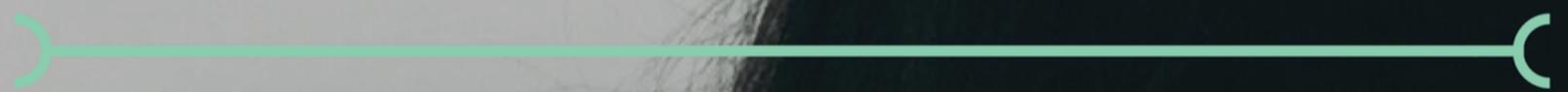


IF THERE'S A CHANCE, SHE WILL FIND HIM.

SPLINTERED



SHADOWS

A. E. SCHWARTZ

Splintered Shadows

A. E. Schwartz

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Chapter 1

Saturday. 11:56pm

LORI KEASLING SQUEEZED HER FLASHLIGHT. Sweat made the plastic shell slick, almost impossible to hold at this angle.

Another gust of wind tore through the pines, snapping her windbreaker and whirring the sound across the water. Her eyes tore from the river and lifted to the sky, to the framework of aspens that stood like a serrated blade against the low, yellow moon.

Something frightening about the way the moon appeared tonight. An uncertain beam that might soon flicker out.

I'm here, Murphy. I'm coming.

Her jeans brushed against a sapling Chokecherry, awakening her to the fact that she was falling behind the search team.

“Murphy!” Her husband’s name again, being called from her throat. She listened. All of them were shouting his name—Deputy Jeremy Cooper, his two deputies, and search and rescue volunteers Kurt Asherby and Tim Douglas.

Another burst of wind. Another drone of pain through the thick blackness. She numbly sensed the thin fabric flutter wildly against her chilled skin. The windbreaker Murphy had bought for her.

Lori couldn’t breathe in this place, couldn’t think of anything but that name.

That name.

She tipped her flashlight a little higher, noting how that small difference elongated the shadows from the rock-strewn terrain near the river. Rain began to drizzle lightly against the water’s surface. A pecking sound. She took in a lungful of the moist air and lowered her flashlight beam to touch where the sagging weeds and water met. The very places Murphy might have been standing while fishing earlier this evening.

Blood swirling along the bank.

The plastic case almost tipped from her grip.

A blink, and the eddying red became gray. Just foamy mist sliding against the rocks.

“Murphy!” The rock face steepened, forming a vertical bank against the river. She steadied her flashlight below. So many crevices. So many places to fall and not be seen.

A quiet step. Then another.

“Ma’am.”

Lori sucked in the frigid air and turned. Deputy Morrison was facing her, the beam from his flashlight intersecting hers on the ground. “Ma’am, be careful. We have experienced guys who’ve already checked that location.”

“I just thought...”

What had she thought?

The wrinkles on the deputy's face became accentuated from the light below. "Team's moving south." He said that last sentence with a slight toss of his head, willing her to go.

Lori clutched her flashlight, wanting to go and yet yearning to stay. "You checked it good?" Her words dropped off somewhere in the wind. She was shaking now, cold.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned to leave, then paused. "You said your husband never ventured past Lower Mesa Falls? Not past the base?"

"That's what he told me."

"He ever head past the Upper Falls at all?"

Lori waited two steps before following the deputy, who was now advancing forward. "No. He used to park on the dirt road—the one near the campground — but now he uses the overlook." She steadied her footing against the uneven terrain and let her eyes stray to the moon. Looked paler now. "I don't really know if he wandered a lot while fishing or if he stayed in one spot."

Because you didn't come with him.

Not enough to remember.

If only you'd come this time.

"I understand," Deputy Morrison said.

She'd overheard his conversation with Tim, and now she ran the words again through her mind, hoping this time something would click. Instead, everything became more frazzled with the ever-increasing roar of the falls and the knowledge that, according to Tim Douglas of Fremont County Search and Rescue, they still had roughly six-hundred meters left of ground between their current location and Lower Mesa Falls. She doubted very seriously that her husband, despite his enthusiasm for fly fishing, would have wanted to venture this far.

Lori focused blindly in the direction of the crashing falls. The lodgepole pines were heavily concentrated here, forming a sort of giant encasement that held the thick mist in its clutches. Ahead, veins of light searched both sides of the trail. Her gaze drifted across the uniforms of the Fremont County Sheriff's Department as she struggled to piece together the hope that had fragmented the moment she had first realized something was wrong. Murphy had never stayed out fishing this late. He was always home when night fell.

Except this time.

"Murphy!" Another violent gust of air stirred the tree limbs. Dark strands of hair tore loose from her ponytail and flowed in front of her vision, brushing across her neck. Sent another chill running through her shoulder blades.

Somewhere ahead, the falls roared loader. The terrain was worsening the farther they hiked, becoming almost impossible in most areas.

"Murphy, please!" she yelled.

He should have answered. Even if he were hurt somewhere, Lori knew that Murphy would have made every effort to stay conscious.

Deputy Jeremy Cooper came to a halt, swung his flashlight across the ground, then traced the rain-slicked rocks with his cone of light.

“Basalt’s too dangerous when wet,” one of the other deputies commented, stepping beside him. “Going any farther is a risk in this rain.”

Lori evaluated that. Although she fought it, the man was probably right.

“We could get back on Highway 47 and work our way backward from the Lower Mesa Falls overlook,” the deputy continued. “Use the campground access she was referring to.”

Lori stared long at the sunken rocks with its network of shadows and underlying warnings. The heavy night air circulated through her lungs.

“Would he’ve really ventured this far?” Deputy Cooper asked. “The guy had a bad leg.”

The comment made Lori bristle.

The other deputy shrugged, his facial muscles visibly stiff.

“Maybe we should think about accessing the other side of the river in case he used a drift boat to—”

“Murphy never used a float,” Lori said. “He just waded right in.” She knew what Deputy Cooper was thinking. What they were all thinking. *If we don’t find him after the initial sweep...*

Her eyes studied the black currents and its glassy tips dancing in the moonlight, wondering and yet not wanting to know.

“Then we search the river,” the other deputy said. “It’s your call.”

Deputy Cooper turned toward the rest of the search team and rubbed the rain off the face of his watch. Lori guessed it was well past midnight. “No choice but to postpone the search until morning,” he said. “The rain’s getting heavier. Too much of a risk at this point.”

Lori scanned the darkness and breathed slowly. He was out here somewhere, maybe hurt. Maybe worse.

No, not worse.

“I’ll radio in additional search and rescue to be here at the crack of dawn,” Cooper continued, “along with a helicopter. By that time, we’ll have additional equipment and can thoroughly search the canyon.” He sidestepped a broken tree limb to stand next to Lori. “We’ll find him,” he said, low enough for it to be just their conversation.

Lori nodded, though something inside her disagreed. She stared up at the rim of the canyon one last time. Thunder groaned behind the veil of clouds, the moon like the eye of a starved monster.

She turned to follow the team back down the rugged terrain where their vehicles and blankets were waiting.

Chapter 2

Sunday. 6:18am

SOMETHING THUMPED AGAINST THE ROOF OF THE SUV.

Lori's eyes fluttered. Too feeble, so they shut again. A pulsating pain in her head.

It took a moment to realign her thoughts. Icy prickles swarmed her left arm as her head slid away from its resting place. She breathed in the smell of the backseat, the weight of fatigue again tugging her toward oblivion. Toward the incoherent fragments of the dream she'd only momentarily captured.

The numbness was starting to fade from her arm as warm blood tingled its way toward her fingers.

Wake up. Pull out of this.

Voices. Faint. A distant car door popped open. Outside, the gentle sound of insects carried through the air, just like any other day in Idaho's forests.

But somehow, unlike all the other days she had ever remembered waking to.

Lori blinked against the pale darkness and leaned up on her elbows.

Murphy.

The search team was likely gearing up to get started again.

She checked the time on her cell and discovered she'd only slept a little over two hours, since she hadn't actually fallen asleep until a little before four in the morning. Her battery was almost dead from having called Murphy's cell repeatedly during the drive over, only to reach his immediate voicemail every time.

A film of precipitation on the SUV's windows rearranged the outside world into muddled forms. Blotchy watercolors on a wet page. She noticed how the wind was quieter now, the trees upright and calm, as if last night had only been a horrible nightmare. Something one wakes from and soon forgets.

Lori slipped on her shoes and popped open her car door to the smell of drenched vegetation. Dew and grime slicked against her hand as she shut the door, looking beyond the squad cars to where Murphy's black Chevy Silverado sat solemnly between two empty parking lots.

They'd searched it. She'd searched it. But still, the sight of it sent a chill down spreading through her shoulders. She sucked in an almost yawning breath of air, then let it seep out slowly, processing the stress.

"Mrs. Keasling." A woman in uniform approached her and identified herself as Deputy Peggy Joyce.

Lori located the extra sheriff's department car and an additional search and rescue vehicle against the ashen backdrop. In the weak daylight, the unit appeared to be milling around their gear and corroborating with Deputy Cooper.

Lori rubbed her arms. "When can we start looking?"

Deputy Joyce's radio squawked, then silenced against her left shoulder. "Soon. Search and rescue is locating sites in the canyon where they can repel.

We can't cover the entire bank of the river on foot, but your husband might have reached those more dangerous areas if he waded through the water."

Lori crossed her arms to trap in the heat and blinked hard. Her headache hadn't taken long to intensify. "I just want to find him."

Deputy Joyce absorbed that before responding. "As we wait, I wonder if I could go over a few follow-up questions with you."

"Of course."

"I'd like for you to tell me again exactly what happened. From the beginning."

From the beginning. Lori tucked a black wisp of hair behind her ear. Those last three words had sounded mechanical, rehearsed—words expected to be spoken but hardly stirring any response within her.

You have to focus now.

Missing.

Still no sight of him.

Her eyes wandered to Murphy's truck. To the skyline. *You have to go before that. To the very beginning.*

"Mrs. Keasling?"

Lori focused, this time her gaze falling on the notepad the deputy was clutching between stiff fingers. The scene smudged as her eyes burned with fresh tears. "Yes, I'm sorry. Um..." She found her mouth suddenly dry as her world cocooned into something silent and cold. "Murphy was..." The image of Murphy's timid smile and steel gray eyes. If she could only hold it a moment longer—

"What were you going to say? Murphy was...?"

Shooting pains fired deep in her chest. "Careful." Yes. Fearful, even. Aware of his own limits.

A trickle of search and rescue personnel threw equipment over their shoulders and began dispatching to the scene.

So. Things were beginning again.

Deputy Joyce fingered through the notes on her scratchpad. "You reported your husband has type 1 diabetes."

"That's right."

"Did your husband frequently experience loss of vision? Unconsciousness?"

That one time in the shower. The back yard while the mower was still running. "At times, he got lightheaded, but it was never frequent."

"He gave himself insulin shots."

