

Birdwatcher 2 is the adrenaline-fueled sequel to the literary thriller *Birdwatcher* that careens through the Poconos and deep into the psyche of serial killer Joey Marks, who is on the run from a nationwide manhunt spearheaded by Detective Philip Silverwood.

A demonic presence haunts a cabin in East Stroudsburg, additionally to possessing the fragile soul of Abigail Wincoff. With the assistance of an ordained priest, Abigail's mother is determined to free her daughter's spirit from this evil entity.

Through Abigail's talent for astral projection, the demon will take many forms before the climactic spiritual showdown comes.



ANN GREYSON BIRDWATCHER 2

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BIRDWATCHER

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are not to be interpreted as real. Any resemblance to actual events, organizations, or actual persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental and not deliberate by the author.

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Prologue

2017. Napa, California

THE ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL squinted in the direction the sound had come from. Just like he'd hoped she would do. Peeking at her from behind a tree, he dropped the twig he'd snapped on the ground, white with yesterday's snow.

Rosalia was her name. He'd heard her mother call out to her, in the middle of arguing with her husband, no less. Couldn't forget her voice — a woman's voice with a profound New York accent. Bickering. Something they often did. They were on holiday, but it didn't matter. She had been standing off to the side seemingly uninvolved, lost in her own world, while her parents were engrossed in their conversation. Girls often did that sort of thing. Fantasize. Talked to herself. Daydreaming.

Here she was, walking toward him like a bride, curious about the noise she'd heard. And here he was scooting closer to the tree, on the verge of swooning.

She didn't see him, nor the chloroform-soaked rag in his hand. Not too much. Just enough to knock her out for a while.

Joey Marks tossed onto his left side on the four-poster bed, its draperies and curtains shimmering with gold threads, in his large bedroom. Deep in a sleep cycle, no one could wake him, if they even dared to try. It was April 25, the middle of Spring, and here he was reliving the kill.

The little girl plunged ahead, head down, hands in her coat pockets. Her long brown hair was tucked in a fur hat. She couldn't hear the footsteps on top of her. A smirk graced his lips.

The dream changed. Vivid in his mind, the details were clear.

The little girl was lying on the ground in the woods of the Adirondack Mountains of northern New York State, not far from Canada. Her eyes began to flutter. She was waking up, sensing a presence that passed between herself and the sunlight. Her head moved from side to side, glancing around dizzily. Once her eyes focused, all she could see was the shadowed image of a man standing over her.

He tightened his mouth into a cold, dimpled smile. "I'll kill you if you scream."

Her brain was buried in a sludge of fear. She shut her eyes, brain spinning. Where were her parents? Where was she?

She was about to open her eyes again, then the shadowed man stomped on her back and kicked her on the head with his steel-toed black boot. The air came out of her lungs in a cold whoosh at the same time the pain set in. She couldn't speak and gasped for breath. Why did he strike her?

Just as a biting wind had sprung up, his adrenaline kicked in, and his panting came heavy and fast. He walked around her while he mumbled softly to himself. When she tried to turn her body round, a blow crashed against her nose and cheek. He had kicked her again.

"Why?" she whimpered.

No response came.

With a lung-bursting effort, he kicked and kicked her fiercely. Her hands grasped her stomach. She closed her eyes and let the tears fall.

The next thing that happened in the dream was the girl at his feet was dead. He was staring at her body, feeling as if it was a Christmas well spent. What he relished were the sounds. The way Rosalia struggled to breathe. His own heavy breathing. He wished he could have recorded it with a digital camera.

Soon after, a vast flock of birds flew over his head, passing under the rays of the sun. It looked as if a jagged streak of lightning had struck. He looked up to see thick

clouds had obscured the sun and only the faintest orange shimmer showed that it was there at all.

That was when he awoke.

With a disgruntled look, he turned over to lie on his back and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He was disappointed at the way the dream was no more than jumbled images switching quickly from one scene to another. This last kill stayed in his memory in bits and pieces only. This didn't please him at all.

A jangling noise, like a siren closing in from a far distance, startled him out of his thoughts. One elbow cradled in the pillow, he groped for the alarm clock on the nightstand and pressed the "Off" button.

He sprung up to a sitting position against the pillows stacked at the headboard. His gaze clouded over as thoughts surfaced about the farm fields full of black cows scattered about that he had passed on his way out of Franklin County, New York. And that there was a flurry of news media attention to the case of Rosalia O'Reilly, who vanished and later turned up dead. Her body was found a week later. He made a sour face. Neither did he care to remember.

Sunlight filtered through a gap in the curtains from a window next to his head, causing him to squint against its brightness. Sleeping enclosed by curtains that drew together midway across the end facing the door, made him feel like a vampire, which he liked for some foolish reason. In any case, it was time to get going. *Ugh*, he

thought, as he threw off the black silk comforter and rose from the bed, stark naked. He showered, dressed and left his 1-bedroom townhouse.

Marks gazed into the rearview and backed his 2014 BMW MINI Cooper Countryman subcompact SUV out of the driveway, humming to himself. The thrill of knowing he'd upended many girls' lives shot through him. On this particular Tuesday morning, he was in a good mood.

Two minutes had gone by since he had gazed away from the rearview mirror. Three police cars were coming up slowly. They didn't see Marks at the end of the street, about to turn into the main road. At his townhouse, the officers parked their cars at the curb.

On the drive there he was silent and moody, thinking to himself how he wanted to act on his desires again. With his thirty-second birthday coming up on May 8, he could use another vacation. The bottom line was he needed another kill.

With optimism, he drove into the parking lot of the winery, giddy on that thought and whistled softly through his teeth. He felt ready for his first task of the day: connect the pump to a hose leading from a juice and grape skins filled stainless-steel tank with dials and gauges on the front, ensuring a seething fermentation.

What he couldn't foresee was that the police were closing in on the real identity of "Ryan Messer." His perfectly happy day was about to change — drastically.

Chapter 1

ON THIS BRIGHT SUNNY Monday afternoon in the Poconos, the buzz of chatter, glasses clinking, and forks scraping across plates filled the top-rated Victoria Station with noisy prattle. Connected to the lobby of The Stroud Inn, an elegant five-star accommodation, the restaurant was situated in the coldest spot, high atop the Pocono Mountains. Now, in the last week of April, residents had since recovered from a two-surge Arctic outbreak in the Northeast of back-to-back coastal storms last January, which had deposited 7 to 12 inches of snow on much of Pennsylvania.

Estelle Rowland, a longtime waitress at Victoria Station, exited the kitchen carrying a tray filled with several covered dishes. She moved at a fast clip, the heels of her black patent leather shoes clicking with each step. The

maître d,' in a tailored black suit, nodded as he walked past her on his way to his station.

She was in a remarkably buoyant mood considering she was about to take her break. Since January, her hours were part time. Her shoulder-length, salt-and-pepper hair was now a smooth shade of blonde, dyed for her forty-ninth birthday last February. Other than that, she still knotted a portion of her hair on the top of her head, held in place with a diamond-studded hair stick. As always, she was dressed appropriately in a black skirt, and a white silk blouse with a lace dickie around her neck.

When she reached the right table, she distributed the plates with a flourish. Attentively, she noted the coffee mugs needed refilling at the nearby table where two casually dressed men were talking more than eating, planning a real estate investment they were about to make that afternoon.

While she disappeared into the kitchen to retrieve the coffee pot, the distinguished-looking man, with crinkles at the corners of his eyes, in his late fifties with impeccably styled, graying hair, seated at that table, reached inside the huge brown leather briefcase propped against the leg of his chair. He handed a folder to the man seated across from him.

“Two bedrooms, a single bathroom with a shower, a massive cathedral-ceilinged living room with a two story-high stone fireplace, and a small kitchen, which could be expanded. Look it over, Don. All you have to do is sign the

closing papers and it's yours," he said, zipping up his briefcase with a sharp crackling noise.

Sixty-one-year-old Don McKinney raised up an eyebrow, didn't say a word. He opened the folder to the contract on top, which he turned over and examined with his large brown eyes that were deep-set and looked out between thick, black lashes. A lock of his gray hair fell over one eye and made him look endearing. He was wearing neatly pressed tan Dockers, a beige and brown striped sweater and reddish-brown loafers.

As he separated the chicken, the vegetables and rice on his plate, he glimpsed the hesitation in Don's eyes. "There's no telling when it might go. You rarely see a golden opportunity like this in the Poconos real estate."

For a minute, McKinney studied the photos. The cabin, surrounded by trees and brush and set away from the road, was modest, but it felt homey, and he liked that. After having a successful thirty-three-year career as an engineer at the Goddard Space Flight Center, a major NASA space research laboratory located in Greenbelt, Maryland, the quiet and solitude of the Poconos was alluring to him.

McKinney looked up at his dearest friend and ex-wife's brother-in-law Gerry Andrews, recognizing the narrow-eyed, intense gaze of utter concentration. "So, you believe I should put an offer in for this cabin on Wagon Trail Road in East Stroudsburg?"

Estelle was barely two steps away from their table. She shot McKinney a strange look as she heard the tail end of his statement.

Overhearing those words, she instantly froze. Wagon Trail Road. It echoed in her ears while her heartbeat accelerated, and one eyebrow shot up. The way her eyes were locked open behind the lenses of her black horn-rimmed glasses was disconcerting.

For the next minute, her gaze went back and forth between the two men, listening intent, a pot of coffee in one hand, eavesdropping on their conversation.

“I’ll give it to you straight. The chestnut log cabin could use some work. It has a slightly weathered condition, but all still relatively sound. Which explains why the asking price is lower than the market price in the Poconos. What’s important is that the cabin is located in a gem of an environment to relax in,” Andrews said, raising his voice some.

They were engrossed in their conversation and paying Estelle no mind. A growing sense of alarm rising within her, yet she didn’t interject. Instead, her shoulders slumped as she turned her body away from them anyway.

“I’m inclined to agree with you on this one, Gerry. It seems like the perfect getaway retreat for myself whenever I want. And when I’m not there, I can make some side money off it as a rental,” McKinney said, as if reassuring himself.

Andrews, loaded fork halfway to his mouth, stared at him. “That’s right. The place could realistically pay for itself within the span of a year’s time. You have to get it before someone else buys it out from under you.”

Finally, Estelle moved over to refill their coffee mugs, still watching them through lowered lids. Her cheeks were red, her chest flushed. It was obvious to her that the men didn't know about the murder case of Abigail Wincoff. Before her body had been found at that cabin, for what seemed like a blip of time, she had become a symbol of missing kids everywhere after she disappeared in the woods of East Stroudsburg. Her killer at large most likely assumed that her body would remain hidden there forever. This surprised her, because she was sure this was the first case of serial killing to hit the Poconos.

Obviously, out-of-towners, she thought as she finished topping off their coffees. Not knowing them from Adam or Eve, she refrained from mentioning anything about Abigail Wincoff and gave a half-shrug. Besides, she felt it wasn't her place. With so much on her mind during the busy lunch period, she figured they might find out on their own someday.

"If you need anything else, just let me know," she uttered in such a calm tone, but the grim fixed look on her face did not relax.

Half turning around, Estelle left, and with that a light conversation about trivial matters started up between the men. By sometime tomorrow, the Poconos cabin on Wagon Trail Road would belong to Don McKinney, for better or worse.

In the kitchen, Estelle grabbed her lunch bag from the refrigerator and headed for the small employee break room in the rear of the building. She reflexively took her usual

seat — the right corner of the secondhand leather couch up against one wall across the folding table with a microwave on it. In the middle of the room, there was a row of lockers.

She took a large bite of her corned beef on rye sandwich, chewed, and swallowed. Her eyes wandered out the window to the beautiful view of the 30,000-acre Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge. While gazing at the patches of snow in the grass, she ate her sandwich and potato chips at the same time. She thought how the days of 2017 were flying by much too fast. All of a sudden, it was the middle of spring.

Yet all the while, the conversation she had overheard rang in her ears. Up till now the thought of Abigail Wincoff hadn't even entered her mind. How were her parents doing? She was feeling inexplicably sad, moved by genuine empathy.

Maybe she could've done something different that day in the restaurant, and somehow saved Abigail. Would telling her parents about the man she'd seen staring inappropriately at their daughter have really made any difference? In all the months since her body had been found, sometimes, Estelle had wondered that very thing.

An ache bloomed in her heart as she gathered her things together and left the room. She'd never know. She had to live with regret of what could've been for the rest of her life.

Chapter 2

IT had been another tough day for the Monroe County police. Detective Philip Silverwood, along with two officers in police uniform, had just spent three hours sifting through reports, probing the little evidence there was. The long business lunch of steaks and fries at the LongHorn Steakhouse in Bartonsville, Pennsylvania was crucial. The case of Abigail Wincoff, nonetheless, was solid: he had the statements of Millie Dozier and Estelle Rowland. He also had the manuscript, *Murder in the Poconos*, which laid out the details of the little girl's murder. They had evidence collected at the cabin on Wagon Trail Road in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, but they needed more.

Only God knew why. He had made a wrong turn off Interstate 80 and was now driving on Sellersville Drive, quite near Wagon Trail Road in East Stroudsburg. The

realization of that made the hair on the back of his neck spike.

Just after five o'clock and tired, he didn't want to think about that place right now. He was already running late for his brief meeting with Sheriff Cole Burgio. He had to return a file on the case.

Reaching the city of Stroudsburg, and driving toward the Monroe County Courthouse, thoughts of that cabin on Wagon Trail Road penetrated into his mind far more deeply than expected. He reflected on how it had become hallowed ground for the residents of the Poconos. It really hit him how the whole community got turned upside down. The unlikely murder of 12-year-old Abigail Wincoff was the kind of nightmarish event that almost never happened. The rarity of a stranger pulling off a crime like this, rather than an acquaintance, triggered so much shock that the story went national for a while. So, there was pressure on the Monroe County Sheriff's Office to solve the case as quickly as possible. When that didn't happen, the Pocono Mountain Regional Police Department assigned him to it.

On August 16, 2016, every parent's worst nightmare happened when a little girl was forcibly attacked and abducted from the safety outside a rental cabin, where her mother was sleeping. Lest he forget the tears in Gillian Wincoff's eyes when he mentioned to her how they were treating the case as a murder investigation, given the circumstances in which specks of Abigail's blood was found in the kitchen sink of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. It was a heartbreaking sight.

He intended to bring justice to Abigail's family. For Silverwood well knew tomorrow all of that could change.

Accompanied by two police officers from his department, they were due to fly out in the morning to San Francisco. Working alongside local police officers, they planned to arrest and question Joey Marks a.k.a. Ryan Messer in connection with this murder.

It was not a designated task force. He hoped it wouldn't come to that. With Joey Marks' swift apprehension, he expected to wrap up the case shortly thereafter. There was a very remote, infinitesimal chance that Marks could do a runner, just escape to some designated place of exile. *Fat chance*, Silverwood thought. Marks didn't know that the police had prepared to set up surveillance of his townhouse the next morning.

This man, Joey Marks, was a nemesis to him. To put it frankly, just another dim-witted killer who assumed he would never be brought to justice. Little did he expect that Abigail's corpse would leave some traceable forensic evidence behind. Possibly, he had three or four murders under his belt. Somehow, he had managed to escape detection for a number of years. The veteran detective was going to make sure that changed soon.

Though the crime had been committed in Pennsylvania, if Marks was tried in California, his place of residence, he hoped they'd give him the death penalty. That was his stance on capital punishment. But it had to happen fast. The State of California planned to stop their executions by putting in place an indefinite moratorium on the death

penalty in the form of a reprieve for all people sentenced to death. Despite that, he reassured himself knowing that Proposition 66, a ballot measure passed by California voters in the election of 2016, allowed prison officials the right to transfer inmates to any state prison or penitentiary that provides the necessary level of security. Which could include the release of some third strikers.

From 7th Street, he turned onto Monroe Street and pulled into the parking lot behind the three-story courthouse building. When he parked in a visitor's space, he turned off the ignition, and stared out the window for a quiet moment.

Less than a beat later, he glanced at his watch and realized the sheriff would be leaving soon. With his mind cluttered by everything he had to deal with, he still needed a moment alone to gather himself. Trying to relax a little, but failing miserably, he leaned his hands on the back of the chair and took a breath. His expression was pensive.

His insides were all over the place, brooding about tomorrow, hoping by the end of the day tomorrow, Joey Marks would be in police custody. He hoped that things would go smoothly. And that he'd have proof — one way or the other — whether in fact Joey Marks murdered Abigail Wincoff. If he was her killer, he'd have to find evidence at his townhouse. Right now, all Silverwood had was a lot of circumstantial evidence.

On one end, he was relieved that local police had acted promptly in obtaining a search warrant signed by a Napa County superior court judge that allowed them to search

Marks' townhouse, and his vehicle for any trace evidence such as blood, or hair.

It was approaching 6:00 P.M. As the sunlight began to fade, two officers in mid-conversation casually walked by his vehicle, jolting him from his trance. He twisted his body sideways, and the gray pants of his modest suit crinkled. It was then that he finally got out of his police department-issued Chevrolet Tahoe and briskly walked to the doors of the Monroe County Sheriff's Department.

Chapter 3

THAT NEXT TUESDAY MORNING, at about nine o'clock, for whatever reason, when the cabin on Wagon Trail Road came into view, a disconcerting feeling descended upon Don McKinney. Deep tire ruts cut into the dirt driveway, surrounded by a forest of trees encroaching all over. After parking, he sat back in his black Toyota Highlander, just thinking, staring at the cabin, while the engine was running. Something had him mesmerized.

His eyes flicked restlessly over his surroundings, traveling everywhere but to the attic window. A dark figure appeared there. He was in the line of sight, but he didn't catch sight of the ghostly form, with a ghostly face. It was watching him through reddish eyes, bellowing a dark sinister cackle.

And then the entity was gone, just as quickly as it had appeared. It simply vanished, the shape blending together

until there was nothing left but puffs of bluish smoke in the air. But it was real.

The moments passed until he left the SUV and walked to the front door. Despite its lack of aesthetic appeal, he was determined to make the place work.

Two steps into the dim-lighted cabin, he stopped short. The air stunk of death and mildew.

He covered his mouth with his hand and mumbled. “Jesus Christ.”

In the cathedral-ceilinged living room, he left the lights off. Dust danced in the sunlight streaming in through the half-opened, heavy, white curtains, casting long shadows across the black, gold, and cream Oriental rug covering the worn oak floor beneath him. The cold, musky smelling empty room bothered him such that he cracked open a window.

A quick gander around the room, his eyes fell briefly on the two story-high stone fireplace. Then he reached into the pocket of his wool coat and pulled out a small notepad. On a page in the pad, he started scratching notes. Now that he owned the place, he realized there were things he wanted to change about it (like changing the furnishings and painting the walls a different color).

The cabin wasn’t silent. Outside the window was a sturdy tree. The branches of that tree scratched against the windowpane, at the same time cawing from crows, and the fluting of blackbirds struck. Yet, he remained undeterred. Only for a moment did he look out the window, but then returned to writing notes in his notepad.

Standing between the two windows, the whistling of air disturbed him. And he could hear something creaking in the wind outside. Then he heard moaning and sighing words that he could not understand coming through the vent in the ceiling.

He put the notepad and pen on the polished veneer side table beside a wingback chair upholstered with beige corduroy. The moaning sounds were fading as he went to stand under the vent. He waited and waited but heard nothing except his own breathing.

A moment later, he returned to retrieve the notepad and pen, shadows swaying around him. It wasn't there. He shook his head, clearly disbelieving his eyes because he was sure he had put it there. Where was it?

There it was, lying against one of corduroy throw pillows on the enormous white suede couch, but not where it should've been.

"How did it get there?" he asked himself, in a deep frown as he picked them up and looked at them.

Suddenly he heard a rustling sound behind him, and something touched him from behind. He wildly turned around in fright.

Nothing was there. Was he going crazy?

Something touched him again. With a gasp of shock and eyes widened, McKinney spun around faster than a washing machine to face whatever it was.

Once again, nothing was there. It scared him, but he wasn't going to let it show.

There was a loud growl.

At first, he thought he was imagining it, but when a terrifying bellow broke out from the hallway, he realized there was something going on. Was there an animal in the cabin? The sound became more pronounced, and he left to check it out.

A split-second later there was a hard thud, enough to shake the wall in the hallway, then silence. He froze there, as if his feet were rooted to the floor. But maintained his tough-guy image.

“Who’s there?” he asked, looking from side to side.

Before he could register what was going on, a shadow was detaching itself from the wall in the middle of the hallway. Whether it was an hallucination or real he couldn’t tell. The horror of this sight was exacerbated by the stench that accompanied it. A scent of rotting flesh permeated the air, so foul he wanted to cover his nose and mouth against the smell.

There were growls and moans now, all around. None of them sounded right, as if they didn’t belong in the living world. During this time, a wash of dark and light shades of gray danced across the hardwood floor.

Panic came then. But he couldn’t move a muscle. It was like he was in a trance. He remained very still, but opened and closed his eyes several times in an exaggerated fashion, straining to get a proper look at what was happening.

Slowly in a lingering trail of black smoke, the demon assumed a shape out of the shadow and projected itself into human form. In the blink of an eye, it had flickered into a little girl, twelve-year-old Abigail Wincoff.

With the ability to shape-shift, the demon could pretend to be something it wasn't. Indeed, it was a clever deception. It preyed on your emotions with an innocent appearance.

A stunned McKinney wondered if he was looking at something astral like a ghost, or even worse, a demon but had to ask, "Little girl, how did you get in here?"

No response came.

In a thin, short-sleeved, simple white linen dress that hung just above the knees, she stood sideways with her shoulders slightly hunched, one held higher than the other, merely a few feet away. Her body was shaking a little, too. What he couldn't see was her eyes, which were open but blank, rolled up to the whites.

At last, he tried to walk away, and she cocked her head toward him. Something in her expression made him stop and swallow hard. Like her eyes, her skin and face were pallid white, too, and creased with spidery lines. To him, she looked like a zombie.

It wasn't just that he couldn't move, but when he tried to speak, nothing came out of his mouth. He thought he was possessed. That he'd been taken over by none other than a demon. What he had originally suspected, namely that it was, in fact, a demon.

"Will you help me find my doll, Carrie?" Abby asked in a gruff voice, twisting her head at an awkward angle.

Then she stepped closer to him. He couldn't meet her pallid, grim eyes. He had to look away.

A few soft growls came from deep within her chest as she lunged toward him, soaring in mid-air. He flung his

arms up and swatted at her. Somewhere above his head, she dissolved and vanished in swirling black smoke.

Terrified beyond belief, he desperately wanted to leave the cabin. With each step he took, that terrifying feeling continued to grow. Upon opening the front door a crack, he stopped because a clawed hand reached through the opening between the door and the post. Long, pointed nails on thick black fingers scraped against the wood while another clawed hand gripped the oak doorjamb.

“Why do you seem so scared of me? All I want to do is play with you,” came a little girl's voice, but mixed with the harsh tone of rasping quality.

With all his might McKinney pushed his weight against the door. But an extraordinary force beyond his expectation pushed the door into his face. He lost his balance and fell. Within a blink, his body connected with the hardwood floor with a heavy thump, forcing his foot through a weak part in the floorboard. A crack. Energized by terror, he tried to pull his foot free, but a piercing pain knifed his ankle. He could feel that he had broken a bone.

Loud growling came. Noises amplified as the darkness, except for light from the window, hooded him. It was a terror he couldn't fight. He was trapped on the floor. His whole body was tense. Felt like the air in the room had gone stale — and everything went black. And quiet.

The mobile phone holstered on the belt around his beige Dockers slacks beeped, shattering the silence. But he stayed unconscious, crumpled on the floor next to the door.

Chapter 4

“JOEY, YOU need to go pull bins of grapes from the flatbed of the Mack truck. It’s already twelve-thirty,” snapped a dark-haired fortyish man in an olive tweed suit standing in the hallway that led past the administrative offices.

At that moment Joey Marks’ reverie was interrupted. At times, Pietro Virgili, the manager and CEO of the winery named for his maternal great-great-grandfather, could be overbearing, often reminding him of his duties. But Marks took it in stride, feeling his job was a means to an end. For some years, he held the same low-level position. As far as he was concerned, he never cared about having a career or advancing to a higher position.

Aware that he sent scarcely a glance towards him, confusion remained on Virgili’s face. “Did you hear me, Joey?”

Now in its third century, Silvio Franzoni Winery was a large, multigenerational winery in St. Helena that fused tradition and innovation to craft the finest wines in the world. Founded in 1869, it was the oldest continuously operating winery in Napa Valley, California and had been owned and managed by the Elias Virgili, Sr. family for two generations.

“Yes, of course. Yes, I’ll get right to it,” Marks said in an accommodating way, turning his head more directly toward him.

An odd look in his direction, before Virgili took off to his office. He didn’t like dealing with Marks but accepted him because he was a good worker — reliable. Though Marks’ moody behavior didn’t sit well with him and gave him the creeps. There was just something odd about him.

Marks spun around and proceeded down the hallway to the staff room. He checked his dark blue sling bag in a locker and slammed the door closed.

Using a duck’s voice, he imitated his boss, “You need to go pull bins of grapes from the flatbed.”

With a gleam in his blue eyes, he thought about taking a vacation sooner than later. At the end of the day, he was going to have a chat with Mr. Virgili about taking some days off. And he knew Virgili would agree to it, if only to get him out of his sight. For reasons he couldn’t put his finger on, he had noticed that Virgili didn’t like having contact with him.

For a second or so, his stomach growled. The lunch he'd had was sitting heavily on his stomach. Suddenly, feeling queasy, he went to the men's bathroom where he relieved himself and after washed his hands.

Back in the hallway, he came within earshot of Pietro Virgili's office, which was around the corner to the left of the entrance.

The static squawk of a police radio interrupted the silence: "Officer Aranoff, this is dispatch. What's your location?"

His eyes were full of alarm. Marks froze there in the cool of the hallway as the words hit him.

Officer.

The police had found him. He stared wide-eyed at nothing particular, listening.

"Dispatch, this is Officer Aranoff. I'm at the suspect's workplace..." His deep, rumbling voice trailed off as he left the room.

This was a nightmare that had come true for Marks. His heart leaped into his throat, and he wanted to cry out. But he calmed himself with the reminder that he had a few tricks up his sleeve for when the police came along.

Another voice came with an edge of impatience.

"When the police didn't find him at his home in Napa, we came over here. As it is, the three-hour time difference between here and Pennsylvania is playing havoc with my body's circadian rhythm. Could you take us to Joey Marks? I'd like to get this over with as quickly as possible."

As soon as he said Pennsylvania, Marks just knew it had to do with the murder he had committed there. But there was not time to worry about that now. He had to get out of there.

“Follow me outside, where he should be unloading bins from a truck,” Virgili said, trying to keep the stiffness out of his voice.

As fast as possible, Marks backpedaled through the door to the staff room. He moved quickly to the window in the men’s bathroom. From his vantage point, he saw a couple of police cars parked in front of the two-story building. Flashing blue and red lights from the cars bounced off the stone walls of the building that were finished in a coat of smooth concrete stucco. In one of the cars there was an officer in the passenger seat talking into a radio.

Thank God, he wore his black flexible pants, he thought. Did he even believe in God? He wasn’t sure whether he was an atheist, or agnostic. In this moment he turned to God with such penitence. He needed a miracle to get out of this one.

In a rush of fear, he popped open the window, climbed out, and scaled down the wall. In as much as he was in good physical condition, it wasn’t a stretch for him to pull it off.

Overwhelming relief surged through him. He stepped to the ground without a scratch. Sweat filmed his forehead and darkened the cuffs of his long-sleeved shirt. His face was red from exertion, and it took a moment for him to gather enough breath to continue on.

Once he reached the parking lot behind the vineyard on Main Street, he crouched behind a parked car. He watched a police officer coming up the street and gave him the dead-eye stare.

Before taking a step forward, he looked back at his brown BMW MINI Cooper Countryman subcompact SUV, realizing he'd never see it again. There was a police cruiser with an officer inside, blocking his car's escape. He couldn't see him very well, but he didn't need to. A flash of a second later, he took off running in the direction of the parking lot across Main Street.

Meanwhile, the winery had been locked down on Detective Philip Silverwood's orders. Police officers had fanned out scanning the area for Marks, but with no luck. The detective and his team of police officers figured that Joey Marks had somehow given them the slip.

Around two o'clock, most everyone was on a much-needed fifteen-minute break. A handful of police officers were skulking around the winery, poking around, some even stopping to check out some of the wines they produced. Silverwood stirred sugar and cream into a cup of coffee in the break room downstairs. Part of his brain continued to process the situation. Possibly, he spent too much time brooding about how Joey Marks had escaped. Marks' car was in the parking lot and had been searched by police. So, the detective had a scenario in his mind. Marks was either on foot or in a stolen vehicle. As of yet, no stolen cars had been reported, but it was still early.

That got him to glance at his watch, and then he lifted his walkie-talkie. “Notify me the second a vehicle is reported stolen.”

The detective drained his coffee in a couple of quick gulps and left the room. Before he could head over to Joey Marks’ townhouse, he had some interviews to conduct with a few of Marks’ coworkers, hoping to shed light on some crucial questions:

What made Joey Marks tick? Where would he show up next?

Chapter 5

THE IMPOSING Detective Silverwood stood outside the entrance to Joey Marks' 1-bedroom townhouse on E Street in Napa. The corner of a folded-up search warrant was sticking out of the side pocket of his black coat. He was staring at the splintered door jamb, half blinded by the sunlight piercing through an aperture in the crowns of the palm trees.

Earlier that morning, police officers repeatedly rang the bell and demanded immediate entry. When there had been no response to several knocks, they heaved a battering ram against the door. Wood splintered. Another slam punched a hole through the door and sent the doorknob spinning across the hardwood floor inside the townhouse.

The police were out in force to catch Joey Marks, all over the area. Squad cars were cruising past, back and forth along the streets. The site had been roped off by the forensic

team to keep nosy neighbors away. A couple of uniformed cops kept the perimeter secure, while the techs were inside, working.

Detective Silverwood narrowed his eyes at the three officers who'd been sent to Marks' residence that morning as they poured through the door from the hallway. "Hold on there a moment. I've been trying to figure out why you didn't get Joey Marks? We shouldn't have had to go to his workplace. Now he's in the wind, out there somewhere. And that's on you. I wouldn't be surprised if he's even across the border in Mexico by now."

Unfortunately, the detective had been infuriated by Marks' escape and had made no effort to disguise his feelings. The stone-faced police officers stood at ease, listening. They didn't say anything and inclined their heads in the barest of acknowledgments.

"How much of a head start Marks has I couldn't guess," Silverwood said, in an ironic tone.

Over the birdsong and the chatter of squirrels came the sound of a distant lawn mower engine catching, a roar as it started up, reducing to a purr as it continued. Although Silverwood was frustrated, he said no more, dismissed the cops, and they went to their black-and-white police cars.

It was three-thirty, and the detective was eager to get to work. He rushed into the modern townhouse: high ceilings, bare brickwork, wooden beams. The living room was at the end of a narrow hallway. What little light there was filtered in through two large windows.

The forensic team from the California State Police had turned the place upside down, searching for anything whatsoever of possible relevance to the case. Even so, he was keen to notice that the townhouse was obsessively organized. As he came into Marks' large bedroom, he caught a weird vibe from the neatly made four-poster bed. A black silk comforter added to the macabre nature of the scene and looked out of place amongst the gold-threaded curtains. He slowly studied the room, the positioning of the furniture along with so few possessions, imagining what kind of person lived like this, and wondering if that person was a serial killer.

A bulldog-faced officer was sorting through the open built-in closet. He found a black sling bag hanging on a hook on the wall. Inside was a range of hunting gear and an object that didn't belong.

"Check this out," the police officer exited and called out, his eyes narrowing at the detective.

"What do you have?" Silverwood asked, walking to him.

"It's a blood-stained, pink hair ribbon. Possibly from one of his victims," the officer replied.

The noose of guilt had tightened. His eyes penetrating, the detective recognized it as a souvenir, something that would fuel a killer's fantasy.

"No doubt a memento of sorts. Bag it into evidence," said the detective.

A moment or so after that, Silverwood made his way to the entrance of the closet for a quick look, stepped back out,

and nodded the officer standing by the window over to him. “That tall, black file cabinet inside the closet is unlocked. There’s a good chance you’ll find something interesting in it.”

As presumed, that officer found a file folder with thirty-eight newspaper clippings that were already yellowing with age. They were of Susannah Rae Dirnberger a.k.a. Randee Rae Devereux, covering her murder case in Pennsylvania. In perusing the articles, Silverwood discovered that former Monroe County Sheriff Andy Kirkman had reportedly cracked the 19-year-old cold case. It was clear that this case was connected somehow to Joey Marks.

A stumped Silverwood was stuck with more questions than answers. He wished he were the type of detective who instinctively knew the connections with just a single glance. But he wasn’t. He got by with making observations, note taking, and putting the pieces together, one by one.

Digging his cell phone out of his pants pocket, he walked out the door of the townhouse. There was an officer in the driveway beside a patrol car, radio to his mouth. So, he moved around to the side of the townhouse for a private conversation. He searched through his phone’s contacts, found and dialed Andy Kirkman’s home number. After the call was answered, he brought him up to speed after a brief introduction.

“Do you have any idea why Marks has a file full of newspaper clippings on the murder of a topless dancer in Pennsylvania?” Silverwood asked, rushing his words together.

After a short lapse of silence, Kirkman answered with this response. "I'll be darned! How old would you say Joey Marks is?"

"What makes you ask that?" Silverwood responded with a question.

"It just hit me that the late Susannah Rae Dirnberger had had a son with a man named Wesley Marks some thirty years ago. When you said her name, it just cut through me, the name Marks sounded off in my ear."

The realization set off an alarm inside the detective that he found impossible to silence. Knowing his mother was killed by a serial killer left Marks psychologically scarred. Maybe that was Marks' trigger to start killing.

The detective let a few seconds pass, and then said gruffly, "I'm going to pull the case file on the Susannah Rae Dirnberger murder and do some reading. I want to interview members of his family, hoping they can shed some light on his character. I'm glad I called you, too."

"Happy to be of service. Now, tell me: Could you find anything that connects Marks to Abigail Wincoff?" Kirkman asked him eagerly.

There was an instant of silence, followed by a gruff chuckle, and then another pause on the other end of the line.

"I suspected you would ask that. As of yet nothing, but the search is still in progress. We've got him either way."

"Just between us, please keep me posted on any further developments. Very soon Gillian Wincoff is coming by to visit with me. I hoped to tell her something that could ease

her pain,” Kirkman said so softly it was almost like he was confessing to something.

“I get you. I can’t promise anything, but I’ll try. Duty calls. Be sure and relay my regards to Mrs. Wincoff,” Silverwood said with a grin and hung up.

After putting the phone away, the detective stood there on the grass and thought on their conversation. There was something else that disturbed him, and it made him anxious. How much time did he have? Joey Marks had smarts about him and would be using an alias by now. It was necessary that he should redouble his efforts to match wits with the killer before tragedy struck again ... somewhere the police would have no jurisdiction.

Chapter 6

FRESH OUT OF SURGERY, Don McKinney was laid up in bed in a recovery room in an East Stroudsburg hospital, attached to an IV drip and monitor wires on his chest just below his neckline. His left leg was encased in plaster and suspended in traction from a metal contraption in the ceiling above the blankets. A heart monitor by the bedside beeped normally with a consistent rhythm.

A nurse shifted the pillow under his head as he slept. The orthopedic surgeon had come and gone. But the young doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope hanging from his neck was studying him and issuing orders.

“Laura let’s get a set of vitals on him,” the doctor said to her with authority.

A tall, slim, 26-year-old, transplant from the United Kingdom, Laura Spencer was born and raised in Northampton, Northamptonshire, a town in England’s East

Midlands region. Two years ago, she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from St. John's University in Jamaica, New York. Afterwards, she took a much-needed vacation in the Poconos. She fell in love with the quaint countryside, the forest, and the people of Pennsylvania. By the next day she had applied and was hired at the hospital. No longer a foreigner living abroad, she has since become an American citizen.

"His vitals are stabilizing, his blood pressure normal, and his core temperature's up to normal," Laura said loudly in a British voice.

The doctor gave a murmur of relief. After a narrow look at his patient's leg, he strode out of the room. It couldn't have been more than a minute when Gerry Andrews came to stand in the doorway, his expression strained as he looked straight at Laura.

"Is he going to be all right?" he asked with a mix of expectancy and foreboding.

"Yes, he's a strong man," she chirped cheerfully.

Instantly, the worried lines on his forehead disappeared. The look on his face was replaced by an expression of relief. Glancing over the bed, the round, black-rimmed clock on the wall showed it was 7:30 P.M.

The next moment McKinney stirred in the hospital bed. His eyes opened and moved from side to side a couple of times. Everything seemed so confusing and then he noticed Laura. His eyelids fluttering, as tingles of self-awareness flickered through him, what was going on?

After ten seconds or so she wrote something on her clipboard before walking over to the bed. She leaned forward, tucking the edge of the blanket into a corner as he murmured something.

“Mr. McKinney how are you?” she asked, somewhat startled, looking him straight in the eye.

Andrews’ insides flipped over, and he rushed to his side, dropping his coat on the chair by the foot of his bed. “Thank God you’re awake! You gave me such a scare.”

“Where am I?” McKinney asked in a groggy voice.

“You are at Lehigh Valley Hospital–Pocono,” she told him in a calm voice.

Relief rushed through McKinney. In a flash came the memory of what had happened. The cabin. The demons.

“I’ve got to ...,” McKinney started saying, his body half lifting up from the bed.

“Lean back. You need rest,” she said firmly.

Seeing the skepticism in his eyes, Andrews added, “She’s right, Don.”

Reluctantly McKinney complied with their wishes, falling back against the pillows, and responded in a weak voice, “I’m feeling fine. You’re both making a lot of fuss over nothing.”

“Just take it easy for now, okay? I’ll bring up the bed. Make you more comfortable,” she explained, smiling at him.

But McKinney could only grin unenthusiastically. “How long was I out for?”

“A little over seven hours. But I don’t know how long you were unconscious when I found you,” Andrews said, and then asked in a high, querulous voice. “What happened at the cabin?”

At that moment McKinney rubbed at his bleary eyes, unsure how to explain. Laura patted his shoulder and checked his IV. She seemed uninterested in their conversation. Her attention veered toward the hallway past the slightly opened door. Perhaps, she should get the doctor to give McKinney a check-over. She bustled around in her squeaky rubber shoes for another minute more, and then went to the nurse’s station.

Though he felt safe talking, McKinney decided it was best to whisper. “Demons.”

“Come again?” Andrews asked with an alarmed look on his face.

“I was attacked by two of them. I couldn’t shake them off, Gerry. I’m telling you; the place is haunted by demons,” he said slightly louder, able to speak more coherently as he rambled on to him.

Frowning, as if puzzled by that, Andrews ran his gaze over him, thinking. “Well, Don, you must have had some kind of nightmare. All I can tell you is that you didn’t show up for our lunch date. When you didn’t answer my calls, I went around to the cabin and found you unconscious on the floor. I thought you had had a heart attack or stroke. I called 911 and you were brought here by ambulance.”

For now, McKinney was feeling twisted inside, outside, and upside down. He turned his head to the side, thinking

about what had been said to him. One thing was for certain: There was no way he was going to return to that cabin.

"I don't want the cabin anymore. First thing tomorrow morning I want you to call the realtor and arrange to get my money back," said McKinney, with a tinge of annoyance.

