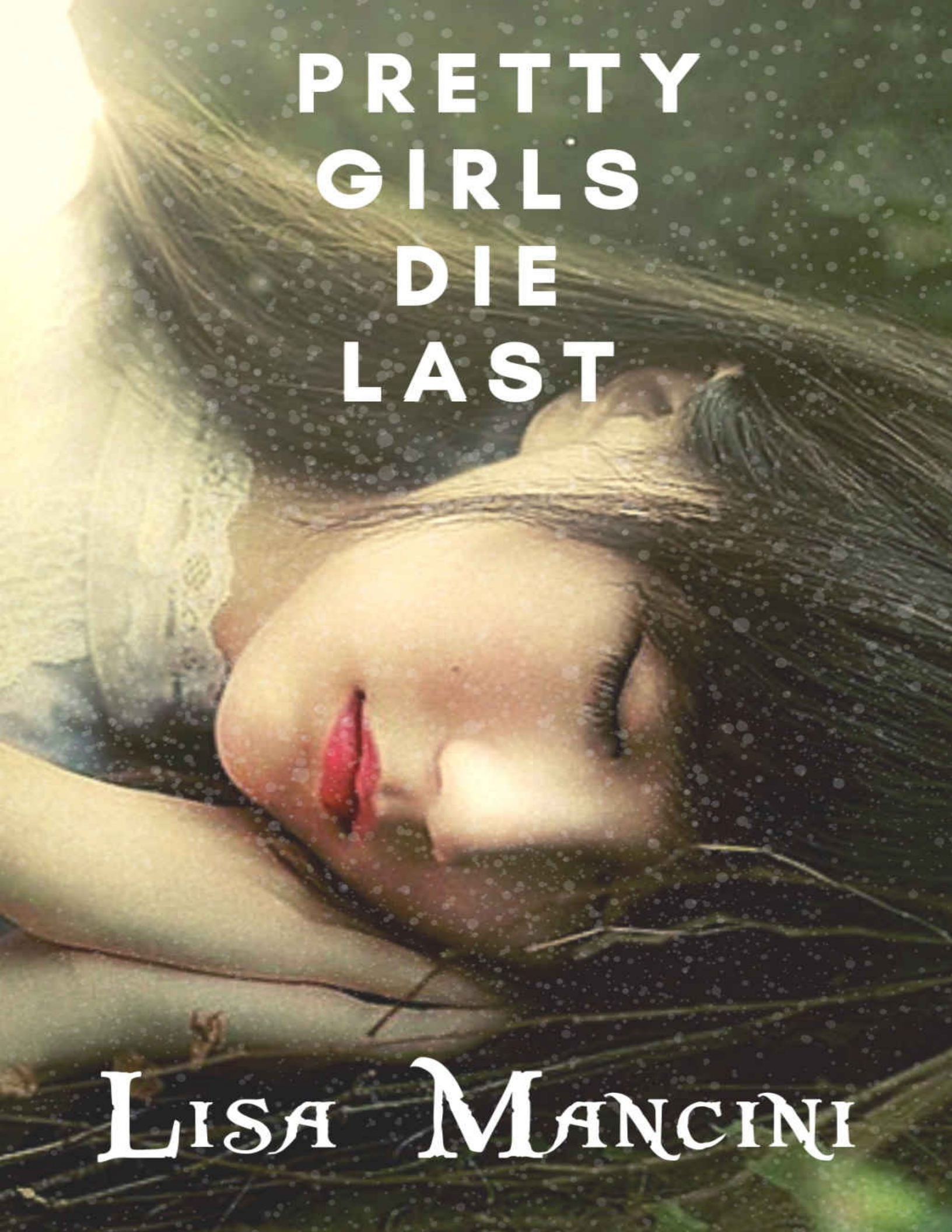

PRETTY
GIRLS
DIE
LAST
LISA MANCINI

Lisa Mancini

PRETTY GIRLS DIE LAST

The Freya Barret Mysteries
Book Three

Pretty Girls Die Last

Copyright 2019

Amazon edition

Lisa Mancini

Book cover by Divine Designs

This story is a work of fiction and the creation of the author’s imagination. Any connection to events real or factual is purely a coincidence and not the intention of the author.

This book is for my sister Patty.

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

PROLOGUE

The breeze from the car window rustled her hair. She left it loose that night and free from the French braid her mother always insisted she wear. Besides, he liked it loose. She exhaled and relaxed her body. The car seat was comfortable for such a small car. He drove fast but not too fast. He knew she didn’t like it when he drove too fast.

They had plenty of time to get to the restaurant. The other girls were jealous tonight when she told them about her date. The car slowed and eventually stopped. She saw only the forest. He walked around to the passenger side, opened her door, and extended his hand. She accepted it and got out of the car. She loved him when he used romantic gestures.

They walked a short distance to the pond, Raven’s Pond, as the locals knew

it. Formerly a place for lovers or teens wanting to be alone. Long forgotten and rarely visited by tourists, they had it all to themselves tonight. The moon shone brightly above them acting as a spotlight. They walked to the edge of the pond. He reached down and kissed her then. She had never felt so happy. Life was good. She was young, rich, talented and pretty, but unbeknownst to her; soon she would be dead.

CHAPTER ONE

“Erik, we need to leave by 8:45 if we want to make the premier by 9pm,” said Freya Barrett to her boyfriend. Her house-warming party now over, she busily rushed around her living room picking up empty glasses. Depositing them into her kitchen sink she turned to look at Erik, who was deeply engrossed in his cell phone.

“What’s so interesting?”

“What? Oh, it’s Jake. He says the Paramount is packed. We’d better park in the Walmart parking lot and walk over from there.”

She picked up her jacket and walked out the front door with Erik, locking it behind her. The thirteen jack-o-lanterns she had placed in her front yard shone ominous greetings to late trick-or-treaters. She’d left a basket of candy on her porch with a note that read – Take a bag of candy. Enjoy!

“I hope I don’t end up looking ridiculous in this film,” she lamented to Erik. He listened but said nothing. He’d heard that comment all night. Freya had taken part in a paranormal investigation a few months ago at the haunted Regency

Hotel on Main Street in downtown Agatha Falls. During the investigation, she'd fallen through the floor and into a secret room that held the remains of two bodies. The Fairchild brothers caught the accident on film. Their film, A Haunting on Main Street was premiering tonight at the Paramount Theater. The whole town would be there.

They parked in the parking lot of Walmart and briskly walked the short distance up the street to the theater. They walked into the historical building and waited in line to present their tickets. Freya recognized several of her friends waiting in the line as well.

"Freya? Freya, is that you?" asked a voice toward the back of the line. She looked toward the direction of the voice and saw that it was her friend, Enid Prager Jones, the local historian. She had helped Freya in the past by providing historical information about Agatha Falls when Freya was writing about the Joey Taylor murder last year. She was youthful at 80 years old and the two women had become close friends.

"Enid! Hi, I'm so glad to see you. Sorry you missed my house-warming party earlier."

Enid smiled. "Oh Freya, I just came from Wellesley Manor. Minerva hosted a Halloween party. It was so much fun. The theme was a masquerade party and everyone dressed as their favorite literary character. Can you guess who I am?"

Freya studied Enid's outfit. She was wearing a long white sheath and had flowers in her hair. She gave it her best shot.

"Hmmm, are you Juliet?"

Enid laughed. "No, my dear, but you're close. I'm Ophelia from Hamlet," she giggled like a schoolgirl. "It's my favorite play by Shakespeare."

"What do you think about Clyde Embry coming back to town? I hear that he's gotten death threats," said Enid. "I know his sister Marlene well. She used to work at the local library, but had to quit because the patrons started harassing her about her brother."

Freya nodded. She knew about the sexual predator that had just relocated to

Agatha Falls since his prison release. He was a very unpopular person. Ten years ago, convicted of molesting a local boy, he was released early from prison for medical treatment. He had kidney disease and needed dialysis every 72 hours. Originally he intended to relocate to Stamford but his sister offered to let him live with her. Marlene Embry, a respected member of the community and longtime churchgoer and hospital volunteer; agreed to supervise her brother. So, the city council and the mayor agreed to the relocation much to the consternation of many of the Agatha Falls community.

“I’m well aware of the controversy,” said Freya cautiously. “I hope no one does anything stupid.”

The line moved quickly now. Freya presented her ticket and she and Erik entered the theater and found their seats. Within minutes, the lights dimmed and the movie began. For the next hour and forty-five minutes, Freya relived her paranormal investigation with the Connecticut Paranormal Investigators and thought nothing more about Clyde Embry.

The audience enjoyed the film and was scared at the appropriate moments and a few even laughed when Freya fell through the floor. Freya laughed too as she saw herself plummet through the old floor. She soon became serious and a little sad when she remembered that the tarp she fell onto contained the remains of a mother and her young daughter. The film ended with a standing ovation for the Fairchild brothers who produced the film. Freya, also applauded, took a bow facetiously, grabbed Erik’s arm, and rushed him up the aisle toward the restrooms.

“I need a moment. Why don’t you wait for me in the foyer?”

Erik nodded and walked off and Freya rushed into the bathroom and into the farthest stall from the door. She took a deep breath and leaned against the wall. Feeling relieved that the film was over, she wanted to escape the mob most likely waiting outside to congratulate her. But congratulations were not necessary. Freya found the attention uncomfortable. She checked her cell phone for updates and skimmed through her texts from Ali. She jumped to attention as

the bathroom door suddenly banged open loudly.

“Jesus Anya! What the hell!” said an exasperated Arielle. Anya was being a total bitch tonight. She almost ruined the film for Arielle by making sarcastic comments through the whole thing. She was seriously thinking of going home from the theater. She didn’t look forward to the sleepover. And to make matters worse, Sydney hadn’t texted her yet. Where was she?

“Screw you Arielle! I’m not taking your crap, so shut the hell up,” said Anya angrily as she kicked the trash can. Freya peeked out through the crack in the stall door and saw two young girls, not even old enough to be teen agers, standing by the sinks. One was a small blond wearing a St. Bernadette’s athletic jacket and the other a taller girl wearing a gorgeous leather jacket and too much eye makeup. Freya pushed open the door and walked over to the sink to wash her hands. The girls became instantly quiet. Recognizing her, the small blond spoke.

“Hey, you’re her – the reporter who fell through the floor. What was it like? Did you really fall into a pile of skeletons?”

Freya laughed. She explained as succinctly as she could her personal version of what happened at the hotel. The young girl listened in awe.

“Wow. I would love to go on a ghost hunt but I don’t have the guts.”

“Well, I’ve got to go now. But it was nice to meet you. Happy Halloween.” Freya walked out the door and into the lobby where Erik was waiting. Much of the crowd had dispersed and Freya and Erik walked hand in hand out the door of the theater.

“What happened? I thought you had been kidnapped,” said Erik as he squeezed her hand.

“Sorry, I was talking to my fans,” she joked.

“Fans? Well, can I be your groupie?” he joked back. They laughed as they walked to his truck and she hopped in. “Hey, I’m starving, let’s go to Santorini’s,” said Freya.

“Sounds good.”

They drove the short distance to Freya's favorite Italian restaurant and parked under the large oak tree. Santorini's wasn't busy and Freya was glad. She wanted to have some alone time with Erik. They rarely had time for each other these days. Both were busy with their careers.

"Let's sit near the juke box," said Freya. She loved the oldies music that filled the old jukebox - no Taylor Swift or Beyoncé here. Elvis, The Beatles, and Patsy Cline were her favorites. They sat themselves in a booth by the front window and each grabbed a menu. Santorini's specialized in homemade Italian food and the lasagna was her choice tonight. Erik chose spaghetti and meatballs. They sat back in the old vinyl booth and spent the next few minutes relaying the events from earlier in the evening.

"So, tell me honestly, did I look stupid in the film tonight?"

Erik exhaled. "Freya, you could never look stupid. So, don't think about it anymore. As Jake said, A Haunting on Main Street is not Star Wars. Only your friends and neighbors will ever see this film. So, don't worry about it."

"Hey, have you heard the latest?" asked Erik. "Agatha Falls is getting a Starbucks."

"Really? Where are they building it?"

"On the site where the old Royal's Hearthside is located."

Freya grabbed his arm and shook it. "But, that's a historical building! It was built in 1801. They can't tear that down," she cried. "Does Enid know? She wrote a book about that building."

"Hey, I know it's old, but the city council and the mayor already approved it," said Erik sadly. "I looked that building over too. The interior architecture was amazing. They don't build structures like that anymore," he said shaking his head disbelievingly.

Erik paid their bill and they walked out to the parking lot. The temperature had dropped and Freya pulled up the zipper on her jacket. As she stepped up into the tuck, her cell phone buzzed. She looked down at the message from her best

friend, Ali.

Freya, get to a TV. Hannah Baker is back.

“Oh my God. Hannah Baker is home. We need to get to a TV,” Freya explained to Erik as he drove. Within minutes, they were at Freya’s new house on Moon Brook Drive. She ran in her front door, with Erik following behind her. She turned on her TV. There on the screen stood both Dr. Lydia and Dr. Thomas Baker with their little girl, Hannah.

The little red haired girl looked straight at the camera but said nothing. She was holding a golden retriever puppy in her arms and she held the puppy as it squirmed to get down. Her mother spoke.

“I want to thank whoever returned our daughter to us. Right now, we ask the media for privacy. Our priority is our daughter. If you have any questions, please address then to our family lawyer, Barry Velshi. Thank you.”

Dr. Lydia Baker reached down to take her daughter’s hand but Hannah roughly pushed her away and rushed off camera. Dr. Baker faced the camera. The look on her face said it all – she was furious.

CHAPTER TWO

Arielle, Anya, and Megan rode their bikes the five miles to Arielle's house. Still no word from Sydney. But the girls weren't worried. Sydney was known for her aloofness. Her friends accepted that about her. They rode the short distance in silence. After leaving the movie premiere, they decided to go back to the slumber party and watch a movie. Anya, the movie buff in the clique, suggested Rosemary's Baby . Megan and Arielle had never seen it, so Anya was excited for them. She knew they wouldn't be able to sleep afterwards. And that's exactly what she wanted. After all, who sleeps at a slumber party?

"Who is Rosemary? And what's so special about her baby?" asked Megan slightly out of breath.

