

Chapter 1

1

MARK STONE COULD STILL SMELL THE GREASE ON his hands.

No matter how hard he scrubbed or what fancy soap he used, the residue remained, stained into the creases of his fingers and caked under his fingernails. In a way, though, it was comforting. At least something in his life was still predictable. He gripped the steering wheel of his classic Mustang with both hands and willed his eyes to stay open. The hum of rubber on asphalt was almost hypnotic. It had been a long day at the shop, and he was ready to go home, soak in a hot shower until he puckered like a raisin, and get cozy with his pillow.

Outside, the headlights cut a swath of pale yellow light through the dense autumn darkness. Stars dotted the night like glitter on black felt. A pocked moon dangled low in the sky in front of him, a cratered carrot on the end of an unseen string, leading him home, home to the comfort of his bed.

His cell phone chimed the theme from *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Mark turned down the radio and flipped open the phone. It was Jeff Beaverson. “Jeffrey.”

“Hey, buddy. How goes it?”

Mark glanced at the dashboard clock—10:10. “Kinda late for you, isn’t it?”

Jeff laughed. “You know me too well. I was at my parents’

house installing a new hot water heater, and it took longer than I thought it would. I'm heading home now. Gonna walk in the door and drop myself right into bed. You in the car?"

"On my way home."

"Boy, you're putting in some late hours."

"Yeah, business is good right now. Keeps my mind off... stuff. You know."

"I know, buddy. I've been thinking about you. Thought I'd check in and make sure we're still on for tomorrow."

Tomorrow. Saturday. He and Jeff were scheduled to meet for breakfast at The Victory.

On the radio, John Mellencamp was belting out "Small Town."

"Yeah. Seven o'clock. You still... kay with... at?"

"Sure. Where are you? You're breakin' up."

"Mill Road. Down...oopers Hollow... lasts a... ittle."

Mark paused and tapped his hand to the beat of the music. Jeff's voice boomed into his ear. "Am I back? Can you hear me now?"

"Yeah, I can hear you fine now," Mark said with a laugh.

Jeff snorted into the phone. "I always lose my bars along that stretch. Hey, I've been meaning to ask you..."

Jeff's voice was suddenly drowned by a hideous screaming. Not just one voice, but a multitude of voices mingling and colliding, merging and blending in a cacophony of wails and groans, grunts and cries. A million mouths weeping and howling in bone-crunching pain. Agony. As if their skin was being peeled off inch by inch and their burning anguish was somehow captured on audio. It rose in volume, lasted maybe five, six seconds, then stopped just as abruptly as it had started.

Mark clicked off the radio and pressed the phone tighter

against his ear. Goose bumps crawled over his arms. “Jeff? You OK, man?”

There was a pause, then, “Yeah. Yes. I’m fine. What the blazes was that? Did you hear it?”

Mark massaged the steering wheel with his left hand. “Yeah, I heard it. Sounded like something out of some horror movie.” *Or hell. Weeping and gnashing of teeth.* “Weird.”

“Maybe our signals got tangled with something else. Weird is right. Anyway, I’ve been wanting to ask you—and we can talk more about it tomorrow if you want—how are you and Cheryl doing?”

Mark clenched his jaw, pressing his molars together. Cheryl. *Don’t make me go there, Jeff. It’s too soon.* “I don’t know. I think it’s over.”

“Over?”

Over. Finished. Kaput. I blew it, and now I have to live with it. “Nothing official yet. But she pretty much made it clear she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

Jeff paused and sighed into the phone. “Man, I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

Mark slowed the Mustang around a hairpin turn. He didn’t want to talk about this now. He wasn’t ready. And besides, it was late, and he was tired. “No. I don’t even think there’s anything more *I* can do. Can we talk about it in the morning?”

“Absolutely. I just... wait. Hang on a sec. What’s this guy—”

The sound of screeching tires filled the receiver. Rubber howling against asphalt. Then a low earthy rumble... Jeff grunting... crunching metal and shattering glass.

Mark leaned heavy on the brake, and the Mustang fishtailed to a stop. The engine growled impatiently. “Jeff? You there?”

Nothing. Not even static. His pulse throbbed in his ears.

Mark dialed Jeff’s number. Four rings. “Hello, this is Jeff.”

Voice mail. Great. “You know what to do.” A woman’s voice came on. “To leave a voice message, press one or wait for the tone. To—”

Mark’s thumb skidded over the keypad, dialing 911.

2

Sheriff Wiley Hickock sidestepped down the steep embankment, sweeping the light from his flashlight to and fro in a short arc. Up above, a couple of firefighters were winding a hose; two others were stripping out of their gear. Lights flashed in an even rhythm, illuminating the area in a slow strobe of red and white. Red, red, white; red, red, white. The pungent smell of melted rubber and burnt flesh permeated the air. Three towers holding four floodlights each lit up the area like a baseball stadium during a night game.

When he reached the bottom, Hickock surveyed the ball of twisted, smoldering metal that had once been a Honda Civic before it bulldozed ten feet of oak saplings and wrapped around the scarred trunk of a mature walnut tree. Tongues of smoke curled from the misshapen steel and licked at the leaves of the walnut. A large swath of ground had been dug up, exposing the dark, rich soil.

