

SHADOW

BY THE SHORE

WENDY BYARD

PROLOGUE

The two women spotted the headlights through the cabin window - ominous lights that pierced the property's thick, dark tangle of pines. They gasped and jumped up from the worn dinette table simultaneously – hot tea spilling everywhere.

“Oh my god, hide! Hurry! In the closet!” Mother screamed.

The young woman raced across the small room to the broom closet. Like so many times before, she heard the terrifying crunch of his tires on crushed stones and car door slamming into its metal frame. He would enter the house in seconds. She swiftly opened the knotty pine door, pushed aside the skinny vacuum, and squeezed her tall, lithe body into the small, musty space. It was just in time. The heavy oak front door flung open, and it banged hard against the interior pine wall.

“Where is she?” he howled. His black eyes darted madly.

“She’s gone for a walk,” Mother replied evenly – smoothing her hair and trying to appear calm.

“She wanted to see the fall colors. Maybe she went to the lighthouse.”

“Of course, I don’t believe you,” he snarled, eyeing the two cups and liquid splattered across the table. “You always lie. And it’s getting dark.”

From the closet, Lena heard car keys drop on the table and the sound of a kitchen chair dragging across the floor.

“See for yourself. She’s not here,” Mother said. “She’s probably visiting the caretaker.”

Lena, quivering, peeked through the sliver of opening and saw the man circling the table after Mother who was moving away from him. Her faded blue house dress drooped on her thinning body. Her dull brown hair hung flat to her scalp. She looked so fragile and beat down versus his menacing build.

“Why don’t we just talk about this? There must be another way,” Mother implored.

“You know there isn’t another way!” he bellowed. “This is the way! Today! Now go fucking get her!”

He shoved a rusted metal kitchen chair across the wood floor, and Mother jumped.

Suddenly, a shocked Lena saw Mother grab his car keys off the linoleum table and run into the cabin’s living room.

“No!” she yelled over her shoulder. “You are not taking her!”

The man just stood there and watched her run. Then a smile broke over his pitted face. He guffawed loudly and began striding toward the living room.

“Do you really think you are going to stop me? You are hilarious. Now give me the keys.”

He advanced like a dark cloud in his oversized rain coat toward Mother who was now standing in front of the basement steps. She was visibly shaking.

“You know she has to die. It’s for your own good as well.”

Lena caught her breath at his words. What could he possibly mean? How could murdering her own daughter be for Mother’s “own good?” She trembled even harder. She knew that if the man found her, she would be dead and buried somewhere in these lonely woods before night was out – and raccoons digging up her cold remains by morning.

Then, unexpectedly, the man lunged at Mother. The woman quickly stepped backwards toward the basement steps - the car keys still clutched in her hand.

“No, no, no!” she yelled. “I won’t give them to you! I won’t! I’m not letting you kill her!”

What happened next surprised both women. Neither thought he would actually hurt Mother. The man took two large steps forward and, with all his strength, shoved her down the old stairs. Lena fought to conceal her gasp. Mother’s anguished cry let loose, exploding and ricocheting throughout the cabin as she fell down the stairs. Lena could hear the sickening thuds and moans

as Mother tumbled down the wooden steps to the concrete floor below. The man immediately ran after her.

Lena knew it was now or never. If she was going to live, she had to escape this very second. She quietly opened the broom closet door and carefully but briskly walked down the narrow hallway that led to the cabin's back door – completely unaware of the blood drops that were now falling from her reopened head wound.

Just before she unlatched the metal door that led to the back yard, she stooped down. She slipped open the small drawer in the side table next to the washing machine. There it was. Mother's glossy new Smith and Wesson. Lena slipped her hand into the drawer and grasped the stainless-steel gun. As the young woman was opening the back door, Mother let out a terrible cry, then all was silent.

Lena eased open the back door. Then, with a fierce determination to live – and finally be free – she put her plan in motion. The young woman clenched the small pistol, rushed out into the cold autumn air, and ran down the overgrown path that led deep into the dense Michigan woods.

PART 1
STOLEN FROM THE SAND

“We are like butterflies who flutter for a day,
and think it is forever.” – Carl Sagan

CHAPTER 1

14 Years Ago

The winged insect flitted over the little girl's head.

She looked up and squinted into the hot midday sun. An unusually large monarch butterfly, with its brilliant orange wings and thick black veins, hovered mere inches from her face. Then it did something unexpected. The creature landed gently on the child's sun-toasted cheek and basked in its warmth while tasting her skin with its feet. The girl felt a slight tickle from its claws and bristles and was delighted.

She dropped her plastic sand pail and, keeping her head so very still, slowly stood up, her left eye keeping watch on her winged companion. However, despite her efforts, the skittish butterfly startled and flexed its wings. It left the child's cheek and fluttered upward, immediately catching a lake current that lifted it high into the air.

Emily turned excitedly to her parents, but she saw that her father and mother were still sleeping soundly on the quilt. She could hear her father's low snore through his thick mustache, and her mother's sunburned arm was draped lazily across her face.

The girl looked up. Now, the ethereal butterfly was twirling gaily on the wind, rising and falling on Lake Michigan's playful eddies and swirls and gliding toward the nearby dune. Its oversized black eyes looked down and seemed to smile at the little girl - beckoning her to follow.

The child took one last look at her unconscious parents and then made an unfortunate decision.

She dug her tiny toes into the warm beach and began to chase after her new found friend,

running farther and faster until she crested the mound of windblown sand covered in dune grasses and was out of sight.

CHAPTER 2

The Shadow

Just off the tranquil Lake Michigan beach, a man who had been sitting in his van and watching the small family from a secluded pull off immediately sat up straighter. The little girl he had been watching intently had suddenly left her parents and was running away from them headed for the dune that rose just feet away from his car.

His breath quickened. He then lost sight of her for a moment and looked upward expectantly – excitedly - hoping the girl would crest the hill. First, he saw a large orange butterfly appear over the dune. Then, seconds later, he saw the girl.

The child's eyes were looking up - glued to the mesmerizing butterfly floating above her as she attempted to chase after it down the hill, her feet sinking with every step into the hot, thick sand. Adrenaline coursed through him. He couldn't believe his good fortune. Only minutes ago, he had been observing the child through a small opening the trail afforded, and now she was only feet away! He sucked in quick bursts of air while his mind raced with competing thoughts. This was quite the opportunity unfolding!

While he wildly contemplated his next steps, the girl suddenly stopped. She cried out in pain and flopped down in the sand, grabbing her tiny foot and whimpering. The man quickly looked over at her parents, but the two of them were still sleeping soundly.

Such disgusting people, he thought.

As the butterfly flew away, the child began to cry, and he could see large droplets of blood oozing from the wound on her foot. The man suddenly remembered he had band aids in his van. He leaned over to his glove box, pulled out the package, and placed it on the passenger seat, removing two band aids.

Was he really doing this?

“Hello, it looks like you hurt yourself,” the man yelled kindly through his open van window.

“Are you okay?”

The girl, her warm face awash in fresh tears, was startled and looked up at him in surprise. She was so intent on the butterfly that she never saw the man sitting alone in his van. She shook her head slowly but didn’t answer. She just kept clutching her foot, her little hands now covered in what seemed like a lot of blood. Her brown eyes were wide and her eyelashes wet from crying. A lone seagull flew by overhead.

“Look, I’ve got band aids. I’ll bring you some,” the man said, holding them up through the window to show her. They fluttered gently in the lake breeze.

The girl smiled slightly.

He exited his car and looked once again over at the parents. They were still sleeping. There was no one on the beach. He scanned left and right. In fact, there were no people anywhere – for the moment. He couldn’t believe his luck. He carefully approached the little girl and knelt down.

“Wow, that looks like a bad cut,” he said quietly. “I think you need to go to a doctor. I don’t think my band aids are going to be enough to stop the bleeding. How about I drive you to the doctor? She’s just around the corner.”

His mind exploded at this course of events. It was hard to form words as his excitement mounted. The hot sun beat down on his oily, sweating forehead, and he knew he had only seconds to grab her. Surely, someone would spot them any second.

“Okay,” the child spoke softly. “My mom and dad are just over there.” Her tiny finger pointed to the other side of the dune.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll call them when we get to the doctor’s office. They can meet us there.”

She slowly nodded yes while her blonde ponytail caught a breeze and shifted.

“Here, let me pick you up,” he said. His gentle manner masked the intense emotions he felt swelling up inside.

He encircled the child with his large arms and lifted her up, experiencing her radiating warmth.

I’m really doing this.

He carried the weightless child the few steps to his van. Her foot continued to ooze blood drops as he walked, and a few fell on his khaki slacks

“Jesus,” he muttered. “On my new pants.”

Crying softly, the girl held him tight and placed her head against his chest.

With his right hand, the man opened the back side door and placed the girl’s tiny body on the cloth seat, her foot now bleeding on the floor’s plastic tray. As he closed the door, her wide, big brown eyes looked up at him with doe-like appreciation.

He turned and when he did, he saw a piece of beach glass sticking out in a pool of Emily’s blood.

The smooth, purple glass was glinting in the sunlight. He ran over and picked it then quickly ran to his van and jumped into his driver’s seat. In seconds, the van was driving away from the secluded spot and pulling out onto the main road heading north toward coastal highway M-22.

He set the piece of bloody glass down on the plastic console between the seats.

Then the man looked in his rearview mirror at the quivering child and a broad smile broke across his face. Suddenly, the happiest of thoughts exploded into his brain.

This might be the best day of my life.

