided them, bringing home flowers, planning a second honeymoon to Hawaii, and insisting on date nights. But nothing worked. She was gone.

And then one day, she sealed the deal. Jack was staying late at a friend’s house, working on a science project. Keaton had made dinner reservations in Cannon Beach.

He came home to find the house empty, Emma’s Volvo gone. When she hadn’t returned an hour later he tried her cell. It went straight to voicemail and he didn’t bother to leave a message. He started calling every fifteen minutes, haunted by memories of their early years. But that was so long ago. Surely she wouldn’t disappear now, with Jack to come home to?

They found her car in the water off Highway 101, near the Barview Jetty. Her body was inside. According to an eyewitness, Emma had hit the gas as she swerved off the road, picked up speed as she crossed the rocky beach, and plunged nose first into the surf. Her death was deemed a suicide.

The drive from Seaside to Astoria was filled with Jack’s never-ending chatter about Cyclocross. He seemed determined to educate his ignorant father on all the ins and outs of the sport.

“Dad, did you know that on a typical Sunday up to six hundred people participate in the races?”

“Huh. Who knew there were that many crazies in Oregon?” Jack didn’t seem to get the joke.

“It’s true! There are all different kinds of courses, with mud and grass and different ramps and stuff. Did you know they don’t just ride their bikes? Sometimes they have to jump off, *while the bike is moving*, and carry it over different obstacles. Isn’t that cool?”

“Very cool, buddy.” Keaton took an extra large swig of his coffee.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Clatsop County Fairgrounds at half past ten. Jack skipped ahead of him to the entrance, then ran back to pull at his dad’s sleeve.

The moment they entered the overheated arena, Keaton knew it was a bad idea. The noise hit him like a jackhammer to the forehead.

They found seats in the back row of bleachers. He removed his jacket, rolled it into a ball, and tucked it between his head and the wall. Leaning back against his makeshift pillow, he tried not to vomit.

Some time later, he was jolted awake by Jack tugging on his sleeve.

“Dad, I’m hungry!” he shouted in Keaton’s ear, making him wince. “Can I go get a hotdog or something?” They had passed a hotdog stand on their way into the arena. Keaton fished a twenty out of his wallet.

“Get me a Coke, OK?”

Jack stuffed the crumpled bill into the front pocket of his jeans. He smiled back over his shoulder as he moved into the aisle. “I’ll be right back!”

Keaton gave his son a half-hearted wave and closed his eyes. He didn't watch as Jack descended the metal stairs and disappeared into the sunshine beyond the arena door.

Chapter Six

“Josh? I think we’ve got another one for your collection.” Carl Robertson’s voice crackled on the other end of the phone.

“Oh yeah? What’s the story?” Josh Metcalf sat up and grabbed a pen out of the FBI coffee mug on his desk.

“Nine-year old boy in Clatsop County. He went missing from a Cyclocross competition on the County fairgrounds.”

“What in the world is that?”

“Some kind of bike competition. Anyway, he wasn’t competing, he was there watching with his dad. Dad says he went to get a hotdog and disappeared into thin air. That was four days ago.”

“And the dad?”

“I met him today. I doubt he’s involved. He’s a drunk, but with reason. Wife committed suicide last Valentine’s Day. His son is all he’s got left.”

“What makes you think it’s one of mine?”

“Remember that Kerry case a couple years back?”

Josh swiveled in his chair. They stared back at him. Forever frozen. Forever lost. Forever pinned to his mural of tears. Some of the photos were almost fifty years old, curled at the edges with age. The most recent was from four months ago.

Josh scanned the photos until he found her, low down on the left. Jessica Kerry, a six-year old who was snatched from a mall in Portland during the Christmas season almost three years before. She was blonde and freckled, captured with one bottom tooth missing.

There were exactly seven hundred and seventy-eight photos on the wall, and Josh knew each one by name. It averaged out to fifteen or sixteen new cases a year, although some years there had been almost no disappearances, and other years, like 1998, there had been more than thirty.

On the surface there was nothing to link the cases, other than the fact that they all disappeared without a trace. The kids were Black, White, Hispanic and Asian. They were from every part of the country and every socio-economic class.

