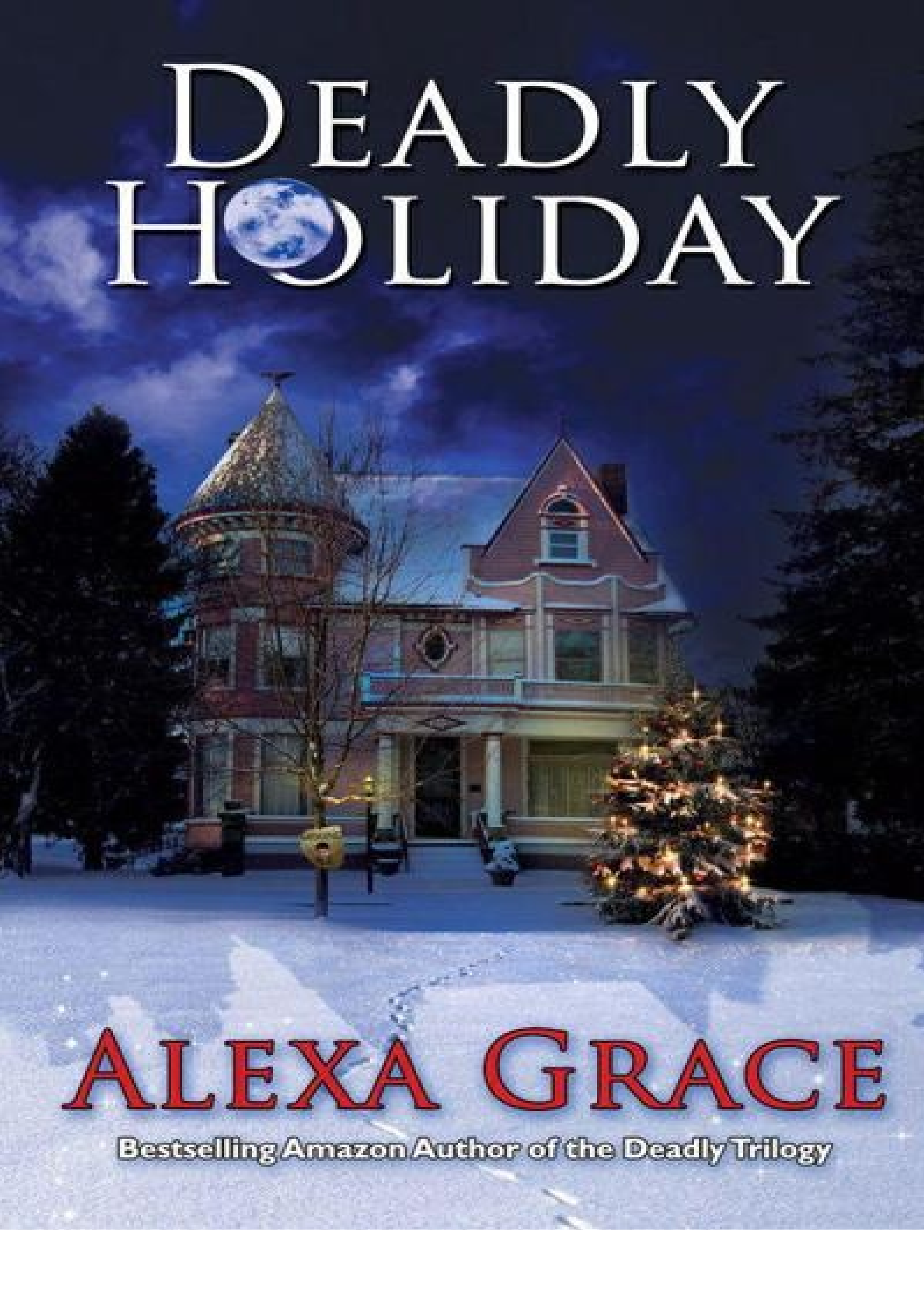


DEADLY HOLIDAY



ALEXA GRACE

Bestselling Amazon Author of the Deadly Trilogy

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Deadly Holiday

By Alexa Grace

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Dedication

For my amazing, loyal readers, and street team.
May your holidays be merry and filled with happiness.

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Any mistakes here are entirely mine.

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Thank you to Jeff and Karen Dible for allowing me to use a photograph of their lovely home for the design of this cover.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to my family and friends. Without their love, encouragement and support, this book would not have been possible.

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Anne Mason-Brandt peeked through sleepy eyes at her clock, noticing it was five forty-five in the morning. The handsome man sleeping soundly next to her, who was the county prosecutor, would wake up in fifteen minutes. She rolled over to wrap her arms and legs around his warm, hard body. As his arms tightened around her, Anne felt she was the luckiest woman in the universe. She was married to the man of her dreams, who'd given her two beautiful children, and a happy life she'd once thought was beyond her reach.

Anne traced Michael's broad shoulders and hard-sculpted body with her fingertips, smiling when his eyes fluttered open. He pulled her close and planted tiny kisses on the sensitive places around his neck that sent a delightful shiver up her spine. Anne sighed, tilting her head to give him better access. She sighed again, this time in frustration, because he abruptly stopped when they heard a knock at the door, and two loud barks from an excited dog.

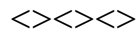
Michael softly whispered, "We'll continue this later," as their five-year-old twins, Melissa and Michael Jr., bounded into the room and onto the bed, followed by their Giant Schnauzer, Harley.

Melissa wrapped her little arms around Anne's neck and said, "Grammy-Daisy said that Santa was watching us to see if we're being good."

Anne smiled as she visualized Daisy, housekeeper, friend, and the children's Grammy, using the holiday bit of information to get the sometimes-unruly twins to behave. "Honey, if you are behaving then you've nothing to worry about. Right?"