PART II
SEARCH FOR A GHOST

CHAPTER 3

14 Years Later
Michigan State University
Cadie McLeod

Six-year-old Emily Hadly had been missing over a decade when 22-year-old Cadie McLeod strode across the MSU campus. The bright autumn sun shone down on the confident college senior as she walked along the cold, fast-flowing Red Cedar River.

She passed a copse of sugar maples ablaze with brilliant fall leaves and smiled at their beauty. She suddenly felt gratitude permeate her body. It had been an amazing three years. Despite all she suffered in her early life, Cadie was now experiencing happiness. While her life was far from perfect - there were plenty of moments when she experienced profound grief about the tragic events of her life – the good times were outweighing the bad. Three years of therapy and her Landon Hall support group helped immensely when her mind went creeping back to its dark past. More often than not, though, she felt she was approaching peace in her life.

Honestly, I'm just thankful to be alive - thankful for so many things. I just wish mom and dad were with me. 'Are you out there, mom and dad? Can you see how well I'm doing? Are you proud of me?'

As she turned north on Farm Lane, the autumn breeze picking up and tousling her long, red hair, Cadie's mind traveled to her many blessings at Michigan State. Of course, all the typical college town fun was had. Big Ten football games on Saturdays. Racing from parties to Spartan Stadium in green and white face paint. Overnight 'Spartan Watches' when she and others stood guard over the Spartan mascot. Evenings with friends at Crunchy's, and listening to live bands at Rick's Café. She even felt blessed for MSU athletics and her God-given speed. In the spring, she set a school record in the 55-meter hurdles. Running always gave her a sense of strength and freedom.

Yet, far outweighing these wonderful college experiences were the countless hours spent with the utterly handsome and forever loyal Nick Brennan.

In the past three years, the two had grown very close. Nick would travel to MSU at least once a month, or Cadie would drive her dad's Camaro over to Ann Arbor for a weekend visit. Cadie almost laughed out loud picturing the many times Nick pulled his silver Corvette into the Landon Hall parking lot. He would wait until she looked out her ground floor window and then pop his headlights up and down – almost winking at her. That always cracked Cadie up. She would grab a quilt and race out the door.

Sometimes, they playfully argued who had the better muscle car, Nick's Corvette or Cadie's Camaro (the young people loved classic cars due both their fathers' influence), but Nick always let Cadie win.

Then the young woman remembered their many walks around campus late at night. The twosome would find a spot and lay down on the quilt. Cadie loved looking into his warm, brown eyes, holding hands, and talking. She also loved the evenings spent curled up together in her tiny twin bed in Landon Hall, talking about their future. After the murder of her parents, Nick became her best friend and the most important person in her life besides Aunt Marie. And of course, Nick's dad who saved her life.

As she approached Giltner Hall, her mood dampened slightly when she pondered that she hadn't seen Nick in six weeks. Both students were extremely busy with school and activities. Now Cadie was embarking on something new that would change her life. She wondered how it would impact her and Nick in the days to come. She also wondered what was in store for their future after graduation. Her thought then wandered to the letter tucked in the bookbag slung over her

shoulder. It was an important letter she received from the University in mid-August – the letter she had been waiting for.

Dear Cadie McLeod:

We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected to participate in the Michigan State Police Cold Case Unit Internship. Michigan State University is proud to offer you a unique learning opportunity by partnering with the Michigan State Police First District Cold Case Unit. Throughout the semester, you will work with detectives on cases to organize and digitize cases, help determine any new possible leads, reexamine evidence and identify new sources of information. Please attend the orientation Monday, September 15, at Giltner Hall, Room 5, at 2 PM. We look forward to your participation. Welcome to the Unit!

She really couldn't believe it! They had chosen her for the internship!

Much more important than her pride, though, Cadie was ready to put her knowledge and skills to use. She was now in the fourth year of her Forensic Science Masters' program and ready for real life – ready to help others.

When she was 12, Cadie vowed to solve her parents' murders. However, three years ago, when their killer's identity finally became known, Cadie made a new vow. Like the MSU School of Criminal Justice promised on its website, Cadie intended to "solve crimes and serve justice." She intended to live a life that would make her deceased parents proud.

As she walked across the concrete patio to Giltner, she noticed the change in the weather. The winds had picked up, and the sky was becoming overcast. The young woman walked past a massive oak tree, its lengthy limbs stretching high into the now darkening sky, and a wind gust suddenly snatched her long, crimson hair and twisted it upward. She shuddered and gathered her

sweater closer as she reached the entrance and pulled hard on the heavy, wooden door. She was ready to enter into the next phase of her life, although she really had no idea what was coming.

CHAPTER 4

Cadie felt a sense of foreboding entering the towering 15-story building, home to the Department of Anthropology's Forensic Lab. She quickly saw the sign on the wall: Classrooms 1-5 to the right. She began walking down the gray marbled tiles, looking for the room that would orient her to the next two months of her life.

Suddenly, as she passed the science lab on her left, Cadie smelled the pungent mix of Formaldehyde and body decomposition, and a feeling of doom washed over her. Seeing and smelling the lab triggered a dreadful memory. It was spring semester, Forensic Pathology 101, the first day of class.

Cadie had entered the expansive, brightly-lit science lab in a good mood. She was actually humming a song on her ear buds when she saw it: skeletal remains spread on a table. In front of her on a metal specimen tray were some two hundred yellowish-white human bones – smooth and seemingly polished - and damaged three ribs. They revealed how the young woman died. As she peered closer, Cadie saw the narrow, v-shaped punctures in the rib bones – some thirty sharp, clean-cut stab wounds the woman had brutally suffered before succumbing to her boyfriend's jealous rage.

Seeing the ravaged bones made Cadie feel nauseous. She immediately grabbed a nearby table to steady herself. The bones triggered a gruesome image in the young woman's mind: the remains of Cadie's own parents scattered across highway M-22. She closed her eyes and willed herself to banish the image.

Mom and dad are not suffering anymore. They are at peace. You can do this, Cadie. One step at a time.

In the twelve years since her parents' murders, Cadie still struggled to keep the imaginings of her parents' horrific deaths at bay. Unfortunately, terrible thoughts were sometimes triggered, and looking at bones of a murdered woman was definitely triggering. Cadie took a deep breath.

Be strong. Think of Nancy Drew. How would she handle this moment?

Cadie knew some people might find it silly if they knew she gained fortitude from the fictional young woman, a character in a book, but the feisty heroine always provided Cadie strength. And she also understood that throughout time, people have found heroic figures in literature to be inspiring. So, in tough times, in addition to thinking about her resilient mom and dad, Cadie thought of Nancy Drew.

She reached the end of the tiled hallway, and in the moody sunlight that poured in through the tall paned windows, she saw the number 5 on the vintage door. Her heartbeat quickened.

What case will they assign me to? An adult victim? A child? And how did they die? Just how bad is this going to be? Prepare yourself.

Cadie took a deep breath and opened the door.

CHAPTER 5

The young woman looked around the small room at five silent soon-to-be colleagues who were seated and faced forward. She knew most of them. Everyone in the classroom was in the same program, so they were acquainted already. Two of them were chatting, while the other three looked at their phones.

When Cadie entered, the students nodded, but no one spoke to her.

Then the students heard heavy footsteps in the hallway, and suddenly two Michigan State police officers – one man and one woman - dressed in matching French-blue shirts and navy-blue pants walked in. The man also had on a v-neck sweater with gold buttons. Both sported gold badges on their left chests. The two officers stiffly took their places at the front and surveyed the small room with 40 chairs and only six of them filled.

“Hello, students, welcome to the Michigan State Police Cold Case Unit. I’m Trooper Lyons, and this is Trooper Smith,” said the petite female officer with short gray hair who resembled a body builder. Her muscles strained against her tight blue shirt.

“First of all, congratulations,” she said. “This is not an easy internship to get into. We turned away a lot of good applicants and narrowed it down to the six of you. That means we chose you all for a reason. After reviewing your applications and talking to your counselors, we believe you represent the best of the best in the MSU forensics program. And we’re excited.”

The students smiled at this and sat up a bit straighter.

“And that’s what we need,” Trooper Smith interjected. “The best. This is real life, folks. We are here to close cases and give closure to grieving families. So, in this internship, you’re going to help us with things like organizing and digitizing case files. Sometimes, you might perform forensic research or help analyze case details using what you've learned about victims and

offenders in your criminology classes. But, most of all, each of you will collaborate with us to re-examine three investigations. Your fellow students have already solved one cold case, a 1997 murder. It was a challenging case as the victim's head and hands were cut off."

At that, one of the students gasped.

"Some of your classmates analyzed years of data, and with their help, the Sepulveda brothers are both behind bars. Where they should be. So, we know this class can get things done, and we welcome your help."

Taking a step closer to the students, Trooper Lyons said, "We clearly believe this partnership can produce results. Today, we are going to present to you three cold cases: one decades-old murder and two missing child cases. It's time they're solved."

At those words, the room and the students became even more still. This was serious.

"You've been taking forensic courses for three years," Trooper Lyons continued, looking intently at each student in the room. "Lots of studying. Lots of lab work. Now, it's time to put what you know to the test. It's time to crack these cases."

The five students shook their heads affirmatively. They were fully roused.

"First, we'd like to go around the room and introduce yourselves. Tell us a bit of who you are and why you wanted to be in this internship."

The students took turns introducing themselves. One woman had always loved science. One young man was following in the footsteps of his older brother who earned a forensics' degree at MSU. Then, when it came to Cadie, the room became still and quiet. Everyone became fixated on the beautiful redhead. Most knew something about her background already – college gossip – but they wanted to know more.

