

**Scent of Sunday**

**By**

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**Chapter One**

Levi Ledger was packing when the call came. He ignored the ringing, threw two thermal shirts into the duffle bag. The cell continued to ring. He added another pair of jeans, a heavy sweater and four pairs of socks before the ringing stopped. He didn't bother to look at the phone. He didn't care who called. He didn't want to talk to anyone.

Grabbing his canvas coat, he picked up the duffle, swung it over his shoulder and headed for the door. The phone rang again. Swearing, Levi dropped the duffle and pulled the phone out of his jeans pocket. He glanced at the number on the display.

Indecision gripped him. The ringing stopped. Decision made.

He'd made it to the car before the next call came and this time, before he could think about it, he put the phone to his ear. "I'm gone," he said.

"Levi?"

He was surprised by the voice on the other end of the line. He'd expected to hear George Kling, head of security at Adams Financial, but the voice wasn't the smoker's hoarse Kling, it was soft and uncertain. A woman's voice.

"Levi?" she said again.

"Who is this?"

"Suzanne. Suzanne Buckingham."

Levi had to work to place her. The pretty long-haired redhead analyst at Adams Financial.

“This isn’t a good time,” he started, but she interrupted.

“Please,” she said. “I need your help.”

Levi closed his eyes, inhaled deep, let it go. “No,” he said and ended the call.

She waited almost two hours before calling again. By then, Levi was on a thin black band of a state road in New Hampshire. There were no streetlights. His phone lit up green as the call came in. He kept his eyes on the road ribbon, but the neon reflected in the windshield, painted the car in soft lime. He passed the junction of 16 and 25 and took a left onto a road that was no more than a dirt track.

The house was a mile and a quarter down the road. The headlights washed over the peeling T-1-11 and broken shingles. He pulled right up to the steps and shut the car off. He sat in the dark for a moment, staring at the black oblong windows, saw the cracked glass in the door. He wondered when Nora had been here last. It looked like it had been a long, long time ago.

Maybe being here was as hard for her as it was for him.

He got out of the car, grabbed the duffle and went up the three steps to the front door. It had been purple, once, because Nora thought a purple door invited people in with a smile. But the purple had faded to a dull gray and Levi knew no one had been invited in for more than a year. He found the right key on the first try and the door opened easily, as if the house had been waiting for him.

Maybe it had.

He didn't listen to Suzanne Buckingham's messages until the next morning. Sleep had come faster than he'd expected. It seemed he had just put his head down, and a second later, dawn light was squeezing through the rips in the cream-colored shade. He rubbed a calloused hand over his face, feeling the stubble. When had he shaved last? Two days ago? Three? A week? He guessed it didn't matter. It hadn't mattered since Nora left.

He threw back the covers and planted his feet on the cold wooden floor. The house was freezing; the fire must have gone out.

The early morning minutes passed quickly as he made a new fire, started a pot of coffee and ate a bowl of oatmeal. The world outside was just coming to life. The ashen dawn gave way to cold sunshine. He wandered over to the picture window that looked out over the pond and thought, "*He was happiest, here.*"

The thought gripped his heart, cleaved it and his jaw clenched as he bit back the pain. They told him it would get easier, that time would heal the wounds, but he didn't believe that. He knew a more bitter truth. Time didn't heal; it just passed. In truth, he wasn't sure he wanted the pain to end. If it did, that meant he was moving on, which meant moving past, life goes on and all the rest of those insipid grief clichés.

He was thinking about Nora, wondering how often the pain gripped her in its monstrous fist, when he picked up the phone and punched the icon for messages. He told himself he wasn't hoping one of the six messages waiting for him was from his wife, but his heart knew the truth.

Nora hadn't called.

Suzanne Buckingham had. Six times. Six messages, each one increasingly anxious. It was the final message that got to him.

“Look, Levi, I know this is a bad time for you,” there were tears in her voice, like she had swallowed a cry and it was choking her. “I know what happened with Nora. With Jeremy. But that’s why you’re the right one to call.”