Stroking the big dog's head, Michael Jr. shot his mom a skeptical look and said, "Does Santa watch Harley, too? Because yesterday Grammy got mad because he tracked in dirt on her clean kitchen floor."

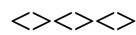
Anne glanced at her husband who was trying not to grin, and said, "It sounds like Harley should wipe off his paws when he comes inside. Maybe we should get him some boots." The twins giggled at the visual and their dad pulled them into a bear hug, sending them into shrieks of laughter.



After breakfast, Anne helped her husband with his tie and kissed him before he left for work. She wandered into the formal living room where she admired the six-foot Christmas tree that Michael and the kids had chosen from a wooded area of their farm, along with Hank, their farm foreman. Michael had made hot chocolate that they'd sipped by the fireplace, as the children decorated the tree. The memory made her smile.

Upstairs, Anne pulled off her nightgown and stepped into the shower, letting the warm water stream down her body. Squeezing some rose-scented shower gel into her hand, she rubbed each arm until a cloud of suds appeared. Anne put more gel into her hands to wash her left breast then her right. Warning spasms of alarm erupted within her when she felt a pea-sized lump as hard as a stone in her right breast. Panic like she'd never known before welled in her throat. No, it couldn't be. Anne had lost Marion – a friend who was more like a mother – to cancer, and the horrible disease had become her greatest fear. Perhaps she was imagining something that wasn't there.

Anne ran her fingers over the area again. The lump was still there. She leaned against the shower wall, staring but not seeing, her breath bursting in and out. She slid against the water-slickened shower wall until she sat cross-legged beneath the pounding water. She hugged herself, rocking back and forth, as she wept. Anne indulged in her personal pity for a few minutes before she got on her feet. She resolved to tap into the strength she knew she had deep inside. She wrapped herself in a towel and called her doctor.



Prosecutor Michael Brandt looked at the frightened boy in his office and wished he could avoid the discussion that would ensue. The kid, sitting stock-still, was thin with auburn hair and a sprinkle of freckles across his nose. His legs weren't long enough to reach the floor, and he nervously kicked on the floor back and forth.

That any little boy should have to testify against his father was wrong on many levels. That he should have to do it this close to Christmas was dreadful.

Michael cleared his throat as he moved around the desk to sit next to Shawn Isaac. "I want to start out by telling you how brave I think you are. I know testifying today isn't going to be easy for you. Do you have any questions?"

Shawn looked up at Michael, eyes wide with fear. "Will my daddy be in the room?"

"Yes, Shawn. He will be sitting at a long table with his attorney."

"Will he be able to hurt me?"

"No, Shawn. I won't let him hurt you. Neither will the judge nor the policemen in the room."

Shawn sighed as he considered this. "What about my mommy? Will Daddy be able to hurt her?"

"No, Shawn," he said. The muscle at the side of his jaw tightened, but Michael fought to control the anger that filled him. His son, Michael Jr., was the same age. Shawn should have been able to count on his father to protect him, just as Michael Jr. depended on him. In a perfect world, Shawn would not have experienced beatings at the hands of his father. And he would not have witnessed the abuse his mother suffered. "Let's talk about when you testify."

"I'm scared." Shawn said, as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"I know, Shawn. But you're braver than you think. I know you can do this." Michael squeezed the little boy's hand and continued. "When you are in the witness chair, I will be asking you some questions."

"I know. Detective Blake said I must tell the truth."

"He's right. Tell the truth," said Michael. "When I'm asking you questions, it will help if you only look at me. Don't look around the room, and don't look at your dad."

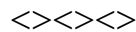
Biting his lip, Shawn nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Speak loudly enough so that you can be heard," Michael advised. "Don't worry. I'll be standing close to you. I'll be right there if you need me."

"Will the judge make my daddy stop hitting us so that we can be a family like Billy Collins has. His mommy and daddy are nice to each other. They kiss. Sometimes they pull Billy into a big hug."

Michael's heart squeezed as he struggled for the right words to comfort the boy. "Shawn, the judge will do all he can to change your dad's behavior. But when it comes right down to it, your dad must decide to change."

A loud rap on the door let Michael know that Blake Stone had arrived to take Shawn to the courthouse, and wait with him until the boy testified. Michael affectionately patted Shawn's back then headed for the door.



At her front door, Jennifer Brennan-Stone stood aside so her parents, Megan and Tim, could enter her house. Their arms filled with Christmas presents, they headed for the living room where Jennifer and Blake's glittering, decorated tree stood before a wide window.

"Gonna snow tonight," predicted her dad. Though he was sheriff, he prided himself on his accurate weather predictions. "By the way, you're huge. When did your doctor say the baby was due?"

"Thanks for pointing out my size, Dad," Jennifer said as she waddled to the sofa to sit down. "If I get any bigger, I'll have to shop at the tent and awning store for clothes."

Megan sat on the sofa and picked up a soft throw to lay across her daughter's lap. "Ignore your dad. He's missing the filter that goes from his brain to his mouth."

"Jennifer, you know how excited I am about this baby. If I comment on your size, it just means I'm hoping for twins. Or how about triplets?" A grin teased the corners of Tim's mouth.

Jennifer groaned and threw a sofa pillow at her father as he eased into the recliner. Truth be known, Jennifer didn't care if she had one baby or three, just as long as they were healthy. She and Blake had already decided to fill their home with children — as many as they could afford.

Megan leaned over to kiss her daughter on the cheek. "You look beautiful, honey. You've got that happy glow that pregnant women get."

"Thanks, Mom. I am happy. I can't wait until this baby arrives, and neither can Blake."

"Are you still telling your doctor you don't want to know if it's a boy or a girl?" asked Tim.

"I want it to be a surprise — the best holiday surprise ever."

"Yeah, I get it. But I sure would like to know. It'd make it a lot easier to choose those sports-related Christmas presents I've been eying."

Megan rolled her eyes and said, "This baby isn't even born yet and you've got it playing sports."

