

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Jake was released from Munson Hospital early Tuesday morning, so Nick drove his Jeep up to Traverse City and brought his dad home. Two TC detectives drove Jake's Tahoe from the Casper property to his house in Harbor Cove, but Jake was told by his doctor not to drive for a day or two. The detective was still a little groggy – mostly from the sedatives the nurse said – but he was much better. Jake just needed to rest, but that was the last thing he wanted to do. Knowing that Cadie might be imprisoned, even hurt or dying on the Casper property, tore him up. He believed he was so close to finding her. Nick told him what Bakker said, that the FBI and Michigan State Police with their dogs were searching the property. Right now, there was nothing Jake could do.

“Are you up for a coffee, dad?” Nick called out to his father from the kitchen. “I made a full pot, but I wasn't sure you'd be up to having some.”

“Uh, do you even know me?” Jake laughed sleepily from the bedroom. “Of course I'll have a cup.”

Nike poured the coffee, took a cup into the bedroom, and placed it on the stand beside his dad's bed. Nick took a seat across from his dad in a floral wingback – a remnant of his mother's decorating style.

“I'm going out on the boat today with Blake and his uncle,” Nick said. “I wanted you know that I'm doing this. I have to. I need answers.”

“God, son, I'm still not sure this is a good idea. How well do we really know Blake? Do *you* think he had any involvement with Cadie's disappearance? He hasn't been cleared as a suspect.”

Nick didn't want to tell his father what Sergeant Bakker revealed at the hospital the night before or Jake might not let him go. He would find out soon enough.

“I don't. Yeah, the dude can be weird. And he was really upset when Cadie dumped him, but it seems like he's moved on. Lots of dudes get dumped, but they don't kidnap their ex. I mean, you haven't kidnapped mom.”

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, Nick regretted them.

“Yeah, okay. No, I haven’t kidnapped your mom. But we’re talking about Blake okay, and I’m serious.”

“It’ll be fine, dad. I’ll have my phone with me, and I can text you if anything weird is going on. Plus, Blake’s uncle will be there and maybe Dirk and his dad.”

“Okay, but I’m also worried about that storm they’re talking about. I got an alert on my phone a while ago that we might be in for a strong one. Where is Robert taking the boat? I don’t want you guys going too far off shore in case this storm comes our way.”

Jake knew a storm might whip up quickly, but it also can change course just as quickly and head to the UP instead of coming ashore. People along the west coast prepare for everything but also make plans because, as often as not, it’s blue skies and sunshine.

“I don’t know. We might head over to the Manitou Islands.”

“I wish you guys wouldn’t go even go that far,” Jake said. “Just keep an eye out for a shelf cloud. News has it there’s a powerful storm out west that might be coming our way. If it gets bad, head to Leland.”

“I’ll keep an eye out. And Blake’s uncle won’t keep us out if a storm comes. Plus, Blake said his new boat is fast.”

“I also assume you guys will be drinking to celebrate Blake’s birthday. Can you just promise not to drink too much? Stick to beer. Liquor and boating are not a good mix.”

“I’ll be fine, dad. Don’t worry. And I don’t care about drinking; I care about finding Cadie.”

“Of course you do.”

“Are *you* going to be okay?”

“Oh, sure. If I need anything, there’s always Patty next door.”

Nick went into the kitchen and finished packing his bookbag for the boat: a beach towel, a large water flask, a jacket, sunscreen, and a gift card he took from his mom’s drawer for Blake.

“See you later, dad. I’ll text you.”

Nick walked out the house’s side door and quickly ducked into the small wooden garage. He walked to the back of the garage and found Jake’s red toolbox on his workbench. His dad’s steel folding knife in a leather sheath was in the lower tray. Nick placed the knife in his bookbag. He had no idea what to expect when he confronted Blake today out on the boat, but he planned to be ready. The guy might truly be a sociopath.

After watching his son’s yellow Jeep leave the driveway, Jake felt incredibly tired. The events of the previous day were catching up with him. He could barely keep his eyes open. His brain ached. He decided he would grab a few minutes of sleep and then head to the police station. Nothing was going to keep him from hunting for Cadie McLeod.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

As soon as Cadie awoke, she smelled the kerosene. Tired and dehydrated, the young woman carefully stood up and shakily walked to the wall. She had noticed the peephole on day one and now peered through the opening to see what was going on in the exterior room with its tiny window. Immediately, she spotted the kerosene heater and generator on the floor by the door.

“Oh god, no,” she whispered. “I was right.”

Thankfully, neither machine was running – yet. However, the sharp, oily smell of kerosene was already finding its way through the tiny root cellar and adding to the young woman’s misery.

It's now or never.

Cadie walked slowly to the back of the root cellar, holding on to the wall to steady herself so she wouldn't fall. She had sweated out most of her body's remaining fluids yesterday dislodging the two large rocks. Now she had one rock to go. She hoped she had the strength to move it. This was her last chance.

While she slept, she dreamed the two Great Horned Owls visited her again in the night. She saw their yellow eyes looking down at her from up above. Were the owls her parents, signifying they were there to help her break free from this dungeon? Or were they there to guide her somewhere else? Cadie wasn't sure she believed in an afterlife, but her scientific brain told her to stay open to what may be possible. However, her instinct to survive right now couldn't be diminished - not yet. She wasn't ready to die. She chose to fight.

Cadie sat down in front of the remaining rock and stared at it for a moment.

It's you or me pal. What's it going to be?

She laid down, her tangled red hair fanning out all around her, and stretched her long, athletic legs. She placed raw, blistered feet on the sizeable rock. It was smooth and cool to the touch. She began pushing on the rock. Her dehydrated calves were swollen, sore, and weak. She kept pushing, even when her legs began to spasm. What little sweat she had left beaded on her forehead.

She closed her eyes and pictured Thomas and Aileen. What did they want for her? Did they want her to survive this ordeal and live and thrive? To become a forensic scientist and solve their murder? To help other families? Or was it her time to go? Did they want to bring her home to them, to keep her close and safe for all eternity? How could she know?

She continued to push, to move her feet around the rock. Finally, she mustered all her remaining strength and pushed as hard as she could.

Suddenly, the rock shifted!

"Oh my gosh!" Cadie screamed, her voice echoing through the stone cellar.

The movement gave her renewed energy. Cadie got on her knees, the cold dirt floor grinding into her kneecaps, and focused all of her body's might onto her two hands and left shoulder as she leaned into it, pushing the rock with everything she had left.

The rock broke free!

A loud CRACK blasted into the cellar and echoed off its dusty walls. Cadie felt the large stone surge forward as the dry mortar crumbled. It dropped with a thud through the opening. Cadie almost hit her head on the rock above as the rock breaking free propelled her forward. She leaned through the opening and heaved the rock once more. Her nemesis tumbled down the grassy hill.

The young woman sat there for a second. Stunned. She had begun to believe she might die in this tomb. Far away from Aunt Marie, far away from Nick Brennan, far away from everyone who loved and cared for her, and far away from her hopes and dreams.

"Goodbye, stupid rock!" she yelled and laughed simultaneously. "I win!"

Cadie began to lay down but then had a sudden thought. She walked back into the cellar, bent over, and grabbed Wilson from the carpet. She then walked back to the opening. She laid down on her back and moved her head into the hole. With her arms straight at her sides, she moved them backward and forwards, scooting her body by inches through the small opening. As she pushed through, she felt the warm morning sun discover her face. She couldn't stop smiling. Then she felt the cool grass on her neck, her shoulders, her back, and finally her upper legs.

She was through!

Placing one hand on the grass and weeds, she slowly pushed herself up to standing.

Freedom! It was the most beautiful feeling in the world.

Cadie stood there, wobbly on the uneven hill, and surveyed the spectacular view before her. She saw the High Rollways above the Manistee River, and the dense canopy of budding trees in most every direction. She smelled

the fragrant Basswood trees. Their creamy yellow flowers dotted the landscape. Then she turned west and saw the storm clouds off in the distance, closing in rapidly. She slowly and carefully made her way down.

At the bottom of the hill, Cadie spied a narrow, winding dirt path reaching out in front of the cellar. She knew it was her path to freedom. She felt gloriously happy to be alive. She began walking, sometimes swaying from fatigue, down the rolling path in front of the cellar. The path soon opened up into a larger, grassy area. She spotted a small, weathered wood barn to her left. A large padlock was clearly visible. Cadie reached the barn that was overgrown with tall weeds and began walking around it. The wind began to blow harder.

Then she spied it. A tarp covering a car.

Surely, that car doesn't work. I could never be so lucky.

However, Cadie felt her luck was turning.

With her biceps and triceps tight and depleted, Cadie tugged at the rotting fabric, moving around the dusty, blue car and pulling the tarp from several angles. Finally, she was able to remove all the filthy covering and pile it behind the car. She walked to the driver's side. Cadie noticed that the front left bumper was heavily damaged. In fact, as she looked closer, the entire front end was heavily damaged. Cadie even thought she could see dried blood, like the car had hit a deer. Maybe more than one. Some rain began to fall.

Oh, no. It's been in an accident. It will be a miracle if it works.