"Are you sure about this? Don't you want to wait until you're in a more stable frame of mind?" he asked with a meaningful look in his eyes. "Don, you're not thinking clearly and you're still woozy from the anesthetic."

"I know what I'm doing, Gerry. Cancel the contract," he demanded in a loud tone.

He wasn't well, Andrews thought as he turned a wary glance on him and stared at his exasperated face. "You got it. I'll do just that."

The next minute the doctor briskly swept into the room. Andrews turned his head, saw him, then made a polite gesture and excused himself from the room.

"Good evening, Mr. McKinney. I'm Dr. O'Farrill, your intern. How are you feeling?"

37-year-old half Spanish, half Irish Rafael O'Farrill received a medical degree from the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain and trained in intensive care medicine from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.

"A little lethargic," McKinney replied.

"That's the anesthetic wearing off. After examining all the X-rays and scans of your fractured ankle, our chief of surgery aligned and stabilized the bone," O'Farrill said, and then asked in a stern voice: "Can you tell me what happened to you?"

Seeing the serious look on his face, pen in hand, ready to write, McKinney decided not to tell him the truth. “Though it was stuffy in the cabin, I neglected to open any windows. In the living room, I started feeling dizzy in the head, dropped into a wingback chair and gasped several times for air. I think I was hyperventilating and wanted to go outside for some fresh air. When I got near the front door, I lost my footing and stepped through on what should have been a solid surface and fainted to the floor.”

Dr. O’Farrill thought it over before saying. “The EKG showed no indication of a heart attack. It seems likely you did faint, possibly from the shock of breaking a bone.”

“How long do I have to stay here?” McKinney asked, looking squarely at him.

The doctor carried on, saying, “Tonight and for at least a week, possibly ten days. Depends on how your ankle feels. Your ankle’s been weakened, and you need some recovery time. When you’re discharged, we’ll give you crutches. Ice for swelling. Any pain is easily remedied with over-the-counter pain killers.”

“Oh brother,” McKinney said with a sigh and relaxed into the bed.

Still, McKinney was pleased that he had accepted his explanation. Once the doctor left, he closed his eyes and made himself remember what he’d seen at the cabin: a pale skin ghost, a claw-handed demon. Did he really see a ghost? He was swimming in those thoughts as he dropped off to sleep.

Chapter 7

JUST THE NEXT DAY, on a cool Wednesday morning in San Francisco, Joey Marks checked out of his fleabag hotel room. His hair dyed blond — a new hair style if he was going to escape to Canada undetected by the police. All night he had slept in his clothes. Among his only possessions were the keys in the front pocket of his pants, and the wallet in his back pocket.

Once Marks stepped outside, he crossed his arms and hugged himself in the chilly morning air. His long-sleeved shirt wasn't enough to keep him warm, and he hotfooted it down Market Street. Minutes later, he turned onto 15th Street, and hurried into the Chase Bank lobby.

Waiting in line for a teller, he kept his anger hidden as he twitched at every noise he heard, wondering if he'd be recognized. He felt certain there was an all-out statewide

manhunt for him, and his picture in every local police department.

When he reached a teller window, he asked to access his safe-deposit box. He presented his California state driver's license, signed his box rental card, and was ushered into the vault room. After both his key and the teller's key were turned, his deposit box was pulled out and handed to him.

"I'll be in this booth," Marks said and stepped away.

He unlatched the metal box and swung the lid open. Inside was everything he needed for a new identity. He looked over a passport, with the name Michael Wilcox and a driver's license and social security card with the same name, before shoving it in the front pocket of his pants. With some effort he stuffed two stacks of twenty-dollar bills bound by rubber bands, each stack worth \$10,000, into his black leather wallet.

Still somewhat on edge, his hands shook a little as he closed up the safe-deposit box, now empty. He carried it out of the partitioned booth and handed it back to the teller.

An armed guard in the lobby saw him coming and opened the door that led to the outside world. That discomfited Marks. But he walked on, and kept his eyes forward, though he was sweating and blinking with nervous energy, which made it hard to concentrate. Luckily, the guard didn't notice, didn't say anything, just stared out the door.

It was a good five minutes of walking before he reached the Eureka Valley / Harvey Milk Memorial Branch Library.

What seemed like a second later, he was in a corner of the main room sitting on a stool in front of a computer screen, his legs dangling. He was troubled by what he was reading. It was news reports on a number of Internet sites about the murder of Abigail Wincoff in the Poconos of Pennsylvania. He hadn't known her name until now. And it didn't affect him one bit. She was just another notch on his killing record. A record that went back six years.

His eyes went wide when he read that he was a suspect in the girl's murder. He was silently cursing the fact that he had been found out. Until now, he'd never been discovered. Why was that?

A tremor shook the building. It felt like San Francisco was experiencing an earthquake. Immediately after the shake was over, a power outage plunged the library into darkness, and the faint mechanical hum of computers fell silent.

Unaware of what happened, panic rippled through him. Did the police find him? His eyes roamed the room. He didn't hear or see anything to that effect.

Minutes passed. No light. No announcement.

But he strengthened and got a grip of himself, if only momentarily, realizing that there had been an earthquake.

As he waited, and waited, for the lights to return, he knew that his escape had just begun. This revelation had come to him quickly and clearly shaken him, so much so that he lost it. He started pounding the table with his fists.

Despite the darkness, people sitting nearby noticed his agitated behavior. He continued pounding his fists without

a care ... until the librarian loudly announced that the lights would be restored at any moment.

Almost simultaneously, Marks settled down and all the lights returned. The librarian walked around, checking all the areas. He felt calmer when the computer started up, but only for a short while. His mood was dampened, and his stomach was growling.

The sliding doors opened to a burst of noisy cars on Jose Sarria Court in the Castro district of San Francisco. The clouds moved in front of the sun. The wind kicked up and the air seemed colder. He stopped on the sidewalk, to the left of the doors, rubbed his arms and shivered, then took a deep breath. He needed a minute to think, because he wasn't sure which direction he ought to go next.

His first thought was to visit the parking lots at the San Francisco International Airport to find a car to steal. That thought put a smug smile on his face. The San Francisco city bus trip to the airport would have to wait, because his stomach couldn't wait any longer.

In under ten minutes he had snaked his way down to the Morning Due Café on 17th Street. The lunch rush was starting when he sat down at a table. Only so briefly, he winked at one of the four gay men seated at a table in front of him. It helped that he came off as gay, to blend in with the neighborhood. That was his cover.

While eating his omelet, he'd had time to ponder how the police found him. The logic of it finally hit him. A storm of emotions raged inside him, and his knees nearly buckled beneath him. It was a battle to contain those emotions.

An olfactory clue sparkled before him. It had to be that pesky waitress, the only person who really noticed him. From the moment he first saw her in the Victoria Station restaurant, he never liked her attitude. He remembered the sidelong suspicious way she looked at him. And he knew in that moment that she was the one who reported him to the police in Stroudsburg.

In this precarious situation, with his life turned upside down, his thirst for revenge was too great. Canada could wait. Next stop, Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

Marks took the last bite of his omelet on the thought of killing that waitress. He didn't know her name. But he would make it his mission to find out where she lived.

A savage smile cut across his face followed by a belch. He took a sip of his coffee and looked demure, worried the gay men nearby had caught wind of the noise he'd made. Lucky for him, no one was looking. As usual, most people didn't pay much attention to him. He just had that kind of face.

The more he thought about his plans, the better he felt. But he wouldn't be able to relax yet. He fled the restaurant, looking around the corner for the bus stop.

Just when Estelle Rowland thought she'd seen the last of Joey Marks, their paths were about to collide ... again.

Chapter 8

LANCE WINCOFF woke up late, feeling sluggish and anxious. The first thing he noticed was the luggage in the corner of the room was no longer there. Gillian's luggage. She'd left without so much as a kiss goodbye. Why had she left without waking him? He rolled over in the bed, with no play of emotion on his face, but with a softening in his eyes.

It was Saturday, April 29. He had no particular plans. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he wrapped a white robe over his blue-striped pajamas, and brown leather slippers. Rather aimlessly he made his way to the kitchen to make coffee and breakfast for himself. There was a knot in his chest that felt like anger. Was he missing her already? Yes, he was dwelling on the fact that he was going to have breakfast with her before she left. She wouldn't have eaten much of it anyway. That was what she did lately: picked at her food through the meal.

Lately, they'd been ignoring each other. She'd changed, he could see it. After the funeral, Gillian had been submerged in grief. She was driven into a deep depression and frequently cried herself to sleep. Other nights she didn't sleep at all. She didn't talk much either. He had done his best to comfort her with an occasional hug or a little kiss on the cheek. But she didn't seem to have any affection left in her for him.

All of this occupied his mind as he put the skillet on the burner to warm, then cracked eggs into a bowl. His eyes were dark and unreadable, as it all engulfed him.

Abigail's death was probably the hardest on her. Just the same, he felt Abigail's loss just as much as his wife did. It just wasn't obvious to Gillian, who openly expressed emotion. Whereas he wasn't able to face the pain of losing their daughter and showed no emotion at all. Although, this was merely his public face, a trait he inherited from his dear old dad.

Sitting at the kitchen table in peaceful solitude, his gaze centered on the coffee in his mug. Again, he was reminded of his father when he took a piece of buttered toast from his plate and forked some fluffy scrambled eggs onto it. Done in the same way as he had watched his father do when he was little. Jimmy Wincoff was where he inherited his medium-sized chiseled nose and the shape of his eyebrows.

The product of a strict upbringing, he was born and raised in Bronx, New York, by a father, who was always so sure about everything. Jimmy Wincoff had a stern demeanor and thought of himself as the port in a storm,

solid as a rock. He wanted to be the one whom his family could lean on for support. Good old Jimmy, who had been the superintendent at his Bronx High School of Science, just had his way of doing things. For instance, he taught his son never to show emotions in public. Displays of fear, especially tears, would brand a man as weak.

“Lance, my boy, deal with the problems you have like a man. If you have to throw a fit, go ahead, but do it in private,” his father told him.

And he had learned early on that his father’s way was the only way. Always the dutiful son, he conducted his life in a manner consistent with what his late father had expected.

For thirty seconds or so, he refrained from drinking his coffee. At these moments he missed his father intensely, and tears were appearing in his eyes. He was struggling to control his emotional state.

A few breaths later, he regained his composure. And suddenly, as he sipped his coffee thoughtfully and was finishing up his breakfast, an image of his father came into his head.

When he was a boy of about nine years, he used to play checkers with his father, who was pretty good at it. He liked to play with the red pieces, and his dad was content with the black. For what seemed like hours on end, they would sit in the living room playing with the checkerboard and the empty box of checkers between them. That one occasion he wasn’t sure where to move a piece.

His eyes flickered as he remembered his father saying to him, 'If you don't know where to go, you'll think long and hard about it. And when you do make that move, it will be your best move. And it will make you a better player.'

Surely his father was with him now, watching over him, advising him. He was convinced that this flashback was a sign. His interpretation was that he needed to make his best move to keep his marriage together.

Looking down at his empty plate, he considered calling his wife. With narrowed eyes, he looked up at the solid brass clock on the wall, and realized that she was already on the plane, in the air. He assumed she was probably napping, considering the early hour she had left this morning.

He told himself to relax. She was going to be away for the weekend. He would see her again on Monday evening when he returned from work.

Determined to get his mind off the thoughts of his wife, he glanced around the room. In doing so, for the first time, he realized how quiet the place was. He had neglected to turn on the television.

Glancing over his shoulder, he stared at the TV screen, aware that his mood was still dark. What he needed was a distraction. A suitable one that would get his mind onto something else. The news.

Every day, the news on CNN was predictable, riddled with reports about the recently elected 45th President of the United States. The media was solely responsible for the political ascendancy of Donald Trump. Well, that was his

impression. He wasn't thrilled by any means, because the real estate market in New Jersey was in a state of paralysis. Though some might argue this was a good time to buy. Being a Realtor, this mattered to him.

But in this exact moment, he was keen on anything that would take his mind off the emotional roller coaster he'd been on from the moment he'd learned that his daughter had gone missing. He stood up and picked up the TV remote, pushed the power button and raised the volume. The TV blinked on to CNN's Headline News, one of the anchors talking about the Catholic Church's Pope Francis at the International Peace Conference in Cairo, Egypt, celebrating Mass with a crowd of nearly 15,000. He listened while he went to the sink and began to wash his dishes and stack them on the sideboard.

Chapter 9

THE AIRPLANE landed on schedule at Lehigh Valley International Airport in Allentown and Gillian Wincoff went to the Avis Rent-a-Car desk to pick up the silver Nissan Altima sedan she had reserved. She drove out of the airport onto U.S. Route 22 heading east in the direction of Stroudsburg.

This trip to the Poconos had taken a great effort on her part. In the past four months, she had barely left her Watchung neighborhood house, skulking around all day. In the aftermath, she'd been grieving the loss of her daughter and not in the least interested in dealing with her daily tasks.

Buzz was all over the Poconos and other areas of the country, that Abigail Wincoff's body had been found under the floorboards of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road in East Stroudsburg. Reporters wanted to do an exclusive interview with her and her husband. Among them was BRC TV13

anchorwoman Kristi Maratos, who, on one occasion, had come to her house in New Jersey. For one terrible moment, Kristi stood on her porch, slammed the brass door knocker hard ... once, twice, three times. While on the other side of the front door Gillian sat, back pressed to the clattering wood. Before leaving, she shoved a handwritten note under the door offering her fifty thousand dollars for a sit-down interview. The sheet of torn-off notepad paper smelled of Tresor by Lancome. A flabbergasted Gillian crumpled it into a ball and threw it in the trash can in the kitchen.

Forty-five minutes later, she drove through the four-block-long business district of Stroudsburg, noticing the post office and the Monroe County Courthouse. With glazed eyes she gazed out at the buildings and pedestrians and appeared to see nothing. Her mind wasn't registering what her eyes were seeing. A tear escaped from her eye as she thought back to that day, in August, her husband had driven around sightseeing, her daughter Abigail in the backseat.

It wasn't much later that she reached Andy Kirkman's residential neighborhood. A gentle bend in the road ahead caused her to tap her brakes before she made a turn onto Bryant Street.

She turned off the car in the driveway of the two-story, colonial house, and stared straight at the garage. Somewhat lost in her thoughts, she did not notice Andy Kirkman come out of the front door.

Pulling her out of her thoughts that were heading in a depressed direction, he tapped on the driver's window with

his ring finger. She turned to look, smiled, and then grabbed her black leather handbag off the passenger seat and undid her seatbelt. His face was pink, though whether that was from the cool air or from rushing up to her car, Gillian wasn't sure. She came out of the car dressed in comfortable travel clothes: dark blue jeans and a light pink cashmere sweater under a dark blue windbreaker. He greeted her with a warm handshake, and she turned it into a hug.

"I'm so glad you could come," Kirkman said, ending their embrace. "You holding up okay?"

"I'm doing well, considering, my life has splintered into a thousand fragments, since losing my daughter the way I did," she said, causing him to pause, then move away from that line of thinking.

"Come inside, Merrilee prepared us a wonderful meal. That should boost your spirits a little, if not a lot. It's just the three of us. My daughter Kara is at a friend's house," he said, walking her into the house.

Upon entering, Kirkman's wife was in the hallway coming toward her just as he closed the thick oak door behind them with a click.

"Gillian, it's a pleasure to meet you after all this time," Merrilee announced, smoothing her apron.

Part of her wanted to say something more comforting, something that would give Gillian encouragement. Another part of her hesitated.

"I'm mighty glad to meet you," Gillian responded with a gracious smile.

Mrs. Kirkman was talking as she went, passing through the small, dark, and formal dining room and ushering them into the kitchen. “Hope you don’t mind eating in the kitchen. It’s a cozier setting to eat our meal.”

“Um, sure,” Gillian said agreeably as she opted for the spacious kitchen with white, sheer curtains around two windows that gave a prime view of the backyard.

Removing her apron from a patched cotton dress that reached her knees, Merrilee added, “Have a seat, while I check the tenderness of the simmering pasta and get the rest of the fixings.”

The warmth of the oven and the smells of garlic and olive oil comforted Gillian. With a polite nod, she sat down in one of the chairs at the small, nicely set table laid with a white linen cloth that had a shimmering, silken look to it.

Before sitting down with them, Merrilee found glasses and filled them with iced tea. As they began to help themselves to food from the covered dishes, Kirkman started in.

“Now that you’re comfortable, I’d like to give you an update on your daughter’s case. It’s not the best news,” he said with a look of empathy on his face. “But I anticipate — more than anticipate, I hope — that it will get better soon.”

Gillian’s eyes narrowed as she swallowed the large bite in her mouth. “I’m anxious to hear what you have to tell me.”

“Please go on,” Merrilee threw in with encouragement.

He told her that the chief suspect in the case had given Detective Philip Silverwood and the police the slip. What more frustrating development could there have been? He rubbed his chin. His brain doing backflips, he was trying to imagine what she was thinking, wondering how she was going to react.

“Is he the man who killed my daughter?” Gillian asked, a proprietary edge to her voice.

There was a short silence broken by Merrilee, whose fork scraped the plate.

“Joey Marks sure fits the bill. Silverwood is convinced more than ever. I’m sure the detective is on the right track. He has years of experience working homicides,” he said, and then picked up his fork and dug into his carrot mashed potatoes with relish.

Strangely quiet, Gillian set down her fork next to her half empty plate, her stomach tightening. Letting it all sink in. She just sat there, staring at him, her eyes moist.

“This is all so unsettling. Gillian, I wish you hadn’t had to go through that, and that we’d met some other way,” Merrilee said with a sympathetic look.

Merrilee’s warm and friendly clear blue eyes seemed almost transparent, like little shards of glass. It broke her heart to see Gillian so distressed. It struck her as strange how people react to tragedy. There were an infinite number of ways people could react. Some became more religious or kinder. Some even a little paranoid. But the one thing that stood out to her the most was they were somehow stronger now than they’d been before.

Moved by her tender words and the sweetness of her voice, Kirkman lowered his glass of iced tea. “What you said was really nice.”

“Aw, thanks, honey,” Merrilee said, appreciating the compliment.

“My sentiments are the same as yours. I’m more than grateful for your hospitality,” Gillian replied, looking at her with kind eyes.

From there, the conversation turned to other things. Time moved too quickly. It seemed minutes later when they had to say their goodbyes. Lunch came to an end at length, much to Gillian’s relief. She was tired from the morning flight.

“It’s been a pleasure, Gillian,” Kirkman said, wagged his brows.

Hugging him helped to erase the sadness of saying goodbye and brightened Gillian’s gloomy spirit a bit. Before walking out of the house, she waved at Merrilee who was standing in the hallway outside the living room.

As soon as they parted ways, a vague tremor of feeling passed through her. After starting up the car, she forced a smile at Andy Kirkman, who was standing in the doorway, his faced shadowed. Odd as it seemed, she wanted to see the place her daughter had been buried. First thing tomorrow, she would visit the cabin on Wagon Trail Road.

Chapter 10

THAT SATURDAY EVENING was to be Detective Philip Silverwood's last night at the Hyatt Place. The hotel was located downtown on 3rd Street, half a mile away from the San Francisco Police Headquarters. He hadn't had one good night's sleep during his stay there. It was understandable, given the circumstances. He had been upset all week, even a little angry with the police for not apprehending Joey Marks. Early the next day, he would take a flight back to Pennsylvania empty-handed. And that didn't settle well with him at all.

His hotel room was on the top floor. There was almost nothing to obscure the view of the twinkling lights of the whole city below, stretching to the distant San Francisco Bay. He sat on the king-sized bed, black leather briefcase and duffle bag next to him and stared out into the night. He was still wearing his brown suit pants and a light blue shirt

open at the neck, though his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. The shade of the bed-lamp kept his face in shadow.

As the night sky grew darker and darker, the fog was rolling in from the ocean. But, still, his reflection in the window became sharper and made him appear to have sharper cheekbones than he really did.

The well-ventilated room, soft and comfortable neatly made bed, the tranquility of San Francisco at night, were all favorable. Nevertheless, his mind was still on his work. It bothered him that a serial killer was wandering the streets. He felt like the bay echoed the turbulent emotions running through him.

This was Silverwood's disturbing thought: Joey Marks was addicted to killing, and he believed he couldn't stop killing and needed to kill again. Serial killers didn't wake up one morning and decide to turn over a new leaf.

To him, Abigail Wincoff was a little girl who delighted in the pastime of birdwatching in the woods, an innocent pleasure shattered when a stranger stalked and killed her. The police checked Joey Marks' computer's browser history and looked into his cell phone records and couldn't find any evidence that he killed Abigail. But the detective knew they had their man, the man responsible for this horrible act. They needed stronger evidence linking Marks to Abigail's death if they were to have any chance of seeing him convicted. Perhaps forensic science might link him to the scene of other crimes.

If he had to profile him based on no more than seeing his home, he'd categorized him as an anger-retaliator killer.

His dislike of children, or young girls in his case, acting out revenge fantasies, comes through loud and clear.

His hand slipped into his briefcase to rummage inside it. He pulled out the file on Joey Marks.

Carefully perusing the file's contents, the thing that struck him as being most outstanding was that he sensed Joey Marks' obsession with his mother Susannah Rae Dirnberger. The newspaper articles he'd collected showed that Marks harbored feelings for her, maybe resentment, maybe anger. Whenever those feelings unnerved him, he planned another murder. Getting to the bottom of this was essential in this case.

Profiling isn't an exact science. It was merely a guide. Even finding out if there was a perceived slight to a suspect could be helpful to the investigation. Over the years, he'd poured over the research regarding the psychology of killers. Marks knew he was being hunted. He was going to make a mistake. All killers messed up, or most of them did eventually. When he did, the detective was going to be there.

He thought back to the break in the case that led him to this point. It was a near miss for the police, should Sheriff Andy Kirkman not have cross-referenced the information on the statements in the case file. A woman named Millie Dozier had crossed paths with the killer. That day in August when Abigail Wincoff had gone missing, Millie reported the driver of a red Chevrolet Silverado that had nearly run her off the road. She recalled the driver was exhilarated and careless, but Sheriff Kirkman hadn't made the connection

consciously. Not yet at least. A few months later, Estelle Rowland provided a description of that vehicle driven by an unsavory patron at her place of employment, the Victoria Station restaurant. Estelle had seen him staring oddly at Abigail Wincoff, who was seated at a table with her parents, when he thought no one was looking. Kirkman would eventually circle back to the statement Millie Dozier had provided him. This past January, a partial fingerprint was found on a stolen red Chevrolet Silverado abandoned in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The print was a match to Joey Marks. The stolen truck constituted the best evidence they had right now. In the course of the investigation, Adrienne Weiland, the concierge of The Stroud Inn, identified him as Ryan Messer, which turned out to be a fake name.

Then there was the manuscript *Murder in the Poconos*, highlighting the details of Abigail Wincoff's murder by a serial killer. It had been left behind at the cabin, where her body had been buried. No other than an obvious calling card that would be found long after Marks was out of the state of Pennsylvania, ensuring the police would know he had trumped them.

In the face of difficulty, he maintained a cool-headed demeanor. He often preferred to work alone on a case. This meant he wasn't a team player. To make up for it, he was always willing to put in long hours to solve a case. At times using unorthodox methods, or if he cut corners on occasion, it was part of his line of work. To this date, he had solved every homicide case that had passed through his desk. This was due to his uncanny dedication to the job, to the point

where he would rather work than be on a day off. He practically lived at the police department offices in Pocono Summit. The downfall was that he had no home-life, no social existence — he had no significant other in his life. 37-years-old as of March, he wasn't thinking of dating, didn't want to date anyone. The timing wasn't exactly perfect. While he wasn't good-looking, he had the kind of face you could trust. His eyes glittered brightly, his best feature. No doubt he knew that too.

Now that he had a good bit of information about Joey Marks, he realized that he was tired. He straightened a little and looked around the room. The low humming sound of the motor of the minibar fridge seemed to call to him. He stood and walked over to it, rested his palm on the handle. He took out a tiny bottle of Jack Daniels and downed it in one swallow, leaving a stinging sensation in his mouth. Just a little something to take the edge off a most disappointing week, hoping for a better night's sleep tonight. It wasn't his habit.

Chapter 11

IN THE EERIE SILENCE of the Poconos woods, nestled amid oaks and whispering pines, stood the cabin on Wagon Trail Road in East Stroudsburg. In a clear sky, the air was pure and richly scented. The rising light of the day was filtering through a disappearing pale, misty fog. A glistening, emerald sphere surrounded the cabin, which made the atmosphere seem ominous. Days since the rain, the foliage was dry and even dusty from the dirt carried by the wind.

In the solitude and silence of the cabin, shadows danced on the attic walls from the sunlight streaming through the window across the room. An occasional bird flew from the trees or the underbrush and past the window in a flash of shadows. Every so often they came close enough that you could hear the sound of their wings pouring forth in a gush of melody.

A dark mass suddenly and silently materialized out of the semidarkness in the attic. A high-pitched whine emitted from the mass that transformed into something like a humanoid shadow. With that came a stench of sulfur and rotting flesh filled the air.

The demonic form began to swirl and cavort around the room, causing the floor beneath it to tremble. Glowing red eyes narrowed. Talking to itself, its mumbling words suddenly ripped through the silence.

Inside the demon, Abigail Wincoff's spirit played a part in making it stronger. Her soul was trapped under its command. Whatever the demon wanted her to do, she had to surrender all to Him.

Rapping sounds came, followed by terrified moans and shrieks, echoing out of the red-eyed demon. The sound seemed to be swallowed up by the floor.

The demon floated forward, and slowly moved over to the window, cruising through the bands of pale, dusty light on the floor. It gazed down upon the ground below. The sun shone brightly over the silent scene. A soft wind blew away the spider's web across the grimy window.

The tiny, black spider was crawling on the shelf at the bottom of the window. Amused by the pathetic creature, the demon kept staring at it. The spider began to spin a new web, the thick thread spiraling round and round, filling the window frame.

The demonic entity had other plans in store for it and managed to grasp the tip of its life force. The spider keeled

over backward, and its legs stopped moving. The demon gave a satisfying rasp as it willed the life out of it.

The spider, crumpled now into a hairy ball, was pushed off the shelf with some force. Its forked tongue lashed out, completely wiping away the web on the window frame.

Reflected in the glass, the wild-haired demon had talons for hands and feet, which slowly changed. Its talons retracted, slipping back inside the fingertips, the arms dropped to its sides. The red faded from its eyes, leaving it with a human face. Abigail Wincoff was manifesting herself. It seemed Abigail's very spirit was entangled in the demon's soul.

Before long, the projection in the window was that of Abigail. Her eyes were pointed straight at the woods, and her mind was busy whirring with feelings of irritation. The resentment of her life cut short was making her mad again. Her image shifted side to side, but she did not utter one single word.

There came a diversion in the sound of an approaching vehicle. A car purred down the narrow road, wound around a curve in the path and stopped abruptly before the cabin.

Low and behold, behind the wheel was Gillian Wincoff. So unexpected, there was Abby's mother. It was the first time she'd put her eyes on her mother since that day in August when she'd snuck out to go birdwatching.

What could she do? she asked herself incessantly.

This sighting sent Abigail's emotions into a jumbled spiral, her spirit struggling within the entity. As surprise started to sink in, the weight of the turmoil that had

been pressing down on her ever since she'd been killed was suddenly heavier. She wanted to cry but couldn't. She wanted to scream out but couldn't.

Then a revelation hit her as powerfully as a thunderbolt of lightning striking against her. She had made the wrong decision to give herself to this demon. Now, more than ever, she needed her mother's comfort.

How could she escape the demon's hold on her?

It wasn't going to happen today.

With a deep moan, the demon pulled Abigail's soul into itself. Abigail's face distorted into the ghastly demon's face. Fiery red eyes stared from the window, one clawed hand resting on the pane. Its mouth opened wide in a silent, sharpened fangs revealing grin and a forked tongue winding from its mouth.

With its sinisterly glowing eyes, the demon was looking directly at the car like a target. Its predatory gaze zeroed in on Gillian Wincoff. Helpless in every possible way, she could only watch as the demon plotted against her mother. Suddenly aware that her mother's appearance was fast becoming the object of the demon's curiosity. It was something so foul and disturbing.

When Gillian reached for the door handle, the demon began to retract. Its eyes vanished into the dark, while the rest of the demon sank into the floor, evidently moving into a domain in the netherworld. All that was left was darkness.

It seemed like merely seconds later that creaking sounds like footsteps came across the hardwood floor.

“Down came the Good Fairy, and she said, Little Bunny Foo Foo,” came a scratchy demon voice that resonated from the attic and echoed through the stillness of the cabin.

Chapter 12

SUNDAY MORNING came quicker than anticipated. Gillian Wincoff wasn't ready to leave the car. The reality that she was staring at this place overwhelmed her. A hidden gem among the surrounding woods, the cabin on Wagon Trail Road was rustic in appearance. But something didn't feel right inside and had caused her to take her hand off the door handle. There was a feel to the place she didn't like — that went beyond the knowledge that her daughter had been buried there. While she had been sitting there, she had felt like she was being watched.

What was happening?

As it was, she couldn't hear anything. What was odd, too, was that there were no birds chirping or flying from branch to branch. Even the wind seemed to be skipping over this area. Nothing was as it should be; it was as if time had stopped still in the small part of the Poconos.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a bird finally appeared. A large black crow came swooping down and landed on the hood of the sedan. It began to caw loudly and repeatedly, its glistening black eyes piercing her own.

After a moment's thought, she hit the steering wheel with her fist. The sound of the horn burst out. To say the bird was startled would have been putting it mildly. With a judder, the crow couldn't fly away fast enough. It flew into the highest branches of the nearby trees, disappearing into the depths of the woods.

The silence returned. The sun shifted from overhead, to bobbing above the tops of the pine trees, its rays hitting the rearview mirror and blinding her.

She exited the car, minus her handbag, which she left on the passenger seat. As she turned, she pocketed the keys in her dark blue windbreaker's pocket. Right off the bat she spied the path that led to the cabin's door. But she didn't move forward.

There came a breeze. The cold air cut through the thin fabric of her black merino wool sweater, and she zipped her windbreaker because she felt the chill. Feeling more at ease, she inhaled the scents of fresh earth, her nostrils flaring to drink their fill of the heavy scent of pine and decay washed down with the early-morning dew and mist. Attempting to clear her mind, she took in the view of the surrounding woods, and the sun's rays bathing the cabin in a warm, dreamy glow.

As she stood there mourning the death of her daughter in silent prayer, she felt a strange presence again. Moving

her head from side to side and just about everywhere, she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. But still, she felt like her feathers had been ruffled.

With uneasy apprehension, she took a slow walk around the entire cabin. Her eyes darted everywhere, but there was nothing in particular to look at. So, she returned to the front of the cabin.

Something scraped like tiny fingernails on the edges of her mind — a need to look up. Buy why?

That was exactly what she did. Shielding her eyes against the glare of the sun and the sudden wind stirring at her back, she spotted a dark figure in the attic window. A soft light glowed around it and she knew she wasn't hallucinating.

As she stared at the shadowed figure, she felt as if she was paralyzed with shock. Darkness overcame her, and a feeling of being surrounded. She wanted so badly to look away, but she couldn't. Call her crazy, but it was as if a force was tugging at her very soul, drawing her to whatever was up in that attic.

The figure moved, its features invisible in the darkness. The only observable movement was the slight flexing of thick clawed fleshless fingers scraping the glass, trying to pull the window up. She squinted her eyes at it, wondering what it was going to do next.

A pair of red eyes appeared. Yes, red. And they were looking right into hers, seemingly penetrating her mind, and soul. Staring like a cobra, hypnotizing its prey so that it

could strike. There was an intensity in them, utterly painful, projecting an evil and sinister demeanor.

Gillian asked herself and almost inaudibly, “What in the world am I looking at?”

The eyes darkened. Right before her eyes, the figure vanished in a sudden rush. The transformation took her aback. She shook her head. Maybe she was seeing things.

“And she said, Little Bunny Foo Foo,” she heard a husky, scratchy voice singing in a whisper.

Wide, shocked eyes, her mouth opened slightly with astonishment tinged with fear. Her hand went to her mouth, and it was trembling. A voice in the back of her head screamed: *Abby*. But it wasn’t her daughter’s voice at all. Someone was singing Abby’s favorite song.

Was her daughter’s killer hiding in this cabin? Had it been Joey Marks she’d seen in the window? Perhaps, that was what she’d been sensing from the moment she had arrived.

Fear overtook her, causing her stomach to squeeze uncomfortably, like it had turned upside down. Her heart pounded as she struggled to swallow.

As she was about to turn away, she heard the voice again, louder, and the sound of it was like a punch to her gut. “Little Bunny Foo Foo.”

Whoever sang was calling her, attempting to get her attention, maybe even mocking her. She looked up at the attic window. There were those red eyes again. Petrified to see them, but, in fact, she just knew that it wasn’t a human being. This was something supernatural, something that

was evil. The possibility had burst onto the stage of her mind. So, it couldn't be Joey Marks, after all.

In an unexpected twist, she sensed the presence of her daughter. She could see Abby's face and her eyes watching her from behind the demon's awful face. She needed to say something, to do something, anything.

"Abby," she yelled into the wind.

In response, she could swear she saw the demon smirk at her. Unable to speak again, she froze. Helpless to do anything other than watch, staring deeply into its eyes. Whatever it was, it had thoroughly unhinged her because she knew it had something to do with her daughter.

Unbeknownst to her, Abigail was struggling within the grip the demon was holding on her, trying hard to escape. She wanted to rush to her mother and embrace her in the only way a ghost could. There was no way that was going to happen. The demon would not let go, would not relent. Upon this discovery, it cackled, grew larger to engulf her spirit as if to swallow her. It strengthened its control over her soul, driving her backward into the darkness. Along with this, the ceiling shook, and the walls rattled.

What just happened here? ... This was the question running in Gillian's mind. She could sense her daughter's soul was being held hostage by this demon. Worst of all, Abby's eternity was in jeopardy. How had this happened? There was no explanation she could think of. She wanted answers. But where would she get them? She wanted help. But who would give it to her?

Her face blank, and her eyes full of pain at the sight of her daughter's possession. A part of her wanted to go into the cabin, to get to the bottom of what she'd seen and heard today. Another part was terrified.

After a long, excruciating moment, she scurried off to her car. Her feeling of dread was too great. She reversed out of the driveway faster than was safe.

"Bye, mommy," cried the voice of Abigail Wincoff.

The demon made a face of total disgust. There came a husky howl before it vanished into thin air.

Chapter 13

THERE were so many feelings running around inside Gillian Wincoff's brain, frowning as she steered the car onto Wagon Trail Road. Fear was the biggest emotion she felt. Deep in her thoughts, she didn't notice how her hands were clutching the steering wheel as if it might spin away if she loosened her grip. She couldn't help it. It was as if she'd looked into the eyes of hell itself. In all of that the only thing worse was feeling the presence of her daughter. The feeling was so strong that she couldn't get her emotions under control.

Before she reached the end of the road, intersecting with Sellersville Drive, she punched the brakes with everything she had, screeching to an abrupt halt. She was breathing so hard, feeling about to suffocate, she thought she might pass out. Tears streamed from her eyes as she steered the car off to the side of the road. She needed the loving warmth of her

mother's embrace, who had provided a shoulder to cry on. Louise Melinda Sisler was more supportive than her husband, who became increasingly preoccupied with work. Occasionally, though, Ms. Sisler had a habit of overstaying her welcome at their house.

What was happening to her was real now. Unbuckling her seat belt, she half turned in her seat, bit down on her bottom lip, cringing a little. Chills, upside-down stomach, all driven by fear. Those things were real.

Feeling desperate, she came out of the Nissan, gasped for air, leaning against the side of the car near the front tire on the driver's side. After righting herself, she placed her hands on the hood. She started to cry. Her mind was on overdrive. She was blaming herself for her daughter's death. Because she had to take a nap, carelessness on her part and disregard of her responsibility to her daughter. After all this time, this turmoil inside of her — this feeling of guilt — was overblown, like all emotions. Whether irrational or not, she just couldn't let it go. For she knew her guilt was a burden she would bear the rest of her life.

Wallowing in her own pity would do no good. Almost inch by inch, she mentally shook herself out of it. Then she turned around and sat down on the hood of the car.

Somehow, looking out at the view of the trees in the distant mountains made her think the sight was too beautiful. It was hard to comprehend that such a horrible thing had happened to her daughter in this picturesque town. Not only did she have to contend with the fact that

her daughter had been killed by a serial killer, now a demon had Abby's soul captive.

Could this be real? Something so far-fetched from reality had to be a nightmare. But it was worse than a nightmare because she knew she was awake. There was no need to pinch herself. And she couldn't let herself go crazy or fall to pieces, either.

Winded and distraught, she realized that she needed to ask God. Why was she going through all this? The fact was she needed a spiritual breakthrough.

A dusty black pickup truck, the music blasting, came whipping down the empty road. The sound of it made her look over her shoulder with a rush of alertness. This wasn't the sign from God that she was looking for.

The curly-haired man behind the wheel gaped at the sight of her outside. He slowed the truck to a stop, pushed the Down button to roll down the passenger-seat window, and looked to the right at her.

"Ma'am, are you alright? You want me to call a tow truck?" he asked in a Southern accent so thick that at first, she could hardly understand him.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine!" she hollered back, brandishing a completely normal smile. "Just getting some fresh air."

"Okay. I was just being a concerned citizen, that was all," he said, and pushed the Up button to close the window.

The engine revved and the truck peeled off so quickly the tires screeched as it turned onto Sellersville Drive. Within a moment it was gone.

Her eyes weary, she didn't want to keep staring at the woods. But she couldn't look away, no matter how hard she tried. It was the place her daughter had gone birdwatching and the place her daughter had been murdered. She couldn't see anything else.

A thundercloud formed on her face. *She was going to take some action*; she thought and came off the hood of the car. With renewed strength, she got back in the car and started up the engine.

A shadow leapt from the woods alongside the caw of a crow. No birds were anywhere in sight when the caw came again. Then the large bird landed on the hood of the car with a screech. *Twice in one day*, she thought. *Was this an omen of things to come?* She questioned herself as she blankly stared into the eyes of the perched and unmoving crow. Thereafter, a car came flying past her on her left, traveling about sixty miles an hour. The bird took off next.

Common sense took hold of her. She needed to talk to the owner of the cabin. Plain and simple. They would know if the place was haunted. Stupid as it sounded to her, that was the best place to start. She would be paying a visit to the realtor's office that very next day. The rental agent Joy Franklin worked there. She hated to think that was the lady who had recommended Victoria Station to them. If only they had never gone to that cursed restaurant where the killer had seen her daughter.

She glanced both ways before turning left onto Sellersville Drive. After another turn, she started down a street, motivated purely by instinct.

But there were other things she had to do first. She was going to extend her stay at the hotel for a further two weeks and cancel her flight back to New Jersey. That should be ample time for her to get the answers she needed. Her husband wasn't going to like this one bit. And she wasn't going to tell him the real reason she was staying, either. At least, not at the present moment.

Chapter 14

IT was nine o'clock in the morning of Monday, May 1 and Philip Silverwood had breezed into the Monroe County Sheriff's Department in the three-story Monroe County Courthouse to meet with Cole Burgio. He walked briskly past the front desk where Chief Deputy Aubrey Livengood stood talking on the phone, his free hand on his holster, a bad habit of his since quite some time. The detective only gave him a nod. Next, he trotted past the cubicle of the cumbersome shaped Kimberly Kaasa, the secretary and dispatcher, who had her back to him. He glimpsed her as she ran her fingers through her weave and saw golden-blond highlights throughout.