Lori couldn't tell if that was a question. "He had the insulin with his fishing gear. Yesterday." Lori swept another loose tangle of hair behind her ear. The wind was constant, but not stiff. "I know because I always make sure before he leaves."

"I see." Deputy Joyce's jaw remained tight as she scribbled. Too-dark makeup had creased in the thin lines above her lips. "And his left leg was injured in an automobile accident?"

“It was during...” The worst of the incidents. “He was driving and blacked out. Blood sugar was too high. We didn’t know then he had diabetes.”

An orange tint shyly broke the surface of the horizon in the distance.

“You mentioned he still limps. Is there any chance—”

“Murphy regained most of the strength in that leg. He’s even started to run again.”

“I assume your husband knew how to swim?”

The question caught Lori off guard. “Yes.” Bitterness held to her tongue. She paused, not understanding why the musty air and sodden skies and this whole moment suddenly felt so desecrated. So wrong. “He’s always been confident around water.” But the ache pressed deeper. The river was not a pool. Trying to swim with a bad leg would’ve taken more effort, and with the gear he wore—

“Cooper!” The man was running out of the tree line and onto the pavement, fumbling to re-clip his radio. “We got something.”

Deputy Joyce stuffed away her notepad and jogged to where the unit was gathering. Lori followed.

The man’s next words were juttled out between breaths. “I just received... radio communication from the team at Lower Mesa...They found a jacket washed up on the bank just below the falls.”

Chapter 3

LORI KEASLING'S HEART DROPPED AS SHE WATCHED DEPUTY COOPER SPRINT TOWARD HIS VEHICLE.

"I need everyone relocated to the Lower Falls overlook," he said. "Now!"

Deputy Joyce tugged Lori toward her cruiser. She'd barely pulled her door shut before the vehicle hummed to life and surged forward.

Lori's eyes found the clock on the dash. 6:32. "Did they say what color the jacket was?"

The deputy kept her vehicle nosed close behind Cooper's. The turnoff would be just ahead. "No. We're almost there, though."

Lori gripped her seatbelt, which snugged tight across her chest. As she thought about it, Murphy hadn't been wearing his jacket when he left the house yesterday, but he'd had one slung over his arm.

The red and white reversible, water-resistant one with the broken zipper.

She closed her eyes as she remembered that horrible fact.

The turnoff for the overlook was just ahead. Deputy Joyce touched her brakes before steering into the turn.

Everyone seemed to burst out of their vehicles at the same time. Lori barely had a chance to assess the scene before she was moving again. The quiet morning air suddenly shredded into the noise of limbs fracturing and rocks skittering down the steep incline. Images of Murphy's red jacket falling weightless in the falls cut across her mind, then filled with the reality of thick, sodden pines rushing in and out of her vision as she kept pace behind a search and rescue couple who were nearing the talus slope. The thrashing sound of water grew stronger in her ears, just like it had last night.

Just like it had all night long.

"Spread out as you descend the rocks!" one of the voices—she couldn't discern which—hollered. "It gets bad here, and we don't wanna shake one loose."

Lori didn't try to be careful as she scrambled down the rock pile. Her eyes traveled from the endless chunks of gray stone to the infinite flow of Lower Mesa Falls.

Let him be okay. Please, let him be okay.

She tripped and sent her knee smacking into a boulder-sized rock.

Flaring pain. She recovered and spotted the team below. Furiously, she descended the slope, keeping her eyes less on the rocks and more on the falls.

Just ahead, an ominous basalt tower sat to the left of Lower Mesa Falls, shrouded in a green moss that collected in deep veins. On any other day, the tower might have been beautiful.

Might.

Urgency and fear fused as she neared the bottom, closer to the place where the foaming throat of the river spilled its contents into a crashing mist below. White froth tumbling, crashing over the basalt cliffs. Her jaw tightened as she watched it, trying to keep from envisioning a jacket tumbling down.

Or a body.

The rocks leveled out once she reached the bottom.

A team of three was already wading through the water, using their flashlights to skirt the edges of the canyon where dawn's light was slow to reach.

Then.

To the right of the river lay a jacket.

Red and white.

Tragically, those two colors.

Lori's legs solidified of their own will. A dead stop. "It's his." The words barely escaped, mixing with the morning. She started slowly, then ran, her shoes slapping the water against her jeans until she finally collapsed next to where the jacket lay. The two men standing guard beside it stepped back to give her room.

Her fingers felt inside the left pocket where Murphy kept his insulin shot. Empty, but sadly, it made sense that it would be. The water was oddly calm in traveling past, knocking lightly against the pile of rocks at her feet. Somewhere, the ripples faded into the rest of the wandering river.

Deputy Cooper knelt beside Lori to look at the jacket as one of the search and rescue guys came sloshing toward them.

Numbness.

The river continued to cuff against the rocks and retreat again. Lori examined the top of the rock pile where, beneath the mist and paling darkness, the last of the search and rescue unit were now rapidly descending. In that small moment, she wondered if finding Murphy's jacket really meant he was down here too. It was possible he was still inside the canyon somewhere between the falls. And with this limited visibility, it was probably more than possible that even search and rescue could have missed him the first time through.

You're in denial.

She couldn't help but trace her eyes over the surface of the river one more time.

Empty.

The falls roared above the sound of the insects, venting out its glory as if this were all some cruel game and it had won. Lori stood. Though the pain in her knees and shins from descending the rock pile was beginning to surface, the rest of her hadn't found a way to respond to it.

She ventured deeper into the water, its coolness curling around her ankles.

His body. *Where is his body?*

Nausea swarmed her stomach. She reached for a rock and steadied herself, but the white cobwebs had already begun forming, circling toward the center of her vision, pressing her eyelids closed as the ringing in her ears turned to bells. Loud wedding bells. Throbbing, groaning bells.

Paling now.

Softer now.

Softer...

Yesterday. 4:21pm

“The radar shows rain moving in around six.” Lori switched the phone to her other ear as she paged through a recipe magazine. “Looks like only a corner of it will pass over you, though.”

“That’s why I buy waterproof everything.” Murphy’s voice—deep, strong, alluring.

“Where are you now?”

“Just parking.”

Lori pressed her ear closer to the phone. “I hear your music.”

The volume cranked up. “Guess.”

Which one of his CDs, he meant. No Bluetooth or audio jack had kept his options limited.

Lori only had to listen for a couple of seconds. “Soft rock, track two.”

“You’re good.”

“You need more CDs.” Through the speaker, she heard the truck’s engine shut off and the door pop open. “I’ll let you go. I know you’re eager to get going.”

“Love you, Lori.”

“I love you too.”

Silence. Blackness.

Head throbbing, throbbing. Sweat slicked against her neck. No more wind.

“I love you, Lori.”

The bells hushed to a listless tune.

Chapter 4

Present day. 7:03am

HER EYES STARED INTO THE DEAD SPACE. She'd stopped crying now. Somehow, it was more painful not to cry. Breaking inside in small pieces was a far worse sensation.

Deputy Morrison stepped beside her with a steaming foam cup. "Want something to drink?"

"No." Lori's neck muscles flinched. "Thank you."

"How's your head? You went out pretty hard."

"It's fine." She crossed her arms and stared at Murphy's truck. "I just need a minute."

"Sure."

Lori dug through her purse, hands shaking. Then she stood, feeling the warmth leave her. The September air cooled her tears before they could curl under her chin and streak gently down her neck. "Murphy." A whisper. Just a chance to say his name again, as if he would walk up and wrap his arms around her.

She'd unlocked his truck last night to let one of the deputies search it while she and the rest of the team had started the search at the base of Upper Mesa Falls. The deputy had recorded his findings, ran over a few questions with her, but nothing substantial had surfaced. Just routine procedure.

She popped open the door of Murphy's Silverado and heaved herself inside, her arms like lead, fingers clutching numbly at the wheel. *You're not dead. I'm not ready to be alone.*

Hot tears brimmed her eyes right before she squeezed them shut. Then she opened her mouth and breathed out as she brought her forehead to the steering wheel, close to the place where his hands might've last touched.

The nightmare didn't seem to be finished. She removed her keys and started the ignition, letting the stale air from the vents blow across her hair. Before she realized what had happened, the lyrics from Murphy's homemade CD filled the speakers. Her fingers instinctively brushed against the knob to turn the music off, but they stayed there in a transfixed state, wanting to shut it out and yet willing to take the pain because she knew if Murphy were here, he would have let it play. So she did. At the moment, it seemed like the right thing to do.

Murphy's parents in Tennessee had been notified. She'd talked with them late into the night, though soon they were just stirring around the same words. Then she'd called her family. After that, there'd really been no one else to call.

The lyrics played on.

This song.

Not the same one Murphy had been listening to when she'd last spoken to him. No, it was track number two that had cut off abruptly when he'd killed the engine, just before she heard his door pop open and they had said their goodbyes.

But this was the ending of track number four.

She withdrew her trembling hand and set it in her lap, scanning over the contents of the truck. Did that difference matter? Murphy had returned to his vehicle and started it up for some length of time. A few minutes more.

But also a substantial length of time.

Had he driven down the road and back? Deputy Joyce's vehicle had barely made the trip from Upper Mesa Falls to Lower Mesa Falls within two minutes, according to her clock, and that was at flying speed. Maybe Murphy had simply returned to get warm. Or to charge his phone.

The path seemed little more than a dead end. A futile attempt to keep her mind involved with something other than the reality of what this raw September morning was trying to tell her. The same thing they were all trying to tell her.

Murphy was dead. Whether he had drowned or suffered an attack or gotten pulled down the falls, he was alone somewhere and not breathing. Maybe miles down the Snake River, or perhaps lodged only a few feet beneath the white spit of Lower Mesa Falls. That's what they were trying to tell her with their eyes, with the way the muscles sagged low in their faces as the knowledge of death twisted through the mist.

Lori slid the keys back inside her purse, feeling lost in this place. Just as she was stepping out, a search and rescue vehicle pulled into the parking lot beside where Deputy Joyce stood. It was always difficult to declare someone dead without a body, but because of Murphy's health issues and the unstable terrain near the river, the element of peril was evidently present in their minds.

Lori leaned her back against the truck's door until it clicked closed. Nausea stirred. She wanted to just be sick and get it over with. The bottom half of her jeans was still sodden with river water and turning cold in the light breeze, making her quiver.

She turned her face away from the wind, toward the back of Murphy's truck. Collapsed onto her hands and knees as her body shuddered forward.

And threw up.

Chapter 5

LORI KEASLING SAT AT HER COMPUTER, STARING BLANKLY AT THE DATE ON THE CALENDAR APP.

October fourth. Almost two weeks.

Murphy's case had fallen cold and hard, the effort finally waning into filed paperwork. Search and rescue had done all they could, skirting the canyon for two solid days and scouring the area below the falls where the jacket had been recovered. Then they were gone, and while the sheriff's department had remained on the case a little longer, even they had reached their stopping point.