Levi gripped the phone, held so tight against his ear it would leave a mark. He could hear her soft breath on the other end of the line. She cleared her throat. “We need your help,” she said again. “You couldn’t do anything to help your son, but there are children who need you. A teenage girl.” Levi heard the intake of breath. “And a little boy.”

They agreed to meet at a small restaurant on the New Hampshire border. Levi had passed it a hundred times on the way to the cabin but had never stopped. They’d always been too excited to get to the cabin, or too exhausted on their way home, to stop for a fast meal. Still, it was the first place that came to his mind when Suzanne asked to meet.

The Meager Pub wasn’t what he expected.

From the outside, the restaurant looked like one of those family diner places, where the menu would boast dishes like “Mom’s Meatloaf” and American Chop Suey. He expected vinyl seats, cheap tables, paper napkins. The Meager Pub was anything but cut-rate.

The room was spacious, carved into dining alcoves. The chairs were gleaming black wood, the tables covered with soft gray tablecloths. The silverware gleamed under the velvety glow from the hanging lanterns.

He saw Suzanne right away. She was sitting at a table for two, facing the door. A large TV hung on the wall behind her; a baseball game was on. Suzanne didn’t see him at first, busy taking off a heavy coat, fussing with her bag. She might have felt his stare, because she suddenly looked up, her eyes met his and she tried to smile.

He slid onto the chair opposite her and waited.

“I’m sorry to be such a pest,” she began, “but I didn’t know who else to call. They’re questioning him like he’s a suspect and he isn’t. I mean, what is he supposed to do? Brian thinks he should hire a lawyer—”

Levi put a hand up to stop the word gush. She stopped talking instantly.

The waiter, a young man in his early twenties, dressed in a white shirt and black tie, drifted by. “I’m Benny. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Hot tea, please,” Suzanne said.

“Beer,” Levi said. “IPA, whatever you have on tap.”

When the waiter left, Levi leaned over the table. “I agreed to meet you so you’d stop calling. I didn’t say I would help.”

Her eyes widened in panic. “But you have to!”

Levi held her eyes with his own. “No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“Will you at least listen? Can I tell you what happened?”

“It won’t matter, Mrs. Buckingham—”

“Suzanne,” she said.

“-- because I can’t help you or whoever it is who needs help. I’m out. On sabbatical. Taking a leave. Pick your phrase. Bottom line, I’m done.”

“But it’s children!” she burst out. “A girl and a little boy!”

Levi’s heart twisted and his voice was harsher than he intended it to be. “And that’s why you called me? Because a little boy needs help?”

“Yes! Yes! And his father and mother. They’re desperate and the police think the father has something to do with it.”

Despite his surety that he wouldn't get dragged in, Levi heard himself ask, "Are the kids dead?"

Something in Suzanne's eyes changed, tears brimmed but didn't fall. She shook her head no. "They thought Mark was, but I found a picture. He's alive."

Levi leaned back. "Okay," he said softly. "I'll listen."

She told the story in circles, began with the information that the parking lot to the supermarket was full. Snowbanks, the color of dirty grout, blocked many of the center lanes. She'd circled twice and then saw a space in the end row between a white van and a blue Toyota. She slid the Blazer between the two and turned the engine off. Pocketed the keys and opened the door. She'd parked a little closer than she should have. The door almost hit the side of the van, but she managed to squeeze out without dinging the smooth white paint.

When she came out a few minutes later, the van was gone and the space next to her car was empty. Suzanne shifted the paper bag to her left hip and dropped the keys. Cursing, she knelt to pick them up and the Polaroid on the ground fluttered.

It was backside up, a black square marked by a white border. Without thinking about it, Suzanne picked the photograph up, flipped it over and the world tilted.

The picture was of a little boy – ten, maybe eleven years old – lying on his side in the back of a white van. His arms were tied behind his back. His ankles tied. A wide strip of duct tape covered his mouth. His head was lifted, turned toward the door. His eyes were wide open and expectant. Full of terror and hope, like he thought whoever had opened the van door was going to save him and not just snap a picture.