On top of that, all the cases were flimsy on evidence. More often than not, there were no witnesses. When someone *had* seen something, the description of the suspect was always different. One time it was an older white man with silver hair. Next it was an African American woman in a business suit. Then it was a twenty-something hippie type with dreadlocks who smelled like patchouli and B.O. Always different. The suspects were as varied as the kids who went missing.

Before computers caught up, and before Josh Metcalf came along with his deep and never-ending personal obsession, law enforcement had never connected the dots between the cases. There were only a few connections, but they were there.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, there was blood found at the scene. We typed it. It’s not human.”

“Lamb’s blood?”

“You got it.”

Josh's eyes travelled across the wall of faces until he found her. The red hair. The Coke bottle green eyes. She haunted him. "I'll see you in about five hours."

According to Hollywood, FBI Agents travel by special jet. In reality, they are subjected to the same travelling schedules and frustrations as the average American citizen. They even fly coach.

The earliest flight he was able to book was on Alaska Airlines, and it didn't leave Dulles until 5:10 PM. With the time change he would get into Portland, Oregon, just before eight. He choked back his frustration and booked the flight online, then called Special Agent Carl Robertson to let him know when he would arrive. Carl offered to pick him up and drive him the hour and a half to Seaside.

Josh left the office at two-thirty and headed to his Falls Church, Virginia, townhome to pack a bag, take a quick shower and change his suit. He was back on the road twenty minutes later, and made it to the airport in less than thirty minutes.

The metal briefcase that held his Glock 22 firearm and ammunition had to be checked, and he waited while it went through the security screening. Once it cleared the Officer handed back the key to the protective case, and Josh found a Starbucks.

He bought a large coffee and a Washington Post with which to pass the time until boarding, and a blueberry-bran muffin and a fruit and cheese platter to take onboard for his dinner.

The flight was uneventful, but after almost six hours of cramming his 6'3" frame into a coach seat, he was stiff and fighting a dull headache. Carl met him at baggage claim, and led him through the short-term lot to his company issued Chevy Suburban.

Josh placed his bags in the trunk and took a minute to load his Glock, which he holstered against his ribcage. Once ensconced in the passenger seat, he asked Carl if there were any new developments in the case.

"There's been nothing. The vendor remembers Jack. Says he was alone. Bought a couple of hotdogs and drinks. We found the dogs and the two spilled drinks about fifty feet away. One of the dogs had a bite out of it."

Carl paused as he paid the cashier, pulled through the gate and navigated the twists and turns toward the onramp for I-205 South. Once they were on the freeway he pulled a file folder out of the center console and passed it to Josh.

"It's all in there, if you want to catch yourself up."

Attached to the inside page was a picture of the boy. Jack Barbetti was a good-looking kid. He had pale brown hair cut close to his head and large almond shaped brown eyes. His teeth would require expensive orthodontic work. Smooth skinned and lanky, his cheekbones were just starting to push out with the promise of the man he would become.

Would have become. Josh felt the familiar ache in his chest. If Jack Barbetti was case number seven hundred and seventy-nine, he would never be seen again.

The Barbetti home was on a small street of clapboard single level homes, a block and a half off the beach. It was painted a bright yellow with pale blue trim, and the yard was artfully appointed with tufts of sea grass and driftwood.

The front door had a two-foot square inlay of blue and white sea glass, which surrounded the word "Welcome" in shades of green. The windows were aglow, making the home look incongruously cheerful.

There was a makeshift shrine around the mailbox; a pile of wilting flower arrangements still in their plastic, a few teddy bears and a large sign that said “May God bless Jack and bring him home safe!”

The smell of brine and rotting fish assaulted Josh’s nostrils as he emerged from the vehicle and stretched out his long frame. He could hear the waves crashing against the shore. Patches of beach were lit by the dim glow of lamps, and beyond lay the vast black of the Pacific.

He tightened his tie and buttoned his suit jacket, then followed Carl up the path. A battered red Ford F-150 was tucked into the left side of the carport, the other side was vacant save the oil stain on the cracked concrete.

There was a tinfoil-wrapped casserole on the stoop, and Carl picked it up and took a peek at the attached card. It smelled like noodles and cheese.

“I let Mr. Barbetti know we were coming,” he said quietly as he knocked on the door.