Lori kept her hand on the computer mouse, because online bills needed to be paid and she would need to find a job with a higher hourly wage if she was going to call this place home for another month.

Try to make it through one more day. Just one more day.

Instead of heeding responsibilities, she clicked on the deleted folder of her emails and scrolled through old messages. Mostly spam, expired coupons, newsletters, and past correspondence. She clicked into Murphy's separate email account for work-related communication—primarily emails from McGrail College where he taught two classes—and scrolled down, finding the rejection emails from back in August when Murphy had sent off the book proposal for his spy thriller to several agents. A tinge of a smile. Life was good then. Sometimes hard and disappointing, but still good.

She clicked through the emails one by one until she landed on a note she hadn't read before.

Hey, man. It's Brady from your domestic terrorism class. You know, the redhead who talked your ears off about my heritage lol. Anyway, I'm back in the area for a couple days and wondered if you wanted to meet up for coffee. Got something I'd like to discuss with you if you're free this weekend.

It seems she did remember her husband mentioning something about a former college student getting in touch with him. From the date on the email, that weekend had been her husband's last.

No matter where she turned, the reminder was there. And so was the ache.

A tear crawled down the outside of her cheek as her hand trembled against the mouse. Murphy's reply would be among the last of the emails he'd sent. She found the message and clicked to open it.

*Brady Kavannah? Good to hear from you. It's been, what, two years? As far as meeting up goes, my schedule stays pretty tight. I can meet you at the college next Wednesday after 4pm, unless you want to brave Mesa for some fishing lessons Saturday evening (I remember how much you hate fishing). –
Murphy*

Lori's heart thrashed against its cage. Murphy had told someone.

He mentioned his location.

In a way, it felt so small to consider. But it formed a link, something she hadn't known before.

Someone out there knew where Murphy would be Saturday evening.

She scanned the emails again, searching for a second email from Brady. None. Not even in Murphy's deleted folder.

What were you wanting to talk to my husband about?

She clicked into Facebook. Typed Brady's full name.

The search results popped up, and the topmost profile matched the specific spelling she'd entered. The rest showed variations of the last name.

She clicked the first one.

A private account, or else Brady was simply inactive. Limited posts from 2008. No friends list visible. The profile picture didn't show a face, but a tattoo.

She clicked on the image to expand it. Five people had liked it. The tattoo, appearing to be located on the upper shoulder, was of a single eye. A sundial made up the inside of the eye where the pupil should have been. Around the circumference of the dial were letters mixed with numbers. The word *Spann* stretched across the rigid gnomon.

A span of time? A distance?

She clicked the names of the five people who had liked the photo. Three of the five had *Bracksboro, Utah* listed as their current location. Likely friends living in the same town.

Only a state away.

She wanted to reply to Brady's email. Ask him if he'd gone to meet with her husband at the falls. If he'd seen anything. Knew anything about what had happened.

Murphy's dead. You know that, don't you?

Chasing hope. The profile page in front of her promised nothing.

Still, it connected to Murphy. And the least she could do was follow the lead wherever it took her.

Lori closed her car door and stared into the deep, winding crevices of the floor mat. The sheriff's department building appeared so tired against the backdrop of gray. She shouldn't have come.

If I'm supposed to give up, then let me give up so I can move on.

She'd left the printout of Brady's email with the Fremont County Sheriff's Department. And then they'd told her they would look into things. Whatever that meant. Sometimes it's all small departments can do to keep their heads above water. Priority calls come in, older cases get shifted to the back burner, understaffing becomes an issue, and in the end, everyone's overloaded with paperwork. She'd seen it all before. Part of her even sympathized, since Murphy had spent six years in law enforcement before they married, two of

which were served in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

But a year after they married, Murphy went into a diabetic coma while driving and suffered an accident. The damage to his leg left him with a permanent limp, which kept him out of work longer than he'd hoped and eventually resulted in their moving to Aston, Idaho four months later. When he'd learned that McGrail College was seeking to hire a professor in Domestic Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies—no physical fitness test required—he'd applied and got the job. And yet, all the time, he would still talk about his leg healing up and returning to the ATF. The place he really wanted to be.

Lori started her car, adjusting the heat. *You're not supposed to give up.*

She thought about the conversation she'd just had with Deputy Cooper.

"So, what is it exactly you're suspecting by these emails, Mrs. Keasling?"

"I'm just saying it seems strange that a student from my husband's past would contact him coincidentally the same week he disappeared."

"Did your husband arrange to meet him?"

"He mentioned it as a joke, I think." Because Brady apparently hated fishing.

"Are you suggesting foul play, then?"

"I'm not sure—"

"Were there any ill feelings between them, or—"

"I'm just saying what if. That's all." Her voice had been edgy, desperate.

"We never found his body, sir. All I'm saying is what if someone's path crossed with his and something happened? I know it sounds crazy, but I have to ask these questions."

"I understand, Mrs. Keasling."

He understood.

Okay.

The words dissolved in specks from her mind. She glanced at the passenger seat where her purse sat beside Murphy's old college notebook full of random notes and deadlines. It was one of the few Murphy had kept in his *pothole of college junk*, as he'd termed it. Since Murphy had taught Brady once, the notebooks had seemed important to bring along. Now they just needled her. Painful reminders. A futile attempt at putting reality off another day.

She put the car in reverse but kept her foot against the brake. She reached for the notebook, fingering through the worn pages once more, skimming quickly over words hardly legible because she'd mastered reading his handwriting over the years. He'd recorded exam dates in the margins, sketched illustrations, recorded definitions—

And formulas.

The numbers stuck out to her.

Especially that one.

C₅. A quick glimpse at the top of the page revealed that Murphy's presentation for that day had been titled, "Biological, chemical, and nuclear agents." The name *Eric Brame* had been scrawled beside it.

A chemistry instructor at McGrail College. Murphy had probably referenced him because of the scientific nature of his presentation that day.

The chemical combinations made her think of the letters and numbers on the tattooed sundial. She pulled out her cell where she'd taken a picture of the drawing.

Yes, zoomed in, it was clear that one of the letter and number groupings was C₅.

So the sundial represents chemical elements?

Her foot stayed against the brake pedal. Maybe it wouldn't help, but she felt the sudden need to talk to Professor Brame. If chemical names meant so much to the man with the tattoo, maybe—possibly—he'd also taken a chemistry class at the college.

She stared for a long time at the sheriff's department building. She could go back inside and tell them or do this alone.

She closed her eyes. *Something happened out there at the falls.*

A groan of thunder snaked across the belly of the clouds.

You need to find out what that was.

She'd heard stories of people who'd lost a loved one and couldn't move on, who just kept praying the same prayers that things would pick back up again.

"Don't try to prove anything," Murphy used to say during his law enforcement days.

She released the brake and let her car roll backward, facing the black sky and the mountains ahead.

"Instead, take each possibility and rule them out one by one. When you run into one you can't rule out, then try to prove it."

That's what she was doing. Ruling out the possibilities.

Chapter 6

LORI PARKED AND SLIPPED THE VISITOR PASS BENEATH HER WINDSHIELD. She slung her purse over her shoulder and, taking a deep breath, exited her vehicle.

Several students were milling about, some with backpacks heading toward the buildings while others followed the International Festival signs that pointed toward the courtyard. A couple vaped near the shuttle stop. Seeing the college where her husband had worked was almost like seeing an old friend, and, in that small moment, she thought about the unpredictability of life—how short it is, how vastly sad and happy it can be, but most of all, how much people leave behind of themselves after they're gone.

The weathered two-story buildings seemed dejected against the backdrop of smeared clouds. Bare trees labeled with their scientific names stretched slightly over the winding walkways, where their fallen leaves and brittle limbs were already collecting in the crevices.

Lori spotted the Stanton-Roger Hall science building and rounded her way toward the entrance, trying to rid her mind of heavy thoughts. She wrapped her fingers around the tarnished copper handle, and it registered that Murphy might have touched this same handle dozens of times when coming to see Brame or the other professors. The ache fluttered straight to her core as she tugged open the door.

Inside, the room numbers traveled down the right wing while the door leading to the offices stood to her immediate left between the restrooms and vending machines.

Lori pushed open the door leading to the professors' offices.

Behind the desk, a woman with square glasses blinked in her direction and scooted away her giant cup of coffee that read *Science Is Power*. "Can I help you?"

Lori was already scanning the doors for the names of the professors. "Yes, I'm looking for Professor Brame. Professor Eric Brame. Does he still teach here?"

"He does. But he won't be back for another, oh, twenty minutes. Lecturing in chemistry. You're welcome to take a seat."

Lori spotted a row of worn chairs behind her. "Thank you." She sat and folded her hands over her purse, trying to form what she would say, or what should be said. Her eyes traced across the closed doors again until they found Dr. Eric Brame's name on the third door. She relaxed in her seat again and checked her watch. Eighteen more minutes.

The door Lori had entered swung open. She started to rise until she realized it was a female professor.

"Marcie, I'm taking lunch early," the woman said. "Give me half an hour."

"Lab test?"

An exhale. "Class average sat at a sixty-five percent."

"Ouch."

“I know. Trying not to think about it.”

The professor proceeded to her office. As her door swung closed, Lori got a glimpse of the name plate.

Dr. Kavannagh.

Kavannagh...

The same spelling as Brady’s last name.

How does she—

Lori rose from her seat a little too quickly, unaware that she’d caught the attention of the desk receptionist again. Maybe the professor’s name was a chilling coincidence, or maybe it represented something more.

Lori hurried past the row of empty chairs and stopped in front of Professor Kavannagh’s office door. Without even trying to think of what she would say, she skipped knocking and opened the door.

Professor Kavannagh met her with a disinterested gaze as she pulled her sandwich and trail mix from a bag. “I’m on lunch right now,” she said, her words forming a slight edge, “which I assume you already know since you just overheard me telling that to Marcie.”

“Yes, but I have—”

“Then would you kindly wait outside?”

The woman had some venom. She could work around that.

Lori looked to the plaques on the walls. So her first name was Cassandra.

Different tactic. Get her talking.

“Is that a publishing agreement? The framed page there.”

Cassandra followed Lori’s eyes to the wall, her face tight. “I’m coauthoring a second textbook after the first I helped publish last year. It’s all very thrilling.” Her fingers swept over some loose papers. “So unlike this conversation right now.”

Lori slid over a chair and planted herself. The tactic hadn’t worked, but she wasn’t content to leave until some questions were answered. “I want to talk to you about Brady Kavannagh.”

A sudden change in the professor’s face. Lori had hit on something.

“Whatever he’s done, I’m not interested.”

Lori tilted her head, then ventured ahead with ease. “So you do know him, then?”

Her eyes met Lori’s. Colder. Darker than the clouds brewing outside. “He’s my husband.” Then her lips formed a fake smile as she blew air from her nostrils, showing lack of care. “But you won’t find a wedding ring to prove it.”