They were riding their bikes up hill and soon would be on Arielle's street. Arielle and Anya peddled effortlessly, while Megan struggled to keep up.

Slightly plump and not in the least bit athletic, Megan's weak spot involved sports and physical activity, so she avoided both. Finally, Arielle's house came into view and the girls slowed their bikes. Parking them in the driveway, they ran up the steps and Arielle unlocked the front door. As soon as Arielle shut the door behind her, Anya began her movie review.

" Rosemary's Baby is a film about a pregnant woman who gives birth to the child of Satan. Her husband is an actor looking for his big break in film, so he makes a deal with a witches coven. He lets them use his wife as the mother of Satan's mortal child so he can become famous. Rosemary has no idea. She has a weird pregnancy but no one, not even her doctor helps her. Finally, she gives birth and the coven puts the baby in this cool black bassinette. I can't wait for you to see the movie. It's really great!" said Anya effusively.

As an afterthought, she added, "It was made in the 1960's, so things were different back then."

Megan shook her head and Arielle rolled her eyes. It wasn't the first time Anya had suggested a film that they both hated or didn't understand. Apparently, this movie was one of those. Arielle checked her cell phone but still no text from Sydney. It was now past midnight. Arielle texted Sydney telling her she would leave the front door unlocked for her. Then she, Megan and Anya ran up the stairs to her bedroom. Anya put the movie on and the girls settled down to watch.

An hour later, Anya set the film on pause while Megan used the bathroom. Arielle took the opportunity to call Sydney but there was no response.

"That's it, I'm calling Logan," declared Arielle. Anya turned to look at her. She always suspected that Arielle and Logan were friendly. Both were involved with many sports activities. Logan lived one street over from Arielle and they often ran together when they were in training. Megan entered the room and asked Anya what was up.

"Arielle is calling Logan. Still no word from Syd."

Arielle said hello and the girls listened.

“Logan? Hi, it’s Arielle. Is Sydney with you?”

Megan and Anya watched from across the room. Arielle listened and her poker face gave nothing away.

“What time was that?” she asked.

“Hmmm, I see. Well, she’s not home yet and no text, email or call. Her phone keeps going to voice mail,” she said. Her voice rising and alarming the girls.

“I’ll call Molly then. Thanks.” She hung up and immediately called Molly.

“Hi Molly. Sorry to call so late, but it’s important. Is Syd there?” she asked quickly.

Arielle’s eyes grew large and she motioned for Anya to listen in. Anya rushed over and Arielle held out the phone so Anya could hear. Megan, feeling left out, walked over to the window, and glanced outside into the dark night. Almost 2pm and the street was quiet. Feeling anxious, Megan grabbed an Oreo from the plate on the nightstand and stuffed it in her mouth. Eating always made her feel better.

She turned suddenly as Anya spoke loudly into the little purple cell phone. Arielle looked on nervously.

“Molly, when did she call you?” asked Anya. She looked at her watch. “That was more than two hours ago. Where is she now?”

Anya went over to Megan and filled her in.

“Logan and Syd had a fight up at Raven’s Pond tonight. They never went to dinner. Logan said Syd called Molly and asked if her sister could pick her up. So, he left her up there. He figured she’d get a ride home with Katie,” she said shrugging her shoulders.

Realizing the danger, Megan asked, “So, what happened? Did Katie pick her up?”

“No, she couldn’t do it. So, Syd told Molly she’d walk. Raven’s Pond is only a couple miles from my house.”

“So, where is she? It doesn’t take three hours to walk that far!” exclaimed Megan.

Just then, Anya slammed the phone down and said dramatically, “We have to look for her. She must still be up there. Get your bikes, come on.” Anya grabbed a Calvin Klein sweater and pulled it over her head. Arielle and Megan followed behind.

“Wait, I’ll get flashlights. They’re in the kitchen.”

Arielle returned a few minutes later, handed each girl a light, and locked the front door behind her. They hopped on their bikes and took off toward the pond.

“I can’t believe that Logan just left her up there all by herself and in the dark,” said Megan.

“All men are rats,” said Anya wisely.

“Not all men,” said Arielle. “Logan probably offered to give her a ride back but you know how stubborn Syd can be. Logan is a good guy,” said Arielle defensively. They peddled the rest of the way in silence.

Raven’s Pond was named for the Raven family who once owned the 150 acres where Evergreen Acres now stood. Robert Raven, the last descendant of the Raven family sold his land to the city of Agatha Falls in the late 1980’s. The land slowly developed into Evergreen Acres, a wealthy gated community on the southeastern side of Agatha Falls. Mostly surgeons and business owners resided there. The pond was all but forgotten by many of the locals. Located in the southern portion of the Old North Woods, Raven’s Pond was frequented by the teenagers who lived within the gated community. In the 1950’s, it was nicknamed Lover’s Pond by the teens that often brought their dates to the lonely but lovely forested area for a romantic tryst.

“We’re here,” shouted Anya, acting as the leader of the trio.

The girls dismounted their bikes and stood together in the darkness. Turning on their flashlights in unison, they began to follow the dirt path leading toward the pond. Their flashlights offered a dim passage as they slowly stepped over fallen branches and wayward shrubbery. Arielle screamed as a thorny branch

caught on her jacket. Believing she was being grabbed by an unknown assailant, she shouted out into the night. Anya giggled but Megan rubbed Arielle's arm in solidarity.

"Arielle! You are such a girl sometimes," admonished Anya as they approached the pond. Even in the dark of night, the pond appeared an ominous sight as the water gleamed in the waning moonlight. It was almost early morning now and the girls feared the worst for their friend. Sydney had been missing over three hours now. The girls presumed the worst.

"You don't think the same person who took Hannah Baker took Sydney, do you?" asked Megan worriedly.

"I hope not," said Arielle.

"You guys! Hannah's back. It was on the news earlier, remember?" Anya reminded them of the earlier news conference they had heard about at the movie premiere.

"I still can't believe that Logan left her here," said Megan.

And this time, Arielle did not defend him. Standing in the dark in the middle of the huge forest, Arielle shivered in her thin jacket. How could Logan have left her friend here? What kind of fight would lead to that? Arielle tried to reason what and how it could have happened. But, she knew that Sydney had a temper and maybe the teen-age boy had met his match. She knew her dad often walked away whenever they had an argument. Her grandmother told her a long time ago that men did not like to engage verbally. Women were better at that. Well, maybe that's what happened tonight.

"Look! Over there. It's her bag," said Anya. The girls turned their flashlights toward the direction Anya pointed. Yes, there was her Prada bag. A recent gift from her aunt in New York City. She bragged to everyone about the bag and carried it with her everywhere. There's no way she would have just dropped it.

"She must be hurt!" said Arielle. "Maybe she fell and hit her head," said the worried young girl. Megan uncharacteristically ran toward the bag and picked it

up. She opened it, removed her cell, and held it up.

“Her cell is here. But where is she?” She looked around and flashed her light but only darkness surrounded the girls.

“Give me that phone,” said Anya as she grabbed the phone. She swiped it and scrolled her finger down the screen.

“Look, here are your texts. But no response.” Anya passed the phone to Arielle who reviewed the texts and calls. She saw her texts but more importantly, she saw the call made to Molly Raju, their friend from school. It fit the time frame offered by Molly. Arielle made a decision.

“We need to call the police right now.”

Anya and Megan nodded and Arielle removed her cell from her pocket. But, she had no bars.

“I have to walk back to the road and call 911. I don’t have any cell phone reception here.”

She followed the path back to the main road and hit 911. She explained her concerns and gave the location to the officer. Before she clicked off, she heard a scream. It sounded like Megan. Oh my God! Maybe the person who took Sydney just grabbed Megan. What should I do, she asked herself. But, being the type of person she was, Arielle put her friend first and ran into the forest.

She arrived at the far end of the pond and saw Anya holding a crying Megan in her arms. Shocked by Anya’s show of compassion she almost missed the dead body floating in the pond. She shone her flashlight in the direction that Anya pointed. There, in the middle of the pond, was her friend Sydney.

She immediately remembered the first day she met Sydney, back in 4th grade. Arielle was new and had just moved to Agatha Falls from North Dakota. She walked into the cafeteria and stood with her tray surveying the tables filled with girls. They ignored her as if she were invisible. But one girl acknowledged her. She was pretty and smiling and waved her over. Arielle walked to the table hesitantly and said shyly, “Hi I’m Arielle Armstrong and I just moved here from

North Dakota.”

The dark haired girl stood up and introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Sydney Sanders and I just moved here from New York City. We’re new here. We should stick together.” And they had, for the last five years.

Arielle burst into tears, dropped her flashlight, and covered her face with her hands. Her best friend in the whole world was dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Death of a Beauty Queen
By Freya Barrett

Sydney Sanders had it all. Good looks, money, and even a title – Miss Junior Connecticut. The popular thirteen-year old was found drowned in Raven's Pond in the early hours of the morning following Halloween. Sydney was an eighth grader at Evergreen Middle School. According to her best friend and next-door neighbor, Arielle Armstrong, a fellow eighth grader at St. Bernadette's School for Girls in Castleton, Sydney left a planned slumber party at Arielle's house to go on a date.

The date, Logan Bell is a sophomore at Wainsbridge Academy. The sixteen year old said he picked Sydney up at the slumber party and they drove to Raven's Pond. While there, the young

teens got into an argument and Sydney refused to get back in the car with Bell.

“She was stubborn,” said the young man. According to Bell, Sydney made a call on her cell to Molly, her other friend and neighbor. According to Raju, Sydney inquired whether Katie, Raju’s older sister could pick her up at the pond, but Katie was unable, as her car was being serviced at a local garage. According to Miss Raju, Sydney said she’d walk the two miles back to Arielle’s house. She never made it.

Miss Sander’s parents are physicians at Mercy Regional and were unavailable for comment for this article. Her classmates are holding a prayer vigil this evening at Evergreen Middle School at 7pm.

The town of Agatha Falls has been rocked recently with the abduction and eventual return of nine-year-old Hannah Baker. Ms. Baker still has not spoken since her return. At this time, there are no known suspects in her abduction.

Sheriff Carmichael is warning the public to stay calm. Just last month, Clyde Embrey, a registered sex offender was released from prison and relocated to Agatha Falls. Mr. Embry and his sister have received death threats since his relocation. An investigation is ongoing and Sheriff Carmichael will be giving a press conference tomorrow afternoon.

Sydney Sanders was an honor student, an accomplished pianist, and the winner of several beauty pageants since childhood. Ironically, her platform as Miss Junior Connecticut was teen safety. According to Anya Andersen, Sydney’s friend from St. Bernadette’s, Sydney had dreams of being a television journalist and her idols were Lady Gaga and Oprah Winfrey. Sydney Sanders celebrated her thirteenth birthday, exactly one month ago today.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hannah Baker hadn’t spoken since her unexpected return two nights ago. Her mother suspected the girl experienced sufficient trauma. As a doctor, she understood how the body processed stress. In someone as young as Hannah, it wasn’t unusual to lock the bad experience away in a box and act as if nothing happened.

When someone experienced trauma, no matter their age, the brain often forgot the events, in order for the person to go on with their life. Sometimes later, maybe even years, the memories resurfaced and the victim remembered the traumatizing event. Dr. Baker had seen enough sexual assault victims who could not remember where their attack occurred but could remember what their assailant smelled like or the color of their shoes. This inability to remember key details made sexual assault hard to prosecute. It was not surprising that so few rapes or sexual assaults were prosecuted by the law. And it was not surprising

that so few women ever came forward to report their attacks. Many felt assaulted all over again by the very people who were supposed to help them.

Thankfully, her Hannah had not been sexually abused. At least, the examination found no physical evidence. In fact, she was found in pristine condition. Her hair was washed and set in a perfect French braid. Her little pink dress was handmade. Whoever took her daughter had loved her.

But, now Sydney Sanders was dead. Drowned in a pond not far from their home. It made her shiver to think that another girl's life had ended just when her own daughter was safely returned. She dreaded her interview with the reporter from the Beacon today. But, her husband wanted life to get back to normal and he thought an interview would do that.

Her daughter was a difficult child. She was stubborn and liked to do things her way. Her husband said she took after her mother. But Lydia Baker was a surgeon with a successful practice. She didn't have time for little girls with an attitude. Not even her daughter.

"The reporter's here," said her husband anxiously.

Her husband Thomas was a surgeon too at Mercy Regional Hospital. As much as they wanted children, their careers came first. Six nannies in four years; for some reason they never worked out. Neither would admit their daughter was the reason. No nanny could deal with her tantrums for very long. Eventually, they all quit.

Freya Barrett arrived at the Baker's home with a photographer. Normally she worked alone but the editor wanted a family picture for the front page. After her interview with the Bakers, Freya was heading over to St. Bernadette's School for Girls to speak with Sister Evangeline. As the principal, Freya hoped to learn more about the culture at the elite girl's school. Last night she went online and checked out the website. She was shocked at the tuition. $59,000 a year. Not many people in Agatha Falls could afford that. No wonder so many of the students were from out-of-state and international. Sydney's best friends and neighbors attended the private school so Freya thought it best to begin there.

The interview with the Bakers went well until Freya started asking the hard questions. The Bakers wanted to go on with their lives and their careers. But, at what cost to their young daughter?

“So, you don’t think Hannah needs counseling?” asked Freya. “Is she speaking yet? I heard she hadn’t spoken since she returned home.” Freya sat back and waited for the response.

“What? Who told you that? Of course, our daughter speaks. She’s nine years old. I don’t know where you are getting your information from, Ms. Barrett but that is totally false,” said Dr. Baker defensively.

Changing the subject, Freya said, “I noticed she was holding a puppy on TV. What’s the dog’s name?”

The innocuous question shocked Dr. Baker even more than the previous one. She stared blankly ahead. Finally, her husband answered for her.

“His name is Brady, after Tom Brady. I’m a Patriot’s fan,” he offered shyly.

Freya nodded. “Could we get a family picture for the paper? I think it would be a great final touch for the article. Is Hannah here?” said Freya looking around.

‘Yes,” said her father. “I’ll get her.” He left the room, leaving Freya and Dr. Lydia Baker together. Her photographer, Neil, was astute enough to know she wanted to be alone with the doctor. He gave the excuse he had a call to make. Once alone, Freya turned to the doctor.