With a quick stride down the hall, he stepped into the former office of Andy Kirkman now occupied by the newly elected sheriff of Monroe County, who was reviewing some reports. So, Silverwood simply stood in the doorway,

admiring the room, until he looked up. To his surprise, it had been redecorated since his last visit about a week ago. His eyes were drawn to the new steel-trimmed desk, and the tan woven carpet. He couldn't help twitching his nose from side to side at the smell of antiseptic cleaner and new carpet. On the wall closest to him photographic portraits of his family hung below a painting of mountains from the southern part of the valley of Araba. He was also quick to notice the walls were still off-white with the same built-in bookcase dominating the center interior wall, still stuffed with file boxes.

In front of Burgio, who sat behind his desk, lay a box, its contents of a case ever-present on his mind.

Upon seeing him, Burgio's eyes brightened, as he stood up, pushing the box to the end of the desk. The new sheriff carried himself erect with his broad, square shoulders, deep chest and sharp chiseled features.

"Detective Silverwood, I've been expecting you. Here," Burgio said with a grin, piercing the silence like a foghorn.

For the second time, the detective had looked about Burgio's office, noticing the changes, leather chair, a plush, swivel recliner, and said now, squinting his eyes, "I came here straight away."

"I pulled the case file on Randee Rae Devereux and slapped it on my desk after our phone call last week, just as you asked. It didn't take long to find because it had been stored in the closed-case section of the records room," Burgio countered, and gestured to two brown

upholstered chairs set up in front of his desk, which was tidy and neatly organized.

Philip Silverwood, who wasn't the sort of man who felt compelled to fill every silence with chatter, just put up his hands, and grabbed the box. "Fantastic."

Just straight talk, spoken like a true detective, thought the sheriff before responding with. "Something else I happened to notice too."

After taking a seat, Silverwood slowly raised his eyes from the box. "Go on with it."

Burgio was beginning to dislike him intensely. He wanted to pop him in the face with the polished gray marble paperweight from his desk, but he didn't want to get arrested for assaulting a fellow officer in the process.

After a quick sigh, Burgio rubbed his neck and met his eyes. "When Gillian Wincoff filed a missing person's report on her daughter, the Monroe County Sheriff's Department immediately issued an all-points bulletin. But it wasn't broadcast over certain radio signals."

The detective was silent for a while as he mulled it over. He stared at the walls, the ceiling, and the carpet before gazing at Burgio.

"That's understandable. It's likely that Sheriff Kirkman didn't want to alert the media to what was happening, and didn't want to scare off the travelers in town. The FBI was notified, and so were the police in East Stroudsburg and Arlington Heights and Bartonsville. Furthermore, County officers along with Kirkman, who did a fine job, putting

everything he had into the case, made a search of the area for clues.”

A satisfied expression settling over his face, Silverwood reached into the box and withdrew a folder. For the ongoing murder case of Abigail Wincoff, he was the lead detective on it. There were aspects of his ways the sheriff wasn't privy to. Therefore, Burgio knew there was no disagreeing with his decisions. As far as he could tell, Silverwood was a good man doing his best to solve the case. He knew to stand back, and let the detective do his work.

Sheriff Burgio quietly moved the conversation back a step. “What exactly are you hoping to find?”

“Won't know till I see it. The suspect kept extensive newspaper clippings about the case. There may be some connection between the case and the murder of Abigail Wincoff,” Silverwood said straight-faced, staring briefly at his prominent nose.

“Best of luck finding it,” the sheriff added, “It may be more comfortable to work in the conference room, and for privacy.”

“Good point,” Silverwood said, and stood up from the chair to leave with the box in his arms.

Deputy Missy Sparks came through the door with an announcement. Her black hair was noticeably longer, which was tied back in a ponytail. She had on a little makeup, but not much, more like a reminder of her femininity than anything else.

Her words echoed in the room. Watching Silverwood exit, Burgio understood exactly what he was going through — at least from the outside he did.

Setting aside Kirkman's misgivings about Burgio, he had a favorable statewide reputation as a seasoned lawman, not a fallacious self-promoter. He carried out police duties with grit and determination, from breaking up bar brawls to tracking down suspects and dodging gunfire. The bottom line was he meant business.

Chapter 15

AT 10 O'CLOCK, the sun was lighting up the surrounding trees. The wind whipped a few dry pine needles against the windshield and Gillian Wincoff flinched. Panic had already been building through her since parking her car beside a Mazda among the grove of trees outside the Cozy Vacation Rentals office on Lower Lakeview Drive in East Stroudsburg.

Removing the keys from the ignition, she dropped them into her handbag and hesitated. Her thoughts whirling, rehearsing in her mind what to say, hooking her handbag over the crook of her arm.

When she came out of the car, she stood for about a minute looking very bewildered. It only just occurred to her that she had neglected to call her husband to inform him of her extended absence. She made a note to herself to call him

by the end of the day. Otherwise, he would panic when he returned home from work and found her missing.

Not giving herself a chance to change her mind, she hurried to a door marked OFFICE, handbag swinging against her hip, buffeted by the wind. The breeze was blowing her shoulder-length, faded honey-blond colored hair to one side, caressing her nape in its cool sweep. She was hiding her hands in the pockets of the dark blue windbreaker. The corners of her mouth were twitching uncontrollably, the small mole above her lip moving up and down. She didn't know which was pushing her more at the moment, anxiety or some feeling of terror of the unknown within her. Before she could open the door, though, there was a rustling noise as Joy Franklin stepped out with a client, talking.

Joy, sans make-up and hair in a bun, just stared at Gillian, feeling like she'd seen her somewhere before but couldn't think where or when. While Gillian moved to the side of the door, waiting without a word.

The client spun around. She was a tall, thin black woman with short-cropped hair and a roundish face in a lavender suit under a tan trench coat.

"I'll call you with my decision tomorrow after I've had time to review the rental agreement," the lady client said in a rush.

"Wonderful," Joy held out a hand, eyeing Gillian the whole time. "I look forward to your call."

They shook hands, and then the lady left toward her red Mazda 6 sedan. Straightening the dark gray blazer of her

suit, and then smoothing out her pale-green blouse beneath it, Joy wrapped her arms around herself. She was waiting for Gillian to say something, anything. But she didn't say a word.

Another moment of silence passed before Gillian spoke. "Good morning, Ms. Franklin. I'm not sure if you remember me. I was sitting in the car outside the cabin off of Sellersville Drive, while you were meeting with my husband Lance Wincoff last August."

"Actually, I do. I remember meeting your daughter. Such a tragedy. She was such a lovely girl. I'm sorry for your loss," Joy Franklin said with a graceful softness in her tone. "What brings you here to my office?"

"I have a rather odd request, which is ..." Gillian tapered off, worry showing on her face.

"Please explain this odd request of yours," Franklin asked, with a query in her voice.

Whatever Gillian was going to say, she rethought it. "I'm sure you heard on the news that the police found my daughter's body under the floorboards of the basement of that cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Your agency was the seller of that cabin. I want to meet the owner. Can you ..."

Convincingly, Gillian quelled a whimper and tapered off again, and Joy was quick to interject. "Because you want to view the basement, where your daughter was buried."

Gillian just nodded, a sad look on her face.

“I guessed as much. I have a great deal of intuition. At my age, I’ve seen a lot of things in life. It’s just natural with me.”

“Yes. That’s it. I just want a glimpse inside. I’m leaving in a few days, and I don’t know when I’ll be back. This may be the last chance I have to get that little bit of closure,” Gillian agreed in a reassuring tone.

The lines around Joy’s eyes softened. A smile grew slowly.

“Normally, I wouldn’t disclose a client’s confidential information without the informed consent of the client, but in your case, I can allow an exception to the rule. This is an awkward situation, too, because ... well, the strangest thing of all is that an ownership shake-up has occurred. Due to an unfortunate accident, the recent owner of the cabin, Don McKinney, backed out of the agreement altogether,” the rental agent explained.

There had to be a link between what Ms. Franklin had just said and that strangeness of the cabin. None of this was playing well in Gillian’s mind.

“What kind of accident?” Gillian probed, tilting her head toward her.

“I really can’t say, Mrs. Wincoff. The most I can tell you is that Don McKinney is recovering at Lehigh Valley Hospital–Pocono.”

“Thanks for telling me this,” Gillian paused, thinking this over.

“Wait here, and I’ll go get the keys to the cabin. I’m lending them to you. I expect them back before you leave

East Stroudsburg,” Joy Franklin said, opened the door and stepped into the office.

All kinds of horrible images flooded Gillian’s head. She pictured that ghost attacking the owner.

“Ms. Franklin you’ve been such a help. I’ll be sure to return them soon,” Gillian said, when she came through the door and handed her the keys.

Several beats after Gillian walked to her car, Joy stood there thinking with squinted eyes and a facial grimace, watching her drive away. That made her look very droll in the face.

Driving to the hospital, Gillian Wincoff had so many suspicions whirling through her mind. She needed to see Don McKinney and find out what he knew about the situation at the cabin. But she wasn’t sure how well it would go over.

What if he wouldn’t see her?

Chapter 16

COLE BURGIO, dressed in full uniform complete with jacket, sheriff's badge shining and ball cap, stepped into the small hospital room of Don McKinney. He had come to interview him about the incident at the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Just six days back, Dr. Rafael O'Farrill had duly reported the incident as soon as the unconscious McKinney had been wheeled into surgery. A report that was tedious given the fact that there was very little to report.

Removing the aviators resting on the bridge of his nose, the sheriff noticed McKinney's eyes were fluttering shut. Burgio thought he looked the part of a hospital patient, dressed in a gown, his hair unkempt, and his face covered with beard stubble.

There was nothing Don McKinney wanted more than to escape into a peaceful sleep due to the pain in his

hoisted leg in plaster. When his eyes caught sight of the sheriff standing at the foot of the bed staring at him, internally, he was livid. His eyes flew open, and something like panic flitted across his face.

“Mr. McKinney, I’m glad I caught you awake,” he said, “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Cole Burgio, the sheriff of Monroe County.”

“Why are you here? I didn’t call the police. There was no reason to, I didn’t call anybody,” McKinney said in a nervous voice, slumping and shifting so he could extend his plastered leg.

In the interim, the sheriff was showing much patience, waiting for him to stop fidgeting around.

“Ouch, my leg hurts” wailed McKinney, raising up in the bed the best he could.

The sheriff was unmoved, refusing to be provoked by his words. “I just want to ask you some questions.”

With apprehension surging inside McKinney, he said nothing because he wanted to go to sleep. He glared at the sheriff as if he held him personally responsible for ruining his day.

Burgio knew he was being ignored. He didn’t mind. Gave him time to think.

The liter bag of fluid that still hung from the IV pole added to his anxiety. Additional to the calls over the PA system, the soft conversation between patients and hospital staff, and the constant beeping of the heart monitor was more than he could stand. He didn’t want to stay any longer. Lehigh Valley Hospital–Pocono might be a good hospital,

but he wanted to get home to his own bed. He wished he could walk out on his one good leg. Of course, he would stay because the doctor wasn't going to release him.

"Nurse," McKinney hollered toward the open door, still ignoring him, and leaning forward. "Get this IV out of my arm."

His tone became patronizing. Burgio rolled his eyes at him, spellbound by his behavior. Could it be any more obvious that McKinney didn't want the police involved? The sheriff shook his head in frustration but listened, nonetheless. After so many years of anticipating and responding to people's unspoken signals, Burgio could clearly read that he was thinking about leaving.

McKinney looked away from him and at the window, where soft light was filtering through flimsy curtains. That irritated the sheriff.

"Word came into the station about your accident," he said, then McKinney heard a hitch in his voice when he added, "That cabin was the site of a murder investigation. A little girl's body was recovered from underneath the floorboards of the basement last year."

"I wasn't aware of any crime having been committed there."

"You understand that I'm only doing my duty," Burgio said, trying out his most accommodating smile, but it bounced off him without making a dent. "Want to tell me what happened there?"

"When my foot slipped into a crevice in the floor and got stuck, I panicked and fainted. There's nothing more to

tell,” McKinney said in a gruff voice amidst a fit of violent coughing.

In a moment of haste, anger, and frustration, McKinney pulled the IV needle from his arm as if he knew what he was doing. A trickle of blood splattered across the ceiling and streamed down his arm. There was no pain, and he just leaned back. The sheriff looked at him in shock, at the same moment Laura Spencer flounced into the room, her white sneakers squeaking on the linoleum.

“What have you done?” her voice, high-pitched and panicky, made McKinney turn his head sharply.

Astounded by what she saw, she hurried to the bed. She gave him the once-over, not sure what to say. Her gaze flew up his body to his face even as he looked at her.

“Let me see your arm,” she finally said, slipping into action mode and focusing on the problem at hand.

Defiantly, McKinney set his jaw. “You wasted your time, Sheriff. There’s nothing out of the ordinary to report.”

There was that attitude again. Clearly tired of it, Burgio held his look, thrust out his lower teeth and gave an exasperated sigh.

Why doesn't he just leave? McKinney had thought to himself. Then it hit him that to get rid of the pesky sheriff, he was going to have to play this another way.

McKinney turned his head toward the nurse and spoke more pleasantly. “Please forgive my behavior. It’s just that this morning the doctor told me that intravenous fluids had been discontinued, because my blood biochemistry had returned to normal.”

“You’re right about that. I’ve reviewed your chart. You have to be patient. I couldn’t come sooner because there were other patients needing a higher level of monitoring, observation and care,” she said as she pressed against his arm with a cotton ball before applying a Band-Aid.

Casually, the sheriff cleared his throat, partly because he was being ignored.

Laura smoothed the floral scrub top she was wearing and straightened her ponytail. “What brings you here, Sheriff?”

“Official business,” he replied, squinting his eyes at McKinney, and then added a smiling glance in her direction that transformed him into more of an everyday kind of fellow than an authority figure.

“I feel lightheaded and need to take a nap,” McKinney countered, burning him with a look.

Drawing a long breath, Burgio shook it off. “Don’t be alarmed. We’re done.”

“Good,” said McKinney, who stared at them with a mixture of discomfort and irritation.

“Doctor will come to visit soon,” said Laura, who then turned to the sheriff, “I’ll walk you out.”

They promptly left without another word. McKinney exhaled. Without moving, he sank further into the bed, trying to relax.

Chapter 17

WHAT was Gillian Wincoff doing in town? Why had she been talking to that Realtor? The questions rang over and over, on and on. Kristi Maratos was stopped at a stop light behind two other vehicles behind Gillian's rental car. She had been following her ever since she'd driven past the Cozy Vacation Rentals office and seen Gillian wrapping up a conversation with an agent.

But she had needed a second look to identify her.

Without stopping to think, she had turned in a U-turn, discreetly, if that was even possible. She circled around to drive by again. And when she did, she knew for certain that it was Gillian Wincoff, who at that exact time just happened to be getting into her car.

The radio was on in her car. But it became apparent that the easy-listening tunes were distracting her enough to be more fidgety. She needed all her faculties, working and in

good order, for her covert observations of the streets. She reached to turn the radio off. Her hand on the knob. At which point there was a loud burst of static with the hasty way she'd clicked the radio knob to off.

The light turned green, and she pressed on the gas pedal and drove at a leisurely pace. As discreetly as possible, she followed, keeping two cars between them. She was doing a good job of blending in. Surely, she had to give herself credit for that.

Where was Gillian going? she wondered dimly. Perhaps a hotel? Hopefully ... so she could approach Gillian in the parking lot, catching her off guard, and score an interview with her.

For the longest time, she had wanted an exclusive interview with the Wincoffs after their daughter went missing. She couldn't understand why they had turned down their noses at her. Reminding herself of the time she'd visited their house in Watchung, New Jersey, waiting outside for a response, as she tried her best to sound as polished and polite as possible. It was like they didn't want to share their story with the media — like they didn't want any publicity at all. Once they met her, she knew they would like her. It would all be so easy if they did. Believing she could convince Mrs. Wincoff to do an interview, she saw this as her chance. A reporter like her didn't climb her way up the ladder without being hard as nails and twice as sharp. Time and time again, she'd proven that she wasn't just another pretty face.

Kristi followed her down several streets, until she came to a hospital.

What was she doing visiting a hospital? The question rang in her mind. Her mouth hung open as she watched Gillian's car pull from Brown Street into the Lehigh Valley Hospital–Pocono parking lot.

This would put a damper on her plans. The last thing she wanted to do was approach Mrs. Wincoff in a hospital. Something she had never done, and it didn't feel right for her to do that.

When Kristi was about to turn into the parking lot, something made her stop the car and look. For one wild moment, a Nissan pickup truck swerved in front of her almost causing a collision. She was very aware of how close she just came to being in an accident. Though she was emotionally agitated by the incident, she pulled into the parking lot with an uninterrupted view to the hospital's entrance.

It took her some moments, twisting around looking out the back window, before she saw Gillian Wincoff straighten her blouse inside her windbreaker as she strolled through the sliding doors of the hospital's main entrance.

Whereupon Gillian walked past Sheriff Cole Burgio, who was heading toward the exit, without uttering one word to each other. He paid her no mind; Not even did he give her so much as a glance as she turned left and headed toward the welcome desk. He didn't know who she was, neither did she know him. To this day, they hadn't been introduced. In the recent months, she had been keeping tabs

on the investigation into her daughter's murder through conversations with Detective Philip Silverwood, and prior to that, with former sheriff, Andy Kirkman.

Outside, in the parking lot, Kristi Maratos had decided to wait in her Mazda sedan. No surprise there. There was a story there, she could sense it, and all she needed to do was dig it out. Plus, she had gotten comfortable in her seat, shifting her colorful print dress in blues and reds, inside her black patent leather jacket. After a while, she could feel the cool air from outside seeping into the car. So, she tilted the vents and relaxed a smidgen. The hot air on her face and neck felt good.

Just sitting there, she looked great, just having turned twenty-nine a few weeks earlier. A smooth, high forehead, her complexion was radiant. Her cheeks were soft and rosy. And her hair: a thick mass of it in pure blonde color.

The sound of a car door slamming alerted her to the Ford Expedition parked across the lot. While the sheriff's vehicle sat idling, she blinked and looked again. *Some coincidence*, she thought.

A question sprang into her mind as she was beginning to wonder about what was going on. Maybe something to do with Gillian Wincoff. What was the new sheriff doing visiting a hospital? She kept her eyes on the SUV as it pulled out from the parking space and rolled to a stop at the exit of the lot.

On second thought, it was common for police officers to visit hospitals, since they dealt with crimes that often resulted in bodily injuries.

Either way, she was inclined to sit back and wait for Gillian to return to the car. The rest of her day was clear of meetings. That morning she had only been scheduled to anchor the news show on BRC TV13.

Chapter 18

THE HALL was warm from the heater, though Gillian felt a shiver of fear. Her footsteps slowed as she debated the decision she'd made to come here. She hadn't thought about what she would say when she saw Don McKinney. Would she dare mention the sighting at the cabin?

"Would he believe it?" she wondered.

There were times she didn't believe it herself. She was still wrestling with her conscience. Acutely aware that she had seen a spirit, she was nevertheless unnerved by it. The whole thing had left her shaken.

At the last possible second, the resolve came to her. What if he thought she was crazy? Well, so be it. She didn't care. Her daughter was the victim of a serial killer. At the very least, he would understand the anguish she was going through. When explained that way, it made sense. It was just as well that she might be crazy after all. But if she

wasn't crazy and the cabin was haunted, that would be another matter altogether.

As nonchalantly as possible, she walked up to the circular welcome desk. Though she retained her outward poise, inside she was frantic. Hiding her shaking hands in the pockets of her windbreaker, she cracked a stiff smile.

"Hello and welcome. How may I help you today?" the receptionist asked coming off her stool, then placing her palms on the desktop, and leaning forward slightly.

"Hello to you, too," Gillian said, glad the shiver didn't show in her voice. "Could you tell me where I can find a patient?"

"What is the patient's name?" the lady asked.

"Don McKinney."

Out of sheer habit, the lady took the pen in front of her, pinched it between her forefinger and thumb, lifted it and dropped it into a ceramic mug that bristled with other pens. Then she tapped in Don McKinney's name in the prompt window on the computer display screen.

"He's in Room 322. Sign there," she told her, then gestured with her arm as she spoke and handed her a guest pass, pointing to a pair of elevator doors on the far wall. "Please take the elevator to the third floor."

Gillian signed the check-in sheet and turned, walking off without another word.

As soon as she stepped out of the elevator, a nurse, slimly white and elegant, came running up the hall, pushing a gurney, wheels rattling, and a doctor jogging behind her,

pressing the stethoscope to his chest with a palm to prevent it from bouncing. This caused Gillian to hesitate.

Her gaze flicked up and down the hall. A woman, pristine in spotless nurse's garb, was pushing a semi-conscious man along in a wheelchair. In the crook of her arm, she carried a black leather medical bag.

The hospital's PA system cackled open and blared an announcement. The nurse stopped to listen. Gillian headed in their direction just as the nurse gave the wheelchair a shove and began to move off along the hall. The wheelchair's wheels screeched on the scuffed beige tiled floor.

Moments later, Gillian came to the half-opened door of McKinney's room. Her stomach did nervous flip-flops as she raised her fist to knock on the door. She paused. What if he was sleeping? She swallowed at the thought that she had wasted her time coming here. *Oh, what the heck?* she thought to herself, rapping on the door, the sound reverberating through her body.

"Enter," came a male's voice.

Her heart was thumping like a drum as she stepped into the room. She found Don McKinney sipping a drink, his lunch tray in front of him. He looked up at her. A perplexed expression crossed his face. Still terribly nervous, her mind went blank for a moment.

His eyebrows came together in a puzzled frown. "I think you're in the wrong room, miss."

"Don McKinney?" she asked, stopping at the foot of his bed.

“Yes, and who might you be?” he inquired, setting down the cup.

“Gillian Wincoff. I’m the mother of the girl whose body was found some months ago buried in the ground beneath the basement floor of the cabin you owned on Wagon Trail Road.”

Hearing her say that made him think back to the conversation he’d had with the sheriff earlier that day. That the cabin was the site of a murder investigation.

“I’m sorry about your loss,” he said, then shot her a questioning glance. “What brings you here?”

Gillian took in a breath, held it a moment, let it out, wondering how best to put it, then decided on the direct approach.

“Maybe this sounds crazy, but I have to ask you something about that cabin. Did you see a ghost?”

There was far more she wanted to say, but she had said enough to indicate that he had. The shocked look in his eyes and arched eyebrows gave it away.

McKinney didn’t want to tell her the truth. He had been forcing himself to forget the whole thing ever happened. With that look of desperation on her face, he sensed she knew something more. All along, he had wanted to confess the truth about what he had seen. This meant she was the one person he could confide in.

He pushed the tray to the side, scooted up a little in the bed, and now, his face grimaced with pain from his healing ankle bones. “Bloody hell.”

“I didn’t mean to disturb you. But yesterday, I was at the cabin. The truth is, I ... saw something in the attic window. That is, a strange dark figure with red eyes. It didn’t appear to be a real person. And then even it disappeared, as if swallowed directly into the air. I assure you I’m not crazy,” Gillian said rather frankly, rushing her words and nervously clutching her handbag to her.

“Oh, you’re not crazy, lady. I can see you want answers to questions you could barely bring yourself to ask. Let me enlighten you. Just between us, that cabin is more than haunted. Whatever is in there is unholy. I am quite certain that I was attacked by demons. Don’t go back there,” he said with a warning note.

“I appreciate your honesty,” she said and let out a sigh of relief.

“Again, I’m sorry about what happened to your daughter.”

“I’ll be candid. I’m not past it. I can’t so long as my daughter’s soul is under the control of a demon. Anyhow, thanks for the warning,” Gillian said filled with panic as she left the room.

A dumbfounded McKinney was left to wonder how her daughter’s soul had anything to do with the demons in that cabin. Yet, after thinking on it some more, he decided it made sense. That had to be the real reason she’d come to see him. He shrugged to himself. It didn’t matter. From this moment on all he wanted to do was bury the issue.

Gillian Wincoff went to the toilet. And then, at the sink, she splashed cold water on her face in an attempt to keep

her mind together. She looked at the distraught reflection of herself, closed her eyes and erased the washed-out image from her mind. When she reopened her eyes, she knew she had to do something to save her daughter's soul. The warning Don McKinney had given her was of no use. On that notion, she walked out of the women's restroom.

Chapter 19

ONCE INSIDE HER CAR, Gillian belted up and drove off to find a Starbucks for a sandwich and coffee. She made a left onto Smith Street and the car bounced over a pothole. Her teeth clacked together briefly before she turned into the Starbucks on Prospect Street in East Stroudsburg.

As she was sitting in the driver's seat, snuggled in her windbreaker and drinking her cup of coffee, a light, chilly rain began to fall. She turned on the wipers and watched them swish back and forth.

"Come back here, you thief!" yelled a man in the parking lot.

To her left, she was shocked to see a black homeless woman violently arguing with a black man in a security guard uniform. Gillian could tell the man was mad enough to get into a fight. He tried to grab the woman's arms but couldn't get a grasp on either wrist.

A bag of potato chips hit him in the face.

Absentmindedly, the black woman had thrown it and jerked backwards. The security guard swung around and yelled something inaudible. And Gillian wondered if she should call the police.

Just as she feared, the woman took a big swing at the man, missing him by mere inches. The security guard started punching and punching the woman's head and face in a grunting frenzy. Rain drizzled on them in thick drops.

"Someone call the police!" yelled a lady.

The security guard was spooked to see the handful of spectators standing outside Starbucks. He stopped hitting the woman, who then took off running. The man brushed off his black pants and walked briskly toward Starbucks.

A minute later, the rain hammered hard against the windshield. The steady rhythm of the rain was soothing on the roof of the car and matched the cadence of her thoughts. The fight she'd just witnessed was still revolving in her mind. In the slowest possible manner, the rain was helping to clear her mind.

Her body felt cool, and she felt extremely drowsy. While she'd thought about taking a catnap, she turned the key in the ignition, stopping the wipers in mid-arc.

After sticking her coffee cup in the beverage holder, she tipped her head back and closed her eyes. But she didn't fall asleep. A memory flashed in her mind. Vividly. She pictured the rain bucketing down outside the vacation cabin, the day her daughter went missing. She couldn't help it — and felt the tears rising. And it was like she couldn't remember a time when she wasn't fighting back tears.

Her mobile phone rang in her handbag on the passenger-side floor. She opened her eyes and just stared at the handbag. The incessant ringing of the phone inside was incomprehensible. Who was calling? She groaned. There was only one person who could possibly be calling her. No doubt, it was her husband, whom she hadn't called yet. *The timing was just right*, she thought.

After a few more seconds of pondering, she reached for the phone in her handbag. She looked down at the caller ID, not really wanting to answer it. But, of course, it was Lance.

"You should have called him before you went to the hospital," she said to herself before she answered.

Right off the bat, he questioned why she hadn't called him — moot point now — and she apologized and got him up to speed about her extended stay in the Poconos. She did her best to convince him that she needed this time away, but she could tell by the sound of his voice he was shaken by this news. The worst part was that she didn't tell him the truth. Part of her wanted to tell him what had happened, but her gut wasn't talking. She didn't tell him anything about the spirit she'd seen in the attic window of the cabin or about her meeting with Don McKinney. Because she didn't want him to be any more worried than he already was. Additionally, her gut instinct sensed he would tell her to ignore it. And that she couldn't do.

With all that settled, the conversation continued along more pleasant lines. He was concerned about a real estate deal for his successful development company and how anxious he was to get the project rolling. This seemed to

calm him. He enjoyed conversations about his work and became more animated when talking about it.

They talked for a while longer. Or, rather, he talked while she listened and stared out the windshield, her mind millions of miles away. It felt a little strange, having misled him, but she saw no other alternative. This was one of those countless times she'd listened to her inner voice. Watching the rain, she let her worries drop away from her. Not that her secret was a burden, only she would tell him in her own time.

What made this more complicated was how she and her husband had gone in different directions. When at home, they weren't really talking to each other. For reasons she didn't completely understand, it felt uncomfortable to speak to him about anything.

A month after Abigail's funeral, Lance's father Jimmy Wincoff had died of a sudden stroke, alone in his townhouse in Riverdale, New York. Returning from some shopping, the sight of him dead on the floor got to his wife. Stella had never had the harshness of real life come this close to her. His mother was all broken up inside. The timing couldn't be any worse. Not long after, they were at another funeral. This made them more distant instead of closer. This made her wonder if they would ever be a happily married couple again.

When the call ended, it was clear that she left her husband in a better state than she had found him in at the beginning of the call.

The weight of the many things on her mind faded against the sound of the rain. It was so peaceful. Her eyes drifted shut as she leaned her head back against the seat and fell into a light sleep.

Chapter 20

DISAPPOINTMENT was an understatement for what Kristi Maratos felt, which was frustration beyond the possibility of alteration. That her time had been wasted. The entire time, she had followed Gillian Wincoff in her car. Seeing her drive to Starbucks, talk on her mobile device and fall asleep wasn't what Kristi had anticipated at all. She didn't care for the fight she'd seen between an alleged shoplifter and the security guard, either.

As casually as she could, she glanced to her right, then to her left as she made a U-turn from the curb. Much too cautious on her part, especially since Gillian was napping in her car and wouldn't catch sight of her.

Driving further down Prospect Street, she skidded into the Sunoco station. The rain and the rumble of thunder irritated her as she pumped gas into her car. Turning her head to the left was not the best choice as the wind changed

direction, tousled her hair and pushed droplets of rain onto her. The cold chill of the water just made her more irritated.

At a quick pace, avoiding the rain, she returned to her vehicle, and fixed her hair in the rearview mirror, that was messed up from the wind and rain. She took the opportunity to reapply her lipstick, too.

The minute she got comfortable in her seat, she thought about Gillian Wincoff again. She couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something was up. Gillian looked frazzled, even from the distance she was at, she could see her face. It was as if something had happened. Something was on her mind other than grieving for her daughter. Something that might have to do with her daughter, but something else.

At this time, it was nearing two o'clock in the afternoon. Her stomach growled, reminding her of the lunch she'd decided to forgo. Change of plans. She decided to reflect on the matter over some fast food. That seemed like the best option since she thought better on a full stomach.

Kristi urged her car away from the pump and toward a Wawa to the right of the station and turned into the parking lot of the restaurant. She parked near the entrance, went inside and placed an order with a cashier.

Sounds of people eating and drinking filled the air just as much as the smell of food. She buzzed around the front counter, staring at the occasional customer passing the time on their mobile phones as they waited for their orders. The wait was short, however.

“79.”

That was her number. She moved a few steps and took the to-go bag filled with a chicken salad and a mango banana smoothie off the counter.

“I’ve been waiting here a long time! My number wasn’t called,” yelled a lady standing behind her near the counter.

Turning around, Kristi paused to look at the lady. It was a twentysomething skinny black woman with a black doo-rag wrapped around her knotty head and dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and black baggy sweatpants. The woman’s expression was one of utter dissatisfaction, looking at the cashiers and shaking her head disdainfully.

“Maybe you didn’t hear it,” a cashier said without any concern in her voice.

“Could you give me your number so I can check on your order?” another cashier said enthusiastically.

The black woman folded her arms across her chest and looked at the cashier with an uncomfortable expression on her face. “It’s 74.”

For the conversation in progress. Kristi had no interest in what would happen next nor in what was happening now. She only raised her eyebrows, and, with a slight toss of her head, headed out the door.

Ducking her head against the rain, she slipped quickly inside her car but not before some rain slapped her face. First things first. She wiped the rain from her face and tucked her hair behind her ears before proceeding to eat. During this time, she thought about many things, and one thing in particular. Why was Gillian Wincoff in town, she

asked herself for the hundredth time? She pondered this question as she finished her salad.

An inner argument started. Kristi had to decide whether she wanted to take a chance, on following her instincts, or shelve it altogether. She ought to forget about it, she thought to herself, suddenly unsettled, pondering what had happened earlier — that she'd wasted her time driving around following her.

No way, Jose! Her best bet was to visit the Cozy Vacation Rentals office and talk with that agent tomorrow afternoon. She was a top-notch reporter through and through and wasn't about to quit that easily. Snooping was her job. She didn't believe in not knowing. One never knew what could be stirred up from asking the right questions.

The rain was pelting harder against the windshield as she drove away. She wanted to get out of the rain and get home to her townhouse in Nesquehoning. Just for the rest of the day, she promised herself not to think about Gillian Wincoff anymore. Especially now as she concentrated on the road in front of her.

A black sports car pulled out of a side street in front of her. She quickly gained speed and swerved around it, maintaining control on the wet road. She sighed, as the young male driver sounded off on his horn and was glaring so intensely at her, before speeding off ahead. *Attitude was the last thing she needed right now*, she thought, as she watched the car's lights grow smaller and smaller until they disappeared. The day had been frustrating enough without adding to it.

She straightened her spine and frowned. It had become glaringly apparent to her how Stroudsburg was filled with obnoxious drivers.

Chapter 21

COINCIDENTALLY, ACROSS TOWN, in the August Moon Chinese restaurant, Joey Marks had just finished his lunch. It seemed ironic that only an hour ago he had driven into Stroudsburg. He hadn't yet booked a hotel, either. Over the past five days, he had driven practically nonstop from California.

It was never his intention to be back in the Poconos. Revenge drove him. He would hide in plain sight, in the one city in which the police would never think to look for him, effectively hiding right under their noses.

Sporting a Phillies baseball cap, he rose from the table to leave. He winced briefly. His shoulders felt tight after sitting up in the driver's seat for he had no idea how many hours. To top that off, his faded red long-sleeved shirt and khaki cargo pants, he'd purchased at a Goodwill store, were wrinkled.

As he moved toward the entrance, he heard an irate woman's voice with a Jamaican accent. "One of your cleaning staff barged into the women's bathroom without knocking or announcing themselves. I was wiping myself with toilet paper when the door of the stall was pushed open. It was a Latino man. I yelled at him to shut the door and leave. Without any apology, he closed the door with a grunt. Not even a minute later, the lights were cut off. Being so dark I could hardly see. My elbow bumped into the door of another stall. And I couldn't find the switch for the lights. This is inexcusable! I left the bathroom, without flushing the toilet or washing my hands."

The black woman with a protruding belly in a white sweater and red jeans stood to the side of the entrance, near the glass door, complaining to the manager. She had a hairpiece attached to the crown section of her hair, which had come loose and slipped to one side, exposing a hemisphere of black scalp. Without taking her eyes from the Chinese man, the woman ranted on and tried to force the hairpiece back in place.

The skinny man, in a black tie and white buttoned-down shirt with the word manager on the pocket worn over his black polyester trousers, kept saying in his Mandarin accent. "Terribly sorry. Very sorry."

She puffed out a sigh. "Is that all you're going to say?"

The manager responded with a question. "What do you mean?"

“What do I mean? I’m telling you to do something ...” The woman’s voice trailed off as Joey Marks shrugged and walked out of the restaurant.

He stepped onto Main Street in the eclectic Stroudsburg downtown district and halted. The earlier rain had dropped to a light sprinkle, and there was no wind. The sky was obscured for the most part with clouds here and there. Disguising himself, he slipped on a pair of wraparound sunglasses on his unshaven face and eyeballed his surroundings. With that slight military look, he was practically invisible, the way he liked it. Besides, his eyes burned from lack of sleep, stressing constantly. Plus, he knew that waitress wouldn’t recognize him, either. That was important to him because he wanted to catch her by surprise.

Somewhere nearby, a loud, muffled voice caught his attention. There, fifteen feet away, sat a woman on a bus stop bench. Even with the extremely filthy brown, wet blanket draped over her head and midsection, he could hear her talking to herself. That did not alarm him. However, he was surprised to see mentally unstable homeless people in the heart of the Pocono Mountains. In response, he gave a look of disgust. *As it turned out, San Francisco was not the only city with its share of weirdos*, he thought.

After looking to his left and right, he crossed the street and entered the parking lot, where a pristine, black-colored Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo was waiting. His latest ride. He went around to the driver’s side and got in. The 2015 model had 23,000 miles on the odometer, a black leather

interior, and fully accessorized with four brand-new Hankook tires. The SUV could jump from 0 to 70 in 6.2 seconds. Great for avoiding the cops.

His dark gray windbreaker lay folded beside him on the passenger's seat. He tugged his ballcap off his head then smoothed his dyed blond hair, which seemed to make him glow and fit the gay personality he had created.

Before turning the key in the ignition switch, he gave the dashboard a love tap. He was proud to have stolen it from the parking lot at the San Francisco International Airport and put stolen Virginia plates on it. After cranking the engine, it revved to life with a wailing sound. That was how a Jeep sounded.

Two hours later, he was relaxing in his room at the Red Roof Inn. He had stopped at the first hotel he saw and paid through the next ten days. It was five-thirty. It would be dark in another hour. He grabbed his windbreaker from the massive, tufted leather chair big enough for two and left the room.

In chipper spirits, he picked his way down the narrow stairs of a side stairway to the ground floor. He strode quickly in the direction of the parked Jeep, slipped behind the steering wheel and backed out of the hotel parking lot. Heading in the direction of The Stroud Inn, a plot loomed large in his imagination.

His mood was about to take a turn for the worse when he remembered that he'd left some mementos from his victims at his townhouse. There was a good chance he could be tied to the murders of at least two girls. It would take

time to trace the mementos to the missing girls, but it still made him uneasy. For all he knew, the police could be hot on his trail. He was going to be looking over his shoulder for the foreseeable future. And that was all there was to it. His knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel tightly in an attempt to restrain his anger.

As he drove down Park Avenue, a gas station flashed by out of the corner of his eye, followed by trees. Next came the street to where The Stroud Inn stands.

It started raining again just as he parked in a space in the corner of the lot of Victoria Station and waited. It was delightful in the Jeep. Snuggled in the driver's seat, he could plan every move.

One hour passed, and it was dark, except for some lights in the rear of the parking lot. And it was pouring, much as it had been earlier that day. He whistled softly and repeated the action another two times. In between, he waited, counting the seconds, allowing a minute to pass between each whistle. And each time, watching in the rearview mirror, he scanned the parking lot and the door of the restaurant. He couldn't see all that well, but the important thing was that the rain shielded him from the possible observation of the waitress. With any luck, and he certainly felt due in the luck department, that waitress would appear any minute now.

Just like he'd hoped, his patience paid off. The next instant he saw her come out of the door. Watching her walk to her car, under an umbrella, he was grateful that she didn't turn and look in his direction. An evil smile graced his face,

that exposed a row of small, very neat bottom teeth. The rain had become a heavier downpour, and in the deluge, water slammed down upon the windshield. Lightning splintered the sky; thunder boomed. Estelle Rowland couldn't see him in the rain and the darkness, and he relished it. He was more than excited to crank the ignition, turn on the wipers and the lights, and follow her all the way to her home.

Chapter 22

IN THE GOLDEN HILLS NEIGHBORHOOD of Fullerton in Orange County, California, Detective Philip Silverwood drove his rented car down Grandview Avenue. After pulling into the driveway of a classic single-story ranch house, he cut the engine and sat for a moment. He admired the white stucco exterior with a Spanish clay tile roof reminiscent of a Mediterranean villa, double windows, and an attached garage next to that, surrounded by elm trees bordering the quiet cul de sac.

Some more random thoughts before he stepped out of the SUV and walked toward the double front doors. In the second before he removed his sunglasses, there came the sound of feet moving quickly. There was no time to knock before the door flew open.

A seventyish man, with a shock of gray hair and a lanky frame wearing charcoal corduroy pants and a gray long-

sleeved shirt, stood in the doorway to greet him. “Good morning, Detective Silverwood. I’ve been expecting you.”