She opened the creaking door and got in the driver's seat. Of course, there was no key in the ignition. She searched the dusty seats and the console. No key. She looked all over the floor mats covered in dead flies and lifted them up and looked under them. Nothing. Then she placed her hand under her seat and began feeling around the scratchy rug. Her hand landed on a variety of unknown objects. Suddenly, it touched metal.

There it was!

Her hand grasped the set of car keys and yanked them up.

If this car doesn't work, I might just die sitting here.

Cadie put the key in the ignition, and, praying beyond hope, turned the key.

It started.

“Oh, yes!” she yelled out. “Oh my god, yes!”

Cadie began to laugh hysterically and then began sobbing, her chest heaving and her eyes trying to form tears from her dehydrated body. Overcome with emotion, she put the car in drive and began to ease it around the side of the barn. Then she stopped.

Cadie leaned over and opened the glovebox. There were some papers, and she pulled them out. On top was the registration. Cadie looked at the name on the document. She blinked. She leaned in and looked at the name again more closely. Cadie stared at the name for a solid minute, trying to process what she was seeing, then set the registration down on the seat.

Minutes later, she was driving across the large grassy property to an old dirt road. She turned right and headed west toward Harbor Cove. Her destination was its police station and Jake Brennan. She pushed down hard on the gas and began racing down that gravel road toward freedom and the rest of her life.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Nick pulled his Jeep into Van der Velt marina, which was coming to life with activity. The cheerful morning sun cast a happy glow over the sea of picturesque sailboats bobbing gently in Harbor Cove. The serene, aqua blue water glistened, and Nick observed several slender young men in blue marina tee-shirts and beige khakis completing various tasks on the docks sprawled out in front of him.

He drove to the back corner of the parking lot, behind large Oak trees, in an attempt to isolate his Jeep and keep it from being banged into again by people who don't know how to park. As he rounded the tree, he was surprised to see Blake's truck parked there as well. Blake never parked there. He enjoyed his privilege too much and always parked in the spots reserved for owners. Nick grabbed the camo green bookbag off the front seat and exited his vehicle, uncomfortably conscious of the knife tucked in the interior side pocket.

He walked over to Blake's truck, remembering what Sergeant Bakker told him the day before.

"The FBI said the truck that's been driving past Cadie's house late at night is blacked out. All its chrome and identifying elements are completely covered black."

Nick looked at the blacked-out truck. He remembered when Blake told him he planned to do it. Nick said he thought it was a dumb idea, something that young men did to seem cool, but Blake went ahead and blacked out the truck anyway. Now Nick was approaching a truck similar to the one in a video at an FBI lab. He could recall only a few other blacked out trucks in Harbor Cove. He walked up to the Chevy Colorado's driver's side door and peered in the window. There was nothing too interesting, but then his eye caught on something around the rearview mirror.

What is that?

Nick studied it for a moment. Then it dawned on him.

Is that a zip tie?

Nick felt a wave of cold pass through him.

Why is there a zip tie around the mirror?

He began to sweat. His anxiety multiplied.

As he walked away from the truck, he also remembered all that he had heard yesterday. Special Agent Dority told the group that the FBI further enhanced an image of a hat taken from Cadie's cell phone the night she disappeared, and the hat appeared to have three lowercase letters, two of which seemed to be "r" and "d." Nick didn't say anything to the group, but his mind immediately went to "der." Nick knew people in Harbor Cove with "der" as part of their last name; many people of Dutch descent live on the west coast of Michigan. However, there was only one person with "der" in his last name – Blake Van der Velt. A person who had professed to love Cadie McLeod and claimed to be heartbroken when she dumped him and who now seemed completely carefree. Oh, and who drove a blacked-out truck.

Nick adjusted the bookbag, pulling it closer to him, and made his way to the front of the marina. He walked onto the wooden planks and under the large green and teal welcome sign with its smiley-faced sun and seagull that stretched over the entrance.

“Dude, you made it!”

Blake Van der Velt was walking briskly toward him wearing his signature aviator Ray Bans, tan Sperry boat shoes, and light blue J. Crew swim trunks. He had a blue and yellow Oberon already open in his hand. In that moment, Blake reminded Nick of Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*.

“Happy birthday, buddy,” Nick said, leaning in to give Blake a half hug. “Looks like it’s going to be a great day.”

Nick looked up at the innocent, white puffy clouds. He knew his dad had mentioned a possible storm, but Robert’s million-dollar-plus Pursuit could go 50 mph. He felt confident they could outrun any storm and make it to shore safely.

“Oh yeah, it’s going to be an awesome day,” Blake said, grinning broadly. “I’m really glad you could make it. I guess Dirk and his dad aren’t coming. Luuk had to go to Central and dragged Dirk along with him. But no worries. We’re going to have a blast. Now let’s get you a beer.”

The two young men walked down several docks until they reached the mini-yacht, Robert Van der Velt’s new offshore cabin cruiser named *Best Revenge*. They entered the boat from the stern, stepping alongside the bulwark onto the narrow passageway next to three Yamaha V8 motors and four long trolling rods with silver reels and brightly colored mono line. Blake walked over to the white built-in cooler and dug his tanned arm into the ice until he pulled out an Oberon and handed it to Nick.

“Man, this is a fantastic boat,” Nick said, admiring the impressive, 46-foot fiberglass, white and light blue cruiser. He knew that Robert Van der Velt, who had inherited the marina from his grandfather years ago, was wealthy, but this boat was something else.

“Oh yeah, it’s got everything,” Blake said. “It’s got a galley for cooking, berth for sleeping, and a sick sound system. The bridge deck is so sweet. I’ll show it to you.”

Nick opened his beer and took a drink, still holding his bookbag firmly over his shoulder. The two young men walked past the livewell, a 75-gallon fishbox, and a white couch to their left and stepped up and through the aft’s large glass door onto the bridge deck. The nine-foot-high windshield and tall side windows allowed the bridge to be awash in bright sunlight. Robert Van der Velt was sitting in the white and gray helm seat, his back to the young men. He was checking to see that the steering, throttle, and electrical system were operating properly. He heard the young men enter the bridge and rotated his seat.

“Hey, Nick, good morning,” Robert said, putting out a tan, weathered hand for a handshake.

“Good morning, Mr. Van der Velt,” Nick said politely, shaking his hand.

“It’s Robert. Haven’t I told you that before?” Robert laughed. “Mr. Van der Velt makes me feel like my grandfather. So, how do you like my new boat?”

“Oh, man, it’s awesome,” Nick said. “Thanks so much for having me out on it. Blake says it can go 50 mph and planes almost immediately.”

“Yeah, that’s right. It can hit 20 mph in 14 seconds.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. So, I have a question for you. Why is it named “Best Revenge”?

Robert smiled. “Haven’t you heard the old saying? Living well is the best revenge.”

“Oh, I get it,” Nick laughed. “It’s true. So, are Dirk and Luuk coming?”

“No, I guess they can’t make it,” Blake said, an angry look passing over his face like a fast-moving storm cloud. Then it was gone – quickly replaced by his perfect smile.

“Well, okay, then. Looks like it’s just us. Why doesn’t someone get me a water, and we’ll get going. We’ve got a birthday to celebrate,” Robert smiled.

“Oh sure.” Nick walked down the step to the cooler and dug a water bottle out of the ice. Robert and Blake followed him onto the stern as they began to ready the cruiser for departure. Robert had turned on the blowers, and now he and Blake began removing the synthetic lines that moored the boat to the dock. Once the boat was ready to leave, Robert returned to the bridge with its panoramic views of the marina and began easing the large cruiser out of its slip. Minutes later, the boat was cutting through the placid waters of Harbor Cove on its way to the mighty Lake Michigan.

“Let’s go hang out on the cabana,” Blake said, leading Nick alongside the bulwark to the foredeck where there were two built-in lounge chairs with headrests.

“Hey, Robert, can you put on some tunes? I hooked up my phone.”

Minutes later, the two seemingly lucky men lounged on the foredeck, sipping cold beer, warm sun on their faces, while the lengthy cruiser smoothly passed through the narrow channel and out into the 321-mile-long and 118-mile-wide Great Lake.

As the cruiser cleared the channel and transitioned into the large, dark Lake Michigan waters, the boat began to pitch slightly. Nick’s mind turned to his plans. What exactly was he going to say to his friend? When would he say it? And how would Blake react? Nick had witnessed Blake’s temper before. So had Cadie. Nick looked over at his bookbag that was lying to his left next to the bulwark. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blew into his face. As Robert turned the boat northwest toward the Manitou Islands, Nick looked toward the horizon and thought he could see, off in the distance, a hint of dark clouds.

“Hey, let me get you another beer,” Blake said.

“I’m not done with this one.”

“Jesus, pound it already.”

Blake got up and walked to the boat’s stern. Nick took his cell phone out of bookbag and saw he didn’t have service.

I hope I can reach Jake if I need to.

Blake brought back two fresh beers and took a seat, laying back.

“So where exactly are we going?” Nick asked.

“Robert’s taking us to north Manitou Island. Fishing is there is good for Lake Trout and Salmon. We’ll probably anchor offshore on the north side. There’s a drop off, and we can anchor on the edge.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” Nick said, watching his friend quickly put away another beer.

“We need to break out the Glenlivet,” Blake laughed. “It’s my birthday for crissakes. Robert, can we open the Glenlivet?” he yelled over his shoulder.

