



Deleted Scenes

Someone is watching . . .

FATAL ILLUSIONS

ADAM BLUMER

Dear Reader,

Every novel goes through a transformation from submitted work to final printed product. My first novel, *Fatal Illusions*, was no exception. What follows are some of the scenes that landed on the cutting-room floor in an effort to streamline the story, make the plot tighter, and improve the novel in numerous ways. Even if you haven't read the finished, printed novel, I think the content to follow will make sense as it currently stands.

If you've read my published novel, what you'll mainly find here is an alternate ending involving disturbed counselee Stacey James. I originally had different plans for her. Though I'm happy with the final printed novel, part of my heart still clings to my original idea. Curious to know what that is? Enjoy.

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Summary Up to This Point

Gillian Thayer's calligraphy business helps to keep her mind off two small headstones in the cemetery. Still healing from the death of her twins during birth, she absorbs another emotional blow when a disturbed counselee, Stacey James, shoots her pastor husband, Marc. While Marc is on sabbatical and recovering, Gillian, Marc, and their daughter, Crystal, are forced to leave Chicago to escape the eye of the media. Together they seek refuge at Whistler's Point, a historic lighthouse on Lake Superior near the tiny town of Newberry, Michigan.

But they are not the only new arrivals looking for a place to lay low. Haydon Owens, an amateur magician and accomplished killer, has also come to Newberry hoping to start a new life, but he isn't there long before he spots another potential victim. Retired homicide detective Chuck Riley comes out of retirement to catch the Magician Murderer once and for all. Meanwhile, Stacey James flees the police and tracks down the Thayers with plans to confront Marc one more time . . .

Chapter 1

Donny, Donny, Donny. Life is so short. We can't afford to waste a minute.

Sitting on a stool behind the counter, Haydon Owens glanced at the library clock and sighed, his mother's counsel ringing in his ears. He hated working the afternoon hours because they seemed like such a waste of time. He would rather be home practicing his magic tricks.

The glass doors swung open, and three high-school girls breezed in, giggling and talking loudly. The blond one in the middle said good-bye to her friends, who headed toward the room with the computers and the Internet access. She strutted up to the checkout desk and plunked down her library card, meeting his gaze confidently. He pretended he didn't recognize her, but his nerves were buzzing.

"Hi, I'm looking for the soundtrack to *The Sound of Music*. Do you got it?"

Her shimmering, blond hair was nice, but it wasn't enough to outweigh her minuses—a slightly upturned nose, chubby cheeks, and a bad case of acne. And then there was the nose ring: weird but kind of cute in a way. She was also heavysset, her biggest flaw, in his opinion.

"Tape or CD?" he asked.

"CD."

He put on his businesslike voice and pushed his black-frame glasses up on his nose. "I'm pretty sure it hasn't been checked out. Let me check our holdings." He checked the database.

"Yep, it's here. Just check the recordings. You'll find it under 'Soundtracks.'"

A couple of minutes later, she returned with the CD and handed it to him along with her library card. Running her card through the scanner, he studied the display. "I'm afraid your

library card expired last spring. I guess you don't come to the library very often"—he saw her name on the computer screen, not that he needed prompting—"Tanya."

"Rats. What do I have to do?"

Marjorie had gone over the policy with him just yesterday. "You need to apply for a new card. I'll need your driver's license or some type of ID proving you live in this county."

Sighing, Tanya began digging through her black, leather purse. "Good grief, I'm as blind as a bat without my glasses." She fished out a pair of oval, wire-rimmed glasses and shoved them on her nose. "There, now at least I can see what I'm looking for."

Blond hair. Blue eyes. Wire-rimmed glasses.

For weeks, he had been watching her and sending her taunting instant messages and e-mails via a phony name—probing, teasing, threatening—but she hadn't replied to any of them. He studied her again, the glasses sealing it for him. Overcome by rage, he dug fingernails into the palms of his hands, trying to gain control. The anger dissipated but not by much.

"There." She slapped down her driver's license. "That should be enough."

While he processed her account, she made conversation. "Did you know that the local theater group is doing *The Sound of Music*? I went to the audition and couldn't believe it when I got the lead role of Maria. It's such a big surprise. I mean, people always told me I had a nice voice, but, wow, I never thought I'd get the lead part. God is so good, isn't He? Isn't it amazing the way He surprises us sometimes?"

Tanya, you have no idea. He handed her the new ID and ran the CD through the scanner. "There you go. You're all set."

"Thanks, you're a big help."

“Good luck on the musical,” he called to her back as she walked away.

Her personal data glowed on the screen, drawing him like a moth to flame. Grabbing a pencil, he wrote down her address and slipped the paper into his pocket. He glanced at the clock, measuring the minutes until his replacement would arrive. He’d been watching Tanya long enough.

It was time to move.

Chapter 2

Crystal Thayer handed a towel to another drenched teen who had dunked his head into the wooden barrel, bobbing for apples. Smirking, she stepped back, not wanting to get wet. A teen splashed another teen. Then somebody filled a cup with cold water from the barrel and made a mad dash for the closest unsuspecting victim. Teen girls squealed. Crystal hid behind a lawn chair, hoping to avoid notice. The bearer of the cold water didn't see her and dashed after someone else.

When the chase headed toward Pastor Randall's backyard, Crystal came out of hiding just in time to notice Tanya Wright open the sliding screen door and step into the backyard with two trays of caramel apples. The trays tottered.

Crystal leaped up. "Here, let me help."

Tanya looked relieved when Crystal took one of the trays. "Thanks."

"No problem. Wow, they sure look good." Crystal was tempted to eat one, but decided to save her appetite for a special meal planned with her parents that evening.

Pastor Randall emerged from the yard to the side of the house and strolled toward them, his long-sleeved polo shirt drenched and pulled tight over his sizable paunch. What remained of his thinning iron-gray hair was dripping wet. He had apparently been the next unfortunate victim.

Crystal laughed. "You look like you could use a towel." She reached toward the basket of towels, but his words stopped her.

"What would be the point? I'm the pastor. Somebody might as well draw a bullseye on my chest. As soon as I dry off, somebody else will soak me."

He led them to the picnic table, which was crowded with every variety of junk food known to man. Somehow he cleared a spot, and Crystal and Tanya added their trays. Seconds later, a mob descended, and only a couple lonely apples remained.

Pastor Russell glanced at Crystal with a sigh. “I hope my wife can make more fast.” He headed toward the house with one of the empty trays.

Watching his back, Tanya grinned. “I’d say the harvest party is a success.”

She’d put away her oval glasses, and Crystal thought she looked better without them. “I didn’t know there were so many teens in the neighborhood.”

“It’s amazing who comes out of the woodwork when you advertise free food.”

“Let’s hope they all stay for the devotional.” Crystal had been hoping for a moment to chat with Tanya and find out what made her tick. To Crystal’s surprise, Tanya was now attending church and had even accepted Crystal’s invitation to the harvest party. But was Tanya even a believer? Crystal hadn’t yet been able to peel back enough layers to find out, and getting to know new people wasn’t one of her favorite pastimes.

Grabbing one of the caramel apples for herself, Tanya plopped onto a lawn chair in front of the sizzling bonfire. She flicked long blond hair over her shoulder. Taking a chair beside her, Crystal asked, “So you been living in the U.P. for a long time?”

Tanya wrinkled her nose as smoke drifted her direction. “All my life. Can’t wait to leave.”

“What are your plans?”

Tanya waved a hand in front of her face until the smoke shifted. “College for sure. Too many friends decided not to and are bagging groceries somewhere. That’s not for me.”

“What would you study?”

“Music. You already know I love to sing, but I’m not stupid enough to think I’m good enough to hit the big time.” Tanya took a bite of her apple.

“Then what would you do?”

After chewing and swallowing, Tanya shrugged. “Take composition classes and learn to write my own music. I’ve been making up songs since I was a kid.”

“That’s cool.”

Tanya leaned her head back, eyes closed, and favored Crystal with a sample.

And when he turned and walked away
She knew he’d come another day
And that their love had come to stay
Across the miles,
Oh yes, across the miles.

Tanya ducked her head as if embarrassed, but her smile widened when she saw Crystal’s nod of approval. Reminding Crystal of something from a Broadway musical, the pretty tune clearly showed talent.

“Songwriting pays pretty decent if your songs are good enough,” Tanya said. “Of course, I’m not saying my songs are good enough yet, but maybe they will be . . . someday. If I get the right training.”

“I think you’ve got talent,” Crystal said, and meant it. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from Tanya’s nose ring and wondered if it made her nose hurt.

“I got music from my dad. My mom can’t sing a lick.”

“Where is he—your dad?”