"Lean toward soccer, Dad," said Jennifer. "Blake and I are hoping he or she will want to play soccer. It turns out we both played in high school."

"Where's Blake?" asked Tim.

"He went to Michael Brandt's office to pick up Shawn Isaac and take him to the courthouse. Today is John Isaac's hearing, and Blake wants to be there for Shawn," Jennifer explained. "I just wish

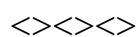
could have been there, too. It's going to be tough for Shawn to testify against his father."

"Honey, your doctor has you on bed rest for a reason. You're not going anywhere," said Megan.

"Blake really likes that kid," Tim began. "I think the feelings are mutual. Did you know that Shawn requested Blake for my Buddy Program that pairs children-at-risk with law enforcement officers?"

"Yes. Blake really enjoys spending time with Shawn," she answered. "They made lasagna together last weekend." Jennifer smiled as she glanced at the numerous presents under the tree that were for Shawn. He'd become a frequent visitor, thanks to the Buddy Program. "He is a very special little boy. I think he owns a piece of Blake's heart, and mine, too."

"Too bad about his dad," said Tim. "What kind of a man beats his wife and five-year-old son? I hope the judge throws the book at him. The last thing that little boy should be doing this time of year is telling a courtroom filled with people how his father abused his mother and him."



It was an overcast day with puffy snow clouds dotting the gray sky, as Blake walked Shawn through town to the courthouse. Shop owners spared no expense in the glistening ornaments and glittering lights gracing their store windows, capturing the curiosity of small children. Shawn paused before each, his eyes filled with wonder. Blake's heart clenched as he speculated about what kind of Christmas the little boy would have at home. He'd heard that Shawn's mother had lost her job and was drinking again. Blake was going to ask Eve if she and Shawn would join his family and friends for Christmas dinner. Everyone was gathering at Tim and Megan's Victorian home, and there would be children with whom Shawn could play. The little boy had stolen his heart. He'd do anything to make Shawn's life better, happier.

Blake felt a tug on his coat sleeve and found Shawn had stopped before a storefront filled with shiny, new toys. Wordlessly, the little boy stood staring inside the shop window. He reached for Blake's hand and held on.

"What do you want for Christmas, Shawn?"

"I want a fire truck, a train and a soccer ball," he answered, as he bent his neck to look up at the big man.

"That right?" Blake said with a smile. He and Jennifer had wrapped those three items and placed them under their Christmas tree the night before.

Glancing at his watch, Blake said, "We need to go now, Shawn. We don't want to be late." He and Shawn walked hand-in-hand down the street toward the giant brick courthouse where the fate of the little boy's father would be decided. Blake wished the hearing were over. More than anything, he wanted the kid clutching his hand so tightly to be happy and wondering about things other than why his father abuses his mother and him.

In no time, Blake and Shawn passed through security and climbed the marble steps leading to the second floor. As they approached Judge Jackson's courtroom, Blake could see Eve Isaac, Shawn's mother. She was scheduled to testify against her husband, John, then Shawn would enter the

courtroom to sit in the witness chair. Blake was glad Judge Jackson was overseeing this hearing. He was a fair man, and very perceptive about the needs of children.

Eve Isaac hugged her little boy, then introduced Blake to her mother, Helen, who was wheelchair bound, thanks to a leg amputation. The bailiff opened the courtroom doors and both women entered to take their seats. Blake and Shawn waited on a bench in the hallway for Shawn to be called to testify.

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Shawn sat on the hard, oaken bench next to Blake, biting his lip as he worried about testifying. His mommy, Blake, and Mr. Michael told him that telling the truth was the right thing to do. He shoved his hands in his coat pockets and balled his fingers into fists. He was so afraid. Shawn hadn't been this frightened since his daddy shoved his mommy against the wall and she hit her head hard.

This time the fear gripping his insides had nothing to do with his father. Shawn feared someone would ask questions about his mommy. Blake and Mr. Michael told Shawn to always tell the truth. But his mommy said if he ever told anyone about what she did to him; the bad people would take him away from her. They'd make him live with mean people who didn't like children, and they would beat him harder than she ever did.

At first, he thought he earned Mommy's whippings by doing things that annoyed her, like leaving his toys in the living room, or not eating everything on his plate. But after Mommy lost her job, she started drinking just like his daddy. When she was drinking, any little thing would set her off. She would make a switch from a branch from the tree out back, and lash it across his back and butt until he thought he'd die from the pain. In the morning, or when she was sober, she was always sorry and begged him not to tell. He promised he wouldn't, which created his current dilemma. If anyone asked, he'd betray his mommy by not keeping his promise to never tell. But if he didn't tell the truth, he'd let down Mr. Michael and Blake. He wished he could run away and hide. Then he wouldn't let anyone down.

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Though his attorney ordered him not to look at her, John Isaac couldn't take his eyes off his wife, Eve, as she sat in the witness chair. She would regret opening her mouth, he vowed. She'd ruined his life. The Sugar Creek Cafe was nearly bankrupt, thanks to the coverage in the local paper of his arrest for domestic battery. The goody-two-shoes patrons stopped eating at his restaurant. Just like that. They'd enjoyed his good food and service for years. One little arrest, and they avoided his restaurant like they would a case of food poisoning.

The bitch was divorcing him, and John's attorney said she'd get the small farm where they'd lived since their honeymoon. Hell, Eve would probably get fifty-percent ownership of the failing cafe, too. All that plus child support. John gritted his teeth as he glared at her. If the deputy sitting behind him didn't have a gun in his holster, he'd take the chance to rush her in the witness chair and give her the beating she deserved. Eve would pay for ruining his life. He didn't know where or when, but she would pay.