Deputy Jessica Foreman headed toward him. Her dark russet hair looked like it had been hastily pulled back in a loose ponytail. Her uniform was wrinkled, a road map of creases. Her hands were sheathed in blackened latex gloves.

Wiley frowned as she approached. “Sorry to get you out here on your day off, Jess. Thanks for helping out, though.”

Jess tugged off the latex gloves and swept a rebellious lock of hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. “Do what’s gotta be done, right?”

Wiley squinted and ran a finger over his mustache. “That’s

what they say. When did fire and EMS get here?" There were still some firefighters milling around the wreckage, poking at it with their axes. Two paramedics were standing off to the right, talking and laughing.

"Bout twenty minutes ago. Didn't take long to douse the fire." She glanced at the paramedics. "No need for those guys. Did you notice the skid marks on the road?"

Wiley nodded, keeping his eyes on what barely resembled a car. The driver was still in there. He could see his rigid, charred body still smoldering. Mouth open in a frozen scream. Lips peeled back. Back arched. Fingers curled around the steering wheel. He'd seen it only once before—a burned body. It was revolting, and yet there was something about it that held his gaze, as if the burnt stiff had reached out with those bony, black fingers and grabbed his eyeballs—*Look at me!*

He shut his eyes tight, trying to push the memory of the *other* burnt corpse from his mind. He knew it would never leave, though. It was seared there by some psycho-*something* branding iron.

Wiley opened his eyes and blinked twice. *Concentrate*. "Yup. Two sets of 'em. But only one car. I don't like it. Loose ends. What's your take?"

Jess shrugged and nodded toward the wreck. "Got run off the road by a drunk or sleeper, lost control, and met Mr. Tree."

"You sound fairly certain. Got a witness?"

Jess turned and pointed over her shoulder. "Almost. See that guy over there?"

Wiley looked up the embankment and saw a thirty-something average joe in a faded gray T-shirt and grease-stained jeans leaning against a classic Mustang, hair disheveled, arms crossed, shoulders slumped, eyes blank. "Yeah. Who's he?"

"He was on the phone with—" She jerked her thumb toward

the wreck and the stiff. "Said he heard the accident happen and called it in. Got here before anyone else, but the car was already a torch. Name's Stone. Mark. Said our friend here said something like 'What's this guy doin?'" then he heard the wheels lock up and busting up stuff, then nothing."

Wiley eyed Stone again. In the light of the cruiser's strobes, his eyes looked like two lifeless chunks of coal. His mouth was a thin line, jaw firm.

Wiley turned his attention back to the Civic. "Anything else?"

"No. Not yet anyway."

They both stood quietly, studying the remains of the car, until a man's high-pitched voice from their right broke the silence. "Sheriff."

Wiley turned to see Harold Carpenter, volunteer fire chief, high-stepping through the tall grass, his chubby jowls jiggling like Jell-O with each movement. With his sagging cheeks, underbite, and heavy bloodshot eyes, the man looked like a bulldog.

Carpenter stopped in front of Wiley, flushed and out of breath. "Sheriff. What'd ya think?"

Wiley didn't even look at him. He kept his eyes on the corpse sitting behind the wheel. "Just got here, Harry. Don't think much yet."

Carpenter shoved a singed, brown leather wallet at Wiley. "Here's the driver's wallet. One of my guys retrieved it from the...uh...back pocket."

Wiley took the wallet and handed it to Jess. Opening it, she slipped out the driver's license. It was singed around the top edge. "Jeffrey David Beaverson."

"Did you run the plates yet?" Wiley asked.

Jess nodded. "Sure did. Same Beaverson."

3

It was a perfect day for a funeral. If such a thing existed.

The sky was a thick slab of slate suspended over the small town of Quarry, Maryland, coloring everything in drab hues of gray. A dense mist hung in the air, a blanket of moisture, covering the region in a damp clamminess. The air was cool but not cold, and there was no wind whatsoever.

Mark Stone walked from his car to the grave site, his black loafers sinking into the soft ground. With the exception of their little cluster of about twenty people, the cemetery was empty. Still and quiet. Eerie, Mark thought. For acres, granite headstones protruded from the ground like stained teeth, each memorializing somebody's loved one, lost forever. In the distance, maybe a hundred yards away, stood a mausoleum, a concrete angel perched on the roof above the doorway. Mark shuddered at the thought of a body lying inside. Dead and cold.

Mark looked to his right then to his left. The other mourners—friends and family of the Beaversons—were climbing out of their cars and making their way across the wet grass, shoulders slumped, heads bowed low. Men held black umbrellas against their shoulders; women held white tissues to their noses. A few trees dotted the landscape, their twisted, half-barren branches reaching into the gray sky as if begging for even a glimmer of life. But there was no life in a place like this. Only death.

Mark swallowed the lump that had become a permanent fixture in his throat and ran a sleeve across his eyes.

The reverend (Mahoney, was it?) stood beside the black, polished casket, faced Wendy Beaverson, and opened a little black book. He cleared his throat and began reading, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes

in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes..."