Lying next to him was a girl, older, maybe fifteen, tied like the boy. She'd lifted her head as well, but there was no hope in her expression. Her eyes were dead.

Suzanne had looked at the photo blankly, and then she began to scream.

"The police had a hundred questions, but they were all the same," Suzanne wiped a tear away from her left eye. Levi lifted the beer to his mouth, took a swallow. His hands were shaking.

"The girl's name is Chloe McGuire," Suzanne said. "The police thought she was a runaway because she'd disappeared after taking all of her money out of the bank. Her mother lives in a tenement on the edge of the city. An amber alert was issued and there was a search, but it was like she'd disappeared from the face of the earth." Suzanne played with her tea, turning the cup in circles on the table. "There was an online boyfriend. They thought Chloe climbed into a car and drove into her future."

She lifted her head, locked eyes with Levi. "The little boy's name is Mark Straub. He's been missing for three weeks. His father, Tim Straub, took him hunting for the first time on November tenth. Tim set his boy up in a stand and then he saw a ten-point buck. He took the shot. Tim knew he'd hit the buck, but it ran deeper into the woods. Tim told Mark to stay where he was. He tracked the deer, and then went back to get Mark, but he was gone."

The search started immediately. First townspeople, police, firemen, and then the National Guard got involved and started an air search. They searched hundreds of miles over the next five days, walking miles, inch by inch through the forest, but no trace of the boy was found.

"I knew the story," Suzanne said. "Maybe you saw it, too?"

Levi nodded.

He'd followed the story. For the first three weeks, the lead on the local broadcast stations had been little Mark Straub disappearing in the woods. Lost in the deep, black forest, somewhere in the White Mountains.

"My boy knows how to use his compass," Tim Straub said over and over on the news. "He's still alive out there."

But after the first major blizzard, when three feet of snow fell in twenty-four hours, the boy was given up for dead. He couldn't have survived without shelter, the experts on TV said. Still, rescuers used snowmobiles to search the heavy drifts, hoping that perhaps he'd found shelter in the dense woods. But hope faded as the day wore on and the temperatures plummeted.

As Suzanne talked, Levi remembered watching one of the TV reporters trying to interview Tim Straub as he was walking out of his ranch house early one morning after the search was called off, a lunch box clasped in his meaty fist.

"Tim! Tim! Do you think your son is still alive? Do you think he survived the blizzard?"

And Tim had slowed, but he hadn't stopped walking. He half turned toward the camera and Levi had been struck by how old the man had become, how his skin seemed to have loosened in just a few days, hanging gray and limp off his bones like bread dough gone bad.

"The story's over, fellas," Tim said, and even his voice was empty. "My son is dead."

Levi had snapped the TV off, Tim's words echoing in his head.

"But then I found the picture," Suzann's voice brought Levi back to the present, "And now we know they're alive!"

Levi let her talk in tangents, rarely interrupting, until her voice dwindled to a stop. She looked at him expectantly. Levi spread his hands wide.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Buckingham, but I don't know what you want me to do."



Her dark eyes widened again. “I want you to help!”

“In what way? The police are investigating. The parents are co-operating. They have attorneys. What help can I bring?”

“But you’re a private investigator! I’ve seen the work you do – you’re good! You’re the one who caught the guy who stole all that money! You can look into things the police can’t or won’t. You can help Tim find his son!” Her voice was desperate and the tears that had been threatening to fall finally did. “I know about you! I know about your work with the FBI and how you were special forces before that.”

“And where did you hear that?” Levi asked evenly.

Suzanne looked around wildly as if the answer could be found in the leather booth. “At work,” she said, vaguely. “I can’t remember who told me…” her voice faded and she covered her face with her hands as if ashamed by her tears. Levi stood and was just about to leave when she said, “I can’t live with this,” the words were spoken so softly he had to strain to hear them. She took her hands away from her face and he was struck by how determined she looked. Like something inside of her had hardened. “I have to do everything I can to help them find their kids.”