Lori’s eyes instinctively went to Cassandra’s empty left hand. “I’m sorry.”

Cassandra made a display of rolling her eyes. “You sound about as sincere as he did during marriage counseling. But nobody’s really ever sorry until it happens to them. And even now, I’m not sorry.”

Lori tried to determine if she should continue playing it safe or dive right in. “So I’m guessing you don’t know why he wanted to meet my husband almost two months ago?”

A blank look. “I haven’t seen Brady in almost a year. Whatever he’s done, I’m not responsible for it. I’ve been picking up his pieces for too long.”

“What makes you think he’s done anything?”

“If this is about some civil suit, I don’t know where Brady lives, nor do I know his phone number, nor do I know his general vicinity, nor do I care.”

“That’s not what I’m here for.”

Professor Kavannagh leaned back in her chair. “Then why exactly are you here, Mrs....”

“Keasling. My husband, Murphy, teaches domestic terrorism here.”

Teaches. Present tense. A flare of undeserved pain.

The mention of Murphy’s name seemed to register in the woman’s eyes. This was a small campus, after all. News of his disappearance and the search for his replacement had likely been spoken of by every professor in these buildings.

“I’m wondering what kind of man Brady is since he chose to contact my husband after years of him not being in Murphy’s class. Did he ever mention Murphy to you? Because he went missing the day Brady wanted to meet him.”

Cassandra’s jaw clamped.

“I need to know. What kind of man is—*was*—your husband?” She spoke slower now, emphasizing the urgency. “What was it about me mentioning his name that made you think he might have done something? Because that’s what I need to know.”

Cassandra was silent, but something solemn lay in the way she stared at the closed blinds beside her. Focusing.

Remembering.

Lori had been guilty of doing the same. After Murphy was gone. Reliving each moment, grinding through the emotions that seemed to be alive with so much spite.

“Did he have a tattoo?” Lori finally asked. “One with an eye and a sundial and symbols?”

Cassandra’s fingernails slipped against the edge of the desk a little too roughly. “You really shouldn’t pry, Mrs. Keasling.” The words came out monotone, deliberate. Grayscale instead of color.

“What is it you’re not telling me?”

Silence. The atmosphere shifting into something sinister.

“Why did he want to meet my husband, Cassandra?” Lori stiffened, fighting the weakness that had become her voice. “Why—”

“I’m through discussing it.”

The floorboards creaked down the hall. Professor Eric Brame was likely returning from his lecture.

“As long as my husband is missing,” Lori said, “I’ll never be through discussing it.”

“No one is worth going insane over.”

Lori tried to make the words compute.

“No *book* is worth going insane over.”

A certain tightness squeezed her chest. “Book?”

“Would you like to read it? It’s probably still at Freshcreek Fellowship. Or maybe Brady took it with him. I really couldn’t care less.”

None of this was making sense. Cassandra rose and started toward the door. So, the conversation had officially closed. Over.

No. Something. You need something. That last comment still gnawed at her. “What is this about a book?”

“Goodbye, Mrs. Keasling.” She twisted the doorknob and pulled open the door.

Lori searched the room once more for any pictures, any evidence that Cassandra had once been married.

Only certificates, framed letters, and awards.

“Marcie, will you kindly direct this woman to the exit?”

Marcie gave Cassandra a knowing look and started to stand.

Speaking to Professor Brame could wait. Lori stepped through the door without a word. Heard it shut behind her.

Freshcreek Fellowship.

Lori pulled her keys from her purse, already familiar with the church’s location. And if Cassandra was telling the truth, Brady had known the location once too.

Chapter 7

LORI'S CELL VIBRATED. Didn't recognize the number. "Hello?" She slowed to meet a construction crew.

"This Lori?"

She tried to place the voice but couldn't. "Yes."

"It's Deputy Rae with the Fremont County Sheriff's Department."

"Oh," was all she could manage to say.

"We met briefly the day after your husband's ... I joined the search team Sunday evening."

Lori braked as the construction worker flipped the sign to read STOP. "I'm sorry, I don't remember. So much was happening—"

"I understand. These things take time."

What took time—the case or moving on? Lori squinted at the setting sun.

"Cooper told me you came in today. I thought I'd give you a call."

Lori relaxed her hold on the steering wheel. "He told you to call me?"

"No, he didn't." Deputy Rae cleared his throat. "Truth is, I'll be taking over your husband's case."

So Cooper was already calling it quits. For whatever reason, she'd had more faith in him than that.

The sign flipped to SLOW. Lori eased forward into the other lane. "Thanks for having the guts to tell me." An odd thing to say, but still. She'd met with Cooper just this afternoon. The man could've said something to her as she sat on the other side of his desk.

"I want you to know I'm taking this case seriously. The department's got me on other assignments as well, but this one's a priority to me."

A quickness beneath her rib cage. "You believe me, then?"

"From what I heard, Murphy put his whole heart into law enforcement. I just want to help any way I can."

A smile pained the muscles of her face. "I appreciate that."

"And I got a glance at the information you turned in today. Gives me a start."

Lori slowed her speed to thirty-five as she saw the welcome sign for Ashton and glanced up at the hill where a church bus sat in an otherwise empty parking lot. Freshcreek Fellowship.

Professor Kavannah's words came back to her: "*No one is worth going insane over.*"

I'm not going insane.

"You really shouldn't pry, Mrs. Keasling."

Something cold and hard tightened in her stomach. "Is this crazy?"

A pause. "What?"

Lori shook her head. Stupid. "I'm sorry. Nothing."

Deputy Rae breathed into the phone. "You have to know. I would have to know if it were my spouse."

The blur of late-evening headlights dripped across her wet windshield. Apparently a pop-up shower had occurred while she'd been speaking with Cassandra.

"Okay, then," he said, in that awkward way one tries to end a going-silent phone call. "I'll be in touch."

Lori nodded, even though it's not like he could see her. She hung up. The church rested in her rearview mirror now.

She'd visit on Sunday. Two more days.

The church foyer was spacious, glowing with recessed lighting that centered on the sanctuary door entrance and media tables. The morning service didn't start for another thirty minutes, and with only a few cars in the parking lot, Lori hoped she hadn't come too early. Freshcreek Fellowship seemed larger on the inside. Incredibly bright. A little too warm.

After accepting a bulletin from the greeter, she stepped into the sanctuary and dropped her jacket and Bible onto a seat in the back corner.

She scanned the room. Two older men seemed involved in their conversation at the front of the church. A girl to her right apathetically poked at her phone.

"Good morning."

Lori pivoted. Behind her, a bald man with a graying goatee was stretching out his hand. "Good morning," she replied, noticing his guitar pick as she shook his hand.

"I'm Donald. Good to have you with us this morning. This your first time?"

"Yes." *Maybe he would know. Ask him.* "But I think I know someone who used to come here."

"Who's that?"

"Did you know Brady Kavannagh and his wife?"

The man swallowed and then gave a rolling nod. "For a short time, yeah. He used to run our library."

Lori followed the man's gesture to where the library evidently sat on the other side of the sound system, but a pulled curtain hid most of the room from view. Something about seeing the dark space with its diminutive glow from what must've been a window made her heart race. Maybe that's where the book was that Cassandra had been referring to.

"I'm not really sure what happened to them, though," the man continued. "Great guy. Ex-marine, you know."

Lori stared at him, then back at the room. *No, I didn't know.* Everything up to this point had been pricked with suspicion, laced with uncertainty.

"Well, was nice meeting you," he said at last. "Enjoy the service."

She didn't know what to make of the man's smile, but she feigned her own to mask the concern. "Thanks."

The library seemed to swell in her peripheral vision. Darkness, except for the weak, inky residue of light. Thin shafts of copper bleeding, spilling into the black perimeter.

She crossed the aisle and walked through a row of chairs, approaching the room.

Brady used to run the library. Was an ex-Marine.

More footsteps entered the sanctuary. Chattering.

Why does no one seem to know where he is?

Lori stepped inside the cold linoleum-floored room and found the light switch. The air hung with the thick odor of aged books and musty shelves. Fake topiaries sat caked in dust, evidently untouched of cleaning for some time. In fact, as she studied the thin trace of grime on the shelves and found no lines of disturbance, it appeared that this whole room had been untouched.

Since he left, maybe.

Her eyes traveled across the rows of titles, noticing no particular arrangement had been used, no subject-matter grouping, no alphabetical order. The worn spines of the books as well as the drained color of their covers led her to believe that these were old copyrights, serving now as more of a physical presence than a source of knowledge.

Lori took a step back. Rubbed her neck. Reread a few of the titles.

Nothing stood out.

She grabbed the sign-out sheet from the shelf and looked to the last dated entry. December of last year. Either people weren't signing out anymore because Brady was gone or there simply wasn't an interest.

She pursed her lips, trying not to feel disappointment crawl inside. Again, she scanned the titles. Old copies. Unorganized.

The crowd outside grew louder.

She studied the cracked spines, wondering if Brady's presence hadn't been as far-reaching as she'd believed. Just another class he had attended several years ago. Just a stale, outdated library. Just a handful of people who knew him, but perhaps never really had.

Lori returned the sign-out clipboard to its location. That's when she noticed the last book, third shelf. Author's name.

Colin Spann.

Spann.

Iceiness spilled through her. Then the flush of warm adrenaline.

Her thoughts reeled back to the tattoo. To the word written along the sundial gnomon, which she had originally taken to reference a span of time.

Only now she realized it had been referring to a name.

As Lori pulled the dust-shrouded hardback from the shelf, a strange feeling tingled through her fingertips, inviting the coldness of the room closer to her core. Fragments coming together.

Strath of Splinters by Colin Spann. She paged through a few sections, finding historical commentary about Ireland, time references, charts. And yet,

there were chapters that read just like fiction. She turned back a page to where Chapter 14 began.

The fog thickened until the lights afar were no more. The road was filthy with rain and slab. I drew lower and watched it lash down, ponderin' that the veins of water looked like banjaxed strings, perhaps which had once played a tune. But that tune had passed.

The bog nearby smelled of ould fuel, else it was the mask I wore that smelled of it. I couldn't be sure. Five of us wore our masks, we did. Wrecked and shiverin' to our bones, but still cradling our guns while the sky kept bucketing. We were ready for the slew of 'em, as payback for the blood feast they had on us. It's about catchin' 'em by surprise. It's about feeling the warm, grisly beating of blood through and through.

Lori jumped as the curtain separating the room fluttered. People were entering in larger numbers now.

Time to go.

She slapped the book shut and tucked it against her stomach, then exited the library.

She wouldn't be staying for the service. Didn't need to anymore.

She snatched up her things and headed for the door.

Chapter 8

LORI DIALED DEPUTY RAE'S NUMBER AS SHE CROSSED THE PARKING LOT. Towers of smoke rose into the air from a burn pile below the hill, stiffening the air with its scent. She blinked her dry eyes away from its direction, fumbling for her car keys.