Mark looked across the casket at Wendy. Her red, swollen eyes leaked tears that coursed down her cheeks in long rivulets. Her honey-colored hair was pulled back in a tight bun, accentuating the sharp angles of her face. She wore a black knee-length overcoat buttoned to the collar. In her left arm sat little Gracie, clinging to her mommy's neck.

Poor kid. She'll never remember her daddy. He was a great guy, sweetheart.

Wendy's right arm was draped over Sara's shoulder. The eldest daughter, just five, leaned against Wendy's hip, her head fitting perfectly in the dip of her mother's waist.

A sob rose in Mark's throat, and he struggled to keep it under control. Death was a beastly thing. Showed no mercy at all. A daddy torn from his family; children left confused and empty; wife suddenly bearing the burden of raising two daughters by herself, no one to share joys and heartbreaks with. What a crock.

Reverend Mahoney continued talking, his monotone voice a fitting backdrop to the dismal atmosphere. "And so, as we bury Jeffrey today, it is true to say we bury one of us. We bury him in a cemetery..."

Cheryl had an arm around Wendy's shoulders, holding her tight. She always was the caring type. A real Mother Teresa. Mark wiped at his eyes again and watched his wife comfort his best friend's wife. Widow.

"...I have never yet heard anyone say there is a different heaven for each faith..."

A splinter of guilt stabbed at Mark's heart, and he was suddenly glad he and Cheryl had not yet had kids. He'd hurt

her enough. Ripped her heart out and tossed it in the garbage like last week's leftovers.

—*It's over, Mark. Done.*

—*Cher—Cheryl, wait... I—*

—*No! Wait? Wait for what? Wait for what, Mark? Your apology?*

—*Cheryl, please don't go—*

—*Shut up! You think saying you're sorry can make up for what you... what you did to me? To us?*

He would have never been able to bear knowing he'd not only betrayed Cheryl but betrayed a son or daughter, or both, as well. Hurting Cheryl was enough. More than enough. Seeing her now, he could barely stand to be in his own skin. If only. That's what he'd told himself a million times since she'd found out. If only this. If only that.

“...we are all the same before God...”

Life was full of *if onlys*, wasn't it? But the kick in the gut is that those *if onlys* become a phantom, a haunting, relentless ghost that clings to the soul like a parasite, slowly sucking the life from its host. But there's not a thing to be done about it. No one can change the past. What's done is done. Live with it.

Mahoney was still droning, “...we take nothing with us when we die...”

Cheryl looked up, and her gaze met Mark's. A knot twisted his stomach at the sight of her hollow eyes. They were once so brilliant, so alive, so...blue. The color of a Caribbean surf on a cloudless day. From somewhere deep in his *noodle* (that's what Cheryl would say) a memory surfaced. Mark didn't want it to surface, not now. Save it for some lonely time when he was parked on the sofa in front of the TV with a microwave dinner on a little folding tray.

The memory: sitting on a blanket in the park, Cheryl by

his side, her head on his shoulder, a cool breeze playing with her hair, bringing the scent of her shampoo so close he could almost smell it now. Cheryl tilts her face toward his.

—*What d’ya know, babycakes?*

—*I know I love you.*

—*Really? Forever and ever, cross your heart and hope to die?*

—*Forever and ever. Cross my heart and hope to die.*

But now those eyes were dull, muted by the pain of betrayal and the ache of death. Her face was drawn and pale, thinner than the last time he saw her.

I’m sorry, Cheryl. So sorry.

He wanted to scream the words, run to her and drop to his knees, but she would never forgive him. She held his stare for mere seconds, her eyes piercing his with a loneliness that he’d brought on.

Cheryl. Baby. Babycakes. I’m sorry.

“...So as we bury Jeffrey, we bury one of us...”

Mark shifted his weight, clasped his hands behind his back, and lowered his head, letting the mist cool the back of his neck.

When Mahoney finally finished, the mourners slowly cleared, whispering to each other. “Isn’t it a shame.” “What a horrible tragedy.” “The poor woman. Two little girls with no daddy, but didn’t they look precious.”

Back to life as they know it. Life goes on. For some.

Wendy approached the casket and rested her hand on the glossy surface. She whispered something Mark couldn’t quite make out. Little Gracie turned her head to look at the box that held her daddy, and Sara choked out a sob, her tender mouth twisting into a broken frown.

As Wendy passed Mark, she rested her hand on his forearm and squeezed. She didn’t say anything, but her eyes said it all: *Thanks for coming.*

Mark forced a smile and nodded.

Cheryl followed Wendy. As she passed in front of Mark, he took her arm in his hand. “Cheryl, I—”

“Don’t, Mark,” she said, her voice strained with grief. She looked at the ground and her chin quivered. “Don’t.”

Mark let his hand fall to his side and let his wife walk out of his life. Again.

Ten minutes later he was sitting behind the wheel of his Mustang, tiny raindrops pattering on the windshield. The mourners were mostly gone now, heading to the Beaversons’ home for the wake. He didn’t want to go but knew he had to at least make an appearance...for Wendy. His mind wasn’t on the wake, wasn’t even on the funeral. It was on the screams. They were as fresh in his mind today as when he’d first heard them a week ago.