They heard shuffling inside, and a moment later the door opened. Keaton Barbetti might once have been a handsome man, but grief and alcohol had taken their toll. His sandy hair was tangled and sticking up on end. His blue eyes were bleary and puffed with tears and lack of sleep.

He was barefoot, wearing grey sweatpants and an Oregon Ducks t-shirt with a rip near the left armpit. A week’s worth of scruff covered his face and the scent of whisky was coming off him in waves, like cartoon stink lines. Josh did his best not to wrinkle his nose.

“The FBI are bringing me food now?” His voice was raw with grief.

Carl gave him a half smile. “Trust me, you wouldn’t want anything I managed to cook.”

Without another word, Mr. Barbetti stepped back from the door and shuffled into the living room, leaving the Agents to close the door and follow him in. Carl left the casserole on the hall table on top of a pile of unopened bills.

The living room was a mess of scattered bottles, newspapers and take-out wrappers from Taco Bell and Subway. Keaton Barbetti sat down on the couch and reached for a glass of amber liquid in which a couple of ice cubes were melting. They clinked against the side of the glass as he took a long swallow.

Despite its more recent neglect, it was obvious a woman had once lived in the home. The late Mrs. Barbetti’s touch was everywhere; in the seashell lamp on the side table, the overstuffed yellow cotton couch and chair, and the rainbow rag rug that covered the hardwood floor.

The walls were covered with paintings of ocean and forest scenes. Josh spied an “EB” neatly scripted in the lower corner of the nearest painting, a beach scene in which a young boy was building a sandcastle.

It took him a moment to realize the artist must have been Emma Barbetti. To his untrained eye she’d had talent. The ocean was deep and mysterious, the waves somehow alive, and the curve of the boy’s back managed to capture the brief innocence of toddlerhood. He wondered if the boy was Jack, and his chest tightened with frustration.

How many more? How many more innocent children would disappear into the abyss while he chased after them in utter futility? Would he go to his grave still chasing these shadow children, never knowing what had happened to them?

He turned back to Keaton Barbetti, yet another frantic and terrified parent in another sad living room looking at him with the same desperate hope. And once again he had no hope to give. He never did. It was his life, and he felt like the worst kind of failure.

“Mr. Barbetti, I’m Senior Special Agent Joshua Metcalf of the FBI. I’m here to help find your son.” He tried to sound calm and authoritative, like an FBI Agent should, but he felt like such a fraud.

“Oh yeah? And how are you going to do that?”

“The first thing I’d like to do is ask you a few questions.”

"Look, I appreciate your help." Keaton Barbetti dropped his empty glass onto the coffee table with a clumsy clatter. "I really do. I hear you came all the way from DC. But I don't see how going through the whole story for the millionth time is going to help."

"It probably won't." Josh sat down in the chair across from him and loosened his tie. "I'm up to speed on the particulars of this case, Mr. Barbetti. But I have a few questions about Jack that no one has asked you yet. Depending on your answers, we may have a great deal more to discuss."

That seemed to get his attention. "OK, shoot."

"This might seem like a very strange question, so bear with me." Josh glanced at Carl, who gave a small nod of encouragement.

"Mr. Barbetti, is your son, um, special in any way?"

"Special? What do you mean?"

"Does Jack have any abilities that would be considered...abnormal?"

"He's really smart. He's tested at a genius level. The school keeps talking about skipping a grade, but he doesn't want to move ahead of his friends. Is that what you mean?"

Josh frowned. "That might be significant. But does he have any, um... psychic abilities? Like mind reading, or predicting the future, or being able to move objects with his mind?"

"Moving objects with his *mind*? Can people seriously do that?"

"You'd be surprised."

"No. Definitely not," Mr. Barbetti said with a smirk. "He's never once changed the TV without the remote, or passed me the salt without using his hands."

"What about when he was younger? Did he ever talk about dreams that came true, or ghosts visiting him, or anything?"

That seemed to stop him cold. "Well, yes, now that you mention it. Why?"

Josh leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. No matter how many times he did this, it never got any easier.

"What kind of ability does Jack have, Mr. Barbetti?"