He noted Marks’ expression was a mix of curiosity and concern, the kind of look that suggested he was anxious to get their meeting underway.

Awkwardly, the detective stared unflinching into his eyes as though he was searching for answers. “Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, Mr. Marks. I’m in the middle of a manhunt. So, you can see the urgency of the situation.”

“Come inside. I just made coffee,” Dean Marks said, in a quick manner.

Silverwood nodded: “Thanks.”

The detective followed him into a pleasant kitchen, where he was directed to sit at a small, dark oak table, hexagonal, ringed by two wooden chairs with leather backs. He let his eyes wander around the brightly lit room, taking in the old appliances, brown cabinets, aged linoleum floor, and beige walls. The sun shone through the two, high small windows.

At the counter, Marks poured coffee into two mugs, handed one to him, and settled into the chair across from him. The steam from Silverwood’s coffee rose between them like a curtain. Thus, he fell into a momentary lapse of silence and could only focus on the swirling patterns in his mug.

They talked for a while, sipping their coffee. Detective Silverwood wasted no time in filling him in on the case and asking him about his relationship with his grandson.

“I’ll be candid with you. Your grandson has been on a murder spree, for I don’t know how many years. And he specifically targets adolescent girls. Knowing what makes Joey tick might get us a step closer to finding out where he is,” Silverwood said, resting his hand against his mug.

Dean Marks shook his head with a gloomy air, stared at him for a long moment, then said, “Since speaking with you on the phone, it’s been hard for me to swallow that my one and only grandson is a serial killer. But considering Joey had a turmoiled childhood. It was guaranteeing that he would turn out that way.”

Marks went on to add that Joey left the house and never came back. There had been no contact between them in years. And that his estranged son Wesley, never had any kind of relationship with Joey. But he offered Wesley’s contact information if he wanted to question him.

“What did you mean earlier when you said Joey had a turmoiled childhood?” the detective’s straightforward question caught him off guard.

He blinked, momentarily at a loss for words before saying, “Well, Detective, thinking back on his life, he had trouble here from when he was a student of Fern Drive Elementary. I always attributed that to his abandonment issues. Like all boys, he’d fantasize, wishing his mother Susannah would visit and take him back to Pennsylvania with him. More often than not, she was planning a weekend of partying, or topless dancing, which he didn’t know at that time. The hardest thing I ever had to do was to crush that dream of my grandson by telling him his mother had died.”

“You look like you have more to say,” Silverwood had said after writing something on his notepad.

No answer came. Marks thought for a few seconds, going over in his mind the things he wanted to say.

“Do you remember Joey dating — or having any girlfriends?” Silverwood added before he could respond.

“No, that’s the thing. As a kid, Joey had no real friends. Around that time, I felt he was becoming more and more introverted. Not only did he have no social life, but he struggled academically. Later, as a teenager, he got into some fights at school. Back then, I didn’t think much of it; after all, boys will be boys. During his second year in high school, I started to notice he was angry at the world because his father and mother weren’t around, which was causing him emotional distress. Then one day, he just disappeared. As I mentioned earlier, my late wife and I never heard from him again,” Marks said, fiddling with his empty mug.

“Anything else you’d like to share that would help us with the case?” inquired the detective.

“That about sums Joey up,” murmured Mr. Marks in a disappointing tone.

“I appreciate the time you took to meet with me today. Here’s my business card with my phone number if you need to reach me,” Silverwood handed him his card pulled from the large pocket of his dark gray, light jacket over his long-sleeved light blue shirt and dark gray slacks.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” said Marks, who quickly got up from the chair.

Inside the rented white Toyota Prius, Philip Silverwood paused to review his notes from the conversation he'd had with Dean Marks. Even though he had no criminal record, Joey Marks had the classic background of an emotionally disturbed person — as a child his mother and father abandoned him, leaving him with his paternal grandparents. Being abandoned had left deep scars that even after all this time had yet to heal. His poor academic performance and social ineptitude were indicators that contributed to his sociopathic tendencies.

Putting on his shades, he pulled out of the driveway. His next stop was lunch somewhere outside the hotel, at a table in the fresh air, preferably. There wasn't time for anything else. He was booked on a first-class flight to Pennsylvania leaving tomorrow morning at ten fifteen.

Chapter 23

ON TUESDAY MORNING, Gillian Wincoff slowly blinked her eyes open, feeling sick. A dull ache pulsed behind her eyes. Her throat felt like sandpaper. A nightmare. Turning over onto her back she couldn't place where she was, though. Couldn't remember —

The demon! Now she remembered.

Inside the cabin on Wagon Trail Road, the dark-shadowed spirit tried to capture her. She was running down the hallway from those hideous red eyes. Several times, she screamed her daughter's name. There was nothing else she could remember about her deep, turbulent sleep.

Did the entity know what she was planning; surely it couldn't let it happen? Now she was sick as a dog. As she drew to a conclusion, though, she understood that it was all just some awful coincidence.

Sunlight slipped through the beige curtains, casting a soft glow across the room. She was grateful not to sleep any

more. But she was glad to be cozied up under sheets and a blanket in the king-sized bed. With her stuffed-up nose, she could barely smell the sterile scent of the spacious nonsmoking room at a Stroudsburg hotel with a pullout sofa bed.

The moment she pushed herself up against the pillows, groaning, there was a wave of dizziness which threatened to black her out. Gazing at the clock on the nightstand in confusion; it was barely past 9 AM.

Shifting over, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and hesitated, battling the urge to collapse back into the bed. But she wanted to check herself in the bathroom mirror and grab a quick shower. With all her might, she catapulted herself forward and shuffled to the bathroom, wincing as the cold tiled floor sent a jolt of adrenaline through her body. Splashing water on her face did little to soothe her. She examined herself; her skin looked pale, and her eyes were red-rimmed.

To start off, she jumped in the shower, then put on loose black sweatpants and a baggy sweater. In her condition, she couldn't leave the hotel room. What was more, she had to ask the front desk to deliver an order of breakfast from the free buffet in the lobby. More than anything else, she wanted orange juice, for vitamin C.

Her throat was sore, but she could at least talk. She made her request with the front desk clerk, who graciously complied. Then she made her way to the coffee maker to pour herself a cup of tea, hoping it would soothe her throat. The tea was fragrant, with hints of ginger and lemon and

she let the steam roll up into her eyes as she sucked up the first sip. Searching through her handbag, she helped herself to two Bayer aspirins from the bottle she kept there.

By the time she'd blown her nose through half a box of tissues she'd swiped from the bathroom, she heard a soft knock on her door. She was stiff with panic.

"Guest Services!" a cheerful voice called from the other side of the door.

The sudden voice took her by surprise. She opened the door slightly, peering through the crack. If she was acting paranoid, she had a good reason to. The nightmare had left her completely rattled.

The smiling hotel employee had a white Styrofoam container in his hands. "Good morning. Your breakfast."

There was nothing particularly noteworthy about him. He was Hispanic, average height and build, dark eyes, dark hair. He was dressed in black slacks and some kind of white work jacket, with the hotel's logo over the breast pocket.

"Thank you so kindly," she said in a scratchy voice.

"You're quite welcome," he said and handed her the container.

Gillian shut the door with a sense of gratitude. The fresh-baked waffles and oatmeal smelled inviting. She brought the breakfast to the bed, where she snuggled. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Determined to make good use of her time, she powered on her laptop computer, where she would search for details of paranormal investigations. She figured she could get a

crash course on the subject over the Internet. She sought to educate herself on demons and demonic possession. That was something of particular concern for a Catholic like her, who didn't know about other religions. In a way, she had no agenda, no idea what she would be searching for. If anything, the staccato rhythm of her typing helped distract her from the discomfort of the flu.

Hours later, the light in the room was fading. As the sun dipped lower, the sky gradually darkening, she wasn't hungry but felt the need to sleep. The ache in her body was still there. She dragged in a deep breath and got comfortable in the bed; the laptop computer closed beside her. She would be better tomorrow. Yes.

By some unlucky chance, she couldn't have been any more wrong. She remained sick until Friday, when she was able to go outside. Shopping for necessities was a relief. There was however, one drawback. The stores were busy, the tourists were out in droves, taking photos and leisurely strolling the downtown area.

In lieu of this, she had to extend her stay at the Hampton Inn & Suites for a few extra days, in case, and informed her husband accordingly. But her time in the hotel room had not gone to waste. From her Internet research, she learned the name of the cleaning service used by most of the owners of the rental cabins in the Poconos. She spoke to the person in charge at the Clean As A Whistle agency and coerced her into giving her the name of their regular maid, who had cleaned the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. She Googled her name and found her

home address. Now, armed with that information, she planned to pay this cleaning lady a visit this Monday.

Other than the word of Don McKinney, she wanted to know if someone else had seen the demon or felt the presence of evil so profoundly. Just a little reassurance, that she would bring to a priest of a Catholic church. Because she needed spiritual help.

Chapter 24

ON THAT SUNDAY MORNING, Millie Dozier was deep in a slumber, her hair wrapped in curlers, half-heartedly covered in a red scarf. She tossed and turned in the bed, tossing her head back and forth on her pillow, in the middle of a nightmare unlike any she had ever experienced.

It started innocently enough, with a nighttime stroll in the woods. The pine trees towering overhead completely blocked out the moonlight with their intertwining branches, which cast eerie shadows upon the path ahead. The more she traveled this route it was like she was being swallowed up under the cover of the thick foliage which surrounded her. But she didn't stop. Something was guiding her down this path that was dark, and led to where she did not know.

A soft wind whispered through the leaves as she pressed forward. Many other eerie sounds echoed around her, taunting and mocking, and filled her with an ominous sense of dread.

But then she stumbled upon a clearing, where the cabin on Wagon Trail Road, stood among the gnarled trees bathed in the dappled moonlight. She stopped mid-step and stood completely still. The cabin's weathered facade bore the marks of time, unpainted and unrepaired. Yet it radiated an unmistakable aura of darkness that sent a shiver down her spine.

Deep in the recesses of her subconscious, she knew now she was dreaming.

Her feet would not move forward, because she had vowed to herself never to return to that cabin. A sense of foreboding, mingled with fear coursed through her veins. She frowned, remembering the whispering and her sensing an otherworldly presence in that cabin. Moreover, she was so shocked when she'd had a confrontation with the entity that was there that day last autumn when she was assigned to clean the place.

Footsteps, solid and steady, sounded behind her as someone, or something, approached. Panic gripped her. Desperate to get out of there, she took a fork in the path to the right and walked as speedily as possible, only to find herself standing in front of her church, its steeple piercing the twilight sky. The Church of Saint Luke didn't have a steeple!

It was then, again, that she knew she was dreaming. But it didn't help. Before she realized it, she was walking down the aisle of the church. Two elderly nuns on their knees in the first pew just before the altar prayed in Latin. Their repeated words echoed in a breathy whisper.

“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

The air was thick with the scent of aged wood, candle wax, and the faint aroma of incense. The flickering lights from the votive candles on the left of the altar almost hypnotized her with their rhythmic routine and cast dancing shadows across the pews. The atmosphere was both solemn and haunting.

A shadow flickered at the periphery of her vision. In the corner, beneath the stained-glass window depicting a serene angel, a pair of eyes glittered behind a figure cloaked in shadows. Its red eyes fixed on her with an eerie intensity. They glowed like embers, cutting through the dim light.

The air grew colder and heavier. Trembling, chilled to the marrow, she wrapped her arms around herself for warmth. Then she took a slow breath to soothe her nerves, but the calm was fleeting.

A growl made her look at those red eyes, burning like coals in the darkness. She squinted, trying to make sense of the apparition. Upon further scrutiny, she saw twisted horns and its forked tongue flickered. Why is there a demon in a Catholic church?

The demon grinned, revealing rows of jagged teeth. “Little Bunny Foo Foo.”

Its voice slithered into her mind like the hiss of a snake. Those words were sickeningly familiar. She remembered hearing them sung from inside the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. But the voice had been different. The voice was a child’s, far less menacing than this vile demon.

Its eyes seemed to beckon her. But she wouldn't give in to this entity, wouldn't allow herself to be possessed.

With a burst of inner strength, she bolted out the church door and sprinted into the woods, with the demon hot on her heels. For a fleeting moment, she glanced back and tripped. Snagged her shoe on a rock and she crashed down hard at the base of a tree. Moss hung in grotesque gobs from the canopy formed by the upper branches.

Blinking as she got her bearings, a large snake slithered down the trunk of the gnarled tree. Startled, she scrambled up and turned around only to discover that the snake had vanished. Just like that, it was gone, leaving her to wonder if she had imagined it.

For the second time in the dream, she was standing in front of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Yet again, she realized it was a fevered hallucination in her slumbering brain.

Her crossed eyes narrowed to slits as she saw the demon was watching her from the attic window. The sight of it reflected in the glass, red eyes flickering, came like a blow. Now, her dream was feeling more real than reality itself. Falling into a trance, she gaped at the face of the dark figure gazing at her, the face that appeared to be as transfixed by her as she was by it. Her feet were rooted to the spot, and no matter how hard she tried to move, she couldn't.

Her skin grew hotter and hotter as she continued staring into the demon's angry and penetrating eyes. They made her feel as if she was melting inside. It looked like the demon had taken complete control of her.

The apparition of a little girl in a white dress appeared behind the demon, pushing it back. Then, somehow, she broke free from the nightmare's grasp. Emerging out of it, she began singing as she woke:

"Little Bunny Foo Foo. Hopping through the forest. Scooping up the ..."

The possession of her passed quickly.

But even as she lay in bed, she still felt like she was asleep and couldn't shake the feeling that the demon's eyes were still watching her.

There was no sound. Not even a meow. Where were her two Abyssinian cats? They always slept by her feet.

She tossed the comforter to the side, slid her legs off the mattress and into her fuzzy yellow slippers. Searching through the house, she found her cats sitting side by side on the living-room windowsill, tails poking out between the curtains. They weren't meowing and stared out impassively at something.

"Dearie, dearie me. Caboo, Doodles. Come from the window," she pursed her lips as she cooed to them.

A meow came out. The cat with a ticked tabby coat hopped off the sill and landed not two feet from her. The other cat, with a dark brown coat with black ticking, followed after. Hopping and landing with much less grace, its body was low to the floor in the classic feline defensive posture.

Curiosity had driven her to such impertinent intrusion, she extended a trembling hand toward the curtains and

parted them with her fingers. Her pupils flicked around through the parting and found those red eyes staring at her. Shrinking back, her face was tight with fear. The cats were nudging and nuzzling around her legs. She did not know how long she was there until a little girl's voice mixed in with what must have been the thunderous voice of the demon broke the silence.

“Do not be afraid. I only want to play with you.”

The demon's face took shape, grew sharper and clearer. Wreaths of smoke poured from its mouth before it broke out in laughter. The laughing echoed through the window, mocking her fear and despair.

The intensity of the scare pulled her out of the dream and into reality. A shaky breath escaped before she put her hand to her mouth in shock, just as if she were stifling a scream. If she didn't have a clean bill of health for a fifty-six-year-old woman, she was sure her heart would've given out. Not exactly the way she wanted to wake up this morning.

Blinking away the remnants of the haunting dream, she sat up in bed and fumbled for the lamp switch. Her crossed eyes darted around as she took a slow, steady breath, trying to suppress the sensation of bile rising in her throat. Her eyes fell on the cats, half-asleep at the foot of the bed.

Thankfully she crossed herself before saying to them, “Wakey, wakey. Come with me to the kitchen. I'll fix you something to eat.”

Chapter 25

LATER THAT MORNING Millie Dozier was at Mass, sitting in her usual pew, second row from the front of the Church of Saint Luke. She wore a simple tan dress with pink velvet piping beneath a battered tan London Fog trench coat. For more than a decade, she'd been attending services there. Outside the church, located on Main Street in downtown Stroudsburg, stood an imposing 45-foot-high Millennium Cross, which was erected in the year 2000, marking the start of the third millennium of the Christian era. The interior, simple and elegant, was highlighted by sculptures.

While the choir bawled out, she rested her chin on her folded arms and prayed upward. For a tiny moment, she thought about the terrible nightmare she'd had and wondered how much of it might be real. Was there really a demon in that cabin? But she quickly told herself that she

must stop thinking about it. The service was to bring her closer to Jesus Christ, her Lord and Savior. She considered herself a woman of God, who balanced morality with strong faith.

The stained-glass windows glowed warmly, splashing colorful shards of light around where Reverend Claude Bonanni, flanked by the deacons, stood on the second altar step. Completely engrossed in the eloquent sermon, Millie listened and gazed raptly at Bonanni, who addressed the quiet and attentive congregation. Her left hand fingered the cross hanging from her neck, while her right hand held firmly onto a Bible resting on her thigh.

Reverend Claude Bonanni was rumored to be in line for a Bishop's appointment by Pope Francis, or what the latest rumor was among the church staff ministers. The fifty-four Italian born man with a touch of graying hair wore a stole, and an embroidered chasuble over a black suit with a clerical collar.

After the service, she spared no moment to pull Bonanni aside for a private word. "I seek your guidance."

The Jesuit priest could see a muscle in her cheek twitch. His instinct was quick to discover that she had something weighing on her mind. He raised a snowy eyebrow, clasped his fingers together and nodded.

"Millie, my dear. What's troubling you?"

"There's something I must confess — something I've never shared with anyone. Since you're a priest, I feel I can trust you with it," she said, with a touch of a Creole accent.

Observing her hesitation, he tipped his chin toward her and searched her eyes intently. “What’s got you so bent out of shape? This is not the Millie I know.”

“Last night, I dreamt there was a demon in a cabin — the same cabin I was hired to clean, and where I’d sensed a supernatural spirit that was evil in its nature. The cabin I speak of is the one on Wagon Trail Road. Where the police found the body of that missing girl,” she said, shocking herself with the admission.

She’d never come forward, never had the guts to tell anyone outright that she thought there was a supernatural force of evil operating at the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Until now.

To his complete shock, he tried to understand if that was possible. He shook his head at the unseemliness of it and considered alternative explanations, only to conclude that it was just a bad dream. And that she was confusing the dream with reality.

“This is quite a revelation,” he said repressively, “But are you certain of this?”

“I’m certain there is some kind of demon in that cabin,” she said, finishing with her crossed eyes shifting nervously toward the floor as though she were afraid to look at him.

Trembling slightly, she wouldn’t back down, because she believed she was right.

Thousands of thoughts flooded his mind, obviously moved by her words. He looked very worried, but didn’t say anything for a moment.

“What would you like me to do about it?” he asked.

“If you go over there, to that cabin, maybe you would see something. Or hear something. And cast out that demon,” she said, her Creole accent overlaid with a slight drawl.

His voice took on a gentler aspect. “You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

A deacon, dressed in a dalmatic, interrupted him by grabbing his arm. “Reverend Bonanni. Sorry to interrupt. But I’ve come to summon you to a meeting. Some news about the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord celebratory Mass scheduled for May 28.”

Bonanni nodded to him, then looked at her thoughtfully, “Millie, I’m sorry to cut this short, but come to my office later in the week and we’ll talk more about your dream,” he said and stalked away down the length of the church, followed by the deacon.

Her mouth opened, but he was gone before she could say anything in response. She folded her arms across her chest and watched them dart around the corner of an intersecting hallway. The look on her face was almost as if she was flabbergasted by the way her revelation had been dismissed as a dream. Her crossed eyes were unwavering, her expression frank.

Moments passed before she realized that perhaps she was making something out of nothing. She shrugged, still feeling vaguely disappointed, and headed for the exit.

She sat inside her white Toyota Camry Solara for a few moments in the church parking lot. And upon further thought, she wondered if she had been overly superstitious.

But she couldn't help it, considering that she was a black Creole woman. Or she hoped it was just paranoia that was churning her guts.

Once and for all, she shook away her troubling thoughts. With her mind clear of everything, she started the engine and drove away.

Chapter 26

THE NEXT DAY, Monday, May 8. Joey Marks had been up since nine A.M. It was now ten forty-five. On this particular morning, he was in his stolen Jeep driving to Gouldsboro, a city in Monroe County, Pennsylvania.

His plans for Estelle Rowland were on hold. Today was his birthday, his thirty-second birthday, and he had to face the bitter fact that he might have to live on the run for some time. Believe it or not he planned to celebrate. His brain had decided at some point to enjoy his freedom while he still had it. Now here he was on Main Street approaching the Viking Tavern. The classic American restaurant was the former location of Classy Lady strip joint, where his mother Susannah Rae Dirnberger had worked as a topless dancer. There was something of the macabre about it. This was the kind of birthday he'd had in mind.

The building, when he came to it, after driving nearly thirty miles, was an airy-looking restaurant, while a flight of stairs to a side entrance led up to the offices above. He blew out a breath and took a turn into the empty Viking Tavern parking lot, cutting off the engine. Deep in his thoughts, he stared out the windshield grimly, obviously trying to grasp that he was here. This was the parking lot where his mother had been strangled to death by a serial killer in her car in September 1997.

Ironically, he too was a serial killer. He was attracted to killing as a way of life much like Ryan Hugh O’Conor, the man who had killed his mother. Some men would have sought revenge. Not him. He was fascinated by this killer and desired to emulate him. Hence came the inspiration for the first name Ryan as his cover alias used when he stayed in Stroudsburg last year, when he killed Abigail Wincoff. Perhaps it was his destiny.

His eyes turned toward the Viking Tavern, wondering — how the building might have looked when it was Classy Lady. He leaned back into the driver’s seat and tried to picture the nudie bar. With his eyes closed, he envisioned his mother dancing around a crescent-shaped stage, gyrating against a pole, flashing her skimpy thong panty at her customers. Suddenly her image became a permanent picture planted into his brain. His gut twisted with anger and resentment, thinking about, the men smoking and with too much to drink fighting for her affection. Was it just for the money? Or did she crave that kind of attention from

men? Maybe both. But he settled on the belief that his mother couldn't temper her partying ways.

Feeling parched and hungry — he hadn't eaten or drunk since the previous night. It was time for a lunch break. He sat up straight and rolled his neck around, cracking it to break up the tension in his shoulder muscles. The feeling of exhaustion left him. How long had it been since he'd been to the gym and worked out? Three weeks? Maybe longer. Something he must do once he settled in Canada.

On that note, he left the SUV. He took a slow walk to the Viking Tavern. After placing his order with the waitress, he sipped his glass of ice water and let his eyes wander around the place: vaulted dark gray ceiling, glossy white walls, large windows, brown leather chairs, wooden tables. The images of Classy Lady flashed into his mind, but he squashed them just as swiftly. Didn't want to get anxious. It was bad enough his stomach was growling.

During his meal of a roast beef sandwich and potato chips, he reflected on Ryan Hugh O'Connor's obsession with targeting strippers. How many had he murdered over the years? O'Connor saw these women as sleazy tramps and gave them what they deserved. Maybe he had some kind of Jack the Ripper complex.

Did he think his mother was a harlot and deserved to die? Sometimes he did. Other times he felt sorry for what had happened to her. And yet he didn't think about any of this as revelation, but rather as a painful memory of the past. All these years, his mind had been twisted with so many emotions concerning his mother's death.

Regarding the murder case of Randee Rae Devereux, his mother's stripper name, O'Connor's trial was scheduled for the end of October this year. He'd been following reports about it posted on the Internet. His only birthday wish was to be situated in Canada before the start of his trial.

When the check came, he gave the waitress cash, including a twenty percent tip. He kept his baseball cap on, pulled down low, the whole time. It was important not to stand out, and — if at all possible — not to attract attention.

Standing up from the table, he turned around, taking one last look, and then stepped outside. There was a start of tears in his eyes, but none escaped. He had to blink rapidly several times to quell them. But he couldn't hide the lump in his throat caused by sadness. The feelings for his mother were still there.

It had been a mistake to visit Gouldsboro in the first place. Or so he was telling himself when he took off in his Jeep. Feeling worse than he did before coming there, he needed to turn his mood around.

Decision made, to cheer himself up, he would hole up for the rest of the day in his hotel room, watching horror movies on the flat-screen TV. It would definitely put a smile on his face. The Red Roof Inn had no room service. For dinner, he would order Chinese food from a nearby restaurant, which would be delivered to the room for a small additional fee.

From Tobyhanna Road in Coolbaugh Township, he got onto Interstate 380 and drove south. He rolled down the

window and started whistling a catchy tune; it was Rick Dees and His Cast of Idiots' "Disco Duck." He even sang the lyrics in a duck's voice. That was something he loved doing since he was a kid.

Chapter 27

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, Gillian Wincoff was in a residential neighborhood of East Stroudsburg walking toward a tidy frame, white-with-green-trim house behind a picket fence. She passed the neighboring house. A *Beware of Dog* sign on the side gate warned her that the premises were being protected by a dog. Which stands to reason why a large German shepherd came running toward her at top speed, barking and growling. It scared the bejesus out of her. She stumbled over a rock but didn't fall. Her head swayed gracefully as she hurried, her step. Behind an enclosed fence, the dog caught sight of her moving away but barked loudly over and over again.

Undeterred, in front of the house now, she inhaled sharply, trying to gain a hold of her bearings. Subsequently, she unlatched the wooden gate, pulled it open, and walked up onto an asphalt driveway surrounded by an unkempt

garden of several seasons of fallen branches, tall grass and vines. As she approached the front door, she looked over her shoulder and saw the gate swinging back and forth in the light wind. Before ringing the doorbell, she smoothed her beige cable-knit sweater over her brown corduroy pants under her trench coat and fluffed her hair.

Millie Dozier, relaxing on her day off, was dressed in comfortable attire, wearing a leopard-print sweater and khaki slacks. She was sipping iced tea in her tidy kitchen, with neatly arranged cookware on the long counter, when she'd heard the dog barking. She'd thought it was some passerby. That was until she heard the gate creak and the sound of the doorbell.

She stared through the front door's peephole and saw a white woman, and not one she recognized. For lack of a better description, the woman looked preoccupied with worry with an almost tragic expression on her face, even with the restricted vision the tiny peephole provided. *Dear lord*, she thought, 'What does she want here?'

"Probably a Mormon." she sighed, then spoke loudly. "How can I help you, miss?"

"My name is Gillian Wincoff. I was told you cleaned that cabin on Wagon Trail Road. The place where my daughter's body had been found." Her voice was quiet but determined.

A dull ache spread from her heart through the rest of her body after hearing what she'd said. Standing on her stoop was the mother of that girl that went missing and was found dead in the Poconos last year. And she wondered if there

was a connection between her visit and the dream, she had the night before last. So, she spared not another moment and opened the door.

“Come inside. Would you like some iced tea?” Millie offered.

“No thank you. I won’t take more than a moment of your time.”

Gillian followed her down a hall dimly lit by two sconces. The hall opened into a small living room. Light yellow curtains were drawn in front of three windows. She sat down on the couch covered by a reddish-brown weaving behind a glass coffee table.

“Tell me what’s troubling you,” Millie said, sat down on a red suede chair in the corner, and faced her squarely.

“Besides losing my daughter, you mean?”

“I’m truly sorry for your loss,” Millie said with a meaningful look at her.

“I hope this doesn’t sound crazy, but if it does, I hope you understand what I’ve gone through over the past year. A demon may really be haunting that cabin on Wagon Trail Road. And my daughter’s soul could be trapped in it,” Gillian said, her brow lifting to punctuate her point. “Did you sense a presence with you, or watching over you when you were there?”

As Millie was listening to her, her crossed eyes shifted anxiously and seemed to be looking out into space.

“Dear Lord. I never expected anyone to ask me,” she said in an almost hypnotic cadence. “But yes, I did. There was an ethereal presence about the place.”

“Would you please explain what happened there, and what led you to this conclusion?” Gillian pleaded.

The question had put her in a state of tension; though Millie still had enough self-possession to look round very sharply, her eyelids twitching.

“When I was at the cabin the first time, standing outside the front door, I heard what sounded like a child’s voice singing these words: Little Bunny Foo Foo,” Millie said promptly. “The next time I was there dusting in the living room. A sudden chill washed over me. All around me, the temperature dropped. It was at that moment a voice cried out that didn’t sound of this earth. I literally couldn’t move. I felt as if it was trying to grasp my soul.”

Overwhelmed by this revelation, Gillian gasped, stood from the couch too quickly and fell down into a sitting position. “Little Bunny Foo Foo was a nursery rhyme my daughter liked to sing.”

“And her body was buried there at that cabin,” Millie said, mulling it over.

“Will you go back there with me?” Gillian prompted.

“You’re not serious?” Millie asked incredulously.

“I am most definitely serious. I could use help on this. My daughter’s soul is at stake here.”

No longer did Millie wonder whether she was having delusions. Frankly she was amazed at how the situation exemplified how often we were put in positions we never expected to be.

“If a demon has a hold of your daughter’s soul, she has no peace. The demon needs to be cast out of her,” Millie said with emphasis.

Opening her mouth to respond, Gillian stopped short, frowning, thinking over what she’d just said. “Are you telling me I need an exorcist?”

Seemingly from nowhere, Millie’s two cats ran through the living room to the bedroom, interrupting them. This took them both by surprise and caused the conversation to pause for a quiet moment.

“That’s exactly what you need if you want to save your daughter’s soul. You see, my aunt’s daughter, Merced, or my cousin if you prefer, who lives near New Orleans, knows a thing or two about exorcisms. Superstition plays a role in Creole families. But we don’t talk anymore. She entered into a green card marriage to help the poor man out with the understanding that it was a business transaction to earn a little easy money.”

Clearly baffled by her rambling, Gillian crossed her arms, glaring at her in frustration. Hence, Millie relented under her hot glare.

“Very well, I won’t go with you to that cabin, but I know just the man who can help you,” Millie said, her crossed eyes sparkling even brighter than the sun’s rays creeping through the curtains.

Chapter 28

ON TUESDAY MORNING Marisa Sosa came out of the door of the Clean As A Whistle agency and headed directly for her car. She'd been assigned to clean the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Don McKinney had reneged on the purchase and sale agreement, so the cabin needed to be cleaned and aired out for prospective buyers now that it was on the market again at two thirds of the original price.

The 33-year-old Hispanic maid, hailed from the Dominican Republic. Her mood was optimistic. Just a week earlier, her application for a green card had been approved, a process upon which she'd embarked with such enthusiasm. Prior to that she had been staying in the U.S. on a visitor's visa. It had all to do with the fact that she had married an American man one year ago and began the Green Card application process right after the wedding. And ten months ago, she gave birth to a daughter.

At nine o'clock she arrived at the cabin. She came out of her KIA sedan perched at the bottom of the driveway, clueless to the demon in the attic window, just grinning at her. A grinding, shrieking sound vibrated throughout the room as it stared at her with fiery eyes, wanting to suck the life out of her.

Quickly unlocking the door, she went inside and set down her cleaning supplies near a bucket, which covered a hole in the wood floor. A quick frown before she made a mental note to tell Celia, at her agency, that the floor needed to be fixed. Dropping her handbag and keys on the polished veneer side table by the door, she headed down the hall, admiring the interior's beige ceilings and oak flooring. The two story-high stone fireplace, the cathedral-ceilinged living room, and the cozy, sunlit windows with the same old furniture, all dusty. From what she gathered, the cabin had yet to be redecorated. *I guess I have my work cut out for me today*, she thought as she slapped on a pair of latex gloves.

Her visit to the cabin couldn't have come at a better moment. The spirit of Abigail Wincoff couldn't pass up the opportunity to take advantage of this distraction as a means of escape. In other words, conditions were ideal for her to break free of his hold that for days she'd been wanting to carry out. To the demon's surprise, Abigail started pulling away from the entity's grip, her spirit pushing itself outward. Bitterly defiant, she had no idea where her courage came from. But the demon held firm.

Claps of thunder slashed across the sky like a ripping cloth, and the rain fell drummingly faster just as Marisa began in the bathroom. That was the only sound she heard while being surprised at how clean the former owner had left it.

The demon's plans had been thwarted. No, it couldn't go after Marisa. The scornful sound the demon made, almost like a gentle song echoing through the cabin, wasn't directed at her, but at Abigail. None the matter. The noises in the attic would go unnoticed by her. She plugged her ears with headphones and switched on her iPod, which she had loaded up with pop songs, as she poured bleach into the toilet bowl and closed the lid.

As Marisa moved to the living room, she carried her bucket of sprays, bottles and rags. There she swept, vacuumed, wiped down surfaces and dusted the furniture.

Up in the attic, the supernatural battle between the demon and Abigail continued. Anger stirred inside Abigail. She was assaulting within the entity's confines, wreaking havoc to undermine its defenses, and failing miserably, her strength ebbing away. Power flickered between them. The struggle wasn't entirely invisible. The clashing spirits radiated like bursts of heat coming out of a furnace.

All the lights in the cabin flicked off then on. Marisa was in one of the bedrooms. Around the bed, she felt a strange energy while straightening the sheets and fluffing the pillows. Moments after, creaking and groaning floated down from the attic. Briefly, she paused, inclined her head and gazed unblinkingly at the vent near the ceiling.

Over her headphones, she mistook the sounds as the whispering wind and the patter of heavy rain.

Within two hours' time, she had got the cabin put back together, making the living room probably about like it had been. The floors gleamed, and the air was fresh. Between the music in her ears and the heavy rain and thunder outside, the paranormal activity went undetected.

As an end result, Abigail's young soul had grown tired and succumbed to the demon's influence. It had been a feeble attempt. Beside the window, her spirit gave in and merged with the demon's simultaneously. The demon overpowered her, seizing her personality. Abigail was left wondering if there was any chance of breaking away from the mind-altering control the entity had on her.

Under a light rain-shower, Marisa made her way across the driveway. The cold, damp gravel crunched beneath her black sneakers, and the cool air chilled her skin, giving her goose bumps beneath her long-sleeved flannel shirt and black slacks.

The demon was watching her from the attic window, staring at her with anger. Full realization dawned. No doubt the struggle he had had with Abigail had prevented him from striking the maid. The sound of disappointment filled the air with growls that blended into a cacophony of evil laughter and reverberated around the room.

Once behind the wheel, Marisa twisted on the ignition and flipped on the wipers. The car radio clicked on with a glow and the noise of static filled the air. The next minute

the radio clicked off on its own, and the car was filled with silence.

Glancing back at the cabin through the rearview mirror, the place now seemed creepy instead of ordinary, and she did not know why. She could almost swear there were invisible eyes trained on her, though she didn't see anyone. The curtains were drawn on all the windows with the exception of the attic, which was dark and out of her peripheral view.

Rounding the bend, she saw the shadowy image of a girl in the side-view mirror. It made her jump in her seat and hit the brakes. A girl in the attic window? Or that was what it looked like at first; it was only after closing and reopening her eyes that she saw that there was nothing there.

Thunder rumbled again and again.

Torrential rain clouded her vision. She pulled her gaze from the cabin and turned to the windshield, staring ahead as if in a trance. It felt almost as though she were falling through space. A line of a song escaped from her lips, with a low, but rapturous cadence —

“Little Bunny Foo Foo hopping through the forest.”

Just at the back of her spine, she felt a shiver, wondering why that simple melody, that she didn't recognize, had popped into her head. What had happened here seemed strangely unreal. What she'd just sang kept replaying in her mind over and over.

There was an uneasy silence. While her car idled away, Abigail Wincoff's image had been projected behind

Marisa's car at a twisted, unnatural angle. Her ghostly image could be seen in the rearview mirror.

The odd feeling that gripped Marisa started to wane. She became frustrated with trying to understand her obsession with the song. It was time to move forward. A new flood of adrenaline rushed through her. She drove forward to make a turn, and Abigail's dead black eyes followed her, fixed on her like those of a rattlesnake. The demon was the force behind her. But Marisa didn't glance in the rearview, didn't get a final glimpse of the cabin. All she could think about was getting home, so she could make dinner ... and share it with her husband.

Chapter 29

THE RED ROOF INN was a three-star, two-story hotel with a budget-friendly room rate in the entertainment district of Stroudsburg. The exterior corridors were rocked by human bustle and traffic rushing past. An exit off U.S. Highway 209 was located on one side of the building. Exhaust fumes carried into the hotel's inner courtyard and mixed with the scent of the musty corridors to create a toxic smell. What Joey Marks liked best about it was no one looked you in the eye, except occasionally by the people at the 24-hour front desk.

All day Marks had stayed inside, sleeping. He'd woken up that morning, discovering immediately that he'd overdone it watching too much TV the day before. He had a pulsating headache at the base of his skull and couldn't manage to climb out of the king-sized bed.

So, at almost seven o'clock on Tuesday night, here he sat, forward on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a towel, with

a fresh-out-of-the-shower smell. His eyes were open and focused on the floor, and he was making a whistling sound as he breathed. His headache had disappeared. And though his feet were firmly planted on the carpet, his thoughts were in another place altogether.

He was tired of being stuck in the hotel all day, with nothing to do but watch television or sleep. As the minutes crawled by, he started to torture himself with dark thoughts. He was overcome with regret that he hadn't been as careful as he ought to have been.

Having to flee to Canada really irked him. But the police knew who he was and what he had done. There was nothing he could do about it. All that was left to wonder was that he would be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. It was as much as he expected if he was apprehended. A future behind bars seemed impossible.

Because no one was around, he felt comfortable not cinching the towel so tight and stood up that way. He paced back and forth, ten steps forward, ten steps back. He was so crazed.

In this manner, he cast his thoughts back on the past incidents of his life. It was all so long ago, but the worst part was remembering how he'd had so much trouble. For the third time that school year he'd been brought to the principal's office for fighting, punched a boy right in his face.

A young Marks sunk into the chair, trembling, fidgeting nervously, listening to the principal, which he found exhausting. The weight of his words bore down with

relentless pressure. It was like getting hit in the head with a hammer. He ended up getting a headache. What made it worse was that his grandfather was there to see it. Seeing the look of disappointment and confusion etched on Dean Marks' face left a knot of anxiety twisting in his stomach.

"It hasn't been easy raising him, without his mother or father," his grandfather would always say.

In a typical response, Principal Montoro, a fair-looking Mexican American man, sat there behind his desk, his expression unreadable. Marks couldn't read anything in the dark depths of his eyes, which locked onto his as he leaned forward.

"Well, boy. What do you have to say for yourself?"

With his chance to get a word in edgewise, Marks rose up from the chair and spoke, unable to meet the principal's gaze. "Gilberto started in on me. We were arguing and shoving each other. Then he was holding on to me."

"Enough!" the principal had interrupted, maddeningly calm. "You can't retaliate like that. You have to call for a teacher. I've told you that many times before. I don't think I'm getting through to you."

His growling stomach pulled him back to the present. He couldn't finish the thought. There was no point. He scanned the Chinatown Express take-out menu he'd picked up from the side table beside him, then picked up the phone to have some food delivered.

After ending the call, he began to dress and considered. What he missed the most about his former life in California, other than his freedom, were his excursions into the city of

San Francisco. His interests had spread to the Chinatown area centered along Grant Avenue. The restaurants he liked best were near the dramatic large, dragon-clad arch at the northern edge of the Union Square shopping district.

Thirty-five minutes later, a knock on the door told him the food he'd ordered had arrived. A cheerful voice greeted him, and he was in no mood to hear it.

"Delivery for Michael Wilcox," Marks said in a low duck's voice, mimicking the delivery man's voice.

Marks lumbered over and opened the door to a Chinese man. He stared at Marks with big eyes, which made him nervous. He speared him with a glare. Heck, if looks could kill, but the man didn't seem to have noticed or pretended not to.

"The check," the Chinese man said, pointing to the paper receipt stapled to the big brown paper bag, steaming with a Styrofoam container and plastic packets of soy sauce.