He’d raced to Cooper’s Hollow after dialing 911. The first thing he saw was the gyrating orange glow of the fire on the horizon, retching a pillar of smoke as black as new charcoal into the night sky. The next thing he saw was Jeff’s Civic engulfed in angry flames and Jeff pinned behind the steering wheel, bloated and stiff. The sound of the fire was like a locomotive. The smell of burning fuel and flesh was hot in his lungs.

The rest of the night was a black blur, a nightmare that would surface piece by piece until the whole ghastly affair played itself out like some cut-’em-up horror movie in his head. And he would be forced to watch, eyelids taped open and head held in place. The last thing he remembered was arriving home, falling into bed, and dreaming of Jeff’s blackened corpse writhing in anguish as flames licked at his flesh and wrapped his body in hell’s chains.

Mark ran his hands over his face, feeling the bristles of his morning stubble, a reminder that he hadn’t shaved. He could still

hear the screams, awful sounds, like thousands, no, millions, of voices lifted in agony, a chorus of misery and anguish. Every time the sounds of the outside world died and silence crept in like a demon, the screams were there, echoing through his head, filling his ears with the sound of the tortured. If it was nothing more than tangled signals like Jeff had suggested, where was the signal coming from? Hell, that's where.

He shut his eyes and pressed both palms to his forehead. Maybe the wake would take his mind off things.

4

Judge sat in an old brown metal desk chair in the center of a basement room, elbows resting on the armrests, fingertips lightly pressed together, forming a tent in front of his face. A gray metal desk sat against one wall, its surface covered with photo clippings and notebook paper scrawled with notes. To the left of the desk stood a metal bookshelf, empty except for one stack of spiral notebooks and manila file folders. To the right of the bookshelf stood a gray, metal, four-drawer locking file cabinet.

Everything was metal. Firm. Dependable. Solid.
Fire resistant.

In the center of the room, a single 60-watt bulb dangled from the ceiling, casting sharp shadows on the walls.

All four walls were covered with a collage of photos. A closer look would reveal that all the pictures were of four women in particular. One for each wall.

His four victims.

No, not victims. No way. They weren't victims. *She* was a victim. *Katie* was. *They* were perpetrators. Guilty and getting exactly what they deserved. Justice.

He stood, walked over to the wall behind the desk, and stared

at a photo of a brown-haired woman in a miniskirt and halter top. Amber. He knew everything about her. Probably more than she knew about herself.

She got off work every night at ten. Took exactly thirty-seven seconds to walk the forty-five yards to her car. Drove a late model Chevy Cavalier that she bought from Prairie View Pre-Owned Cars eight months ago. License plate: LUV ME. Drove the five miles to her second-floor apartment in just under ten minutes, depending on traffic flow and traffic light patterns. She was thirty-one, five-six, hazel eyes, and drop-dead gorgeous.

Drop dead, gorgeous.

She *was* lovely, though, wasn't she?

But it wasn't about love. No way. Not even about desire or lust or hunger. He wasn't a pervert like some. Sure, he liked to look as much as the next guy, but when it came down to business, it wasn't about the needs of the flesh. It was about justice. And he was the judge and the jury.

That's why he called himself Judge.

She was guilty. They were all guilty.

He smiled and stroked the tuft of hair below his lower lip. He'd heard somewhere that it was called a soul patch. A fitting name. His soul needed to be patched.

He then smoothed his mustache with his left hand and gently stroked the photo with his right.

Justice would be served tonight. His heart beat a little faster at the thought, and his stomach fluttered. This is what he was born to do. Be an agent of justice. An enforcer of right.

An image flashed through his mind. A young girl, thirteen. Katie. She was innocent, and they killed her.

And he did nothing. Cowering like a frightened kitten, fighting the urge to vomit, struggling to find oxygen, he did nothing but watch in paralyzed horror.

Well, no more.

He glanced at his watch—8:27—and tapped a picture of Amber. “Soon.”

The plan was ready, everything down to the last detail. Details were good. He would carefully execute the plan, documenting everything.

Tonight. Justice.

It's gonna be a hot time in the old town tonight.

5

Amber Mann slipped off her apron and hung it on a brass hook on the wall. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, stood on her toes, and looked at herself in the small mirror that someone had hung a little too high for the averaged-height waitress.

“You outta here, hon?” Marge, her co-waitress for the evening, emerged from one of the bathroom stalls and went to wash her hands.

Amber smoothed her eyeliner, puckered her lips, and applied a thin layer of lip gloss. “Yup.” She glanced at the clock on the wall—the one with *Bertha's Diner* in fancy script painted across the face. Someone had given it to Bertha for the diner's twentieth anniversary. She didn't particularly care for the style, so she'd banished it to the lady's room. 9:57. “Three minutes and I'm punching out. I need every minute I can get.”

Marge chuckled and tilted her head to the side. “You goin' out tonight?”