“Dr. Baker, can I ask you something, off the record?”

She nodded cautiously.

“Dr. Baker, do you think there is a connection between Hannah’s abduction and Sydney’s murder?”

Dr. Baker sat still and said nothing. She inclined her head to one side as if weighing the possibility. And then, her decision made, she spoke.

“No, I don’t. I think the person who took my daughter was disturbed but rational enough to return her. As far as Sydney goes, I think that person is different. Do you know how hard it is to drown someone?”

Freya nodded.

“They would have to have held her down for at least 20-60 seconds submerged underwater. Just her head but still that is a long time when someone is fighting for their life. Drowning occurs when an individual’s lungs fill with water. The ability to transfer oxygen in your bloodstream is diminished. As you struggle to breathe, you expand so much energy, you lose consciousness,” explained Dr. Baker.

“She was held down, we know that from the autopsy report,” said Freya. “The multiple bruises on the back of her neck and upper arms were large enough to belong to a man. I wonder if we have another murderer in Agatha Falls,” pondered Freya aloud.

Before Dr. Baker could answer, Hannah entered the room with Brady on a red leash. The little golden retriever puppy jumped up into Freya’s lap and she laughed as he nipped at her pencil. Neil returned and took the requisite shots of the family. Both parents sat on the sofa with Hannah on her father’s lap and Brady in her arms. It was very sweet. And this time, Hannah smiled a broad happy grin.

Freya saw her chance. “So, Hannah, do you remember anything about the past month? Where were you?”

Before either parent could stop her, the little girl responded. “She was nice to me. She played with me. She didn’t have a career,” said Hannah in a soft sweet voice.

Her honesty shocked Freya. *She didn’t have a career.* Well, that said a lot. Dr. Lydia Baker caught the innuendo as well.

“Come on Hannah, it’s time for your lunch. Tom, take the dog out for a walk. Ms. Barrett, we have a great deal to do today, so if you’ll forgive me….” She walked away with Hannah in tow and Freya glimpsed the angry look her daughter gave her mother.

Freya and Neil let themselves out the front door and walked quickly to their vehicle. Neil broke the silence.

“That is a dysfunctional family, if I ever saw one. I feel sorry for that dog.”

He shook his head as he tossed his camera in the back of Freya's SUV.

"So, now where do we go?" he asked.

Neil was a long-time employee of the Beacon. His pictures had won awards over the years and now on the verge of retirement, he worked only part-time for the paper. He loved his job but looked forward to retirement next January. He was tall and lanky with a grey crew cut and wire rimmed glasses. He resembled an accountant more than a newspaper photographer.

"St. Bernadette's School for Girls," said Freya dramatically.

Neil nodded knowingly. The school had a reputation for cliques, hazing and bullying. Not the place Freya would send her daughter, if she ever had one. Sydney was best friends with some of the girls there. It was the perfect place to begin an in depth interview about the dead girl.

"That's the posh school for little rich bitches, am I right?" he asked.

Freya laughed. "Yes, but don't say that. Especially in front of any nuns."

They drove to St. Bernadette's School. The drive took them to the border between Agatha Falls and Castleton. The school was private, all girls, and college preparatory. Founded in 1908, its motto was education equals power or **educationem deducis imperium.** With the yearly tuition topping out at $59,950 Freya couldn't wait to see what kind of education was offered for that price. Situated on 50 acres and surrounded by a private forest, the campus was littered with brick buildings dating back to the early 1900's. Overall, the campus was lovely.

"It's certainly pretty," said Freya.

"For almost 60 grand a year it should be," quipped Neil.

He started snapping pictures and Freya locked her vehicle. She checked her phone for the latest text from Jean, the assistant at the school. She gave Freya directions to Sr. Evangeline's private office. Her interview earlier in the week was cursory. But now, she had planned detailed questions for her friends. She remembered what eighth grade had been like for her. And that was only seven years ago. She knew things changed fast but not that fast. As a former babysitter,

Freya had a way with children and young people. She liked to talk to them. And she never spoke down to them. Kids were smart. Adults sometimes forget that. Freya never would.

Freya and Neil entered the front door of the school and walked the short distance to the principal's office. She knocked gently on the office door and waited. A few seconds passed before the door was opened by a woman in her early sixties wearing a *habit*. In the typical Roman Catholic orders, nuns wore a habit that consisted of a black tunic covered by a scapular, suspended from her shoulders. A black veil covered her head.

Freya researched the wearing of a veil and found in the Bible a quote that read, "Every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered disgraces her head." First Corinthians 11:3. She unconsciously stroked her own long, wavy brown hair worn loose and wondered what the nun thought of her uncovered head. She needn't have worried. Sr. Evangeline smiled broadly when she saw Freya and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Freya! What a wonderful surprise. I thought you were coming tomorrow?" she queried. Freya explained the texts from Jean, the assistant and the nun rolled her eyes.

"Jean! She never tells me anything. Sometimes I think it is more work having an assistant. Never mind, come inside. The girls will be here shortly. Do you want to speak to them here or in private?"

Freya knew the girls would not say anything useful in front of a nun. And she was sure that the principal knew that too.

"I'd like to talk to each of them separately if I could. Did you speak with their parents? They are underage."

'Yes, I explained the situation and their parents and guardians have no issues. Let's have some tea first," she said turning to Neil as if seeing him for the first time.

"Now, who are you?" she asked directly.

Freya explained that photos of the school would accompany her article. She

suggested it would be a good idea to emphasize that Sydney's best friends attended this school. St. Bernadette's had a reputation of including girls of every religion. Freya wanted to demonstrate the friendship between a devout Catholic girl and a devoted Jewish girl. The nun agreed it was a good idea.

Freya, Neil, and Evangeline sat down to tea and cookies and the nun told Freya the mission of the school. It was St. Bernadette's mission to educate young women to be future leaders. After a ten-minute commercial for St. Bernadette's, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Sr. Evangeline.

The door opened and four young girls entered. They each took a seat on the sofa across from Freya. Wearing the school colors of purple and gold, their uniforms consisted of purple and gold plaid pleated skirts that fell just below the knee, white long sleeved blouses and tweed jackets with black ties. They looked very impressive.

Freya had attended public school her entire life. Although her late mother was a college professor and a Catholic, she believed strongly in public education. Baptized a Catholic, Freya was not a churchgoer. But she had made her confirmation and her first holy communion. Her saint's name at confirmation was St. Bernadette. Freya loved the story of the girl from Lourdes.

Bernadette Soubirous was born in 1844 in Lourdes, France. She was the oldest of nine children and lived in extreme poverty. She was a slow learner and often bullied by the other children for her inability to learn quickly. She was very sickly. At age fourteen, she started having visions of a dazzling light and a white figure or a small woman. After experiencing eighteen visions, Bernadette assumed she was seeing the Blessed Virgin. The townspeople called her crazy and a liar but she never relented. During one vision, Bernadette dug up a spring in the ground and soon after that, people claimed miraculous cures. Eventually many churches were built near this site and pilgrimages are held there even to this day. People still claim to be cured by these miraculous waters.

Bernadette became a nun and died at the age of 35. She was canonized a

saint in 1933. Freya loved the story. Bernadette was not smart, rich, or beautiful, but the Blessed Virgin saw something special in her. It was a message for all. Look a little deeper and you'll find something special in everyone. Freya firmly believed that.

Sr. Evangeline suggested that Freya and Neil visit the conservatory on the south side of the property. She walked them to the door and said goodbye. Freya promised to stop back before she left. Neil took off toward the quad to continue photographing the campus. Freya followed the girls until they reached a glassed in building shaped like an octagon. It looked like a large green house but instead of plants, it was filled with chairs, sofas and even a TV suspended on the wall. Freya stood and waited to see where the girls sat. She let them take the lead.

Each girl sat separately from each other. One sat on the sofa across from where Freya stood; one sat on a large overstuffed chair and leaned back staring straight at her. But, a tall dark-skinned girl sat near Freya and a short, chubby girl who looked to be the youngest sat down beside her. Freya sat near them and waited. Before she could say anything, the girl lounging in the overstuffed chair said the last thing she expected to hear.

"We each have a theory as to who killed Sydney. But we're not going to talk about that today. We're going to tell you about something else. Something even worse than death. What's the worst thing that can happen to a woman?" asked the plain, overly made up girl. Freya guessed her to be about 12 or maybe even 13. She wore too much eye make-up. But that was not her business. Before she could answer, the dark-skinned girl spoke.

"If we tell you something, do you promise not to tell anyone?" she asked in a shaky voice.

Freya said yes.

The girl took a deep breath and spoke.

"There's a culture here that is very dangerous. We try to stick together but sometimes that's not possible. Popularity is everything here. And there are certain things you have to do to be popular." She swallowed. Freya waited for

her to speak again. The other girls looked very anxious now, even the overly made up girl, who seemed to be the leader.

“What is going on that you want me to know? I won’t tell anyone. You have my word,” said Freya.

Finally, the little plump girl spoke. She looked Freya straight in the eyes.

“The boys at Wainsbridge Academy have rape parties. If you don’t go, they spread vicious rumors about you on the internet. And if you do go, they either rape you or try to rape you. Sydney went to a party last July. She was raped. We think the boy who raped her was her killer.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Freya was speechless. She had almost been raped last year by a man who murdered several people in town. She still had nightmares about it. She chose her next words carefully.

“Did Sydney say who raped her?”

The girls nodded.

“Who did it?”

“Brandon Cambridge. He tried to rape me too, but I got away,” said the dark girl beside her.

“Okay, let’s begin again. Can you all introduce yourselves? I remember you Arielle, its Arielle Armstrong, right?”

Arielle gave a little wave from the sofa.

“I’m Anya Andersen, how soon you forget,” said the girl practically lying down in the overstuffed chair.

“I’m sorry Anya. Our initial interview was so quick. I apologize,” said

Freya sincerely.

“Apology accepted. For the record, no one has ever tried to rape me. I’d cut off their balls if they did,” she said confidently.

The little chubby girl beside her rolled her eyes. She extended her hand. “We haven’t met before, I’m Megan Monahan. I’m only eleven and I skipped a grade. But, I’m in eighth grade too,” she said seriously. Freya smiled. She liked Megan instantly.

She turned to the dark girl beside her.

“And you are?”

“My name is Molly Raju. I live across the street from Sydney. Last summer, Brandon tried to rape me. But, I was able to get away. Then, he posted all these lies about me online. I almost transferred schools. So, Sydney made a deal with him. She took my place.”

“What do you mean, she took your place?”

“She let him do it to her. She let him rape her. She made a deal with him. If she let him have her instead, he’d leave us all alone. And so far, he has,” she said quietly. “That was our deal. She sacrificed herself for the group. She believed it was better that way because it was on her terms.”

Freya looked around the room. These girls were 11-13 years old. This was their social life. *My God, what kind of world do we live in?*

“Okay, I’m going to presume that no one has ever reported Brandon to the police?”

Anya snorted. “The police? Do you know how raped women are treated in this country? They are vilified.”

Freya was impressed. Not only did this young girl know her statistics, she also used the word vilified correctly. She needed to proceed slowly and carefully.

“Who is Brandon Cambridge?”

“He’s a junior at the prep school a couple miles from here. It’s the old Castleton University. Wainsbridge expanded their school and bought the university after it closed three years ago,” offered Megan.

“How old is he, 16-17?” she asked.

“He just turned 17,” said Arielle. “I know his family. His dad works with my dad. Brandon is a drunk too - a mean drunk.”

“So, does everyone know about these rape parties?”

The girls nodded in unison. Molly explained.

“Brandon is super-rich and super-popular. If he likes you, you are golden. But, if he doesn’t or you piss him off, you might as well be dead. He trolls you on the internet or has his friends do it.” She shivered in the sunny room.

“Have any of you told anyone about this?”

“You mean, like parents or the nuns? Are you serious? We’d either be blamed or called liars. Either way, we’d be screwed.” Once again, Anya hit the nail on the head. Freya was again impressed.

“Do any of you believe he killed Sydney?” she asked.

All the girls but Arielle nodded. Freya looked at the blond girl sitting across the room from her. She knew something. She just felt it. But now was not the time. Megan responded as if reading Freya’s thoughts.

“Arielle has known Brandon a long time. She doesn’t think he’s a killer,” said Megan.

Arielle spoke rapidly, “Just because some guy drinks too much and acts like a moron, doesn’t mean he’s a killer! I know how bad he gets when he’s drunk, but how could he have waited in the dark at the pond and drowned her? And why now? The rape happened four months ago – why now? And if he did know she was going to be at the pond that would mean Logan was in on it, and I’ll never believe that!” she finished speaking, gulping for air. The girl looked distressed and Freya took control again.

“Hey, what if I ask my friend? He knows a lot about law enforcement and may be able to give us some advice on how to proceed?” offered Freya reasonably.

“What do you mean – us?” asked Anya wisely.

Freya stood up and walked over to the girl slumped back in the overstuffed

chair. She stood over her and looked her straight into her kohl-lined eyes.

"Anya, let me help you. We're all women here. We need to stick together on this. You know, I was almost raped last year, I know what it feels like to still wake up in the middle of the night after a bad dream and think he's in my house. I haven't felt safe since. Give me a chance. Let me see what I can do, okay?"

Anya's eyes glistened. *Were those tears? What happened to this young girl to make her so negative and sarcastic? Or was she just an angry and frustrated pre-teen?* Freya was still young enough to remember what that felt like. She reached out and squeezed the girl's shoulder. Anya relaxed and nodded.

"Okay, just one more question – where do these parties happen?"

Again, Anya answered for the group. "Usually at a guy's house. Like, Logan Bell or Mike Chancellor's house over the summer. And a couple at Brandon's house. Their parents are never home – they travel a lot for work. So, it's just the housekeeper and the kids."

"So, do you attend in a group or do you go separately?" asked Freya.

"We always go in a group and we stay in a group," answered Molly. "But, I wasn't feeling well at the last party so I had to use the bathroom. It was the 4th of July weekend, a big party weekend. I was flattered to be invited. Usually my sister Katie goes but she has a boyfriend, so the guys leave her alone. I thought I'd be safe because there were so many people there. Anyway, Sydney came with me to the bathroom and waited outside the door. But, when I came out, Sydney and I were jumped by Brandon and Mike. They each picked us up, ran into the room across the hall, and threw us on the bed. They jumped on top of us. I couldn't breathe!"