The young woman cleared her throat.

“Hello, everyone, I’m Carolyn McLeod, but you can call me Cadie. I’m assuming you know a bit about me already, so I won’t go into all the details. But nine years ago, both my parents were murdered. They were walking down M-22 when they were run down by a car.”

The students’ eyes widened. Shock registered on every face.

Cadie held her voice firm. She was trying to keep it together.

Just keep going. You’ve got this.

“For years, we didn’t know who killed my mom and dad or why. So, after their deaths, I made a vow that I would find their killer and bring them to justice. I was only 12 when they died and made that vow. That’s why I wanted to become a forensic scientist. I wanted to solve their murders. But three years ago, we discovered the identity of the person who took my parents’ lives. Now, I just want to help people. Also, my father Thomas was a chemist, so I think I inherited his nerdy side,” Cadie said, smiling a bit. “He was the smartest and kindest man. Both my parents were.”

This was a lot for the room to take in, but Cadie’s smile at the end lifted the mood a bit. A couple of students quietly thanked Cadie for sharing.

“Cadie, you’re a strong person, and I know you will be an asset to our team,” Trooper Smith said with a gentler voice. The students could tell the older man with intense brown eyes was touched.

“Quite often, young people pursue forensics because of a personal trauma. My own sister was raped and murdered in Bay City when I was fifteen. She was pulled into a car after leaving a bar. So, I understand your desire for justice. My sister’s killer has never been identified. He’s still out there - somewhere. We may never be able to get justice for her, but her death motivates me every day to help others, and that’s worth something.”

Hearing his painful story immediately personalized both troopers. The students, who already respected these individuals, now felt an emotional pull.

Trooper Smith continued. "Today, we are going to share with you three cold cases. Two students will be assigned to each case. We are going to split you up, and your orientations will take place with your assigned trooper."

The young people glanced around the room. There were only two troopers. Where was the third officer, they wondered.

Trooper Lyons, who had a folder tucked under his arm, opened it and glanced at the first page.

"Kayleigh Sullivan and Michele Bradkirk will be with Trooper Smith," she said.

The two women looked over at each other and smiled.

"Dan Wiseman and Emma Longmire will be with me. That leaves Max Clark and Cadie McLeod," Lyons said. "So, as you probably figured out by now, there's only two of us. That was your first test."

The students chuckled.

"Actually, we are waiting on another person to join us," Lyons added. "This person is not a Michigan State Police Officer but a retired police sergeant. She helped us solve a murder for hire in our jurisdiction a few years ago, so we are returning the favor. She has a very cold case she needs help with. A little girl that's been missing 14 years. So, Max and Cadie, you will be assigned to that case. There's also another connection, but we'll let the sergeant explain when she gets here."

Cadie cocked her head and considered Lyon's words.

I wonder what that connection could be? That's interesting.

Trooper Smith walked over to a seat in the corner and sat down. “Kayleigh and Michele, could you please join me over here?”

The two young women got up and gathered their things. Then Trooper Lyons walked to the other side of the room. “Let’s meet over here, Dan and Emma. And Max and Cadie, just relax for a bit.

The police sergeant texted she’s running late but will be here any minute.”

The other two students followed Trooper Lyons to the west side of the room and sat down. The six people began talking, while Max and Cadie sat still and waited.

“So, you look familiar,” Cadie said, turning to the handsome young man seated beside her. He had wavy blonde hair and bright blue eyes – kind of a modern-day Robert Redford, Cadie thought. Her mom had loved the movie “The Way We Were,” and Cadie was introduced to the handsome, charming movie star in middle school. Her mom always cried at the end, and Cadie sadly remembered the two of them hugging on the couch, feeling sorry for Barbara Streisand’s fiery, activist character who would never be with Hubble, the man she loved.

Geez, get it together Cadie. Focus.

“Have we had a class together?” she asked, turning to the young man.

Max just smiled

He definitely was cute.

“You really don’t recognize me?”

“No, I don’t,” Cadie replied, feeling a bit foolish and blushing. “Should I?”

“Well, we are on the same track team,” he laughed. “I know I’m not a record holder like you, but I thought at least you’d recognize me.”

“Oh, no! I feel terrible!” Cadie said, laughing a bit nervously. “What events do you run? I can’t believe I don’t remember you!”

“Well, to be fair, I just transferred to MSU in the spring. I’m your new pole vaulter,” Max laughed. “I take a pole and then vault with it – you know, over a bar.”

“Yes, I know what pole vaulting is,” Cadie smirked. “So that explains it. The separation between the track and field is a real thing.”

“Yes, it is,” Max replied. “But I certainly remember you.”

Cadie felt heat rising to her face. It made her uncomfortable. She only wanted to feel that way with Nick. And she wasn’t at all sure about the meaning behind his words.

Relax, Cadie. It’s no big deal.

Suddenly, someone entered the room. Everyone looked at the door in unison. Cadie couldn’t believe what she was seeing. It was Dana Bakker! The Harbor Cover police sergeant! Both women locked eyes immediately and smiled broadly.

“Well, hello, Miss McLeod,” Bakker said warmly. “I can’t tell you how great it is to see your smiling face.”

Cadie stood up and walked quickly to the front of the room while everyone watched. They wondered how Cadie McLeod and this officer were connected.

Despite the serious mood in the classroom, the two women hugged fiercely. In that moment, they just didn’t care what anyone thought. Both had been through so much. Dana almost had a nervous breakdown searching for the vanished young woman three years ago. Then there was the impact over the years of never finding her parents’ killer. Physically and psychologically, the crimes had taken a toll - and cost her a marriage.

Once the two women pulled back from their hug, they looked at each and grinned. Just then, Max Clark walked over and stuck out his hand.

“Glad to meet you. I’m intern number two,” he smiled.

Cadie couldn't help but notice his tall, lean, athletic build.

Dana laughed and shook the young man's hand.

"Well, it looks like they gave me the best in the class," she said quietly, leaning in. "I'm Dana Bakker, retired Harbor Cove police sergeant. Nice to meet you, Max. Now let's go sit down."

The three took a seat in the back of the room. As they settled in, Dana's countenance seemed to change. A different look took hold, and her smile turned serious.

"I can't tell you how pleased I am to have the two of you on my case. So, let's dig in. I have a little girl that's been missing over a decade. It was a terrible situation. She literally disappeared from the sand dunes while her parents were sleeping. Her remains have never been found, and we don't know if she's dead or alive, but her mother is suffering that's for sure. It's beyond time to give her some closure, some sort of peace."

Cadie looked at Dana with a growing awareness. She felt her body tighten.

"Dana, is the missing girl Emily Hadly?" Cadie asked hesitantly. "The child that went missing from the same dunes as me?"

When Cadie said that, Max looked a bit taken aback.

Dana leaned forward. She spoke matter-of-factly.

"Yes, it is, Cadie. It's Emily Hadly. She was six years old when she went missing from Mariner's Beach. She's been missing 14 years. That's a long time. Her entire childhood. Now, she may be dead somewhere, but she could still be alive. No matter what, we owe it to her family to find out what happened to her."

Then Dana paused.

So, do you two really think you are ready for this?" she said. "This is a big job, guys. It will require a lot from you. Do you really think you can help me find Emily?"

Both Cadie and Max solemnly nodded yes – their minds spinning. This is what they had been studying for - waiting for. However, now that the moment had arrived, Cadie felt anxious. She looked into the eyes of the woman who fought to save her life and wondered if she was ready to repay her efforts.

Am I truly mentally stable? Am I strong enough to do this?

Cadie contemplated whether she was prepared to dive into a case so similar to her own and revisit the ugly past. Yet, the two cases were different. Cadie McLeod ultimately survived her abduction, whereas little Emily Hadly was still missing. Could she truly handle placing herself in that harrowing world of crime and cruelty again? In the mindset of socio and psychopaths? Could her mental health survive going back?

I guess I'll find out.

CHAPTER 6

Heidi Hadly

Heidi Hadly sat on the cozy front porch of her powdery blue cottage and began sorting through the morning's mail. It was a brisk but bright morning in Harbor Cove. Sunlight dappled through purple leaves on her large dogwood trees, and two Black-capped Chickadees hopped along the wood porch railing on short little legs. Sitting in gray sweatpants with a blue hoodie, Heidi watched the tiny birds with little black bibs and smiled slightly. In recent weeks, her mental health had improved and she was doing better. She was hopeful that maybe, just maybe, she could attain some peace in her life again.

Heidi looked down at the mostly white letters in her lap. They were the usual: a pile of bills. Two from utilities, one from her oncologist, three from the insurance company - and four pieces of junk mail from local businesses. She tossed the junk mail on the table. All the other envelopes were uniform in height and width. Legal size. She slowly flipped through them when she suddenly came upon an unexpected final envelope. It was orange and smaller – hiding behind the others.

Is this an invitation? I sure hope not. I really can't stand another party with everyone telling me how sorry there are for me.

She turned the orange card over. There was no return address. The postal imprint said Traverse City and that the card had been mailed Wednesday. The envelope was slightly bumpy in a few places, and her address was oddly written in small block letters. But what was truly unsettling was how the envelope was addressed.

To Emily's Mom.

A massive chill shot up her spine.

She set the other mail down and shakily began to open the petite card. Inside she saw a folded piece of paper. She carefully slid it out on her lap and nervously lifted it open.

Heidi completely froze.

It was a dead butterfly.

Laying on the folded piece of paper was a large, orange butterfly with wings that were small and crumpled – their tissues shredded where they would attach to the thorax. Little pieces of the butterfly's wings were scattered on the paper.