Amber shot her a sideways look and a devilish grin. “What's it to ya, mommy dearest?” She quickly unbuttoned her uniform shirt, slipped it off, and replaced it with a black tank top with thin shoulder straps. Yanking her pants off, she pulled on a black miniskirt that barely covered her fanny. She then slid her feet into a pair of black pumps.

“Well, if you ain’t, you sure look good for just sittin’ ’round your ’partment.”

Amber laughed. “Yeah, I’m going out. Over to Bruno’s, see what kind of action is happening tonight.”

Marge put her hands on her hips and gave her a motherly look. “Well, be careful. Bruno’s ain’t the safest place for a girl lookin’ like you to be goin’. Lotsa tough guys tryin’ to impress the girls there.”

Amber stuffed her uniform in a pink duffle bag. She grinned wide. “Don’t worry about me, mommy. I can handle myself around the boys.”

“You doin’ anything special this weekend?” Marge said, drying her hands with a paper towel.

“Tomorrow I’m going over to my sister’s to spend some time with my nephew. You should see him; he’s so adorable. I just can’t get enough of him. How ’bout you? Got any big plans?”

Marge humphed. “Yeah, right. All Jim wants to do is sit around and watch football. The old goat. I’ll keep myself busy ’round the house, though.”

Amber looked at the clock again. “Hey, it’s time. Gotta run, Marge. Love ya, girl.” She pulled on a red coat and gave Marge a loose hug.

“Love ya, hon.”

They left the bathroom, and Amber headed for the back door. As she pushed through the door she heard Marge call out one more time, “You be careful now.”

She let the door close and breathed in a chestful of cool autumn air. Bruno’s should be hoppin’ tonight. And Mitch would be there. She could almost feel his thick arms around her waist as they danced, her head on his chest, breathing in his masculine scent. They would stay like that for hours, bodies intertwined, moving in unison to the steady rhythm of the

music, then go back to his place. It was perfect, heaven on earth if there ever was one.

She strode across the parking lot toward her car, heels clicking on the asphalt, echoing in the stillness of the evening. She hadn't told Marge about Mitch. He was a tattoo artist, had his own shop downtown. Mommy Marge would never approve. She watched over Amber like a mother hen, closer than her own mom did. Amber could just imagine what old Marge would say if she ever found—

She started and took a quick step to her left. A man was suddenly there, walking beside her, step for step. "Oh, hey. You scared me."

The man stopped and faced her. "Amber Mann?"

She stopped too. One hand rested on her duffle bag, the other hung loosely at her side. Somewhere in the distance, a few blocks away, a car horn honked. "Yes. Is something wrong?"

"Can I ask you a few questions?"

Amber brushed some hair off her face and tucked it behind her ear. She noticed her hand was suddenly shaking. "Uh, sure. Is something wrong?"

"No, ma'am. Nothing's wrong. Just need to ask you a few questions. It's about Mitch Young."

Mitch. Amber felt her stomach twist into a knot, like someone had gut-punched her. She knew what she had with Mitch wouldn't last. It couldn't. Her life didn't work that way. "Um." She bit on a fingernail, not sure if she wanted to answer questions, not sure she wanted to know Mitch's secrets. "I guess."

"Let's walk to your car," he said.

"Oh, OK." She turned and headed toward her Cavalier. She was within feet of the car when something exploded in the back of her head.

6

It was nearly half an hour later by the time Judge dragged Amber to the barn. He'd had to knock her several times to subdue her enough to get the ether over her mouth and nose. She was quite the feisty one. It was too messy, though, too sloppy. During the time it took, someone could have driven by or come out of the diner. But she was the first. Now he knew; he'd have to be more careful with the others.

He gripped her by the wrists and pulled her into a corner where a bed of straw had been prepared. Outside the barn, the dogs were barking like maniacs, over and over, nonstop. Judge kicked hard against the barn wall. "Quit your bawling! Or I'll roast you!" The racket ceased for maybe five, six seconds—long enough to notice the sound of crickets in the distance—then resumed in a flurry of yelps and coughs.

Removing a pocketknife, he flipped it open and cut the duct tape from Amber's wrists and ankles. Just a precaution during the long ride over. He didn't need her coming to and throwing a hissy fit in the backseat while he was driving. Safety first.

She moaned and tried to roll over, but a grimace twisted her face and she relaxed again, letting out a strained sigh. He could see two goose eggs on her head but knew there were more. He'd walloped her at least three times.

"Sleep tight, beautiful," he said, squatting beside her. "You're gonna have one killer headache when you wake up."

The dogs continued their onslaught, like an old smoker trying to clear fluid from his lungs. Judge stood and kicked the boards again. "Shut up!"

Placing his hands on his hips, he looked around the barn. Enough light from the full moon was seeping through the cracks between the wall planks to dust the spacious interior

with soft blue light. Straw, strewn across the floor like a loosely woven carpet, glistened under each moon ray. It was actually a very pleasant evening. What a shame to have to ruin it for little miss LUV ME here.

He stared at her for a moment, taking in her graceful, feminine form. She lay on her side, hand resting on her head, long legs slightly crossed. She was a fine specimen, indeed. But it wasn't about that, he reminded himself. It was about justice and justice only. Nothing more, nothing less. Don't personalize it.