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Blake looked at his watch. It was almost over; Shawn was testifying and holding up well. Michael Brandt finished with his last question and John Isaac's attorney announced he would not be asking Shawn any questions. Judge Jackson found John Isaac guilty and set the date for the sentencing and released Isaac on his own recognizance, with the caveat that he stay away from his estranged wife and son. With a tap of the gavel, the hearing was over.

Blake ushered Shawn to the hallway to turn him over to his mother, so he wouldn't be late to drive Jennifer to her appointment with the obstetrician. They were doing another sonogram today, and Blake didn't want to miss a last peek at their baby prior to birth.

Eve Isaac was deep in conversation with her mother and a friend when Blake approached her with Shawn. She nodded her thanks and continued her conversation. Her little boy stood awkwardly next to her and watched Blake leave.

Soon, she nudged Shawn, "I'm meeting a few friends, so you're going home with your grandmother. Without waiting for a response, she left, heading toward the exit stairway.

Shawn knew that when his mommy said she was meeting friends, it meant she was going to be drinking and would most likely arrive home late and drunk. He hated it when she drank. She became another person — mean and grouchy. He was sure to get another beating, just like he did every time she drank.

He nodded absently and moved to stand next to his grandmother's wheelchair. She was talking with the neighbor who drove her to the hearing, and barely noticed him.

Once his mother was out of sight, he pulled at her arm, "Grandma, I need to go to the bathroom."

"Well, just go," she said abruptly, before turning back to continue her conversation with her neighbor.

Shawn walked toward the men's restroom. Once he reached the door, he glanced back at his grandmother, who was still talking. He then raced down the hall to take the side exit stairs. Once he reached the first floor, he walked out of the building and down the street.

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Eve Isaac was pumped. She was sure her no-good, loser husband was going to get the book thrown at him. That alone was a great reason to celebrate. Not that she needed a reason when she got together with her friends. Sandy, Laurie and Stacie had been friends since their wild high school days. Eve picked up the pace as soon as she saw her old red Pontiac Firebird parked nearby. By the grace of God and her buddy, Larry, the car was still operational.

Reaching the car, she opened the door, threw her purse in, slipped into the driver's seat and started the engine. It was then she felt the knife at her throat. Every nerve in her body told her to scream, but when she opened her mouth, only a rasp came out. She looked in the rearview window to see the crazed, dark eyes of her estranged husband in the back seat.

"You look surprised, Eve. Did you really think that 'No Contact Order' would stop me? Just a damn piece of paper, bitch," he growled.

"Please, John. You don't want to do this," Eve begged.

"That's where you're wrong. Back the car out of the lot, and get on the road."

Eve slipped the car into gear and backed out of the parking space, feverishly hoping someone would notice that she needed help. There were dozens of people leaving the courthouse, looking for their cars in the parking lot. She only needed one of them to help her.

"Turn left here," he said, as she approached the parking lot exit.

She obeyed and asked, "Where are we going?"

John adjusted the knife a bit. It was no longer pressing into her flesh, but a painful bloody cut was left behind. "Do you remember what we did on our first date?"

Eve searched her memory. At first she could not remember, then it hit her. "We went on a picnic didn't we?"

"That's right," John began. "But where did we picnic?"

"By the river."

"The beginning and the end, Eve. Every book and movie has one of each," he said. "And now we have ours."

"Are you nuts? What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Keep driving," he seethed with mounting rage. To show her he meant business, he sliced the knife slightly across her neck, just enough to make a trickle of blood ooze down her neck onto his shirt.

Eve cried hysterically, running off the road, but jerking the car back onto the pavement just in time. It was snowing now. Snowflakes floated about and melted on the windshield, making visibility difficult as her outdated windshield wipers smeared back and forth.

A rectangular green sign for the picnic area appeared, and John shouted, "Turn right. Turn right." He fought Eve for control of the steering wheel when she refused to turn.

She hammered down on the gas pedal, driving past the picnic area and onto the bridge. Pushing himself over the front seat, John viciously elbowed Eve in the face and thrust the steering wheel to the right, crashing the car through the bridge guardrails, plunging down into the icy waters of the Wabash River.

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As the obstetrician moved a wand across Jennifer's swollen belly, Blake stared at the ultrasound monitor as their baby sucked his or her thumb within his wife's womb. Jennifer still wanted the sex of the baby to be a surprise, but Blake disagreed and searched the image for evidence it was a boy. The sound of his cell phone ringtone disrupted his search. He excused himself and stepped outside the room to take the call. He saw on the display that the caller was Lane Hansen, his boss.

"Hey, Lane, what's up?" he answered.

"Blake, Shawn Isaac has disappeared."

"What? I was just with him at the courthouse. I left him with his mother," exclaimed Blake. F

was incredulous. How could Shawn have disappeared?

"It seems Eve left to meet up with some friends, and left him with his grandmother. He asked to go to the restroom and no one has seen him since."

"Damn it. Where does his mother think he may have gone?" Blake fumed. Was it too much to ask for a mother to spend time with her little boy after he testified against his dad? What was she thinking?

"Actually, we can't find her, either," said Lane.

"You're kidding. Did you check the bars where she likes to hang out?" asked Blake. He'd bet his next paycheck she was out drinking with her friends, instead of watching out for her son.

"Yeah. Eve's not around, and no one's seen her. She was supposed to meet up with some girlfriends at the Hoosier Sports Bar, but never showed."

"Did the security at the courthouse run through today's surveillance file to look for Shawn?"

"Yes, I've got the file on my computer. We can see him walking toward the men's restroom, but he stops at the doorway to look back at his grandmother. Then he runs to the exit door. The next time we see him, he's leaving the building, headed toward Main Street, then we lose him. We're at the office planning a search. Can you come in?"

"I'll be right there."

Blake opened the examining room door. He debated whether or not to tell his very pregnant wife that Shawn was missing. Jennifer adored the little boy as much as he did, and he didn't want her to get upset, especially this close to her due date.