"Well, I wouldn't really say he has *any* ability. It's been a long time since any of this happened, but...I just don't see how this has anything to do with Jack's disappearance."

"Please, just humor me," Josh said.

After a moment Keaton Barbetti nodded. The bottle clinked against the edge of the glass as he poured himself another three fingers and took a hefty swallow.

"Look, Agent Metcalf. I was raised in a good old-fashioned Italian Catholic home. We ate fish on Fridays, I was an altar boy, went to mass every week, the whole shebang. My wife was raised the same way.

"When my son was three he started talking about seeing people who weren't there, how they were asking him to do things for them. We took him to a Priest. The Priest told us he was possessed. He talked about doing an exorcism, and it freaked us out." He drained his glass, and Josh noticed his hands were shaking.

"My wife was especially freaked out. She'd gone through the same thing when she was a girl. She told me about it that night, after we'd visited with the Priest. When she was little, she was terrified of this old lady who would try to get her to do mean things to other people. She'd do them, and then get in trouble with her parents, and the old lady would laugh. My wife said it took her a long time to realize no one else could see this woman, or any of the other people who tried to talk to her." Despite the amount of alcohol that must have been coursing through his veins, his eyes were sober.

"Emma managed to gain control of this, *thing*, whatever it was. She had to work very hard at it, at shutting out the 'lost people', as she called them. Eventually they stopped trying to reach her. Or so she said. Now I, well...I have my doubts given her, um..."

"I know how your wife died, Mr. Barbetti," Josh said softly.

"My wife didn't kill herself. Suicide is a mortal sin."

Josh noted the stubborn set of Mr. Barbetti's shoulders and nodded. "All right. What happened with Jack?"

"Right, well. She worked with Jack to block his visitors. I don't know all that went on between them. I was too chicken to get involved. After a time Jack stopped talking about that kind of stuff. Emma seemed pleased, said Jack was really strong. I was just relieved it, whatever *it* was, was over with."

"Mr. Barbetti, do you think Jack was still seeing these 'people'?"

"I don't know. He never said anything to me if he did. Why?"

"Do you think he would have talked to anyone else? A teacher at school, or his friends?" Josh pulled a pen and notepad out of his breast pocket.

"I...don't know. Maybe. Please, what's this about?"

"I need to talk to Jack's friends. I'll also need access to his medical and school records. Has he seen a psychologist or anything? If so I'll need to talk to him or her as well."

"What? Why?"

"I want to know if anyone had knowledge of Jack's abilities." Josh snapped his fingers and made a note in his book. "The Priest you took Jack to. What church was it?"

"What in the world is this all about?" Keaton Barbetti stood up, knocking some newspapers to the floor in his agitation.

"I'm sorry." Josh took a breath, and put his notebook back in his pocket. "Of course, please sit down and I'll explain what I can." He waited until Keaton sat on the edge of the couch, and then cleared his throat.

"For the past decade I've been heading a large missing children investigation. Since the 1960's over seven hundred kids have gone missing across the U.S. I believe, although not everyone agrees, these cases are linked. And I think your son might be one of them."

"How? Why?"

"Because all these children have some form of ESP, whether it's telepathy, precognition, telekinesis, or something else."

"I don't know what those things are. You seriously think Jack was kidnapped because he used to talk to ghosts?"

"Yes, I do. That's not the only connection. The lamb's blood left at the scene is a major clue. Sometimes there's just a drop, sometimes more. But it's always there, like a calling card of some kind."

"Seven *hundred* kids? Are you freaking *serious*?"

"Seven hundred and seventy-eight, actually. Not including your son."

"If that many kids have gone missing, how come it's not on CNN or something?"

"Because over fifteen thousand kids go missing *every year*. Seven hundred and seventy-eight kids seems like a lot, but over the course of fifty years it's just a drop in the bucket."

"Fifty years? This has been going on for *fifty years*?"

"Yes, sir. I believe so."

"So...what? Does that mean you know who took Jack?"

"I wish I did. I suspect this is being done by a large organization. They have a lot of resources, and many people involved. The kids always disappear without a trace. I believe they are being taken because of their special abilities, but for what purpose? I just don't know. But I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"I strongly believe your son is still alive. I think they all are. No bodies have ever turned up, not ever. Not *one*. So that gives me hope. And if we can find just one of them, I think we'll find them all."