But still, he couldn't deny the fact that she was beautiful. Maybe just a peek under that skirt. She would never know—

No! It's not like that. I'm not a monster.

He went outside, walked around to the back of the barn, and stopped in front of two metal dog kennels. Stooping to unlock them, he said, "Now boys, you keep good watch over our guest. And don't stray too far. She's gonna get lonely, you hear?"

7

Amber rolled onto her back and lifted both hands to her forehead. Her whole skull throbbed, felt like it would explode any second. She peeled her eyes open and noticed the first rays of light filtering through rough-planked walls, dust swirling in the air. Something crunched beneath her. Where was she? What happened last night? Her mind spun. She winced and ran a hand gently over her head. Where did she get these lumps? So tender. She moaned and tried to push herself to a sitting position, but her body felt like it was filled with lead, and her muscles refused to cooperate. Finally, she settled on scooting herself back and propping up on the mound of straw.

Straw? Wait a minute. She was on a bed of straw. She looked around again. Wooden planks rose vertically on either side of her about fifteen feet into the air, held together by wooden

beams. A few slanted bars of sunlight slipped past the gaps in the planks and dotted the floor with golden light. Straw was scattered over the worn flooring.

Amber's mind was slowly beginning to piece things together. Straw. Wood. Beams. She was in a barn. For the first time since regaining consciousness, she drew in a long breath. Yes, definitely a barn. The musty, earthy odor of straw and rotting hay and who-knows-how-old animal dung was unmistakable.

She looked around. The barn was obviously abandoned. There were no stacks of bales, no tools, no tractors, and as she listened, no rustle of animals. As far as she could tell, she was the only occupant. She leaned to her left and pressed her face against a gap between two wall planks. Outside the barn, the ground sloped away toward what looked like an overgrown pasture. On the other side of the field, maybe a quarter mile away, stood a line of trees that stretched as far as she could see to the left and right. North and south. The sun peeked out just over the treetops, and beyond that, fingers of pink light reached into the pale blue sky.

A jolt of panic, like a thousand-volt shock, buzzed through her nerves.

Where was she? How did she get here? And how did her head get so banged up? The questions stood like giant bullies, refusing to leave until answered. Like her dad. An image of him towering over her, thick arms crossed, forehead wrinkled, asking over and over again "How many bales today?" flashed through her mind. How many bales? She was only nine. She just wanted to do a nine-year-old's worth of chores and go play. But he made her work and work and work. And if she didn't make her quota? Well, well, "You're not goin' anywhere, missy, until you finish your chores." He'd corner her and fire questions at her, quizzing her on mundane farm facts—how many square

feet in an acre, how many acres in a square mile, how many quarts in a peck and pecks in a bushel—and wouldn't let her eat or sleep until she answered every one correctly. The bully.

But this time she had an answer, one that made her shiver. She'd been kidnapped. Taken against her will. Abducted. Apparently beaten and...she didn't even want to think about what else. Instinctively, she tugged at her skirt, wishing she'd worn pants.

Slowly, like a TV station slowly picking up the signal from a rotary antenna, her memory faded in. She left work last night and a man approached her in the parking lot. She remembered his face, lean and angular, mustache and patch of hair under his bottom lip. But that was all. Just his face. He'd asked her a question, she knew that. But what the question was, was yet another question. Unanswered.

And what about Liz? She was supposed to visit Liz and Christopher today. Surely they'd miss her and report it, right? They'd have cops looking for her before the day was over. Or maybe not. Maybe Liz would just assume something came up, something more important. But if Liz didn't report it, surely Mitch would. She was supposed to meet him last night. Mitch. He must have been worried sick when she didn't show. That settled it in her mind. By the end of the day, there would be a massive search effort underway. There had to be. Somebody would miss her.

She pulled her knees up and looked out between the planks again. Suddenly, a furry, toothy face appeared only inches away, mouth curled into a snarl. A dog! Then another face appeared. Two dogs! Dobermans. Outside the barn. The dogs began clawing at the planks, snarling and growling. Amber tried to push herself away from the wall, but her hand slipped on the

straw, and she tumbled to her side. A jolt of pain shot up her neck and pounded in her head, and she let out a scream.

“I see you’re awake,” a voice said from one of the far corners. A man’s voice.

Amber started and sat up straight, her head scolding her for the sudden movement. She searched the far corners of the barn and noticed a man standing in one. He was wearing jeans and tanned leather work boots. The rest of his body was hidden in the shadows.

“Good morning,” he said. His voice was in no way cheerful but not altogether sinister either. The voice from last night. This was the man she’d met in the parking lot. And no doubt the man who gave her the killer headache and brought her here.

Amber tried to push farther back against the wall, but she was already pressed against it. She tugged again at her skirt. “Who are you?”

The man shifted his weight and crossed one leg over the other. “No need to bother with names here. Let’s not make this personal. You can just call me Judge. There’s a gallon of water and bag of apples to your right. That should hold you over for now.”

The dogs to Amber’s left began chewing at the wooden planks, snarling, their tongues flitting in and out of their mouths. Amber shot them a wary look.