Tanya stared into the fire, her eyes misting. “We don’t know where he is. After he left a few years back, he just vanished. He obviously doesn’t want anything to do with us.” Tanya took another bite of her apple.

Crystal heard resentment in Tanya’s voice and patted her arm. She had no idea why Tanya’s dad had left, but it wasn’t really her business to ask. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I didn’t mean to make you feel—”

“No, it’s okay.” Tanya peered down at her polished fingernails and shook her head. “I know, it sounds weird. How could somebody just disappear?”

Crystal nodded. She couldn’t imagine her dad vanishing like that.

Tanya met her gaze. “The truth is, sometimes people don’t *want* to be found. Know what I mean?” She shrugged and kicked the large rocks ringing the fire. “I just wish I knew whether he was dead or alive. He doesn’t have to come home. But if he’d just let us know he’s okay, then I wouldn’t worry so much.” Her voice quavered. Hurriedly, she wiped tears away, as if embarrassed.

Crystal so badly wanted to touch that hurt place in Tanya’s heart and make everything better. “I’ll pray that God will show you where he is either way.”

Tanya shrugged. “If you think it’ll help.”

Pastor Russell rushed toward them, out of breath. “Crystal, could you do me a favor? We’re running out of food, and my wife’s trying to make more fast. She sure could use some help in the kitchen.”

Crystal stood. “Sure, no problem.” She glanced at Tanya, wanting so much to continue the conversation. Tanya’s layers were slowly peeling away. If they kept talking, perhaps she could figure out how to make a difference. “Maybe we could talk again sometime.”

Tanya’s voice was noncommittal. “Sure. Whatever.”

Chapter 3

Henry Henderson, Marc's employer at Whistler's Point Lighthouse, had sent Marc to town on an errand to pick up some supplies as they prepared the grounds of Whistler's Point for the winter. After getting everything on Henry's list, Marc was on his way home when his cell phone chirped. It was Pastor Jim Randall at the Baptist church the Thayers were attending. He and his wife had hosted a harvest party in their backyard. More teens had attended the event than they'd expected, and Pastor Randall wondered if Marc was available to give some of them rides home.

Marc agreed, though it would have to be quick, he explained. Today was an important family event, and he had no intention of getting home late for the festivities. Within five minutes, he swung by the Randalls' house and soon had a load of boisterous teens. The rides didn't take as long as he feared. Finally, he was alone with a pudgy, blond girl with a slightly upturned nose and oval, scholarly-looking glasses. He tried not to stare at her nose ring.

"What was your name again?" He sat up straight, pushing his shoulders back, determined not to hunch.

"Tanya Wright." She glanced at him shyly. He detected a slight flirtation in her look, but that didn't faze him. Wherever there were girls like Tanya, there would be hunger for manly attention.

Tanya attended church with her mother, her father apparently out of the picture. *She probably isn't close to her father*, he thought, *and she probably doesn't have a boyfriend either*. In his opinion, the nose ring didn't help matters. But still . . .

“So you were a pastor in Chicago, huh?” she asked.

“News travels fast.”

“What brings you and your family to the middle of nowhere?”

He didn’t miss the cynical tone in her voice. Like Crystal, Tanya wanted to be far away from the North Woods, too. If he had been her age, he supposed he would have felt the same way. “My wife and I are temporary staff at Whistler’s Point.”

“Whistler’s Point is pretty cool, I guess, if you get into old historic places like that. Don’t you have a daughter named Crystal?”

“The one and only.”

“We’re both in *The Sound of Music*. I’m so excited about being Maria. I checked out the soundtrack from the library today so I can review how Julie Andrews sang the songs. I hope I can remember all those lyrics.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“I never expected to get the part of Maria. It was a big surprise. I thought I’d pass out when my name was announced.”

“It’s quite an honor, Tanya. I’m sure you’ll give of your best to do the part justice.” He turned the conversation to more important matters. “It’s been great to see you and your mom out to church lately.”

Tanya glanced out the window. “Crystal invited us. Mom and I like it a lot.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. Hearing the preaching of God’s Word is so important for the Christian life.” Absently, he tugged at the bill of his Bulls cap. While repositioning the hat on his head, he noticed Tanya’s eyes following his every move. “What? Did I grow antlers?”

She giggled. “No, it’s the hat. See, I collect basketball caps. I’ve got just about every basketball team except the Bulls.”

Pulling off the hat, he tossed it to her. “Well, there you go, and it’s even autographed. You probably didn’t know this, but I used to play for the Bulls. But I didn’t play for them very long, so you’ve probably never heard of me.”

“No way!” She stared at him in awe. “But you don’t have to give me your hat. Just tell me where you bought it, and I’ll look it up on the Internet.”

“No, you keep it. I’ve got too many autographed hats anyhow.”

Her eyes widened. “You really mean it?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t.”

“Cool!”

Following Tanya’s directions, Marc found a small ranch-style house squatting forlornly at the end of a long, gravel drive. What grass grew in the front yard seemed to be hiding behind the weeds.

Tanya hopped out. “Thanks for the ride.”

“My pleasure. See you at church.”

Slamming the door shut, she strode toward the house. Then, as if remembering, she turned and waved before continuing on.

Marc scrubbed a hand across his face and waited for her to reach the door before putting the Tahoe in reverse.

Nice girl, but I’d never let Crystal wear a nose ring like that. He stopped himself. But does she know Jesus? That’s what’s important.

Chapter 4

Slowing the stolen Buick Skylark to a stop behind the cover of roadside trees, Stacey watched from a distance as the girl hopped out of Marc's SUV and strode toward the house.

Marc, honey, she's a little young for you, don't you think? Then again, she supposed his giving the girl a ride home was perfectly harmless.

She had arrived in Newberry only an hour ago, faced with a new challenge. During her long journey north, she'd failed to plan how she would make contact with Marc once she reached her destination. She couldn't very well walk up to his house and knock at the front door. First, she was a wanted fugitive. Second, the possibility of Gillian's answering the door would have created an interesting situation. Nor could she call Marc and say, "I'm here in town, and I want to see you."

The main question was his response. Would he be happy to see her? Would he be angry? After all, she *had* killed his dog and almost killed him. But if he loved her—something she felt confident about—certainly he had forgiven her by now. Trying to decide what to do, she had been roaming around Newberry, checking the place out, when she spotted him coming out of the hardware store. The rest had been as simple as following him here.

Now, as Marc's SUV pulled back onto the highway, she wondered what he would say when he saw her for the first time since their last, fleeting glance in the courtroom. Would he look startled? Or would he smile at her knowingly, his eyes tender, and say, "I knew you'd come"?

He was steering the SUV toward her, but she wasn't ready to make an appearance yet. Quickly, she huddled on the seat as he sped past, the SUV rocking the small sedan. Letting a moment pass before rising, she put the car into gear. She was ready to pull away, her foot poised on the brake, when something caught her eye.

Fifty yards away, a man broke from the trees. Slender and blond-haired, he strode purposefully toward the girl's house. His furtive glances told Stacey he didn't belong here. There was something menacing in his stride, something completely wrong. Was he a thief?

Something inexplicable told Stacey that what she was seeing was important while another part of her urged, *Marc's gettin' away. You're losin' him.* But then she reminded herself that finding Whistler's Point would be no problem. It was obviously the biggest tourist attraction around, and getting there would be as simple as following the billboards.

As the man neared the house, Stacey got out of the car and crouched amid roadside weeds. Maybe if she got a closer look . . .

Chapter 5

Tanya’s mood soured when she saw the note taped to the front door. “Gone to auction,” her mother had scrawled. “Won’t be home till late.”

Swearing under her breath, Tanya thrust the key into the lock and jostled her way inside. She tossed her backpack on the living room couch and stomped into the kitchen to see if her mother had left her anything for supper.

Nope. She didn’t see anything and felt even angrier, if such a thing were possible. She slumped on the couch, admiring the hat Mr. Thayer had given to her. “I wish you’d just stayed home,” she said to herself. “Like you even give a care.”

Pulling the too-big hat down on her head, Tanya sighed and got up to search the refrigerator for leftovers. She plopped some cold taco salad on a plate and slammed it into the microwave. While the microwave hummed, she fished *The Sound of Music* from her backpack and turned on the CD player, the only decent thing her mom had brought home from one of those lousy auctions. As the soundtrack’s beginning notes swelled into song, Tanya leaned against the counter top and imagining herself like Julie Andrews, dancing across a flower-dotted mountaintop.

Tanya remembered the words—she had seen the movie five times, after all—and sang along as she put a single place setting on the table, the alluring aroma of the taco salad beginning to permeate the room. When the doorbell rang, Tanya jumped.