“Let’s wait until we get to the island,” Blake’s uncle yelled back from the bridge.

North Manitou – three by three miles long and 22,000 square miles altogether - is an island rich in forests, tall dunes, and breathtaking shorelines that would rival any beach in the US. The Island is some 35 miles northwest of Harbor Cove, so it makes for a good day of fishing. Their trip would take them north to South Manitou Island, east around the island, and then west through Manitou Passage and the Manitou Passage Underwater Preserve, which surrounds both the North and South Manitou Island next to Michigan’s Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

Once known for shipping, boats of the past sought safety from storms in the lee of the Islands. Thus, the preserve was rich in shipwrecks, underwater docks, and other artifacts. Robert planned to take the young men past a cool shipwreck south of South Manitou that rose above the waterline.

“My uncle said there’s a river that dumps into Lake Michigan on the north side of North Manitou. It’s supposed to be good fishing there,” Blake said, “as long as it isn’t too windy.”

Nick watched the young man drain his second beer and now began to contemplate the wisdom of them being that far out when a storm might come ashore. The winds were picking up and becoming louder.

At least, we’ll only be 15 miles or so from Leland.

Nick laid back, trying to calm his anxious mind. He thought about Cadie and said a prayer for the beautiful woman he adored.

God, please bring her back to me. Please let us find her.

Nick began to think about what he was going to say to Blake - who had never once asked about Cadie since Nick stepped foot on the boat.

What exactly do I say? 'Hey, why don't you seem to care that Cadie's missing? Did you kidnap her? Maybe you killed her? The FBI has your truck on video. Are you some kind of psycho?'

Nick was thankful Robert would be on the boat in case Blake got angry and things went bad. He was also thankful for his dad's knife, although he prayed he wouldn't have to use it.

Nick closed his eyes, feeling the growing pitch of the boat as it moved through the deep blue waters that seemed to be growing more restless. He then felt raindrops. He readied himself for the storms that were headed his way – storms he would have to endure if he was ever going to see Cadie McLeod alive again.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

After his short nap, Jake got dressed and drove to the police station. It was now raining and getting dark. As he pulled into the parking lot, he noticed the tall row of arborvitaes along the parking lot whipping back and forth in the growing winds. Best he could, Jake jogged across the parking lot and pulled open the heavy police station door. He hoped to sneak back to his office and get on his computer. Just as he stepped through the door, though, a chipper Debbie walked into the reception area with her steaming cup of black tea.

“Jake! What are you doing here?” Debbie yelled, quickly setting her cup on the reception desk and running over.

“Are you okay? I heard what happened. I thought you’d be taking a few days off.”

Before Jake could even respond, Sergeant Bakker yelled from her office.

“Brennan! Is that you? You’re not supposed to be here!”

A second later, Bakker was in the reception area, hands on her hips, not looking at all happy, her ponytail seeming tighter than ever.

“Why are you here? You need to be at home resting.”

“You know I can’t rest. You of all people should understand that. I need to be here. I need to know what’s going on with Cadie.”

Bakker just closed her eyes and shook her head deeply.

“Honestly, does anyone around here listen to me? You almost died, Brennan. From a big pile of crap,” Bakker said and couldn’t help the smile that slightly curled at the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, you’re never going to let me live that down, are you?” Jake said.

“Well, you’re here, so come on. Let’s get you up to speed. We’ll go to the conference room. You want a coffee?”

“Of course.”

A minute later, Bakker and Brennan took a seat at the large mahogany table in the conference room, rain pelting the window. Brennan looked out and saw a blackening sky. He turned to Bakker.

“First, I want to say I’m sorry about how things went down at the Caspers. I never wanted that to happen. It was a chaotic scene. And I had no idea there was a pit of shit that was going to kill them.”

“Hey, let it go. That was a crazy situation. No one could plan for something like that.”

“So, no word on Cadie?”

“No. MSP and their dogs are still up there. It’s a big property. FBI has some agents, too. But, no, they haven’t found anything.”

Just then, Debbie brought in two hot coffees and set the steaming cups down.

“You’re the best, Debbie,” Jake said, moving his coffee closer to him. “Thank you.”

He turned to Bakker, “So what is new? Tell me everything.”

“Well, there are some important pieces of information, but I’m almost hesitant to tell you,” Bakker said.

“What? Why?”

“Because they seem to point to Blake Van der Velt.”

The color in Jake's face drained a bit.

"Blake? Why Blake?"

He leaned in, increasingly worried as he thought about his son currently on Blake's boat miles offshore, a storm clearly on its way.

Detective Craig Kitchen entered the conference room and put a wet bag of beignets on the table. His intense green eyes and shaved head always got everyone's attention.

"Hey, buddy, how are you doing? You gave us quite a scare."

"I'm fine. Honestly, Craig? Really? Beignets?"

Somehow, Jake felt that enjoying treats right now was inappropriate.

"Yeah, I stopped by Scoop's. I wanted to check in. See if anybody has heard anything. I talked to Alcee for a bit. She feels horrible about Cadie. Gave me this bag of beignets to share with everyone. Told me to give you all her best."

Jake immediately felt bad for giving Craig attitude. He was a good man.

"That was nice."

Turning back to Bakker, Jake said, "Okay, so, why are we settling on Blake? What about Rod Keonig? Dawson? Even Carl Casper? Or the creepy janitor?"

"There's a few other names floating around out there, too," Kitchen added.

Craig took a seat at the table. Just then a strong gust of wind rattled the window. Everyone looked and wondered just how bad it was going to get.

"As you probably know, we have a warrant out for Keonig, but we really don't have anything to tie him to Cadie," Kitchen said. "Yeah, he was at the party, and yeah, he's a loser, but he isn't known to wear a hat. He does drive his mom's truck from time to time, but it's not blacked out."

"Okay, so now I need to know exactly what's going on. This is all new information," Jake said, shifting in his chair. Kitchen leaned forward and grabbed a powdery beignet from the white bakery bag.

“As I was telling you,” Bakker said, also grabbing a beignet, “there’s information that points to Blake. One, the FBI enhanced the image taken from Cadie’s cell phone the night she disappeared. The suspect was wearing a boating hat with roping that was frayed on the hat’s left side. The hat is similar to what the employees wear at Van der Velt Marina.

They also were able to determine letters. In the middle of the hat we now know were three letters, two of which were identified as the lowercase letters d and r. As in der. As in Van der Velt.”

“Well, that seems to be a stretch. Everyone has one of those hats. And Jesus, there’s a ton of people around here with der in their names,” Jake said “The whole westside’s Dutch.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Bakker said. “But the videos that Rebecca pulled from Marie’s neighbors, the nearby streetlight, and the BP gas station shows a black truck going by the McLeod’s late at night on several occasions and parking in front of their house.”

“Okay, once again, this town is full of black trucks.”

Jake so badly did not want it to be Blake.

“Not a black truck. A blacked-out truck.”

Bakker carefully enunciated the word blacked so it almost sounded like two syllables.

Jake sat for several seconds, not saying a word.

“A blacked-out truck? A truck that someone covered all the chrome and emblems black?” Jake said out loud, processing the information, but already knowing the answer.

“Yes,” Bakker said. “A blacked-out truck like the one Blake Van der Velt drives. That is the truck in the FBI video. It even has a bull bar, just like Blake’s truck. But there’s more. Let me call Rebecca in here. She’s better at this forensic stuff than I am.”

Bakker sent Detective LaCroix a text, and she joined them in the conference room, taking a seat next to Craig. The winds outside were growing louder, stronger.

“Rebecca, explain to us again about the note. The one Cadie found in her mailbox.”

“Well, you know how when you have a pad of paper, and sometimes what you wrote on one sheet also leaves an impression on the sheets that follow?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jake said.

“The FBI has a machine, an EDD – Electrostatic Detection Device – that can make out an indented impression that’s not visible to the naked eye,” Rebecca said. “When they used the EDD on Cadie’s note, four letters were detected. Dority said it appeared they were a person’s initials, like someone signing off.”

“What were they?” Jake asked.

“Capital B and V, then lowercase d, and then capital V.”

Craig whistled. “Blake Van der Velt.”

Jake was stunned. He looked down at his hands, ingesting all the information – processing it. Struggling to believe that Blake Van der Velt kidnapped Cadie McLeod. Maybe even murdered her.

“I really don’t want to believe this.”

Jake shook his head. With this new information, fear for his son began to grow.

“Guess where my son Nick is right now?”

“Where?” Bakker said, cocking her head, staring at Jake.

“He’s on Blake Van der Velt’s fishing boat out on Lake Michigan.”

Bakker stood up.

“What?! Why?! Why is Nick with Blake?! On his boat?! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Jesus, Dana, they’re friends. There’s no way I really thought Blake was involved in this. If I did, I would never have let him go. I mean, Blake’s just a kid.”

Jake was now shaking, his adrenaline coursing, his fear mounting. He stood up and began pacing around the room.

“This is just great!” Bakker yelled. “And now there’s a storm!”

“Let me pull up the radar on my phone,” Craig jumped in. “I’ve got a good weather app. Uh, yeah, it doesn’t look good. Some pretty strong straight-line winds might be coming our way. Possibly 50-70 miles per hour.”