“Don’t worry about them,” the man said. “They can’t get in. They’re to keep you from getting out. Don’t even think about making a run for it. We’re miles from nowhere, and the dogs are very hungry. Do you know what it’s like to be eaten alive? Meat pulled from your bones while you’re still kicking and screaming? No, of course you don’t. And trust me, you don’t want to find out.”

Amber covered her mouth with her hand and choked back a sob. Her eyes burned with tears, and a lump the size of one of

those apples had lodged in her throat. Fear had wrapped its bony fingers around her neck and tightened its grip. “What—what are you gonna do with me? Why am I here? What do you want?”

The man chuckled and uncrossed his legs. “Soon enough, my dear. You’ll get answers to all your questions soon enough. You’ll be getting some company too. I don’t want you getting lonely all the way out here. The dogs are good for some things, but they’re lousy conversationalists.”

There was a long moment of silence, and though she couldn’t see them, masked by the shadow as they were, she could feel his eyes on her. And it made her skin crawl.

Finally, he walked to a cutout door in the middle of the larger, rolling barn door, opened it, and paused, still obscured by a slanting shadow. “Until later, Amber.” And then he was gone. She heard a lock slide into place and something large and heavy thud against the door at the bottom.

To her left, the Dobermans continued their gnawing and chewing.

8

It was almost three o’clock in the afternoon when Mark finally took a break to eat lunch. After the funeral yesterday he’d gone to the wake and numbly stood in a corner of the den in Jeff’s home (the same den where he’d spent countless hours playing poker, shooting pool, and rooting for the Washington Redskins) nursing his iced tea and watching Cheryl mingle with their friends. Correction, *her* friends. After she left him and the news became public, *their* friends suddenly wanted nothing to do with him. Jeff and Wendy were the only ones who had remained loyal. The rest had proven to be fair-weather friends—the worst kind.

He’d spent less than an hour at the wake, returned home, fell

onto the sofa, clicked on the flat screen, and zoned out. How long he sat there or what he watched he had no idea. But it was late, wee-hours-of-the-morning late, by the time exhaustion finally overtook him. When he'd had enough, he trudged into the bedroom, the one he *used* to share with his wife, and collapsed on the bed, falling quickly asleep still wearing his dress clothes.

This morning he'd debated whether to go into work or not. It was, after all, Saturday. He could stay home and play zombie all day, regretting how his life had turned out, regretting every poor decision he'd ever made, regretting there was nothing he could have done to save Jeff. Or he could go to the garage, lose himself in some engine or transmission, and hopefully keep his mind off the hopelessness of life and retain his sanity for another day.

The prospect of sanity finally won.

Mark sat in a gray swivel chair in his cubicle-sized office and opened his cooler. Ham sandwich, barbecue chips, and an apple. He wasn't hungry, but he unwrapped the sandwich and took a large bite anyway.

Jeff's death was a shock, of course, and Mark's heart ached for Wendy and the girls. Every time he pictured the girls in their pretty dresses standing beside that casket, a lump rose in his throat, and his eyes burned with tears. But one thing that kept hammering in his mind like a hyperactive woodpecker was the phone call he had with Jeff just before the accident. There was that awful scream that had interrupted the conversation. What was it? Where did it come from?

Mark took a long swig of Diet Pepsi, wiped the condensation from his hand, and took another bite of his sandwich. In the main shop area, his boom box belted out some guy singing.

"...you had a bad day..."

Mark grunted. That pretty much summed it up. How 'bout bad life?

His mind went back to the scream. At the time he'd thought nothing of it. Just some interference in the cell phone signal or something. But now, for some reason he couldn't explain, he wasn't so sure. But what was it? It was the first time he'd ever heard such a thing, and it just so happened to occur on the same night—only minutes before—Jeff got in a bizarre car accident and died? Not just died, burned to death. Weird. Very weird.

He reached for a chip and flipped it into his mouth just as the phone on his desk rang.

Mark quickly chewed the chip, took a gulp of Diet Pepsi, and answered the phone on the third ring. "Stone Service Center."

"Mark, it's Jerry down at Detweiler's. How's it going?"

Crappy, Jerry, but thanks for asking. That's what he wanted to say, but he had no desire to talk about Jeff's death yet. Play it safe. "Bout half. What, you working Saturdays now too?"

Jerry chuckled. "When business is good you do what it takes to keep it that way."

"You got a point there."

"Hey, I have that fuel injector you ordered. For the '99 Cavalier. You—"

Screams cut off Jerry's voice like a guillotine. *The* screams. The same ones Mark had heard before—before Jeff died. Hideous, tortuous wails and groans. An image of thousands, maybe millions, of twisted faces, distorted with pain, flashed through his mind and his blood ran cold, as if someone had jammed an IV of ice water into his vein. Goose bumps freckled his skin, and his neck and jaw tingled. His throat suddenly tightened, and he found it hard to breathe.

Like last time, it lasted maybe five seconds then ceased abruptly.

“Mark? Mark, you still there?” Jerry was talking to him, but Mark’s mind was not registering it as actual words spoken to him. They were off in the distance somewhere. “Hello?”