"But so far you haven't found *any* of them, right?"

“That’s true. But it only takes one.” Josh spoke with more confidence than he felt. It had been ten years since he first linked the cases, and his confidence was pretty much shot. But he would never give up.

“Somehow this organization is finding out about these kids. Finding out what they can do. If I can figure out how they’re getting their information, that just might be the bit of thread I need to unravel this whole thing.”

Chapter Seven

“The Telekinetic kids were extra special. They got taken somewhere else.”

“What? Rowan...Rowan! Can you hear me?”

“They were the Inner Circle...”

“Rowan? You are freaking me out! Wake up!” Dan sounded like he was yelling through miles of pillowy cotton.

Slap!

Distant fire prickled my right cheek.

“Uhhhhh...”

“Rowan, wake up!”

Slap!

The left cheek this time.

“Whaaaaa...”

I couldn’t open my eyes. My eyelids had bricks on them. Why were there bricks on my eyelids?

“Rowan!” Dan’s worried face swam into focus, hovering over mine.

“Oh, shit. They *are* open.”

“What?”

“My eyes.”

“What? Can you see me? Are you OK?” Dan’s worried face floated above me like a balloon.

“You have a booger in your right nostril.”

“Rowan, seriously...what the *hell*?”

“Did you slap me?” My cheeks were burning.

“Yeah, sorry. I didn’t know what else to do. Are you OK?”

“I could fire you for that.”

“You go right ahead. Can you sit up?”

“I think so.” He helped me anyway, supporting my back and not letting go until he was certain I wasn’t going to flop backward and concuss myself on the floor.

“What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know. That card...”

“Right.” He grabbed it off the floor. “‘Ricordare, Ritornare’. I didn’t know you spoke Italian?”

“I don’t.”

“Then how did you know it meant ‘Remember, Return?’”

“I don’t know. Can I see it?” Dan pulled it into his chest, clearly wondering if I would pass out at the mere sight of it. Again.

“I’m OK, I promise.”

He handed the card over. There was nothing else on it. Just those two words, in bold print on white cardstock. How sinister could that possibly be?

And yet dread was pounding its spikes through my temples like coffin nails. I handed the card back to Dan with a shudder.

“Get rid of it for me?”

“Of course.” He stuffed it into the pocket of his cargo pants and helped me to my feet. I was shaky, my legs felt like rubber. Dan shoved a chair under me and I sat down with an embarrassed laugh.

“Sorry. I really don’t know what that was all about.”

“Do you think you should go see a doctor? Maybe your blood pressure dipped or something. My mom gets that a lot, then she falls over just like you did.”

“Isn’t she in her eighties?” I lifted an eyebrow in his direction.

“Well, yeah...”

“Thanks, Dan. I think I’m OK.” He was still frowning with worry. “Are the latest CCD images in?”

I waited him out. Dan was a smart man. He understood the futility of arguing with a stubborn redhead. He gave in with a sigh.

“About twenty minutes ago. Would you like me to run them through the star catalogue match?”

“That would be great.” I tried to stand and realized just how shaky I still was. “Maybe I’ll head home early. Do you mind?”

“I think that’s the first sensible thing you’ve said in the last hour. Go home, get some rest, do whatever else it is you do when you’re not busy being a science nerd.”

I laughed. “OK, thanks.”

He helped me on with my coat and handed me my purse.

“See you tomorrow night? Wait! Are you sure you don’t want me to check...”

“I’ve got it.” And with that he pushed me through the door and slammed it in my face.

Like most medium sized towns, Las Cruces, New Mexico, had been hit hard by the economic downturn.

During the real estate crash, I took advantage of a steady job and a hefty savings account to buy my first home. A year before the house would have been way above my means. I had patiently worked through the red tape that came with buying a foreclosed home, and was proud to be in my thirties and mortgage free.

The house was located in a newer subdivision off El Camino Real on the north end of Las Cruces. The development was full of beige stucco houses with Spanish tile roofs. In the back corner, my house stuck out like a sore thumb.

It looked like a child had put it together. Five white blocks of varying sizes were stacked in a random way and then linked by a central courtyard. The inside had two bedrooms and a den spread out across twenty-two hundred square feet.