“Fuck!” Jake yelled. “I’ve been trying to text Jake, but I can’t get through. No service out there. I can’t believe I let him go!”

Jake abruptly stopped talking. He turned quietly.

“And there’s more.”

Bakker came back to her seat and sat down. Her eyes narrowed to slits.

“What do you mean, ‘more’?”

Jake swallowed hard.

“Nick is planning to confront Blake on the boat.”

“WHAT?!” Bakker yelled. “No, no, no. He can’t do that.”

“I know, I know!” Jake yelled. “Don’t you think I feel bad enough?! Jesus, Dana, he’s my son! He’s all I’ve got!”

Jake jumped up and headed toward the door.

“Where are you going, Jake?” Bakker asked, forcibly quieting her voice and trying to remain calm. She knew how much Jake loved Nick. She knew her attitude wasn’t helping.

“I’m going to the marina. I might be able to get service there and get a hold of Nick. If I don’t, I’m grabbing a goddamn Coast Guard boat myself and heading to Manitou.”

Jake walked out the door, and Bakker pulled out her cell and started making calls.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Nick nervously watched the horizon; he saw the line of dark storm clouds coming closer. The other two men on the boat seemed oblivious to the approaching bad weather. Blake was over drinking and chatting nonstop, while Robert was up on deck looking over the controls. Nick gripped the side of the boat, scanning the distant sky and feeling the sharp westerly winds whip his hair and tee-shirt. He looked down into the deep waves that were increasingly rough and choppy and prepared himself for the conversation ahead. He hoped Blake would give him answers. He prayed those answers would lead to Cadie.

Robert decided to bypass the Manitou Passage, known for its aggressive waters and shipwrecks, and steer the cruiser around the western side of South Manitou Island to the northern Island. The skies above were cloudy, and the waves getting higher – about eight feet. Robert ran the boat at six knots, heading northwest. After about 17 nautical miles, the cruiser reached the waters off North Manitou, near the island's river mouth.

Blake's uncle turned off the boat. The large cruiser swayed slightly but held its own in the choppy Lake Michigan.

"Is it time to break out the Glenlivet? Blake yelled up to his uncle on the deck.

"Okay, okay. Let me get it."

"I'm going to put my jacket on," Nick said as the cooler winds made him shiver. He walked toward the boat's bow, holding on where he could, and dug his jacket out of his bookbag. He saw the knife poking out of the pocket. He thought about Cadie and what might be happening to her.

Is she injured somewhere? Wondering why I haven't come to save her? Is she dead? Why hasn't Blake said a goddam word?

Nick tried to push all the dark thoughts and questions from his mind. He had to if he was going to get through this afternoon – to get the answers he came for. Nick thought about what he was going to say to Blake in the next hour. Then he remembered the gift card at the bottom of the bookbag and dug it out. Heading back to the stern, Nick handed the card to Blake.

"Here you go, buddy. Happy birthday."

"Oh, wow, thanks. Fifty bucks. Nice! You're such a good friend," Blake said, grabbing Nick in a slightly drunken hug. The men stumbled a bit as the boat lurched in a larger wave.

"Oh shit," Blake laughed.

Robert appeared on the top step with a distinctive aqua blue box with gold seal in his hand.

"Here we go, gentlemen. Are we ready for some Scotch Whiskey?"

He removed the similarly colored bottle from the box and walked down the steps.

"Hell, yes!" yelled Blake. "Finally! Let's do this!"

Robert opened the bottle and handed it to Blake who took a long drink of the deep gold liquid. He handed the bottle to Nick who took a shot. Blake then grabbed the bottle back and took a second shot.

"Show down, Blake. We have all afternoon," Robert laughed, taking a seat. "Hey, fellas, why don't you guys sit down? I have some good news I want to share."

Blake and Nick took a seat on the bench seat across from Robert. Blake smiled broadly and a bit drunkenly. He was enjoying his birthday so far.

“I got good news this week,” Robert smiled. “It looks like someone got a full-ride scholarship to play tennis at Western.”

“What?” Blake jumped up. “No way!”

“Yes way,” Robert laughed. “You got a full ride. Alec Patterson called me this week and gave me the news. It was down between you and that player from Grand Rapids, but Alec said the committee thought you were the stronger overall player.”

“Oh my god, that’s awesome!” Blake whooped. He threw back another shot of the whiskey.

“Congratulations, Blake. You deserve it.”

“That’s just crazy,” Blake said grinning, sitting back down with the bottle and taking a fourth shot. He finally handed it to Robert who took his own shot of the expensive, floral-smelling whiskey.

“I also have another surprise.”

“More surprises? This is the best birthday ever,” Blake laughed.

“So, you know how we’ve been having problems with your truck? Well, guess what? I bought you a new one! I ordered you the Raptor. It’s got a great engine. Perfect for off roading. We’re going pick it up this weekend. You’re going to love it.”

“Oh my god! No way! Thank you, uncle!”

Blake jumped up and hugged his uncle. He then turned to Nick.

“Can you believe it? Robert bought me a Raptor!”

Nick smiled through gritted teeth. He wasn’t feeling at all enthusiastic for Blake’s happy news.

“I can’t believe it. Robert, you’re the best! A Raptor! We are going to be doing some serious wheeling, Nick! This calls for a drink!”

Blake grabbed the bottle from a surprised Robert and took another shot.

“Hey, slow down, Blake. You’re going be drunk before we even catch a fish. Why don’t we get going?”

Robert stood up.

“You guys check the trolling lines, while I start up the boat. Nick, why don’t you fish with the rod in the starboard outrigger while Blake uses the port-side rod? Once we get underway, I’ll use sonar to find some schooling baitfish. I see some birds swooping over there, so we’ll head that way.”

“Look at those clouds, Robert,” Nick said. “It looks like it’s getting bad out there.”

“Oh, no worries. If a storm blows in, this boat can outrun it. If it gets too bad, we’ll head to the Leland Marina and wait it out.”

Nick felt slightly better, but his anxiety was growing. Blake was on his way to drunk, and Nick knew what that meant.

How in the hell is this afternoon going to play out?

Nick pulled his cell phone out of his short’s pocket. Still no service.

Robert climbed up onto the bridge deck while Blake headed portside and shoved the Glenlivet in a crevice. The boat began to move, almost immediately reaching the trolling speed of two mph. Blake picked up a rod and nestled it under his left arm and elbow. Nick took up the starboard rod and shoved it into his hip. The waves were rolling pretty good now, and the boat tossed.

“Hey, Blake. So, you were having problems with your truck?” Nick asked over the wind. He was perplexed about this new information.

“Yeah. Robert noticed something off with the engine. He’s been driving it for a few weeks. He’s been trying to figure out what’s wrong. If it’s something serious.”

“I didn’t know that. What have you been driving?”

“Robert had another truck he kept at some family property. I’ve been driving that truck for a couple weeks.”

Nick pondered this.

Robert’s been driving the blacked-out truck?

It didn’t make sense.

“So, you haven’t been driving your truck for a while?”

“What is this? No. I told you. Robert’s been driving my truck,” Blake yelled over the wind from the other side of the boat.

The cruiser moved toward a squabble of seagulls circling and swooping down into the waters. The winds were growing stronger. The cruiser swayed. Nick saw the dark clouds advancing.

“Is that a shelf cloud, Blake? Sure looks like one.”

Blake, fairly inebriated, turned unsteadily to look.

“Nah, that’s nothing. We see that all the time out here. It’ll blow north,” Blake said.

He picked up the bottle and drained most of the remaining whiskey.

“Dark clouds are always blowing through out here. If a storm does whip up, this boat can handle it, and we can always go down below.”

As the cruiser trolled through the black waters, Nick looked out over the increasingly large waves. His mind feverishly attempted to process the information he had just learned and was told to him yesterday by Bakker. *Robert’s been driving Blake’s truck? So, he’s been driving past Cadie’s house late at night. Why? And Cadie got a threatening note with the initials BVDV impressed on the paper. It’s has to be Blake: Blake Van der Velt. What about the hat in the video? It had the letters d and r for der. It’s the same hat Robert’s employees wear. Just what the hell is going on?*

Nick’s mind twisted and turned.

Just then a tremendous wave washed over the bow, spraying water everywhere.

“Blake,” Nick yelled over the increasingly loud wind. “Don’t you think we should head in? It looks like it’s getting worse. Why don’t you talk to your uncle?”

“Dude, chill! It’s fine!”

“Maybe I should say something to Robert?”

“Don’t! It’s my birthday, goddammit! Don’t ruin it!” Blake barked, agitated now. “You always have to go and fuck everything up,” he yelled at Nick.

Nick knew this behavior was coming. Yet, he felt powerless to not respond in kind. His suppressed fear and anger began to break free.

“Fuck everything up? What does that mean?”

Looking at his Blake’s contorted face, Nick could see his friend’s darker side taking hold.

“You know what I mean! Don’t pretend you don’t!”

Suddenly, the boat pitched hard.

“Oh crap,” Nick yelled out, grabbing onto the side so he didn’t fall.

Blake was undisturbed. He just swayed drunkenly and kept yelling.

“I’m talking about Cadie, you asshole! We had a good thing going until you ruined it! Ruined my life, basically!”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t ruin your life! You guys were already broken up by the time I liked her. You know that.”