Too little, skinny and nerdy, Marks thought, as he tugged at the sleeve of the thrift store sweater he'd just put on, which was a little too long. Marks was quick to notice his small hands and thin arms too, as he pulled out thirty dollars and told him to keep the change.

"Thank you. Thank you," the Chinese man said, handed him the bag, bowed slightly and then just stood there gawking at him.

With a look of disregard, Marks just yawned, shrewdly eyeing the man and rubbing his thumb nervously against his fingers on his free hand, all the while waiting for him

to walk away. Dozens of odd moments passed between them. Unwilling to break the silence, Marks didn't care for further conversation and slammed the door shut in his face and locked it.

Chapter 30

IN SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH, Philip Silverwood climbed out of a squad car, along with two police officers in front of a Motel 6 in the downtown area. Less than an hour ago, the detective had arrived at the Salt Lake City International Airport. The police car had met the detective and escorted him to the motel. It was six o'clock in the morning on Wednesday, May 10.

Four armed police officers in tactical gear and with automatic rifles across their chests surrounded the motel room's door right across from the outdoor pool. Silverwood and another two-armed officers, positioned themselves behind them. As the detective stood behind an officer who was squatting, gun drawn, he felt they were wasting their time. What were the chances Joey Marks would use his own credit card for purchases knowing the police were after him?

The motel manager gave an almost identical description to that of Joey Marks as the man who used the credit card to pay for the room. Of course, considering the manhunt, the tip was hot and required to be acted upon expeditiously by the police officers.

An officer banged on the door and shouted. "Open up! This is the police!"

No response came from inside the room. They waited fifteen seconds, then knocked again, a bit louder this time. Nothing. The door remained closed.

A beat. Officers heard what sounded like a lamp falling over. The noise was followed by the sound of feet shuffling across the floor.

Another officer slipped the door key in the access slot and quietly turned the handle. The officers spilled into the empty room, weapons drawn. They kicked open the bathroom door, where they found the man, in boxer shorts and a T-shirt with grease stains streaked across the belly, hiding behind the shower curtain.

The scruffy-faced man, who reeked of marijuana and alcohol, hesitated, the weight of the moment pressing down on him. His breathing was ragged. His blue eyes flicked to the door, but he knew he was trapped. He lifted his hands in the air in a sign of surrender.

Two officers took him out of the bathroom and into the room for questioning.

The odor of marijuana lingered in the air as Silverwood and the officers swept their eyes around the room, noticing the overturned lamp. On the nightstand by the bed was a

half-empty bottle of Corona beer, some take-out menus and two Visa credit cards. The queen-sized bed was unmade, clothes were strewn across the floor.

The detective viewed the obviously homeless man with raised brows, not ready to talk to him yet. It was not Joey Marks, although the thirtyish man resembled him closely, but was skinnier, taller and a little longer faced.

"It's not him," the detective said and took a walkie-talkie from his belt pouch. "It's not Joey Marks."

Standing behind the man and holding him by the handcuffs around his wrists, the older police officer tipped his head back with a groan. "What's your name?"

He rambled on, angrily, seemingly intoxicated. "Johnny Landa. What's it to you? What are you doing here? I — I didn't do anything!"

Detective Silverwood abruptly put away his walkie-talkie. "Where did you get Joey Marks' credit card?"

Landa didn't answer. He glared at the detective, then lowered his head, eyes on the floor.

"The detective asked you a question!" the same officer said and nudged him in the shoulder with his elbow.

"Who?" Landa asked.

"The credit card you used to pay for your stay here. Where did you get it?" the detective reiterated in a harsh, toneless voice.

"Oh, right —" Landa experienced a laughing fit before continuing "— I didn't steal it. The credit cards were given to me. I was sitting against the brick wall of the 7-Eleven on 800 South Street. A car stopped on the street in front of

the 7-Eleven and the driver threw the wallet out the window at me. I searched the wallet and found a couple of dollars inside along with those two credit cards on the nightstand.”

The detective fired off questions at him. “When did this happen? What kind of car was the man driving?”

“I can’t possibly remember things of that sort,” Landa said at first; then a moment afterward added, “Hmm, must have been almost two weeks ago. I couldn’t see the driver’s face as he wore a baseball cap, but it was some kind of SUV. No, no, it was a Jeep, a black one. I’m 100 percent certain of it.”

Silverwood grabbed his walkie-talkie and pressed the talk button. “I need you to check for stolen Jeeps in the past two weeks in California, Nevada and Arizona. Any sport utility vehicles — I want to know.”

The officers were in motion, one left the room in a hurry, others gathered near the bathroom doorway. The ceiling light flickered on. The older police officer jerked back a step, and Landa winced.

“Stop tugging on the cuffs, man,” Landa said in a whiny voice.

“Marks is cunning. He knows what he’s doing, I’ll give him that. But he has just made his first mistake. We know he was still in the U.S. not too many days ago. The direction he’s driving doesn’t lead to Mexico. There’s a good bet he’s going to Canada. The odds of catching him are pretty good,” Silverwood said to the cops, ignoring Landa.

“Do we charge Landa with anything?” the older police officer asked Silverwood.

“No. He’s only guilty of being stupid. He’s cooperated. His story fits. Get a full statement from him and check him out of here. Bag Joey Marks’ credit cards, and his wallet, if you can find it, into evidence,” Silverwood instructed, then left the room, walkie-talkie in hand.

Chapter 31

ABOUT HALF PAST ten o'clock on that same morning, Gillian Wincoff drove her rental car through the streets of downtown Stroudsburg to the Church of Saint Luke, Millie Dozier's parish. The radio was on, broadcasting the local news. The gas tank was two-thirds full. Partially blue sky and temperature in the mid-sixties made things seem just right. But ... she didn't feel right, that was for sure.

She'd spent all day yesterday preparing for today. On the passenger's seat was a manila folder filled with countless reports and articles about paranormal activities she'd printed off the Internet on a computer, in the hotel's fully equipped business center near the lobby, to show Reverend Claude Bonanni. She wanted to come across as strong, and confident. And, most important, sane.

Would he help her? She was scared he wouldn't. Desperate for answers, she prayed anyway that he would as she stepped out of the car in the parking lot.

Sucking in the candle-scented air, she made her way toward the altar, wondering suddenly if the man in a black suit with a clerical collar standing in the sanctuary, the area around the altar, was him, or if he was in another part of the church. A quick glance around, she spied the contemporary decorations and the stained-glass windows behind the altar.

Her daughter's funeral had been the last time she'd stepped inside a Catholic church. She was feeling both nostalgic and emotional. If Millie Dozier hadn't been so adamant about Reverend Bonanni being able to help her — surely, she would have sought out a priest from St. Matthew's Church, where her daughter's Requiem Mass was held.

Closer now, the man still had his back to her, seemingly unaware of her presence. She stood before the giant crucifix painted with Jesus Christ's realistic wounds, which hung above the altar, and prayed for God's protection and her daughter's soul and for the grace to accept her loss.

The man started walking toward the vestibule door just as she crossed herself with the "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." She had no idea where to begin but decided to follow him just the same. She walked past two sections of wooden pews and into an alcove filled with shelves of votive candles, where he stopped to light them.

"Excuse me," she said hesitantly.

He barely turned his head to look at her and held up his hand, a gesture preventing her from saying anything more. "Confession hours are from three to five in the afternoon."

"I have nothing to confess," she said, taken aback by his candor. "Are you Reverend Claude Bonanni?"

"I am," he answered, turning his body around to her and looking at her in wonderment. "And who might you be?"

"My name is Gillian Wincoff. I was referred to you by Millie Dozier, a parishioner of yours."

"I'm familiar with her." Like the Reverend's gaze, his voice was direct. "Your name sounds very familiar, though I can't believe I would have forgotten meeting you."

Fighting the tears.

"My daughter was Abigail Wincoff. The girl that went missing, then turned up dead. You probably heard about it on the news," she said, as a small, silent tear crept out of the corner of her eye and pointed her stare at the marble floor.

Gillian looked every bit the grieving mother. When she looked up again, he caught a sullen expression on her face, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. His expression, body language, and entire demeanor changed. His dark brown eyes took on a compassionate look.

Reverend Bonanni massaged his temple even though it didn't produce any more of a satisfying response. "Yes, I heard about it. Very sad indeed."

She rubbed the sleeve of her brown sweater between her thumb and index finger and took in a calm breath.

“This may sound nuts. But I must ask whether you believe in demons?” she asked, getting right to the heart of the matter.

It wasn’t a difficult question, yet he looked at her blankly, as if he didn’t understand what she said. He gave no immediate response, as he was frozen in thought, thinking of what Millie Dozier had said to him after Sunday Mass. Only days ago. A demon in her dream. He was starting to put two and two together. Something was connected with Gillian Wincoff’s visit.

“Are you alright, Reverend?” she asked, noticing his pale color and furrowed brow.

“Demons can take hold of a person or their soul. Once they sink their claws into you, it’s hard to break free of that hold,” he said. “Please explain your interest.”

“I’ll be frank. I am in need of your help. My daughter’s soul is suffering. I’m sure I saw her ghost and something else more sinister at that cabin on Wagon Trail Road, where my daughter was found buried beneath the floorboards of a disused basement,” she said wild eyed.

What he’d just heard wasn’t shocking news. He had suspected a connection between the demon Millie Dozier had seen and Gillian Wincoff’s appearance here.

“Pardon me,” he said earnestly, removed a long-nosed lighter from inside his jacket, turned around, and let all she had said sink in.

In a short span of time, he hopped from candle to candle, lighting each one, talking as he did. “Millie came to me with a revelation about that cabin too.”

The Reverend wanted to believe her. He did believe her, mostly, and turned to face her and continued, "The probability that two different people saw what they think is a demon at that cabin seems plausible that there may be paranormal influences at work there."

"This is for you," she said, and handed him the manila folder.

His gaze narrowed as he took the folder and perused the first few documents. "I can see you've done quite a bit of research."

"Truthfully, I haven't read the Bible much. Ever since the birth of my daughter thirteen years ago, my husband and I found ourselves too busy to attend Mass. Religion became less important in our lives. So, we only attended church on important holidays, like Christmas and Easter. This happened too because the monsignor at our church told us that they didn't baptize infants and young children. Rather they wait until the child is of age to understand Christian discipline. Had she lived, Abigail would have been baptized this year, at the age of thirteen," Gillian said, changing the subject and looking away.

Right from the start, she'd felt this was the reason. That God had taken Abigail away from her as her punishment for straying from the church. Internally she blamed herself for what had happened to her daughter.

"It is not uncommon for people to stop attending Mass or even lose their faith. But you're here now, which demonstrates a renewal in faith," he said, putting the folder under his arm.

“My daughter didn’t understand faith. This demon could easily manipulate her soul.”

“This demon may very well have taken up residence inside Abigail. By now, it could be bound within her core, possessing her soul at this very moment,” he said, echoing her sentiments.

“Dear God,” she exclaimed, stifling a sigh. “What kind of demon is it?”

“The nature of this demon is yet to be determined,” he said. “It’s important you know that demonic possession isn’t something that Catholics invented. After death, your daughter’s spirit was trapped in limbo. Very likely, a portal to a demonic otherworld opened for an unholy spirit to invade her. That’s how demonic possession works.”

“Can you do something about it? Will you come with me to the cabin on Wagon Trail Road?” she asked in a pleading voice.

Realizing what a devout Catholic he was, he said in a firm tone. “I will get to the bottom of this. It’s my duty to investigate such phenomena.”

His genuine concern soothed her jangled nerves. Too emotionally charged, without thinking she embraced him, as she would any friend, both arms around his shoulders.

It seemed so long ago that she’d thought that coming to the Poconos would be her chance to face her broken dreams and bring some closure to her endless grief over her daughter’s death. Unprepared for this twist in events, she broke her embrace gently and exhaled, wondering what would happen next.

Chapter 32

THERE was her car in the parking lot of the Church of Saint Luke. Kristi Maratos' brain spun like a roulette wheel. *What was Gillian Wincoff doing at a church?* thought Kristi, one hand shading her eyes, trying to avoid direct beams from the emerging sun.

“Oh, no,” she said and sighed. “Not again.”

She changed into the left lane and drove her car to the intersection of Main Street and 9th Street from the moment she caught wind of it. Her body tensed behind the wheel. At the red light, she debated with herself if it seemed advisable to spy on Gillian yet again.

Just before the light changed, she'd made up her mind. She drove down Main Street and drove past the church until she could make a U-turn in the parking lot of a dry-cleaning service two blocks away. She parked in an inconspicuous spot on the other side of Main Street, a block away where

she could see Mrs. Wincoff through her windshield. A line of pine trees separated the church from the street.

Relaxing into the seat, she stretched her legs beneath the dashboard, deciding right then and there, that she would wait. As crazy as it seemed, she was going to follow Gillian Wincoff again, determined to find some answers. Though, for the snoop she was, she felt apprehensive about it.

As an extra precaution, she flipped down the sun visor against the glare. *Incognito*, she thought.

For reasons she couldn't understand, she had a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that seemed to indicate something was off. This stemmed from the fact that she knew a memorial service had already been held for Abigail Wincoff at St. Matthew's Church in East Stroudsburg.

Somewhere around ten minutes later, Gillian Wincoff exited the church and walked to her car accompanied by a man dressed in priest's clothing. Kristi could see perfectly well that she looked emotional, as if keeping back tears. The man closed the driver's door after Gillian got behind the wheel. The priest stood there, waving goodbye as she peeled out of the parking lot, leaving Kristi struggling as she U-turned in the street and followed behind her. Kristi drove fast to catch up, but not so fast that she would notice.

The distance between her and the Altima's narrowed as its taillights winked at the end of Main street. There was hardly any traffic at all. Kristi's eyes were wide and focused. She was right behind Gillian's sedan. Her Mazda sedan stood out as if pinned by a searchlight, so much so that she might as well put a sign in her windshield that said

I'M FOLLOWING YOU. But once Gillian made a sharp left turn onto 8th Street, she slowed down as she turned in order to maintain a good distance between the two cars.

The silver Nissan Altima drove through the heart of downtown Stroudsburg, a community full of a variety of shops and restaurants. Antique stores, and the post office stood out the most to Kristi. There was plenty of passing traffic. It was easy to keep at least one or two cars between them at all times.

Gillian Wincoff failed to notice anything at all. She was so emotionally charged after her meeting with Reverend Claude Bonanni, she almost failed to stop at the next red light. Her visceral instinct at that moment was to go back to the hotel and wait for Reverend Bonanni's call.

Kristi was quick to notice this, and was grateful, too.

That all changed when, after driving half a mile, the traffic light was changing from yellow to red, too soon. Kristi got stuck at the red light at Ann Street. The last she saw of Gillian Wincoff's car ahead of her was that she put on her turn signal to make a left before the intersection.

Before the light turned green, in frustration at waiting, her hand had slapped the steering wheel ... and regretted it. That her hand hurt at the hit, added further insult. Gingerly rubbing her hand, she stopped as soon as she saw the green light. She tore away from the intersection, kicking up gravel and a dirt cloud.

There was no luck finding Gillian. She scanned 8th Street, glancing left and right, searching for any sign of the car, but the Altima was nowhere in sight. All she saw were

the expressionless faces of the drivers in other cars. Her resolve began to wane, and her frustration mounted.

Tense minutes stretched into what felt like hours. Every corner she'd turned she'd expected to see Gillian's car, but that didn't happen. Her thoughts wandered. She heard the faraway bark of a dog on the sidewalk. She drove past some hotels such as the Red Roof Inn. But she didn't think Gillian Wincoff would stay in that shabby-looking place. She drove around in circles, barely aware of the traffic around her. She went through green light after green light, ending up right back where she'd started, back on 8th Street.

A wave of doubt washed over her, leaving her irritated. *Maybe it was a mistake to have followed Gillian Wincoff in the first place*, she thought. She wrinkled her nose in disappointment, with the resolve to give up.

It made her think back to days before when she'd visited the Cozy Vacation Rentals office. No dice there. It was inexplicable how the agent Joy Franklin had claimed client confidentiality and turned her away flat, without letting her step foot inside the office.

A buzz came from the cell phone lying atop her patent-leather purse on the passenger seat. She shot a worried look toward it. The caller ID said that it was Billy Shipley.

A string of expletives spilled from her lips as she glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard. 11:50 AM, its glaring red numbers mocking her. She had a lunch date scheduled with him at 12:00, and she was practically on the other side of town. There was no time to take his call.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered, her foot pressing down harder on the accelerator as she swerved around a slow-moving pickup truck.

Making haste, she urged the car forward with slightly more speed than propriety dictated. She zipped between the lanes to get around the cars. The streets seemed to have conspired against her — every light was red. Only she relaxed when the silhouette of the diner was clearly visible against the sunny sky, its blue awning at the entrance, taunting her.

At three minutes after twelve. she pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant on 5th Street. Out of habit, she quickly refreshed her makeup in the rearview mirror. Her eyes sparkled. She was pleased with the way she looked, but unhappy being fashionably late. She adjusted her thin white sweater in her dark blue pants, climbed out of the car and rushed inside.

Chapter 33

LATER IN THE COOL EVENING, a few minutes after six o'clock, the light of the day had faded to dusk. The air was silent and still. A full moon was on the rise, silver and round, in the sky to the east. Blackbirds were trilling in the tall trees around the mobile home of Estelle Rowland, who had just rolled into the paved driveway.

An anxious Joey Marks saw the lights of the Cadillac DeVille turn off. A jolt of adrenaline hit his bloodstream. After tonight, all the risks were worth it. So, he thought. He was too confident. He hadn't worn a ski mask, but he wore all black — sweater, sweatpants, hiking boots, and gloves in order to be inconspicuous, to move unobserved.

The moonlight gave Estelle the best illumination as she exited the car. Leaving the Jeep, Marks jogged through the shadows toward her. As he drew nearer, a nasty edge lurked in his eyes.

Taken by surprise, Estelle hadn't seen him coming but heard him come up behind her. It didn't do her any good. She started to turn around just as he attacked. His elbow crashed against her back. Her shoulder lifted, causing her black leather Gucci handbag to slip out of her hand and drop on the ground. Then he grabbed her neck from behind to strangle her.

"Get your hands off me, pervert," she grumbled, barely audible.

It was all she could get out. And it didn't reveal the undercurrent of rage from her voice when she had said that.

Marks pressed tighter on her neck. She couldn't scream. Her breath was rasping. She tried not to think about dying. *Not here*, she thought. Not by his hands, whoever he was. She couldn't see him with her back turned.

Estelle felt her breath quicken as her gut-level instincts came into play. An unconscious knowledge that she needed to defend herself, no matter what.

He wasn't expecting her to twist her body sharply. Like a crazy woman, she firmly clutched the diamond-studded stick from her hair. Her hair flipped forward into her face, knocking her black horn-rimmed glasses to the ground. A fast jab.

The pain rushed up from his hand and filled his body and mind. He felt like the wind had been knocked out of him, and his forehead creased. The momentum was lost, but he was still holding onto her. She pushed him away roughly.

For at least five seconds, Joey Marks stopped breathing. He swallowed down the humiliation rushing up his throat. Frozen. He lost all sense of direction or time.

Turning to face him, her breath came in wild gasps. “That’s what you get for messing with good old Estelle.”

Her voice ripped into his unstable mind. He stepped backward into a shadow and yelped as he held his stabbed hand by the wrist, blood dripping. Rage building, he pulled out the stick and tossed it to the ground.

Though her eyes never left him, his face was shadowed, and she couldn’t make out details without her glasses. Above all else, she had difficulty seeing in the darkness.

Panic boomed through his face. What if she recognized him?

In an attempt to scare him off, Estelle did something she had never done before: she screamed. It was high-pitched and without words, like one you would hear in a horror movie. Marks thought it was the most annoying sound on earth, the worst thing he had ever heard.

Get out of here, he told himself. *Now*.

Afraid to stay, Marks spun around. He sprinted back down the path the way he had come, dirt kicking up as he barreled in the direction of his parked Jeep.

Like an exhalation of breath, Estelle felt the cool air whoosh around her as he disappeared. A line appeared between her eyebrows, as she tried to make sense of what had happened. Something was niggling away at the back of her mind, a detail about him. His body structure, the feel of his hands on her. Something. He seemed familiar, though it

was improbable to a degree approaching impossibility. And, considering her present circumstances, she couldn't figure it out. Perhaps she was reading too much into what had in reality been a random incident. Without further thought, she left it at that.

Feeling her way in the dark, she knelt down to pick up her handbag and glasses from the ground. The glasses weren't broken. She had yet to notice the tiny scratch down the middle of the right lens. She straightened and cleaned them with the cuff of her black hoodie.

"Well, that's that," she said as she put her glasses back on. "Time to call the police."

Trembling, she reached into her handbag, pulled out her mobile phone, and dialed 911.

The moment that dispatch answered, she said, "I've just been attacked outside my mobile home on Allegheny Lane, an RV community in East Stroudsburg. Please send the cops here. And hurry, in case he decides to return."

At that same time, Joey Marks had reached his Jeep and was climbing into the driver's seat. Breathing ragged, he feared the police might be on the way and stole a quick peek in the rearview mirror. He saw and heard nothing. No sirens or doors slamming.

After opening the glove compartment and conducting a cursory search, he came up with a rag and wiped his bleeding hand. Then he wrapped the rag around his hand and tied it in a knot.

Almost sobbing in frustration, Marks bowed his head. He was cursing to himself in a duck's voice, cursing his

own foolishness. His stomach clenched with nerves, and he interlaced his fingers to calm his distress. He closed his eyes and disappeared into himself.

His mind traveled back in time. His cowardly behavior took him to the last time he wimped out under pressure. Thirteen years old at the Bolsa Chica State Beach in the city of Huntington Beach with his grandparents. He had built a sandcastle and was digging a moat around it. Three boys from his school were there, too, happened upon him, and Godzilla stomped through it. He had wanted to fight back but his grandfather Dean Marks gave him that look. He ended up wimping out and slumped over in the sand. To make matters even worse for himself, one of the boys, still looking back at him from a distance, yelled out “Blockhead Joey.” The boys all erupted in laughter.

Very faintly a sound came to him. Could it be a siren?

Come on, get a hold of yourself, he thought to himself.

The time had passed pretty rapidly, and he found that he had no time to brood on the past. He wasn’t a child anymore, so he did what he’d told himself to do — he pulled himself back to reality. He unclasped his fingers and cracked his knuckles as he lifted his gaze, looking to his left, then his right.

The Jeep started up quietly. There was hardly any rev at all. He wondered if the battery was dead.

The dashboard lit up, soft and orange, bright against the surrounding darkness. He was overcome with a feeling of enormous relief mixed with a rush of pure anxiety to get away before someone heard the noise, despite how low it

was. Hunched over the wheel, he drove forward out of the brush and onto the road. The black Jeep disappeared into the darkness of the night in next to no time.

Chapter 34

ESTELLE ROWLAND, who stood in the doorway of her mobile home, huffed and scowled at Deputy Missy Sparks, confused by her incomprehension. “That pervert accosted me from behind, holding me tight. I could hardly breathe. I twisted around as hard as I could, and my glasses slipped off my face. I couldn’t see much in the dark. I’m near-sighted, but I’m not blind. I told you all of this already.”

Livid and fuming, Estelle, head high in the air, put her hands on her hips and waited for a response. The officer and her partner, Deputy Billy Shipley, were the first to arrive on the scene. Sparks was taking down Estelle’s statement, while Shipley was bagging and labeling her hair stick with the perpetrator’s blood on it. The stick would be sent to the county’s forensic lab to get a DNA trace on it. They had only been there about ten minutes and already Estelle was frustrated with them.

“Let’s go over what you told me, see if you remember anything else about the man you saw or if you remember anything he might’ve said. He was shadowed in the dark, but he appeared taller than average, with an athletic build, and a full head of hair, and dressed in dark-colored clothing,” Sparks said, trying to sound encouraging, but paused when she heard the sheriff’s Ford Expedition pull up behind her squad car.

Gathering her thoughts, Estelle relaxed her arms at her sides and squinted her eyes at her. “I’ll tell you what I think. I think he was trying to strangle me until I was unconscious and take me somewhere and kill me. Because he didn’t ask for money. And he didn’t take my handbag.”

Using a flashlight, Sheriff Burgio carefully combed the ground for any trace evidence the perpetrator may have left behind. Very briefly he shined it in the direction of Estelle, who looked like she was about to explode.

“Don’t point that in my face,” Estelle roared, held up her hand to cover her eyes, turned, her profile lying half to the light that came full upon it.

Cole Burgio watched Estelle’s rage kick up a notch and moved the flashlight away quickly. “Sorry.”

There were drops of blood on the ground. Nothing more, though. Just as the sheriff decided not to look around anymore, Deputy Billy Shipley went to him to confer about the incident.

“Read over your statement — and you can make any corrections or additions — sign and date it at the bottom, there,” Sparks prompted, holding the paper out to her.

Shipley called out to Deputy Sparks, who turned her head, and saw him point to the blood on the cement ground. Burgio directed them to collect the blood to give forensics more samples to work with.

“I signed the statement. Take it, please. I’ve got to get my dinner started!” Estelle hollered and looked at Sparks with tempered surprise as the officer quickly walked away from her and started walking toward Shipley.

It was no good. Sparks was already assisting Shipley collect the blood from the pavement.

“I guess I should be grateful to Jesus Christ,” Estelle said to herself in a low tone, and exhaled, releasing the tension that had settled in her shoulders. “I’ll be sure to attend the service this Sunday at the Church of the Nazarene.”

In spite of having lead a topsy turvy life — divorced from her first and only husband, who was murdered by a jilted lover — she kept her faith in Jesus.

“When you two finish, I want you to go back to the station,” Burgio said to the deputies, switched off his flashlight, and then juttet his chin at the door. “I’ll grab Ms. Rowland’s statement and finish up here.”

A look of impatience grazed Estelle’s face as the sheriff walked toward her. But he failed to notice it because a sliver of moonlight partly illuminated her expression. Dark shadows stood out in sharp contrast against the paleness of her skin giving her the appearance of the older woman that she was.

“Ms. Rowland, we haven’t been formally introduced. I’m Cole Burgio, the sheriff of Monroe County,” he said, stepped forward and extended his hand, but she didn’t take it.

He looked at her, expressionless, for the space of three heartbeats; she put the statement in his hand and let go of the doorknob, arms folded, the door open against her shoulder. “Mmmhmm.”

“I understand you went through quite an ordeal,” he said. “We’ll do our best to find the man who did this to you.”

Her back throbbed from the hit she’d taken. She felt a bruise rising.

Her hand reached behind her back to massage it and she stammered as she spoke. “That creep elbowed me in the back. It is amazing that I survived the attack.”

“Should I call an ambulance to check you out?”

“No. The bruise should go away on its own pretty soon. Plus, I don’t do hospitals. I never have liked them,” she said, with a degree of haughtiness.

Burgio took out a contact card. “We may need to speak to you again if something comes up in the course of our investigation. And if you remember anything else about this man, anything at all, please call me and one of us will come straight to see you.”

Half listening, she actually found herself watching the two officers get into their car and drive away. She furrowed her brow in annoyance. This had taken too long already.

Snatching the card from his hand, she realized she couldn't even be bothered to hear his closing words, but she heard him say, "If it's all the same to you, we're done here."

Releasing the door, she hesitated. Before letting the door close, she canted her head back, an unsettling smirk on her face. She looked at the sheriff's stunned expression, which went on for several seconds. It was as if he was seeing something he had never seen before.

The door closed in his face.

She was an arrogant woman, Burgio thought, and released an audible sigh, wondering if he'd made a wise decision. He had just left for the day when the report came over the radio of his vehicle, and shown up to oversee the handling.

The sheriff turned around and winced. A cool wind blew past him. He zipped up his jacket, pulled a sheriff's ballcap from one of the pockets and put it on. As he headed to his SUV, the wind picked up all around him.

Chapter 35

THE SUN hung low in the sky on a mildly cloudy Thursday morning, its rays bouncing off the cars passing, and casting shadows on the asphalt. From his patrol car parked on the side of the road, Officer Sebastian Calvo adjusted his sunglasses and scanned the road in both directions. Aubrey Livengood, sat in the passenger's seat, feeling a yawn coming on. The chief deputy fought against it for a few valiant seconds, lost, and gave into it.

"Another coffee, that's what you need," Calvo said to his partner.

At half-past the hour of nine o'clock, Estelle Rowland was flicking the indicator right and waiting to turn onto Timothy Lake Road. She pulled down the visor against the slanting rays of the sun and rolled down the road.

She was scheduled to work today but called in for a personal day, a brief respite from the psychological drama

unfolding within her — her feelings about what happened last night. In her mood she half believed she might have died. It was a bad evening all the way around.

Livengood spotted a car on the road that matched the description of the car they were looking for. Calvo shifted his feet under the dashboard and bolted upright. A resident of a mobile home community noticed a black car circling the block just after sunset last night. He had reported to the police that it might have been a Cadillac sedan or sport utility vehicle.

Officer Calvo removed his sunglasses, started the motor and pulled out behind the sedan. Livengood raised his scarred eyebrow, called into dispatch and told Kimberly Kaasa that he was attempting a traffic stop.

Without warning, a siren went off. Blue lights flashed in Estelle's rearview mirror. Beams of light caught her eye.

The patrol car's intercom burst into noisy life, Chief Deputy Livengood's voice shouting. "Pull over, stop your vehicle, and turn off your engine!"

"You must be kidding?" she said, eased off the gas and pressed lightly on the brake.

Her hand slapped the steering wheel before veering off to the side of the road. Something wasn't right with this picture, and she wasn't pleased. She knew she hadn't been speeding. Did she have a broken taillight? Maybe the man that attacked her had broken it in a mad rush to exact revenge on her. It hadn't occurred to her to inspect her car.

The police car parked behind her car. She looked in the rearview mirror and watched the police officer step out of

the patrol car and approach, hand resting on his holstered sidearm. He was tall, broad as a mountain with hard dark eyes fixed on her car. She rolled down the driver's side window, removed the keys from the ignition, and dropped them in her lap.

"Is this your car?" Calvo asked her this rudely, she felt.

"Yes," she replied, and laced her fingers together in her lap.

"Were you driving it last night?"

"Yes. What's the problem?" Estelle asked with a hint of attitude in her voice.

"We got a report of a vehicle matching the description of your car seen driving in this vicinity, around the mobile home park where a woman had been attacked last night," he said with a firm but calm voice.

Her mouth agape, she wasn't sure if he was serious or if he was teasing her. She paused to see if he was going to start talking. But his lips remained closed, like he was waiting to hear what she was going to say.

Her blood pressure was about to shoot through the roof of her car. "This is an outrage. I'm the woman that was attacked!"

The warrantless stop of her vehicle had been conducted on the officers' hunch, simply on the color and make of her car. But that was a mistake on their part. It just went to show that the line between suspect and law-abiding citizen was thinner than supposed.

Calvo started to respond, but the crackle of his police radio interrupted him. He dialed up the volume and listened.

“There’s a report of a hit-and run accident. We don’t know which direction the perp took off when he fled from the scene. Paramedics have been dispatched. We’ve got to get going,” Livengood said, lowering the radio handset.

“Just show me your driver’s license, and registration, and you can be on your way,” he said, in a quick manner.

His eyes darted toward his patrol car, then back to her.

“Oh, for God’s sake!” cried Estelle, her voice steady despite the tension thrumming through her body.

Her eyes bespoke nothing but scorn as she reached into her handbag for her wallet, leaving one hand on the steering wheel and continued complaining all the way. “These are challenging times for all of us. This haphazard policing has everything to do with our new President, Donald Trump. He isn’t the right man to lead this country and by no means govern the country with rule-of-law concepts, ensure law enforcement, and lead the way in abiding by the law. I fully expect him to be a one-termer. The people are different now and won’t elect him again. God save us, if they do.”

“Sorry we had to stop you, Ms. Rowland,” Calvo said, ignoring all that was implied and handed back her identification.

“Do you have any updates about my case?” she asked as he turned away to leave.

“You’ll have to call the sheriff,” he said, with his back turned and waved a hand in the air as he walked away.

The police car took off at high speed. Estelle still sat there, bowled over by what had happened. The sun dipped

behind a swath of clouds and produced shadows on her car, blacking out her face.

Having thought things over, she rolled up the window and settled back in her seat. Lunch would have to wait. She was going to give the new sheriff a piece of her mind.

Chapter 36

GOOD TO HER WORD, Estelle Rowland had walked into the sheriff's office and hysterically complained. She was struggling to keep her emotions together but chatting on and on about what had happened last night and this morning. She was stuck on the fact that there were no leads on the man involved in the attack on her. The reality was coming into sharp focus for her.

Sheriff Cole Burgio could only stare at her and answer in a restrained voice that was, none the less angry. She returned the gaze as defiantly as she could, her eyes searching. It was as if she was waiting for something to happen and trying to find something that he wasn't saying.

"He's just going to get away with it!" she said in a raised voice as her chipped red nails tapped the edge of the desk.

Sheriff Burgio's eyes rocked up to meet hers, hot with emotion. He preferred that she sit. To put some distance

between them. He had grown tired of listening to her yapping for the past twenty minutes. But he was glad she couldn't read minds, because he knew she wouldn't like what he was thinking. She closely resembled that negative figure of a woman, Miss Gulch in the MGM movie *The Wizard of Oz*. To put it mildly, that was just part of what he was thinking then.

"As I told you before, we need time to investigate the information you've provided," he said, shifted his weight in his chair and concentrated on her.

Estelle heard the stiffness in his voice. She gave a huff of disapproval and shook her head silently. Even more, she wasn't sure she liked his tone, folded her arms and looked down at him. Mentally, he winced, preparing for the flood of anger he knew she was going to heap on him.

"The man who had your position previously would have been more sympathetic, more understanding. I'm talking about Andy Kirkman. You probably didn't know that I was the one who provided him with key information during his investigation of a missing girl," she said haughtily.

Cole Burgio sighed, not sure how to address that. She seemed to be implying that her testimony to the former sheriff of Monroe County gave her clout with the police department. He took his time, staring at the paperwork on his desk, wondering whether it was worth the effort.

"So, noted. Anything else you care to add regarding the investigation?"

She walked to the other side of his desk, leaned against it, then adjusted the bejeweled hair stick shaped like a

snake, which pierced through the triangular knot of hair atop her head. “I lost my best hair stick guarding my life. The one I’m wearing now is my spare. I have to find time to shop for a better one.”

“Your best hair stick has been bagged into evidence. That’s the best evidence we’ve got,” he said in a drone.

On an afterthought, Estelle refrained from her huffy attitude and came back with another word. “Did you tell the detective working that girl’s murder case? He should know what happened to me.”

Burgio turned a surprise look at her. “Are you talking about the murder case of Abigail Wincoff?”

She reacted. “Of course, in my state of duress, her name had escaped me. It’s a shot in the dark, but maybe it’s relevant to the case, that a witness was attacked.”

Did she need to remind him that she was the only one who had gotten close enough on the heels of the murderer of Abigail Wincoff? This was all starting to feel surreal. He stared at her, contemplating her response, his gaze sharp. There was a hint of doubt in his narrowing eyes. It was too coincidental that he ruled it out. Given his stance, he knew that wouldn’t appease her.

“It’s a slim chance that the killer and your attacker are one and the same. I won’t bother informing the detective,” he said, his voice calm, but there was an edge to it.

A quick look about the room before her eyes twitched at him. She had nothing left to say (at least that would matter in any way). Not that she was defeated, but that the point was mute.

His eyes were squinched up, he was that happy when she left his office, but not without a huff or two. He sat back more comfortably in his chair and thought about having lunch at Raffles Bistro on 9th Street but decided against it. Not going to lunch before noon was a matter of discipline. Perhaps he should return to his paperwork.

He checked the clock on the wall. Forty-five more minutes and then he could head out and purchase a turkey, cheddar, and lettuce on rye with extra mustard, and place that humungous sandwich in his mouth.

Sitting upright, he brought his hands up to the desktop and looked down at a sheet of paper. He picked up a pen and circled something on the form. A female voice, the dispatcher's, came over a speakerphone on the side of the intercom.

"What is it, Kimberly?"

"You've got a phone call. Estelle Rowland says she has something to add," she said with her professional air.

"Go ahead, put her through," he said with reluctance in his voice.

Waiting patiently, Estelle was sitting in her car in the parking lot behind the Monroe County Courthouse. She had only rolled the driver's-side window down several inches, before she called the police department on her mobile phone.

Several seconds elapsed before she heard his voice through the crackle of the intercom. "Did you forget something, Ms. Rowland?"

“I’m not going to let this rest, Sheriff Burgio. With my part-time hours at Victoria Station, I’ve got time. I’m going to find out who attacked me. And when I do, you’ll be the first person I call,” she said with an air of confidence that was meant to annoy, and it did.

“Take it easy there. Leave the police work to us. Don’t go out of your depth,” he said curtly.

“And another thing that irks me is —”

“Save it for another day!” he interrupted her in mid-sentence and there was a harsh edge to his voice. “Please, don’t call again. I’ll call you when I have something. I’m going to hang up the phone and disconnect it for a while. Bye, Ms. Rowland.”

Burgio ended the call before she had a chance to reply. She slid the phone into her handbag on the passenger seat. Doubts about the new sheriff swirled in her head as she turned the ignition, put the car in reverse and backed away, but not before she put her nose up in the air toward the courthouse.

Chapter 37

CONSIDERABLY irritated, in every sense, Joey Marks was barricaded in the hotel room dealing with his own demons. He flushed a bloody gauze down the toilet. While he ran his aching hand under the cold-water faucet, he stared at himself in the mirror of the bathroom cabinet with so much anger on his face. Eyes narrowed, the passion pulled at his face, twitching and spasms in the muscular parts.

“Ow!” he grunted bitterly, as he got carried away scrubbing his hand with soap like he was sanding a floor.

For the second time that day, he was redressing his hand wound. In the process, he started venting his frustration.

“I should have killed that pesky waitress that day she interrupted my train of thought last year, in that restaurant. With crow’s feet and a puzzled frown, staring at me

intently,” he grated through his teeth, his good hand curling convulsively into a fist.

She had missed doing any permanent damage, but the cut was deep enough and burned. There was no way he could risk going to a hospital. Eventually the wound would heal on its own without stitches. He massaged it, secured the bandage in place, and left the bathroom.

Dressed in a plain white long-sleeved T-shirt and gray sweatpants pulled up to his knees, he was pacing the carpeted floor in his bare feet. He had to leave the area now. Stirred and restless, he felt his insides turn. The frustration was so thick inside him, he could taste it at the back of his throat.

Just briefly he entertained the notion of going back a second time to kill that waitress. She’d said her name was something like Rochelle. He couldn’t quite recall, but he couldn’t forget her face. Undoubtedly, the police were already searching for him, or rather the man who had attacked her. He hoped she hadn’t recognized him. But that didn’t matter. Quite likely the police collected his blood and took it to a forensic laboratory. There was enough of his blood left on that barrette to do a DNA match. Really, he wasn’t sure how that worked, or even if the police had his DNA profile in their database. The thing he knew for sure was: They would have it soon enough.

Joey Marks sat himself on the arm of the leather side chair in the corner of the room, to try and relax some (if that was even possible at this stage). He certainly needed to think more calmly. Everything had been going wrong for him ever since the police had tracked him down in

California. Had the police informed the media? He wasn't going to watch the news, as he didn't think he'd be able to handle it.

A click carried to his ears, shooting a current of fear down his spine. Someone in the hallway had undone a dead bolt on their door.