Turning down “Climb Every Mountain,” she went to the front door and squinted through the tiny window at the top. It was that guy from the library. Opening the door, Tanya noticed that he seemed out of breath.

“Hi, Tanya. I’m from the Newberry Public Library. Remember me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Faded jeans. Same outdated plaid shirt he’d been wearing earlier. Black-frame glasses that made him look like a typical bookworm. His face was pale against curly, blond hair and black eyes. She hadn’t given him a close look before. He looked . . . well, not bad actually. Certainly not her type. But his eyes—they were stunning. And the goatee was okay, but she preferred it thicker.

“Is your mom home?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Hey, is that *The Sound of Music*?” When she didn’t answer, music from the soundtrack filled the space between them. “Yep, sure is. That’s gotta be one of the best musicals, don’t you think? Unfortunately, the real Maria von Trapp stupidly sold her story for beans and didn’t get a cent when the movie raked in the gold. You probably didn’t know that, did you?”

Tanya studied him. *What planet is this guy from?*

“Anyhow, the reason I’m here . . . I wonder if you could do me a favor. Your mother checked out a book some time ago, and it’s way overdue. People on the waiting list are getting impatient. Do you think you could find it for me?” He handed her an index card, on which were printed the book’s title and author along with other things that meant nothing to her.

“Wait here,” Tanya said.

On the way to her mother's bedroom, she heard the *beep beep beep* of the microwave. Maybe she could act fast and get this over with. Certainly there couldn't be anything urgent about an overdue book. Come to think of it, she didn't think her mom even had a library card. Egypt was all her mom ever read about—pyramids and mummies and secret curses. And everything she read came from the History Book Club.

Flicking on the light, Tanya knelt beside her mom's bookshelf, tilted her head to one side, and skimmed titles: *Secrets of Ancient Thebes*; *King Tut, the Boy King*; *The Great Pyramid*; *Hieroglyphics for Dummies*.

Tanya didn't realize the librarian was behind her until she heard his heavy breathing. She whirled around. A piece of rope dangled from his hands. His eyes were glassy, his breathing heavy. Beads of sweat rolled down his smooth cheeks. With a sickening stab of fear, Tanya realized he had the doorway blocked.

"Erin, you came back." He spoke in a monotone as if he were in a trance. "You shouldn't have done that."

Chapter 6

The Thayer family is celebrating Crystal’s birthday when someone interrupts their party...

Cutting the first slice of the birthday cake, Gillian heard a voice coming from the living room she didn’t recognize. She and Crystal exchanged puzzled looks. Reaching the living room with Crystal at her side, Gillian stiffened when she saw a burly police officer talking to Marc. Standing near the open door, the cop was scribbling something on a small notepad.

“What’s this all about?” Gillian asked.

The blond officer, his face pitted from acne, turned to Crystal and Gillian with a smile that was official but not overly friendly. “I’m Sheriff Nate Dendridge with the Newberry Police Department. Do you know a girl named Tanya Wright?”

“Yeah, she and her mom have been visiting our church,” Gillian said. She could tell by Marc’s frustrated nod that he’d already shared this information.

“She’s also on the cast of *The Sound of Music* with me,” Crystal said.

Sheriff Dendridge tapped his pen against the notepad. “Sorry to tell you this, folks, but Tanya’s dead. She was found strangled a few hours ago.”

Gillian felt her knees weaken. “Oh no!” Noticing that Crystal was pressing both hands to her mouth in shock, Gillian pulled her daughter into a hug.

Dendridge turned to Marc. “Could you come to police headquarters with me and answer some questions?”

Marc studied the sheriff’s face uncertainly. “I guess, if you think it’ll help.”

As if noticing the dismay on Gillian’s face, the sheriff added, “Just routine, ma’am. It looks like Marc was the last person to see Tanya alive.”

Gillian searched Marc's stunned face. "What?"

Marc shrugged. "Pastor Randall called and asked me to drive some of the teens home after the harvest party."

"We got a tip from someone who saw you pick Tanya up," the sheriff said. "You may have important information to help our investigation. Okay, let's go."

Gillian didn't see any handcuffs, but there was no mistaking the tone in the sheriff's voice. Marc didn't really have any choice, even if they were in the middle of celebrating Crystal's birthday.

Marc put an arm around Gillian and gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Look, everything will be fine. I'll call you later, okay?" He paused, frowning, as if reading her mind. "Now don't worry. You heard what he said. It's just routine."

Gillian forced a smile and nodded. The last time she had seen a policeman was at the hospital on the night Marc almost died. She fought to sound as if she were holding together just fine. Making a quick decision, she said, "We're coming, too."

Crystal put the ice cream away while Gillian grabbed her purse, glanced at the kitchen table, and saw the uneaten birthday cake. Gillian shook her head. *What a way to celebrate a birthday!*

Chapter 7

Somewhere in the background, Willie Nelson crooned about his lost love who would never come home. The clerk at Zellar's Village Inn in Newberry squinted at the database on the fingerprint-smearred computer screen and fixed Stacey in an impatient stare. "How many nights do you plan to stay?"

"I'm sorry?"

"One night? Two nights? I need to know."

Stacey flushed under his searching gaze. "Sorry, honey. Three nights."

That should be long enough to find Marc, to find out what his true feelings are, and to skip town before anybody's the wiser.

Suspicion glinted in his eyes when she said she'd pay with cash. "Your name, please?"

"Mallory Lewis." It was the name of a friend from her high school days. She winced at the memories. The less she remembered about those days, the better.

The clerk handed her keys, gave her directions to her room, then muttered something about a continental breakfast, complimentary HBO, and free use of the indoor swimming pool, whirlpool, and sauna.

Thanks, but no thanks. She planned to lock herself in her room and hide from the world for a few days.

After checking out the dull but functional room, she sat on the edge of the squeaky bed and counted her cash. Biting her lip, she chided herself for spending so much money. She, who'd

always had a big bank account and had never worried about finances before, was getting skimpy on cash, and the feeling was otherworldly.

Why had she decided to rent a room? She could just as easily have broken into somebody's abandoned hunting cabin, but no—she'd been determined to retain some modicum of respectability and behave like a decent, law-abiding citizen. At least for a few nights while she bathed, slept in a real bed, and tracked down Marc Thayer.

Ten minutes later, she sank into the bathtub, the water as hot as she could stand, and enjoyed the moment of bliss. The almost-scalding water soothed her aching calves and thighs; she had walked more miles than she thought herself capable of walking. Then she had come across a used car lot and an absent-minded attendant who had left the keys in the Buick's ignition.

He won't be makin' that mistake again, she thought with a smile.

She soaked for a half hour before climbing out, her legs rubbery, the skin on her hands white and wrinkled. After rubbing herself extra hard with a towel, she wrapped herself in a teal terry cloth housecoat. Cinching the belt around her waist, she froze, her eyes fixed on her hands that gripped the belt.

Her mind flashed back to what she had seen through the bedroom window: *the rope was tight around the girl's neck, and the man was pulling the rope tighter . . .*

Stacey lurched to the bed, her legs betraying her. Forcing her head down between her knees, she waited for the sickness to pass.

Something she couldn't explain had compelled her to give up the chase for Marc, sneak up behind the house, and peer through the lacy bedroom curtains. Why had she done that? What

she had seen through the window had nothing to do with her or her trek to the North Woods. But something—women’s intuition, she supposed—had convinced her that what she was seeing was important, that it might prove to her advantage. She shuddered again at the recollection.

Now she had a new problem, and she wasn’t sure how to deal with it.

She pictured the killer’s fair skin and his curly, blond hair—the fingerprint of his face. She’d jotted down the license plate number of the brown Chevy sedan he had carelessly parked on the dirt road running behind the girl’s house. It was all the information she needed to cash in on a good opportunity—that is, if she could find a way to contact him.

Later, she told herself. I’ll decide what to do later. Right now, she just wanted to erase the image of the murdered girl’s face from her mind.

Her stomach heaved. Feeling her forehead, she wondered if she had a fever. Weak and light-headed, she decided to find some medication soon. Perhaps she could break into a local pharmacy. She also needed some hair dye to give herself a new look. Shaking her head, she realized that each time she broke the law, she was increasing her risk of being apprehended. Going back to prison wasn’t an option; she’d kill herself first.

A noise in the hallway outside her room made her heart race. She imagined policemen crouched just outside her door with raised guns, ready to knock the door down. After a few moments of silence, she relaxed. As long as she continued using cash and her assumed name, nobody could possibly know who she was . . . that is, unless she was careless. Unfortunately, the hotel clerk had seen her in the flesh, her face haggard, her makeup smeared away. It was too late to do anything about him now.