The increasing winds rattled Nick’s thin jacket. He shivered uncontrollably as they sliced through him. Looking to the west, he saw the shelf cloud stretching north and south coming closer.

“Hey, we really need to get going! Let’s go to Leland and dock. We can always come back out after the storm passes.”

“Fuck, you’re an asshole sometimes!” Blake screamed. “It’s my birthday, and you always want to make it about you! Typical Nick!”

Nick just looked at him, fists clenched. He fought to stay calm. He was afraid what he might do if he let loose all his pent-up feelings.

“Listen, I’m going to talk to Robert. We need to head for shore!”

Nick took a step up toward the bridge deck when Blake suddenly grabbed his jacket and yanked him powerfully. Nick fell backward and landed hard on the fiberglass stern.

“What the hell?” Nick yelled at Blake, who was now drunkenly standing over him, swaying as the boat pitched in the strong waves. “I can’t believe you just did that!”

“It’s my birthday! We’re staying out here! You’re not going to ruin another thing in my life!”

Nick pulled himself up to sitting. Sharp pain pulsed at the back of his soaked head from hitting the stern. His jacket and shorts were drenched from the lake water swishing around the back of the boat.

Nick looked up at his drunk friend.

“Dude, you’re delusional. Cadie’s breaking up with you had nothing to do with me.”

Nick stood up. He held onto the cooler handle to steady himself. The wind whipped his hair into eyes.

“I can’t see what she sees in you, man,” Blake slurred, his eyes narrowing. “I mean, you didn’t even get into college. What kind of loser can’t get into college? I just got a scholarship, and you can’t even get in. And you live in the tiniest house in town. I mean it’s fucking small. So, you’re stupid and you’re poor!” he spat out.

“And even Laura took off. Your fucking mom doesn’t even like you!”

Nick just glared at Blake. His head throbbed. He had reached his breaking point; fury coursed through him.

Nick took a deliberate step. The two men were now face to face. Only inches separated them as both glared.

“Oh, really, Blake? Let’s talk about you for a moment. How about I tell you that the police think you kidnapped Cadie. Maybe you even murdered her, you sick fuck.”

At that, Blake’s face visibly changed. The angry smirk was gone, and his eyes now more open.

“You haven’t said one word about her since I got on this boat, but somehow she was the love of your life?!

Instead, you’re acting like you don’t have a care in the world. Just getting drunk. Not one word about Cadie!

Not. One. Fucking. Word! What’s that about?! Where is she, Blake?! What did you do to her?! Did you kill her?!”

The boat pitched hard. The two men struggled to remain upright.

“What are you talking about?!” Blake screamed back, water spraying across his face.

He stood there drunk, shaking his head. Trying to process what Nick had just said. He sat down on the bench seat and dropped his head in his hands. Then, after a few seconds, with glassy eyes, he looked up at Nick.

“I didn’t have anything to do with Cadie going missing. I would never hurt her. Why would you even think that?”

“Because Sergeant Bakker told me a few things yesterday. She said you’re their number one suspect. The night Cadie went missing, her phone took a video. The guy is wearing one of your marina hats with a d and a r on it. As in der. As in Van der Velt.”

Blake, shaking his head profusely as the boat swayed, yelled, “That’s your evidence? Jesus, Nick, hundreds of people have that hat, like all our employees. I think I even gave you one!”

“Except there’s more. Cadie found a weird note in her mailbox, something threatening. The FBI took it and was able to find an impression on the note. They were initials, like someone signing their name. Guess whose initials were on the note: BVdV? How many people in Harbor Cove do you think have the initials BVdB, huh? Just you, Blake! Those are your initials! What did you do to Cadie?! Tell me!”

Nick was shaking, seething with anger. He was holding onto the side of the rolling boat. Water rolled down his face and into his eyes.

Blake looked down, shaking his head, trying to work through Nick’s words.

The winds grew louder, more intense.

He sat there, his brain wildly processing. Suddenly, he looked up at Nick, His eyes were huge and bulging. Sheer terror stretched across his face. His entire demeanor radiated fear.

“There’s someone else with the initials BVdV!”

“Yeah, right! Who?!”

“Robert! Blake yelled into the wind. “My uncle!”

“Robert?” Nick answered, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Robert sometimes signs his name Bob! Bob Van der Velt – BVdV!”

Both young men froze. They stared at each other, neither saying a word as the cruiser pitched more violently. Water continued to splash over the sides of the stern, but neither noticed.

“And you just heard Robert’s been driving my truck.”

Their eyes locked and darkened. Both men suddenly understood. It was Robert who drove past Cadie's house late at night, parking in front of her bedroom. It was Robert who wrote Cadie a threatening note. But why? Why in the world would Robert do this?

Just then, the tall, imposing man appeared on the top step.

Nick and Blake looked up.

"What are you boys talking about?" Robert called down calmly. He gripped the railing and stood there stiffly, legs wide.

Nick saw that Robert was now wearing a hat. The Marina's nautical hat. The one Bakker said was spotted in the cell phone video. Nick stared at it. The left-side roping was frayed just like Bakker had mentioned.

He looked up at the unsmiling man, and his mind filled with horror. Nick felt he couldn't move. Like a statue, he stared at Blake's uncle while older man glared down at him. Suddenly, Nick had the most overpowering sensation: He felt he was in the presence of pure evil.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Cadie was now hypertonic. Extremely dehydrated and mentally foggy, on sheer willpower alone she drove north and then west miles down twisting, rolling, rain-soaked roads, trying to stay conscious while rain blew into her line of vision. Finally, she reached concrete and turned left, and headed west for Harbor Cove. She wondered exactly where she was; it was hard for her to concentrate. She couldn't think clearly. She thought she might be north and west of Buckley because of the Rollways she viewed from the hill above the cellar.

The road was deserted. She pushed down harder on the gas.

I have to stay awake. I have to get home to Nick and Aunt Marie. I won't die like this. I won't!

Cadie imagined the scene if Nick and Marie found her dead in the car. It was too terrible a thought to entertain. She drove as fast as she dared. The rain and winds were picking up. She also didn't want to kill someone if she fell unconscious behind the wheel. That is not how she wanted her life to end.

Five miles later, she crossed into Harbor Cove.

Oh, thank god! I'm going to make it! I am!

In her momentary celebration, she passed a wooden pole, and something caught her eye. She quickly glanced over and saw a wet poster, its ink dripping, nailed to the pole.

Was that me? Was that honestly a picture of me? Are people looking for me?

Feelings of happiness and joy flooded through her.

Oh, thank you, everyone! Thank you! I'm going to make it home! I promise you I will!

Cadie moved her head back and forth, trying to stay awake. She knew she was on the verge of unconsciousness.

She checked her seat belt. She drove three more miles and turned left on Sandy Shore. After a mile, Sandy Shore ran closely along Lake Michigan, and now, through the foggy side window, she could see the massive waves pounding the shore of Lake Michigan. Storm clouds swirled overhead. Winds buffeted her car. It seemed to be raining even harder. With everything she had, Cadie fought to stay awake.

She drove down the deserted street, the extreme winds pushing her car into the northbound lane. She fought to keep the car on the road. Up ahead was Van der Velt Marina. The parking lot was largely empty. Most of the boaters had left before the storm got bad. She passed the marina and went around a bend. She accelerated, praying she would reach the Harbor Cove Police Department before she passed out or died.

Suddenly, she became nauseous; she was sweating profusely. Her ears began to ring. She realized she was going to pass out. She could not last even one minute. She was at the end.

Goodbye, Nick. I really did love you.

In her final seconds of consciousness, the young woman pressed down hard on the brake, then she was out. She slumped against the wheel. Now, with no driver, the full-size car swerved across the lane and entered the ditch. The front end hit the ditch hard and then popped up, and the car continued driving quickly across a grassy, sodden field. It continued on toward a large marsh full of cattails and bulrushes. Just then, the car's anti-lock brakes kicked in. The brakes pumped in quick bursts, emitting a loud grinding noise. In front of the tires, rainwater, grass, and weeds combined to create a dam effect, slowing the car, and within four seconds, the car came to a stop.

Under the dark sky, the headlights turned on. They glared at the tall, reedy plants right in front of them. Just six feet away was the edge of a deep, flooded marsh - bloated from rain and snowmelt. At ten feet deep, the marsh would have swallowed Cadie and the blue LeSabre whole.

After all she had been through, after fighting for her life and finding freedom, for a second time, Cadie McLeod escaped being never heard from again.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“Oh, boys, I really wish it hadn’t come to this,” Robert yelled over the howling wind.

He stood on the bridge deck looking down at Blake and Nick. Neither said a word. They were shocked into silence.

The *Best Revenge* was now rolling side to side. The low, ominous shelf cloud had closed in, leading the powerful thunderstorm that was close behind. The temperature was now a frigid fifty degrees. Upper clouds swirled wildly, while gusts of winds 60-70 mph besieged the cruiser.

Nick and Blake attempted to stay upright in the heaving boat while swirling waters washed back and forth across the stern.

Robert, on the top step, stood steady, gripping the side rail tightly. He continued to stare down at the two young men. His eyes darted around like he was contemplating his next move.

After what seemed like forever, Robert yelled again.

“And we were having such a lovely time!”