A Sunday. Rae might've been with his family.

Please pick up.

Chimes stirred somewhere nearby as she waited, then finally lowered the phone from her ear. She decided not to leave a message.

She plopped behind the wheel and offloaded her armload of stuff into the passenger's seat. Her Bible slid across the thick book she'd smuggled out of the church, then tilted off its edge.

Sorry it's been so rough. A prayer, maybe.

The smell of smoke was still present as she put her car in reverse, thinking of so much, like how any of this might lead her to Brady. She didn't really want to go home. No connection there anymore—just the same old pieces of furniture that had once surrounded a life she was no longer living.

Several miles down the road, she spotted an entrance to an empty playground and pulled in. Solitude, because the quiet would feel better than going back to that house. Just beyond the walking trail lay a pond with benches, so she snatched up the heavy book and stepped out of her car.

The clouds seemed to be thickening, overlaid by unseasonable fog. The smell of last night's rain still lingered in the air like a faint perfume, mixed with the scent of the ragged waterlogged benches that lined the fenced-in playground.

Lori tugged the zipper upward on her jacket.

I don't want to get angry. I just want you to hear me. I just want to hear you.

But as she neared the pond, every emotion began to slide downward. The resolve, the hope—all just mud slipping on an impossible slope. She neared the edge of the water and drew her legs underneath her, even though the moist ground quickly penetrated the shins of her jeans. The pond was calm. Peaceful. So unlike the last time she had been near a body of water.

A tear unexpectedly found her arm. She wiped away the second one before it could fall. "I'm sorry I couldn't find you, Murphy. Sorry I was too late."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and felt it burn all the way down.

Taking *Strath of Splinters*, she paged to Chapter 1.

The words were chilling. The brutality of the killings, the profane language, the violent campaigns, the prolonged accounts of different people's lives and how they all connected—everything hinted at a historical context. The Provos, they called themselves. Freedom fighters for Ireland using guerilla tactics in their own country.

Strath of Splinters.

By Colin Spann. And nothing more.

Lori had moved to the bench half an hour ago, and now she lowered her head to the armrest, determined, at least, to get through a third of the book before the storm rolled in. Page 113 marked the first chapter that began without any Irish accent.

I normally avoided night activity when possible. The moment someone breaks their routine, alarms go off behind the curtains of those watching you, or behind the window of the car parked across the street that you can't see into. But tonight, I needed to clear my head of the chore I'd neglected.

I needed to clean my tires.

The rumor was traveling that informers were responsible for Eric MacAullife's imprisonment. Not our best man, but it hurt to lose a contact. Our smaller cell structures were meant to protect against it. It killed us to learn that it was not the regular enemy responsible, but an Irishman who had spotted the light gray clay in the cracks of MacAullife's tires and had alerted the British. The training ground the six of us were assigned to was thick with ashen clay, while the soil here contained no trace of it.

So the soil was different and that made a man guilty. Fine. If they would get smart to us this way, we would have to get smart back.

MacAullife's arrest site was a minute's drive from where I lived, and I wasn't about to make his same mistake. I would ensure there were no rats watching me. My pocket knife always worked best for this, so I slipped it into my pants and grabbed a bowl to put the fragments into.

The night air was thick with the mixed smells of grain malt from the brewery and wood fires. Pockets of milky yellow light spilled across the road, but I was not concerned with being seen. And if I was, my Barrett M82 resting against the length of my leg as I walked would take care of that.

Something vibrated beside her. A moment lapsed before Lori could tear her thoughts away and realize the buzzing was coming from her phone. She snatched it up.

"Hello?"

"Lori, I saw where you'd called."

"Deputy—yes." She closed the book, suddenly feeling the dizzying effect from reading for so long.

"Listen, I found a Brady Kavannah, but he's not in our system. Squeaky-clean record, apparently. But I'm looking into something."

"Looking into what?"

"I need more information first. Actually, I'm talking to another department right now and waiting for them to call me back."

"What about?"

"It's not all that clear yet. Believe me when I say as soon as I know something, I'm phoning you."

Lori felt a sigh swell within her. The helplessness felt like a foreign bacterium, something that knocked around inside her without ever really

belonging. A sensation no person should ever have to feel—desperation trapped inside a cavity, never finding its way out.

“You still there?”

A tinge of pain jerked her neck. “I’m here.” No, she was far away, looking at a vaporous Mesa Falls like she had done so many times when she was in the dark, just before sleep drew her eyelids closed. “I found a book. Brady apparently oversaw a church library at one time.”

“A book?”

“The author’s name was the same as the one on the tattoo. You know, Spann?”

Beep.

Lori pulled the phone away from her and saw the battery was almost dead.

“It’s the name of an author, then?”

“Apparently.” Lori glimpsed the streaked, drained sky, wondering why the rain had delayed. “Isn’t that odd?”

Or is it nothing.

“Give me the name of the book.”

Lori closed the book to reference its title, even though she already knew. “*Strath of Splinters.*” The spidery flicker of typing in the background. “It’s right at a four-hundred pager, and it’s all I can do to make sense of it.”

“About Ireland.”

“You’ve heard of it?”

“No, I’m looking it up online.” A few more pecks at the keyboard.

Beep.

“Yeah, but why Ireland?”

A mouse-click. Then she heard the deputy suck in a short breath.

“Kavannagh is an Irish name.”

Dread, for whatever reason, spilled into her. “What?”

“Says here the surname is of Irish origin.”

Lori weighed the monster of a book in her hands, letting her eyes trace across the bland gold lettering as if she were seeing it for the first time.

Beep.

“This doesn’t belong in a church library,” she said. “It’s about people killing off their own government, about how they build bombs with coffee grinders. Why would he include that?”

“I wish I knew.”

Lori hated waiting like this. “So you don’t know anything else yet?”

A useless question. He’d already told her as much.

“Not yet. A million things on my plate...Sorry, that sounded rude. Not at all my intention.”

Lori became conscious then of how hard she’d been pushing him. He was committing every spare second he had to Murphy’s case, and even though the steps seemed small, she realized they’d actually made a lot of progress from where they’d started.

“What you’re doing,” she said, “it means a lot. How are things going with your other cases?”

Small talk. The switch felt good.

“Well...” Maybe he wasn’t supposed to tell her. The cases might’ve been confidential. “Just don’t leave your vehicle in an unlit area for an extended period of time. All I can say.”

The statement made sense in light of last month’s news. Neighboring county, but still close. She’d almost forgotten about the incident, and hadn’t previously connected that the department here might’ve been assisting with the case. A chemical time-delay bomb had exploded in an unoccupied car. Maybe someone gearing up for Halloween. Then there was a pipe bomb that had exploded a second vehicle. Also unoccupied. Serrated nails had been inside.

Maybe her saying something about the coffee grinders being used as bombs had sparked him turning the conversation in that direction.

Beep.

Silence.

Lori pulled the phone away and saw the screen was dead.

Chapter 9

LORI SHUT OFF THE HEAT. Now all was silent except for the gentle hum of her vehicle.

She slowed around a curve, briefly glimpsing a backyard where a woman and two young boys sat on the edge of a trampoline. A flare of the familiar, even though she and Murphy hadn't had children. The concept of an uninterrupted life. It was good to see others still living with a semblance of peace. She used to be one of those people.

Don't. Think about something else.

She trained her eyes on the grim, fluid movement of pavement that seemed to disappear endlessly at the hood of her vehicle until a break in the trees brought her house into view.

A black Pontiac Firebird was backing out of her driveway. She removed her foot from the gas pedal, but then the vehicle traveled away from her, and she realized the driver had likely just been turning around. Another overreaction. It wasn't like the world was stocked with bad people.

Lori parked and reached for the book. In some ways, it felt like a permanent part of her now. A silent, destructive companion. And as the rain began to leak from the solemn clouds, she felt a curtain pull across her soul.

She contemplated reading more of the book tonight, but now the pages seemed like only strings of dead words, buried in a decades-old past, so when she entered her home she laid it on the coffee table face down.

The sound of a vehicle returned to her driveway. Door closed. Lori hesitated in the middle of the living room until a hard knock came at the door.

"Hey, Lori, it's Deputy Rae. Can I come in?"

She hurriedly unbolted the door and found the deputy standing there, uniform splashed by the rain, black hair slightly wet, a look of concern written across his face. She pulled the door open wider. "Please, yes."

Deputy Rae stepped inside. "Your phone was dead. I didn't figure you'd mind my stopping by."

The door clicked shut. "You found something."

He shed his jacket first, then paused to listen to dispatch over his shoulder radio, though the direction of his eyes and the tightness in his jaw led her to believe he wasn't really listening at all. The blinds were parted slightly, and he seemed to be focused on the movement in the sky as the first sound of thunder rolled across the belly of the clouds. "I want to make one thing very clear before I begin."

Lori sat, realizing just how fast her heart was beating.

"What I found..." He measured his words slowly. "It may or may not relate to any of this. Just try not to jump to any conclusions before we—I—can investigate this further, okay?"

Lori leaned back. So he had found something on Kavannagh.

So.

"Okay?"

“Okay,” she repeated.

The deputy swallowed and pulled the notepad from his chest pocket, sighing before another clap of thunder shook the atmosphere. The dark circles under his eyes became deep pools in the angled light, and Lori couldn't be sure if the beads of water on his forehead were from the rain or from sweat. He withdrew a folded piece of paper and held it out to her. “First, I want you to look at this.”

Lori took the paper and unfolded it. A printout of Brady Kavannagh's driver's license had been expanded until it almost filled the top half of the page. He was young—upper twenties, even though Cassandra had appeared older. Light skin tone. Five-ten. Something about his eyes seemed distrustful, unsafe. A shadow of facial hair bristled his jawline.

Her eyes flickered to the address—202 Canvas Drive, Bracksboro, Utah—then glanced up at Deputy Rae, who was watching her with concern but said nothing. Slowly, she set down the page in front of her. Words just didn't seem possible right now.

“Remember how I told you I was talking to another department?”

Lori found his face. She'd never seen such wearied eyes. “I remember.”

“Apparently he's not the model citizen in Utah. Three priors.”

Lori turned toward the blinds, watching as a shelf of darker clouds moved in to blot out more of the sky. “Violent crimes?”

“Illegally modified weapons. Bracksboro PD has reason to believe he has an interest in assembling explosives.”

The bomb-making connection again. Was the rest of *Strath of Splinters* a handbook on building explosives? Had Brady been the one to set off those bombs in the neighboring county?

One thing at a time.

“They don't know?” she asked.

“Search warrant turned up chemicals. Stacks of fertilizer. They couldn't say conclusively. Kavannagh claimed it was all just one big chemistry lesson. And, since his wife happens to be an author and teacher in the field of chemistry, his argument won.”