It took almost forty-five minutes to get home from the White Sands Missile Range, but it was worth it to live off the base. I had lived on base at WSMR for six months after my transfer, and that was plenty.

After getting my Masters in Aeronautics and Astronautics from M.I.T, I had moved the forty minutes to Westford, Massachusetts, to work on improving the Haystack Long Range Imaging Radar. After more than a decade of greenery, apple orchards, and New England winters, the move to New Mexico three years ago had been a huge adjustment.

Las Cruces, or “City of Crosses”, was a combination of Old Mexico and Old West. Modern conveniences like Albertsons and the drive-thru Starbucks were slapped on top of the old town like a fresh coat of paint that barely covered the rough grain of the wood underneath. The Rio Grande cut a path across the west side of the town, and to the east the Organ Mountains stood sentry like ancient guards.

Due to proximity, it housed many employees of the White Sands Missile Range and the White Sands Test Facility, as well as students from New Mexico State University. It was through NMSU that I had just completed my Ph.D.

The eastern sky was aglow as I pulled my yellow FJ Cruiser into the garage. I had held it together during the drive home, but as I let myself into the kitchen, I began to shake. The walls pushed inward, threatening to collapse on top of me like a weighted blanket. Fighting the urge to escape back into the emerging daylight, I took a big, trembling breath. The walls receded on my exhale, so I did it again. And then again.

Light. I needed light.

The house was as I had left it, but as I moved from room to room turning on lamps, nothing felt the same. I kept expecting to see something out of place; a painting hanging askew, a vase tipped over, the corner of a rug turned up. But there was nothing.

I finished in the living room, looking around as though I were a guest. The couches were made of buttery leather, accented with orange and plum throw cushions. The table lamps were made of orange glass, and a revolving rosewood coffee table stood in the center of the room. The artwork was bright and abstract, by artists such as Darlene Keefe and Sharon Cummings.

Most of the furniture in the house was mid-century modern, a style I found pleasing to the eye. I had purchased the furniture and artwork with studied care; through time, I'd cobbled together a collection that made me feel at home.

Yet it all looked like an illusion. Like a stage pre-set with furniture and props. I stood with my hands on the back of the couch, waiting.

Waiting for what?

I could feel the anticipation in the surrounding stillness, like a held breath. The air throbbed in time with my heartbeat.

What actors would step out of the wings? And what story would they have to tell?

But the stillness remained. For once there was no one lurking in the dark corners, waiting to torment me.

It was *inside*. Like that stupid slogan about being the change you wanted to see in the world. The change was happening within.

I closed my eyes, shaking my head in denial.

Ricordare, Ritornare.

There was a cesspool of toxic junk churning deep inside me. It was spinning faster and faster, threatening to spill over the sides and burn me with memories.

Remember, Return.

My jaw clenched convulsively. My tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth. The tendons in my neck went as taut as violin strings. Was I having a seizure? I crumpled onto the couch, curling in on myself.

Ricordare! Ritornare!

"No! I'm not ready!" I screamed, terrifying myself even more. What? Ready for what?!

The tinkling of wind chimes. The earthy scent of hay and horses.

"Rowan, Rowan

Under the apple tree

Rowan, Rowan

Remember, Return to Me!"

A child's rhyme. A skipping rope chant. I could hear the slap of the rope hitting the ground. Again and again.

"Rowan (slap!) Rowan (slap!)

Under the (slap!) apple tree (slap!)

Rowan (slap!) Rowan (slap!)

Remember, (slap) Return to Me! (slap, slap!)

The rope was red plastic. It glowed in the last rays of the setting sun, flaming for a moment as it arced up over my head, and then winking out as it dove down into the shadows.

My feet found the air at just the right moment, missing the rope as it passed beneath them. I jumped and landed, jumped and landed.

My body was light as air, small and sturdy and perfect. I was burning with childfire.

"Rowan, Rowan."

With one last devilish wink, the sun dropped behind the mountains.

"Under the apple tree."

They were green and rocky and impossibly tall.

"Rowan, Rowan."

Before my child-eyes everything faded.

"Remember, Return to Me!"

Leaving nothing but shadows.