If she sniffed danger, she could always sneak away tonight and forget about the three nights she had promised. Of course, her sneaking off would surely arouse suspicion. Or would it? After all, she *had* paid in advance, so she couldn't be accused of theft.

Surfing through the TV channels, she stumbled across a local newscast and felt a jolt as the camera panned on a familiar ranch house. The voice-over talent was saying, “. . . the scene of a grisly strangling just hours ago.”

Footage followed of paramedics carrying out a gurney, where a body was covered by a white sheet. A prim-looking female reporter stood in front of the house and stiffly peered into the camera.

“Tanya Wright, seventeen, was a student at Newberry High School and had lived in Newberry for the last twelve years with her mother, Mary Beth. She was active in concert choir and enjoyed participating in a variety of local theater productions. More recently, Tanya was cast to play Maria in the upcoming local theater production of *The Sound of Music*. Investigators continue to process the crime scene. They have received several leads but have not yet made an arrest.”

The video cut to a close-up of Tanya's mother, Mary Beth. Her attractive, heart-shaped face was flushed, her cheeks streaked with tears.

“Whoever did this horrible thing deserves to suffer to the fullest extent of the law.” She swallowed hard, visibly trying to keep her emotions in check. Then she looked away from her interviewer and peered directly into the camera lens. “If the killer is watching this right now, I'm asking you to give yourself up. I don't hate you, but I hate what you've done. I can forgive you because God has forgiven me.”

Sounds like somebody from Marc's church. Stacey smiled. The newscast segued to the local weather, and she switched off the TV.

If she wanted to retain her freedom, she couldn't go to the police with her information. They would discover who she was and arrest her. But perhaps she could use the information to her benefit, perhaps to get the money she would need for the journey ahead. If Marc turned his back on her, she would flee to Canada, but she didn't have enough money for a trip like that. And she would be stupid not to prepare for the worst scenario.

Stacey pulled out the paper where she had scrawled down the killer's license plate number. The number could provide the information she needed to pinpoint his identity. But how could she best obtain his identity without arousing suspicion? She had a friend who worked for the Department of Motor Vehicles and wouldn't betray her location to the police. Maybe she could e-mail her. She had seen the Internet computer in the motel lobby but felt uneasy about using it, certain the proprietor would be keeping his eye on her. She needed more public Internet access.

After a moment's hesitation, she flipped through the phone book, picked up the phone, and dialed. A woman's voice answered on the first ring. "Newberry Public Library."

Chapter 8

Haydon rolled the jam-packed cart behind him as he filed the books one by one, caring little about speed or efficiency. It was Saturday morning at the library, and he could think of a thousand places where he'd rather be right now. Glancing to his right, he watched a patron stop Marjorie mid-stride.

Something about the woman piqued his interest. Arms encumbered with books, he let them sit, biceps burning.

“Yes, may I help you?” Marjorie asked.

“Honey, I'd like to use your Internet access,” the woman said. “Where can I find that?”

“No problem,” Marjorie said. “Could I see your library card please?”

The woman hesitated. “I'm afraid I don't have one. See, honey, I'm from out of town.”

“That's not a problem. Why don't you follow me?”

She was tall and slim in blue jeans and a black sweatshirt. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had the cutest southern accent he'd ever heard. He could tell right away she wasn't from around here.

Marjorie was leading the patron toward the computer room when the woman seemed to realize he was watching her. Their eyes met for an instant, and a spark of recognition passed between them. Then she followed Marjorie away as if nothing had happened.

Standing, he watched her retreating back. She hadn't looked familiar to him. She was just . . . well, pretty. Perhaps she was someone he'd known in Cincinnati, though he didn't have the

foggiest idea who she could be. He drove fingernails into his palms until he gained control.

Perhaps she would expose his true identity. It was a risk he wasn't willing to take.

Chapter 9

Stacey tried to still her hammering heart as the librarian directed her to the busy computer lab and gestured to the only remaining station. Stacey took a seat facing a computer monitor and smoothed back a wisp of black hair that had strayed from her barrette. The sight of the hair startled her momentarily until she remembered dyeing it just that morning. She tried to compose herself, to play the part.

Planning to e-mail the killer’s license plate number to a friend, she’d never expected to see him face-to-face. He’d been shelving children’s books from a cart. Was he an employee?

“Have you been on the Internet before?” asked the librarian, whose name tag said “Marjorie Stevens.” It was obvious that many patrons were computer dunderheads, and her assumption that Stacey fit that category was obvious by her tone.

“Hundreds of times, honey. I’ll be fine.”

Stacey barely listened as Marjorie listed the rules. No online gambling. No surfing to pornographic sites. No chat rooms. Yada, yada, yada.

What if he knows who I am? But how could he? She’d glimpsed him through the bedroom window, but he hadn’t seen her. She was sure of that.

“Yes, that’s fine.” Stacey clicked on the Internet Explorer icon and went to the CNN site, as if to check the headlines.

When Marjorie turned to leave, Stacey said, “You’ve been such a big help, honey. Can I ask you one more question? See, I’m tryin’ to find a friend of mine, and I think he’s an employee

here. Actually, it's supposed to be a surprise. I don't want him to know I'm lookin' for him, understand? The problem is, I don't have his phone number or address."

Marjorie drummed violet fingernails against her cheek. "We've only got a couple male employees right now, and the other one is just a kid, so I guess that narrows the field quite a bit, huh?" She chuckled, her face a mask of curiosity. "In fact, I just spoke to him a few minutes ago. My goodness, I hope he didn't see you when you came in."

Stacey feigned alarm. "You mean, he's here? Now?"

"That's right."

"Then I better get out of here." Stacey rose, clutching her purse. "I'm not ready to see him just yet. Actually, I was hopin' to find his address and telephone number on the Internet, but I don't know . . ."

Marjorie waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Don't waste your time on that." She scribbled a phone number down on scratch paper and handed it to Stacey. "I hope you give him a good surprise. I've tried to befriend him, but it's no use. Loneliest guy I've ever met. Never goes out with anybody. Never does anything remotely exciting. Lives in a cabin on a lake all by himself and does magic tricks, of all things." She studied Stacey. "Are you a former wife or something?"

"No, I'm just"—Stacey's mind clutched at air—"a friend."

Chapter 10

Leaving the computer lab, Stacey slung her purse strap over her shoulder and glanced around furtively. The library was crowded; she hoped she could blend in long enough to exit the building and reach the safety of her car. On her way, she passed the children's literature room where she'd seen the killer stacking books earlier, but she didn't see him anywhere. She felt herself relax. Perhaps he had left for the day.

As she strode toward the glass doors to exit the building, she sensed someone bearing down on her from behind. A hand grabbed her left arm. Something cold and sharp was pressed to her right side. Warm breath tingled against her ear.

"Don't scream. Don't make a sound, understand?"

It's him.

Stacey felt her mouth turn dry, felt her body begin to tremble. Hesitating, her mind grasped at what to do. Call out for help? Risk the plunge of the knife between her ribs?

The reward of her hesitancy was an even more painful jab in the side. She was certain he wouldn't hesitate to use the knife if she didn't cooperate.

But use it now or later when we're alone?

She had to do something. She wanted to get a good look at him, at least to see his face, but he wasn't letting her budge an inch. Each time she resisted, the knife tip dug in a little deeper.

"Look, lady, just move!"

Her legs felt unyielding. Every muscle, every tendon, was stiff with fear. He was pushing her out the swinging doors and leading her toward the parking lot.

No, no, her mind screamed.

When they were outside, he clamped his left arm across her shoulders, as if they were lovers. His right hand continued pressing the knife to her side. She could feel its cold prick against her skin, and a cry of pain caught in her throat.

“*Please.*” She heard the tremble in her voice. “Who are you?”

“Shut up!” He sounded angry and irrational.

“What do you want?”

He was breathing hard. “I should be asking you the same thing, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what you m—”

“Shut up!”

He guided her across the parking lot. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her car. The keys were in her purse. If only she could break free . . . Ten seconds was all she needed.

“Please let me go. I don’t know who you are. Honest.”

“But of course you do. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Look, just let me go. I won’t say a word to anyone. We can forget this happened.”

“You think I’m a complete fool?”

The knife point dug deeper into her side. She fought to keep from crying out.

Don’t make him mad. Just do what he says.

She willed her body to relax, to give in to his every move. She felt herself loosen a bit, and he seemed to notice. The jab in her side lessened.

He was leading her toward a brown Chevy sedan she recognized.

No, God, not a car. Please don't let him touch me.

First, he would rape her. And then . . . She pressed her eyes shut, not wanting to imagine.

Nearing the car, he removed his arm from across her shoulders to check the door. It was locked. He cursed and reached into his pocket for his keys, still holding the knife to her side. He dropped the keys and bent to get them.