The formulas on the tattoo. Was that all this was? Some grand fascination with science?

A stretch of silence fell across the room.

“The book there,” Deputy Rae started. “*Strath of Splinters*. You know why it's named that?”

“No.”

“*Strath* comes from an Irish word that means a wide valley. *Splinters* probably refers to all the splinter groups that originated under the Irish Republican Army. From my research, it seems to be a collection of stories from the different splinter groups and different time frames.”

Lori tightened her jaw. “I wonder if Kavannagh was inspired. Maybe he felt a sort of connection to it.”

“How much have you read?”

“About a quarter of the way through.”

Rae seemed to run that through his mind. “You haven’t got to page 303, then.”

Lori looked at him quizzically, then slid the book off the coffee table. For some reason, the pages felt unusually withered and cool between her fingertips as she flipped to the right page. Breathlessly, she scanned over the words.

And that’s when everything aligned.

And crumbled.

“It mentions the tattoo.” Nausea, swarming her. “And it’s exactly the same. It says here, ‘I saw it the day he was staring down hard at a report. I noticed in detail the marking on his neck of a sundial and a beast’s eye.’”

The sound of rain intensified, deepening the silence.

Finally, Lori set the open book in front of her. “Do you think he met with my husband? Is Murphy alive?”

Deputy Rae averted his eyes. “Lori, did your husband ever...owe this guy anything? Did he ever cross him? Ever notice anything off about this guy—”

“Nothing.” She’d already gone through the possibilities until there were none left.

None except one.

“Brady may have an interest in building explosives,” she said.

“Right.”

She didn’t want to consider the implications of what she was about to say next. “Murphy was a Certified Explosives Specialist at the ATF.”

The deputy’s face dropped. “He worked in the explosives division?”

“What if Brady knew? What if that’s why he wanted to meet my husband?”

Rae was silent, obviously taking it all in.

The uncomfortable thought seemed to stifle the oxygen in the room. “So Brady Kavannagh lives in Bracksboro.”

“Yes.”

She looked again to the printout of the driver’s license. “Is that his current address? The one on the license?”

A long pause. “Look, I promise to follow up on—”

“It’s a fair question. I want to know where the man lives.”

The deputy moved to retrieve the paper printout, but it didn’t matter. She already remembered the full address. Some things burn into your memory like that.

Darkness from the traveling clouds began draining the brightness from the room, so she stood on her tiptoes to turn on the ceiling fan light.

“He’s not there.”

Lori lowered her arm and stiffened. “Not where?”

“He just...He leaves a lot. Bracksboro PD went out there an hour ago. Nothing.”

Lori tried to figure out what that meant. Brady had left to go where? For how long? “He can’t do this. He can’t keep escaping like that. Are they going to bring him in for questioning?”

Rae gripped the back edge of her couch. Hands that were cracked around the knuckles. They'd undoubtedly bleed come winter if he didn't moisturize them enough. She knew because Murphy's hands had been that way. The bottle of lotion she'd bought for him still sat atop the nightstand on his side of the bed. She'd used some of it last night. Wanted to smell it again now, just to keep from feeling absent.

"I shouldn't have come," Rae said. His back popped as he twisted right. "It's still early. There's a lot we don't know."

Lori didn't feel like sitting, so she ran her palms along the side of her jeans. Keeping the sensation of touch alive.

202 Canvas Drive, Bracksboro, Utah.

Brady had cleared out. Disappeared, just as he had with Cassandra.

But, maybe.

Maybe there was still enough daylight left to—

"Just promise me that you'll..." Rae massaged his closed eyes. "I don't know. That you won't do anything stupid."

Her eyes went to the clock. Almost three. "I promise I won't do anything stupid."

"Good." Rae offered a grim smile that might as well have been a frown. "I better be goin'."

Lori clicked the door shut behind him as he left. *Hug your family when you get home*, she almost told him.

But she didn't.

The last phone call from Murphy faded more from her remembrance every day.

She glanced at *Strath of Splinters* lying open and felt its evil sliding across the room. Light fighting darkness.

She hurried to her bedroom and pulled up the directions to 202 Canvas Drive from her location.

Three hours, two minutes.

So. That would put her arriving around six o'clock. Without hesitating, she pulled open the top drawer of the nightstand.

And removed Murphy's Kel-Tec PF-9. She weighed it in her hand before stuffing it in its conceal case and slipping it into her jacket pocket. He'd always kept this one loaded as a *just in case*.

Now was one of those just-in-case times.

Beads of premature sweat formed on her forehead. She was only bringing the gun along as protection. Anyway, she'd promised Rae she wouldn't do anything stupid.

This wasn't stupid.

In fact, it was the most sensible thing she'd ever done.

Chapter 10

LORI TOOK THE EXIT OFF I-15. The semi in front of her coated her windshield in gritty mist as it exited with her.

Brady lived less than half an hour away, and as she drew closer, she couldn't help but feel apprehension closing in. The door to everything would either mouth open or pull shut.

Right or wrong.

In this moment, the door simply creaked on its hinges. Unsure. Waiting for that small breath of air that would compel it in either direction.

She swallowed, scared now. A pair of headlights approached in the opposite lane. Dipped and crawled down the isolated stretch of road, its lights reflecting against the wet pavement like broken stars leaking out their glory. And then it turned. A chill crawled through her, one much colder than the rain. She made a left and pressed the gas pedal a little harder, then glanced at the gun lying in the passenger seat for the hundredth time.

Still there.

Breathe. Her right hand was drawn inside itself, curled and numb, while the other shook softly against the steering wheel. *You're almost there.*

Slowly, her directions led her farther away from the main traffic and onto the quieter, winding roads where homes were nestled among acres of overgrown weeds and brush. The dampness was almost visible, forming a thick fog beneath the hunched trees.

A burn rose in her throat. Another glance at the directions. Then at the glowing green numbers on the dash.

Her heart pumped violently against its cage. *You're close. So close now.*

Deputy Rae had informed her that Brady had not been present at his address earlier this afternoon. What would happen if she knocked and no one answered?

You go home.

No.

She sat upright and felt the warmth evaporate from the back of her shirt. Sweat, in this weather. The road dipped a little, then leveled again. The pungent smell of rain was stronger here, perhaps because the water was draining off into all the lower parts.

Canvas Drive.

She found the brakes a little too hard, which spurred her heart into a quicker rhythm. The street sign stood angled away from the road. A premonition, maybe—even the sign wanted to leave.

She steered onto the narrow road. Down the hill dotted with pines.

A battered green mailbox displaying the numbers 202 came into view first. Then the wheeled trash can without a lid, sitting alongside the muddied gravel driveway.

Lori slowed. The driveway was empty, and there didn't appear to be any lights on in the singlewide. Rae had warned her.

You need to make sure.

Lori backtracked, leaving her car parked at the edge of a chained-off “No Trespassing” lot that didn’t appear residential, out of sight of Brady’s home. Thickness gripped the air as she slogged through a drenched carpet of leaves toward the cover of pines. Rain continued to pierce the darkening clouds relentlessly, already finding its way down her neck in rolling beads. The Kel-Tec didn’t have a round chambered and was small enough for her to slip into the back pocket of her jeans. She felt for it beneath her shirt now to ensure it wasn’t getting wet.

The sound of a distant car snapped her attention to the lonely road, but nothing materialized. She continued edging toward the backside of Brady’s singlewide, her heart steadier in rhythm now. Her breathing more controlled.

Another step. The undergrowth of thorny plants clawed at her jeans as she trudged deeper. She didn’t know how, yet, she was going to enter—only that she had to. That everything so far had climaxed to this moment.

The tranquil sound of traffic loomed somewhere in the air, seemingly far away now as new sounds of skittering leaves and branches popping beneath her weight became dominant.

A rickety back porch entered her view. So this was where Brady lived. Some of the time. Piled underneath the porch were pieces of old PVC pipe, along with broken chunks of concrete and a couple of ten-gallon buckets. No vehicle here. She approached the porch slowly, scanning the window for any sign that she was being watched. But the area remained still.

Perfect calm, except for the driving rain.

She mounted the steps. Not surprisingly, the back door was locked. She found a window where a cracked air conditioning unit sat and braced her hands against the lip of the window, then pushed upward.

Locked too.

She slapped her hand against the metal unit and exhaled, fogging the air with her breath. She had to break in. Find anything that would tell her where Brady had gone. She glanced at the plastic green chair on the porch. Wouldn’t be strong enough to do the job.

But the chunk of a concrete block would. She descended the first step when a thought hit her.

The A/C unit in the window. Not long ago, she’d heard on the news about a string of home invasions happening exactly that way—window units being pushed straight through if homeowners hadn’t taken extra precaution during the installation.

Lori returned to the window and found two brackets screwed to the outside vinyl and foam lining the perimeter of the unit, but nothing else.

Screwdriver... What can I use? She quickly snapped off the back case of her cell phone and wedged the corner of it into the screw's indentation as the rain continued to peck down.

She turned it counterclockwise. Again. A little faster now.

The screw was almost out—

Tires hit gravel. Paralysis flooded her limbs as she held her breath and faced the small section of driveway that wound around the backside of the house. The rest of the driveway was hidden from view, but the sound of churning rocks grew louder.

Surely it's not him, unless...

Unless.

He was coming back.

With no time to return to the cover of the woods, she ducked beneath the porch and crouched behind the two ten-gallon buckets. Not much of a concealment, but she was out of good options.

Her hand slipped to her weapon but didn't withdraw it.

A shiver found her as a dusty white Mitsubishi truck rolled into the driveway. Its pale headlights glowed behind the veil of drizzle, then shut off. Lori swallowed and watched between the narrow gap of the buckets as the door popped open. Boots slapped the drenched ground as the driver exited, sending a spray of muddied rainwater against the face of a rim.

The door slammed shut, but the stairs blocked any view of a face. The jeans and gait, however, most certainly belonged to a male.

Quiet.

A warning to herself, because her lungs were heaving without permission. Caused by fear instead of lack of oxygen. She returned her arm in front of her, making her body as small as possible behind the buckets. Cool, watery mud slicked against her ankle as she crouched lower.

The man approached the stairs. His stride seemed hurried. A heavy-looking matte black watch hugged his freckled wrist.

Five-ten, she thought. The height listed on Brady's driver's license, although she couldn't possibly be certain of this man's size. *Pale skin.*

He drew closer. His face was coming into view—

Lori's jaw tightened as soon as she saw him. The driver's license photo matched his visage perfectly. His rolled sleeves kept his upper arms from view, but somehow, even though she couldn't see the tattoo, she knew it was on him. Hidden, like apparently everything else in Brady's life.

The wooden boards creaked as he strode across the porch. Lori held her breath, tensing against the tingling sensation in her left leg. A wash of numbness spreading downward.

Keys rattled before the back door scraped open. Brady stepped inside but didn't close the door behind him.

One reason.