"Brandon put his hand over my mouth. I was screaming. Then, Mike got up off the bed and put the TV on loud. That's when Sydney ran off. She ran downstairs and got my sister and her boyfriend. I think if they didn't show up when they did, Brandon would have either raped or accidentally killed me. I was suffocating! He had his hand over my mouth and my nose at that point. But all

the while, he was pulling down my pants with his other hand. Mike was just standing there watching him and goading him on. At one point, Mike told him to stop, but Brandon didn’t. That last thing I remember was the uproarious laughter. They were laughing at me the whole time.”

CHAPTER SIX

Freya left St. Bernadette's shortly before 3pm. She dropped Neil off at the Beacon and drove to the police station. Right now, she needed to speak with Chief Forensic Investigator, Douglas Mott, or just plain old Duke, as Freya called him. It was purely coincidental, that she ended up moving in across the street from him last summer, after purchasing her first home.

Duke was the former Deputy for Agatha Falls. He recently took a promotion within the town to a forensics investigator. Just friends, she often shared her concerns with him or just bantered with the handsome, rugged former football player, who grew up in town and was raised by a family of lawyers. He chose law enforcement over the legal profession and he was extremely popular with the locals, Freya included. If she could trust anyone, it was Duke.

"Hi Joan, is Duke here?" asked Freya of the new receptionist.

"Sorry Freya, he's in Boston for the rest of the week. He's at a forensics

conference."

Seeing the look on Freya's face, Joan surprised Freya by sharing a bit of news not released to the public yet. "Freya, you could speak with our new detective from New York City. She's moving into her office today."

New detective? Oh, that's right – Detective Morrison's replacement. Freya had almost forgotten.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"Oh, she's very nice. I'll let her know you're here. It's Mike's old office."

Freya walked down the hall to the office that once held Detective Michael Morrison who had moved on to practice law, right across the street. Freya knocked on the door gently. She heard a woman's voice say, "Come in."

Freya walked in and was immediately shocked at the stark difference in the office. Gone were the slate grey walls and the old metal desk. The walls were now painted an ivory and the desk was a large old-fashioned oak desk. Plants lined the window shelf and a small oval braided rug replaced the old dirty brown rug that was threadbare and smelled like wet dog. It looked and smelled better already.

"Hi, I'm Freya Barrett. Welcome to Agatha Falls," she said extending her hand.

The detective stood up and Freya noticed her exotic features and adorable short hair. A modern cut that looked like updated shag. Freya had long brown hair that she wore either loose or in a French braid. She wasn't ready to cut her hair short like so many women do, as they get older. At twenty, she was still very young, so she had time to get used to the idea, if she did decide to go short.

She smiled broadly. "**The** Freya Barrett?" she asked dramatically.

Freya blushed and the woman laughed.

"I'm just kidding with you, but I have read your articles. You do a great job. I heard a rumor you were writing a book. Is that true?"

Freya sat down across from the detective and explained that she was writing a book about her experience as a local reporter. It was in the early stages but she

hoped to have it published next spring.

“Very impressive. I have a hard enough time composing an email,” she joked. “So, Freya, let me begin by introducing myself, I’m Detective Dianna Ramirez.”

“It’s great to have you here and all the way from New York. We’re small scale out here, but we still have our share of crime,” said Freya diplomatically.

“Share? Well, I’d say that you have more than your fair share. I mean, just last year a teen-age girl was strangled to death, then a man was decapitated by piano wire, another man hanged himself in jail, not to mention the former sheriff either fell down the stairs or was pushed to his death. A woman lost her eye in a fight with you, specifically. A country club was set on fire from which you escaped. And I haven’t even mentioned what happened last spring with the college sex cult, the brandings, and the arsenic poisonings. I mean, my God, it’s like one of those villages in Agatha Christie!” she exclaimed.

Freya nodded. Yeah, she was right. She relived everything as she wrote her book, mostly at night and in bed. She wrote either on her lap top or by hand in a spiral note book. After all, JK Rowling wrote Harry Potter on a napkin, if you believed that.

“Detective, I need some advice. I spoke recently with some young girls, and I mean young, like 12 years old and they told me about rape parties that they’ve attended. They believe that one of our local boys killed Sydney Sanders. And they say he raped her last July. Now, let me explain. I can’t reveal their names. I’m sorry but I promised them I wouldn’t until they were willing to come forward.”

Ramirez nodded her head and Freya told her almost everything, leaving out names or anything that might reveal identities.

“Do you know why I left New York City?” she asked Freya.

“I left because I wanted to raise my six-year old daughter in a small town that had values and where the people actually cared about each other. If those girls are being raped by older boys so they can add a notch to their belt, then I

want to get those bastards."

"Colleges are notorious for having a rape culture on campus. Girls are sometimes even drugged and while they are unconscious, boys have their way with them. It's still rape, whether they hold them down or not. If the woman doesn't consent and the man persists, than that's rape." She stopped and took a deep breath.

"When you introduce alcohol into the equation, the chances of a rape are more likely. Boys and girls have different expectations at that age. Girls like to wear sexy clothes and flirt but that doesn't mean they want casual sex. But, that's what a lot of guys want at that age. I'm not defending the guys, but that's what I've seen in my line of work. Freya, if you really want to help these girls, I need to know everything."

"I understand," said Freya, "but the boy accused is from a wealthy local family and his father is very friendly within the New England social circles. His dad has political aspirations too. I don't want these girls to be attacked in the press or in social media."

"Why, look at what happened last year to that doctor who accused the Supreme Court nominee of sexually assaulting her in high school? She got death threats and the president went on TV and called her a liar! He mocked her! Can you believe that? Do you want that to happen to 12 and 13 year old girls? Well, I don't," responded Freya hotly. "I'm sure you want to help but we have to do it in a way that protects the girls."

The detective sighed. "Freya, once those girls come forward, life as they know it will be over. If they don't come forward, there's nothing I can do. And if they do come forward, it's their word against the big man on campus. That's the way it is. I hate it- but that's the way it is."

"Now, if they had proof, like forensic evidence or witnesses, we'd be able to bring in the boy for questioning. But just an accusation isn't enough," said Ramirez.

"What about Sydney? Was she a virgin? Did the coroner check for that?"

asked Freya.

“Hmmm, let me see, I’ll read the autopsy report again,” said Ramirez as she turned to her computer. She tapped away for a few seconds and then her eyes got big.

“OMG as my daughter says, we have a note here by the coroner that Sydney’s hymen was not intact and there was scar tissue surrounding her vaginal opening.”

Freya jumped out of her chair. “Well, can we do something with that? Can we go to her parents and bring them in on this? I mean, if I had a 12 year old girl who was raped at a party,” said Freya in air quotes, “I’d want to know so I could kick the guy’s ass who raped her, you know?”

“I like the way you think Barrett. Have you ever thought of working in law enforcement? You’re a natural.” She stood up and faced Freya. “Let’s visit Ms. Sander’s parents. I’ll call first just to let them know we’re on the way. Grab your jacket, come on!” said Ramirez as she rushed out the door with Freya following behind.

Freya and Ramirez walked quickly to the parking lot behind the police station. Freya got in the Dodge Charger on the passenger side. The last time she rode in a police vehicle was after her friend Heather Lind had been murdered. She’d ridden with then Deputy Mott to her dorm. Suddenly becoming sad at the thought of her dead friend, she decided to change the subject.

“What’s your daughter’s name?”

Ramirez smiled. “Marisol. There are many different meanings attributed to the name, like sun or sea and even solitude, but I just like the way it sounds,” said the detective.

Freya smiled. “My mother named me Freya after the Norse goddess of love and fertility. It took her forever to get pregnant after my brother Jake came along. She wanted something unique too,” said Freya fondly.

“My dad made me read Joseph Conrad as a kid because he wrote, Freya of the

Seven Isles. It's a novella and has the distinction of having a woman as the lead character. It's a romance but I had a hard time following it. Conrad is not easy for a fourteen year old," said Freya.

"I like Danielle Steele myself," said Ramirez. "It's not too deep and there's usually a happy ending."

They parked in the driveway at Sydney Sander's house. It was a large Georgian colonial with a paneled front door and five shuttered windows adorning the top front face of the house. Made of brick, it was two stories high and had a huge front yard bordered by a formal garden.

Both of Sydney's parents were cardiologists at Mercy Regional. Neither had returned to work yet. Ramirez rang the doorbell. A petite dark haired woman answered the door. You didn't have to be a psychic to know that she was Sydney's mom. Bleary eyed and emitting sadness only seen at funerals or wakes, Dr. Marsha Sanders invited them inside.

She led them to a massive room taking up almost the entire right side of the home, combining a dining room, game room, and old-fashioned living room. It was decorated in the Georgian colonial style, very lovely and very classy. Freya always marveled at how the extreme rich lived with their expensive furniture and their antiques on display.

As elaborate as it was though, the home felt like a tomb. And Freya wanted this meeting over as soon as possible. She felt the weight of pent-up tension as she entered the overly decorated room and sat on the silk covered divan. She and Ramirez remained silent until both Drs. Sanders took their seat across from them on a matching divan.

Dr. Marsha Sanders spoke first. "Detective, do you have any new information?" she asked in a shaky voice.

Ramirez referred to the note in the autopsy report.

"Were you aware that your daughter was technically not a virgin?"

Both parents looked at each other. Again, Sydney's mom did the talking.

“Yes, we are aware of that notation,” she said icily. “Are you asking us if our daughter was promiscuous?” she asked, her voice rising.

“No ma’am,” said Ramirez. “It’s actually the opposite. We have reason to suspect that your daughter was sexually assaulted back in July at a party. Did either of you notice any change in Sydney beginning in middle to late July?”

The tension in the room peaked. Freya sat still and said nothing. Both Drs. Sanders again looked at each other. They knew. Or, they suspected something had happened. Freya waited. Finally, Dr. Marsha Sanders spoke and her words were chilling.

“I knew something had happened but not that. She wanted to cut her hair. I walked in on her one night and she had the scissors ready to cut off her long black hair. When I asked her why, she told me. Do you know what she said?” Crying now, Dr. Sanders grabbed her husband’s hand for support.

“She said, ‘Mom, I don’t want to be pretty on the outside if I’m ugly on the inside.’

“I didn’t know what that meant and I never asked! I didn’t want to know. Sydney was an extremely independent child but also very dramatic. I mean, she was a teen-age beauty queen. I figured it was some sort of adolescent self-made drama. I never asked…..”

Dr. Marsha Sanders dissolved into tears. The interview over, Detective Ramirez stood and walked with Sydney to the front door. Ramirez handed her business card to the housekeeper, Dalisay, who walked them out.

“Please give this to Dr. Sanders, Dalisay. Let them know they can call me anytime.”

“Wait, detective, I think I may know something,” said the little woman whispering softly. She walked them to the end of the driveway.

“Last month a boy showed up here looking for Miss Sydney. He wouldn’t give a name so I told her a boy wanted to speak with her but it wasn’t Mr. Logan. Well, Miss Sydney rushed down the stairs and when she saw who it was, she got the weirdest look on her face. I never saw that look before. Then, she

slammed the door in his face. She ran back upstairs and didn't even come down to dinner and I made her favorite that night – chicken adobo."

Freya's heart beat faster and even Ramirez seemed excited by the news.

"Could you identify this young man if you saw him again?" asked Ramirez.

"Oh yes! I'll never forget that face. He was so stuck-up and rude. I will never forget that face!" she repeated.

"Great, I want you to come down to the police station tomorrow to file a report, can you do that?" asked Ramirez. "And here is a card for you, call me day or night. Thank you."

Freya and Detective Ramirez drove back to police headquarters. Both were excited at the prospect of an actual witness. Freya's cell suddenly buzzed. It was a text from her boyfriend, Erik.

Grandfather died-going to Montreal-will call tonight.

What grandfather? Men! She'd been dating Erik for a year now and she still didn't know much about him.

"What's up?" asked Ramirez.

Freya filled her in. Ramirez snorted a laugh.

"My husband was the same way, that's one of the reasons we divorced eventually. Sorry," she said noticing Freya's expression. "But, if you don't have good communication, you can't have a long lasting relationship. There, that's my 34 year old wisdom," finished the detective as she pulled into the parking lot. Freya said good-bye and walked to where she'd parked her vehicle. She texted Erik back.

Travel safely. Talk to you soon.

She got into her red Ford Escape and drove home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After arriving home, Freya started on dinner. Her new home on Moon Brook Drive was her castle. She was very proud of the Dutch colonial she'd purchased a few months back. With her job at the paper, she made enough to cover her mortgage payments. The down payment came from a generous gift from the late Judge Maurice Pringle.

Grateful to her for reuniting him with a long-lost relative before his death, he bequeathed her the grand sum of $250,000. Freya invested most of it for her future, but kept enough for a down payment in case she wanted to buy a home. Freya thought the time was right to live on her own. Jake, engaged now and planning a wedding to his longtime girlfriend Lorna Boudreaux, solidified her decision.

And she loved living on her own. People asked her all the time, are you lonely living by yourself? And she answered them honestly – no, she wasn't lonely. Of course, she wasn't alone any more. Now she had Dexter.

Dexter was her torbie cat that she picked up at the local animal shelter recently. Her last cat had passed away a couple years back and she now felt

ready for a new feline friend. Her brother wanted her to get a dog, a big one for protection. But dogs are more work than cats. Cats were independent and cleaner too. No walks and they could be left home alone during the day. Maybe she'd get a dog someday, but not now. For now, it was just her and Dexter.

"Dexter, I'm home!" she sang out.

And within seconds, the cat appeared. He jumped from his cat tree that sat in front of her back window. Dexter loved to watch the birds. He was an indoor cat so Freya reasoned that the kitchen window was his form of TV. Birds, squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, weasels and even foxes, came down out of the woods behind Freya's house. And Dexter observed them all.

MEOW!

"Okay, okay, here's your dinner," she said as she poured a half a cup of Rachel Ray's dry food into a blue cat dish with the name *Dexter* on it. He circled her legs almost tripping her and eventually settled down to his dinner. Freya returned to making her own.