The woman recoiled; she was both horrified and repulsed. The vulnerable creature looked so sad and alone – its once bright eyes now dull and cloudy. It also smelled fetid, like a rotting pumpkin and almost made her gag. There was no writing on the paper. Heidi wondered if the person who sent the card killed the butterfly.

Heidi began to sob immediately. She had little tolerance for death. Any reference to death and dying triggered an avalanche of the deepest pain and years of heartache.

The woman cried for a long time until she was exhausted. She understood that her tears helped release suppressed feelings, allowing her to process pain and loss. Yet, seeing the dead butterfly brought everything rushing back. That horrific afternoon 14 years ago that was filled with absolute horror. The stuff of nightmares. The day someone stole her beautiful child.

The day her world changed forever.

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CHAPTER 6

Harbor Cove

It was the following Monday morning, 10 am, when Cadie McLeod and Max Clark wheeled into the Harbor Cove Police Department parking lot in his black Denali SUV. The trip was a long three hours with lots of twisting and dense, tree-lined backroads, but the internship was paying for their overnight stay at Harbor Cove Inn, so they didn't have to return to MSU until Wednesday. Dana Bakker assured them that some of their work could be done remotely, but today was important. Not only were they going to start reviewing the case file on Emily Hadly, but they were to meet with her mother Heidi and tour her home and daughter's bedroom, but also walk the beach that claimed Emily's existence.

Of course, an extensive search of the Hadly home and Mariner's Beach was conducted 14 years ago when Emily went missing, but part of the internship was introducing students to police procedures. So, today, Dana would instruct Cadie and Max on the 7 S's – a series of steps taken at a crime scene and post-search procedures. Plus, she just wanted them to get up close and personal with the various scenes.

The ride over was filled mostly with small talk and several crime radio podcasts. Cadie didn't feel like sharing her life story with someone she barely knew. And Max didn't have a whole lot to say. When he did speak, it mostly chit chat about MSU football or big parties. Cadie began to wonder if the person she was about to spend days and weeks with might actually be somewhat shallow, albeit handsome.

Also, the morning's overcast sky, like thousands of dirty cotton balls, made Cadie feel slightly edgy. It wasn't easy taking on a case so similar to her own and revisiting the past. Emily had

disappeared from the same beach that consumed Cadie, but those dunes never released their hold on the little girl.

This is going to be good, Cadie. You're going to help find Emily and bring her home.

The two walked across the parking lot with a light rain now beginning to fall. Max jogged ahead a few steps to open the heavy police department door. As soon as they entered the reception area, Dana stood up from her chair. She was waiting for them.

“Good morning, students,” Dana smiled. “How was the drive?”

It was strange seeing Dana out of uniform, Instead, the former police sergeant wore black, bootcut slacks and a gray turtleneck – and her signature ponytail. She also wore black Converse tennis shoes, which made Cadie smile. However, Dana’s face did seem to have darker, harsher lines.

“It was fine,” Max said, “except for all the birds, trees, and critters darting across the road. How do you people live like this?” he laughed.

Max was from Chicago and seemed to be very much a city boy – and a wealthy one as evidenced by his new Denali, Cadie thought.

“That’s sounds very traumatic, Max,” Dana replied, winking at Cadie. “So, the reason we are holding our meeting here is that the new sergeant has been gracious enough to let use their conference room. His name is Chris Jansen, and he should be in later this morning. I’ll introduce you. Now let’s head back.”

The three headed down the hallway to the conference room. Once inside, Dana sat down at the large mahogany table where there was a stack of manila folders. Cadie and Max took seats across from her and pulled out pens and notebooks from their bookbags. They placed them on the table while Dana spread out the folders in front of them.

“These are all the files on Emily Hadly,” Dana said. “Years of photos, statements by various people including suspects, the detectives’ notes, sketches of the crime scene, and lab results and other analyses.”

“Analyses of what?” Max interjected. “I thought Emily just vanished from the beach? What was there to analyze?”

“You’re right,” Dana said, “there wasn’t much to analyze, but there were some things. Police located where she was abducted because of footprint and her blood found at where it seems she was abducted.”

At that information, Cadie and Max glanced at each other. They had never heard there was blood.

“So, blood stain pattern analysis and crime scene reconstruction was done to determine the size, shape, and distribution of the bloodstains. Blood patterns can tell us what happened and the movements made by Emily after the initial bloodshed. Also, there are photos and analyses of tread and footprint impressions. We have photos of Cadie’s footprints as she moved across the sand and down a dune. Then, at the bottom of the dune where there is a car pull-off, there were size 12 footprints and tire impressions of larger, wider tires – possibly from a van. Plaster casts were taken of the impressions but didn’t amount to much. There are just too many tires out there with the same tread.”

As Dana spoke, the winds picked up outside the building. Cadie could see leaves whipping crazily through the window. The weather lent an eerie feel to the discussion.

“And there’s something else. Something new. But we can’t be sure it means anything. Not yet anyways.”

Cadie and Max were immediately intrigued.

“What’s new, Dana?” Cadie asked. She was curious what could have transpired after 14 years.

“Well, it’s a puzzling thing,” Dana said, pulling her heavy chair a bit closer to the table.

“Emily’s mom Heidi received a letter in the mail Friday. But not a normal type of letter. It contained a crumpled-up butterfly.”

Both Cadie and Max recoiled slightly and leaned back in their seats.

“That’s gross,” Max said. “Why would someone send the mom a dead butterfly?”

“That’s what were trying to figure out,” Dana said. “Is it just some crackpot who wants to torment the family? Sadly, there are lots of people out there who get their kicks out of hurting others just for fun. But it could be more. We just have to look into it. Figure out what it could mean, if anything. Also, the letter was addressed “To Emily’s Mom,” so that’s concerning. And there’s another thing.”

“What’s that?” Max asked. He was hanging on Dana’s every word.

“The butterfly was in a folded piece of typing paper. At first glance, the paper didn’t seem to provide any clues. But the State Police lab in Grayling took a look at the paper and found a watermark.”

“A water what?” Max asked.

“Just hold on, Max,” Dana said. “Let me speak, and I will tell you.”

He’s definitely curious, and that’s a good thing. But he needs to listen.

“Oh, my bad. Sorry,” Max said. He pushed both hands through his sandy blonde hair.

Dana continued to speak as she looked down and rifled through a folder.

“So, a watermark is an image like a logo or a picture that is embedded into the paper during manufacturing. A mold or roller is pressed into the wet pulp, and it compresses the fibers, leaving a mark. The Grayling lab has a high-resolution digital scanner and specialized imaging software to analyze the watermark.

“Would they use an Electrostatic Detection Apparatus?” Cadie asked. “Wasn’t that machine used in my case?” Cadie asked. “For the note that was sent to me?”

Max looked over at Cadie with his brows furrowed – concerned for his new colleague.

“Not really, Cadie,” Dana said. “The lab used that machine to find impressions in your note that turned out to be initials. As you know, they helped determine who killed your parents.”

As soon as she said it, Dana regretted her choice of words.

Oh, how I hate remembering that my parents were killed.

“I’m sorry, Cadie,” Dana said immediately. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“No, it’s okay,” Cadie said. “That’s the truth. They were murdered, but forensics helped solve the case. And that’s why we’re here. To help solve another case. So, it’s all good.”

“Thank you for that, Cadie,” Dana responded. “So, anyway, the watermark is not really an impression. It’s already embedded in the paper. That’s why the lab uses a scanner and specific software.”

“What was the watermark?” Max asked. “Have they figured out what it is?”

“They really don’t know yet, but it seems to be a logo or emblem or some sort,” Dana answered.

“But not something obvious anyone recognizes. It contains a compass and possibly a wave or a sail. It’s hard to tell. The techs are working on it, but it’s tough. If it’s a boat or ship’s emblem, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack. There are over six hundred marinas on Lake Michigan. But who knows? This discovery could prove useful. We’ll just have to see.”

“It kind of reminds me of how they caught the BTK killer,” Max said.

Dana and Cadie nodded, understanding the connection.

“How Dennis Radar sent a floppy disk to a TV station, and the disk’s metadata showed who edited the disk last.”

“Yeah, the metadata had the name "Dennis" in it, and the disk was created at Radar’s church.”

“Very good, you two,” Dana said.

“We studied Radar in our Forensics Psychology class,” Cadie added.

“Anyway, I’m hoping to get the photos of the letter and butterfly from the Grayling lab anytime.

They said they would email them to me.”

Just then, a twenty-something woman peeked in the door. She had long blonde hair with streaks of pink.

“Yes, Kelsey?” Dana asked.

“I was just wondering if anyone wanted coffee or some water. We also have muffins.”

“Yes, please!” Max blurted out. “I’m thirsty and starving. Cadie wouldn’t let me stop for breakfast.”

“Because I wanted to be on time,” Cadie said. “Maybe next time eat breakfast before we go.”

“That sounds great, Kelsey,” Dana said, turning to the young woman. “Muffins and coffee. Water, too.”

“What happened to Debbie?” Cadie asked. “She was your receptionist for quite a while as I remember.”

Then, from down the hallway, a voice yelled out.

“Debbie’s right here!”

Everyone broke out laughing.

“Debbie is now an officer for Harbor Cove,” Dana said. “Debbie graduated from the police academy last year.”

“Yes, I did,” Debbie yelled out again. “And they love me here,” she laughed from the down the hall.

As everyone enjoyed a lighter moment, Kelsey returned with the coffee and muffins on a platter.