Jennifer was still watching the sonogram monitor when he entered the room. Blake nodded to the doctor, who left the room so the couple could be alone. He wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"I've been the daughter of a cop long enough to know that look. You have to go," said Jennifer, and her eyes scanned his face.

"I'm sorry. I'll see if there is a deputy nearby who can take you home."

"No need. Mom is on her way. I called her when you went out to take the call," Jennifer began. "Your work cell wouldn't ring if you weren't needed." She looked at him again. Blake was good at compartmentalizing, but she knew him. His brow was creased with worry. She could tell this was no ordinary call. Someone needed his help and it was personal. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

"Honey, there is no reason for you..."

Jennifer interrupted. "Spill it. What's going on?"

Blake sighed. She was getting more upset by not knowing. "We're looking for Shawn. He's been missing since the hearing a couple of hours ago."

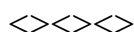
Quick tears filled her eyes. In her experience as a law enforcement professional, the missing child was her least favorite case. There were so many variables and often few leads. "Where is he? Shawn is only five-years-old. It's the middle of winter and we're expecting snow. He can't be out there alone. Anything could happen to him."

Blake stroked her long blonde hair, then slowly ran his hand over Jennifer's back in an effort to

calm her. "Do you trust me, honey?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then trust that I will find Shawn, and I'll call you as soon as I do."



Private Investigator Frankie Douglas-Hansen sat in Mrs. Bea Holden's formal living room, waiting for her prospective client to come downstairs. The Holden mansion was not hard to find. It was the biggest and most ornate house in the entire county. Frankie had visited many homes where the holidays were celebrated, but none as ornate as the Holden house. There were elaborate decorations covering every inch of the first floor, from huge wreaths above the fireplaces, to decorated-and-lit Christmas trees in every room, including the foyer. Tiny burgundy ribbons were even tied on each crystal arm of the chandeliers.

The Holden's maid stood in the doorway, looking like a character out of a fifties British mystery movie. Dressed in a black dress with a lacy white apron, she announced she'd be in the kitchen making tea. Frankie hoped the woman brought back a tray full of goodies, too. She was starving.

"I trust you haven't been waiting long," said Mrs. Holden as she entered the room, using the wonderful imitation of a British accent Frankie had ever heard. In her sixties, the slim but shapely woman wore a red cashmere sweater with a diamond brooch. Three diamond and pearl bracelets danced around her wrists. She was pretty in a classical sense, with a platinum bob haircut, and simple but elegant makeup. She looked Frankie over from her head to her toes, as if making an assessment of her ability to do the job she was about to assign.

"Not at all," answered Frankie, as she straightened in her chair. "You said on the phone you had an urgent assignment for me, so I left the office right away."

"The matter is both urgent and *confidential*," she explained, emphasizing the word "confidential."

"You can be assured your privacy will be protected. What may I do for you?"

"I have reason to believe that my husband, Arthur, is being unfaithful," whispered Mrs. Holden, and she looked down at her folded hands in her lap.

"Has anything happened to make you suspect him of seeing someone else?"

"Yes. He has a poker night with the boys scheduled for Wednesday and Saturday nights."

"That's not unusual, Mrs. Holden. A lot of men play poker."

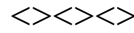
"My husband has not expressed an interest in playing any kind of card game in more than thirty years. Why the sudden interest?" She began, continuing with the fake accent. "Besides, he's the worst poker player in the world. If he had a believable poker face, I'd have trusted him about the games. I wouldn't be meeting with you now."

"I see," Frankie responded, as she clenched her jaw to keep from grinning. "In that case, I can recommend surveillance..."

"And photos! I want photographs!" She interrupted.

"Surveillance and photos are part of the package. Shall we discuss the costs?"

"No, discussing the costs is not necessary. I'll pay whatever you want. If my idiot husband is stupid enough to cheat on me, I'll have my attorney take him to the cleaners. Money is no object. Just do your job and don't let him catch you."



Large pieces of lacy snowflakes filled the air as Frankie headed toward her car. She buttoned her coat and wound her red woolen scarf around her neck, then slipped on her gloves. Frankie couldn't remember the last time she was this excited. If there was one thing she needed right now, it was a very lucrative project. Mr. Arthur Holden owned the Holden Gasket Factory, as did his father and his grandfather before him. The factory employed fifty percent of the county, and provided one hundred percent of the pollution. Yes, she thought with a smile, this could be a very lucrative project.

Frankie and her husband, Lane, had been living from paycheck-to-paycheck all year, thanks to the lousy economy and its impact on her small business. Everyone was cutting back, including the insurance companies that had fed a fair amount of money into her business in their search for disability cheaters. Lane had taken a second job doing security for a local warehouse, and she felt guilty every time he came home late. If her business hadn't been so slow, he would have been home last night with her and Ashley, their three-year-old. Frankie missed Lane. He often came home so late and so exhausted; he dropped into bed and was asleep within seconds.

Frankie turned left at the end of the Holden's long driveway and headed back to her office in town to do some Internet research on Mr. Arthur Holden. She planned to start surveillance as soon as she could. She'd driven about fifteen miles when she noticed an older black Dodge Ram and a blue Toyota Corolla blocking the entrance to the Wabash River Bridge. Parking behind the Toyota, she got out of her car and walked toward two men, who were having a heated conversation in the middle of the bridge. Engrossed in their debate, they ignored the snow falling around them, dusting their hair and jackets. As she drew closer, she noticed a huge section of the bridge's guardrail was no longer there.

"Hey, what's going on?" she called out. The man wearing a camouflage hoodie dismissed her with a glance, and then turned around to continue his debate with an older man, who was adamantly waving his arms as he talked.

"Damn it," he said with a voice filled with frustration. "I drive this bridge every day, and I'm telling you that piece of guardrail was there yesterday."

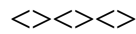
"Oh, come on. This bridge must be twenty years old, it probably dropped off long ago," argued the camouflage man.