By worrying about everything and not getting enough sleep, he was getting paranoid. He was locked in his room. He had thrown the dead bolt on his room too. His only plan was to sleep and eat at most for another day or two, and then drive to Canada.

His attention was drawn to the red blinking lights on the clock on the nightstand. It was approaching one o'clock in the afternoon. Perhaps some lunch would settle the thoughts tumbling through his head. He didn't look the least bit eager but grabbed the Chinatown Express menu from the adjacent side table. Chinese, his favorite take-out meal, yet again. He picked up the phone and placed an order.

While waiting on the take-out delivery and in an attempt to change his mood, he figured he might as well get in some practice time. Returning to the bathroom, he positioned himself in front of the mirror, smiling broadly at himself. He had picked out some phrases he'd heard from past coworkers over the years to help him get into the gay character.

"Fabulous! You don't say!" he said over and over with a playful lilt in his voice that felt awkward on his tongue.

This went on for a while, until he got tired of it, and went to the window. He stared at the distant Pocono

plateau, a dull green-brown landscape of trees sprawled in front of him. When he imagined the forests of Canada, a wicked smile slowly took shape on his face. Wrapped in melancholy, he missed seeing the delivery man drive into the Red Roof Inn parking lot and get out of the car. He felt slightly irritated as a knock on the door took him away from the window.

“Order for Mr. Wilcox,” came a Chinese man’s voice that reverberated throughout the room.

Marks voice was a raw whisper. “Yeah. I’m coming.”

He walked to the door. Through the peephole, from the side and fast, just in case, he could see the paper bag full of food in the delivery man’s hands. He jammed his bandaged hand into the pocket of his sweatpants. Then he slid the chain from its mooring and turned the dead bolt.

Graciously he opened the door with a gay grin plastered on his face. He wanted to be remembered as a friendly homosexual as he handed the man money.

“Ta-ta,” he said in a duck’s voice, grabbed the bag and closed the door.

For an undetermined amount of time, he planned to pretend to be gay. By some means, he had to become someone other than the man he’d been. This was how he was going to escape and get away with the murders he’d committed. He thought of himself to be the cleverest serial killer, that ever existed.

At around three o’clock he was bored beyond measure. The soft hum of the small refrigerator was the only sound in the room. He lay spread on the bed immersed in gloom,

his brow furrowed in concentration. He was back again in a pensive mood, wondering if going to Canada would change his bad fortune. *Very likely not*, he thought. He expected he would be living the rest of his life in quiet obscurity, sleeping with one eye open.

A map of Canada lay unfolded before him, with cities circled in red: Vancouver, Toronto, and Halifax. He traced the route with his finger, envisioning the journey ahead. It felt oddly liberating. The elements of a long-term plan had come together. He was prepared to take the first job he could find and put money away in a safe-deposit box again. There could be a time in the future when he would have to run again.

His mind was made up. He would kill again. And again, until by a fluke someone caught him. He knew he couldn't change. But he was optimistic that on international soil no one there would know who he was, so he wouldn't be suspected of anything criminal. That was his logic. And he fell back against the bed, laughing like a duck.

Chapter 38

IN A DIMLY lit corner of the Eastern Monroe Public Library, Claude Bonanni sat at a wooden, rectangular table. Shadows flickered across the walls, fluted distortions of the pale glow from a small table lamp. The faint scent of paper and dust surrounded him. It was quiet, minus the soft murmur of voices somewhere in the rows. At random he opened a book about modern-day exorcisms. He tried to think about what he was reading, bolstered in his own mind and instincts for what would be a proper way to carry out an exorcism. Like other priestly duties, certain protocols needed to be followed, and Bonanni knew that researching and studying the rites of exorcism would significantly help him to be more effective.

Earlier that afternoon, at the bishop's request, a meeting had been scheduled at the diocese office in Scranton, which was a good forty-five miles away from Stroudsburg. In his

phone conversation with the bishop of the Diocese of Scranton, Bonanni had adopted a tactful line of approach to the matter of Gillian Wincoff's observations of her daughter's spirit, and the demonic presence. They talked in length about how Abigail's soul was at risk being under the influence of a demon. All of this persuaded the bishop to want to discuss the matter in more detail in person to determine the next steps.

The minutes slipped by, one seamlessly into another. He scribbled notes on a pad of paper. The more he read, the more he realized how complex the rubrics of the rite were. The procedure, regulated by Canon Law, called for the usage of the Eucharist, or the Last Supper of Jesus Christ performed as part of the liturgy in Latin, enacted, and commemorated. The Christian ritual was understood to be dangerous and taxing to priests. He couldn't afford to weaken, or he would be vulnerable to attack by the demon. The demon wasn't expected to manifest his presence, while he said his sacred prayers. The reverend would have to find a way to trap the demon into showing himself.

As an ordained priest, he believed in the divine power of Jesus Christ and the power of faith, but meeting Gillian Wincoff compelled him to delve deeper into the unseen world — specifically, where demons dwell. The Catholic Church's position was that the Devil was real. Demons were once angels created to act as messengers for God. Some of them rebelled with the Devil and became fallen angels or demons to help him carry out his activities.

Demons attach themselves to physical beings as well as to their spirit, in certain circumstances. Spirit possession. This was what he would be dealing with. Abigail Wincoff was an innocent child who didn't know where to go when she died. This demon attached itself to her confused soul that didn't cross over into the light. Bonanni had his work cut out for him. It wasn't going to be easy to exercise a demon's influence over a soul rather than a living being.

Outside, in the parking lot, Kristi Maratos had been sitting in her car, pawing through things in her tote bag. She had waited fifteen minutes, preparing for her entrance. Earlier that Thursday afternoon, at the Church of Saint Luke, she saw Reverend Bonanni climb into his car and followed him, thinking he would lead her to Gillian Wincoff, but ended up here instead.

It felt odd stalking a man she didn't know, but what choice did she have? She desperately wanted to know what Gillian Wincoff was up to.

Before she got out, she conducted a quick assessment of herself. Professional business suit? Check. Tory Burch tote bag? Check and check. Flipping open her compact, she painted her mouth a rich red. She blotted her eyes with a white cloth napkin and touched up her makeup by dusting powder across her nose. Together. Successful. And, ready to get some answers!

The reverend flipped a page in the book, then suddenly stopped, his breath hitching as he whispered prayers under his breath. The clock on the wall told him it was 4:40. He

felt a little frazzled. Surely his eyes, tired from reading. He sank into his chair for a stretch.

In walked, Kristi Maratos. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the softly lit room, illuminated by scattered sunlight filtering through small windows. Like a vulture, she hovered around, waiting for the right moment to approach. She perused the aisles of books, peering in the reverend's direction every once in a while.

Kristi watched the reverend walk to the copier. When he finished his photocopying and lifted the book from the machine, she noticed he was oblivious to his surroundings.

The moment came when he returned to the table. She whipped out a compact from her tote, then pulled one side of her hair behind her ear and patted her hair into proper outline. Perhaps she was overdoing it a little, but that was Kristi.

She went to the closest bookshelf. In front of her was a book of eighteenth-century art reproductions. She took it out and pretended to look at it. Slipping it under her arm, lipstick bled from the corners of her fixed smile as she moved across the room and stopped at his table.

"Hello there," she said in a sweet voice and cleared her throat.

"Hello to you," he said, looking up from the book he was reading.

"Kristi Maratos. Anchorwoman. BRC TV13," she said quickly.

"Please take a seat if you wish," he said, in a voice as stony as his face.

“May I ask what you are reading?” she asked, going right to the point.

Something about the way she looked at him that made him suspicious. It was neither friendly nor unfriendly. And her voice was sharp, like she was conducting an interview. She was after something. But what? He smiled, but kept his eyes downcast, making it hard for her to read his expression.

“Just research material for my Sunday sermon. I like to apply biblical data to present-day situations to help ordinary churchgoers understand the Scripture better,” he said with a voice as tight as the weave of splints.

“Always curious. It’s the journalist in me,” she said, aiming at politeness. “I didn’t mean to sound intrusive.”

“Sure, I understand. Please excuse me. I have to search for another book,” he said, trying his best to be curt and closed the book with a snap.

Lickety-split, he was gone before she could blink. He had completely brushed her off. She felt as if she had wasted her time and was kind of pissed off when he left, essentially moving her and the conversation out of his realm.

What had just happened here? she thought, as she watched him walk stiffly to a bookshelf and pull out a thick book.

It made no sense to her. He was so tightly contained, in more ways than one. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. He didn’t even tell her his name.

No, it was mostly her own fault — for telling him she was a reporter.

From the corner of his eye, the reverend caught sight of her palpable irritation as she left the library. Standing by the bookshelf, he opened the book and flipped through it with an insatiable grin on his face.

Chapter 39

AT SOME POINT Joey Marks fell asleep in the worst moments of his moodiness. He found himself in an unfathomable nightmare in the wee hours of Friday morning. Abigail Wincoff had come into his mind — thoughts which he had had sufficient strength to put away from him. Not that he really knew what to make of it all, because he didn't care anything for her.

His arms were flailing everywhere, unaware that he was tossing and turning in the bed. A memory washed over him. He believed he was reliving the murder of Abigail Wincoff all over again. The only problem was he was the one being beaten.

In the nightmare, he was lying on his back on the ground in a puddle of blood. His blood. How could this be happening to him?

Looking up, he saw that a small pallid girl, who had unsightly bloodstains on her short-sleeved, white linen dress, was standing over him. Abigail Wincoff. Shadows twisted and coiled around her in the darkness. She was a corpse with dirt stains on her dimpled knees and elbows. Dark circles over-emphasized her dull, black eyes a trifle too much. Unperturbed, she held his eyes with a somber expression. There was a cold, glazed look about them, as if she didn't really see him.

No way was he going to cower down to this girl. But when he tried to get up, something shoved his head back down. Some invisible force seemed to be keeping him down, keeping him from getting up. No help for him either.

His legs wouldn't support him, and he couldn't budge. Abigail just smiled. A faint red glow emanating from her eyes. Anger wasn't a strong enough word for the fire gathering inside him.

Was this the girl he'd killed not long ago? Or was there an unseen force within her that was stronger than her?

In his dream, he bellowed, "This isn't how it happened. You were the one that was beaten!" at her, but she didn't seem to hear him.

There was a long silence. Then, from only God knew where, came a low moaning laugh that made the hairs on his head stand up. Her pale ghost face dissolved into black, swirling smoke, which drifted into an open space between two trees. Even by the full moon he could barely see her body, which started to morph into something else with a flickering forked tongue and twisted horns.

This was not a person. It was a tall, hulking demon with red eyes that burned like coals. There was a look of such profound evil in its eyes that it seemed to radiate with palpable heat. Growling fiercely, its skin was a disturbing shade of dark gray, almost black, textured like cracked leather. Its hands were curled into claws with pointed nails extending from its black fingers, slashing at the air. And its body, positioned sideways, was checkered by dark shadows of the surrounding trees. But he could make out a series of lumpy ridges protruding from its back.

It had shocked him at first to see this demon, but part of him knew he was dreaming. Questions filled his mind. Why was he dreaming this? How was it that he was able to dream of this demon so clearly?

The horned demon's head shifted to face him. It stepped out of the shadows and growled, revealing a mouthful of sharp fangs.

Marks' jaw was clenched so tightly that the muscles of his face were etched like stone. With some effort he managed to squeeze his eyes shut, desperation clawing at him. Memories flooded his mind — childhood, his first school fight, the faces of those he'd killed. All those thoughts converged, a relentless tide threatening to pull him under, tormenting his brain. Yet, he was determined to stay asleep, to see how the nightmare ended.

The ground shook beneath him when the demon's growl blasted his ears. His eyes opened. A yell formed on his lips. Somewhere in the madness he thought he was yelling. But no sound escaped, as a raspy voice hissed.

“Joey. Don’t be scared. I only want to play with you.”

The demon leaned in closer and let the tip of its tongue play along the edge of Marks’ ear. Its breath was cold and stank of rancid oil. Before he could try to move, the demon lunged at him.

This was when he allowed himself to awaken. He was sweating terribly. Grabbing the blanket, he spread it over his shaking body. He jerked over onto his back and started to sit up. The sheets were wet with perspiration.

Unsure of what to do after such a dream, he gloomily contemplated the pure white of his hotel room ceiling. He was out of sorts in a big way. It had, he decided firmly, everything to do with that nightmare. And he desperately wanted to do something to boost his spirits.

The demon was gone, but its eyes were etched in his memory. Which made him think of Abigail Wincoff and the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. The place he’d buried her body and thought she would never be found. For that moment, he was his old happy, cynical self. He thought about how he’d killed her. If he had to do it all over again, he would do it in a heartbeat.

Beneath the cover, he switched on the lamp next to the bed. The time on the digital clock read 5:10 A.M. He sat back against the headboard, his legs curled up under him. Perhaps the real problem was he had way too much time on his hands, way too much time to think.

Then — bang — it hit him like Maxwell’s silver hammer. He laughed out loud as his vanity took over. He felt compelled to visit that cabin, because it would make

him feel better. But he wouldn't be there for more than an hour. He had about a six-hour drive ahead of him to get to Canada.

There was almost a smile on his face as he left the bed for a trip to the bathroom. He hadn't felt this good since before the police had found him out. By this time tomorrow, he'd be across the border, holed up in some hotel, ordering room service, one way or the other.

Chapter 40

IN WATCHUNG, NEW JERSEY Lance Wincoff woke up at the usual time, around seven o'clock. He felt worried about his wife, tossing over in the bed. What was the real reason she had extended her stay in the Poconos? What was she up to? He wasn't buying into her claim, not exactly. Something didn't gel.

He came out of bed in his white T-shirt and brown boxers determined to get to the bottom of whatever the reason was that his wife was still in Pennsylvania.

But as he thought about calling Gillian, he remembered the last phone call he had received, from her. She had given a few vague answers to some things he asked and changed the subject of her returning home often. He felt like she was hiding something. In order to get some answers, he would have to call someone else.

There were things to do. First, he should get dressed. And eat something! Today was Friday. He had a busy day ahead of him, and he was already starting his workday in a foul mood.

His daughter was dead. And now his wife was slipping away. All that was good and gave meaning to his life was lost. He was in a bad place again — and that was just how he felt. The inspiration from his late father had faded. He had no good move. No moves at all.

He shaved as usual, hurried in the shower and started getting dressed. Whichever way you cut it, he noticed the harmful habits he'd developed in his withdrawal from normal life activities. Instead of jogging around the neighborhood in the early morning, he was watching the TV morning news religiously; instead of planning informal activities with his wife, he was isolated most weeknights and weekends in his home office, planning his work week.

Was there any way to change this? he wondered, slowly backing out of the bedroom.

Grimacing, he strode through the empty house to the kitchen. He prepared his usual breakfast, toast, scrambled eggs and coffee, plenty of sugar and milk. He had decided not to turn on the news, because he didn't want to be caught up in useless details this morning.

Outside the window, he could see the sun hadn't yet burnt off the morning mist that shrouded the house. And the wind was blowing through the trees.

The coffee maker percolated a cup of brew, the only noise other than the ticking of a clock on the wall and his

own sounds. But the percolating water couldn't distract him from the thoughts encompassing him in a tide of memories ... And uncertainty. The last time he saw Gillian was the night before she left for Pennsylvania. He had found her up-and-about, packing clothes into her suitcase. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, exposing her neck to the full. He always liked her hair that way. Though she looked frantic. The sight of her pacing up and down the bedroom, obviously preoccupied with thoughts, was a clear indication that she was not in a good mood or anything close. He didn't want her to leave. And the truth was something he couldn't tell her. Because if he did, it could have upset her further. She needed her space, so he gave it to her.

And yet, she gave no sign that she would prolong her stay in the Poconos. It was only supposed to be for the weekend! Days later, she was still there.

A half-empty mug of coffee sat in front of him. It was cold now. He wrapped his fingers around the mug and studied his coffee as if searching for tea leaves. Instead of drinking it, he pushed his mug away, eyes wide and shining. Flecks of coffee splashed on his gray double-breasted suit. He could care less. It finally dawned on him who he should contact.

Lance left the kitchen and went to his office. He pulled a business card from a desk drawer. At a fast pace he collected his cell phone from the nightstand in the bedroom. His grip tightened on the phone, and he proceeded to dial Detective Philip Silverwood's direct number from the business card he had given them on more than one occasion.

Straightaway, he quickly brought Detective Silverwood up to speed on the issue with his wife prolonging her stay in Pennsylvania, ending with the little he knew. “The only thing she really told me in our few conversations is that she’s staying at the Hampton Inn & Suites in Stroudsburg.”

The detective started to brush him off. Wanted to brush him off. He couldn’t be bothered with this.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Wincoff. I’ve got a serial killer on the loose, and the Chief Superintendent of the Pocono Mountain Regional Police Department looking over my shoulder,” the detective said in a rapid, abrupt sort of tone.

Lance wanted to reveal his suspicions to him. He ran a hand through his hair, frustration boiling beneath the surface.

“That’s what worries me the most. Isn’t this a strange coincidence? This is going to sound completely ridiculous, but it looks like Gillian is running an investigation of her own. And I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Detective Silverwood sighed deeply. “I see now what you’re getting at. I’ll talk to Kirkman about this. He might know what’s going on with her.”

“Thanks. I’m tied up with work here in New Jersey. Otherwise, I’d drive over to Pennsylvania myself and check on her.”

“Sure, I get it.”

“Before you hang up, do you have any updates on the case of my daughter?”

“The timing’s just not right. I’m in the FBI’s field office in New York with the Serial Killer Task Force, tracking down a lead. Another missing girl,” Silverwood said, then added hastily, “I’ll give you a quick summary. Other than the body of your daughter, no other bodies have been found. We’re diligently searching through a nationwide database of missing persons against evidence found at Joey Marks’ residence. If we can’t get him on the murder of Abigail, we’ll get him on another of his victims.”

“I see,” Lance said at almost a whisper. “I appreciate all the work you’re doing.”

The call ended, and Lance exhaled deeply. The tension in his shoulders eased slightly, but his eyes remained wide with worry. With that, he picked up his keys and left for work.

Chapter 41

IT was Friday, mid-morning, when Claude Bonanni came into the Diocese in Scranton and encountered a custodian mopping the floor. He greeted the lone worker before he turned down a silent corridor. The shades in the windows were pulled down and there wasn't much light, save that which came from the rectory across from the bishop's office at the end of the hall.

Which was precisely where he was headed.

The reverend proceeded to knock at the oak door. A short moment later, he heard a faint 'Come in' from inside the room. It was the voice of the Monsignor, the Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia for the Diocese.

Inside he found two men dressed in black suits and clerical collars, Jesuit priests from his parish. They were seated beside each other at a small conference table in the middle of an oak-paneled room. All eyes were on Bonanni.

The two priests whispered among themselves briefly, casting glances his way. To their right, sat Sister Rita Hernandez, a no-nonsense nun dressed in a dark blue habit, already scribbling notes on a pad of paper. Bishop Hugo Acosta, a tall, pudgy man, nearing his sixtieth birthday, was wearing a black suit with a Roman collar and red shirt. The bishop, a seasoned cleric with a reputation for thoroughness and a meticulous approach to matters of supernatural faith, sat at the head of the square table, of course.

“Would you please take the empty chair?” said Monsignor Francisco Carrillo, a short man with thick shoulders and a sturdy build, seated at Acosta’s left.

The biggest issue, as far as they were concerned, was whether or not there really was a malevolent spirit haunting a cabin in the Poconos. Bonanni was going to present to them the concerns he had about the situation. This informal inquiry was merely to hear his report on a case of probable possession. The bishop would review the reverend’s formal request to carry out an exorcism as foreseen in the *Rituale Romanum*, a liturgical book of the Roman Rite of the Latin Church of the Catholic Church designed for use by priests.

The rite had long been frowned upon by the church authorities, deemed ‘medieval.’ Over time, consideration came to the Church’s ongoing battle against the forces of evil — and against Satan, a real present force of danger in the world. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the rite was restored and somewhat modified. This was partly aided by an increased awareness of a new threat in the form of black magic and satanic cults. The fact remained that the

Church recognized the possibility of demonic possession and prescribed an exorcism only as a desperate resort.

“Locally, this was a well-publicized murder of a child. A child whose soul is now at stake,” Reverend Bonanni finished with passion in his voice and a nod, then quieted to listen to the clergy around the table discuss the pros and cons of granting him the permission to perform an exorcism.

Monsignor Carrillo was the first to interject. “The word of a parishioner and that of the mother of the murdered child compels me to believe there is a spiritual presence in that cabin.”

The bishop was growing visibly anxious as Reverend Bonanni continued. “The circumstances here involve a plausible claim to evict that evil spiritual entity from possessing that cabin and the soul of an innocent girl.”

“Reverend, you’ve made your point,” the bishop said in an authoritative tone, his ears perking up. “It’s time to let someone else have the floor.”

The two priests shared a look.

“I’m inclined to side with Reverend Bonanni. Based on everything I’ve heard, I believe ... it’s worth investigating. We must do what we can to break off any demonic activity occurring in that cabin,” said Sister Rita, throwing in her somewhat two cents and scarcely glancing at the bishop.

“What it sounds like to me is that this is some form of demonic entity that sensed Abigail’s spirit had a problem crossing over. It was drawn to her innocence and attached itself to her soul,” said one of the priests.

“This demon came to Millie Dozier in her dream, but clearly, this had something to do with what was happening to Abigail Wincoff,” Sister Rita said in a firmly declarative tone.

Enough had been said to satisfy the bishop. At long last, he leaned forward and put up a hand like a traffic cop, his gold ring glinting in the harsh fluorescent overhead lights.

Bishop Acosta stood and banged down a gavel. “All in favor say aye; opposed, no.”

They all said “Aye.”

Everyone in the room had agreed: The situation warranted a careful investigation with the intent to perform an exorcism to purge the cabin on Wagon Trail Road of demonic infestation. That was if, and only if, should the findings require it.

Acosta turned his head to him and said, “Reverend Bonanni. It seems we have a consensus of opinion.”

“Thank you all for trusting me with this,” Bonanni said to everyone there, nodding in agreement, but he was troubled by the possibilities.

At the meeting’s conclusion, Acosta grabbed Bonanni’s arm and pulled him to the side. Everyone else left the room. Though whispered, their short discussion was intense. It wasn’t just a pep talk. It was about the larger picture of what it takes to be a servant of God. It was laid out to Bonanni as to what words were to be used. And he was to speak the Scripture to the demon in a way modeled by Jesus. And should he encounter the slightest difficulty, he was to leave

the cabin, come around the next morning and confer with the bishop.

“I want a written report of your results,” the bishop said lastly to him.

Before Reverend Bonanni left his eyes lifted to the crucifix over the bishop’s desk. With a quick inner prayer for courage, he turned away from the bishop who picked up his desk phone to make a call.

Chapter 42

THE MAITRE D, standing tall in his black tuxedo, was in a very perky mood. He sent a big smile Claude Bonanni's way, as he stepped through the doors of Victoria Station. The reverend couldn't remember the last time he'd had a lunch date, yet here he was, with a book of exorcisms he'd checked out from the library, tucked under his arm. After a cheerful greeting, the reverend smiled back in return as the maître d' laid the menu on one of the last available tables he'd been brought to.

The replica of a vintage European railroad dining car restaurant was already packed with tourists when Bonanni had arrived just after one o'clock — that an unsuspecting tourist would think he was in another city, possibly Chicago or Philadelphia.

The Reverend, who was leaning his elbows on the table, admired the decor of the place; the dark colors and the

subdued lighting. The book lay beside a glass of water. He removed his wrist from beneath his chin, arranged the napkin on his lap and began to gaze fixedly at the menu.

Estelle Rowland brought drinks to the table she'd been waiting on, then walked down the aisle to stop at the table where Reverend Bonanni had just been seated. She was sporting a new pair of horn-rimmed glasses that made her look smarter than she was. And she had her hair set the very same way. A portion of her thick, shoulder-length hair was knotted in a pile held in place with her snake-shaped hair stick on the top of her head.

She was a tad jumpy, and not just because it was a busy Friday afternoon. The attack on her life had left her much more on her guard than before. Because she didn't know who had targeted her. As she walked, her eyes traveled around the four-diamond restaurant wistfully. Wondering if the person who'd attacked her was watching her right now.

As she came to a stop, she gave Bonanni an intent look, even as she smiled. "What can I start you off with to drink?"

When she saw the book, her eyes twitched. Something she didn't want to examine too closely. With that came an up and down jerky movement of her brown horn-rimmed glasses on the bridge of her crooked nose before she turned her focus to him.

Without moving the menu, he directly said, "Just get me a cappuccino. I'm waiting for someone."

As Estelle whirled away, she tilted her head sideways and said, "I'm going to place your order."

Gillian Wincoff nodded as she walked past the maître d.' Pasting a squinty-eyed smile on her face, she was trying not to look distressed or troubled. She was struggling and failing on both counts as she navigated the room to the table the reverend was sitting at.

Bonanni noticed her withdrawn demeanor as she sat down. "Don't be nervous about this procedure, you're in capable hands."

"It's not what you think," she said opening up to him, tears showing in her eyes. "I'm nervous about being here. This was the last place I visited with my daughter — the day after she went missing."

"We can go somewhere else, if you want?" the reverend suggested in a kindly tone and patted her shoulder.

"No, I want to get this over with," she said, grabbing a napkin and wiping her eyes. "I have to face my demons, put it behind me once and for all."

Returning with his drink, Estelle shot Gillian a look of surprise. She curiously stretched her head in her direction — looking closely at her — almost like a long-lost friend.

After setting the cup down, she met Gillian's confused and expectant gaze. "Mrs. Wincoff?"

"Yes," Gillian answered with a questioning expression.

"I never thought I'd see you again. My name is Estelle Rowland. I served the man who was staring oddly at your daughter that day you were in here. The man who I'm sure killed your daughter. I gave his description to Sheriff Kirkman," Estelle blurted out nervously.

In consideration for her tender emotional state, Gillian stood up and embraced her. “Thank you for coming forward.”

“I only wish I had said something to you back then, but I didn’t and have regretted it nearly every day since,” Estelle said earnestly as they came apart from their embrace.

“You’re only human,” Bonanni said in a compassionate tone. “God understands perfectly well. Just don’t lose faith.”

“He’s a reverend at a local church, so trust what he says,” Gillian said, pushed her windbreaker aside on the seat and sat down again. “At the time, you couldn’t possibly know he would kill my daughter.”

A bald man seated at a corner table, with someone who looked Chinese and a smartly dressed black woman, clicked his fingers to get Estelle’s attention. Which, she noticed, and became all business-like.

“Been here too long. Let me get your orders, before the customers start complaining,” said Estelle.

Reverend Bonanni stopped drinking, banged his cup back into its saucer. “I’ll have the salmon entrée with a garden salad and pocket bread. And an iced tea with lemon.”

“I’ll have the same,” Gillian said when she turned to her.

As soon as she left, Bonanni said to Gillian, “Let’s go over the plan for tomorrow.”

It wasn't too long before Estelle came with their entrees. She placed them on the table in front of them and placed the bill in between them. But she didn't leave yet. Prickling with alarm, she stood there, just staring at Gillian.

"Is there something else you want to say?" Gillian asked her.

"Um, yes," Estelle said with pauses.

"Don't mind me. Please continue," the reverend said and went back to eating.

"I was attacked some nights ago. It was dark. I can't say for certain it was the man that killed your daughter. It's just a hunch, but he felt familiar. It could very well be him, because I can't think of anyone who has a grudge against me," Estelle said carefully, in a low voice.

"What did the sheriff say?" Gillian asked.

"I suggested he tell about this incident to the detective working your daughter's case. But Sheriff Cole Burgio is working on the theory that it was a random attack — presumably, though nothing was taken from me," Estelle said in a huffy voice.

"Your hunch could be right. You never know. Since the killer is on the run and there's a nationwide manhunt for him. It couldn't hurt to tell Detective Silverwood. I have his business card in my handbag. I'm going to go outside and call him now," Gillian said to her, and then excused herself from the table, the cell phone already in her hand.

"It just has to be him!" Estelle said, the words sounding loudly, then covered her mouth with her hand.

Once outside the restaurant, Gillian stood at the edge of the parking lot and dialed up the detective. She told him all that had transpired in the conversation between her and Estelle Rowland. All of which he ignored. He was more concerned with what she was doing in Pennsylvania. And that her husband was worried about her.

For two heartbeats she went silent. She felt discouraged. Then she relayed the same story to him that she had with Lance before. That she needed some time away before ending the call.

Let it go, she chided to herself, as she went back inside the restaurant to continue her meeting with the reverend. The most important thing to her right now was that she needed to work with him to save her daughter's soul.

Chapter 43

AROUND THE SAME TIME that day, Don McKinney couldn't come out of Lehigh Valley Hospital-Pocono fast enough. He'd had enough of the poking and prodding. He maneuvered himself out the emergency room doors, ready to move on with his life.

The sky was clear with only a couple of cotton ball clouds dotting the blue expanse above. Propped up on his crutches, he squinted in the sun, turning his gaze in the direction of the parking lot. Hours earlier, his friend Gerry Andrews had brought his SUV to the hospital. He was grateful when he spotted his black Toyota Highlander parked next to a silver pickup truck.

Sliding into the driver's seat, he was craving coffee of all things. After that stale hospital coffee, he had developed a greater appreciation for the many kinds of coffee available

to buy on the Internet nowadays, additional to the many coffee shops just about everywhere.

As he pulled out of the hospital parking lot, his neck and shoulders relaxed. He pressed the gas, anxious to get far away from the hospital. Keeping his eyes divided between his rearview mirror and the road ahead of him, he breathed a little easier as he returned to civilization.

A Dunkin' popped up in front of him. It was just what he'd been hoping for. He turned into the drive-thru lane. Forget the donuts, he ordered a large mocha latte and got right back on the road. Like a good book, he savored every bit of it, every sip.

Driving with a cast on his left leg was awkward. It took a little time getting used to it. But it was good to be doing something other than lying in bed all day.

Roughly twenty-five minutes later, he was driving down Sellersville Drive in East Stroudsburg. It didn't occur to him that the route he was taking passed close to Wagon Trail Road. But he wasn't concerned about that cabin — there wasn't anything holding him to it anymore. He'd gotten back the money he'd invested. Despite having come so close to death, all thought of the demon that dwelled there, hidden, was long gone from his mind.

Actually, he was in a good mood considering all he'd been through. He was leaving the area for good, returning to Chevy Chase, Maryland. His only plan was to invest in his own house and age with grace.

And then it happened.

Nearly fifty feet away, McKinney eyed a Jeep driving sporadically, weaving back and forth across the center line and into the opposite lane. The lane he was driving in. The roaring approach of the Jeep terrified him, and he wasn't in the mood for it.

Donning a Phillies baseball cap pulled down tight and low on his head, and a pair of wraparound sunglasses, so you couldn't really see his face, Joey Marks' thoughts were still not clear. His head was tilted a little to the left, and his eyes were narrowed. He was headed toward the cabin on Wagon Trail Road, just feeling that way inside. Little did he notice his surroundings. Nor cared, either, perhaps.

For the longest time, there hadn't been any traffic on Milford Road. He didn't see any when he had turned onto Sellersville Drive either. And that led his thoughts to stray to other places he shouldn't go. In doing so, he lost sight of the road in front of him during momentary intervals.

The grumpy expression on McKinney's face said it all before he smacked his hand on the steering wheel.

The sound of someone laying on a car horn blasted so loudly Marks thought the car was on top of him. To say the least, it got his attention, hitting him like an electric shock. A frown crept across his evil face.

The Jeep zoomed wildly. Marks slowed down and turned the wheel hard to the right. He fought to keep the Jeep from tilting and crashing onto the side of the road. At the last second the Jeep moved back into his lane and missed McKinney's vehicle completely.

As he passed, Marks removed his sunglasses, leveled a glare at him and shot him the bird. It was doubtful he even saw the glare because Marks' face was shadowed by the sunlight in front of him. At this particular time, going unnoticed wasn't something important to him.

In return, Don McKinney yelled out the window. "You idiot."

In his rearview mirror, he watched McKinney's Toyota Highlander disappear down the street. He looked down at the speedometer. He was clocking fifty. Turning his eyes forward, he punched the gas and clicked that quickly up to sixty.

And then something else happened.

A crow flew into his windshield. There was a splash of black feathers, and he jerked the steering wheel slightly. The glass did not crack or break, but the bird died instantly. Its body slipped off the vehicle as he let off the throttle and the Jeep came to a stop at the side of Sellersville Drive.

With a smirk on his face, Marks said to himself: *What else could possibly go wrong?*

The minutes ticked by as he sat idle in the driver's seat. A ripple of queasiness spread throughout his chest as the wipers washed away the disgusting mess of residue of the dead crow.

He sucked it all in and slowly moved the Jeep back onto the road.

The day had whizzed by. That morning after he left the hotel, he took his time gassing up the Jeep, checking the oil and the air in the tires. Then he had a long lunch at the

Wawa on Main Street in Stroudsburg. He had to kill some time because he thought it would be wiser to drive to Canada under the cover of night.

Chapter 44

APPROACHING two o'clock in the afternoon, the sun was being swallowed up by dark clouds rapidly gathering. Judging by that, it looked like it was going to rain.

Finches were buzzing like flies over the barn-shaped birdhouse perched in a branch of a tree beside the window near the cabin's door. In the gravel and dirt driveway, Joey Marks stepped on the brake and heard a pop sound. The left front tire had run over something sharp, and air was escaping from it. He turned off the Jeep and got out.

Something else went wrong, he thought. One thing at a time. Affix the spare tire later.

The air started getting cooler and smelled of damp earth and pine needles. He forced his lungs to take in a breath to calm himself. There was something about the scents. What did he know? Only that the smells evoked strong feelings, which took him back to that day in August

last year, when he'd carried Abigail Wincoff's body through the woods to the cabin.

His thoughts being now more composed, he glanced right and left, looking around before he circled toward the front of the cabin. He didn't know why he had expected the cabin to look different, but he had.

And yet, it was.

Something seemed out of place. Because he couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on him, yet nobody was around.

Suddenly there came a growl, like some living animal. He looked in the direction it came from. A curtain moved in the living room window. There was no doubt about it. He squinted, trying to see if someone was inside, watching him.

Another noise came.

This prompted him to look up at the trees. When his eyes moved to the attic window, he saw a dark figure there. He couldn't make out a face. All he saw was the red glow of its eyes staring deep into his soul. He closed his eyes and slowly opened them again, as if he were emerging from a trance. This time, the image of Abigail Wincoff appeared with a weary look on her face. *No way*, he thought. His mind was whirring; how could that be her?

There was an anger inside him now, growing with every passing second. "I killed you before. I'll kill you again!"

Abigail's image vanished like a candle, snuffed out.

With his curiosity peaked, he was going to break into the cabin and check things out. But the front door was partly

ajar. He pulled in a fast breath. How come he didn't notice before?

Upon stepping inside, he wanted to go to the attic. Thud, thud. The sound of descending footsteps echoed from below. Was he seeing and hearing things?

If someone was in the low-ceilinged basement, he wanted to know who it was. Also, it was where he had buried Abigail Wincoff. Remembering that made him mad.

Horrible echoey creaks were coming through the basement door. He crept down the darkened hallway toward the partially opened door, listening all the way. When he pushed the door all the way open, a cold chill swept up the stairs and engulfed him.

Upon reaching the foot of the stairs, whispers filled the air, and an icy chill settled in his bones. Yet, he walked further into the basement, staring at the floorboards. Something dark and ugly pulsed through him. His feet began stomping on the wooden floor. He lost it and teetered on the verge of a meltdown, knowing Abigail's body wasn't there anymore. Whatever was happening with him was crazy.

His fury had been disrupted by a rasping rattle. Four times this was repeated, the rattle varying in length. He stopped, looked all around, and saw nothing. Still, he wanted to leave.

The air in the room became unbearably cold as he walked toward the stairs. It was freezing. He was shivering and felt like he was suffocating.

Directly behind him there was a ghostly figure lurking in the shadows, its red eyes burned with an otherworldly fire. The figure twisted into the air and fell back to the floor. Marks didn't sense it, but it was its aura — a malevolence that emanated from its very being — that made Marks hurry his step.

It got in front of him, five feet from the stairs, blocking his path. Two horns on its head and claw-like hands and feet. The demon from his nightmare. On approach, its mouth opened, a cavernous hole, black and brimmed with sharp, wicked fangs. And it was growling.

Pulsating with dark energy before his cold eyes, the demon closed in on him. Thinking he was seeing things, Marks blinked his eyes twice, and still, the demon was there. How could it have invaded his real world?

"Please stay. All I want to do is play with you," said the demon with Abigail's voice.

Her laughter echoed throughout the room. Marks' eyes alight with fear, he glanced to the side, looking for a way out. He couldn't fit through the small window. It seemed to him that he stood outside of himself, looking down on this dread scene from somewhere high above. Was this really happening to him?

His heart thumping. Thinking what to do. He began picking at the bandage on his hand, attempting to peel it up from one side where the adhesive had come loose.

Pushing his way past the demon, he made a dash for the stairs, running up three wooden steps. A loud growl terrified him in such a way that his foot slipped on a step,

and he fell backward to the floor. He broke his neck, fatally. Slowly dying, his face puffed, and gurgling sounds escaped from his throat. Dark blood poured from his mouth, down his chin, dripping onto his dark blue shirt.

In the deafening silence Joey Marks lay there, his body limp and dead with his eyes in an unfocused stare.

Fading sunlight came through the high window half submerged beneath the ground. In under thirty seconds, the floor rippled, and the human form of Abigail Wincoff rose from the floor a bit at a time, as if she were walking up a stairway.

She wore a demon's grin and felt nothing at the sight of Joey Marks' dead body. Glaring red eyes stared at him from her face. The demon liked this.

Chapter 45

THAT FRIDAY NIGHT, Lance Wincoff drove into the driveway of his house close to seven o'clock. To his shock, a waving Louise Melinda Sisler approached his SUV. His heart skipped a beat, then sank.

She stood there, dressed in burgundy slacks and an impeccable floral sweater that was slightly too bright for the Spring weather. Her graying hair was neatly styled, and her makeup was just the right amount of overdone. She looked like a woman ready for a garden party. This was her second visit to the house since Abigail's funeral.

With some reluctance, he rolled down the driver's door window. "Louise? What an unexpected surprise. What are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to greet your mother-in-law?" she responded. "I've been waiting out here for over an hour. I called Gillian and left her a voice message. Where is she?"

“She’s in Pennsylvania,” he said coming out of the SUV. “Didn’t she tell you?”

“No. I haven’t spoken to her in over two weeks. That’s why I came here. I was very worried,” she said nasally.

“Well,” he said, standing there just staring at her.

“Aren’t you going to escort me in and take me to the guest room? You don’t expect me to check into a hotel for the night, do you?” she asked all attitude like.

Lance put on his brightest smile. “Not at all. You’re always welcome here.”

Without further ado, he walked over to her two suitcases parked next to her Subaru Crosstrek and picked them up.

She followed him into the house, carrying on about her latest activities in the solitude of her very empty three-bedroom house in Morris Plains, New Jersey.

“Her sister Carolyn is surprisingly doing well, since her divorce. Probably fairing much better than Gillian these days. Her telephone conversations have been a big help in my very boring life,” she said rather precariously.

He nodded, his smile freezing slightly at the edges. Like a thunderstorm gathering force, he could feel it in his bones: trouble was coming.

Inhaling sharply, she edged in front of him, making her way to the kitchen. “I’m starved. I can’t wait to have dinner and hear more about what Gillian has been up to.”