Suddenly, without warning, Robert jumped. The older man landed on the stern below and took three large steps toward Blake. Blake, drunk and taken off guard, quickly retreated backward toward the side of the boat. Robert advanced and reached for Blake with his outstretched hands.

Blake screamed, “Robert! What are you doing?!”

Robert grabbed Blake's windbreaker. He both lifted and shoved the young man hard toward the side of the boat. The drunk young man flung against the portside of the fiberglass boat, his head and neck whiplashing. Blake put his arms out to defend himself and tried to form words, but Robert immediately closed in. He grabbed Blake's windbreaker again and the shirt underneath and propelled him up and backwards while never saying a word. Within seconds, while Blake screamed at Robert to stop, the just-turned 18-year-old was flipped over the side of the cruiser and into the raging waters below.

Nick could hear his friend screaming and pleading for help above the wind.

For a second, Nick stood mute, like a statue, gripping the other side of the boat with all his strength, rain pelting his face, watching Robert push Blake overboard. It happened so quickly; his mind couldn't process what his brain had just witnessed.

Robert then turned to face Nick.

His face was slick with rain water; his shirt drenched. Nick looked into Robert's eyes and saw nothing there. No feelings. No humanity. Just empty and black. He knew he was looking into the eyes of a sociopath – a monster. He wanted to help his friend, but Blake's uncle stood between him and the portside. Nick couldn't hear Blake's screams anymore.

"Robert, we need to help Blake! We've got to help him! Do something!"

Robert took a step forward – a small grin now plastered on his face.

He's enjoying this.

"I'm so sorry, Nick. I've always liked you, and that's saying a lot since I don't like most people."

Robert took another step forward.

"But Blake's dead, and now I have to kill you."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The Weirdo

Twenty-eight years ago, on a warm autumn evening, I went from Weirdo to Monster.

After I yanked Thomas McLeod – TJ to his friends - from his car that fall evening, I beat the shit out of him. I beat him until he bled. I beat him until he was unconscious. He was supposed to be my friend, but instead he betrayed me. He stole my girl. My soulmate. The woman I planned to grow old with. I can still hear his screams as I landed blow after blow on his perfect, handsome face.

“Why, Robert? Why are you doing this?!”

Why! Why am I doing this?! Because you stole Aileen from me! You ruined my life! You destroyed my hope for any chance of happiness! You have everything, and I have nothing!

I can still picture Aileen hanging out the Camaro window, eyes wide in horror, screaming, begging me to stop.

So, what did I do? I beat TJ harder. The moment I punched him in the eye, I heard his bone crack and remember hoping his damaged face would make him forever ugly like me.

Thomas and Aileen were hugely popular students at Manistee Harbor High – voted *Most Beautiful Couple* - and I was nothing. At school, behind my back and sometimes to my face, classmates called me The Weirdo. I'm awkward and insecure. I really don't know how to communicate with people, let alone women. They never gave me the time of day. I was ugly and strange and spoke with a slight stutter. People actually moved away from me in the hallways as I walked by.

From a young age, I knew something was seriously wrong with me. It didn't help that my father loathed me. To him, I was a total disappointment. Sometimes, he hit me in anger. Other times, he called me vicious names and taunted me with my Weirdo nickname. Mostly, though, he just ignored me.

So, practically overnight, I went from being The Weirdo to being regarded as a full-blown monster. Everyone hated me - despised me.

TJ was in Manistee General for a week with a broken orbital bone and contusions on his liver and spleen.

Doctors were even concerned he might have a brain bleed. Of course, at the hospital, I assumed TJ had a steady stream of well-wishers. I imagined the smiling throngs grasping their ridiculous balloon bouquets: "We love you, TJ!" "Get well soon, TJ!" "You're the best, TJ!" An endless line of hugs and kisses.

It made me want to puke.

Obviously, I was arrested at the scene. The tree-lined street was crammed with nosy neighbors and my shocked classmates while the ambulance workers tended to the bloody Thomas lying unconscious in the grass. I was handcuffed and placed in the back of a Manistee patrol car and whisked to the local station. When dear old dad walked up to the holding cell to take me home, I was sitting on the metal bench, covered in TJ's dried blood, grinning profusely.

I'd never been happier.

Dad just cocked his balding head and studied me with black eyes. Minutes later, after we'd left the station, I slid into the front seat of his LeSabre, and, looking straight ahead, he muttered, "I wish you had died that night." I knew immediately what he meant: the night he tried to murder me with carbon monoxide. I was only ten, and already he hated me and wanted me dead.

After beating McLeod, I was ordered by the Manistee County Court to be placed in a ten-unit facility for high-risk youth. So, until I turned 18, I lived in a center for juvenile delinquents surrounded by some quite nasty and violent young men. I recall attending Hopeful House Academy and its course "Social Skills 4 Life." That amused me to no end since I had zero capacity to learn social skills. When my placement ended, my records were sealed, and I looked forward to a fresh start. My plans were to leave Michigan where nobody knew me and begin again.

Unfortunately, the bastard got sick. (Mom had abandoned us years ago, although I do sometimes wonder if dad actually succeeded at murdering someone and getting away with it). So, it was just me and my dying dad as he wasted away from lung cancer. Daily endless coughing, wheezing, and hacking blood all over our living room sofa. I felt nothing but disgust. Months later, my foul-smelling and emaciated father died.

That made me so happy.

Now I was utterly alone.

Dad did leave me money, though. Enough to attend college out of state, so that's what I did. I moved to New York where no one knew me, and I started a new life. I enrolled in NYU's business program and lived in a small apartment in Chelsea. I liked the many art galleries and well-known market. I often took long walks by myself along the Hudson River at night. But mostly, my ears in the Big Apple were all about work. I didn't have time for a social life. Or friends. Or women. People don't like me, and I don't like them. Especially females. They're nothing but cruel creatures who torment men.

Aileen showed me that.

New York also taught me a lot. I learned to wear a mask. I observed others closely: how they talked, how they interacted, how they showed they cared about each other. I watched them smile and say nice things. Hold the

doors open for women. Say please and thank you. This might sound weird, but I would mimic them at home. Just practicing, really. I'd stand in front of my bedroom mirror for hours and pretend to be someone else, someone people liked.

"Oh, how are you today? My, don't you look lovely. Can I get you a coffee? What a beautiful dress."

Over time, my mask improved, and people actually began to think I was the nice, polite person they saw before them. In reality, there were two of me.

One night, I was having a cocktail at the Lobby Bar in the Chelsea Hotel when someone called my name. Naturally, I was startled. No one outside of work had called my name in a long time. I looked up from my magazine and saw Marissa standing in front of me. I hadn't seen her since that night I beat up TJ. She had put on a few pounds, but she wasn't wholly unattractive. She still liked to drink a lot. Anyway, we made the smallest of small talk, and Marissa told me that TJ and Aileen got married and were living a "sickeningly sweet life" in Alma Michigan, where they went to college. It was obvious Marissa didn't like Aileen. I think she was always jealous of her.

Anyway, since that night and as the years went by, I tried hard not to think about TJ and Aileen as the years went by. Unfortunately, I thought about them 24/7. I woke up thinking about them, and I went to bed thinking about them. My dad once called me a vindictive prick. But why should I forget? Why should I forgive? They have happiness while I have nothing but an empty apartment and an empty life.

Then, one day, everything changed.

I was sitting in my apartment, working on a puzzle, sipping my expensive Glenlivet, when I got a call from a lawyer in Harbor Cove, Michigan. She called to inform me that my Grandfather Diedrik Van der Velt had died and left me Van der Velt Marina in his will. I never even knew the old man, but he was a goddamn Van der Velt, and so was I. That's all I needed to know. I also knew someday my luck would change.

In short order, I moved to Harbor Cove. I met with the lawyers and took possession of my family's marina. I found a beautiful condo with massive glass windows facing the shore of Lake Michigan. Soon I became an

admired business owner running a major marina along Michigan's west coast. I was wealthy. People respect that. I made it my goal to become a pillar of the community.

Just have to keep that mask firmly in place.

The *Benzie County Record Patriot* and *Lake Life* even wrote glowing articles about me. I then created a foundation for at-risk youth (Comical, really. Oh, if they only knew!). The picture of me and Mayor Clark at the opening reception made the cover of *Lake Life*. There I was in my gleaming tuxedo, Mayor Heida Clark's arm around me like we were the best of friends. I had arrived! My life was finally prosperous and successful, and I found myself thinking about Thomas and Aileen McLeod less and less.

Until that day.

It was a Saturday morning, sunny and 75 degrees. I drove my newly washed Mercedes Benz down Main Street, a warm breeze blowing through my expensive car, and I tapped along to Bob Seger's *Hollywood Nights*. Then something seized my attention. There she was. I would recognize her anywhere.

Aileen McLeod.

The dream girl of my youth drifted across Main Street right in front of me – like an apparition. I watched, transfixed, as Aileen entered Bell's Diner, her luxurious, crimson hair flowing behind her. I hadn't seen her since that night I almost killed TJ.

I quickly pulled to the curb, my brain shooting off fireworks. I was glued to her and watched her every movement through the restaurant's large glass window. Smiling and laughing, Aileen floated over to a table. Then I spotted TJ. The handsome, tanned Thomas grinned back at his lovely wife and jumped up and pulled out a chair for Aileen.