He's going to leave again.

She braced her hand against one of the grimy buckets concealing her and stared hard at Brady's truck. The corner of a green tarp dangled over the side.

Follow him.

Pursuing in her vehicle would never work. Evening was settling in, and he'd spot a tail instantly.

Her heart hammered. She hadn't come this far to watch him drive away. To let him leave again, elusive as he'd been so many times before, maybe this time for good.

You know what you need to do.

The option wasn't certain. It was even less sane.

Lori kept low and hurried toward Brady's truck. Water from the puddles found her legs, and she prayed the noise of the drizzle against the tin roof would be enough to cover for her as she neared the truck. This was crazy and stupid and everything Deputy Rae had warned against, but the only thing that kept pumping through her mind was that she had to find Murphy. Wherever this lead took her, she needed to follow it.

She glanced at the back door—empty—before ducking behind the truck bed. Brady was in there, maybe using the bathroom. Maybe standing near one of the windows. Watching her. Rummaging for a gun.

Gun.

She felt for her back pockets, already sensing the emptiness. Fabric that went flat against her touch.

It's gone.

A blanket of panic wrapped over her. The gun must've fallen out when she'd squatted to hide beneath the porch. Must be in the mud there now, unmoving and useless and collecting water in the barrel.

There wasn't time to retrieve it. Wasn't time to—

Run away or get in the truck.

She stared at the ratty square of tarp draped inside the truck bed, weighted down by a piece of firewood.

Murphy's words came back to her: "*When you run into a possibility you can't rule out, then try to prove it.*"

Brady hadn't been ruled out.

She lifted a corner of the tarp and slid underneath.

Chapter 11

TWO MINUTES PASSED BEFORE BRADY STRODE QUICKLY DOWN THE STEPS. A moment later, the truck stirred as he hopped in. Started the engine.

Reality flooded in like a thousand icy beads as the tires began to move. Too late to reconsider escaping. She would be taken miles from her parked vehicle—maybe completely out of range of a cell tower—and if Brady found her weaponless...

I'm coming, Murphy.

The only thing she allowed her mind to consider.

The tarp amplified the sound of the pattering rain, as though tiny shards of glass were tumbling from a broken firmament. She shifted her weight cautiously and tried gripping the ribs of the truck bed's floor to keep from sliding around too much. Gravel rocks popped against the belly of the truck, and then the sound was replaced by the rush of air above smooth pavement.

Faster now. She breathed in the thick, musty smell of the tarp, oblivious to everything but the threaded, pea-green veil that shrouded her body.

Brady made a sharp turn. Lori struggled to hold her position with one hand as she used her other to fish out her cell phone. She altered a few settings before punching in a text to Deputy Rae.

Found Brady at his home. In back of his truck now. Track the GPS on my cell. Don't call—too scared to answer.

She'd left out mentioning that she had willingly entered the back of his truck in an effort to follow him. The police weren't as obligated to act when a person took certain issues into their own hands.

But a person considered kidnapped would raise immediate concern. And there were phrases that existed for a person who wanted to be responded to.

I fear he might hurt me, she texted. It wasn't a lie. Losing her weapon had allowed the brunt of her fears to surface. When he discovered her in the back of his truck, he likely wouldn't appreciate the surprise.

She hit the send button.

Over an hour had passed. She'd lost cell service for nearly forty minutes, and when her phone had finally hit a weak signal again, several texts from Deputy Rae poured through. He'd contacted Bracksboro PD. Instructed her to remain calm. Asked a handful of questions that she had difficulty answering because her shaking fingers were missing buttons and nightfall was rapidly settling and she didn't want to risk Brady seeing the glow of her phone from beneath the tarp.

She also told the deputy that her battery had fallen to twelve percent. Continuing to use her phone would only drain it faster.

All at once, the truck hit bumpy terrain, then jolted to a stop.

She slid forward, almost knocking her head against the front of the truck bed. Maybe enough of a movement for him to hear.

Chest throbbing, Lori hurriedly turned her phone face down. Wrapped her hands fully around it, in case Rae texted her back and the small light from the lock screen showed through. She held her breath as Brady exited. The sound of his footsteps trailed off a ways until she heard a door creak open, then slap shut.

She gently pushed a corner of the tarp off her face, noticing first how inky and bruised the sky appeared. Bony tree limbs stretched against the heavens like thin stains, somehow darker than the almost-black expanse.

Slowly, she sat up until her head was just above the rim of the truck bed. Through the darkness, she could see that the property here was covered in trees and dense vegetation. A small glow of light lay just beyond the covering. A neighbor, maybe. The size of the beam made it difficult to guess how far away.

She dropped to the ground. The slight rain made no difference anymore to her drenched clothes and matted hair. She crept a good twenty feet from the truck when she spotted a second vehicle.

Is someone else here?

She peered at the vehicle before the recognition struck. A black Pontiac Firebird.

The same vehicle that pulled out of your driveway earlier this evening.

A new wave of questions pounded into her. Someone inside that house knew where she lived.

Where Murphy had lived.

He's in there, isn't he?

She couldn't know that. Only guesses. She kept her eyes trained on the faint glow.

You need to be careful. Stay alive.

It only took a few more steps until she reached the clearing where the shack Brady had entered sat. The small structure was situated alone behind a wall of ashen firs on all sides. Rain steadily slapped the surface of the watery trench that circled toward the splintered door.

On first glance, it might have appeared vacant, a lost fragment of some hunter's lodge, if it hadn't been for that single square of light flowing from the west side. Subtle and bleeding into the corners of black. So seemingly distant from the rest of the world.

An eerie calmness settled beneath the discolored sky and spearheaded trees. One yellow curtain shielded the only front-facing window, and with no other apparent opportunity for her to be watched, Lori silently approached the edge of the shack. Put her ear against the rough wood exterior and listened.

Two people spoke in low voices. Male. Their words indistinguishable, perhaps coming from another room. She lifted her eyes to the window, hoping to get a glimpse, but the only thing she could see was the curtain's texture. The way the light flickered against it led her to believe that a lantern or some other small flame must have been lighting the room.

Her body shook from either the rain or fear. She surveyed the rest of the outside area. At one corner of the house sat a wrecked lean-to structure, doing little to harbor its chunks of firewood from the weather.

Lori stood only as high as she dared and started toward the back of the property. But just as she reached the edge of the lean-to, a spine of lightning lit the world for a brief moment.

Long enough for her to glimpse what was resting beside the pile of firewood.

The night air crippled her lungs as she reached out and touched the tip of the fly fishing rod.

“Murphy.” Lori cradled the disassembled fishing rod in her hands and returned beneath the fragile light of the window. She swept her cold fingers across the smooth cork, the aluminum reel, the mist-green rod. No, there was no doubt this was his.

Then he’s here.

The realization made her physically tremble.

Then she heard it. A door slapping shut. Shuffled footsteps, paling in sound.

Where were they—

Her eyes went to the base of the house as a second dull light appeared. She crawled closer, steadying her palms against the mud. A cellar window, small and rectangular, not much wider than the length of a brick. Seemed to be coated with dust from the inside. Again, she heard voices, but something was different this time.

She placed her fingers against the pane and gently tried to lift. Wouldn’t budge. She stared hard at the front door.

“I’ve told you everything.”

Her husband’s voice. On impulse, her muscles turned rigid.

He’s in there.

And then the words evaporated into the night, as if nothing had ever been said. As if the entire phrase had been an illusion. She listened for more, but no reply came. Only movement.

Now’s your chance.

Her eyes returned to the front door.

No one would hear you enter.

Drenched thoroughly in the rain and with no time to consider an alternate plan, Lori hurried to the front door and slipped inside.

Beads of water slicked down her neck and arms as she took a second step into the empty room, heart galloping into a new speed.

Easy.

It might explode inside her chest if she wasn’t careful.

Don’t make a sound.

She looked at the floor, knowing Brady and the Firebird driver were down there somewhere, unaware of her presence. And if she’d heard right, Murphy was down there with them.

A dust-stirred darkness cloaked the room. Candles had been the light source. Two of them near the window. Someone had smoked recently, lending to the certain thickness in the air, mingling with cheaply-fragranced vanilla wax. In the failing light, she examined the cramped space: a sleeping bag, a tattered couch, shelves and boxes, scattered papers.

And a smell, separate from the cigarette smoke and candles. Difficult to describe. Almost chemical.

As she took another step, her eyes trailed to the hinged door in the floor. Opened and angled backward against the hardwood. From the way the solid trunk coffee table had been slid sideways, she imagined it typically kept the door from being used.

With the entrance mouthed open, she could easily see the brass padlock dangling from the inside of the door, catching the light of the flickering candles. The key was inserted.

The person in the cellar can lock himself in.

She imagined Brady had added the feature should his shack ever be raided by law enforcement.

Because he's good at hiding.

The flickering candles triggered a thought. She searched the walls until she spotted a smoke alarm mounted just above the door leading to what was most likely a bedroom.

A flutter of hesitation.

She stepped to the window, watching the candle's flame waver above its yellowing wax pond. Then she took the curtain gently in her hand and pulled it over the candle.

Watched it begin to burn.

She let it crawl up the fabric and stepped quietly into the bedroom and rotated the cap off the smoke alarm.

Then pressed the *test* button.

Chapter 12

LORI'S FINGERS TREMBLED AWAY FROM THE SMOKE DETECTOR AS SHRILL BEEPING FLOODED THE ROOM.

A bad plan.

She crouched behind the bedroom door, suddenly unsure of her location. Wondering if she should've chosen somewhere else to hide.

There may not be a way out once you get down—

Someone cursed in the cellar. She repositioned herself, numbly bracing her hand against the threadbare carpet.

One or two people were running up the stairs now.

“The wall's on fire!” one of the men yelled.

Lori peered between the crack of the hinged door as she heard the front door tear open.

She stood. A broad-shouldered man—larger than Brady—had run to the sink. Faucet running.

Go.

Weaponless.

A bad plan.

Lori ran, past the flickering shadows on the wall and the kitchen where the Firebird driver's back was turned to her. She hit the cellar stairs louder than she'd expected.

The man pivoted from the sink.

Eye contact for only a split second before she slapped the cellar door shut and slammed the padlock into a lock hold from the inside.

Her heart throbbed in the musty darkness. She yanked the key from the lock and turned to the hazy sphere of light waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

“Murphy?” She tested two steps and then stopped, noticing how stark the smell was at this point.

Movement above her. The door she'd locked began to rattle. Either the man at the sink was trying to open the door, or he'd notified Brady.

She gripped the railing and took another step.

A pair of boots came into view, tied at the ankles to the legs of a chair. Dirt along the front of the jeans, then—

“Murphy!” She hurried to where her husband sat bound to a chair and tilted his head up at her. His face was bruised, unexpectedly bearded, eyes swimming to focus. Behind him, his arms were secured with multiple zip ties to a chain that wrapped around a large chest freezer.