He paused hesitantly in the kitchen doorway thinking how he was going to deal with her being here. As much as he didn’t like being alone, he didn’t care for her company.

The house was supposed to be a sanctuary, a quiet refuge after the chaos of everyday life, but with her visits, it was like stepping into a whirlwind.

Still in his work clothes, minus his gray suit jacket draped over a chair at the table, he was preparing dinner for the both of them. She was seated at the table just gabbing away.

“You know what, Lance?” she asked, her voice rising with that familiar tone of certainty. “You really should put the plates in the higher cabinets. It’s better for your back. I’ve been doing this for years.”

A shadow of annoyance was on his face, and he knew that she was aware he was irritated with her. It made no difference.

“It’s really not a big deal —” he said in a dry tone.

The last time he tried to put a stop to one of her “suggestions,” it turned into a passive-aggressive comment at dinner. Gillian had never quite understood how overpowering her mother could be, and he was left to manage the fallout alone.

Then he observed her serving herself mashed potatoes, feeling a sense of helplessness wash over him. His brow knitted in disturbed confusion.

There was a pause, a long one that had Louise nervous enough to speak. “Why has my daughter been away so long anyway? What’s she doing over there? You can be honest with me. Are you two having trouble?”

Beyond nosy! Her short imperative questions cut him like a knife. He opened his mouth, and wrestled it closed.

This line of questioning wasn't compelling to him. He sensed something behind those words, and he didn't feel comfortable airing his personal life. So, he kept his thoughts to himself and sat down at one end of the kitchen table.

His only comment was: "Gillian needed some time away to heal."

Louise wasn't done. As he changed into his bed clothes, she wandered into the living room, rearranging the throw pillows and adjusting the curtains before she retired to the guest room.

When he saw what she had done in the living room, he exhaled, rubbing his temples. There really wasn't anything he could do about it. He paced back and forth over the bedroom floor, his brow knitted again in confusion.

How long was he going to have to put up with this? How long was she going to stay here? He chose not to ask her that, because it would be impolite.

Exhaustion overcame him. He collapsed into bed and closed his eyes. The last thing he remembered was thinking he wasn't going to get any sleep tonight, before he drifted into sleep.

At 5:30 a.m. he was startled awake. The pleasant scent of coffee in the air made him shudder. He kicked off the blanket and left the bedroom only to find his mother-in-law in the kitchen making breakfast. All of the cabinets in the room stood open.

At the stove, her back was to him. But he gave her a

pointed look, anyway, fighting the urge to tell her to leave the kitchen. Still, something told him to go along with it. He knew he had to cave in once in a while.

“It smells good in here,” Lance Wincoff said, smiling sympathetically as he took a chair at the table. “What’s that you’re making?”

Chapter 46

ON SATURDAY, Kristi Maratos and Billy Shipley were having breakfast at Raffles Bistro. Their usual hang-out, and they were occupying their regular table. This was not only the spot of their first date, but it was where he'd asked her to marry him. Last Thursday night he'd popped the question and even presented her his mother's wedding ring. Very elegant. The small platinum cluster ring, surrounded with eight small diamonds, was crafted sixty-seven years ago in Asturias, Spain, where his mother's family came from. It had been handed down from mother to son for two generations. Which Kristi happily took, and her words of acceptance fell murmuring on his ears.

The usual Saturday crowd hadn't shown up yet, likely because it was only six in the morning. Too many unoccupied tables around them.

In his cop's uniform, Shipley listened intently, sipping from a mug of coffee. For the past ten minutes, Kristi had sidestepped talking about their engagement and focused on sharing her suspicions about Gillian Wincoff being in town. This was the first he was hearing of this. It had taken her time to tell him, because she had been keeping it to herself, worried what he would think. Much to his annoyance, he let her go on, her words washing over him. She was clearly convinced that she had stumbled onto something significant — something clandestine. She was too excited. Like it was her lifelong dream to land an exclusive interview with the parents of the late Abigail Wincoff.

Tapping her ring finger on the rim of her teacup, Kristi had half expected him to look impressed, but he didn't.

He looked worried.

All the same, she carried on, pressed by a feeling of insatiable curiosity. "I know I sound like a broken record. But I sensed something was off the moment I first saw her in town. I had a hunch, and I've learned to follow my hunches. What's your take on the priest I saw reading a book on exorcisms at the library?"

"Priest stuff. Who knows?" he said, like he wasn't listening anymore.

This was a lot of fuss about nothing. It became clear to him what was going on with her. He thought her behavior was borderline, obsessive-compulsive. In his opinion, she'd gotten carried away drumming up a story. There was nothing more irritating to him than an observant reporter. Already, he was sensitive to the subject of Abigail Wincoff,

especially since he had worked the case with Sheriff Andy Kirkman. He attributed her behavior to the fact that there was a hunt on for the suspected serial killer. This was prolonging the case of the murdered girl from being closed and keeping it alive in people's minds.

But Kristi either didn't understand or was deliberately winding him up more and came back with more questions. "Is that all you have to say? Am I wasting your time with this? Do you think I'm wasting my time with this?"

At times Kristi Maratos could be an impossible woman with impossible opinions, which were tempered by an incredible gentleness and compassion. Her looks had carried her a long way. With a glamour-girl image, she was a popular television reporter with dazzling white teeth. Finally, and very important, she had over three hundred thousand Facebook fans. She really was a local celebrity, who used her status to assist the causes in which were dear to her heart, such as women's reproductive rights; women's issues or issues with which women should be concerned.

This was the woman he was going to marry. He loved her as is. All and all, he was grateful to have gained her interest and gained her trust. Some of the little quirks she had, he thought were so cute. Like the way she would often raise her eyebrows when she was positively delighted or when she spoke more forceful than she meant to.

"It's not that," he said in a compassionate voice and looked at her with his puppy-dog eyes.

She smiled back and blushed. There was an overflow of warmth in her look.

He continued on by saying, “Nothing will come from your snooping around. Gillian Wincoff is just a grieving mother, mourning her daughter. Possibly, she is still in shock, still trying to cope with the loss. She’s probably in town finalizing the last details of her daughter’s burial.”

There was a momentary lapse in the conversation as she put her fork down on the table in a huff and bumped her teacup, causing it to clink against the saucer. Some hot tea spilled down her white cardigan. It left a stain. She put up a hand to pause him. Then she dipped the corner of her napkin in her glass of water and used the wet corner to rub the stain out of her cardigan.

Watching him take a bite of his bagel, she was surprised at his last comment, but didn’t dare admit it as she swallowed hard. “It isn’t logical. That funeral was many weeks ago. I’m not wrong about this. You need to think more broadly about it. There’s more going on than meets the eye here, and I want to know what,” she said, brimming with confidence.

This was one of her wild-goose chases for who-knows-what. Her response made him think of that day. Her cameraman, Morris Miller, insisted he had captured in the B-roll for the morning news, the then-missing girl, Abigail Wincoff running through the woods. And she had believed it too. But he set the record straight. They had been wrong. That was not Abigail Wincoff in that footage. He took the last swig of his coffee, thinking he wasn’t going to mention it. Reminding her would only make matters worse.

“Just think carefully before you proceed following Mrs. Wincoff again,” he said.

The corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly as she looked like she’d had a revelation of some sort. “I got it. Morris had captured an image of Abigail Wincoff with his camera in that week when she was missing. Could it have been her ghost? Somehow, her mother found out. Bingo. That’s why Gillian Wincoff needs an exorcist!”

It was like she took the thoughts from his mind, something she often did. But he didn’t see it that way. Shaking his head, he’d heard enough for one day. He didn’t want to talk anymore. He simply wanted to go to work. Standing up abruptly, he kissed her on the cheek.

“My shift starts in ten minutes. We can talk more later over dinner,” he said before leaving the restaurant.

Chapter 47

WHOSE JEEP WAS THAT? Gillian Wincoff questioned, as she sat there looking at it, and waiting for Reverend Claude Bonanni. She noticed the flat tire. Perhaps it had been abandoned for that reason. Another assumption was that the Jeep belonged to Don McKinney. Was he from Virginia?

An acorn fell, bounced from the car top, making her jump in her seat. She was already jumpy, and that noise amplified her growing sense of unease.

To begin with, she felt chilly in the rental car parked in the driveway of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. She zipped up her windbreaker and put her hands in the pockets. Secondly, her mind was a jumble of scattershot fragments.

It was 9:09 a.m. The minutes ticked by with no sign of the reverend. Was he late? Or was she early? she wondered.

She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. A sigh of wistfulness swept through her. A jolt zipped through her as she remembered that she hadn't checked her cell phone to see whether the reverend had tried to contact her. She rummaged through her handbag and took it out. There were no new messages. No calls, no texts.

In the side mirror, something flashed. Another slight jolt. She looked around. Saw nothing. Saw no one. But she got out of the car anyway. She glanced around to ensure if it was the reverend's car approaching.

Really, she had to keep waiting; she couldn't risk going in the cabin alone. She didn't know what kind of demon it was, or what it might be capable of. So, she leaned against the hood of the car, eyeballing the attic window of the cabin. The demon wasn't there.

Thoughts of her daughter surfaced. She felt strangely emotional. Her eyes shifted to the cloudy sky, then came back to the cabin. She closed her eyes. Watching Abby running in their backyard with binoculars in her hands and a smile on her face was a sight that took her breath away. Her eyes teared up a little. The revelation hit her brain like a punch.

Full circle.

Why had she lost her daughter? For birdwatching. It all had to do with birdwatching.

Her eyes opened to trees in the background of the cabin at the same moment a struggle started up in the attic. But she was oblivious to it.

The ghost of Abigail Wincoff had seen her mother from the window, where the demon had been positioned. As things stood, she had made the wrong choice by giving in to the temptations of a demonic being. The circumstances were different now. She felt her anger cool into something unexpected.

Compassion.

In an act of desperation, she pushed as hard as she could to free her spirit from his grasp. Gasping sounds came from her. Growling sounds came from him. Their shapes were shifting.

Abby's soul was burning from the outside in and from the inside out. When all was said and done, she was losing herself in him. This evil being had a stronger hold over her than ever. There was no escaping him; he was omnipresent, powerful. This was the Devil itself.

How long would she remain stuck like this? For all eternity?

The demon growled as he turned toward the window. Abigail could feel the demon's presence in the shadows of her subconscious, watching. She changed her way of thinking, because she didn't want to further antagonize him. She forced herself to stay calm, if only to buy her some time. She hadn't thought this through, yet.

Her mother was out there. *There had to be a way to reach her*, she thought. Some way to reach the woman who loved her. So, she pushed herself and the demon closer to the window.

"Mom, it's me, Abby!" she hollered as loud as possible.

It worked. In a most strange phenomenon, the force of Abby's desire to communicate with her mother had caused an intersection between the spirit world and the physical world.

Gillian turned her eyes to the attic window. She'd heard a delicate little sound, feeling certain it was her daughter's voice.

"Abby?" she questioned with a whisper.

The sound of Abby's voice was so penetrating and so piercing that it was as if a firecracker exploded in her head. That took her back to the 2016 July 4th celebration she had shared with her daughter, the month before their trip to the Poconos.

Just before it had gotten dark, Lance had driven them to the Watchung Reservation, for the fireworks display. The largest nature reserve in Union County located between Summit and Scotch Plains was set on a ridge within Northern / Central New Jersey, and between the ridges of the First Watchung Mountains to the north and Second Watchung Mountains to the west. They sat in their SUV and watched the display with great enthusiasm. For nearly four hours, the fireworks lit up the sky with magical colors and lights. Abigail loved it. She never wanted the night to end. It was a certain time in their lives when they were the happiest.

Her mind returned to the here and now with a decision. Inhaling a deep, fortifying breath, she wasn't waiting for Reverend Claude Bonanni anymore. Demonic presence

or not, that seemed unfathomable. She needed to save her daughter's soul, right now.

Chapter 48

GILLIAN WINCOFF didn't have to fumble around in her handbag for the keys to the cabin she'd gotten from Joy Franklin. The front door was halfway opened and rasping, scraping sounds were heard coming from inside as she got closer.

Disheartened but undeterred, she entered. Some rotten floorboards had needed to be replaced. She stepped over a hole in the floor, partially covered by a bucket, where Don McKinney had broken his ankle, to peek in the cathedral-ceilinged living room where the sounds emanated.

No sooner did she walk into the room than she was hearing low, rasping coming from a vent in the ceiling. It was like someone was trying to breathe from a throat that lacked moisture, but they couldn't.

She twisted her body around and yelled as loudly as she could. "Abby, honey. It's mommy. I'm here."

The sounds ceased entirely. Everything dropped into utter silence.

The room felt colder. The demon was in the middle of a slow process of materialization near the two story-high stone fireplace.

A cough? — alerted her to the fact that she wasn't alone. She darted a glance around and spied a gray-haired man with a chiseled nose in a light-blue dress shirt and dark-blue pants. The man looked so alive that he crackled with energy. Standing at a sideways angle on the black, gold, and cream Oriental rug, she recognized who he was. And it most definitely wasn't him.

"Jimmy?" she asked, stepping back fearfully.

He looked her way, fixing her with an intense, black-eyed stare. Her face etched with fear, and she clutched her handbag to her body.

"My dear, tell Lance I'm waiting for him," Mr. Wincoff said with the demon's raspy voice and raised his arms, giving a ghastly nod. "Come and give me a hug."

His bony fingers reaching out for her, a great bellow of laughter escaped from his mouth. She could feel tears threatening to run down her face. The demon was taunting her with a vision of someone she had cared for, and how had that vision become so real that she became emotional. And why not? It was using Abigail's talent to astral project, which allowed him to present himself as anyone.

Hoping to will it away, she closed her eyes. When she opened them, the ghost of Jimmy Wincoff was gone, but

she heard a door shut with a bang. She assumed it might be Abby.

Stepping into the hallway, she saw a woman, maybe twenty-seven to thirty years old pulling her hand off the knob of the basement door. Her brown hair was at her shoulders, styled rather carelessly. She was wearing a short-sleeved white blouse dotted with pink and red flowers over tan pants. The apparition seemed so real that Gillian squinted into the dimness.

“What are you doing here, Miss?” Gillian asked in a hesitant tone.

The woman, who turned her face toward Gillian, had a small mole just above her lip.

“Don’t you recognize me, Mommy? It’s Gail. The woman I would have grown up to be —” she said with Abigail’s voice; and without waiting for a reply, she yelled in the demon’s raspy voice, “If I hadn’t been killed!”

Gillian stood seemingly paralyzed and at last shook herself, gasped and clapped her hands to her face. The demon had full control over Abigail’s soul. It was preying on her mother’s vulnerabilities. And loving it!

A sudden interruption came — the thrusting of a door. The ghost of Gail Wincoff opened the basement door and disappeared down the stairs.

Reverend Claude Bonanni brushed lint from his black, priest’s suit and hollered out to her. “I know you’re in here, Mrs. Wincoff.”

Almost as if she was possessed, she slowly trudged over to the living room. Her eyes wide, she looked exactly like someone who'd been terrorized.

Scrutinizing her carefully, he spoke in a gentle voice. "First. Let me apologize for my lateness. Second. What happened? Are you alright?"

"I've seen two ghosts. I believe the demon had taken their form. But, all things considered, I'm fine," she said in a shaken voice.

Something about the tone in her voice, how quiet those words were, said just about all he needed to know. He easily heard the remnants of fear. Saw it in her eyes, when she looked at him, and in her body, as she shivered.

"That you are right. The demon is playing with you. It is capable of taking any form, preying upon anyone unlucky enough to encounter him," he affirmed.

"It went into the basement."

"That's where I'm going to start," he said.

They looked down the stairs. The crumpled body of Joey Marks was lying with his head doubled at an angle, twisted at the neck on the floor by the foot of the stairs. Maggots were crawling out of his eyes. It was quite obvious — he was dead. But they didn't know who he was.

"This changes things," Bonanni said, his tone colorless. "We'll need to call the police."

"What about my daughter? Her soul. She needs your help!" she demanded, hands shaking him by the shoulders.

That was when they heard it: a distant, but significant whisper, barely audible above the sound of their heartbeats.

“Little Bunny Foo Foo,” came Abigail’s voice, singing not very steady but clear enough. “Hopping through the forest.”

“Abby,” her mother called out, and dropped her hands against her jeans.

Gillian’s voice echoed back at her, swallowed by the oppressive silence of the cabin. And she frowned.

“The demon is present,” he said as its energy filled the air like sunlight flickering through the forest.

“Abby, please show yourself!” she said, thinking it was her daughter.

At the end of the hallway, she saw the apparition of Abby. Her eyes lit up with hope.

The reverend hated to dim the sparkle in her eyes, but he needed to ground her in reality. “It’s not her. It’s the demon.”

The demon had morphed into the image of Abigail, perverting her into something almost unrecognizable. A zombie-like appearance, decaying corpse — the shadow of a human being. Long dark brown hair, matted, framed her sunken-cheeked face. The eyes fixing on them were dark ringed, bruises marking the gray pallor flesh. A gash showed ragged edges across her right arm. Dark splotches were visible on her white dress, irregular stains of various sizes, and though Gillian couldn’t be positive, she was almost certain it was a mixture of blood and soil.

As much as she didn’t want to believe her eyes, Gillian watched in awe as the ghost of Abigail Wincoff stared at them.

A mildew-like odor filled the air. Mosquitoes swarmed around her face and neck.

“Are you looking for Abby? She’s here with me. Burning in hell!” she said with the demon’s raspy voice.

Chapter 49

“LET MY DAUGHTER GO,” Gillian Wincoff said, her voice trembling but resolute.

Too bad Gillian had to see this. She was petrified of what was happening to Abby’s spirit. She felt glued to the spot, staring incredulously at the ghastly ghost of her daughter, whose hollow eyes gazed into her eyes, seemingly piercing her soul.

In his attempt to exercise Abigail Wincoff’s spirit from the hold of the demon the reverend intended to bless the hallway.

“I’ll try the lights,” Bonanni said.

He flipped a switch on the wall. The light cut out, then on again, then out again. He flipped the switch again. The light went out again.

Gillian shrugged her shoulders at him. “Nice try.”

“Hear, accursed Satan! I adjure you by the name of the eternal God and of our Savior Jesus Christ,” he said, holding up a crucifix.

The demon inside the astral projection of Abby hissed an angry, wounded sound. And the mosquitoes vanished.

The reverend began his exorcism ritual. He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and dug out a vial of holy water, then splashed some of the blessed liquid on the apparition.

A hiss expelled between the forked tongue and the roof of the demon’s mouth so loudly, Gillian thought the walls would crack.

Bonanni opened the Bible he’d been carrying in his left hand. “This is my body, which will be given up for you; do this in memory of me. This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. Amen.”

A mesmerized look on her face, Gillian walked over to him, took his free hand and prayed alongside him, praying harder than she ever imagined possible. “Please Jesus, answer my prayers. Help Abby.”

Angry beyond belief, the demon wasn’t having this. A glance through dispersing smoke showed the reverend that the deathly image of Abigail was no longer there. The demon slowly revealed itself. A loud moaning sound coming from its mouth, from deep inside the entity. Its forked tongue flicked over its sharpened fangs. Fiery red eyes stared at them, clawed hands waving at its sides.

They all faced each other off, tense. Eyes locked with the demon’s, who regarded them. Yet, there was something

very strange about the demon's stance. Like something was pulling it back, unseen and gaining strength, like a gravitational force.

And suddenly, they could hear the voice of Abigail, emanating from inside the demon. On hearing it, Gillian's eyes perked up.

"Fight it, Abby," her mother urged.

"Stay firm, don't give in!" Bonanni said encouragingly, raised his crucifix and kissed it. "Hoc enim est corpus meum."

The image of the demon bunched and twitched as it straightened itself to full height. A roaring moan erupted from deep within as it lunged at Gillian, who broke eye contact and cowered back a step. Moving fast, it was as if he had a corporeal form.

Quickly reacting, the reverend came between them with his crucifix, warding off the demon.

"Let her go! She's just a child. An innocent child!" Gillian yelled desperately.

Struggling with all she had in her, Abigail was trying to gain control from within. Her mother fighting for her soul, infused her with energy, strengthened her resolve. It meant everything to her.

The war between the spirits unleashed a cool gust of air, which knocked Gillian's handbag off her shoulder. It fell to the floor with a thump, everything spilling out — her wallet, keys and receipts. She bent down, placed the contents back in the handbag and swung it over her arm.

If the demon had its way this supernatural fight would happen elsewhere. With a degree of effort, the apparition of the demon faded away. It was perhaps more of an ooze than a fade, like a slimy dribble, but as a disappearance it was complete. In his wake, a little puddle of black liquid was on the floor and a white trail of smoke hung in the air.

“Where did they go?” Gillian asked, her head twisting back and forth like it was struggling to remain affixed to her neck.

Screams and snarls filled the air. It dawned on Bonanni that the sounds were filtering down from above.

“They’re in the attic,” he said, and grabbed her arm to prevent her from leaving. “Stay here with me. I’m sure they’ll come back.”

Moving about, their two souls merged into one emitting crackling sparks. Abigail could feel the demon’s energy intensify. Its life-force was like the sizzle of static electricity.

The ladder to the attic descended, waving back and forth. The room shook as if an earthquake was set on tearing apart the cabin.

Deep and powerful thumps, louder and louder. Plates in the kitchen cabinets shook, their doors opening and closing. Some of the contents of the cabinets spilled onto the countertops and floor.

The noises were constantly distracting, at times suffocating. Gillian felt it deep in her ribs. The hair on Bonanni’s arms practically stood up. His breath quickened in fear.

With fervent determination, Bonanni walked up and down the hall reciting prayers. He was acting in persona Christi, administering the Eucharistic Union, both a sacramental transmutation and the reception of the Holy Communion. His voice carried, echoing to the ears of the demon. Abigail's soul was at stake, an eternity of pain and suffering. The reverend was going to fight tooth and nail to claim it in the end.

Chapter 50

“ABIGAIL WINCOFF’S SOUL was no longer in the attic of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. She was around the spot in the woods where she had died, but she was not alone. Getting her bearings she realized she was on the ground and began to drift into confusion. Panic began to set in when she was immovable. Especially because she pivoted slowly and blinked up at the image of Joey Marks standing over her.

It wasn’t Joey Marks. It was his astral projection, and it was strong enough and real enough to be seen. The demon’s disguise as Marks, by all accounts was to provoke her anger. Another encounter with him should send her over the edge, weaken her spirit, make her seething with resentment. Not just to remind her of the revenge she’d once had inside her, but to remind her why she belonged with him. What he

wanted her to do was, instead of trying to run away from him, pull him closer to her. Was that so wrong?

Interestingly enough, Joey Marks' soul was present. It was beyond his understanding how or why he was there. But he believed there had to be a purpose for it.

In an odd twist of circumstances, though Marks' body had been dead close to twenty hours, his spirit had yet to cross over to the other side. Still earthbound but not bound by space and time. His masculine figure was defined by a pale, glowing luminescence of dense energy. Heaven wasn't in the cards for a man like him, but he wasn't in hell either.

The demon played the part of Joey Marks very well. No mercy was shown to Abigail. He pulled her hair and kicked her several times. In a way he was worse than Joey Marks.

The ghastly face of Marks enviously watched it all happening from the sidelines. At the core of him, he was a cold-hearted killer. He took great pleasure admiring his image, noticing he wore the same clothes, a black and white flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, black jeans, and brown hiking boots.

After a groan, Abigail flopped onto her back. Dying again was unpleasant. The demon inside the astral projection of Joey Marks watched as she fidgeted.

It was time to end it. He stared down into her teary looking eyes. His right hand grazed over her cheek, hoping to stir the wrath of which her meek soul was capable of.

"She's not dead yet. Why did you stop? She ought to be dead! Keep kicking her," the real Joey Marks demanded.

Joey Marks' astral projection vanished like a sculpture of dust. With a deformed, horned head, the demon took shape, fearsome in appearance. He wheeled around and released the most terrifying growl.

Marks froze. The incarnate demon was staring at him, smiling at him, liking what he was looking at. He got the feeling the demon was judging him — peering into his soul — and finding him desirable.

This wasn't a good sign.

Attracted to the evil inside Marks, the demon desired his soul, much more than Abigail's. Because Marks was everything he wanted Abby to be.

With that distraction, Abigail Wincoff gained strength. Something the demon didn't count on was her attempt to push herself away from him. Most especially after he had just given her a vivid demonstration of his power over her. And that had the demon thoroughly puzzled. The conflict within was so fierce. As a result, their spirits were transported back into the hallway of the cabin.

The reverend and Gillian glanced at each other in silent astonishment before turning their eyes to the demon in the hallway hovering motionless, head tilted up, arms dangling. The black leather Bible trembled in Bonanni's hands.

With unwavering diligence, his faith a shield against the onslaught of darkness, Bonanni said a short prayer and read some more Scripture. "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven."

With each word spoken, he felt he was making progress, feeling the demonic presence in the cabin was weakening.

The ghost of Joey Marks was in the basement doorway. He did not seem the least afraid of the demon. His stare was directed at the apparition of Abigail, who was hiding behind the demon, cowering from Marks' penetrating stare.

This was it, the moment Gillian realized who the dead man lying at the foot of the stairs was. It was the man who'd killed her daughter. A thought popped in her mind, and she went with it.

At this, Gillian pleaded with the demon, pointing to the ghost of Joey Marks. "Take his soul in exchange for the life of my daughter. He's the one you want. Set Abby free!"

Reverend Bonanni looked at her in amaze but said nothing. He got it completely. There wasn't a single thing in this world Gillian wouldn't do for that slice of spiritual justice.

The demon understood, twisted its head at Joey Marks and blinked its red eyes that shone like glaze at him. In a shocking act of compassion, the evil entity released its hold on Abigail and floated toward Marks. There was something so really awful in those slow, strange movements as the two spirits intertwined, bounding down the basement stairs.

The demon's growls mixed with Marks' gasping cries. With a shriek like a dying thing, Marks' broken soul was enveloped in the demon's icy embrace.

A draft of air from the basement caused the open door to slam shut.

The hallway slowly came into focus. A glowing figure, Abigail Wincoff was pervaded with light, her energy — the bright light that shone from her innermost soul. She looked corporeal and real; she appeared solid. Gillian ran to her daughter to touch her and hold her. The reverend closed his Bible, clasped it under his arm, and watched them with fascination. All at once, it was heart-rending and wonderful. Showing that even in death, love and compassion could transcend the boundaries of the physical world.

The light hovering around her grew brighter. An intense white light was descending through the ceiling. As painful as it was, Gillian had to encourage her daughter to continue on her spiritual journey.

“Go into the light. Mommy and Daddy will be with you again one day,” Gillian said, holding back her emotions.

“Go to Jesus. Follow him,” the reverend added.

And so, with a whisper of gratitude to her mother, the ghost of Abigail Wincoff faded into the light. Her spirit finally at peace, no longer an earthbound spirit attached to the cabin.

A watery-eyed Gillian inhaled deeply as reality set in. Her daughter was truly gone. She felt the weight of it, that reality, pressing on her chest.

“The demon has returned to Hell taking the consumed soul of that man. It was not through my doing he was taken nor the reason the demon went dormant,” Bonanni said, startling her into the present.

“That man was Abby’s killer,” she said in a half-stifled voice, as she turned to face him. “What are we going to tell the police?”

After some quick thinking, he told her it was best to keep what happened here to themselves and the Catholic Church. His calm, common sense tone brooked no argument. She agreed willingly.

“I will say I came here to bless the cabin and pray for your murdered daughter’s soul to be at peace. And we stumbled upon the body in the basement,” he lastly added, dug into his pants pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

“Don’t forget to tell them about that Jeep outside,” she said plainly.

Chapter 51

COFFEE MUG IN HAND, Sheriff Cole Burgio felt like he would fall asleep in the chair behind his desk. He was dressed in full uniform, a gold star gleaming over a breast pocket. Unable to sit any longer, he sprang to his feet and paced to get the blood flowing. That helped energize him. Pausing to open the door of his office, a sharp snap of cool air blew in at him. He was going to the break room to refill his mug with coffee.

There hadn't been any calls other than his wife, whom he had chatted with an hour ago. The morning had been mundane. There were often days like that — it gave him plenty of spare time to catch up on routine paperwork. Not that he was complaining. He'd already seen enough action in his time in law enforcement. There had been days when he had to break up fights between drunks in bars too often

or handle petty theft complaints. Today wasn't one of those days of his six-day work week.

That was what he was thinking until Kimberly breezed through the doorway, a parcel and some mail in her arms. Dressed professionally, in a yellow silk shirt under a black blazer and black trousers, she placed it all on the desk.

"Thanks, Kimberly," he said.

"How's your day been so far?" she asked him.

"I suppose it's coming along," he said.

"Let me know if you need anything," she said before stepping out of the office.

The mug still in his hands, he quickly perused the mail she'd opened for him. When he turned to leave again, the intercom on his desk buzzed, interrupting his plans, but no voice came through.

In another second, Burgio sat into his chair, glared down at the blinking orange light, then punched the Lucite button. "Are you there, Kimberly?"

No response. He frowned, pressed the button once more and waited, wondering if the intercom was on the fritz.

Sheriff Burgio was about to repeat his greeting when Kimberly Kaasa said, "Sheriff, a call came in just seconds ago about the body of a man found in the cabin on Wagon Trail Road in East Stroudsburg. Officers were dispatched ..."

The sheriff interrupted her mid-sentence with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "And you're telling me this because ...?"

“The call was from a priest, but Gillian Wincoff is there too,” the dispatcher replied.

He banged his empty mug on his desk. “Good God.”

“Something else, too,” she said in a hurried voice.

Eager to hear more, he adjusted his high-backed leather swivel recliner chair, raising it a few inches and braced his elbows on the wooden arms. “Tell me about it.”

“The black Jeep found abandoned in the driveway of the rental cabin matches the description of the stolen vehicle, allegedly driven by suspected killer Joey Marks.”

Could that be the body of Joey Marks? Burgio thought, knots twisting his gut. He scratched his head as if it didn’t make any sense whatsoever to him. But then, he supposed, this was just one more crazy thing that was only expected in his line of work.

The intercom clicked off. Silent seconds went by. The sheriff’s mood had been flipped upside down. His fingers tapped his intercom box, thinking he could bring it to life.

The intercom buzzed with static, and then Kimberly’s voice cut through: “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard you,” he said, shaking his head as he did so and sighed. “The intercom isn’t working properly. I can’t deal with it. Get it fixed as soon as you can. I’m heading over to that cabin right now.”

“I’m on it, sir,” Kimberly answered promptly.

The intercom squealed sharply before clicking off. He rose from the chair and eyed the hallway, hoping he could dart to the bathroom. He grabbed his ballcap off the desk

and tilted it on his head, then pulled on his jacket as he walked out of the office.

Walking down the hallway, he nodded as he passed by Chief Deputy Livengood, who was having an animated conversation on a cell phone. About a second or so later, he heard the intercom in his office suddenly spat painful static.

Frazzled by the noise, Kimberly rounded the end of her cubicle to peek out and cultivated a smile just for situations like this. Then she crossed her lanky arms, nodding at him like she was on top of it.

Sheriff Burgio rolled his eyes at the sound and went through the bathroom door.

Finishing up his bathroom business, Burgio came out and found that Kimberly was in the middle of the hallway. He stood aside so she could pass him. She was headed to his office to unplug the intercom box, which was malfunctioning, flickering on and off at odd intervals.

The phone rang in the station, a boing-boing sound like a cartoon. The sheriff managed to get all the way down the hall and in front of Kimberly before she scooted past him again. She hopped back into her cubicle and fielded the call from the 911 operator. The report stunned her, and she called Officer Sebastian Calvo, who was on patrol in the area.

“An elderly woman collapsed to the floor in the Wells Fargo Bank on Main Street, apparently dead. It is not known whether she was pushed by some passerby’s elbow or fell on her own account.”

That was the last thing Sheriff Burgio heard her say before he walked through the double doors to the outside.

Chapter 52

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” Sheriff Cole Burgio asked, standing outside the driver’s door of his Ford Expedition parked next to an ambulance.

“I don’t think anything, yet,” Detective Silverwood replied, locking the driver’s door of his Chevrolet Tahoe parked on the other side of the black Jeep. “I just arrived from New York this morning.”

The detective threw a glance at the uniformed officers traipsing back and forth through the front door of the cabin. He’d counted three so far. And the sheriff swore he could almost see him ticking off a mental list.

Burgio exchanged words with the paramedic unloading a stretcher, while the detective headed for the door. At first glimpse there was no sign of forced entry at the door or even any disturbance of the windows. Joey Marks had simply walked into the cabin. That didn’t alarm him. It was nothing

Silverwood had never encountered before. He concluded that the paramedics who picked up Don McKinney had forgotten to lock up on their way out.

It was stuffy inside. He crossed into the living room and set his dark brown suit jacket on an arm of the white suede couch, revealing a large coffee stain on his chocolate brown pinstriped dress shirt.

On his way to the basement, he walked past a silent Reverend Claude Bonanni, who was sitting in a wingback chair, casting a curious look in his direction.

“Jeez. All this time and he was right here in the Poconos under our nose,” Silverwood said as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“That was a dumb thing of him to do,” Deputy Missy Sparks said, a foot away from Joey Marks’ body. “But he’s just like all the other brainless perpetrators who return to the scene of the crime.”

“You got that right,” he said.

Before heading up the stairs, Sparks lifted the white sheet covering Joey Marks’ body for the detective to make an inspection. He half-crouched in front of the body so his face was visible. The break was deep. A vertical gash across the back of his neck. He could make out the edges of the bone and some of the tissue within.

As he came to stand erect, he noticed Marks’ bandaged hand. That phone call from Gillian Wincoff came to mind. Estelle Rowland’s natural instincts might have been right. He looked up and saw Deputy Billy Shipley standing near the doorway, his hands clutched together behind his back.

“Deputy Shipley come down here — please!”

Hurtling the steps two at a time, Shipley kept one hand clasped on his duty belt.

“I want forensics and the medical examiner to get a DNA analysis of Joey Marks’ blood to determine what caused the wound on his hand. I want proof positive that he was the one who attacked Estelle Rowland,” Silverwood said, in a hurried manner, then summed up. “Somehow Marks had figured out Estelle Rowland had given him up to the police. That triggered him to come to the Poconos and go after her. When he failed to kill her, he came here to the cabin to relish the memory of his murder of Abigail Wincoff. He needed to get his sense of self-esteem back.”

“That makes sense,” said the deputy.

Shipley finished writing in his pad, stuck it back in his pocket and scurried back up the stairs.

When Detective Silverwood came out of the cabin, he wandered over to Sheriff Burgio, who was just wrapping up a conversation with Gillian Wincoff. As soon as the sheriff walked away, he pulled Gillian to the side of the cabin and proceeded to chat with her in a formal manner, questioning her. Right above them a handful of crows were circling and cawing wildly at the top of their lungs. The noise was unbearable and, they could barely hear themselves talk.

The detective didn’t budge and carried on his stony-faced interrogation. “And you didn’t know who that was lying dead on the floor?”

She couldn't hold his gaze. "How could I know? I told the police everything that happened just the way it did."

His eyes were fastened upon her face, as though he could read her unspoken thoughts. Yet, she had evasive eyes, which didn't look directly at him and seemed focused on some object on the ground.

Reading her body language was easy. Her shoulders stiffened as she exhaled with what looked like irritation. He could detect deceit based upon demeanor, noticing the person's relaxed or stiff persona.

Despite all that, the logical explanation was that the noisy crows were distracting her. With that in mind, he knew she was telling the truth. She didn't flinch. Her story didn't waiver.

To Gillian's horror, two paramedics came through the front door of the cabin wheeling out a stretcher, one at either end. On the stretcher lay a zipped body bag. It was a creepy thing to see, that black body bag — the lumpen stillness of Joey Marks, head to toe. Sheriff Burgio walked out behind the stretcher to watch them put him in the ambulance.

Maybe it was the smell that made her feel nauseous, the odor of something dead. Or maybe it was the thought that he was a psychopath, and nothing more than a man who'd beaten her twelve-year old daughter to death before burying her body under the floorboards of the basement. And by some chance, too, it was the place where his body had been found stone dead.

With a sigh, she recoiled, twisting around to face her car. The paramedics carefully eased the stretcher passed

her. It wasn't until it was lifted into the ambulance and locked into position that she turned back to face the detective. He indicated he was done talking and skulked off.

Chapter 53

A TOW TRUCK was hooking up to the Jeep as Gillian Wincoff turned her back on the cabin and got behind the wheel of the Nissan Altima. Deputy Missy Sparks was writing her report, using the hood of her cruiser like a desk. Next to the cruiser, Sheriff Burgio was talking to Detective Philip Silverwood.

With one last look at the cabin, Gillian was filled with indescribable emotions and would never forget her tearful goodbye with her daughter, Abigail. She felt nothing but disdain for that child killer Joey Marks. All that she'd wanted, all that she'd hoped, was that Abby hadn't been in any pain at the moment of her death. But that was far from the fact, knowing the way he had beaten her to death. She hoped, in the words of that demon, that Marks' soul was with the Devil "burning in hell." It was to be expected that she had no pity for him.

Her mind drifted to Reverend Bonanni, and gratefulness filled her. Jesus had been watching out for her when Millie Dozier recommended him to investigate. She couldn't have asked for someone more sympathetic or concerned.

Fresh on Gillian's mind were the words the reverend had spoken to her. "Demons were angels at one time, and possess the same abilities as their angelic counterparts, but under Satan's influence."

She unzipped her windbreaker, loosened up her maroon sweater and began to back out of the driveway. Through her rearview mirror she saw the logo of BRC TV13 painted on an approaching van. She wasn't interested in talking with the media or their reporter Kristi Maratos. It was on that thought that she hunched forward and down, her head near the steering wheel, and accelerated out of there. Her next stop would be the Cozy Vacation Rentals office to return the keys to the cabin.

Fussing crows kept cawing in the trees. Bending forward, Detective Silverwood covered his eyes with his hands and ducked his head just in time to narrowly avoid being scraped by the three crows' sharp claws. They flew past his head and landed on the outer sill of the attic window. One of the birds struck its beak against the window frame.

"Dang it," he said, and returned to his normal height. "What's wrong with these birds?"

Only when the ambulance had driven away did he cast his eyes toward the sky, which was beginning to turn, filled with heavy clouds as if rain was coming.

It was as he was turning away that he caught a flash of light from the corner of his eye. BRC TV cameraman, Morris Miller, waved to him, aiming the camera in his direction. The detective quietly cursed and shifted his eyes unfavorably. Miller turned the camera toward the cabin and grounds.

A twig snapped somewhere off to his left. His head jerked in the direction of the noise. The dark figure of a man glanced over his shoulder at him with a queer expression in his eyes under dark ragged eyebrows, just as he slipped around the corner of the cabin. Who was he?

A bit guarded, but curious, Silverwood took off after the man. He needed to know who this was. After rounding the corner of the cabin, he saw the man in the distance. He was a physically fit man, about five-foot-nine or six-feet, wearing a checkered flannel shirt rolled up to the elbows, jeans, and hiking boots.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't be here," the detective said, sounding like a security guard at a hotel.

The man didn't react, as if Silverwood had said nothing at all. Whoever the man was, he kept a slow walk.

Where was he going? he thought and continued to follow behind him.

"Detective Silverwood," came a man's voice unknown to him. "I'll be leaving now."

Shaken as he was, he turned around, found Reverend Claude Bonanni standing behind him, and gave him an awkward glance before nodding. "Thanks for informing me."