Now was her chance.

Planting her knee into his groin, she slammed her purse into his head and sprinted across the parking lot. To scream would be to invite the cops, so she fled in silence, breath rattling in her throat. The sidewalk rang with the slap of her shoes on concrete. She didn't hear anyone pursuing her.

She didn't slow until she was four blocks away. Stopping, a pain stabbing her side, she looked around and tried to catch her breath. She didn't know where he was. Was he watching her? Where should she go? Certainly not back to the library.

She pressed on in a slow trot, stopping occasionally to see whether she was being followed. She saw no one and was grateful for the long journey she'd taken to the North Woods on foot. Never in her life had she been in better shape.

A half hour later, she reached the hotel without incident. She didn't feel safe until she was locked in her room, drapes drawn, every light on. Even then, she felt herself trembling and not because her legs were tired.

Slumping on the bed in exhaustion, she emptied her pockets on the nightstand and eyed the paper with the killer's phone number. He would have killed her if she hadn't gotten away.

What had she gotten herself into? She needed the money, but how could she face him again? Part of her wanted to find Marc—she was wasting precious time. Another part of her said, *You can do this.*

But she wasn't ready to call the killer, wasn't sure if she could face him again. At least, not yet. And if she faced him again, she certainly wouldn't go unarmed.

Chapter 11

Underwater and able to see only a few feet in the murky depths, Haydon struggled against the handcuffs. He checked his waterproof watch to measure how much time had passed and frowned. This time was taking longer than usual. In a moment, he would be free of the handcuffs, but he always experienced a few seconds when panic knocked at his door.

The water was freezing.

To ensure the handcuffs were a real test, he'd tossed the keys to the middle of the lake before jumping in. He had to get the cuffs off; his life depended on it. Of course, even if he couldn't get the cuffs off, it wasn't the end of the world. Like Houdini, he was an excellent swimmer and could survive in the water for hours, even while handcuffed.

Then again, he couldn't swim with the cement block chained to his ankles. As soon as he jumped in, the block had quickly pulled him to the bottom of the lake, his ears aching from the pressure.

At last, he felt the lock yield under his pressure. The cuffs sprang open and drifted toward the bottom of the lake. Lungs aching, he squirmed his feet out of the chains that were wrapped around his ankles and kicked hard, propelling himself to the surface.

Twenty minutes later, he was drying off in the cabin and planning the rest of his afternoon. Running low on groceries, he decided to do some shopping soon. He also planned to call the producers of *Masters of Illusion*. He was surprised they hadn't called him back and asked him to appear on their show. He also needed to call the high school and book the auditorium for the first weekend in December. Soon, he would need to design fliers and begin sending press

releases to the newspapers. Soon, people would see a show they would never forget.

He paused at one of the bedroom doors, wondering if he had time for a visit with Houdini. The phone rang, and he went to answer it. He immediately recognized the woman's voice; she had the cutest southern drawl he'd ever heard.

"I saw you stranglin' that girl," she said with a shaky voice.

She sounded nervous or a little angry. Or maybe a mixture of both. He supposed she was still shaken from their jostle in the library parking lot. He should have driven the knife home when he'd had a chance. "Who is this?"

"That doesn't matter. What's important is that I know who you are. I saw you through the window."

"What do you want with me?"

"Honey, I guess that's dependin' on how much your little secret is worth to you."

She doesn't waste time. "I'm not sure I follow." He strolled into the living room and sank into the couch.

"Oh, I think you do, honey. I have all the information the police need to arrest you, but I can keep my mouth shut if you'd like me to."

"And you're going to keep quiet because we're best buds, huh?"

"Let's cut to the chase, okay? I think five thousand dollars would make me forget a lot of things."

He drove fingernails into his palms, taking the edge off his anger. His mind hummed at full speed, sifting through possibilities. "But forget for how long? I don't go for temporary amnesia."

“Five thousand dollars in cash means you’ll never hear from me again, and I promise never to tell anybody what I saw.”

“Like I can trust your promises.”

“You don’t really have a choice, honey, now do you?”

Actually, he had more choices than she realized. After hustling her out of the library, he’d waited in the parking lot for her to return. She hadn’t, of course, so he’d examined the cars left in the parking lot. He had known she was from out of town, so it wasn’t too difficult to pinpoint which car was hers. The pad of paper lying on the car seat had told him the name of the hotel where she was staying. He’d been planning to visit her tonight, but now he didn’t need to.

“Okay, time and place,” he said. “You pick. Let’s get this over with.”

“I’d like nothin’ better. Have you heard of Tahquamenon Falls State Park? It’s about a half hour north of Newberry.”

“Of course, I’ve heard of it. Who hasn’t?”

“Today. Three p.m. Be there. I’ll see you on the observation deck overlooking the Upper Falls. Don’t forget the cash and don’t be late.”

He heard the click of her hanging up.

Of course, I’ll be late. Maybe I’ll even plan to be late. I’d like nothing better than to make you sweat, honey.

Chapter 12

Wearing a heavy coat to ward off the fall chill, Stacey strode at a fast clip toward the Upper Falls at Tahquamenon Falls State Park. Her right hand was stuffed into her right pocket, her fingers wrapped around the rubber handle of the .38 Smith and Wesson she'd stolen earlier that day from the glove compartment of a car parked outside a gun shop.

Children raced by and pointed excitedly at the rumbling Upper Falls, their exhausted parents trying to keep up. The children's laughter and high spirits seemed incongruous to the dark purpose that compelled Stacey closer to her destination.

The sky was overcast, the breeze cool. The hike had taken longer than expected, and she felt winded. When she reached the observation deck, she felt relieved to see that the killer was late. Leaning over the wooden railing, she peered down at the russet-colored river that drifted along as if ignorant of the fifty-foot drop ahead. The river was so much like her life, she reflected. No matter what choice she made, an unexpected pitfall always seemed to loom around the next corner.

If anyone deserves the blame, Marc Thayer does, she thought. She would never have acted so foolishly if she hadn't met him. She would have endured, comfortable in her home and in her husband's income. Her marriage had been unhappy, certainly, but she'd had everything she needed.

Why didn't I just walk away?

If she'd walked away, she never would have succumbed to her anger. She never would have shot Marc and never would have found herself in jail. *And I would never have ended up standin' here about to commit blackmail, of all things. What am I doin' here?*

Conflicting thoughts warred in her mind.

Walk away. Now. Walk back to the car. Drive away. Go see Marc. Find out if he loves you. If he doesn't, persuade him to give you money so you can drive to the Canadian border and then sneak into Canada, maybe somewhere in the woods. You don't have to do this.

No, I can do this. She pulled her shoulders back, straightening her back. She'd always had a way with men and with getting what she wanted. She knew what she was doing. She'd be fine.

The place was beautiful really. On any other occasion, she would have found the roar of the falls relaxing. But she couldn't relax; the tension made her shoulders ache. Deprived of her medication, she felt tired and weak and sick. Her sore throat was a daily visitor.

She glanced past small children, past a couple walking their dog. She liked the openness of the park; there were so many people around. The killer would have to be deranged to hurt her with all these people watching.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She whirled around, alarmed to see a man watching her from only a few feet away. He wore a black leather jacket, blue jeans, brand-new Nike tennis shoes. He didn't need to say another word; she knew who he was. Where had he come from so quickly?

He closed the distance between them, black eyes behind black-rimmed glasses fixed on her face with a trace of amusement. Just to see him this close made her shiver. She instinctively

backed away. She looked for his weapon but didn't see anything, though there was no telling what he was hiding in his pockets. Pushing uneasiness aside, she tried to forget the sharp knife point he'd dug into her side at the library. She still had a nasty bruise from the encounter and had no intention of feeling that knife again.

"You're late," she said.

Resting his arms on the railing, he faced the river, as if ignoring her. "So what if I'm late? I'm here, aren't I?" The breeze tousled his blond hair, his matching goatee sparse and scraggly.

A cough, deep and penetrating, raked sharp claws across her lungs. She muffled it, a hand to her mouth. Not wanting him to see her weakness, she refused to let the agony reach her face.

Now that he was so close, she regretted her decision to meet him. He had a silent, hard quality about him that revealed little if any conscience. After she had her money, she would make fast tracks out of this place and head to Whistler's Point to find Marc. Checked out of the hotel, she had packed everything in her car and was ready for a quick getaway, if necessary.

For a moment, she was tempted to turn and run away. But run where? "Did you bring the money?" She forced more confidence into her voice than she felt.

He smiled. "Of course."

She studied him again. *The knife. Where is he hiding it?* "Okay, where's the money?"