He always was so polite.

Seated next to him was their angelic daughter. After Aileen sat down, TJ leaned over and kissed his child on the top of her precious head.

God, he was always so perfect. Then I noticed a scar around his eye. Did I cause that? I sure hope so.

I put on my sunglasses and slouched down for the next hour, observing the happy McLeod family enjoy their breakfast. All my buried feelings resurfaced: Jealousy. Sadness. Hatred. Loneliness. As I sat there sweating in my two-hundred-dollar golf shirt and \$100,000 car, I grew smaller and smaller.

Oh, how I despised them and their happiness.

That very morning, I made a decision. It was time. I could no longer afford to be tortured by these people. They had toyed with me long enough! So, I formulated a plan. I remembered my father's favorite quote, "Living well is the best revenge," and the thought came to me as I sat in that hot car: dying well might be the even better revenge.

My plan was simple, really. Nothing fancy or complicated. It only called for the complete and utter destruction of the McLeod family – TJ, Aileen, and their little girl who was the spitting image of Aileen. Every last one of them needed to die. No one would be spared.

From that morning on, whenever I could, I stalked the little family. I found out that they had just moved to Harbor Cove. Lucky me! I also was careful to always drive my dad's LeSabre so as not to be detected. I quickly learned the McLeod's daily routines, and I contemplated how I would kill them.

Then one day, I just got lucky.

It was a June evening. I was parked down the street from their cottage, watching the house from under an Oak tree, and I saw Thomas and Aileen celebrating something. Both of my front car windows were rolled down, and I strained to hear. All I could ascertain was their joy as they talked loudly and animatedly on the front porch. I saw Aileen high five Thomas while he grinned happily like he always did. Then Aileen threw her arms around him in sheer happiness. I watched them under their front porch light as Thomas pulled back from the hug and kissed Aileen deeply. Their love sickened me.

I decided to kill them that night.

They walked hand in hand down the cobblestone front path to their car parked on the tree-lined street. Minutes later, I was following them. Thomas made several turns, and soon we were driving up the coastal highway M-22, dark trees on each side rushing by in a blur - the moon hidden by clouds. Then it came to me.

They're going to Frosty Bar.

I sped up and passed them, keeping my eyes straight ahead, hoping they wouldn't see me. I drove quickly for two miles, and then pulled off to the side of the road and waited. It was a Monday night, and the street was quiet. Deserted. Soon, I saw their headlights in my rearview mirror. I watched their white Chevy Cruze slowly pass me and pull farther down the road into the parking lot. Thomas and Aileen exited their car, again smiling broadly, and walking hand in hand like young lovers they crossed the parking lot.

I pulsated with adrenaline. A smile began to form on my face.

I eased my car out onto M-22 and pushed down hard on the gas, pushing as hard as I could in my Prada's without flooring it and squealing the tires. The car ripped down the street.

I timed it perfectly.

When they entered the road, the happy couple was looking north, toward the small ice cream shop. They were engrossed in conversation. Their backs were to me. They were still holding hands. I continued to accelerate.

Then were right in front of me. I think when I hit them, I was going 50 miles per hour. Thomas must have heard me at the last second because he snapped his head around and looked back in terror.

Did he recognize me? Did he understand it was me who was killing him? I like to think so.

As I slowly drove away from their decimated bodies, my headlights caught on something shiny. I slowed, opened my door, leaned over, and picked it up. It was a necklace. It was Aileen's gold half a heart necklace covered in her blood and body tissue. I tossed it on my front seat and drove away. My now bloody hands gripping the steering wheel.

I'd never been happier.

CHAPTER FIFTY

In the downpour, under black skies, Jake raced down Main Street, headed toward Van der Velt Marina.

Suddenly, his Tahoe began hydroplaning in a deep trench of water that ran along the curb, and he wrestled the steering wheel. The SUV finally righted itself. The Tahoe continued to barrel down Main Street until it reached Redding. Squealing his tires, Jake ripped around the corner and tore down Redding Boulevard. He drove the next four miles as fast as he dared and then turned right. He raced down Sandy Shore.

He was rounding the bend when, to the right, something caught his eye. His brain registered that something was amiss. He quickly glanced over and saw headlights out in the grass. There was a car sitting far out in the field near the marsh. He got on his radio and called for assistance.

He was torn. He needed to get to the marina and reach Nick, but he couldn't not stop. His empathy always won out.

He slowed and turned into a small pull off. He jumped out of the Tahoe and looked east through the driving rain. He could see the white smoke exhaust exiting the car's tailpipe. The car was still running.

The cold rain quickly soaked his jacket and pants. The wind howled and whipped his hair around.

He started to run through the rain-slickened grass, but his feet sank in mud. He pulled up his feet and tried to run again, but both of shoes got stuck, and he fell face first into the mud. He knew he was weak from the chemicals he had ingested the day before, but he was determined to reach the car.

He got to his knees and wiped the mud off his face. He pushed himself up. He moved as fast as he could go in the mud that was turning to an inky quicksand. He moved toward the car, one plodding step at a time, while its headlights cast an eerie glow on the row of cattails.

As he drew near, through the foggy side window, he saw a figure sitting in the front seat, leaning against the steering wheel. The person was completely still. No sound or movements. Fear rose up in him as he approached the driver's side door. He braced for what he might find. He put his wet, cold hand on the icy door handle and pulled.

Dear god, please don't let this person be dead.

C

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Nick stared back at Robert in complete confusion.

“Why do you have to kill me? What did I do? I don’t understand!” The young man screamed into the wind at what he now knew was a sociopath.

“Stop this, Robert! We have to save Blake!”

Then, a terrifying realization exploded into Nick’s mind. A thought so horrendous that his brain almost seemed to short circuit.

Robert kidnapped Cadie.

The monster standing right in front of him stole his beloved Cadie!

Nick fixed his eyes on the soulless man and glared with rage. Then a screamed erupted from deep within.

“Did you take Cadie, Robert?! Tell me! Did you take her? Did you kill her?!”

Nick was now shaking and crying, while straight-line winds and sheets of rain pummeled his face and body.

The large cruiser rolled and heaved in the monstrous waves.

Robert, brown hair plastered to his head, rain water pouring down his long, angular face, simply smiled. An empty, evil smile without human feeling. He reached deep into his pant's pocket and pulled out something gold and shiny. He held it up for Nick to see, and it twirled violently in the sheeting winds.

Nick thought it looked like a necklace. He saw a gold half a heart. Nick then realized it was two necklaces, each with half a heart, tangled together.

He was confused. His mind raced. Were these Cadie and Aileen's necklaces? How could Robert have both women's necklaces? His mind tried to comprehend.

"Where did you get those necklaces?!"

Again, Robert smiled - slyly.

"Like my boat says, Nick, it's all about revenge."

The two necklaces continued to twirl in the powerful winds. Rain now poured down on the two men. Robert went to shove the necklaces, one now dripping with old, crusted blood, back into his pocket, but they slipped from his wet hands onto the stern.

"Revenge?" Nick yelled out, shaking his head madly, utterly confused. "What did Cadie ever do to you? I don't understand!"

There was a moment of quiet between the two men that seemed to last forever. Each took stock of the moment.

One man wondered what would happen next. One man planned his next move.

Then the moment broke.

Robert suddenly ran across the stern. Nick instinctively knew Robert planned to shove him to his death just like Blake minutes before. However, Robert didn't know one thing. Robert didn't know that Nick, whose father wanted him to play football just like his dad, spent hours in the front yard learning numerous defensive skills. One skill in particular made his dad most proud.

It was the spin move that earned Jake Brennan All-Conference honors.

Just as Robert reached Nick, his rain-drenched arms outstretched to shove the young man overboard, Nick's muscle memory kicked in, and he stepped to the side and turned with him. The men's eyes met and locked as Nick rotated his body with Robert's. The older man looked at Nick in surprise as he twisted alongside side him. Time slowed. At about three quarters of the turn, Nick grabbed Robert's biceps and shoved with all his strength, using his strong calves to propel the tall man up and backward. Robert's momentum caused him to crash into the starboard side of the boat.

Then, just like Blake, Robert toppled backward over the side, screaming, clawing at his expensive boat, and was quickly sucked into the raging waves below. Nick looked down. He saw Robert fighting to stay afloat, flailing his arms at the waves that crashed at him from every direction. Finally, Nick saw what he had never seen before in the older man's eyes: fear.

Nick turned away as Robert's screams were swallowed by the gale.

He ran to the other side of the boat and scanned the cavernous lake and mountainous waves.

"Blake! Blake! Where are you? Blake! Blake!"

His eyes darted endlessly, and he yelled over and over until his throat was raw, but he did not see his friend. Only the roiling and indifferent Great Lake that stretched for miles. His face and hair drenched, Nick raced around the perimeter of the cruiser, stern to bow, several times screaming and searching for Blake, but to no avail. His efforts were futile.

Suddenly, he spied a red and white lifebuoy and frantically removed it from the buoyant line. With all his might, he threw it overboard against the pressing winds. It was Blake's last hope. Nick knew he would not be able to locate his friend in the massive storm waves that crashed in all directions.