Frankie walked past them to examine the area where the guardrail used to be. The metal of the guardrail was ripped away, leaving behind a sharp, jagged edge. There were patches of red paint on the remaining metal. She moved to the edge of the bridge and peered down at the swirling dark water below.

"I'm no expert," she called out to the men, who seemed to notice her for the first time. "But I'm guessing by the width of this gap in the railing and by the red paint on the metal's edge that there's been a car accident here."

She headed back to her car for her cell phone to call Lane and report the incident. As she passed

the man in the camouflage hoodie, she said, "Oh, and it happened recently. *Very recently.*"



Shawn Isaac leaned against the Elm Street signpost and sighed. He'd been either running or walking for a long time. He'd never walked this far, and he was cold. His legs and feet hurt, and his toes felt frozen. The snow was falling harder, and dusted the shoulders of his navy winter coat. He wished he had remembered his gloves. But as tired as he was, he was proud of himself for remembering the way to Billy's house. This was Billy's street and his house was not far from the sign. Shawn knew Billy's house well. He'd been coming to Billy's house since both boys were two years-old. That was back when his mommy was still working. She'd dropped him off before work and picked him up after. Billy's mommy, Cheryl, was a nice babysitter and made the best peanut butter and jelly sandwiches ever. Shawn secretly wished Cheryl were his mommy, too. She didn't get drunk like his mommy, and she didn't give Billy beatings for no reason.

He'd started walking again when he heard a car motor. He turned to see a police car coming toward him from the end of the street. If the policeman saw him, he'd make him go home, then his mommy would beat him when she got there. He ran behind a house, peeking around the side until the police car passed.

By the time he climbed onto Billy's front porch, Shawn was exhausted and hungry. He gazed at the front window and could see Billy sitting in front of the television. Shawn tapped on the glass and motioned for Billy to let him in.

"Hi, Shawn. Come in. We can play with my Army men," said Billy excitedly.

"Where's your mom?" asked Shawn.

"She's cleaning the basement. She's been down there all morning and I'm lonely."

"Do you have anything to eat? I'm hungry."

After a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches, a glass of milk, and a chocolate pudding cup, the boys went to Billy's room to play Army.

"I can't go home," said Shawn after a while, blinking back tears.

"Why not?" ask Billy.

"My mommy will hit me, and my bruises haven't gone away from last time." The little boy lifted his shirt to reveal a thick band of purple and blue bruises on his back. "I'm really scared, Billy, and I wish I had a place to hide."

"Come with me," said Billy as he pulled at Shawn's arm. In the hallway, Billy opened a door to reveal a staircase that led to an attic on the third floor. Shawn had been in the house many times, but had never noticed that door. "See, Shawn. You can hide in the secret room upstairs. No one will find you."

"But what about your mom and dad?"

"If you're very quiet, they won't know you're up there. I can bring you food, and when Mommy is cleaning, you can come down to go to the bathroom. It will be fun." Billy said as a grin spread from ear-to-ear.

To a frightened five-year-old boy, it seemed the perfect solution, and an adventure, at that.

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It was 2:00 p.m. by the time Blake reached the sheriff's office conference room, where Tim and Lane sat at an oval oak conference table, planning the search for Shawn Isaac.

"Listen, the kid has only been missing for two and a half hours," said Tim.

"True," responded Lane, "But there are two strange elements to this situation that have me worried."

"What's that?" asked Blake as he removed his coat, draping it across the back of a chair as he sat down.

"First of all, we can't find his mother. There are a limited number of bars she could have gone to in this county, and she's not at any of them. Her friends said she called them on her cell phone right after the hearing. She was on her way to meet them. Why isn't she there?"

Tim chimed in, "Have our deputies checked the house she's renting, or the farm house where she used to live?"

"Yes," answered Lane. "She's not there, either. It's like she disappeared into thin air. I've got Sam Brown doing a cell phone history and tower search now. I'll follow up with a warrant."

"I was thinking," Blake began. "Could John Isaac have abducted his son either to get back at Eve or to punish Shawn for testifying?"

"That's my second concern," said Lane. "John Isaac is missing, too."

Blake's eyebrows raised in amazement. "What?"

"John Isaac was on probation for an unrelated assault charge last year. He had an appointment with his probation officer, Lana Baldwin, right after the hearing. He was a no-show, so she called it in. We sent deputies to his apartment, and he's not there. No one's seen him. I've got Sam tracking his cell phone, too."

Tim scratched his chin and asked, "Could the three of them be together?"

"Not likely," said Blake. "Shawn left the courthouse after Eve, and he was walking in the opposite direction from the lot where she would have parked her car."

"I'll feel like we have a better handle on this when the parents are located," said Tim, walking toward the door. "Keep me updated," he said, closing the door behind him.

Lane got up, walked over to the coffee pot, and filled two mugs to the top with the dark, steamy brew.

He sat back down and handed one of the mugs to Blake. "Let's talk about what's been done so far to find Shawn, then you can think about your plan of action."

"Sounds good. He's been missing two and a half hours. You know as well as I do how critical the first twenty-four hours are when a child is missing."

"Right," said Lane. "That's why I went ahead and did an Amber Alert notification. Television and

radio stations are now broadcasting that Shawn is missing. They have a good description of him, as well as a photo I got from the grade school he attends. In addition, I had our computer techs put the notification on the sheriff's website. That's a whole lot of viewers, listeners and Internet surfers who will see the alert, and maybe have information on his whereabouts."

"Good. What about the deputies? Are they helping?" asked Blake. His concern grew with every minute that passed.

"I put a BOLO on Shawn, and deputies will keep their eye out for him as they do their regular jobs."

Sam Brown rushed in the room, nearly knocking the conference room door off its hinges. "I've got it! I've got cell tower history on both Eve and John Isaac's cell phones. Get this. We lost signal from both phones at the same time. But I have the latitude and longitude of where they were when we lost signal. They were near the cell tower over on Covered Bridge Road, by the bridge that goes over the Wabash River.