Still looking at the river, he slipped a hand into one of his jacket pockets and inched out a white business-size envelope, just enough for her to see. On his face he wore a smug expression that didn't ring true. She would have been upset to lose so much money, but he didn't seem to care.

Like he knew something she didn't.

A trap! He has no intention of letting me leave this place with his money.

The realization hit her like a hard slap, and she felt herself beginning to tremble. Why had she decided to meet him?

Shoving the envelope back into his pocket, he kept facing the river. “It’s pretty here. You know, we could make a date out of this. At the Lower Falls, we could rent a canoe. Have a picnic on the island. It would be romantic.”

That’s where’d they’d find my body.

Her skin prickled. “I don’t think so. Just give it to me.”

He laughed, his eyes meeting hers. “Oh, you mean you want me to physically *hand* it to you?”

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. “Look, just stick your hand into my pocket and take it. Go ahead. I won’t stop you.”

What game is he playin’?

She felt herself sweating. Was he hiding something in his pocket, something that could harm her? But the place was crawling with people. Certainly he wouldn’t do anything so foolish...

He chuckled at her indecision. “C’mon, it’s just a pocket. Reach in. Take the money. And it’s yours.”

Finally, she decided to. Quickly, before she could change her mind.

A couple of feet yawned between them; she had to close the space to reach into his pocket. He smelled faintly of an exotic cologne she didn't recognize. She slid her hand in and felt her fingers close around—

Nothing!

“Hey, what are you tryin' to pull?” She glared at him, withdrawing her hand.

“I don't know what you mean.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope, waving it before her face. His eyes sparkled with merriment. “Here it is. If you don't want it—”

“You're some kind of magician, aren't you? You're just playin' games with me.”

“What? And you're not?”

She bit her lower lip. “Give it to me now, or I'm leavin'. And I'm goin' straight to the police. No more games.”

Without hesitation, a smile on his lips, he reached over the railing and dangled the envelope over the river.

And let go.

Chapter 13

Stacey saw the envelope floating down the river and tore down the path by which she'd come. She glanced back to see if the killer was pursuing her.

He wasn't.

Through the trees, she glimpsed the river. The envelope bobbed in the current. Perhaps if she moved quickly . . .

The trail swung to her left, but the river meandered to her right. She left the trail. Brush and wildflowers grabbed at her legs, clung to her ankles. Small trees rose before her as if blocking her way. She struggled past them, feeling sharp branches tearing her coat.

Through the trees, the river glinted like silver. Not far now. As long as she kept moving—

His body slammed into her from behind, knocking the wind out of her.

She fell heavily to the ground. Felt his body heavy on top of hers, pressing her down. Her sluggish mind whirled at the realization of what was happening. Adrenaline kicked in.

She rolled to her back. Saw his raised knife.

She rolled to her side. Watched him bury the knife in the dirt.

She wriggled away from him, reached into her pocket. Felt the cold steel of the gun.

He grabbed the knife, came at her again.

She wobbled to her feet. Pointed the gun at his face. "Stop! I'll shoot."

He lunged toward her.

She pulled the trigger.

Click.

Misfire!

He kicked her arm, and pain streaked from her elbow. The gun cartwheeled into the weeds.

Then he was holding her tight, almost in an embrace, keeping her from running away. Something closed around her neck: a rope or string. She couldn't tell which. He was pulling it tighter.

She gagged and clawed at her neck. *God, help me!*

Struggling, she tried to loosen his stranglehold and searched frantically for the pathway, for other tourists.

Where was everybody? Why didn't someone help her?

She tried to scream, but the rope choked any sound she tried to make. Her neck burned like fire.

Elbowing him in the gut, she heard him grunt in pain as he released her. She broke free. He cursed.

Adrenaline pushed her into high gear, and she fled deeper into the woods. Stumbling down an embankment, she felt the cold tentacles of the river wrapping around her knees before she realized where she was.

The current toppled her. A moment later, her head broke the surface. The water was bone-chillingly cold.

Already she felt numb. Kicking her feet, she tried to touch bottom.

Nothing.

She swam toward shore until she saw him. He stood on the rocky shore, waving the knife at her threateningly, a twisted smile on his face.

He was giving her a choice: the knife or the river. Not that she really had a choice; the current was too strong. She couldn't have swum back to him even if she tried.

She chose the river.

Glancing back at the shore, she watched the distance yawn between her and her tormentor. Turning, she eyed the opposite shore. It looked so far away, but it was her only choice. Could she make it?

Cold. So bone-chilling cold. Already her feet were numb.

Feeling the coat pulling her down, she wriggled free of it and tried to swim to the opposite shore. Frantically, she peered ahead, unsure of where the river ended and where the falls began.

God, help me!

Voices. At another observation deck, people peered down at her anxiously. They were calling to her, warning her about what lay ahead.

The second observation deck!

That meant the falls were only fifty feet away.

She prayed frantically. *God, don't let me go over don't let me go over don't let me go over . . .*

“Help!” She splashed her arms. “Somebody help me!”

A man climbed onto the railing as if to jump in after her, but another man held him back. The rescue was too risky, and there just wasn't enough time.

She swam hard against the current until fatigue made her arms and legs feel like dead weights. It was no use. She was moving too quickly now.

People were pointing and yelling.

“Somebody do something!”

“God, please!”

“Somebody help her.”

“She’s gonna go over.”

Feeling strangely at peace, she ceased her struggles and let the river enfold her in its cold embrace. She floated on her back and stared up into the heavens.

It was a beautiful sky, so clear and blue. Far above, eagles circled as if searching for food.

Marc had warned her about the day she would meet God.

Stacey, call out to Jesus. Trust Him as your Savior. It’s never too late. He’s waiting to hear your voice.

The rumble of the falls was deafening as if a hundred drums were beating at once.

She reached the lip of the falls and slid over the edge into emptiness.

Her stomach plunged.

God, help me!

Chapter 14

The next morning during breakfast, Marc told Gillian about Chuck Riley's request that he investigate Tanya Wright's murder in his absence. To her surprise, Marc asked if she would like to accompany him in his interview of Tanya's mom, Mary Beth Wright.

"You want me to help you investigate Tanya's murder," Gillian said, incredulous. "That's what you're asking me, right?"

Marc nodded. "C'mon, it'll be interesting."

Gillian hesitated. What did she know about criminal investigations other than what she had read in mystery novels or seen on TV? Absolutely nothing. On the other hand, she had always wanted to be part of a real investigation, but she wasn't sure she knew what she was getting herself into. She also wondered if Marc's invitation was his way of trying to patch up their relationship.

If he wanted opportunities to prove himself, she was all for that.

"Feel a little intimidated by the idea?" Marc asked over the rim of his coffee cup. "You're not alone. I feel the same way. So we'll be the blind leading the blind. What do you say? Look, I've got a list of questions Chuck said I should ask her, but I need a woman's touch. I'm sure Mary Beth is still pretty broken up, and I don't want to come across as unfeeling."

Why not? It might be interesting. "Okay. Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later, they sat in Mary Beth Wright's living room, which was cluttered with what she referred to as "spoils of war." In other words, they were bargains from the many auctions that filled her calendar.

“I realize Tanya ran with a rough crowd, but I know she read her Bible.” Mary Beth Wright wiped teary eyes with a Kleenex.

Sitting across from Mary Beth on a blue-plaid love seat, Gillian nodded sympathetically. “Look, nobody is questioning Tanya’s sincerity or her standing before God.”

Mary Beth seemed to relax at her words.

Marc said, “We’re just here to get more information about Tanya and about anything that might have led to her death.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Do you read the newspaper, Mrs. Wright?” Gillian asked.

“Please call me Mary Beth. No, I don’t read the paper. It’s all gloom and doom. Life is discouraging enough all by itself.”

“If you read the newspaper,” Marc said, “you’d know that the sheriff thinks I murdered your daughter.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “I don’t know why they think you killed Tanya. That’s balderdash. You couldn’t possibly have done anything like that. No, it was some crazy person. Who else could have been so . . . so heartless?”

“Anything you can tell us about Tanya’s life over the last few weeks would be a big help in tracking this person down.”

She still looked puzzled, a hand on her chin. “Well, I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

“Was she happy?” Marc asked. “Was she depressed or upset about anything? Did she have a boyfriend? How did she spend her time?”

“Oh, I see. Well, she was pretty excited when she got the part of Maria in the musical. Oh yeah, the news made her very happy—that’s for sure.” She scratched her head. “No boyfriend, at least, not that I know of. She had a boyfriend a year or so ago, but I didn’t like the way he was looking at her, so I put an end to that.”

“Have you seen any strangers prowling around your property, anyone who might have looked suspicious?” Gillian asked.

“Not that I can think of, but there was something weird a few weeks ago. Actually it happened several times.”