“Uh, yeah, Jerry, I’m still here.” He had to force the words out past his restricting trachea.

“Did you hear that?”

Mark closed his eyes, willing his muscles to relax. He took a deep breath. “Yeah, I heard it.”

“What was it? Sounded like screaming.”

Like hell itself. “I know. I don’t know what it was.”

Jerry snorted into the phone. “Crazy. Anyway, I’ll run the injector over to you right now.”

Mark still wasn’t thinking clearly. He was still hearing the screams ringing in his ears. “O-OK. No, wait! Jerry. Wait.”

“I’m waiting. What is it?”

“Are you calling from a landline?”

“You mean a regular phone? Yeah. Why?”

A thought had suddenly occurred to Mark, and it made his heart thump. He was on a landline too. There was no way the screams were some kind of interference, signals crossing with something else. “Um, nothing. Just wondering. You don’t have to bring the injector out here. I’ll come get it.”

There was a pause, and Mark could hear paper rustling in the background. “No, I’ll drop it off. I have a couple other parts to deliver, and you’re on the way.”

Panic seized Mark. He gripped the phone tighter with a sweaty palm, tried to sound calm. This was crazy! “Jerry, really, I insist. I need to get out of the shop for a little. Cabin fever thing, you know? I’ve been putting in some long hours, and I’m getting stir-crazy. I’m leaving right now. I’ll be over in ten minutes. Don’t go anywhere, OK?”

“But—”

“Jerry, please.” He knew his voice was rising, and he knew Jerry probably thought he’d completely lost his grip on reality, but he didn’t care anymore. He pressed his molars together then relaxed them. “Don’t go anywhere. I’m coming right over. OK?”

“OK, OK. I’ll wait for you. Don’t be too long. I got things to do, you know.”

Mark blew out a breath and loosened his grip on the receiver. “Thanks. See ya in a few.”

“OK. A few.”

9

Mark raced down Broadway in his 1973 Ford Mustang, slowing only for the dips in the road at each intersection. Pineville was a small town, hokey even, and anywhere one wanted to go in any direction was no more than a ten-minute drive—going the posted speed limits. But Mark wasn’t anywhere near the posted limit.

His mind raced too. He’d heard it again, hadn’t he? Were the screams real? Of course they were. He’d heard them with his own ears. *Weeping and gnashing of teeth*. And Jerry heard them too. So did Jeff. They were real, all right. Too real. Made his skin itch just thinking about it.

Crazy. That’s all Mark could make of it. And his bizarre reaction. Just because Jeff died shortly after the screams didn’t mean Jerry was in immediate danger. Or any danger at all, for that matter.

Crazy. Jerry had to think he was half out of his mind. Maybe he was.

But what if he wasn’t? What if there really was something to the screams? What if Jerry’s life really was in jeopardy? He couldn’t afford to be wrong. Jerry couldn’t afford it. No, he’d

done the right thing. Jerry was safer just staying put and waiting for Mark to pick up the injector.

At the intersection of Broadway and Clayton, Mark slowed the 'Stang just enough to keep rubber on asphalt and took the ninety-degree turn at a tire-screaming speed. An elderly man working in his garden jerked his head up and around and yelled an obscenity, flailing his arms wildly.

Up ahead, Detweiler's sat on the corner of Clayton and Monroe. Mark pressed the accelerator; the engine rumbled, tachometer climbed steadily. Just before the entrance to Detweiler's parking lot, he stomped on the brake and jerked the steering wheel hard to the right. The car bounced into the parking lot and came to a stop.

Mark jumped out of the car and ran for the front door. His pulse was pounding out a steady rhythm in his ears, and the adrenaline rush had left him nearly out of breath. He was lucky to make it here without getting pulled over.

Swinging open the glass door, he stepped inside and called for Jerry. When no answer came, he looked around and noticed the store was empty. No customers in the aisles. No Jerry behind the counter.

C'mon, Jerry. Don't tell me you left anyway.

Mark peered out the storefront window and saw Jerry's tan Chevy S-10 sitting in the parking lot, *Detweiler's Auto Parts* emblazoned across the door panel.

"Jerry!" He listened and approached the counter. "Hey, Jerry. It's Mark. You here?"

No answer.

"Hello? Jerry?"

Still no answer.

Mark leaned over the counter and nearly choked on his own

saliva. There, behind the counter, lying prone on the cement floor, was Jerry Detweiler.

Mark rushed around the counter and rolled the large man over. Jerry's empty eyes, like two blank TV screens, bulged toward the ceiling, mouth open, a trickle of blood curling around his nostril. Mark pressed his fingers against Jerry's carotid but felt nothing. No life-giving blood pumping through the artery. No steady pulse throbbing under his fingertips. A groan escaped from somewhere deep in Mark's chest, and he clenched his jaw tight, cursing under his breath.

Jerry was dead. But it couldn't have happened more than five minutes ago. Mark had just talked to him, and the drive here only took seven minutes tops. He reached for the phone on the counter and punched in 911. Then, with phone jammed between his ear and shoulder, he placed both hands on Jerry's barrel chest, one on top of the other, and started compressing.