Lane's cell phone vibrated in his jacket. When he pulled it out, he noticed it was Frankie calling. "I need to take this," he said as he moved into the hallway.

"Hey, babe, what's going on?"

"Lane, I'm at the Wabash River Bridge on Covered Bridge Road. A big section of the bridge's guardrail is missing, and there's red paint on the metal guardrail that's left. It looks like there may have been a car accident here recently."

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It took an hour for Blake to get his diving team organized and down to the Wabash River Bridge with its boat. Lance Brody was the only member of the team to own a dry scuba suit that would keep him warm in the icy waters, so he was elected to go into the water, while Blake and the remaining three divers stayed on the boat. Blake propelled the boat from the shore to the section of the bridge where the guardrail was missing. Once the anchor was in place, Lance entered the water. In the murky water of the Wabash, he found it difficult to see. Using the anchor as his fixed central point, Lance swam the radius of a circle, expanding the circular pattern each time around. Finding nothing, he surfaced and asked Blake to move the boat so he could try again. This time when he entered the water, he found the submerged red Pontiac Firebird almost immediately. The dark, murky water prevented him from determining if there were any occupants still in the vehicle. He swam up to the boat to alert the others.

"There's a red Firebird about thirty feet down. Couldn't see if there was anyone in the car," Lane reported.

Blake retrieved his cell phone from his pants pocket and called Chris Hannon, who was waiting with his tow truck on shore. "Got a submerged car. Let's get it out of the water."

Blake's stomach clenched. Eve Isaac drove a red Firebird. Her cell, as well as her husband's, had pinged the cell tower near this river. He prayed for a miracle that Shawn Isaac had not lost both his parents in the submerged car.

Blake couldn't spare the two or three hours it would take to pull the car to shore, so he left the ~~diving team in charge, along with a deputy.~~ They would notify him if there had been any occupants in the car.

He headed back to town. Once he reached Michael Brandt's office, he parked his SUV and retraced the walk he and Shawn had taken that morning to the courthouse. Blake entered each shop or cafe to show the owners and patrons Shawn's photo. He struck out each time. No one had seen the boy. He entered the toy shop where Shawn had spent time peering in the large front window. The owner recognized Shawn immediately. "Sure I noticed him looking in the window this morning. You two reminded me of my son and me when he was that age."

"Shawn's not my son. I'm a detective who is looking for him."

"Could have fooled me this morning. That kid sure looked at you like a son looks at his father."

Blake's heart sank, and an overpowering sense of dread knotted his insides as he walked away. Once he found Shawn, he might have the unenviable job of telling the five-year-old that his mom and dad were no longer alive. He hadn't been notified yet, so there was still a chance neither Eve nor Job was in the car when it went over the bridge into the water. He pulled his coat collar up as he walked against the biting wind toward his car. Shawn's grandmother was about to have a visitor. It was 6:00 p.m., and Shawn Isaac had been missing for six and a half hours. The temperature was dropping, and the snow continued to fall as evening approached.

Eve's mother lived on Murphy Street, just past the elementary school, in a gray house with white shutters that looked like it had been built in the thirties. The home was overdue for a fresh coat of paint and a new roof. He knocked on the front door several times before Mrs. Bennett answered.

"I'm Blake Stone with the sheriff's office. We met this morning before the hearing. I'd like to ask you some questions about Shawn." For a second, Blake thought the older woman was going to back her wheelchair up and slam the door in his face.

Instead, she glared at him and said, "I've already given all the information I have to the cops at the courthouse."

"Mrs. Bennett, I hope you will talk with me. Sometimes, it's the tiniest detail that helps us find a missing child," Blake responded. Hell, if he had to plead with her to talk to him he would, if it meant he could find Shawn.

"Come in," she said begrudgingly, as she backed her wheelchair to make room for him to pass. She closed the door against the cold behind him. "In there." She used her index finger to point to a small room filled to the brim with overstuffed furniture.

Blake sat on the sofa and the older woman wheeled her chair to sit across from him. The first thing he noticed about the room was that there were Beanie Babies on every table surface, and they lined a tall bookcase near the window. There must have been a hundred of them in this room alone. Something he didn't see were any toys that would appeal to a small boy. According to his information, Shawn was her only grandchild.

"What do you want to know?" Mrs. Bennett used a tone that indicated the faster she got him out of the house, the better she'd like it.

"I have the notes from the deputies who talked to you in the courthouse, so I'll ask some questions that came to me." Blake pulled a small notepad out of his jacket pocket along with a pen. "Do

Shawn spend much time with you?"

"Not until Eve lost her job. Now every time she goes out drinking, she leaves the kid with me."

"I noticed how close your house is to the elementary school Shawn attends. Were you Shawn's babysitter when Eve worked?"

"No! I told Eve long ago I didn't want to be a sitter for anybody's kids. Do I look like I'm in any kind of condition to chase after a small boy? My health's not good. Lost my leg, thanks to diabetes. Eve usually does her drinking after dark, so when she leaves him here, I just put Shawn in the guest bedroom and tell him to go to sleep."

Blake clenched his teeth and looked down at his notepad, pretending to focus on writing a note. She wouldn't see the contempt he was feeling right now toward her. How could a grandmother talk like that about her own grandchild?

"Who are Shawn's friends? It would be helpful if I could talk to them."

"Don't know. Never asked him," she replied.

Deciding the discussion was a dead-end, Blake prepared to leave. But before he did, he said, "Sometimes children will return and hide in familiar places. Do you mind if I look around your home before I leave?"

"Knock yourself out."

From the living room, he entered a dining room that housed a round table and chairs. In the lighted china hutch, there were more Beanie Babies of every color filling the shelves. In the kitchen, dirty dishes filled the sink and more were stacked on the old electric stove. There was a pantry in the room, but it was not large enough for a small boy to hide.