“I’ll bring you some waters, too,”

“That would be great,” Dana said. “Now, back to our case. I had wondered why someone would send a letter to Heidi now? It’s been 14 years, and all the crank calls and letters tapered off years ago. But then I found out Heidi was on the front page of the *Harbor Cove Courant* last weekend.

“Why was that?” Max asked.

“She was recently named Harbor Cove’s Female Volunteer of the Year,” Dana replied. “She’s the president of a non-profit called The Children’s Fund. The group provides area schools with personal items for the kids and clothing. Coats, shoes, things like that. So, the newspaper featured Heidi on its cover. I read the piece. It’s very nice. It does touch on the family’s tragedy, but also says Heidi is doing a lot better and moving on with her life.”

“So, you’re thinking that article triggered someone to write that letter? Just to mess with Heidi out of cruelty?” Cadie asked.

“Unfortunately, that could be the case,” Dana answered. “Next week we will review all the letters the family has received over the years. But right now, let’s discuss the butterfly. What do you think it might mean?”

“Was Emily doing any kind of butterfly project at school?” Max inquired.

“Not that we’re aware of,” Dana said. “Emily had finished Kindergarten in the spring. We could reach out to the school, but it’s been 14 years ago. Hard to know if the teacher would remember. But maybe they kept to the same lesson plans?”

“Is the butterfly anything special? Like, did it belong to any place that’s unique?” Max asked.

“Not really,” Dana answered. “It is a Monarch butterfly. In July, when Emily was kidnapped, it would have been feeding and breeding along Lake Michigan before migrating to Mexico in August and September. It’s common to the area.”

The room became silent again. Everyone was thinking hard. Many minutes passed while all three pondered the butterfly.

Then, Cadie startled.

A thought was taking shape in her mind.

“Dana, you said they found Emily’s footprints leading across the sand and down a sand dune, right?” Cadie asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Dana replied. “Of course, by the time police were on the scene, lake winds had blown away many of the footprints. But enough were discovered to make out where she went. And there was her blood at the bottom of the dune.”

“What was Emily doing before she vanished?” Cadie asked.

“She was playing in the sand with her sand toys. Her mom and dad had fallen asleep on a blanket right next to her. Then she walked away and was gone.”

“Did she walk away? Or run away?”

“I don’t know,” Dana replied, curious. “Let me look at the file.”

Dana flipped through case file papers until she came upon a document and studied it closely.

Finally, she spoke.

“From the analysis of Emily’s footprints, it looks like she was running across the sand.”

Cadie’s eyes opened wider. A thought had exploded white hot into her mind.

“What’s wrong, Cadie? What are you thinking? Tell us.”

Dana leaned in, concerned and staring.

“What if Emily was chasing a butterfly?” Cadie said shakily. “What if that’s why she left her parents and ran over the dune? Because she was following a butterfly? If she was, then her kidnapper might know that. They might have seen her chasing a butterfly. That could be who sent the letter. They could be trying to reinsert themselves into the case.”

Dana was taken aback. She said nothing for several seconds.

“Oh my god, Cadie, Dana said, standing up from her chair, “I think you might be on to something. And you know what else this might mean?”

Cadie and Max stared hard at their teacher.

“It might mean that Emily Hadly is still alive.”

CHAPTER 7

Ted's Restaurant

At noon, the three decided to go for lunch. The appointment with Heidi Hadly wasn't until 2 pm, so that gave the group time to grab a bite and hold a debrief meeting. They wanted to go somewhere quiet, somewhere safe where they could talk without being bothered and, more importantly, overheard. Dana suggested Ted's on Crystal Lake. It had a secluded booth by the back door, and it wasn't typically crowded on Mondays. The patrons were usually cops, and they kept to themselves.

Plus, Dana was in the mood for Ted's locally famous Benzie Burger. After the morning's meeting and possible discovery, Dana was hungry. Her stomach acid was making her stomach gnaw, and her brain interpreted it as hunger pains. Although Dana knew well enough that a big, fatty burger was not at all good for her stress ulcer, she couldn't help herself. Sometimes you just need comfort food. Today was one of those days. She thought she might actually be able to devour the entire sandwich made of two large patties – quite a feat actually. She usually took half her burger home in a to-go box.

In the now steady rain, both cars made their way to the old tavern down a dirt road. The restaurant – a cedar chalet - was surrounded by white Birch trees and close to Cystal Lake.

Dana had also chosen Ted's because of the restaurant's history and personal connections.

Harry Harper who owned the place was once a police captain in Grand Rapids before he retired.

After he bought Ted's, he fixed the place up and made it a sort of shrine to law enforcement.

Now, every knotty pine wall was covered with aging yellow tape and newspaper articles about hero cops as well as plaques and medals. Some of the articles dated back to the fifties.

There were also articles on the wall about Dana Bakker and Jake Brennan, the twice Medal of Honor recipient who used to work for Dana before she retired. The articles were all about the Cadie McLeod case three years ago. One article was the front page of the *Harbor Cove Courant*, and it featured a large photo of Dana talking to reporters.

Now, whenever Dana stops into Harry's for a bite, her beer, per Harry's policy, is always on the house. That's Harry's rule: free beer for top cops. A nice gesture, but not so great for Dana's ulcer, she thought.

Dana, Cadie, and Max entered the restaurant and shook off the fall rain that was clinging to their coats. The restaurant was dimly lit because of the rain outside, and its plank flooring had a few wet spots still drying from the shoes of earlier customers. The Bob Seger song "Night Moves" played on the restaurant's blue and silver Seeburg in the corner. At the long, solid wood bar, Melinda, the owner's niece, was wiping up a spilled Oberon and saw Dana walk in.

"Hey, Sergeant, good to see you," Melinda called out good naturedly, putting down her rag and smoothing her apron.

"Good to see you, too, Melinda. It's been a while. And it's just Dana. I'm not a sergeant anymore."

"Yeah, I know, but you'll always be sergeant to me. I could never call you Dana," Melinda laughed. "Please sit anywhere you like," she said gesturing.

Dana saw that the secluded table in the back was available.

"Follow me," she said to Cadie and Max over her shoulder as she walked past a wall full of articles. She spied the two articles about her and Jake, and her throat caught. That an emotional time in her life. She was looking forward to seeing Jake again shortly.

The three reached the booth and slid in, Dana on one side, and Max and Cadie on the other.

Neither would have dreamt of sliding in next to Dana.

“So, I thought it was a very productive meeting this morning,” Dana said, taking off her black rain jacket. “We covered a lot of ground.”

In addition to their initial discussion, both Cadie and Max thoroughly read through the case file notes and spent time asking Dana questions. It was a lot of information for the young people. It would take time to sink in and be mentally processed.

Melinda walked up to the booth with three waters in tall, red plastic glasses.

“Would you guys like anything else to drink?”

All three said they were fine with water.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a bit to take your orders,” Melinda said and walked back over behind the bar. Dana thought she could make out Harry’s deep voice in a back room. It seemed he was talking on the phone. The room was growing even darker as the rain had now turned into a low-level storm. A couple of times, a light over a nearby table flickered on and off.

“I wanted to talk to you a bit more about the butterfly discovery,” Dana said. “What it might mean. The psychology of it.”

“I’ve been thinking about it, too,” Cadie said. “I have some ideas.”

“Lay them on us,” Dana responded, placing her arms on the speckled, laminate table.

“Well,” Cadie began slowly, “the person who mailed the butterfly letter could be someone starting a ‘Cat and Mouse’ game with us. Someone who wants to play psychological games. This person may or may not be involved in our case at all. But, if Emily really is alive, for whatever reason, her abductor wants to now start playing games with law enforcement.”

“Very good,” Dana said. “That’s a definite possibility. Max, any thoughts?”

Max, who was studying the menu and not fully listening, looked sheepish.

“Well, uh, in class, we learned that some criminals like to control the narrative. They’ll insert themselves into a case to try and control the investigation. They try to confuse the police and play head games. Lead the investigation where they want it to go.”

“Another good answer,” Dana said. “Both could be true. I’ve also been doing some thinking. And if I’m right, it might spell good news for Emily Hadly.”

Max put the menu down, and both students listened intently.

“First, why do people kidnap children?” Dana asked quietly, leaning in and watching the students across the table. In the background, a Steve Wonder song was now playing on the Seeburg, and a few cops walked in and up to the bar.

“People kidnap children for all kinds of reasons,” Cadie said. “Sex trafficking and sex mostly.”

“Yes, of course,” Dana answered. “That’s kidnapping by a stranger, and sex assault is the main motive. There are almost 60,000 child abductions every year for sex purposes. Other stranger abductions involve mental illness. What else?”

Just then, Melinda walked up with her pad and pen in hand. She had shoved her mousy brown hair into a hairnet.

“Know what you want?” she asked, smiling and looking around at the group.

“Honestly, Melinda, we haven’t even had time to look at the menus. Guys, listen, they have a great burger here. Why don’t I get us a round of burgers and fries?” Dana said.

“That sounds great,” Cadie replied.

“Sure, but can I have onion rings instead? Or maybe half and half? Half onion rings and half fries? No, never mind. I’ll just have French fries,” Max said and then smiled a charming smile at Melinda. Cadie glanced over at him.

Is he always like this? Sheesh. He can be a bit much. I just wish he wasn't so darn cute with that smile of his.

"Sure, but there's an upcharge for onion rings," Melinda replied.

"That's fine," Dana said. "Bring the man some onion rings."

Just then, a tall police officer by the front door waved at Dana. He was a detective in Grand Haven.

"Hey, howya doin' Sarge?" he yelled.

"Doing good, Wayne. "Doing good. Thanks for asking."

Dana looked back at her two students and resumed.