An hour later and dishes washed; Freya sat down in front of her computer and attempted to finish her paper for psychology class. A junior at Claremont College, her major was journalism but her minor was psychology. Her paper called, Rape Culture on American Campuses was almost finished. She just needed a strong emotional conclusion. But writers block inhibited that. It was unusual for her not to have any ideas. After all, she was a writer, wasn't she? What was her problem? Then she knew what she had to do. Ask Rothstein.

Dr. Rose Rothstein was Freya's former professor at Claremont. She'd taken a leave of absence due to her lung cancer diagnosis last summer. Freya didn't have any classes with her this semester but she kept in touch with the woman and she had become a close friend and a mentor. Freya texted her. Rothstein texted back.

Stop by. I'm free.

Freya locked up and drove over to Rothstein's house. Freya knocked and her professor answered the door in a faded Ramones t-shirt and leggings. They hugged and Freya took a seat on Rothstein's overstuffed leather couch overlooking the back garden. The women made small talk and then Freya got down to business.

"I'm stumped. I'm finishing an important paper on the rape culture on college campuses and I can't seem to finish the thing. I'd like to end on an emotional or personal note but I can't this time."

Rothstein was silent as she considered what Freya had told her. Then, she said with her normal deadpan expression, "you've never been raped, that's why."

Freya was about to remind her about her almost rape last year but Rothstein stopped her.

"I know, I know, you were almost raped, but it's not the same thing. Try using the point of view of someone who has been raped. It's not always about you."

Freya was surprised and a little hurt that she would say that. Yes, it was not always about her but since Rothstein was diagnosed with lung cancer, her personality had changed a bit. That happened, Freya knew from her research into cancer patients that their personality changed. Many are mad at getting sick, others get very depressed, and some even get angry at the living or the healthy. Rothstein had gone through all of that, Freya had observed. She decided to follow the advice of Taylor Swift and shake it off. Not wanting a confrontation with her friend, she changed the subject.

"So, what are your plans for next semester? Are you coming back part-time?"

Rothstein arched her back, reminding Freya of her cat Dexter. Rothstein smiled then, a rare sight for the woman. She was not known to smile often.

"Yes, I'm coming back next semester. I'll just be teaching one class and I can't wait. My treatments have gone well and my doctor signed off on it this week.

The women talked for another hour and Freya left for home. As much as her mentor enjoyed the visit, she tired easily these days and Freya could see the fatigue in her eyes. Driving home, she reflected on what Rothstein had said. Freya should talk to some rape survivors. Then she got an idea. Call Ramirez. She might be able to point Freya in the right direction. Liking that idea, Freya drove home and went straight to bed.

The next day, Freya went to her morning classes and then straight over to the police station to see Detective Ramirez. The woman was in her office when Freya walked in. She explained what she needed and Ramirez told her to sit down, she'd be glad to help.

"I thought it would be a stronger paper if I added the feelings of someone who has actually gone through it. But I don't know anyone who has been raped."

"You'd be surprised. One out of four women in this country has been sexually assaulted so you probably do know someone. They just never told you. There is a support group in the nearby town of Castleton. I can give you the address. It's very hush-hush, but I'll let them know you're coming. It meets every Thursday night." Ramirez gave her the address. Freya thanked her and left.

Freya drove to the Beacon, the local paper she worked at weekdays. She pulled into the parking lot and walked into the back entrance. Making her way to her desk, she immediately checked her messages. Nothing from Erik, he never called or texted last night.

Figures, she thought. But, there was an email from Duke. He was still in Boston but would be back Saturday night. Did she want to meet at his house for burgers? And with Erik gone, she was a free woman, wasn't she? She emailed him back one word –YES.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Freya spent her morning in class. But as soon as her last class ended, she drove as quickly as she could to her office at the Beacon. She had a lead. Last night someone called the anonymous tip line and said they knew who had taken Hannah Baker. The person wouldn't give their name but the call was traced to a Lake Bomoseen residence. A mild day for early November, Freya decided to drive out there. The police already disregarded the tip as a waste of time but Freya had a hunch it would pay off.

She drove to the lake passing through the town of Castleton, located to the west of Agatha Falls. The town was settled in 1770 and by 1777; the town consisted of seventeen families. The railroad arrived in 1854 and the late 1800's saw tourism expand around Lake Bomoseen.

Castleton was famous for its mile-long Main Street with an assortment of Federal and Greek Revival style houses and public buildings, many by builder and architect, Thomas Royal Dake. Many tours took visitors by the Castleton Federated Church to show off the lovely carved pulpit believed by many to be

Dake's masterpiece.

Freya arrived at the house by the lake and walked down the path leading to a red wooden door. The little summer rental looked vacant until she saw a face in the window looking back at her. It was an older woman. She seemed shocked to see someone at her back door. Freya wasn't surprised. There weren't many people on the lake this late in the year. Winter was coming. Only a fool would live on the lake during a New England winter, thought Freya.

The lake effect as it was known, caused lake-effect snow that was produced when a cold air mass moved over a warmer body of water, like a lake. The air picked up the water vapor from the lake, rose up through the colder air high above it, froze it, and deposited it on the shore. This was a phenomenon seen quite often by those living in New England.

"Hello, can I speak with you? My name is Freya Barrett. I understand that you left a tip with the tip line regarding Hannah Baker's disappearance."

The woman looked petrified now. *Good job, Freya. How can I fix this? Think.*

"Hi, I'm sorry to bother you but can I come in? It's really chilly out here," she said, pulling her coat around her. The woman relented and opened the door wider for Freya to enter. She walked into a small but cozy kitchen that smelled of baked apples.

"Do I smell apples baking? Mmm, that's a great smell."

The woman smiled then and offered Freya a seat. She went back to the stove, poured two cups of tea, and handed one to Freya.

"I don't get too many visitors out here. What you said before, I never called any tip line. But I think I know who did, follow me."

Freya followed the woman into a small bedroom off from a tiny dining room. In the bed, lay an even older woman, wizened and very pale. She appeared to be asleep but her eyes fluttered open as they entered her room.

"Ma, get up, there's someone here to see you."

Ma? How old is this woman?

“What! Who’s here to see me? Is it Myrtle?” she asked in a surprisingly loud voice.

“No Ma, it’s a girl. Did you call a tip line?”

The old woman in the bed shut her eyes for a moment giving Freya the impression she was falling asleep. But, she opened them again and said, “Yes! I did. I saw that girl on the TV. Hannah, she was next door. I just know it.”

Her daughter rolled her eyes. She motioned to Freya to follow her out into the hallway.

“My mother is senile. She didn’t see anything.”

Freya nodded as if understanding. But her hunch told her that this woman knew something and her hunches were never wrong.

“Well, as long as I am here, let me hear what she has to say. I won’t take long, okay?”

The woman shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ll be in the TV room watching Jeopardy if you need me.”

She walked off leaving Freya alone with the old woman. Freya pulled a chair over beside the bed. She sat down and before she could speak, the woman began a litany of grievances about her daughter. Apparently, they were leaving in a couple days to head back to Indiana, where they resided during the fall and winter months. Laverne, her daughter, was a widow and her children had all grown up and moved on. So, it was just her and her daughter. Maude, as she was called, had diabetes and a great deal of trouble walking, so she spent most of her time in bed either watching TV or looking out the window. She would be ninety-five in December.

At last, Freya saw her chance. She interrupted the woman’s diatribe. “Oh, my birthday is in December too. I’ll be twenty-one.”

Maude smiled warmly and finally stopped talking. So, Freya began asking questions. The woman seemed alert and answered her with detail. Maude explained that a few weeks back she saw a middle-aged woman with short dark hair and glasses with a young girl. The child had bright red hair and was very

well dressed. They stayed at the house across the road for only a week. But she was sure that the girl was Hannah Baker and Freya believed her. She thanked the woman and her daughter and left.

While walking to her vehicle, she looked across the street at the small brown cabin. It looked vacant. Not seeing anyone around, she made a decision. She was going inside to look around.

She crossed the road and walked around to the back of the cabin. There was a little porch. Freya walked up the porch stairs and saw two little windows facing directly into the living room of the cabin. She glanced through them and saw a furnished house. It looked like it had been thoroughly cleaned. But maybe something was left behind, something that would lead Freya to find Hannah's abductor.

Freya tried both windows and found them to be locked. She went around the perimeter of the house and found all the windows locked. *Hmmm, how do I get in?* Then, she reached inside her bag and pulled out a paperclip. Duke had shown her some months back how to jimmy a lock with a paperclip. *Oh well, here goes.*

She inserted the paperclip into the key hole and twisted back and forth and up and around. After a few tries, she heard a click. *Thank you Duke!*

She opened the door and walked inside. It was starting to get dark now so she pulled out her flashlight. She tried the wall switch and to her surprise found that the electricity was still on. She glanced around the living room and kitchen. It looked neat as a pin. She checked the trash pails and they were empty too. She checked out the other rooms and found two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a room off the back porch used for storage. That was when she saw it. A little scrap of paper balled up on the floor in the corner.

Picking it up, she saw that it was a store receipt, dated a few weeks ago. The print was faded but she read it clearly enough. It was from Prunrier's market in Bomoseen. She checked her watch. It was 5pm. The store might still be open. She stuck the receipt in her bag, walked out the back door, locked it, and ran to her vehicle. She hopped in and drove to the market. She saw a sign that read-

closes at 9pm.

She walked inside. She went up and down the aisles grabbing a few items to make her visit there seem necessary. When she got to the register, she placed her stick of pepperoni and her green peppers on the counter. She smiled at the cashier. After she caught her eye, she showed her the school picture of Hannah and asked if she had seen the little girl a few weeks back. The clerk shocked her.

“That kid? Are you kidding? I’d never forget that brat! She threw a tantrum because her mom wouldn’t let her have a candy bar. If my kids acted like that, I’d smack them!” said the clerk.

“Are you sure it was her? How can you be certain?”

The clerk explained that the child threw a tantrum and the mom had a hard time settling her down. The clerk said she was 100% sure, that was the same kid.

“So, what about her mom? Did you recognize her?”

She shook her head and explained that she couldn’t remember her. She just looked like every other tired and worn out mother. Jeez, thought Freya. I hope I don’t look tired and worn out if I have kids. She paid for her items and was about to leave, but she thought of something else.

“Hey, you didn’t happen to see what kind of car she drove?”

“Nope, sorry. I was so relieved when they left. But wait, I think the kid called her Ivy. I thought it was odd because I figured they were mother and daughter. But the kid didn’t call her mommy. She called her Ivy. That’s a weird name, isn’t it?”

Freya agreed. It was weird and unique. *How many middle aged women are called Ivy these days*? I bet the department of motor vehicles could answer that question, thought Freya. And she had a contact at the DMV too. Ben Hadley. He helped her last year with the Joey Taylor murder. *I think it’s time I gave good old Ben a call.* Freya waved goodbye and walked to her vehicle smiling.

CHAPTER NINE

Freya texted Ben. Ben Hadley worked at the local Department of Motor Vehicles. He had a big crush on her in high school but they had ended up just friends. Last year he was elected to city council. Ben had the distinction of being one of the few living descendants of the founder of Agatha Falls, Agatha Putnam Ingersoll. As such, he inherited the bulk of the estate when Judge Pringle died last year. Since then, Ben was busy with his projects, both environmental and social. If anyone could find the owner of local vehicle, it was Ben.

He texted back that he was in a meeting, but he'd be done in an hour. Freya decided to drive back to town. She wondered if the Sander's housekeeper had spoken to Detective Ramirez yet. Hopefully she could identify the young man who visited Sydney. Freya had a hunch it was Brandon. All she needed now was proof.

Freya's stomach growled. She'd missed lunch. But no worries, one of her favorite eateries was close. Roxie's Restaurant in Castleton was famous for its French fries served with white vinegar and salt. A burger joint really;

hamburgers, fries, chicken nuggets, hotdogs, lobster salad, onion rings and ice cream, just to name a few; were favorites of the locals. But people came from all over to sample its menu. She pulled into the parking lot and walked over to the food bus. Ordering a Coke and fries, she texted her friend Ali to see what she was up to.

Ali was her best friend since high school and she attended Claremont College. Since both were busy with school and jobs, they didn't see each other as often as they used to but emails and phone calls filled the void.

Her order ready, she walked over to the picnic table and sat down. She enjoyed the fresh, salty fries, enhanced with the tart white vinegar sprinkled liberally over them.

She read Ali's text. OMG! Freya quickly texted back. The news shocked her.

Polly Brown retiring. Diner closing.
Yellow Deli buying the space.
I HATE CHANGE! Call me later.

Freya texted back. She agreed. Change was hard. Both girls grew up at the Diner. But the Yellow Deli was awesome too. Specializing in sandwiches, soups, salads and breakfast fare, the food was fresh, homegrown, and never processed. Freya's favorite sandwich was the Green Mountain Club. It featured turkey, cheddar cheese from Vermont, lettuce, tomato, and maple mustard on a pumpernickel roll. It was delicious.

Finishing her fries, she tossed her napkins into the trash bin and walked back to her SUV. As she got into the vehicle, her cell buzzed. It was Ben Hadley. His meeting over, he asked her what she needed from him. She quickly told him and he promised her he'd see what he could do. Satisfied with her day of informal investigation, she headed for home. As content as she felt these days she had some anxiety. Abby Vale was still out there. She hadn't been caught yet.

The woman was responsible for the murders of at least a half dozen young girls and her former lover. A member of the Coalesce cult, she escaped last autumn and was somewhere in Scandinavia. Or, at least that's what the FBI believed. Abby promised Freya in a letter that she'd return some day, very soon to finish her off. Freya shuddered at the thought. But she was prepared.

Freya had her handgun and she was a great shot. She and her brother Jake practiced every month at the firing range. Her home had a state of the art security system. Even Duke, her friend, and neighbor had taught her some self-defense moves. She practiced on Erik. He was caught off guard one day when she flipped the six foot two man over her back and onto her hardwood floors. The look on his face was priceless.

Erik had not called or texted her in at least a week. Still in Montreal for a family funeral, she worried that something more than that was afoot, but she kept her feelings to herself. It did no good to worry about something she couldn't prove. It was another one of her hunches. And unfortunately, they were never wrong.