Moving into the guest room, Blake noted a full-sized bed and a mirrored chest. There were heavy draperies covering the only window, which made the room quite dark. What he didn't see was any sign that a small boy stayed overnight there. There were no toys for a little boy anywhere in the room, nor was there an extra set of clothing. Only more Beanie Babies, which lined the surface of the chest. He headed for the living room. He'd seen enough and felt a little sick. With a mother who was drunk, an abusive father, and a grandmother who didn't care about him, he could see why Shawn might have run away.

Mrs. Bennett was watching television when he returned to the living room.

"I have one last question. If you weren't Shawn's babysitter when Eve worked, who took care of him?"

"I believe he stayed with Cheryl Collins over on Elm Street. She's got a kid the same age as Shawn."

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Jennifer reclined on her living room sofa with her laptop precariously balanced on her baby bump. It was seven o'clock, and Blake hadn't come home for dinner yet. The local news website featured the Amber Alert about Shawn. She looked at his grade school photo and blinked away a tear. He was so young and innocent. One glance out her window told her the snow was falling heavily. The crystalline flakes glittered in the moonlight, frosting windows and collecting on the tree branches. How w

Shawn faring wherever he was? Was he exposed to the weather? She bit her lip and closed her eyes.

She'd kept Eve's promise and told no one, not even Blake, about her visit weeks ago. The pounding on the front door had awakened Jennifer from an afternoon nap. She opened the door to find Eve Isaacs on her front porch. Jennifer ushered Eve in from the cold, took her coat, and asked her to sit down.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, Jennifer. But I remembered you saying that I could talk to you anytime," Eve began. "And right now, you're the only one I can talk to."

"What's wrong? Is it John? Is he bothering you?"

"Nothing more than the usual. I need to talk to you about something very important."

"Eve, you can talk to me about anything," said Jennifer in a soothing voice. The young woman looked like she hadn't slept in days.

"It's the hearing that's coming up in a few weeks."

"What about the hearing? You're going through with it, right? You can't let the abuse continue. Eve. You let the legal process protect you and Shawn."

"Yeah, I guess I know that."

"So you're still planning on testifying against John?" Jennifer asked.

"Yes, I'll testify," Eve said as she nervously clenched and unclenched her hands.

"Then what is it?"

"Call it intuition, but I know as well as I know anything, that I will not live through this hearing."

"What are you talking about?" Jennifer interrupted.

"Please, Jennifer. Just let me get this out," Eve pleaded. "I've never been much of a planner for the future. Never saw the need for it until now." Eve withdrew an envelope and laid it on the end table next to Jennifer.

"What's that?" asked Jennifer.

Instead of answering her directly, Eve said, "I had no business having a kid. Ever. I knew early on in my marriage what kind of a monster I'd hooked up with. But I got knocked up and couldn't find the money to get an abortion. Thus Shawn was born. Poor kid. Motherhood just isn't in my genes. If it was, I wouldn't think of my little boy as an anchor tied around my neck. What kind of a mother feels like that?" She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater, then continued. "And no one in her right mind would nominate John for father of the year. My poor, poor little boy has seen things that would turn a grown man's stomach. He's watched his daddy beat his mommy until her face was unrecognizable to him or anyone else."

Jennifer stretched out her hand and touched Eve's arm.

"Shawn deserves better. And after I'm gone, I'm asking you to save him." As Eve ran her fingers through her hair, her eyes bore a silent plea.

"Eve, what are you talking about? I don't understand."

"I had my attorney draw up the papers so everything is taken care of. If anything should happen to me, I want you to save my son and give him a life he deserves." Eve paused, tears streaming down her face. "Jennifer, you'll be the kind of mother to Shawn that I could never be. I know that. There

nothing I am more certain of. This is a lot to ask, considering you're pregnant with your first child but I'm begging you to do this."

"Oh, Eve, I don't know what to say."

"Just say 'Yes.' Please tell me that you and your husband will surround Shawn with all the love you have. Please pull him into your wonderful family. He loves you and Blake already. I'm begging you, Jennifer."

Jennifer pulled Eve into her arms to comfort her. "Yes, I will care for Shawn. But I don't believe it will come to that. I know you don't believe it, but the law will protect you. Nothing is going to happen to you."

"Thank you. Promise you will tell no one until the time comes. Then, with these legal papers, you will take custody of Shawn."

"Promise."

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Dispatch gave him Cheryl Collins' address. Blake was punching it into his GPS when his cell phone sounded. It was Lance Brody.

"Hey, Blake. I'm afraid I've got some bad news. There was a man and a woman in the car in the river. They both had identification on them. John and Eve Isaac."

"Oh, God."

"Sorry, Blake. The car's license plate checks out to Eve Isaac. The coroner is the only one who can say for sure, but I think it's them."

"Thanks, Lance." Blake disconnected the call and sat stunned for a couple of minutes. He thought of Jennifer and how much he didn't want her to hear about this from the media. He dialed home and waited for her to answer.

"Hi, I was just thinking of you," said Jennifer. "When are you coming home for dinner?"

"Soon, honey. I'm coming right home," Blake said, then added, "Please do something for me and don't ask why. Turn off your laptop and television. I'll be right there."

"Sure. Just come home to me."

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Blake could see Jennifer waiting for him, leaning against the frame of the front door, when he pulled into the driveway. He turned off the car's engine, got out of the car and trudged through the snow to the front porch, where his very pregnant wife flew into his arms. Blake buried his face in her neck, inhaling the clean scent of her perfume. At this stage of her pregnancy, he should be bringing her only happy news. What he had to tell her was anything but happy. If he had a choice he'd not tell her at all. The news media took that choice away from him. It was better *he* was the one to tell her that Eve and John Isaac were dead.

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