A harsh banging sounded on the cellar's locked door. “Open this now!”

Her limbs stiffened. She could only pray she'd done the right thing. With one hand, she held Murphy's face while the other swept over his forehead wound marked by crusted blood. “What have they done to you?”

He started to speak, but his eyes were closing.

Various tools hung on the wall next to a steel worktable. She grabbed a pliers and used both hands to snip at the plastic restraints. At the last cut, his body slumped sideways onto her, toppling her to the floor.

Something's wrong with him.

Diabetic. If he hadn't been getting his medicine—

The smoke alarm stopped blaring upstairs.

Lori crawled out from beneath her husband and shivered, having never felt colder. She scrutinized the walls for any form of escape.

Only the one window, which she'd seen outside. Not big enough to climb through.

The banging on the cellar door reentered her senses. The wood was thick, but it wouldn't hold them back forever.

Her eyes lowered to the far wall. Stacked against it were fifty-pound bags of fertilizer. Numerous cans of paint thinner.

Too many to be considered a harmless interest in science.

He really is making bombs.

She wasn't an expert by no means, but she'd seen enough crime shows to know that unregulated ingredients like ammonium nitrate made things remarkably easy for someone crafting an explosive.

Her gaze returned to the steel table near the wall-hanging tools. A syringe lay on the edge.

Lori stared into her husband's eyes. "Did they drug you or is it your blood sugar making you weak?"

The pounding upstairs ceased. *Please leave.* If only they would flee out of fear of being caught. But she worried that would not be the case.

Lori tasted copper as she swallowed. "Are you drugged?"

Murphy's eyes scanned over her, his arms fumbling for stability. "Lori?"

"I'm here."

He planted his palm on the seat of the chair and tried to stand. "You... shouldn't be here."

Lori wrapped her arm around his waist to help him balance. "Tell me what's wrong."

A weak shake of his head. "My insulin," he whispered. "On the table...Get it for me."

Lori found the bottle of insulin among a collection of other vials and rolled it quickly between her palms to mix it. With no alcohol in sight to cleanse the syringe, she simply swiped the needle along the inner fabric of her shirt and prayed she hadn't introduced any new microorganisms. Pulling the plunger back, she drew the required units into the syringe and returned to where Murphy now stood on his own, shaking terribly.

A gunshot erupted upstairs. The pumping sound that followed told her the shotgun had been fed another round. "Consider yourself warned," the man said. "You're as good as dead if you don't open this door."

Lori's heartbeat spiked as Brady's unbidden face returned in her memory. He really was a madman.

She knelt beside Murphy and lifted his shirt, his arms and legs visibly twitching. She pinched a fold of skin to the side of his abdomen and depressed the plunger.

A second gunshot. The spray of pellets sounded like they'd taken a chunk from the cellar door.

You have to stop this.

She edged as close as she dared to the base of the steps. "I know who you are, Brady!"

An uncomfortable pause, then shifting footsteps. "If you don't unlock this door right now—"

"I've called for backup. The cops have your location. If you don't believe me, then wait, because you're going to prison either way."

His breathing, even though the floorboards, was identifiable. Heavy. Animalistic.

"I'm armed, Kavannah, just as they'll be when they get here. We know who you are. You take one step down those stairs and we'll see who fires first."

Of course, she was bluffing. But it was all she had, and by the stretch of silence that followed, she thought maybe it might work.

But then, she heard it. A trickle of water, maybe.

The stairwell was dark, but soon the liquid came, dribbling down through the cracks of the cellar door, slapping the wooden steps in thin trails.

Something clattered behind her and she turned. Murphy was at the tool wall, rummaging for something. For a moment longer, she eyed the liquid flowing down the steps, then took a step back. Murphy was fighting to stay conscious, and right now he required her full attention.

She asked him, "Do you need more insulin?"

He threw open a desk drawer and dug inside it, his face visibly ashen. Finally, he shook his head. "The other guy was with Brady." Lori didn't connect the meaning until he said, "At Mesa Falls. He hit me in the back of the head."

The words created an incomplete visual in her mind—poor quality and slow motion and one angle. She didn't want to see it anymore.

"Brought me down," he continued, "but I stayed conscious. Then he came at me again."

The sharp scent of gasoline tore away her thoughts. She looked at the stairs again, the liquid suddenly making sense.

No! She glanced at the fertilizer and other materials hoarded along the walls of the room. Everything was clicking into place too quickly.

"They're going to catch it on fire." The words slipped from her lips.

They're going to blow up the evidence—and us.

Murphy snatched something from the drawer and stumbled toward the freezer. "I know." The insulin must've been taking early effect because his words came out steadier now. "He's an arsonist."

The one Deputy Rae and Bracksboro PD and possibly other departments was searching for.

A sudden burst of fire surged down the stairs, lighting up the room with unmatched power. Flakes of gray ash stirred through the air as the flames singed the blistered wallpaper.

Lori shielded her face from the heat and stumbled to where Murphy stood. “What are you doing?”

His complexion was worn, but his movement was sure as he grabbed the padlock that secured the chain wrapped around the freezer. He stuck a tool in it and twisted it a notch, then wriggled the other tool inside. “I’m getting us inside this freezer before the whole place catches.”

She stared at the freezer as though it were an above-ground grave.

A charred ember fell from the roof above the stairwell and dispersed as it struck the floor. Murphy’s words were still ticking through her head. “Brady wanted you to help him become the perfect arsonist.” The reason why the two men had abducted her husband and brought him, a certified explosives specialist, to this room where the materials were.

“He wanted to blow up the college.”

The bluntness of the words made her throat go dry. *The college*. Speculation took over, and she wondered if he’d intended for Cassandra, his wife, to be a target. Or if he wanted to send a message.

“My God,” she said. She turned to monitor the fire, which had now spread almost entirely across the far wall and was nearing the corner of the next. Then her eyes instinctively went to the cellar’s only window, focusing again. “Where’s the main explosives?”

The muscles in Murphy’s neck shook, likely from nausea, as he worked furiously at the lock’s tumblers, but he managed to nod toward the wall. “The ammonium nitrate on the floor.”

She shielded her eyes from the heat as she noted them again. The external and internal heat were almost too much to bear in combination. “Okay. What else?”

“The alcohol and paint thinner, on the shelves there.”

Alcohol. She located it, realizing it had been present all along.

“One of the paint buckets has fuel in it,” he said. “He’s got a powder concoction in the ten-gallon bucket just below.”

Lori grabbed the paint thinner and fuel. “Keep working on the lock.” She slid the chair beneath the window and mounted it.

Freedom, so far away.

She ruptured the window’s glass and began pouring the contents of the paint thinner outside. The window wasn’t at ground level, but close. A few drops of rain spilled inside as the fire raged.

All this time, Brady had been playing a role. A terrorist just like those listed among the chapters of *Strath of Splinters*. She tossed the empty buckets across the room and returned to grab both gallons of alcohol.

The fire was getting warmer, closing in.

“He brought me a picture of you today.”

Beads of sweat clung to Lori’s forehead as she spun. *A picture of me?*

His eyes were bloodshot, desperately trying to stay open. Maybe the insulin wasn't working fast enough after all. "A threat to hurt you if I didn't talk."

Lori thought back to the vehicle she's seen pulling out of their driveway, finally understanding. She finished with the second bottle and hurried back to the shelves for the ten-gallon bucket. She tugged at it but it hardly budged.

He stared at her, like he'd wanted her to say something. Then his hand released the padlock and went to his stomach.

Lori ran to him as he collapsed to the ground. "What's wrong?"

Everything's wrong.

They were going to die right here, in this fire.

He exhaled hard. "I'm gonna get sick. I..."

Lori pulled him close.

"My blood sugar's..." He gritted his teeth and fumbled to grab his fallen tools.

Too late.

She'd tried to remove some of the explosives from the room, but it wouldn't be enough.

Let it be the explosion rather than the flames. She couldn't die that way—trapped and burning. She wanted to cradle her husband longer, but he already seemed to be slipping.

The fire continued to chew against the walls. Too much time had passed already. Murphy's sickness, the fatigue—he might be on the verge of a diabetic coma. "Rest," she told him.

It would all be over soon.

He swallowed a lungful of air and struggled to stand. "You remember how to do it."

She watched the fire reflect in his eyes before locating the scattered tools. He'd shown her before. And she'd done it.

Only once.

She forced her hands to work and pick them up.

Coils of smoke spread across the ceiling as the flames snaked along the floor. The fragile stairway suddenly collapsed, circling the air with paper-thin flecks of sparks and ash.

Lori slid the padlock toward herself. Quickly, she readjusted the tension wrench, holding it at the same angle her husband had.

Leave it there. Don't apply pressure.

The muscles in her arms stiffened as she grabbed the pick and poked it into the back wall of the key entrance. Deep, but not so deep that she couldn't wiggle it.

A small burst of fire erupted and wrapped around an empty ten-gallon bucket, shrinking it slowly into a waxen piece of nothing.

Focus.

Applying slight pressure to the tension wrench, she swiftly withdrew the pick.

A definite *click*.

The lock had popped.

With unsteady fingers, Lori slipped the padlock from the chain and threw open the freezer door. A final look at the flames. “We need to get in right now.”

She helped Murphy stand, and when he fell into the empty freezer, she barely let him recover before piling in beside him. Then she closed the door and their world went black.

Sirens. Distant.

And then very near.

Law enforcement had responded quickly, but without the freezer for protection, they wouldn't have come soon enough.

“The police,” Lori breathed.

Murphy's twitching had calmed to a low tremble. “We're gonna be okay.”

Peace, however small, mixed with warm adrenaline. “Yes. We are.”

Epilogue

MURPHY WAS RELEASED FROM SEAKOTA REGIONAL HOSPITAL TWO DAYS AFTER COMING DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO SLIPPING INTO A DIABETIC COMA. Due to the extent of time he'd spent without consistent treatment, doctors said it was a miracle his condition hadn't turned life-threatening.

The sheriff's department, with the help of Deputy Jack Rae, apprehended Brady Kavannah and his accomplice Tom Cohen as they were fleeing the site of the burning lodge. Kavannah and Cohen were later indicted by a grand jury for their role in kidnapping, arson, and unlawfully making and possessing destructive devices. An indictment is an accusation. A defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

Strath of Splinters was never returned to Freshcreek Fellowship, though it was not missed because the pastor testified he'd never known it had even been there.

The local media had a field day covering the story of the arsonists-at-large being captured, and, as news stories usually go, the fascination ran its course until slowly things returned to normality. To life again.

About the Author



A. E. Schwartz is the debut author of her Christian suspense novel *Nothing Hidden*, which has already received praise from #1 New York Times bestselling author Robert Dugoni and bestselling author Steven James.

When she's not writing, she's busy coaching other authors on the craft of fiction. A. E. lives in East Tennessee with her husband.

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