She drove into town and up Center Street. It was busy this time of day and there was no parking on the street. *What else is new?* But Freya knew where to go, proceeded up the street, took a left hand turn onto Wales Street, and parked in front of Dominos. *Oh well, I'll only be a minute.* Rushing inside the Beacon's headquarters, she wanted a quick word with her boss.

She ran up the stairs to her shared office and saw Kerry Quinn in Lou's office. The girl was waving her hands excitedly and Lou was calmly sitting there watching her. Freya stood quietly outside the glassed in office and caught Lou's eye. He motioned her to come in. Freya opened the door and listened as Kerry spoke excitedly to Lou.

"I'm not kidding you! They saw it and they are positive. Please, let me go to Wallingford to check this out," the girl pleaded.

Kerry was a journalism intern from Claremont College. Normally left to write the obituary page, the college student had persuaded Lou in recent weeks

to let her write actual stories. So far, she'd covered the annual Halloween parade and a local pumpkin decorating contest. But, Kerry had loftier goals.

"Please Lou! What if Freya went with me? Would you let me go then?" the girl looked so strained that Freya felt for her. She remembered what it felt like to be the new person in the office. And for a writer who wants to write and needs to write, not being able to write is torture. So, Freya raised her hand.

"Barrett, put your hand down, we're not in school here," said Lou gruffly.

But Freya knew better. Lou was a pro and as the new editor of the paper, he was willing to take it in a new direction. The Beacon was now focusing on crime and news that affected the world outside of Agatha Falls. She knew he was only testing the intern.

"Barrett, would you accompany Ms. Quinn to the exotic village of Wallingford in her pursuit of a werewolf?"

Freya said nothing. *A werewolf in Wallingford?*

"Sure, why not? I'll go with her," she said. Kerry hugged her and before she knew it, Kerry was dragging her out of Lou's office.

"Wait, I need to speak to him first, okay? And then we'll go." She gently pushed the girl out of the office, shut the door, and updated her boss on the new information into Hannah's disappearance.

"I like it, good work, Barrett. Keep me posted on the DMV. Now, go find that werewolf," he said leaning back in his chair grinning at her.

Freya and Kerry drove out to Wallingford, a little town about ten miles south of Agatha Falls. The town was divided into three villages offering colonial, federal, and Victorian homes. Established in 1761, Wallingford had a population of a little over 2,000.

The actual werewolf sightings occurred at nearby White Rocks Cliffs Trail. Freya hadn't been out there since she first moved to town. She and Jake climbed the trail as kids. Freya never forgot the feeling of accomplishment she'd felt after reaching the top. The view from the peak was amazing.

Following Sugar Hill Road for two hundred feet, they saw the sign for the

National Forest. Kerry jumped out of Freya's vehicle and immediately checked her phone.

"The couple who saw it said they'd meet us at the Information Center."

They walked over to the small building and looked around. There were at least a dozen hikers sitting at picnic tables and Freya glanced quickly at all of them. Kerry went inside the Center to find the couple. After a few minutes, an older man approached her.

"Hello, are you Kerry?"

"No, I'm Freya, but I'm here with Kerry. We're from the Beacon. Did you actually see a werewolf up here?"

"Well, we saw something that resembled a werewolf," said the man who introduced himself as Kent Flattery and his wife as Barbara.

Kerry joined them. Walking up the trail, the Flattery's pointed to the area where they saw something out of the ordinary.

"It was at least eight-feet tall and had the head of a German Shephard but was walking on two legs. But the legs were like dogs legs. And he was eating something. He was holding it in his hands like a human would," said Barbara carefully.

Freya watched the woman closely as she spoke. She seemed anxious. Whatever she saw had frightened her.

"What did the hands look like?" asked Kerry.

The couple looked at each other nervously. The husband spoke. "They were hands but they weren't human hands. They were covered in dark hair and the fingers were very long."

"The claws – don't forget the claws," said Barbara grabbing his arm.

He nodded. "Yes, very long claws. I am a retired veterinarian and I have no other way to explain it except to say it resembled a werewolf like you'd see in own of those old movies."

Kerry snapped some pictures and Freya looked down at the rocky ground. One rock stood out to her.

“Mr. Flattery, did you see these?” she pointed to the rocks. He looked at them closely.

“Did you notice those marks before?” asked Freya.

There on the rock were four jagged vertical scratches. The scratches were deep enough to indent the rock formation, leaving white lines in its wake. Kerry snapped pictures and even Freya took one with her phone.

The Flattery’s backed away from the rock and looked around the trail worriedly. The sun had set and the temperature had dropped. There was barely enough light to accompany them back to their vehicles. Freya pulled the zipper up on her jacket. Feeling an odd sensation that she couldn’t explain, she said, “Okay, we have enough. Let’s head back.” The group turned to leave when Kerry suddenly yelled.

“Hey, look at this!”

They turned to look at the girl as she held up what looked like a black shard of glass. But as Freya got closer, she saw what it was and she inadvertently stood back as well. Kerry’s hand held a partial claw that was at least five inches long. It was shiny like glass and black in color. She took the nail from Kerry and showed it to Kent.

“Could this be a bear claw?” asked Freya hopefully.

“Bears have five claws, not four and theirs are curved. These are too straight to belong to a bear and too long. Bear claws are three inches on average but this is almost twice that. Whatever this is, it didn’t come from any bear.”

Freya pocketed the claw and walked down the trail. Turning one last time to look behind her, she glanced at the rock and felt the claw deep inside her pocket. *A werewolf in Wallingford? Stranger things….*

CHAPTER TEN

Detective Ramirez stared at the yearbook photo. The young man was good-looking and had an air about him. Even she could see that in the black and white photo. So this was the boy. She closed the book and shoved it into her desk drawer. She planned to speak with him tomorrow, on his turf - Wainsbridge Academy.

It now occupied the old Castleton University. After filing for bankruptcy, the school sold its buildings to another local school. That school, Wainsbridge, expanded and moved their entire academic body to the university. Now, a boy's prep school for ages 12-18, it was one of the top schools in New England, if you could get in.

But, if you were a legacy, like Brandon Cambridge, than you were promised a place at birth. No wonder he looked so arrogant in his photo, she thought. She'd encountered men like that in her youth. Men who thought her Latina heritage made her acceptable for a life as a hotel maid or a housekeeper. But Dianna Ramirez wanted more and she got more.

Earning a scholarship to a prestigious college and working her way up to

police detective was not easy. But anything worth having was worth fighting for, she believed. Now she had to make a decision. Did she put all that on the line to help these girls or did she go along to get along? Thinking of her own daughter made her decision easier. She picked up her phone and called Brandon's school. She asked to speak with the Headmaster.

Explaining what she intended to do; the Headmaster stammered and stuttered. *Brandon Cambridge? You want to question him? Yes, she explained. I'll be there tomorrow morning at 10AM*. She hung up. By now, the man had called Brandon's father, who probably called their family attorney. She wasn't worried though. She had a witness on the record who swore that Brandon was the young man who made Sydney Sanders so upset that day not so long ago. Was it true? Did he rape the girl, then go back four months later, and kill her? *We're going to find out.*

Ramirez called Freya Barrett from the paper. She gave the girl a heads-up about the interview tomorrow. She asked the young reporter not to say anything yet and especially not to write about it. The young woman gave her word she wouldn't and Ramirez believed her. She trusted her too. That was unusual for her because she didn't trust many people. But there was something about the young reporter that made Ramirez smile. As long as there were people in the world who were willing to fight for what was right no matter the cost to them, there was hope in the world. And if we needed anything right now, it was hope.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The detective sat very still and didn't smile once. She had no time for small talk today. And no, she didn't want any coffee or tea either. Just bring me the boy – that's exactly how she said it too.

Headmaster Gabriel looked stricken.

"I, I think he's in chemistry now but, but we can get him here. His father is on his way. He asked us to wait until he gets here. It, it should be any minute now," he said in a shaky voice.

Ramirez said nothing and waited.

Ten minutes later footsteps could be heard outside the office. Low male voices too. Then, the door was thrown open and two men walked in. One, a younger version of the other. Both, well dressed, well-groomed and each as arrogant as possible. The older male spoke first in a deep, cultivated voice. Harris Cambridge was not a man who enjoyed waiting for others.

"Who the hell is Detective Ramirez and why does he want to speak with *my* son?"

Ramirez was ready. She stood up and faced the man. For once in her life, she was grateful for her height. At five feet-eleven inches, Dianna was tall for a woman. She inherited that from her mom who had Dutch heritage. Her dad was six inches shorter than her mom was. She extended her hand.

"Good morning. I'm Detective Ramirez, I'm *him*," she said emphasizing the word. The man blushed. They all sat down and Ramirez looked at the young boy in the flesh. He seemed unfazed by all of this. Apparently, his father harbored the worry in this matter.

Ramirez explained why she was there and asked if they would rather come

down to the station for an interview. The look on their faces gave her the answer.

"Okay, then let's begin. Brandon did you know Sydney Sanders?"

The young man glared at her as if she were a bug on the ground. He said nothing.

"Brandon, if you don't answer these questions, I can have you brought to the police station for a proper interview. Do you want that?"

His father spoke for him. "My son has nothing to say. He didn't know this girl and had nothing to do with her death."

"So, he never went to Sydney's house?" asked Ramirez.

"No," said Brandon's father.

"So, Brandon, is that true? You didn't go to Sydney's house a couple weeks before she died?" Ramirez waited. She observed the boy and saw his left eye twitch. She continued.

"I have several witnesses that place you at a party over July 4th weekend. Sydney was at that party. Do you remember that?"

Brandon looked out the window. He became fascinated with the parking lot. His father looked worried.

"What party is that?" he turned to his son.

Ramirez answered for him.

"Mike Chancellor. His best friend had a party but you were out of town that weekend, weren't you, Mr. Cambridge?"

Now looking worried, he nudged his son in the ribs. He whispered in Brandon's ear. Brandon nodded furiously.

"Brandon, what about Molly Raju? Do you remember her? Because she remembers you that night."

It was then that he turned to face the detective. She'd seen that expression before in her work. It was the same look of a sociopath -no guilt, no remorse, and no conscience. Now she knew it was true. This boy was a rapist and probably a murderer too. He spoke for the first time since he entered the room.

His voice was deep like his father's and he showed no fear.

"Detective, I do not know these girls, and I never attended any parties while my father was away. Anyone who told you that is lying and my lawyer will take appropriate action if this slander persists. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a chemistry class I'm missing. Good day."

He stood up and left the room, closing the door behind him. Ramirez faced Brandon's father. She took a chance.

"Mr. Cambridge, I have at least four witnesses who place Brandon at that party. These same witnesses claim that your son attempted to rape one of them and that he did rape Sydney. These same witnesses believe your son killed the girl. Another witness has identified your son as being at the home of Ms. Sanders two weeks before she was killed. Ms. Sanders was very upset at seeing him and refused to speak to him."

"So, we are in a quandary. Would your son consent to a DNA test? What do you say?"

Cambridge stood and looked down at the detective.

"I say, that if you repeat any of these scurrilous charges I'll have your job. And, an out of work mother wouldn't be good for little Marisol, now would it? After all, you're a single mother aren't you?" asked the man contemptuously. He pushed back his chair, scraping the wood floor and walked out.

So, that's how it's going to be, is it. Well, game on! Ramirez walked across the campus to her vehicle and pulled out her cell phone.

"Hey, Freya, you can write your story now, but no names, right? Okay, great, thanks."

Ramirez hung up, turned the radio up loud, and drove back to her office.

If they want a fight, they'll get one.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Growing up Female in a Rape Culture

Freya Barrett

Every 98 seconds someone is sexually molested in the United States. That means over 575 people experienced sexual violence in the past year. Over ninety percent of adult rape victims are female.

Recently, it was alleged by a group of young local girls ranging in age from 11-13 that rape parties occur in Agatha Falls. Local boys, aged 16 and 17 years old, frequent these parties. Their victims are not willing to give their names due to the fear of retribution. As one young girl said, “If we don’t go to the parties, they lie about us on the internet. They brag that they had sex with us anyway. They make life hell for us if we don’t go along. They’re older, popular and have a lot of power.”

This is the world today. A world dominated by rape culture. Rape culture by definition is a sociological concept in which rape is seen

as normal and as a way of life. This attitude is due to social norms about gender and sexuality. It is perpetuated by misogynistic language.

For example, when our president bragged that he could, “grab women by the pussy.” This same president also defended former Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh who was accused of attempted rape while in high school. His high school behavior was excused as nothing more than locker room behavior or the old idea of, ‘boys will be boys’. And after Judge Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court, the president apologized to the accused but not the accuser. What a message.

In rape culture, the victim is blamed. Women who have been raped are often asked, what were you wearing and why did you walk down that dark alley? This makes the victim second-guess their actions before the attack, instead of attacking the actions of the rapist.

The idea of what makes a man masculine also adds to rape culture. We need to re-examine and redefine what makes a man masculine. Rape is not a normal masculine urge. We often hear that rape is an act of violence and not a sexual act, but do we really believe that?
We need to combat rape culture. Stop using language that objectifies women. Speak out when women are referred to in an offensive manner. If a friend says that they’ve been raped, take them seriously and be supportive. And always communicate with your sexual partner and never assume consent.

If anyone reading this article has been the victim of rape, please contact the Rape Crisis Hotline. And if anyone would like to speak to

me about the rape parties, please call me at the Beacon. Your information is confidential. As someone who was almost sexually assaulted last year, I know how much that event changed my life.

It’s time that we stood up to the violence directed towards women. Enough is enough.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Since the local bookstore in town had gone bankrupt, a new business filled the spot. The Magick Shop replaced Phoenix Book Stores on downtown Center Street and Anya couldn't wait to check it out. Anya loved all things mystical. Her Aunt Ursula was also a fan of psychics, tarot cards, Ouija boards, and spell casting. Ursula was not a witch, but she had no problem hexing people she didn't like. Anya learned everything about the craft from her.

Today was Saturday and Anya was meeting Molly, Megan, and Arielle at the Yellow Deli for lunch. Since she had some time to kill, she stopped by the shop to buy some Angelica root. The herb could aid in heartburn, nervousness, insomnia and even flatulence but Anya had another reason for it. She needed it for protection.

In Wicca and witchcraft, the herb is believed to bring good luck and ward off evil. It was also associated with courage. And these days, Anya needed protection and courage.