"What else? Why do people kidnap children?"

"Sometimes parents abduct their own children in custody cases," Max said.

"Another good answer," Dana replied. "Every year in the US, about 200,000 children are taken by a family member. And it's not always custody cases. There are other reasons. Like to protect a child. Or get back at someone. And in less cases, it could be people who are in emotional distress. Maybe they lost a baby or were abused. Maybe they could never have children and saw Emily as their own child. Now, let me get back to what could be good news for Emily."

Dana took a long drink of water and cleared her throat. A group of young police officers had entered and were talking loudly. Dana once again leaned in over the table.

"Some of these child abductors are narcissists and crave the feeling of superiority that they have outsmarted the police. It's an ego trip and sense of power. Then there are criminals who reinsert themselves into cases for the thrills. For example, when some people kidnap children for whatever reason and don't kill them but keep them, over time, the thrill can wear off. What

excited them initially just isn't there anymore. By getting involved in the case, they can relive the crime and stir up emotional arousal. They get to experience it all over again."

"God, people are terrible," Max exclaimed. "Jean-Paul Sartre was right: 'Hell is other people.'"

At that, Cadie and Dana both looked at each other, surprised at his philosophical reference.

"Quite true, Max. People can be selfish and cruel."

Dana said. "I have seen it all in my career. However, the good news is we're smarter. We can profile them. Figure out their patterns. Their motivations. Then we can outsmart them. Trip them up. Ultimately, catch them and free their victims. Amanda Berry in Cleveland escaped after ten years. Jaycee Dugard was discovered after 18 years. Elizabeth Smart was found after nine months. And our Emily has been gone for 14 years, but hope exists that she is alive and out there – somewhere."

Just then, Melinda walked up with a platter of steaming burgers and crispy fries and set them down on the table. "Hotel California" was now playing in the restaurant while a few people chatted and laughed. The trio at the back booth, however, ate in silence for a while. Then Dana broke into their thoughts.

"There's something else that I wanted to share. Something I've been thinking about."

Both students looked up quizzically, burgers still in their hands.

"There was no weapon found at the scene of Emily's abduction," she said. "No knife. No sharp object. Nothing. We just don't know what happened. Did her kidnapper stab her with his own weapon? Was he planning to do that? Or was it an impulse?"

Cadie and Max put their burgers down and continued to look at Dana.

"And the final thought that keeps swirling around my head is that there was a lot of blood.

Honestly, a large pool of blood and large droplets. That's very concerning. Winds had shifted the

sands around, and Emily had stepped in some of her own blood, so the scene was confusing – and hard to analyze. But, with our new development, the butterfly letter, I want to remain hopeful. I really do. But I just keep thinking about all that blood, and I keep asking myself, ‘Can she really be alive?’”

CHAPTER 8

The Hadly House

It was now a misty afternoon, and two cars crept down the maple tree-lined street looking for the Hadly house. Dana helped search the two-story, Victorian cottage years ago after Emily's disappearance, but she couldn't quite recall where on Leelanau Lane the cottage was situated. Finally, she spotted it. She remembered its pale, grayish-blue color with white shutters and posts and covered front porch. The same white wicker settee in which Dana sat interviewing Heidi 14 years ago was still on the porch. The front door was a different color, though. Back then, it was painted a sprightly coral. Now, the door seemed much more subdued – a deep gray.

Both cars turned into the short driveway, and the trio exited. They could hear the tumble of Lake Michigan waves hitting the shore down the road – and the hiss of the wind. All three looked up and marveled at the beautiful, historic home with its gabled roof shrouded in mist. They were mindful that this is where Emily Hadly had spent her quick six years of life before she crossed paths with misfortune. All three thought the home, only three blocks from Lake Michigan and Harbor Cove Beach, as well as ice cream shops and quaint beach stores, must have provided an idyllic childhood for Emily.

God only knew how her life turned out – if at all.

Dana climbed the painted stairs followed by Max and then Cadie and knocked on the front door. Dana could hear someone moving about inside, and a minute later Heidi Hadly opened the door and appeared in the frame.

“Hello, Dana Bakker, thank you for coming,” Heidi said. “It’s been a while.”

Heidi looked like she had aged thirty years, Dana thought, and no wonder. Heidi's face had large, deep circles under her eyes, and her skin was papery thin and pale. It looked like sun hadn't shone on her face in years. Her drab, shoulder-length brown hair hung slackly.

"Yes, it has," the former sergeant remarked. "I just wish sometime I could stop by with good news."

"Yeah, me, too," Heidi replied, the weakest of smiles passing quickly across her face.

"These are my students, Cadie McLeod and Max Clark," Dana said. "As I mentioned on the phone, they're MSU students – part of a cold case internship to help law enforcement crack old cases. As I told you, I'm their mentor."

Both students said hello, and Heidi leaned against the door frame, "So, it's Cadie McLeod, is it? Glad to see you are alive and well. At least somebody made it out of those dunes."

All three were a bit shocked and taken aback at Heidi's comment. They really didn't know how to respond.

I know she's in pain, but I am, too. Am I supposed to feel bad for surviving?

"Thank you, Mrs. Hadley," Cadie said. "I truly am thankful for everyone who tried to help me, including Dana. And we are really hoping we can help you."

"I appreciate that," Heidi replied. "And it's Heidi. Definitely not Mrs. Hadly. I'm not married anymore. Please, come in."

Dana, Cadie, and Max followed Dana into the quaint front parlor with an oak hall tree and glass chandelier.

"Let's go sit at the kitchen table," Heidi said.

She led them into a large room with a stone fireplace in the corner. Along the ceiling was an exposed wood beam. Cadie noticed that unlike her aunt Marie's kitchen, Heidi's counters were bare and mostly devoid of spices and kitchen utensils.

She doesn't have anyone to cook for anymore.

Everyone took a seat around the rustic oak table with fluted legs. There was dried-up yellow mum sitting in the middle.

Heidi, pulling her wood chair closer, began the conversation abruptly.

"What do you want to know?" Heidi asked. "What haven't I told you already?"

She didn't utter the words in a mean way, just in a sort of weary, worn-out manner.

"We really would just like to learn more about Emily," Dana said. "Cadie and Max have read her case file, and I reread it - and I lived it. But today we want to get to know your daughter, to personalize her so she's not just a cold case victim but a real person in our minds. So, Heidi, could you please share with us what Emily was like?"

Heidi closed her eyes and placed her hands together on the table. She was quiet for a long time – like she was revisiting the past and trying to conjure her daughter.

Finally, she spoke.

"Emily is the best daughter anyone could ask for," Heidi began. "I always call her little bumble bee because she is buzzing with curiosity. She wants to know everything. When I take her to Seaside Market, she picks up every fruit and vegetable. 'What's this mom? What's that mom?' I'd say, 'That's an avocado,' and she'd say, 'Can we buy it?'" And then I'd buy it and have to learn how to make guacamole," Heidi smiled. "Emily definitely keeps me on my toes."

Talking about her daughter seemed to bring Heidi back to life. The trio noticed she referred to her daughter in the present tense.

“She loved Kindergarten – loves to learn. Animals are her favorite, horses and dogs. But then, strangely, she loves dragons. Emily is very artistic. In the spring, she actually drew a dragon for each one of her classmates and gave them personal characteristics. You know, like special powers or claws or extra sharp eyesight for her classmate that wore glasses. The drawings are in a scrapbook in her room.”

“Emily sounds like a special girl,” Dana remarked. “Very smart and talented at such a young age. Observant, too.”

“Oh, she really is,” Heidi exclaimed, now even more animated and gesturing with her hands.

“And funny! That’s one thing I really miss is her humor. She’s always giggling and coming up with funny one-liners to amuse us. Harbor Cove Library is her favorite. Emily loves to check out joke books, especially knock-knock jokes. Her favorite was, “Knock, knock.”

I’d respond, ‘Who’s there?’

‘Leaf,’ she’d say.

‘Leaf who?’

‘Leaf me alone, I’m telling a joke!’”

Heidi crossed her arms and smiled – the memory clearly bringing her happiness.

“I think Emily has my mom’s sense of humor. A very in-the-moment type of silliness and joy.”

“Is your mother still alive,” Max asked, not sure why he was asking.

“No, she passed over several years ago,” Heidi said. “Emily’s disappearance broke her. She was never the same after that, but I know she’s in a better place.”

Everyone nodded politely.

“We’ve seen pictures of Emily, of course, but could you describe what she looked like – er, looks like?”

Heidi looked side-eyed at Cadie. She caught Cadie's slip and didn't appreciate it. Her countenance altered slightly, but she continued on.

"Everyone thinks Emily is adorable," Heidi said. "Clear, blue eyes. And a tow-head – almost white-blond hair. She always wants her hair in a ponytail," Heidi laughed. "She'd say, 'I don't like my hair in my eyes, momma. I have too much to see.' And she tilts her head when you're talking to her. Like she's hanging on every word."

"Emily seems quite sagacious," Max remarked.

Cadie and Dana both looked at Max – somewhat impressed by his vocabulary but questioning if he applied the word correctly.

"Yes, yes. That's true," Dana said. "You know, I also must add that Emily is very empathetic, very loving. One time, we were walking Harbor Cove Pier, and she spotted a Painted Turtle with a cracked shell. How it got out on the pier I'll never know. Anyway, Emily made me take it home, and we wrapped the shell in gauze. The next day we took it to the vet. When we brought it home, Emily made a little home for it in a box and tucked in flower petals from our garden. She would feed it pieces of kale and boiled egg. She just has an innocent heart, very loving, also very trusting. I often wonder if her trusting nature was responsible for what happened to her."