He ran to the stern and began to head up the steps to the bridge when he saw the necklaces floating in the swirling water. He grabbed them and then headed up to the bridge. With cold, trembling hands, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called 911.

Nothing.

OF COURSE THERE'S NO SERVICE!

Exhausted and shaking, Nick sat down at Robert's seat at the helm. He spotted the cruiser's radio and turned it on. There's was no noise. He turned the knob until he heard a faint crackling sound. Then he picked up the microphone, pushed in the button, and yelled frantically.

"Hello! Hello! Is there anyone there? I need help! I'm north and west of North Manitou Island. People are overboard! Please send help!"

Nick wrapped his icy hand around the boat's throttle and pushed it as far forward as it would go. Under the dark skies and pelting rain, it was hard to get his bearings. He scoured the control panel until he spotted the black, mounted compass. He pushed the throttle until the magnetic needle pointed at 90 degrees, hoping he was headed toward Leland.

Suddenly, the complete and utter irony flashed bright in Nick's mind.

In the end, the *Best Revenge*, Robert's hoped-for symbol of success and validation, had afforded him nothing but a lonely, watery grave.

The young man held the throttle firm. While the cruiser fought its way through the towering twelve-foot waves, Nick prayed. He prayed harder than he had ever prayed before. He prayed that somehow, someday, he would see Cadie McLeod alive again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Through the ground floor window, Cadie saw Nick's yellow Jeep pull to the curb. She grabbed the quilt off her bunkbed and raced down the dorm's hallway and through a side door. The two young people met on the tree-covered steps outside historic Landon Hall – the Tudor-style dormitory with high-pitched, gabled roofs.

“Hello, beautiful,” Nick said, enveloping Cadie in a huge hug. “College life looks good on you, girl. I’ve missed you!”

Cadie smiled and pulled her head back from the hug and kissed Nick deeply. Both could feel the love and passion between them.

Finally, Cadie took Nick's hand.

“C'mon,” she said, “let's walk.”

It was a bright Saturday morning in early September on the Michigan State campus as the two walked along Red Cedar River. Redwoods, Elm, White Oak, and Norway Spruce created a lush canopy of vibrant fall colors. At 11 am, happy students on blankets already dotted the large expanses of grass. Nick could hear the MSU marching band practicing nearby.

“Let’s sit here,” Cadie said, and began laying and straightening the small quilt.

“A homemade gift from Aunt Marie when she came to visit Tuesday,” Cadie smiled up at Nick as she perfected the last corner and sat down. “We had such a wonderful day together. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Nick smiled. Everyone loved Aunt Marie.

He then noticed a new ring on Cadie’s right hand. It had a little brown and white owl on it.

“What’s with the ring?”

“Oh, this? I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

Nick sat down on the quilt across from her.

“Jake wanted me to tell you he sends his love. He said he hopes you are doing alright.”

Cadie began to cry.

“What would I have done without your dad, Nick?” she said, her voice shaking. “I really don’t know how he did it. Carrying me all that way across the field in the middle of a terrible storm. The doctors said I was nearly dead. If it wasn’t for your dad, I would be dead. Your dad saved my life.”

“That’s my dad,” Nick smiled through tears of his own. “He loves you, Cadie. We both do. You have to know we’d do anything for you.”

Cadie wiped her tears and nodded.

“I’m just so grateful.”

Nick reached into his jacket pocket.

“I have something for you.”

He pulled out a shimmering gold box and placed it on the quilt in front of Cadie.

“What did I do to deserve this,” she smiled. “You’re too good to me.”

She picked up the box and slowly removed the lid. Then she saw what was inside: two sparkling gold necklaces, each with half a gold heart.

She sat there stunned. Saying nothing. Just looking down. Then she began to sob. Deep, wrenching sobs from the depth of her soul that poured out all the pain and anguish she had suffered for so many years and the trauma

she had just endured. Nick grabbed her and embraced her fiercely. He held her close for a long time, stroking her hair, rocking her until the tears subsided, and Cadie was able to find words.

“This means so much to me, Nick. You have no idea. I can’t even begin to tell you how thankful I am to have these necklaces back.”

“I know,” Nick said.

The two young people laid down on the quilt, hands behind their heads, neither speaking for quite a while. Nick looked over at Cadie and once again marveled at her luminous green eyes, lush red hair, and sun-kissed cheeks. She was utterly exquisite.

Nick was finally accepted into the University of Michigan in late June. After attending Blake’s memorial, Jake, his truck crammed full of Nick’s stuff, including Nick’s old PlayStation, drove his son to Ann Arbor and moved him into East Quad. After they were finished, the men sat on Nick’s bunk and shared a shot of Glenlivet in honor of Blake. As they did, the coast guard was still searching Lake Michigan – still trying to locate his remains.

Then, the following week, Nick helped Cadie move into MSU. After everything that had happened, both young people just wanted time to process the events, try to heal, and hope to be normal. So, for the most part, they avoided talking in depth about all that had occurred and was ongoing. It was probably time for a bit of closure. The bells of Beaumont Tower began to ring in the distance. Cadie waited for the peal of bells to end before she began. Cadie sat up and Nick joined her.

“The prosecutor said it was Robert Van der Velt who beat up my dad in high school,” Cadie said. “He was utterly obsessed with my mother, but my mom loved my dad. So, one night, after a party, Robert found them together in my dad’s car. He pulled my dad out and beat him in front of my mom. It was a terrible scene. Robert put my dad in the hospital. Then he was arrested and placed in a juvenile center until he was 18.”

“God, that’s crazy,” Nick said, incredulous. “I always wondered where your dad got that scar around his eye. I wonder if Robert gave it to him? It’s insane that Robert has been holding this terrible grudge against your parents since high school.”

Cadie looked down for a moment, quiet. When she looked up, her eyes were full of tears.

“I didn’t know if you heard this, but it was Robert who murdered my parents. It wasn’t some random drunk driver who killed them. It was Robert. He ran them down in cold blood. The tests on his car were positive for my family’s DNA.”

Nick sat there. Stunned. The news was too much. He thought about poor Thomas and Aileen, and, of course his friend Blake who done nothing wrong but wanting to celebrate his eighteenth birthday.

“Oh my god, Cadie. I don’t know what to say. Robert truly was a monster.”

“It’s impossible to comprehend hating people so much that you would run them over. Then try to kill their daughter. And kill their own nephew. What kind of person does this? I truly feel like I’m living a *Dateline* episode,” Cadie said wryly.

“No one who is happy with himself and at peace could do what Robert did,” Nick said. “He was deeply, profoundly unhappy.”

Nick uncrossed his legs.

“So, now what?” he said, changing the subject to lighten the mood. “What’s next for Cadie McLeod? What are your classes?”

Cadie’s face brightened, and she resituated herself on the quilt.

“I’m just ready to get going!” she said enthusiastically. “I’ve got Forensic Chemistry, Social Science and the Law, Intro to Forensic Science, and Principles of Chemistry.”

“Wow. You’re really going for it! You’re going to be the Amazing Cadie McLeod: Crime Fighter!” Nick grinned. “I’m so proud of you! I can just picture you hosting *20/20* someday. Nothing is impossible for you.”

Cadie laughed, shaking her head and tossing her beautiful hair in the autumn sunlight.

“I think I’ll have my own show! And solve crimes! And nothing is impossible because the word actually says, I’m possible.”

“Did you just make that up?” Nick laughed. “That’s pretty good.”

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t,” she winked.

Then her demeanor changed, and she looked Nick in the eye.

“In all seriousness. I just want to make my parents proud, Nick. I could never give them the justice they deserved, but at least through my work I can get justice for other people.”

“I know you will, Cadie.”

“I believe my mom and dad would want that. It’s the kind of work that would honor them.”

Nick watched the lovely, talented, and strong young woman talk and listened to her every word. It was great to see her laugh and her eyes light up. To see her passion. To see her strength and resolve. As he watched her face glow in the bright autumn light, he knew for sure: Cadie McLeod was going to be alright.

EPILOGUE

Robert Van der Velt murdered my parents. He murdered his nephew. He tried to murder me.

I got away.

My second semester at MSU, I took the course “Psychopathy: The Dark Core of Personality.” From it, I learned the dangerous traits of the psychopathic narcissist: sense of entitlement, lack of empathy and remorse, grandiose sense of self, and a constant need to obtain a goal, which, in my case, was murdering my family. He saw us not as human beings but objects in his game of a twisted life.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus, the handsome young man, forsakes everyone to focus on himself. One day, he sees his reflection in a pool of water and falls in love – with his own image. Day after day, the young man sits on the edge of the pool, consumed by love of self, until, without food, water, or sleep, he succumbs to death.

Robert Van der Velt was consumed with self, and it led to his destruction. My parents, Thomas and Aileen McLeod, were the opposite: they were consumed by love and life. They lived with happiness and focused on other people.

Everyone has a choice to make: light or dark. Good or evil. Robert chose evil. He chose to make dark, terrible choices over and over that hurt the ones I loved.

I can't let evil like that continue unchecked.

I can't let monsters like Robert Van der Velt keep destroying innocent lives and getting away with it. My professor said I was the most determined student she'd ever taught. I guess you could say I gained my motivation the hard way.

Aileen and Thomas McLeod never received the justice they deserved. But I can get justice for others.

And I will.

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