Marc leaned forward. “What happened?”

Mary Beth waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “I’m sure it’s nothing, but it had to do with our garbage.”

“Your garbage?” Gillian said.

“Yeah, it just disappeared. Vanished. And it wasn’t even trash day. I clearly remember leaving it on the curb on Saturday for Monday’s pickup. Well, on my way home from church on Sunday, I noticed it was gone, the containers and everything.” She shrugged. “I don’t know if it’s important.”

Gillian watched Marc write this unusual detail down on his notepad. Why had the killer wanted Mary Beth’s trash? Then she remembered reading an article warning readers not to throw away old checks or credit account statements without shredding them first.

As soon as the trash hits the curb, she thought, it becomes public property—free for the taking. Taking the trash made sense if the perp had been stalking Tanya.

“What about the Internet?” Marc asked. “Do you have access here at home?”

“Yep, we have DSL.”

“Did Tanya spend much time online?”

“Oh yeah, she loved surfing the Internet. We kept a computer in the study; I wanted it in a pretty public place so I could keep an eye on it. There are some pretty creepy places on the Internet. Anyhow, the police took the computer away for some reason. Sometimes Tanya was online pretty late; she said she was doing research for school. I hope she wasn’t getting involved in things she shouldn’t have.”

Gillian and Marc exchanged glances. The FBI computer crimes unit was analyzing Tanya’s computer now, but Riley wasn’t optimistic they would find anything helpful. More than likely, Tanya had received threatening e-mails from the perp, but Gillian didn’t mention this to Mary Beth, not wanting to upset her.

“Tell me about the day of her death,” Marc said. “Did Tanya do anything unusual?”

“She went to school like she always did.” Mary Beth’s forehead furrowed in concentration. “Her best friend, Jody, gave her a ride to school, but Tanya said she didn’t need a ride home. After school, she planned to go to the library and see if they had a copy of *The Sound of Music* on CD. Then she was going to the harvest party at Pastor Randall’s. I guess you’re the one who gave her the ride home.”

“That’s right,” Marc said.

She shook her head. “I had forgotten to tell her that I’d be at an auction that evening.” Her lip trembled. “If only I hadn’t gone to that stupid auction . . . If only I’d stayed here. None of this would have happened.”

“Do you have any way of knowing whether Tanya checked out the CD from the library?”

Marc asked.

“She sure did. I found it yesterday.”

“Found it?” Gillian asked.

“Sure. The CD itself was in the CD player—the police took it away during their search—but I couldn’t find the CD case anywhere until yesterday. I guess it must have fallen under the couch in the living room.”

In her mind’s eye, Gillian envisioned what had happened. A stranger was at the door. Tanya had gone to see who it was. Perhaps she’d had the CD case in her hand when she answered the door.

Maybe the attack began at the door, and she had dropped the case during the struggle. Or perhaps the killer had taken the case out of her hand. Perhaps the forensics team that scoured the place had missed the case completely.

Marc glanced her direction, and Gillian wondered if he was reading her mind. He asked Mary Beth, “Do you still have the CD case?”

“Sure, it’s in the kitchen.” She got up to get it.

Marc stood. “Whatever you do, don’t touch it. Grab it using a Kleenex.”

She looked puzzled. “What on earth for?”

“It could have important fingerprints on it.”

Her mouth formed an O as she got up and went to the kitchen. She returned with a brown paper lunch bag.

Marc accepted it and rose to leave. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. I think I’ll visit the sheriff and show him what I found. If you think of anything else you think might be important—anything at all, no matter how insignificant it may seem—could you call me at Whistler’s Point?”

She accepted their phone number and led them to the door, her face clouded over. “It still doesn’t seem real that Tanya’s gone.”

At the sight of her eyes pooling with tears, Gillian embraced her and let her cry on her shoulder. She remembered a quote from William Cowper: “Grief is itself a medicine.” “Her death will sink in eventually,” Gillian said, “and God will help you deal with it, but you’ll never completely get over it. I know. I’ve lost several children of my own.”

Horrified, Mary Beth clasped Gillian’s hands. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“We’ll have to get together again and talk, okay?” Gillian suggested.

Mary Beth dabbed her eyes with her fingertips. “Yes, please. I’d like that very much.”

Marc said, “We’d be happy to return and read some Scripture with you, too, if that would help.”

Mary Beth seemed surprised by his offer, a hand on her throat. “Would you? That’s something I really need right now. How does tomorrow afternoon sound? We could meet here if that’s okay with you. Same time?”

Marc and Gillian exchanged glances and nodded. Henry could spare Marc’s help for a few hours. “Tomorrow it is,” Gillian said.

Chapter 15

Biting her lip, Gillian glanced at the clock and peered out the kitchen window at the empty driveway. It wasn't like Marc to be home so late for dinner. After their meeting with Mary Beth, he'd dropped Gillian off at the caretaker's house, not wanting to subject her to an unpleasant meeting with the sheriff. Marc had known the sheriff wouldn't be pleased to see him and would most certainly take offense when Marc introduced evidence the sheriff's crime scene technicians had missed.

The CD case. Could it really contain the killer's fingerprints? Gillian hoped so.

She glanced out the window again. If Marc didn't get home soon, the chicken in the oven would quickly lose its appeal.

God, where is he?

Upstairs, Crystal was working hard on her homework. Gillian considered calling Nicole, her new friend, and inviting her to supper but hesitated, marveling at her own spontaneity—something so uncharacteristic of her. Yesterday, over a simple lunch of sub sandwiches and chips, she'd explained the gospel message in simple terms while Nicole graciously listened. Nicole promised to think about what Gillian had said.

Gillian couldn't help considering the possibilities if Nicole *did* turn to Christ. God would help her accept her father's death and remove her guilt about his accident. Her whole life would change.

She was dishing up plates of the steaming chicken Parmesan when Marc walked in and kissed her. "Sorry I'm late. I've had an eventful afternoon."

“You took a long time. How did it go?”

He apparently wanted to keep her in suspense. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Let’s eat.”

Everybody took his seat at the dining room table. After the prayer, Marc dug in. “Wow, Gill. This is your best yet.”

“Thanks,” she replied, waiting for Marc to tell them the news.

“So what happened, Dad?” Crystal asked.

“Don’t leave us in suspense.” Gillian hooked hair behind her ear.

Marc described his meeting with embarrassment. “The sheriff laughed at me. He said there were so many fingerprints on the CD case, it would take a forensics team a thousand years to figure out who they all belonged to.”

Gillian patted his arm. “I’m sorry.”

“So much for our first day as amateur sleuths, huh?” His eyes twinkled at her merrily.

“Don’t feel bad, Dad,” Crystal said. “At least you gave it your best shot.”

Gillian wiped her mouth on a napkin. “Speaking of sleuthing, Chuck called this afternoon. He’s interviewing Erin Walker’s mother again tomorrow. He asked us to pray that he’ll discover something new.”

Marc set his fork down. “Why don’t we pray for him right now.”

Chapter 16

Shortly after 6 p.m., Marc and Gillian returned to the caretaker's house after their second visit with Mary Beth Wright, and after a quick dinner at a restaurant in Newberry. Clara Henderson had called that morning and said Henry was out of commission with a bad flu, so Marc had had the day off. Besides, with cold weather season officially setting in, landscaping tasks had dwindled, and Gillian wondered how Marc would stay busy all winter—that is, if they weren't in Chicago by Christmas.

“Mary Beth is so hungry for the Word,” Marc said as they entered the kitchen. “It’s exciting to see her wanting to learn.” He paused. “You know, I had forgotten how much I enjoy counseling.”

Gillian smiled at him. “You haven’t lost the gift.”

“Thanks.”

“I guess those auctions take up a lot of her time,” Gillian said as she filled the kettle with water for tea. “I wish Mary Beth could be more faithful at church. I think Pastor Randall does a fine job.”

“But he’s getting up in years.” Marc leaned against the counter, arms folded across his chest. “I wonder who will take over after he retires. You know, maybe this is the type of place where we could serve, Gill.”

She put the kettle on the stove and set two mugs on the counter. “You mean, you want to serve up here in the woods? Don’t you miss Chicago?”

“Well, sure. But there’s something about this place. And the people are so needy.”

“People are needy everywhere, Marc.” She locked eyes with him. “Where are you going with this?”

Marc scrubbed a hand across his face. “Pastor Randall told me he’s thinking about retiring. He asked me to consider serving for a while on an interim basis until they can find someone to serve on a more permanent basis.”

She stared at him. “You’re not serious.”

Marc nodded. “It would only be temporary.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“But you never know. It could become more permanent down the road if that’s how the Lord leads. I know. I can see it in your eyes that you don’t like the idea. Look, we don’t have to commit to anything right away. It’s just something to think about.”