Just then, the group heard a distant crack of thunder – somewhere far off over Lake Michigan – and everyone reacted slightly. That seemed to bring an end to the conversation.

"Oh, I feel terrible," Heidi said, standing up. "I never offered you anything to drink. Would you like something?"

Both Dana and Cadie shook their heads no, but Max piped up. "Sure, I'll take a Coke or Pepsi if you have one."

The women grimaced.

Really, Max?

But Heidi grabbed a Coke from her refrigerator and handed it to Max.

“Now, do you want to see Emily’s bedroom?”

“Yes, Heidi, that would be helpful,” Dana answered. “Thank you. And then I’d like us to talk about the butterfly letter you received.”

“Me, too,” Heidi replied, her face darkening.

She moved past Dana, Cadie, and Max and began walking down the dark hallway, a heavy rain now pelting against the cottage windows. Just then, the air was split by another crack of thunder.

Closer this time. The storm was moving inland.

Heidi looked back over her shoulder at the group.

“Follow me.”

CHAPTER 9

Emily's Room

“One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is, I think, to have a happy childhood.”

- Agatha Christie

Cadie and Max exchanged pensive glances as they followed Emily's mother down the narrow hallway. Heading to the bedroom of kidnapped child – one who was most likely murdered - was quite unnerving. Looking at the walls, they saw pictures of Emily, Heidi, and her father Louis in different frames scattered about. Pictures of the family having a picnic, walking down the beach, and eating ice cream. There were also a few professional family photos. Finally, they stopped at Emily's room.

This is just so sad. God, I hope we can find out what happened to her.

Peering in, Cadie thought time had stood still. It didn't appear that the room had been altered in any way since that fateful July day.

“You can come in,” Heidi said. “It's okay.”

Everyone entered the small room with a single bed covered in pink and purple stuffed animals, wood floor covered by a colorful braided rug, window seat overlooking the side garden, and built-in shelves holding all the memorabilia Emily had amassed in six years of life.

“So, this is Emily's room,” Heidi said. “I haven't changed anything. I want it to be just as she left it for when she comes home.”

At that, Max and Cadie exchanged quick glances. It was highly unlikely that Emily would ever return to this room, but they hoped to at least bring closure to Heidi and her family. They hoped to find out what happened to her and retrieve her remains.

“Feel free to look around the room,” Heidi said. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Heidi left the bedroom and returned to the kitchen. They could hear her walk down the wood plank hallway floor and open a drawer. In the bedroom, the window overlooking the side garden was blurry from rain that continued to clatter against the glass.

Dana, Cadie, and Max began studying the room. However, there didn’t seem to be much that would help them in their investigation. Dana noticed a tiny tea set on the lower of three shelves. It contained a white, floral porcelain teapot, four cups and saucers, and a sugar bowl and cream pitcher. Looking at the set recalled memories for Dana. Her own daughter had the same set when she was little. Dana remembered tea parties in the kitchen with Lila and Donnie and him sipping from a tiny teacup. That was one good thing about her ex: he was always a good sport when it came to their daughter. But when it came to Dana, not so much.

The shelves were filled with a variety of colorful hard back children’s books, including the joke and knock-knock books Heidi mentioned. There also were books by Shel Silverstein, including *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Seeing the book, with children peering over the end of the sidewalk, made Cadie sad.

Emily never had much chance to live at the end of the sidewalk. To have a full childhood.

Someone stole that from her.

She also noticed two red pennants pinned to the top shelf. Both said, “Harbor Cove Field Day” in gold letters. She lifted up one pennant to look at its backside. It read, “Emily Hadly. Winner, 50 Yard Dash.” Max came up behind Cadie and read the pennant over her shoulder. Cadie lifted up

the other pennant: “Emily Hadly. Winner. 100 Yard Dash.”

“Wow, a fast little girl,” Max said. “That might come in handy.”

Cadie was startled. She didn’t realize Max was standing right behind her. She felt her face flush and grow warm. That annoyed her.

“What are you talking about,” she said, turning to face him. He was very close.

“I just mean that if she’s still alive, and she’s still fast, that might be a good thing,” Max said.

“She might need to put that speed to use. To escape, I mean.”

That seems like a weird thing to say.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Cadie replied, stepping out and away from his too close presence. “It hasn’t helped her so far, though.”

Just then, Heidi entered the room. She had brushed her hair and swept some of it up into a brown, speckled clip. It looked like she put some concealer under her eyes.

“Did you find anything?” she asked.

“No, not really,” Dana said. “Like I mentioned earlier, seeing Emily’s room helps make her more real to us if that makes sense.”

Heidi didn’t respond but walked past the group to the three shelves. On the lower shelf was a small jewelry box. She grabbed it and walked toward the bedroom door.

“Can we talk about the letter now?”

“Yes, let’s do that,” Dana said, looking at Cadie and Max. Everyone filed out, and Heidi led them back down the hallway to the kitchen once again.

Heidi sat down at the table, and everyone followed her lead. Heidi placed the pink jewelry box covered in yellow hearts on the table.

CHAPTER 10

Butterflies

After putting down the jewelry box, Heid turned to Dana. “Did you bring the photos?”

“I did,” Dana said. She reached inside her zipped raincoat pocket and took out a manila envelope. She placed it on the table across from the jewelry box and opened it. Then she slid out four sheets of paper with photos on them.

Max and Cadie were surprised. Dana hadn’t said anything about receiving the email from the Grayling lab. But there hadn’t really been a moment to talk since they got to the Hadly house. And maybe Dana was waiting for this moment to share the photos with Heidi first.

Everyone drew closer to see the documents. The first contained a scanned photo of the letter with a barely visible watermark. The other three documents contained scanned photos of the dead butterfly from different angles and magnifications.

Heidi drew in her breath.

“Yes, that’s it,” she said. “That’s letter and butterfly I received in the mail.”

Everyone leaned in and began studying the photos more closely.

“I see the watermark,” Max said. “It definitely looks nautical.”

“I agree, Max. But what exactly does that logo or emblem represent? As we know, the envelope was postmarked Traverse City,” Dana said. “So, the State Police have been talking to the marina owners in Traverse City, Leland, Suttons Bay, and Frankfort trying to see if anyone recognizes that image from one of their customer’s boats or yachts. But that’s a lot of boats, and there’s many more marinas up and down the coast of Michigan. It’s a big job to reach out to all of these owners. And the image might not have anything to do with a boat.”

“It could be a travel company or a restaurant. Even a clothing company,” Cadie said.

“Kind of a needle in a haystack situation,” Max added. “But the compass definitely makes it seems more related to a boat.”

“The State Police won’t give up, will they?” Heidi asked. “I mean, they are going to keep investigating the logo, right?”

“Oh yes,” Dana said. “They’re definitely looking into it.”

“How about we talk about the butterfly,” Dana pivoted. “Does anyone have thoughts?”

The room was quiet for a bit. The only sound in the kitchen was the continued rain pelting the roof and windows. The kitchen had become darker as the storm intensified outside.

“To me, it looks like the wings were deliberately removed,” Cadie said. “Look at this one photo,” she said, holding it up to the other three at the table. “Look at where the wings would attach to the thorax. It’s very clean, very straight and precise. If the wings were damaged naturally, they would be frayed and jagged – abrupt. But the basil – the part of the wing closest to the body – is unnaturally straight.”

“I agree,” Max said. “There is nothing natural about how those wings look. Someone cut them off.”

Heidi put down her head and covered her eyes.

“Are you okay, Heidi,” Dana asked. “We can stop if this is bothering you too much.”

“No, it’s not that,” she said. “It’s something else.”

Everyone was perplexed and waited for her to respond.

Heidi took down her hands and looked at the others.

“I have been thinking about why someone would send me a dead butterfly,” she said. “I thought and thought, and finally I came up with something.”

Heidi reached for the pink jewelry box sitting on the table. She opened it, and up popped a pink ballerina that began to slowly twirl to the song “Swan Lake,” which was eerie melody in the previously quiet kitchen. Dana, Cadie, and Max could see a tangle of jewelry in the box. Heidi dug around in the box for a moment and pulled out a gold charm bracelet. It looked to contain ten to twelve charms.

“Here, look at this,” Heidi said, placing the charm bracelet in the middle of the table next to the mum.

The other three leaned in and peered at the bracelet. Suddenly, Max yelled out.

“There’s a butterfly charm on the bracelet!”

Dana and Cadie sort of gasped. It was totally unexpected. Dana looked shocked and quickly tried to compose herself.

“Why is there a butterfly charm on the necklace?” Dana asked a bit shakily. “Did Emily have a special fondness for butterflies?” Dana asked. “If she did, this is news to me.”

“No, that’s not it,” Heidi said. “Not really.”

The woman suddenly stood up from her seat and began walking down the hallway.

Dana, Cadie, and Max were confused - wondering why Heidi abruptly stood up and seemed to leave. They waited quietly and patiently, looking at each other. Then they heard a noise, like a scrape on the wall. Seconds later, Heidi emerged from the hallway with a midsize frame in her hand. She sat down and placed the frame containing a picture of Emily on the table. It was a black and white closeup photo of Emily laughing, her head slightly turned.

“Take a look and tell me if you see it,” Heidi said.

Everyone quickly stood up and leaned across the table, looking as closely as they could.

Suddenly, it was as if they all saw it at exactly the same time.

‘It’s a butterfly!’ Max yelled out. “It looks just like a butterfly!”

“Oh, my goodness, it does look like a butterfly,” Cadie remarked loudly.