“Look—” Levi started, but Suzanne pushed on.

“Why didn’t I notice more?” She stared at Levi. “Why didn’t I walk around the back, get a look at the license plate? Why didn’t I glance into the van? I usually do, you know. It’s automatic, isn’t it, to look into a car next to you?”

Levi didn’t answer and Suzanne leaned forward, her elbows on the table.

“You know why I didn’t do that, Levi? Because I was having a fight with my mother in law in my head. I was thinking of all kinds of mean things to say to her and so I didn’t even—”

And that's when Tim Straub came on the TV.

The game had been replaced by an image of a small ranch house, the words **Special Report** scrolling across the bottom of the screen.

The man filled the forty-two-inch screen. He walked out of his house, ignoring the cameras and lights, his head bent low.

"Tim! Tim!" the reporters shouted.

*Like they know him, Levi thought, like they have a right to be on a first name basis.*

Tim Straub kept walking, like last time. He'd reached his car and was just opening the door when a reporter yelled out, "Do you still think your son is dead?"

The silence stretched out.

**Special Report...** scrolled across the bottom of the TV screen. **Breaking news story...**

Tim Straub stood, head bowed, car door open.

*Go, Levi thought, just get in your car and go!*

Suzanne followed Levi's gaze, glancing up and behind her at the mounted TV. When she saw what was on the screen, Suzanne shrank against the couch. "His face," she whispered, "Dear sweet God, his *face!*"

"Do you still think your son is dead?"

Tim Straub stared at the reporter and then his mouth twitched, he squeezed his eyes shut as if blocking out a bright light. But when he spoke, his voice was clear, though horribly hollow.

"I pray..." he swallowed, his throat worked and he opened his eyes, looking straight into the camera. Into Levi. "I pray my boy is dead rather than being hurt. I pray he's not..." his voice dwindled. The cameraman closed in on Tim's face, anguish twisting his features. Tears leaked from his eyes, his Adams' apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I pray he's at peace."

As reporters shouted more questions, Tim turned his back and climbed into his car.

Levi lifted the beer again, took another swallow.

“Can’t you see it?” Suzanne said. “Can’t you see how much pain he’s in? Please Levi. Help him.”

Levi’s jaw clenched. “I still don’t know what you want me to do.”

“Investigate. Find Mark and Chloe.” Suzanne reached across the table, took Levi’s hand. “I can’t live with this. I have to everything I can to make it right. Can you understand that?”

And Levi could.

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Driving back to the cabin, Levi thought over everything Suzanne had told him, but his brain kept circling back to what she’d said about his son. Levi would have stopped at nothing to save Jeremy – nothing. But glioblastoma is an unrelenting cancer, and four months almost to the day that they’d found the tumor in the seven-year old’s brain, Jeremy was dead. Four months after that, Nora left. She said she needed time to heal, and the best place for her to do that was back home, her childhood home, with her mother. Levi tried to talk her into staying, but it was useless.

She couldn’t even look at him.

Levi understood that bit a little; he had a hard time looking at the grief in her face, too. Jeremy’s diagnosis had creased Nora, folded her in half and extinguished the light in her. She walked heavier, talked lower and the fear never left her eyes. For a time at the end, Levi thought that when Jeremy was gone, they’d cling to each other, share their pain. But they couldn’t, each of them locked in individual anguish. They didn’t touch, they barely spoke. They couldn’t share a look, never mind a bed.

After Nora left, Levi tried to bury himself in work, but that didn't help, either. He couldn't concentrate on the cases that came his way. Who cared if some wife was screwing around on her husband? Who cared if some guy was defrauding an insurance company? What did it matter in the long run?

But the Chloe McGuire and Mark Straub case was different.

The kids were still alive. Or at least they had been a day ago.

Maybe Suzanne was right. Maybe Levi could save this boy. He gave it a bit more thought, but it was more a mental exercise than anything. The decision had already been made. He called Suzanne Buckingham and left a three-word message. "I'll do it."