Kristi Maratos, who was waiting to go on camera, folded her arms across her chest and gave the reverend a one-eyed gaze. “Ah, ha! I knew something was going on between that priest and Gillian Wincoff.”

“What’s that you said?” her cameraman asked, his head angled attentively towards her.

“Nothing. Never mind,” she said without even glancing his way.

The Reverend noticed her staring at him. So, he smiled at her. The corner of her mouth twitched into a smirk she didn’t even try to hide. Bonanni cast his eyes to the ground as he walked past her. He hurriedly climbed into his Infiniti sedan, parked next to the sheriff’s Expedition, backed out of the driveway and drove away.

Before he forgot, Silverwood walked in the direction of where he thought he last saw that mysterious man. But all he saw was a crow that flew away. In an erratic way, he moved his head around to see if he could see this man. The man was nowhere to be seen.

How had he managed to disappear like that?

With blind determination he walked to the other side of the cabin, continually assessing his surroundings. He caught the scent — or thought he did — of a mildew-like odor in the air. But there was no sign of that man. He trembled as he realized where he was standing, precisely where Joey Marks had placed the body of Abigail Wincoff. That spot beneath the basement floorboards. The full impact of knowing that slammed into him.

Some darker clouds covered the sky and trees started to sway, thanks to a light breeze. He turned a sharp eye toward the woods, which were dark and cooler than before. Feeling the chill, he needed his suit jacket.

He shrugged to himself before going in the direction of the front door of the cabin. There were a few things he needed to finalize, and he didn't want to waste any more time being sidetracked.

Chapter 54

IN NO TIME FLAT, the police bulletin about Joey Marks went out. The airwaves filled with bulletins about his body being found at the rental cabin on Wagon Trail Road in the Poconos. It was clear the police thought he died from a slip-and-fall accident. Blue Ridge Cable TV sent Kristi Maratos and a crew out to cover the story for a “Live Breaking News” report in the slot usually filled by their five-o’clock news hour, which airs Monday through Friday.

It was 4:56 P.M. Kristi was raring to go, watching Detective Silverwood’s Chevrolet Tahoe SUV disappear from the driveway.

A loud caw echoed from above from a crow flying in lazy circles, followed by half a flock of crows. She frowned, unamused at the moment a large crow came flying over her head, and in so doing it croaked in a manner which frightened her.

“Please be quiet,” she said to the crows.

“Stand by,” Morris Miller said, in his gay voice. “We’re live in one minute.”

Microphone in hand, Kristi floated into position in front of the cabin. She was wearing a conservative royal-blue silk suit and a little smack of red lipstick. Like always, her hair was fluffed around her face anchorwoman-style.

“And five, four, three, two, one — we’re live!”

The red camera light popped on and she gazed earnestly at the camera. “This is Kristi Maratos coming to you live from East Stroudsburg. Last summer, Abigail Wincoff was on vacation here with her parents. The twelve-year-old girl went into the woods to birdwatch and never came back. In an instant, she became a member of a club no one wants to join — missing children. Then, last December, a manuscript titled, *Murder in the Poconos*, written by an unknown person, was found by the sheriff at this rental cabin. The manuscript provided details on how Abigail died, and that her body had been buried beneath the basement floorboards of this cabin. The police suspected the manuscript was the serial killer’s calling card, left behind to taunt them. Who killed Abigail Wincoff? And why? I encourage you to stay tuned for more on this story after a commercial break.”

The camera cut off her. This was the kind of reporting she wanted to be doing. She would have liked to interview Abigail Wincoff’s parents. At this stage, she had already accepted that it would never pan out. She was neither bitter about it.

Her cameraman nodded and cued her with a five-fingered countdown, pointing directly to her.

Lips open, Kristi enunciated her words with a bright smile, “In a surprising turn of events, the Pocono Mountain Regional Police confirmed that earlier today Joey Marks, the suspect-at-large in the case, was found dead in the basement inside this cabin by a priest, who’d come to bless the place with the mother of Abigail Wincoff. The police have labeled Marks’ death as an accident.”

Just before the camera zoomed in on her for a closing shot, she felt a strange pang of fear. During the segment, she’d sensed a presence watching her.

Still, even at this second, she was thinking there were eyes on her, which she now just couldn’t get out of her mind.

A high-pitched caw made her look up. She saw a large crow perched on the attic windowsill, and peeping into the room, as if someone was in there. But she didn’t see anyone in the window. That nagging feeling wasn’t so misplaced, though, because she still felt an uncomfortable sensation down her spine.

“Are you guys finished yet?” Sheriff Burgio asked, standing in the doorway of the cabin, looking at his gold-toned Seiko wristwatch.

“Indeed, we are!” Miller commented, walking to the back of the van.

The sheriff gave Kristi a stony look and shook his head. Eyebrows raised, she caught it, opened her red-painted mouth, then closed it again in frustration.

Billy Shipley tore out of the cabin to talk with her. On his approach, his mouth turned up at one corner and his green eyes winked at her.

“Are we still on for dinner tonight?” Shipley asked with anticipation.

She blushed rather prettily and looked away from him quickly. For some reason, she was a bit embarrassed about being asked that in front of the sheriff.

“Of course, sweetie,” Kristi answered him in a hurried whisper. “Rain or shine.”

Kristi had thought about their breakfast together at Raffles Bistro. She had hogged the conversation talking about Gillian Wincoff being in town. Nothing could have destroyed the pleasure of the morning more completely. She had gotten carried away, but that was the kind of stuff she did. Tonight, would indeed be different. She would make it up to him by celebrating their engagement.

Elated, Shipley sighed to his relief. “Great, because I’m about done here.”

A loud clap of thunder punctuated his words before heavy rain started falling on them. Shipley twitched his motorcycle cop’s mustache with his fingers seemingly confused, before running with his hands on his duty belt toward the cabin.

“I’ll pick you up at eight,” Shipley yelled back at her.

After a quick glance around, Kristi ran to the white news van and got in the passenger seat. The chubby sound engineer with frizzy, red hair closed the back doors of the van, aching to leave. Morris Miller got into the driver’s seat,

started it up, pulled out of the driveway and sped off in the downpour.

The rain became heavier, lashing against the cabin's windows, great gusts rocking the sheriff's vehicle. The crows flew away. Standing inside the cabin by the doorway, Sheriff Burgio listened to their cawing get fainter and fainter.

A workman's truck pulled up on the other side of the sheriff's vehicle. A man in dungaree overalls and a flannel shirt got out carrying a metal toolbox. He hurried toward the door, the wind-driven rain lashing at him.

"I'm here to repair the hole in the floor," the carpenter said as he approached.

Chapter 55

A LITTLE LATER on Saturday night Millie Dozier's two Abyssinian cats were under the round wooden table in the kitchen when she started preparing dinner. She put their bowls on the counter and filled each of them — two cans of tuna cat food that had been in the fridge, water, then put the bowls on the floor.

Around six o'clock, she plated up her meal and took it to her table. Then she turned on the television to Channel 13 and watched the replay of the "Live Breaking News" report. BRC TV anchorwoman Kristi Maratos presented the story of the discovery of Joey Marks' body found inside the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Kristi's drawl of a voice pierced her brain. No matter, she was fascinated by all of it, glued to the television while eating her cornbread and chicken jambalaya.

Almost in a trance, she walked to the bedroom to turn in early. After changing into her terry cloth nightgown, she

put her hair in curlers without combing her hair in front of the dresser mirror.

On her way to the bed, she started feeling chills. She moved to the closet and pulled out an extra blanket. The lights in her bedroom flickered, and she heard a flash of thunder. The rain had become a steady drizzle.

Once beneath her covers, she found that she couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about that news report. She tossed and turned, the voice of Kristi Maratos echoing in her mind. The background footage of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road was playing over in her mind.

The neighbor's dog began growling loudly, a signal that someone was out there now. Disappointment flickered on her face, because she had to get up early for church service tomorrow morning. She rolled over and punched the pillow.

Things got worse for her when the dog started barking its head off, scaring her cats into hiding under the covers. This awful barking sound, as harsh and wild as a wolf, continued till about one in the morning. Around that time, her mind turned off and she finally fell asleep.

A dream formed in her mind. She saw herself sitting in her car in the driveway of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. Though she swore she would never return, in this dream, she had no control.

Millie was no longer in her car, but outside it.

There were dead crows all over the ground. Limp balls of black feathers lay everywhere. A gray mist in the air was weaving in and out of the trees, and nearly swallowed her, making it difficult to see. Stepping over the them,

through the mist, she cringed nervously, while the smell of death surrounded her.

A small voice within her whispered, *Turn around and get out of there!*

It was like she was possessed and couldn't stop, even if she wanted to. Her crossed eyes were fixed straight ahead as she headed to the front door. Whispers floated around her, a symphony of indecipherable throaty voices. Wincing at the sound, she yanked the door wide and found blacker-than-black darkness and a strange silence.

Her feet dragged as she made her way into the hallway. Everything seemed to be deserted. That was the case, until two red eyes slowly appeared in the darkness. They were like the eyes of a cobra, poised to strike.

"I'm waiting for you. Come to me!" said a gruff hoarse voice.

She woke herself up when she opened her mouth to scream. Spooked by it all, she threw the covers off of her body, sat erect. Her crossed eyes went sideways and up, and then lowered, not recognizing her surroundings — and it more than confused her.

With a ragged sigh, she crossed herself with her left hand. And she felt safe again. Praying to Jesus helped her realize she was in her bedroom. The purring of the cats from their place at the foot of the bed was music to her ears.

Her crossed eyes jerking to the alarm clock by her bed, groggily seeing the little red LED lights blinking 7:27. She felt her way across the bed, switched on the lamp and sank back into the bed. She lay on her back and closed her eyes,

partly of confusion. On considering her dream she concluded that she wouldn't tell Reverend Claude Bonanni, or anyone else.

"It'll pass," Millie said somberly and sat up in the bed again.

Something about her was off. A couple of her curlers had come undone, and the loose hair fell to her shoulders in chunky tangles. Her crossed eyes conveyed something different too. No longer full of fierce resolve, but a sort of insecurity.

A revelation came to her. It was time to leave the Poconos for a place on the bayou of Louisiana. Oh, how she had missed the bayou. The swampy air, the greasy water ... its sounds and smells. The peaceful living in Louisiana, a country house miles from the nearest neighbors, was just what she needed. There was a slim chance she might return to her hometown of Plaquemine. That bright thought lit up her face.

Perhaps it was good that she had that dream.

By her feet, the cats stirred and poked their heads from under the covers. The movement on the bed startled them into wakefulness. The dark brown cat was the first to hop off the bed. The cat with a ticked tabby coat followed after, jumping on the carpet and running to the kitchen.

The cats were meowing pleadingly, waiting to be fed. After a yawn and a stretch, she eased her legs over the side of the bed. She started whistling a Cajun tune, rump shaking her way toward the kitchen. After breakfast, her first order of business was to get ready for church. And

first thing tomorrow, she would call the Clean As A Whistle Agency and give her two weeks' notice. She was going to take tomorrow off, too, because she wanted to get a jump start on all the packing she had to do.

Chapter 56

OUTSIDE THE PLANE WINDOW, lightning began to flicker inside the clouds on this hazy Sunday morning. Gillian Wincoff leaned across the overweight black woman snoring beside her and closed the window blind. In spite of the stormy weather, Gillian wasn't at all worried because the plane had made a slow arc descending toward the runway.

The woman sleeping in the window seat emitted a loud snore. Gillian riveted her eyes toward her. The woman had on a beige knee-length trench coat, which only made her obesity more pronounced. It wasn't enough that the woman, had taken over both the window and middle seats beside her. Gillian prodded her to wake her up, but she responded with blurry, half-asleep mumbles.

After that fruitless effort, Gillian fastened her seat belt, shut her eyes, and waited for the plane to touch ground.

Inside, she accepted she'd probably never be fully healed from the loss of her daughter. But she felt a great peace in her heart, knowing that Abby's spirit was free from harm and in a better place.

The engines shut down. After a brief delay, the passenger door of the plane was opened. In no particular hurry, she plucked her carry-on bag from the overhead compartment. A flight attendant and some passengers brushed past her down the aisle, giving her cross looks. She just ignored it, slid her handbag and carry-on bag over her left shoulder and tossed her windbreaker around her free elbow. It was just her luck that the black woman, sleeping in the seats, finally woke up just as she turned around to walk down the aisle to exit the plane.

When she came into the American Airlines passenger arrival area, she was surprised to find Lance. He was standing feet away from a Korean Air reservation counter that was tucked over to the right next to a gift shop. In plain view, he was clad in a bulky beige sweater, rumpled jeans and sneakers. So much in shock, she stood frozen in place as he started to approach her.

Lance had been waiting one and a half hours for her flight to get in. He hadn't found out that her flight had been delayed until he was already at the Newark International Airport. While waiting, he had sat around and read magazines to kill time. When he heard the announcement that her flight had arrived, he went and waited by the gate, so she could see him right away.

He made his way through the clusters of people around the small waiting area. His eyes glinted warmly in the harsh white glow of the fluorescent lighting. She looked at him affectionately, remembering her husband was a very sexy man. She always thought he looked good, even with the few extra pounds he'd put on.

Her mind went blank. And suddenly, she couldn't remember that he'd been distant with her. How he'd dealt with the grief of the death of their child, a tragedy that should have brought them closer together.

"You didn't call to tell me you were coming," was all she could say.

"And spoil the surprise?" he asked.

Tears began streaming down her face. He caught her off guard when he yanked her forward and embraced her tightly. For what seemed like a long time, neither spoke. This hug was what she needed more than anything.

Gillian was the first to pull away. She had gotten lost in the moment, but the moment had passed.

Picking up her hand, he held it, his look was full of almost tender kindness. They walked toward the baggage claim area, holding hands. When her luggage arrived, Lance swung the black spinner suitcase from the carousel.

"It's after one o'clock," he said, his voice raising as he tried to talk above some sort of very high frequency airport announcement. "I'm sure you're hungry. I want to whisk you away to a lunch you won't forget to make up for our time apart."

Gillian blossomed. "That sounds really nice."

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you!” Lance said, toting her rolling suitcase. “You just missed your mother — she left early this morning.”

“I should have known she would visit,” she said with a frown. “She left me a bunch of voice messages. But I hadn’t had a chance to return her calls.”

It was something more than hope, and perhaps unconsciously, she had sensed their marriage was finally headed in the right direction. Hers wasn’t the first marriage to go through what hers had been through. She knew that when she got married, there would be obstacles along the way. And she had always hoped they would never happen. But they did. It was going to be a long, slow process to rebuild their marriage.

“Now that you’re back in town, you have no excuse to give her a call when you get settled at home,” he said, somewhat encouragingly.

As they rode the escalator she leaned against his shoulder and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. “Are you sure you want me to call her today? If she knows I’m here, she’ll come over to visit again. Probably by the end of tomorrow.”

Lance hid a smile in the corners of his mouth. “I expect so.”

“My mother didn’t give you too much trouble, did she?”

“Oh, just a tiny bit,” he laughed, and exited the automatic glass doors, trailed by her squeaky-wheeled suitcase.

They made their way to the parking lot, where he pulled out his keys. He loaded her luggage in the trunk before he climbed inside his black Buick Enclave SUV, started the engine and drove away.

Chapter 57

TODAY was Philip Silverwood's first day off in weeks. To his relief, the murder case of Abigail Wincoff was finally closed. Just yesterday, the Pocono Mountain Regional Police Department had closed its investigation blaming accused murderer Joey Marks, who was dead and therefore couldn't be tried. Andy Kirkman congratulated him over the phone and invited him to his house in Stroudsburg.

It was half past eleven on Saturday, May 20, and his SUV rounded a bend in the road, and turned onto Bryant Street toward Kirkman's two-story house. He drove a little further, then parallel-parked against the curb between a Nissan pickup truck with a "Philadelphia Eagles" decal in the back window and a maroon Honda sedan.

He was still in the driver's seat when a jingle came from someplace. But who knows where? The recording repeated, like a cell phone jingle and it was getting louder and closer.

With the windows down, he could hear it. He looked around crazily, expecting to find someone close by, but nobody was around.

After a mock groan, he exited his Chevrolet Tahoe and tucked the keys in the front pocket of his faded jeans. The temperature was in the high sixties with a lovely breeze. Just as he pulled the zipper down on his jacket, he heard the crackling jingle repeat itself. The lively instrumental polka section of sixty seconds was followed by an artificial intelligence voice greeting, “Hello?” And it was blaringly loud.

A purple ice-cream van, rusty and dented, turned onto the street, the megaphone on top blaring the jingle meant to attract customers. Its wheels dipped and thumped and dipped and thumped.

On the doorstep he stopped to stare at it as it passed. There was a brightly painted logo on the van’s side that read LA BONITA. The driver’s side window was down, revealing a white-haired Hispanic man behind the wheel. On his face was a toothy grin.

From the looks of things, this was a routine in the neighborhood. But there weren’t any kids on the street, and there weren’t any kids chasing after it. Maybe the pre-recorded music was to blame. He was thinking how he had heard the jingle play four times since he’d been there, and he was already sick of it.

The volume spiked and the jingle broke up before trailing off as the van turned onto another road.

“Goodbye and good riddance,” he mumbled before pushing the doorbell on the panel next to the thick oak door.

“Philip, step inside my humble abode,” Andy Kirkman said with a chipper voice. “Merrilee made her special coffee cake, which I think you’ll love.”

“Thanks, Andy,” he replied, walking into an entrance hallway outside the living room. “I look forward to trying it.”

His wife, Merrilee, appeared, and greeted the detective quite in a friendly way. Silverwood put his blue Nautica jacket on a coat rack before she ushered them through the dining room and into the kitchen where she had laid an elegant setting for four on the table. Their teenage daughter, Kara, was already seated at the round table where glasses of iced tea were waiting for them.

Kara’s black combat boots were sticking out from under the table. The ones that made her feet look larger than they were. But on her, it all flowed well with her black, baggy jeans with holes at the knees and cut-off sweater.

Merrilee smoothed the flowered apron over her rose linen dress that reached her knees. Bowls of mixed vegetables, mashed potatoes, and eggplant lasagna were set on the table. Bowls were then passed around, they served themselves and began to eat.

Right after lunch, Merrilee took Kara shopping at the Stroud Mall shopping mall for clothes, so the men would have the house to themselves.

Armed with bottles of beer, Kirkman and his guest moseyed into the living room and sat down on the sofa.

For a change, there seemed to be no barriers, no formalities among them. They began shooting the breeze about typical male stuff—the Philadelphia Eagles and President Donald Trump.

“What do you think of the new sheriff?” Andy Kirkman asked, moving the conversation elsewhere.

The look on his face told Silverwood he was being absolutely serious.

“Cole Burgio is an alright guy,” Silverwood replied, sounding a little tipsy.

“That’s all you have to say about him?” Kirkman asked, took a gulp of his beer and then wiped the foam off his lips with a napkin.

Silverwood gave it some more thought and said, “How about this? Cole is an alright guy, who is very professional and very dedicated to his career.”

Predictably, this had no effect. Kirkman just gave him a blank look.

“Well, what do you want me to say?” Silverwood asked and took a swig from his beer.

“I don’t know what I was thinking when I asked. As long as you get along, that’s the whole thing,” Kirkman said, sounding vague and somewhat cryptic.

“Do you have regrets about retiring?” Silverwood asked and gulped down the rest of his beer.

“Not at all!” Kirkman answered without thinking. “Okay, maybe some regret. The football season is over. Since that is, I’m sitting up in this house twiddling my

thumbs. Every day I find myself needing something to keep busy with.”

“That’s what retirement is all about. You’re supposed to relax and enjoy yourself,” Silverwood said, and set his empty beer bottle on the mahogany coffee table.

“You up for another beer?” Kirkman asked, standing up from the sofa and pulling down his brown sweater.

“Yeah, sure,” said Silverwood.

“Come with me to the kitchen. I’ll tell you more about the woman Merrilee wants to set you up with. The woman she had mentioned during our lunch,” Kirkman suggested.

“I’m interested in hearing what you have to say about her,” Silverwood said, breaking into a grin as he stood up.

Kirkman mimicked a melody that sounded familiar. “Dun dun dun dun dun, da da da da ...”

“Please not that ice-cream van’s jingle,” Silverwood said, and laughed.

“Hello?” Kirkman asked, in a squeaky voice as he walked into the kitchen from the hallway.

They both laughed.

Chapter 58

THAT MONDAY in Lehighton, Pennsylvania, Morris Miller was suffering from nothing to do in the Blue Ridge Cable TV news studio control room. He had withdrawn into himself and was staring blindly at the battery of TV monitors, which during a live broadcast showed a different picture from each of the three operating cameras. The clock on one of the television monitors showed 11:05 A.M. Fifty-five minutes before the next camera set-up.

He took the last sip of his coffee, stood from his chair, tossed the cup into the garbage can. A drop of coffee splashed out onto his black slacks. But he didn't bother to wipe it away.

Miller blew out a little breath from between his lips. He was tired of doing absolutely nothing since returning from lunch. The heat from all the equipment in the room was

getting to him. Sweat began to gather on his neck under his black wool turtleneck sweater.

It then occurred to him how he might make use of the downtime. He got comfortable in his chair and skimmed through B-roll footage from the past two weeks for the indexed catalog of archives. Between segments, he jotted down titles and running times.

At thirty-five minutes to twelve, Miller pulled up the footage of the rental cabin on Wagon Trail Road and the surrounding woods. It would appear that a momentary glitch had caused the camera to shake. He swiveled around in his chair and did a double take. Because something caught his eye besides the irked expression on Detective Silverwood's face. He dropped his chin before he lifted his gaze again to the monitor. Was he seeing things?

There was a figure in the background, over to one side, visibly in the frame. Unrecognizable to him, though. Who could it be? he wondered.

By pushing a button, he stopped on a shot in which the man looked over his shoulder before he rounded the corner of the cabin and stepped out of the camera's range. He clicked the mouse and zoomed in on the man's face.

And there he was, like a ghost. If you looked closely, the image wasn't clear, but Miller peered hard and was sure he recognized the figure. The man's face was identical to the photo of Joey Marks BRC TV had used on the news alongside the report by Kristi Maratos.

How could this be possible? He couldn't believe his eyes. How could Marks be dead one moment and walking around the cabin the next?

This couldn't be Joey Marks, after all.

This couldn't be happening again!

He thought back to the last time his camera captured a figure around the woods. It looked like the figure of a little girl moving through the woods surrounding the Wincoff's rental cabin off of Sellersville Drive in East Stroudsburg. That was the exact place she had disappeared from. So, both he and Kristi Maratos thought it was a sighting of Abigail Wincoff. But Deputy Billy Shipley had quickly shot down the notion. In time, they came to find out that Abigail was already dead at the time he shot that footage, and, therefore, he concluded that he and Kristi were mistaken.

Running the image through his mental memory bank again, he couldn't say for sure it was Joey Marks. But he couldn't say for sure it wasn't him, either. He frowned at the monitor. *Maybe there were ghosts in the woods in the Poconos*, he thought, and maybe it was Marks' ghost.

People often doubt the existence of ghosts, but he knew that he had captured something phenomenal again, digitally — believing the boundaries between the living and the dead were blurred. Beyond that, he settled on the idea that it didn't matter WHO it was — anymore.

Should he tell someone? he asked himself as he twirled a black Sharpie pen in one hand like a baton.

It was twenty-five minutes to twelve and he needed to make a decision — fast.

Miller leaned back in his chair wondering why he felt compelled to say something. If he told Kristi, she would tell Billy Shipley, and he would write it off as the shadow of a police officer, and that would be it.

His decision was made. The logical course of action was to not say anything. He pulled the footage out and labeled it with a pen. Then he stacked it on top of the others to file in the cabinet where the archives were kept.

Behind the thick soundproof glass separating the brightly lit news studio from the control room, the red-headed engineer guy with a bandanna that covered his head pirate fashion, was connecting wires to one of the lock-down cameras. Kristi Maratos stuck her head through the doorway of the room and gave him a thumbs-up. Her diamond engagement ring stood out against a knuckle. The thumbs-up gesture was identically acknowledged as he leaned forward in the chair.

Kristi looked primed and prepared, seemingly excited to cover a report about the grand opening of Paddle, a ping-pong club and restaurant in Stroudsburg. This expose on the latest trend in entertainment was meant to shed light on the significance of table tennis, which was designed to exercise multiple areas of your brain. This segment for the Pocono Television Network to broadcast on BRC TV Channel 13, would also feature actress and co-owner Susan Sarandon's SPiN, a similar club in New York City for which Paddle was modeled after.

The station supervisor interrupted the moment saying something to Kristi, and they walked away in mid-

conversation. Right after, Miller stepped out of the control room and closed the door with a snap. He took his position behind one of the cameras in the studio.

Chapter 59

WHILE SHE might laugh and joke with a customer here and there, at Victoria Station, by newfound habit Estelle Rowland kept her distance. The maître d' waved to her when she walked through the restaurant to make sure everything was in order. Despite her part-time hours, she still retained her position of authority as the head waitress of the restaurant.

A slew of customers kept her ten minutes after four o'clock, the hour at which her shift should have ended. This often happened on Fridays. She wiped down a table with a damp cloth before going to the break room. In a casual way, she collected her things from the locker and changed out of her work clothes.

After gathering her handbag, she exited the restaurant walking aimlessly toward her Cadillac. The sky above her was partly blue and partly cloudy. A light wind rotated

around her. After shaking back her hair, she stuck her hands in the pockets of her black hoodie.

In the driver's seat, the keys were in the ignition, but she just wasn't ready to start the engine. Turning to stare straight out the windshield, unsavory thoughts arose in her head. For reasons she couldn't fathom, the news reports she'd seen where Kristi Maratos informed her viewers that the body of Joey Marks had been found at the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. More out of surprise than anything else, she couldn't stamp out the strange, unsorted feelings.

She reclined back, rolling her head along the headrest, battling the unsettling sense of being thrust back into thinking about that pervert.

Fact one: Joey Marks killed Abigail Wincoff. Fact two: Joey Marks tried to kill her. Fact three: Joey Marks was dead. All of that still haunted her.

All this hoopla over one little, 2-bedroom chestnut log cabin in East Stroudsburg had her adrenaline running on extreme high. She had to see this place where so much horror had occurred. If for no other reason than she needed to clear her mind of it once and for all. That was her cue to start her engine.

Or she could forget about it, entirely, and go home.

Not going to happen. She left The Stroud Inn parking lot and headed straight there.

Her first thought, as she parked in the driveway of the cabin on Wagon Trail Road, was that it looked exactly the way it did in the news on television. It was a cute and

charming cabin nestled in the woods just like any other rental cabin in the Poconos.

She reached for the door handle, but something inside of her made her quiver and she retreated her hand. Her eyes stayed focused on the cabin. The soothing sound of the wind blowing through trees put her in a trance-like state.

The sky became cloudier, spooking her out. Was it going to rain? she wondered.

Estelle jumped at the sudden caw of a crow that flew past the windshield. She looked out toward the trees, wondering where the irritating bird had perched.

Her eyes fell on the attic window. A dark shape moved behind the glass. Just to be certain she took off her horn-rimmed glasses, wiped them, put them on again briskly, and looked at the window again.

And there, pressed against the window, was a face with hollow cheeks. She studied it, its red eyes glowing like demon eyes. Yet, his facial features were familiar.

When she finally made out his features, a look of shock came on her face. She could swear she was looking at Joey Marks. A more gruesome version of him — as in, his face pale and hardened, blood streaming down his chin. He was wearing the same blue-and-black buffalo-check flannel shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, she'd seen him wear before.

The intimidating image of him didn't faze her none. Spellbound, she gave him a harsh glare, scrutinizingly, yet confused by the sight of him.

His face twisted as he tried to speak, but his mouth couldn't make the words. She heard a cough, but nothing else.

The apparition of him moved away from the window. That quickly, he was gone, which left her feeling perplexed.

What had she seen, exactly?

Nothing could stop her. She jumped out of the car to have a closer look. Her eyes were fixed so intensely on the attic window that she nearly stumbled over a chunk of rock on the ground. But there was no movement in the window, nothing but stillness, darkness.

But she wasn't leaving. She stopped six feet away from the front door, wiped suddenly damp palms down the front of her black sweatpants. Her head twisted around scanning the cabin and the woods. Then she crossed her arms over her chest and stared directly at the attic window.

Still, nothing was there. Not a single thing.

All she caught was that there weren't any sounds at all. The crows weren't cawing. Not a single one of them. And they were all looking down from their branches into the attic window. So, something had to be there.

There was a single screech right above her head, breaking through the silence. She looked up. A crow soared by and tucked its coal wings, dipping into the trees.

Her eyes grazed the window closest to the front door, and the curtain moved slightly. She turned her attention there, watching the curtains part.

Quite clearly, she could see a pair of red eyes staring right at her. The ghostly image of Joey Marks came into

focus. Those sunken red eyes, glittering darkly, narrowed and menacing, fixed hers with a look on his face like he wanted to kill her. She shook then, like the Devil had hold of her soul and she was wrenching it from its grasp.

“Ugh, it’s him!” she cried out. “He’s alive.”

Her own eyes dropped nervously away from his ghastly face. Terrified to death, she took off in a hurry, her sneakers moving briskly and purposefully. She leapt into her car. The engine rumbled as she drove away even faster.

And then, at the end of Wagon Trail Road, she started whistling softly and tunelessly between her teeth. This was something she never did. Before turning onto Sellersville Drive, she stopped whistling abruptly and made an odd face, as if puzzled.

Chapter 60

5:56 P.M. It was the end of a long day, and Sheriff Cole Burgio was in his office. He slipped a photograph into the case file he'd been holding and slid the file into the drawer of a nearby cabinet. Inhaling and exhaling, he stretched his arms high, arching back as his lungs filled with air.

His intercom buzzed just as he turned to grab his jacket from the coat rack in the corner by the door, and he groaned. He sank into his chair and flicked the button.

"Sheriff, you have a call — from no other than Estelle Rowland. She says it's important," Kimberly Kaasa said, in a humorous tone.

Outside the Monroe County Courthouse, Estelle was inside her black Cadillac in the parking lot behind the three-story, white-limestone building. Her mobile phone was in one hand and the other reaching for her handbag on the passenger seat. While she was waiting on the line, she was

only thinking about launching a grievance. Being considered crazy was far from her mind.

“Okay, Kimberly. Patch her through,” he said quivering his eyes.

“Sheriff, you’re not going to believe this but, ...” Her voice sounding high and rather panicky — and even out of breath, she paused to sort out her thoughts.

A little over a minute had passed since she’d stopped talking and Burgio scowled. “Please go on with what you have to say.”

He just wasn’t in the mood for Estelle Rowland hassling him today, the last Friday in May. The last encounter he’d had with her was very ... memorable.

For a brief period, Estelle’s mind was working overtime as she came through the doors of the courthouse. Chief Deputy Aubrey Livengood, in dress uniform, solemn, standing to one side in the lobby, noticed her first. It had taken him aback to see that she was not even looking in his direction. And he was quite alarmed that she hadn’t spoken a word to him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Livengood asked in a loud voice to her ignoring him.

Billy Shipley stood by the door at the far end of the lobby, hands linked behind his back in an at-ease position. His uniform was perfectly clean, the creases sharp. A gleaming service revolver rested snugly in the black holster draped at his hip. They had the kind of acquaintance that required only a nod of a head.

A look of anguish was on the sheriff's face as he became suddenly aware that Estelle Rowland was coming through the doorway. He had mistakenly left the door open.

There she was! In his office, storming up to his desk, staring at him. Her face was soft, but her eyes were hard. Her hand held the mobile phone at the side of her hip. The call was still in progress. Could this day end any worse?

For many seconds, she stood there, trying to put into words all the thoughts that crowded her head.

"I just saw Joey Marks standing at the window in that cabin on Wagon Trail Road," she said, with a crack in her voice.

Sheriff Burgio pushed the button that disconnected the intercom, jerked upright, gripping the armrests of his chair.

"Slow down about this, Estelle," he replied in a voice that tried to calm her. "Joey Marks is dead. His body is still on ice at the county morgue."

A deep and slow sigh when nothing came to her. She stared at him for a time and tactfully said nothing. Seconds passed into moments. The atmosphere thick with tension like the moments before a thunderstorm broke loose. She seemed to be working out something in her mind. Then slowly, she let go of her aggravation.

She consciously gentled her voice. "Has it occurred to you that he was playing dead? And that he escaped from the morgue. As God is my witness, I'm telling you, with the way he looked, he gave off the impression of a man that had just crawled from a grave."

Her words staggered him as he sagged against the chair. It was too late in the day for this grief that she was giving him.

The sheriff scrubbed his hands over his face, elbows on his desk. "It's more likely Joey Marks is undergoing an autopsy."

Estelle shook her head in an emphatic no. "My gut says something else!"

Burgio checked his watch. "My shift ended five minutes ago. I need to get going, my wife is waiting for me."

Tension crept into her voice. "I am ninety-five percent confident my hunch was right about what I saw."

"Never mind what you saw!" he said, disregarding her complaint.

"Call one of your deputies to take over so you can leave!" she demanded in a sharp tone.

Impulsively, she put her mobile phone in a pocket of her hoodie and rolled her sleeves to her elbows. It seemed like she was going to be there for a while.

Sheriff Burgio gave her a *you've-got-to-be-kidding-me?* look. "What for?"

"To take down my statement," she said and pursed her lips.

Her brain, a second behind reality, truly expected him to file her report. In a manner entirely coherent with protocol, the sheriff rose from his chair and placed a hand on his hip and fixed his steely gaze on her.

“Leave my office at once, before I charge you with wasting the police’s time!” the sheriff said with an edge of exasperation.

His jaw clenched against the awareness that hit Estelle’s shocked expression the second her mouth opened. No words came from her. She threw her hands up in the air, turned on her heel and made her way back down the hallway, fussing her way out the double front doors.

Epilogue

A FULL MOON hung low in a cloudless sky, casting an eerie glow on the leaves of the trees surrounding the cabin on Wagon Trail Road. A flock of crows fluttered between trees off to the left of the weathered chestnut log cabin. Even more of them were circling above. And they were cawing, wildly.

The rain had stopped sometime after sunset, but the air, still mildly wet, smelled sweet and fresh, and a gray mist hung low to the ground.

It was three o'clock in the morning. Another kind of darkness emerged. A spiritual darkness. The fluttering of wings ceased. And a strange silence fell over the cabin, save for moans and groans at a low pitch coming from inside.

Thus, the darkness of the spirit was slowly materializing in the attic, the floor creaking. A cool draft ran through the room. In the far corner of the room, where it was darkest,

something evil was mixing in a swirl. A moment afterward, the figure was more distinct. It was the ghost of Joey Marks.

A large crow soared straight for the cabin. It landed neatly on the attic windowsill, puffing out its feathers as it settled there, where it could observe. With keen raven eyes, it peered through the dusty windowpane.

The crow was just watching Joey Marks, who cast his deadly eyes on the bird. The evil stirring within could not be contained as he wanted to kill the crow. Death itself wouldn't stop his desire to kill again. Sensing this, the crow cawed out in alarm, and then roared as it flew away.

Hell, when was the last time he'd thought about killing? Too long.

Maybe whoever he used to be was being stripped away. Sometimes he didn't know who he was anymore. His spirit was powerless against this demonic influence.

Deep in Marks' subconscious, he forced a memory out of his soul. The image of that pesky waitress outside the cabin surfaced. His soul came alive, and aware, and shuddered. He'd hoped she would come inside the cabin. With the demon's help, he could've killed her so easily. But she left, terrified at seeing him there.

When did that happen? he wondered.

How sublime it was, too. A myriad of thoughts hurtled around in him. He didn't know what day, month or year it was. And he didn't know what time it was. Time couldn't be measured here either because it just kept going on and on. Or so it seemed to him.

How long had he been dead? He didn't know the answer to that, either.

One thing that didn't escape his attention was how the demon had influence over his mind. He was simply the demon's plaything.

His thoughts were suddenly squelched. The demon was stirring once again in his soul, looking for a little fun. The pull-down attic stairs started swaying back and forth. The demon tightened his grip over his soul. Marks was growing tired of being his puppet. It was futile, but he tried to resist.

"Joey, play with me. Don't be scared. I don't want to play alone," came the demon's raspy voice, reverberating through the silence of the room.

The vanishing image of Joey Marks shifted from side to side, struggling to break free. And when it did, the image of the demon could be seen taking form. There was no escaping this demon's grasp. Joey Marks was the center of his diabolical world.

All of that was about to change, starting later that morning, the first day of summer. The sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky, and the distant Pocono Mountains seemed to try to add to the color display a fresh brownish-green. The sun's rays glistened on the petals of the sunflowers in the woods close by the cabin.

A white-throated sparrow flew past the windshield of an approaching Kia SUV. Inside was a bright-eyed, honeymooning couple in their thirties, both dressed casual.

The sparrow flew to the birdhouse hanging from one of the branches of a pine tree outside the living-room window

of the cabin. It landed at the entrance, peered in, chirped a few times, then flew inside.

A black Toyota Camry pulled into the driveway and parked next to the Kia. Joy Franklin climbed out of the sedan, a long-strapped purse over her shoulder, and keys to the cabin in hand. Blackbirds circled above her.

The Cozy Vacation Rentals' rental agent was dressed in a dark blue blouse and matching short-sleeved cardigan, and beige slacks. She started walking toward the couple standing by their SUV, just as the man put his arm around the woman with him and pulled her close.

"I'm so glad to meet the two of you," Joy said to them.

"Well, it's very nice to meet you, Ms. Franklin," the man said.

"You won't be disappointed with this rental. This very spacious and quaint cabin is equipped with a fireplace and full kitchen," Joy said, with a ring to her voice.

"I already like it. The air is so clean and crisp out here," the woman said.

The glaring sun was reflecting off something in the attic window. They didn't look up. A dark shape had appeared there. The shape morphed into the image of a gaunt faced Joey Marks. A sadistic grin split his face as his onyx black eyes were slowly turning red, watching them. The wooden planks of the attic floor shook beneath his spirit.

"I'll give you a quick walk-through, then the keys are yours," Joy said, walking to the front door, the couple following behind her.

Neither of them caught sight of a shadow moving past one of the curtained windows.

The demon's laughter echoed faintly throughout the cabin, followed by his snarky growls. The moment the door opened, the sounds ceased. All was silent again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN GREYSON is a multi-award-winning author who primarily writes science fiction and horror fiction genre novels. The reader can always expect her to infuse comedy into her binge-worthy novels, which are packed with memorable characters, drawing inspirations from her acting and dance background.

In 2022, the novel *Birdwatcher* was released to wide acceptance, setting the precedence for the sequel, *Birdwatcher 2*, a follow up story to provide the closure the character of Abigail Wincoff so badly needed, and readers desired. Additionally, Ann portrayed the ghost writer Gail Wincoff in the *Birdwatcher* short television program broadcast on Manhattan Neighborhood Network's Lifestyle Channel 2 in 2019. Characters she has portrayed can be seen in many cinematic book trailers advertising her books: *Birdwatcher*, *Gotham Kitty*, *The Lonely Vampire* and

Never-DEAD, all of which have exploded into multimedia franchises.

Among the short TV programs, she acts in include the SpaceWoman and Super CRAZY Fan series for which she is the creator. Additionally, she sings and acts in the music videos: *Shine, O Christmas Tree*, *House of the Rising Sun*, *Motherless Child*, and *Buffalo Gals*. Associate of Arts degree in English from Howard Community College. Member: Actors' Equity Association; SAG-AFTRA; and Alpha Alpha Sigma chapter of Phi Theta Kappa.

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