Anya believed she was being stalked. Since Halloween night a few weeks back, she'd found hand written notes left in her mailbox and taped to her front door. These messages scared the hell out of her. The stalker implied that he (it was a man she surmised) was watching her. He seemed to know her schedule and he obviously knew her address.

Initially she thought it was an obsessed fan. After all, she was a local TV show host. Teen Time aired every Saturday morning. Maybe it was just some person who liked her but was being weird about it. At least, that's what she told herself in the beginning. But, with the murder of her friend, Sydney; now she wasn't so sure. So, today she was turning to her friends for guidance.

Anya purchased her Anjelica root and a few white candles. She walked across the street to the deli and took a table by the large stone fireplace.

She ordered a green tea and some vegetable soup and waited. Within minutes, Molly appeared with Megan. They took their seats beside her and Molly pulled a copy of the Beacon out of her knapsack. She slammed it down on the table.

"Did you read the paper today?"

Anya shook her head. So, for the next few minutes, Molly read Freya's article to Anya. When she finished, she asked Anya what she thought.

"Well, she didn't use our names, did she?"

"But, people will know it's us!" said Megan.

"So? Let them know. I don't care anymore. Sydney is dead! Maybe she'd be alive if we all came clean sooner."

The server stopped by to take their orders. Molly and Megan each ordered a sandwich and chips. Molly's cell phone rang with an old-fashioned telephone ring and she answered it. She spoke quickly. "Okay, get here soon, we just ordered."

"That was Arielle, she's on her way," explained Molly. Their food arrived and they ate in silence. As they were ordering dessert, Arielle walked in and went straight to their table. She looked upset. She sat down beside Anya and

asked very forcefully, “Did you let Freya Barrett interview you for the paper?”

Anya said no and Molly and Megan shook their heads. Arielle still looked angry.

“So, she just wrote an article about the rape parties out of the blue? What if people figure out it’s all of us and Brandon and Mike?”

The server brought over their desserts and Arielle ordered a vegetable wrap and a raspberry iced tea. She calmed down enough to take off her coat and sit back in her chair. The girl looked exhausted and her friends noticed it.

“Are you okay?” asked Megan shyly.

Arielle pulled something from her pocket and laid it on the table. It was a small blue envelope.

“What’s that?” asked Molly.

Arielle opened the envelope and removed a piece of paper covered with typed words. She handed Anya the note and Anya read to herself. After finishing the note, she handed it back to Arielle. Anya reached into her bag, pulled out a little blue envelope, and laid it on the table. She looked at Arielle.

“You too?” Arielle asked.

“You too what?” asked Molly grabbing the envelope and reading the letter. Megan stood up and read over her shoulder.

> I’m watching you.
> I’m following you.
> I know you.
> And soon, you will know me.

“Oh my God! What do we do now?” asked Molly nervously.

“Isn’t it obvious? We show these to Freya,” said Anya. “We need to trust her. She can help us.”

At just that moment, all four girls turned to the doorway as they saw Freya enter with a tall, husky good-looking young man. They were seated at the far end of the restaurant and before anyone could stop her, Anya was out of her seat.

“What is she doing?” asked Megan. But Arielle rubbed her back supportively.

“No, let her go, she’s right. We need help. We can’t do this on our own. I never told you this, but Sydney was getting notes before she died. She blew them off. She showed them to me. All small typed notes in blue envelopes. All left in her mailbox or taped to her front door. Just like mine and probably like Anya’s too. She was being watched too and by the same person.”

Freya sat down across from Duke. Before either could look at their menu, a young girl approached the table. Freya recognized her instantly. It was Anya Armstrong from St. Bernadette’s School. But, she looked different. Then she realized she wasn’t wearing her customary thick dark eyeliner. The girl looked so much prettier without the gothic make-up.

“Freya, I hate to bother you and your boyfriend but can we borrow you for a few minutes?”

Freya knew instantly that something was wrong.

“Duke, can you give me a few minutes? And can you order me a Green Mountain Club?”

He nodded and Freya followed Anya back to her table. She sat down and looked at the four girls around her. They were scared. She saw the fear and anxiety in their faces. *Why so much fear in such young girls?* She chose to be positive.

“Hey guys! What’s up?” she asked brightly.

Again, Anya spoke for the group. She cleared her throat and began to talk. After a few minutes, Freya understood the seriousness of their situation. She read the notes in the blue envelopes. These girls were in danger. *Was their stalker Sydney’s killer? Was it Brandon Cambridge, the high school rapist? Or, is there someone else?*

Anya finished and Freya took her time answering. She knew they wanted her help. But Freya couldn’t help them alone.

“I want you to meet someone. He’s a friend of mine and he can help you

better than I can. But, we both will help you. I promise you that."

The girls looked at each other. Eventually all of them shrugged or shook their heads in acceptance.

"Great, I'll be right back."

Freya rushed back to her table and asked Duke to follow her, no questions asked. Seeing the look on her face, he stood up and followed her without saying a word. Freya and Duke sat down at the girl's table and Freya introduced him.

"Ladies, this is Douglas Mott. He works for the Agatha Falls police department. You can trust him. I trust him."

She looked at him then and he glanced back. Something passed between them that even the girls caught. Breaking the silence, Duke spoke.

"No one calls me Douglas except my mother. So, please call me Duke."

He smiled. After a few minutes of joking around with each of the girls, it was evident to Freya, that they accepted him.

"Anya, can you fill Duke in on the things you've told me?" asked Freya.

For the next fifteen minutes, Anya explained about their stalker, Sydney's death, the rape parties, and the cyber bullying. Duke listened without interrupting. Then, when she was finished speaking, Molly told him about her attempted rape. The girl cried and Freya hugged her while she spoke. Then, Megan and Arielle told their part. When everyone had finished, Duke spoke.

"First of all, I want you to know that you are all very brave women. It takes guts to do what you just did and I will do everything in my power to help you."

"Firstly, we need to bring your parents in on this. I want all of us to get together and then I can speak to them. Because you are all minors, I'm not supposed to speak to you without their consent. Now, I know you think your parents will get upset by this news and the truth is, they will. They should be. But, if we are going to go forward in this and bring down that pervert, Brandon, then things need to be done correctly. Okay?"

He looked at each girl and waited for her response. Each girl nodded except for Molly. She shook her head.

“I can’t do it. I can’t tell my father about my attempted rape. My dad is very old-fashioned. He thinks we’re living in the 1800’s not the 21st century. I’m sorry,” she said as she looked down in embarrassment.

Freya rubbed the girls arm supportively.

“Molly, what if I speak with your dad? Or Detective Ramirez? What happened to you was not your fault. Don’t blame yourself.”

Molly looked up at Freya. The girl looked so upset. What a burden for such a young person, thought Freya.

“Molly, I can back you up!” said Megan. “I have copies of all the emails and texts Brandon sent you. Anyone who knows you knows you’re a good person and not a liar. And your dad should hear all of us together. Freya, maybe we all could get together, like an intervention. You know. We could be there with our parents and you, Duke and the detective. What do you think? We need to stick together on this. Stronger together!” she said emphatically.

“My dad is out of town until Thanksgiving but I can call him,” said Arielle.

“My aunt and uncle will come. I’ll make them,” said Anya.

“My mom will be there. Since my dad died, she’s come to every PTA meeting. Besides, she’s a nurse. So, she’s very progressive in her thinking,” said Megan.

Molly shrugged. “Okay, if you’ll all be there then I’ll ask my mom and dad to come too. When and where are we meeting?” asked Molly.

“That’s a good question,” said Freya.

“My house,” said Anya. “Arielle and Molly live nearby and Megan is only fifteen minutes away. And besides, Aunt Ursula just renovated the family room and I want everyone to see it.”

Duke laughed. “Well, that settles it then. Is tomorrow at noon okay Anya?”

She said yes and everyone exchanged numbers and addresses and got up to leave. Anya took a hundred dollar bill from her Kate Spade purse and laid it on the table nonchalantly. “Lunch is in me,” she said and walked ahead and out the

door. The girls followed. Freya grabbed Duke's arm and whispered in his ear. He nodded.

Standing on the sidewalk outside the Yellow Deli, Freya explained what Detective Ramirez had told her about her visit to Wainsbridge Academy. Freya had an appointment there Monday afternoon.

"Yeah, fill me in on that will you?" asked Duke. "I'm on my way back to the station now. I'll call you later."

He walked up the street. She watched him until he turned the corner. Her cell phone pinged and she jumped at the sound. She'd changed the alert on her cell phone from a buzz to a ping and she still wasn't used to it yet. Looking at the phone, she saw it was a text from Erik. Finally, he had contacted her after being gone over a week. She read the text.

> Staying another week in Montreal. Helping settle family business affairs. Talk to you soon.

Hmmm. Well, maybe it's better this way. Erik didn't like Duke. And from the way things were going, she would be spending more time with him from now on. Actually, she was looking forward to it.

She walked to her vehicle. Instead of texting Erik back, she texted Ben. She still hadn't heard from him regarding the mysterious woman named Ivy. Since today was Saturday, she decided to drive back home and work on her book. She had six chapters completed and she was quite proud of herself. Enid had read them and offered some slight constructive criticism about format and structure. As an established author, Enid was the perfect mentor.

So, home it is, she decided as she drove though the city. As she parked her Ford Escape in her garage, her cell phone pinged. It was Ben. He had a name for her – Mrs. Ivy Nixon of Killington. Divorced and not even a parking ticket to her name. Why did that name sound familiar to Freya? She'd must have heard it somewhere before. Oh well, that's what Google is for, she thought as she locked her garage door. She went straight to her office, typed in the name Ivy Nixon on

her laptop, and waited. Seconds later, a dozen articles appeared along with images of the woman. Freya read the information that populated the screen. Then it hit her – she remembered the woman after all and then it all made sense. She texted a thank you back to Ben and then quickly texted Duke.

I know who took Hannah Baker.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After leaving the Yellow Deli, the girls rode their bikes back to Arielle's house. With her father out of town and only an elderly housekeeper as an adult stand in, the house was theirs. And what they needed right now was to talk, in private, with no adults around.

Arielle led them into her huge open-floor plan kitchen. The house was large, Danish-modern and often empty. Arielle's dad was a busy man who focused on expanding his business. Raising a daughter was not his priority.

Growing up without a mother was no longer a thought in Arielle's mind. She kept herself occupied with her gymnastics and schoolwork. Her mom left a few years back and saw Arielle only occasionally. She relocated to Utah and remarried. Arielle didn't miss her mom anymore. What would be the point? Since Arielle had moved to Agatha Falls, her mother became a distant memory.

Anya's Aunt Ursula and Uncle Larry also led lives without Anya. But Anya was very independent. After her parent's death, she'd moved to town and never looked back. Her life consisted of school and her TV show. Anya never worried about money because her aunt and uncle were very well off. But she was generous with her friends and not a snob. She was known for her bluntness and her relentlessness. When she wanted something, she went for it. Anya didn't take no for an answer. Her strong personality attracted some but repelled others. But Anya couldn't care less.

Anya, Arielle, and Sydney were best friends until last year when Megan transferred to St. Bernadette's School. A scholarship student, Megan didn't come from money. But she was famous at the private school for being so smart and skipping a grade. Rumor had it her IQ was over 155. Excelling at math and science but socially and athletically awkward, Megan had few close friends. So, Arielle, Anya, and Sydney had adopted her. She was the little sister they never had.

The clique was complete until Molly Raju showed up. A recent transplant from Michigan, her dad was a computer genius and her mom an eye doctor. Molly was beautiful, well-liked and had a lovely singing voice. Her dad was born in Pakistan and was very traditional. His wife was an American, Roman Catholic with Irish heritage so Molly was raised Catholic and attended St. Bernadette's School.

Molly was one of five non-white students at St. Bernadette's but everyone treated her well, to her face. Sometimes, sarcastic comments would be made or ethnic jokes whispered. She ignored all of it. Too young to date, she was flattered when Brandon Cambridge, a junior at Wainsbridge Academy asked her to a movie. She explained her dad's rules of no dating until you were sixteen. He didn't take her rejection well. After that, everything changed.

First, the emails started; negative, racist and all unsigned. She deleted them. But they kept coming. Then the rumors at school began. Someone had heard from someone else that she slept around. Molly was horrified. She finally turned

to her older sister Katie for help. Katie traced the rumors back to Mike Chancellor, best friend of Brandon. It made sense now. It was payback time. Sydney confronted Brandon and he never forgot it.

It was the first get-together of last summer. Brandon was having a party at his house. Sydney, Arielle, and Molly had been invited. The girls decided that they would go together and they would confront Brandon. They even practiced what they would say. So, the night of the party, they cornered Brandon before he got too drunk. Arielle locked the door to the game room and all three girls gave their ultimatum.

“Look Brandon, the emails have to stop. No matter what you say or do, I’ll never go out with you. If you don’t stop, I’ll tell your teachers and your dad,” said Molly.

Arielle gave her part. “Brandon, I have a good relationship with my dad. He works with your dad. He will back me up. So, stop the rumors, stop the cyber bullying, and stop the harassment.”

Sydney was last. “Okay, this is what is going to happen. We have copies of your emails and texts. We gave them to a computer expert and they traced them back to you. According to the rules of your school, bullying in any format represents grounds for expulsion. So, if you don’t lay off Molly, we go to the school administration and the police. Rape is against the law. What would the local authorities think of your rape parties? So, what’s it going to be? ”

The girls waited for his response. Brandon looked at each girl as if sizing her up. To him, they were children. While he had no problem having sex with girls that young, no way were they going to dictate what he did, especially in his own home. Besides, his dad would never let anyone hurt him. He was the heir to the Cambridge estate and his dad had big plans for him. He laughed.

“Are you kidding? Seriously, I’m a straight A student. I’m captain of the football team. I volunteer at the food shelter every Thanksgiving. I’m a peer counselor and I tutor the freshmen. I was an altar boy and an Eagle Scout. I attend Mass every Sunday and I even met the President last year. I’m going to be

a lawyer and then one day, I'll be on the Supreme Court. I'm a legacy for Yale, so you bitches can kiss my ass," he said while checking his watch.

"Now ladies, I have a fireworks exhibit to oversee. Good night." He walked past them and out the door, shutting it behind him.

Sydney turned to Molly and Arielle. She shook her head. "He's bluffing."