Something to think about.

For months, she’d been longing to return to Chicago, but she had to admit that living at Whistler’s Point had its perks. She enjoyed seeing Marc throughout the day, and he had more time for family life—something that had been seriously lacking in Chicago. If they moved back now, would anything be different, or would he just get sucked into the rat race again?

He peered out the window. “Wow. Look how dark it’s getting outside already. Did Crystal leave for her rehearsal yet?”

She nodded, hooking a lock of hair behind her ear. “It’s a big dress rehearsal tonight. She’s been dreading it for weeks. She wonders how she’s going to have enough energy to last through the entire performance.”

“She’ll do fine. She just needs more confidence.” He went to the kitchen door and locked it. Turning, he said, “You know, Crystal’s at the rehearsal, and we’re here all alone. So we could relax in front of the TV and watch an old movie. What do you say?”

She saw his romantic overtures for what they were and smiled. “That’s fine. I’ll make some coffee. Italian roast sound okay?”

Ten minutes later, they sat on the living room floor and rifled through videos and DVDs, surprised by how large their collection had grown over the years. They finally settled on *Vertigo* with Jimmy Stewart, one of Marc’s favorite Hitchcock films. Relaxing on the couch with their coffee and a bowl of hot popcorn, they were just watching the movie’s opening credits when the doorbell rang. Marc got up to see who it was.

Having changed into her pajamas, Gillian stayed on the couch, not wanting to be seen unless necessary. Marc returned moments later, his face stricken. “It’s the police.”

“What’s happened?”

“Stacey James is dead. They found her body floating in the Tahquammenon River.”

She stared at him. “*What?*”

“They want me at police headquarters to answer some questions.”

Gillian reached for the remote and stopped the movie. “I’ll just change into something more appropriate. I’ll be right back.” Climbing the stairs on weak legs, she heard the creaky footsteps of policemen on the hardwood floors below. She held on tight to the banister and fought a sudden dizzy spell.

Stacey James. Drowned.

Pulling on a pair of slacks, she glanced at her drawn face in the bedroom mirror. As much as she had disliked Stacey, the news shocked and saddened her. Another soul had passed into eternity. Had Stacey even been a believer?

Then another thought struck her. She had been coming to see Marc after all.

Chapter 17

Scrubbing a hand across his face, Marc tried to keep his cool. Dendridge sat across from him at a conference table in a familiar, cramped interview room that lacked proper ventilation. Marc wiped his forehead on his sleeve. Dendridge was noting Marc's sweat with great interest, but Marc's perspiring had nothing to do with guilt. The room was simply too warm and cramped; since the car accident, Marc had always hated closed-in spaces.

The crime scene photos weren't helping matters either. They were spread across the table, full color and garish, apparently on display for Marc's benefit. He studied the photos as Dendridge directed and regretted it.

Stacey James had been in the water for several days. Apparently, some witnesses had reported seeing her go over the falls, but then the current had swept her corpse downriver. The cold weather had slowed her decomposition. Though her body was bloated, her face was still recognizable.

Sickened by what he saw, Marc had no problem making a positive ID, but he was puzzled by Stacey's black hair. Since she had known the police were looking for her, perhaps she had dyed her hair to hide her true identity. He averted his gaze, still feeling sickened to see her in this state. What on earth was she doing in the river?

Dendridge leaned forward, intruding into Marc's personal space, his bloodshot eyes scary enough to make anybody sweat. His breath reeked of sour coffee. "Somebody killed her, Marc, and guess what? You seem to be the only guy within a couple hundred miles who even *knows* this lady. You had something to do with her death, didn't you?"

Marc met the sheriff's eyes without flinching. "I haven't the slightest idea what happened to her. A while back, a buddy from Chicago called and told me she'd broken out of jail and might be coming after me. That's the last I've heard of her."

"And why would she be coming after you?"

Marc hesitated. Certainly Dendridge already knew the answer. "Because of her obsession with me, I guess."

"Did she find you?"

"No."

"Really? She escaped from jail and traveled all the way up here only to take a swim and forget her life preserver?"

Marc glanced away, turned off by the sheriff's sarcasm. Stacey's death was nothing to joke about. She had problems, certainly, but she was a living soul just like everybody else. Part of him had always loved her as a sister in Christ who needed help. When her death sank in, he knew he'd have a good cry. But not right now. Too bad for Dendridge. He would have enjoyed seeing that.

Dendridge kept pushing. "You didn't know she was coming?"

"I had *suspensions* she might come, but I didn't know for sure. It didn't seem logical to me, but then she was rarely logical."

"Did you write to her in jail?"

Marc hesitated. "Yes."

"Really. Love letters?"

“If they were love letters, do you think I’d be stupid enough to admit it?” Marc bit his lip, praying for control. “I wrote her after the preliminary hearing and told her I’d forgiven her.”

“For shooting you?”

“Yes. I wanted her to know I had forgiven her as God had forgiven her. And I encouraged her to read her Bible and seek the Lord for help.”

Dendridge smirked at the God-talk. “But that was all? You didn’t write any other letters?”

“No, that was the only one.”

“And you put your return address on the letter so she could find you after she broke out of jail, right?”

“No, I sent the letter to a friend on staff at the church where I was pastoring. He mailed the letter from Chicago. I didn’t want her to know where I was. My location was a secret.”

“For a while, at least. Shortly after Stacey’s escape, someone broke into your church back in Chicago. Stacey may have been the person responsible; she could have gotten your address that way.” The sheriff hesitated. “So she drives up here. Why? What other reason except to find you?”

Marc knew this fact was the most damning of all. “I guess so. I don’t know.”

“Let’s suppose she *did* drive up here to see you. What do you think she would have wanted?”

“A relationship. Or maybe she just wanted me dead.” Marc shrugged. “I don’t really know. She lived in a fantasy world half the time. Remember, I was her counselor for a while. To say Stacey was disturbed is an understatement.”

“If she came up here to see you, she must not have reached her destination. What do you think happened?”

“I really don’t know.”

“You never saw her?”

“No.”

“Did she call you?”

“No, I already told you that. I never heard from her. I didn’t even know she was in the area.”

The sheriff pushed the pictures closer to Marc. “Take another look.”

Marc humored Dendridge and saw his pressure tactics for what they were.

“You’re sure that’s Stacey James?”

“I’m sure.”

“You met her recently, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“Maybe she called you and arranged to meet you at her hotel.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Maybe she arranged to meet you at the river for a lover’s swim.”

Marc stared at the sheriff. “Who in his right mind is going to swim in that freezing river in November?”

“But you saw her, and you killed her because she tried to kill you.”

“No, I didn’t see her. She never contacted me. I never heard a word from her.”

Dendridge swore and leaned back in his chair, folding brawny arms across his chest. His bloodshot eyes never left Marc's face. "Well, we'll track down your phone records. We'll find out if she called you or if you called her. Then I'll know if you're lying to me."

Marc didn't blink. He waited for the next barrage of questions, but Dendridge was silent. He seemed to be quietly weaving a web to trap Marc.

Closing his eyes, Marc leaned back in his chair and prayed. Not for Stacey—it was too late for her. He prayed for Gillian and Crystal. He prayed for Riley, hopefully en route from Ohio. He wished the balding man with the Juicy Fruit addiction was here to put Dendridge in his place.

Suddenly, Marc realized the sheriff hadn't arrested him, hadn't read him his Miranda rights. He looked up and sat up straight, pushing his shoulders back. "You said earlier I wasn't under arrest and could go anytime."

"That's right."

"So I'm not under arrest?"

"Not yet."

Marc stood. "If we're finished here, I'd like to use the bathroom and find my family."

Dendridge shrugged and didn't try to stop him.

Marc turned to the door and stopped. Turning back to the table, he glanced at the photos again. Something was wrong about the pictures, something he hadn't noticed until now. His eyes widened.

Dendridge sat up with renewed interest. "Remember something?"

“Nope. Just noticed something I didn’t see earlier.” Marc slid the photos closer to the sheriff. “Around her neck. Isn’t that a rope?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Wasn’t Tanya Wright strangled with a rope? Maybe the two murders are . . . uh, connected somehow.”

Leaving Dendridge behind to marvel at this revelation, Marc burst out of the door, glad to be out of the stifling interview room. Within seconds, he saw Gillian and Crystal. They both hugged him.

“It’s okay.” He pulled Gillian close. “I’m not under arrest.”

“Is it true?” Crystal asked. “Is Stacey really dead?”

Marc nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“What happened to her?” Gillian asked.

“I have no idea, but I sure wish Chuck was here.”

I hope you enjoyed reading these scenes left behind on the cutting-room floor.

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