They all nodded their heads up and down dramatically. Dana just stood there, shocked, not saying word.

There, on the lower side of Emily’s neck was a small, brownish birthmark. And if you looked closely and studied it, you might just think it looked just like a little butterfly.

“You never mentioned this before,” Dana said. “You never mentioned that Emily had a butterfly birthmark on her body.”

“I haven’t thought about it in a long time,” Heidi replied evenly. “I mean my daughter’s been gone 14 years, Dana. I’ve struggled to even remember the important things about her. Like I try so hard to remember her voice – what she sounds like. So, no, I hadn’t thought about that birthmark in years.”

“Who all would know about the birthmark?” Cadie asked, still standing and staring at the birthmark.

“Gosh, I don’t know,” Heidi replied. Her grandparents. Her dad. Maybe her friends. Her Kindergarten teacher, possibly. She also had an older babysitter for a few years while I was taking classes.”

Everyone slowly sat down.

“Wow,” Max whistled. “This is crazy.”

“Do you really think the letter and her birthmark could be connected?” Heidi asked, looking intently at Dana, her voice rising “Does this mean someone I just mentioned might have sent me that letter. Might have even kidnapped Emily?”

Now Heidi was starting to sound a bit hysterical.

“Does this mean she might be alive? Or is someone just trying to torture me? Why? Why would someone do that? Haven’t I been through enough?” Heidi yelled and jumped up from the table. She began pacing around the kitchen running her hands through her hair. The plastic clip fell out and clattered across the wood floor.

“I don’t understand what is going on. I don’t understand! Someone, tell me!”

Dana turned to Heidi and spoke quietly - calmly.

“Heidi, did you tell the police about your babysitter? I don’t recall reading anything about a babysitter in the case file.”

“I don’t know, Dana. I don’t know. That was a long time ago.” The woman sat down in her chair and began to cry.

Cadie and Max remained quiet. Just watching the scene play out before them.

“What can you tell me about the babysitter, Heidi? What do you remember?”

Heidi tried to regain her composure.

“Well, her name was Barbara, and she lived on the next street over. In the small yellow cottage at the end of the street by the park. But she doesn’t live there anymore.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. After my classes ended, I didn’t need her anymore. So, we fell out of touch. I heard she moved away.”

“Did it end well? Your parting? Dana prodded gently.

“I guess so. I mean I know she needed the money. She was single woman. Never married. She didn’t have a lot of income. But no, everything was fine. She really loved Emily.”

“She did? She really cared for Emily a lot?” Dana asked.

Oh, my god, Dana, do you think Barbara kidnapped Emily?!”

Heidi stood up and stared hard at Dana.

“I don’t know, Heidi. But we need to check her out. What else do you remember about her?”

Heidi began to slowly pace the room.

“Well, she had brown hair, and her last name was a president’s name. Let me think for a moment.

Kennedy! It was Kennedy! And I think she was from up north somewhere, but I can’t be sure.

Oh, and she sometimes brought her nephew with her.”

“Her nephew?” Dana asked, cocking her head.

“Yeah, her brother had drug issues, so sometimes she looked after her nephew. I didn’t really like the nephew, so I told Barbara not to bring him around anymore, so she stopped.”

“Why didn’t you like the nephew?” Dana asked.

“He was just sort of aggressive,” Heidi said. “I didn’t like the way he spoke to Barbara. Kind of harsh and not very respectful.”

“Hmmm,” Dana replied. “When I get back to the police department, I’ll make some calls and see what I can find out about Barbara. Please let me know if you think of anything else, Heidi - about Barbara or anyone who might have known about the butterfly or might have sent the letter.”

Dana looked over at her students and motioned with her head that it was time to leave.

The three stood up said their goodbyes. When they made it to the front porch, they ran quickly out onto the front lawn, shielding their heads with their hands from the rain shower. They were opening their car doors when Heidi ran out the front door and onto the porch.

“Wait! Wait! I just remembered!”

CHAPTER 11

Warm morning sunbeams poured into the hazy bedroom window and onto the young woman's face as she slept. The rising sun began to make her face hot, so she opened her eyes and scanned the bedroom. Like most every day: the same. Laying there, she searched her mind, trying to remember what the day held in store. Then she smiled.

Today, she and Mother would pick apples and pears from the McKinley orchard down Whitefish Lane. She liked Mr. McKinley. He was always kind. The older man would greet her on the dirt path with a hug and a painted deer carving - also a silly pun. Lena appreciated Mr. McKinley's good humor. It allowed her to laugh.

"Lena, what do they call a fake noodle?" he asked, his eyes smiling while he was already giggling in anticipation.

"An impasta!"

The older man would shout with laughter and slap his knee. That particular joke always made Lena's mouth water. She wondered what pasta tasted like and if she'd ever get the chance to eat it. She'd seen a picture of spaghetti noodles in one of the books on Mother's shelf, and they looked wonderful – all hot and saucy. Mr. and Mrs. McKinley owned a tree farm that produced maple syrup and Christmas trees, and sometimes Mrs. McKinley gave them syrup to take home or items from her farm store.

Lena lived for days like this.

Most days, she and Mother just stayed in their small cabin putting together cat puzzles or canning beets and carrots from their garden. Lena didn't really like canned vegetables. They were too mushy. She liked when Mother roasted rutabagas with olive oil and rosemary or thyme.

When they were piping hot from the oven, tender and golden brown, she and Mother would feast on the diced squares and pretend they were eating at a fancy restaurant.

“Pinkies up,” Mom would laugh, extending her bony pinky fingers. “That’s what fancy people do!”

Sometimes, Lena thought about how nice it would be to eat at a restaurant. Yet, she knew the outside world was dangerous, full of mean people who wanted to hurt you. She knew it was her strict obedience to Mother’s rules that kept her safe from everything bad. Still, Lena wondered what the world was like beyond the pines. What did the world look like? How did people act? Were they really that mean? And she wondered what would happen to her if she ever tried to leave home.

The young woman’s belly rumbled, and she shoved aside her quilt. She swung her long legs over the old Jenny Lind bed and stood up, raising her arms above her head. The pine wood floor creaked, and Lena yawned loudly.

“I heard that, Lena! You’re finally up!” Mother yelled from the bathroom. “I was just getting ready to come in there and see if you were still breathing,” she laughed.

From the sound of glass clinking against the porcelain sink, Lena knew Mother was applying her creams. Lena questioned why Mother cared about how she looked. They rarely saw other people. Except for a few neighbors like the McKinleys or Mr. Burke, the lighthouse caretaker. And, of course, *Him*.

“Get up and get dressed,” Mother yelled playfully. “It’s going to be a glorious day!”

Lena smelled breakfast wafting up the wood stairs – crispy potato pancakes and homemade raspberry jam and whipping cream. She threw on her robe and made her way to the stairs.

I’m a lucky girl to have a mother who loves me.

CHAPTER 12

Harbor Cove Inn

After meeting with Heidi Hadley, Max drove Cadie in his white Denali the few twisting miles to Harbor Cove Inn. Neither felt like talking as the afternoon visit was mentally draining. They just wanted to get to the inn and relax a bit before visiting Mariner's Beach in the morning. They also wanted to talk about Heidi's news.

Max had rolled down his window halfway, and the cool, incoming lake air tousled his sandy blonde hair as he drove, exposing his chiseled features. Cadie enjoyed the fresh breeze blowing across her skin and leaned back in the plush seat, her long, red hair fanning out around her. From time to time, she stole a glance at the attractive young man tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and humming along to "Rocket Man."

I really don't know what to make of this guy.

Cadie closed her eyes and thought of Nick. She pictured his deep brown eyes and infectious grin.

I really need to talk to him. I just want to hear his voice. How long has it been since we talked?

Thursday?

She felt stress flowing free from her body. Maybe she fell asleep for a moment. She wasn't sure. It was just so peaceful driving down the picturesque Michigan backroads – trees rushing by and the smooth ride and soft hum of the car lulling her.

"We're here," Max said, and Cadie jolted awake. She honestly hated to see the car ride end. It was just so relaxing. Max eased the car into the historic inn's parking lot. They caught glimpses of shimmering Betsie Lake.

Fed by the Betsie River, Betsie Lake was a calm body of water that flowed out into the harbor and ultimately Lake Michigan. On the north side of the lake was Harbor Cove with its many

quaint beach shops, restaurants, and the Port Betsie Lighthouse but also Harbor Heights Marina with over 100 slips.

Cadie and Max exited the car.

“Hey, do you want to get a quick drink?” Max asked. “Maybe sit out back?”

“That sounds perfect,” Cadie said.

They followed the concrete path around the inn - past a colorful array of purple, yellow, and red mums expertly arranged until they reached the back patio and took a seat under a blue-striped umbrella.

From the back deck of Harbor Cove Inn, the marina was a spectacular vision. Stretching side to side were sailboats with their tall, white masts gently rocking back and forth and stretching high into the blue sky. Filling the slips were large yachts with gleaming hulls and polished finishes, wooden historic vessels, and fishing boats, some small and open, others larger and robust. The marina was saturated in classic whites, deep blues, and vibrant reds. Peaceful waves lapped against the boats and contrasted with the marina’s bustling activity. Up and down the docks were boat owners cracking beers, repairing greasy engines, gutting fish, or chatting with each other and just enjoying lake life.

After the waitress had taken their order, Cadie’s phone buzzed. She looked down at the screen. It was Nick. Finally! Her face lit, and she jumped up.

“Hey, I have to take this, okay?”

“No worries. I’ll be right here,” Max said with a disarming smile.

Cadie quickly walked over to a nearby empty table and took Nick’s call.