"I don't know," said Molly. "He is rich and popular. Maybe this wasn't a good idea," she said worriedly.

"No," interjected Arielle. "We had to confront him. Let's give him a week. See if he sends anymore threatening emails. This is summer vacation anyway. Let's enjoy the rest of the party."

The sounds of fireworks exploding in the backyard prevented any further conversation and the girls went outside to view the display. They stood together and clapped with the others as the fireworks went off one by one. Brandon stood off to the side, facing the fireworks but watching the girls instead. Five months later, Sydney would be dead, Molly harassed at school and Arielle receiving threatening notes.

Recalling the party of four months earlier, the girls shared their frustration. Molly was the most vocal. Tomorrow their parents would be meeting with the police to discuss the ongoing harassment and bullying they had endured. They shared their anxiety.

"I don't know how I'm going to tell my dad about the attempted rape," said Molly. "Thank God, you will all be there. I couldn't do this alone."

"We'll all be there tomorrow. And Freya and Duke will be there. Isn't he cute? I like him," giggled Megan.

Arielle agreed. "Yeah, he's pretty sexy. I think he likes Freya. You could tell by the way he looks at her." The girls nodded in agreement.

"Guys, we're not here to gossip. We're here to prepare ourselves for tomorrow, now let's get down to work – be serious!" admonished Anya.

So, the girls worked diligently preparing themselves for the next day. All the while, they were being observed from a secret admirer watching them from the

backyard. Hidden in a tree and using binoculars to see better, he watched the girls excitedly. It was the not the first time the peeping tom had watched the girls. Nor, would it be the last.

"What are they up to now? Anya is talking- she's always talking. And Molly is crying as usual. Megan is writing in a notebook. Is she taking notes? And Arielle is just sitting there not saying anything. Why, are they having a meeting? Is it about me?"

He pondered their activity a while longer until he grew bored, descended the tree, and walked home. He lived nearby. No one thought anything unusual seeing him in the neighborhood this time of night. After all, they knew him and no one would ever expect anything untoward from the boy next door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Dr. Monika Raju learned that she and her husband were invited to a meeting at Anya's house this afternoon, she grew worried. She suspected something was going on with Molly. Since Sydney's death, Molly's personality had changed drastically. The real changes began last summer. Molly started going to parties with her friends, wearing makeup and sexier clothing. Her husband didn't like seeing his little girl growing up but he accepted it.

Her husband, Azban, was a traditionalist but he was politically progressive, like her. Both her daughters, Molly and Katie were brought up with a focus on education first and socializing second. Still, she liked knowing both of her daughters were popular girls and excellent well-rounded students.

They attended St. Bernadette's School for Girls. A Catholic school, it was known for its tony pedigree and its excellent education. Dr. Raju knew the

importance of education. She and Azban were ambitious in their careers and expected their daughters to pursue careers as well. Katie aspired to be a doctor and Molly would probably end up in the science field. She excelled in chemistry but loved music and the arts too. So, this afternoon meeting at her neighbor's made her anxious. She knocked on her husband's office door.

"Come in."

"Hi honey. Are you done yet? We're supposed to be at the Armstrong's in a half hour."

He stood up and turned off his desk lamp.

"Let me change my shirt and I'll be ready in ten minutes," he said.

A man of his word, fifteen minutes later, the Raju's walked the short distance to Anya's house. It was one of the benefits of living in a cul-de-sac. They walked to the back door and knocked. Ursula Armstrong answered the door. Tall, sleek and all in black, she hugged them each and escorted them into the newly renovated family room.

The walls were grey and a large white sectional sofa occupied the middle of the room. A blue and white geometric rug covered the hard wood floor. A small bar area filled one corner and a jukebox filled the other.

A huge wide screen TV hung suspended over an electric fireplace. And a pool table stood in front of the double French doors leading out to the pool area and hot tub.

Shelves lined one wall. They were filled with family photos and exotic souvenirs. Two ceiling lights with chandelier glass balls hovered over the room giving off subtle lighting that added to the cozy atmosphere. Two white leather chairs faced the fireplace and several grey, blue, and white beanbags covered the floor. Sitting on the beanbags, were Anya, Arielle, Megan and their daughter Molly. They were sharing a bowl of popcorn.

Monika and her husband sat on the sofa with Ursula and her husband, Larry. A woman she'd never seen before introduced herself as Jody Monahan, Megan's mom. Apparently, Arielle's dad couldn't make the meeting so he was the only

absent parent.

The doorbell rang and Larry got up to answer it. He returned shortly with a young girl that Dr. Raju had never seen before. She looked like a college student. The man beside her was tall and well-built with dark wavy hair. She recognized him as the former deputy for Agatha Falls. A very tall exotic woman was standing beside them. She had never seen her before.

“Hello everyone,” said Ursula excitedly. “I’d like to introduce you to our guests. This is Freya Barrett from the Beacon, Duke Mott from the local police department and Detective Dianna Ramirez. She is our new detective all the way from New York City! Please try the delicious treats from the local bakery. The bathroom is right down the hall on the left. Welcome to our home!”

Anya rolled her eyes. “Aunt Ursula, get on with it!”

The woman ignored her niece and continued to talk for another few minutes about the recent renovations in her home. Eventually she turned the floor over to the detective and sat down beside her husband. Detective Ramirez stood up and thanked the Armstrong’s for letting them use their home that afternoon. She then explained as succinctly as she could, the girl’s situation. When she was done, she sat down and Freya took over.

“So, it’s very important that the girls have your support at this time. They need to tell you what is going on, but in their own words. We’re just here for guidance and to help them, of course.”

Dr. Raju raised her hand shyly. “Yes I need some clarification. Are you saying that there’s a rapist roaming the streets of Agatha Falls? And he is targeting our daughters?”

Before Freya could answer, Molly stood up and walked over to her parents.

“I need to tell you both something. Please don’t say anything until I’m done.”

For the next few minutes, Molly told them about the night last summer when Brandon and Mike attacked her and Sydney. In a strained voice, she recounted that night. When she finished, no one spoke. Finally, Molly’s dad said

what they all were thinking.

“Why isn’t this monster in jail where he belongs? Why haven’t you arrested him?”

Duke spoke next and his words seemed to calm the growing anger in the room.

“Mr. Raju, your daughter thankfully was not raped but she was attacked. This happened five months ago, and it was not reported at the time and the only witness is dead. Attempted rape is a misdemeanor in this state. We can arrest Brandon and Mike but they will probably be released without any jail time. We need to build a case against this young man who may be the killer of Sydney Sanders. Please, don’t misunderstand me, I want to get this guy, but we have to do this right.”

Megan’s mom spoke next. “I understand what you’re saying but these girls are 11 and 12 years old! They’re children! Megan, my God, why didn’t you tell me about this?” she demanded.

Speaking calmly and slowly, Megan showed maturity beyond her years.

“Mom, I’m fine. No one has raped me or tried to rape me. I haven’t been bullied yet either. But, I have evidence of cyber bullying from Brandon. I hacked into his personal computer and found the emails he sent to Sydney and Molly. We can get him expelled from Wainsbridge for that. And don’t worry about me getting in trouble for hacking. I didn’t leave any evidence. I’m not sloppy,” she said confidently.

“As far as attempted rape, that’s only punishable by one year in jail in this state if he gets convicted and that’s a big – IF. So, we take what we can get. We take him down with bullying. Once he’s expelled, it ruins his school record. He won’t get into a good college and he’ll never be on the Supreme Court. That’s his dream, by the way. Brett Kavanaugh got away with it, but Brandon won’t.”

She finished speaking, walked over to the snack table and picked up a slice of pizza. Following her lead, Anya and Arielle each grabbed a slice too and began to eat. Even Molly grabbed a slice and ate with her friends; still sitting on

the floor in beanbag chairs. Eventually, the adults started to eat too and after a half hour, the atmosphere in the room relaxed considerably.

On one side of the room sat the parents with Ramirez, Duke, and Freya. On the other side, the girls. The adults discussed their next step while the girls sat quietly, eating, and observing the adults quietly.

“What now?” Molly whispered to Megan.

“I gave Duke the evidence of the cyber bullying. So, that parts done. Next, you have to give a statement to the police about the night you were attacked. And then, Brandon will be taken in for questioning and asked to give a DNA sample,” said Megan.

“How do you know all this?” asked Arielle.

“I’ve already spoken with Duke and Freya. I did it last night and again this morning. I like to be prepared,” Megan answered. The girls continued to talk and snack while the adults made arrangements of their own.

“We need to keep this between us. Please don’t share this with anyone else. We don’t want to lose the element of surprise,” explained Freya.

Duke asked the Raju’s to bring Molly to the police station Monday morning to give her statement. That same afternoon, he would take Brandon in for questioning and ask for the DNA sample. It wouldn’t be easy and he expected Brandon’s dad to fight this all the way. But as soon as Molly’s police report was filed, he had the legal right to act. Plans made, the gathering ended and the guests dispersed. Only Arielle remained at Anya’s and asked if she could sleep over.

“Of course you can! You know I think of you as my own daughter,” gushed Ursula.

The girls ran upstairs to Anya’s room and Ursula and Larry straightened the game room. With the girls out of earshot, the adults spoke unguardedly to each other.

“My God! First Sydney is killed, then Molly almost raped and now Anya and Arielle are being threatened. What can we do?” asked Ursula.

“Well, I’m not standing around waiting for the Agatha Falls police to solve this thing. I’m hiring a private investigator. I know the perfect person for the job. I’ll call him right now.”

He hurried off to this office. Ursula checked the French doors to make sure they were locked. Once she was satisfied, she shut off all the interior lights and turned on the exterior security lights. The back yard, pool, and hot tub were brightly illuminated. For just a moment, Ursula thought she saw movement by the pool house but when she looked again, there was nothing. She shivered in the warm room and pulled the curtains shut. Thankful for the expensive security system monitoring their house and grounds, she went upstairs to her bedroom and turned on the TV. Larry walked in and shut the door behind him.

“Well, it’s all set. He’s going to start following Anya around tomorrow. She won’t know it of course; he’s too good for that. But if anyone tries anything with that kid, Bruce will stop him. We’ll take care of that pervert ourselves.”

Feeling satisfied with himself, he got into bed with his wife and soon fell asleep never knowing that down the hall, his niece had her own idea of how to stay safe. If he thought he knew her, he was very wrong. If anyone could take care of herself, it was Anya. But like most men, he was clueless and had the preconceived notion that he knew what was best for her. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

This morning Freya was going to meet Ivy Nixon; the woman she believed took Hannah. And this afternoon, she was accompanying Duke and Ramirez to Wainsbridge Academy to pick up Brandon. Texting her professor a heads up, she told him she had an assignment for the paper that she had to prioritize. Then, she took off for the long drive to Killington.

Killington was formerly known as Sherburne. The town voted to rename itself Killington in 1999. It was known for its ski resort that was the largest in the eastern United States. Freya was not a skier. As a high school student, she tried cross-country skiing but never downhill. Not a born athlete, she quickly gave it up. Currently her only outdoor winter sport was shoveling snow.

Ivy Nixon lived on River Road. Freya drove along the dirt road until she came to the house. A ski chalet what else? She got out and walked up the front stairs. Looking around, she didn't see anyone so she knocked. A few seconds passed. Suddenly the curtain in the front window was thrust aside. A woman's face peered out. Freya gave a little wave and a smile. The woman appeared

anxious but opened the door anyway. Freya introduced herself.

“Hi Ms. Nixon, I’m Freya Barrett from the Beacon. I’m writing a story about the return of Hannah Baker. I’d like to talk to you. Is that okay?”

The woman looked defeated. Her face was lined with worry and she gave the impression that she lived in a profound state of sadness. Freya felt sorry for her and she didn’t even know her. But, she knew about her past and that was enough to make her sad as well. The woman nodded and opened the door wider and Freya walked inside.

The living area was small but cozy and she could smell the scent of caramel. A wood stove stood in the center of the room and gave off a welcoming heat. Freya followed Ivy into the kitchen. She sat down at a large oak table overlooking the lovely scenery. Ivy poured her a cup of steaming cocoa. Freya inhaled the aroma.

“Is this caramel? That’s one of my favorite flavors.”

“It’s a white chocolate cocoa with caramel added to it.” The woman sat down. Sensing the inevitable, she asked, “Will I be arrested?”

“Why would you be arrested?”

The woman looked at her oddly. “Well, why are you here then?”

Freya sipped her cocoa and waited. She knew that patience was a virtue for a reason. Sometimes, it yielded the best information. People often confessed to her when there was silence. She hoped Ivy Nixon would admit what she had done. She had the feeling she wanted to unburden herself to someone. Freya hoped she could be her confessor. She waited.

A few moments passed. A clock hummed on the wall. A TV was heard in another room. Was that CNN? Finally, the silence became too much. Ivy spoke.

“I live here alone. Well, I have a dog and a cat but you know what I mean. I’m divorced. I had a daughter.”

She stopped then and Freya put her cup down and leaned forward. She looked at Freya and her face said it all. This was the face of a woman who’d lost her child. Freya knew the facts. But she wanted to hear from Ivy. She waited.

Ivy continued. “My daughter disappeared five years ago. She was playing in the yard. I went out to find her but she was gone. It was summer and we were living in town then. We lived near the hospital and it was a good neighborhood. But the police never found her.” She stopped then, and Freya took her empty cup to the sink and rinsed it out.

“Can I call you Ivy?”

The woman turned around to face her. She seemed relieved to hear her voice.

“Yes, call me Ivy. I want to show you something, come with me.”

Freya followed her into a room that looked like an office. Ivy took a photo album off a shelf and handed it to Freya.

“This is what I have left of her. This was her last school picture. She would have been 14 last month. I like to believe that whoever took her loves her like a daughter. But I know she’s dead. I feel it.”

Freya looked at the picture. A red haired girl with freckles and wide set eyes. She had her mother’s eyes. Freya smiled and handed the album back.

“What was her name?”

Ivy smiled. “Ainsley. It means meadow in Gaelic. I thought it was pretty.”

“They never found her. Who do they think took her? Any idea?”

Ivy shrugged. “The police came up with lots of theories but her body was never found. My husband blamed me, I blamed him, and we split up. I moved up here to get away from everyone. I work from home. I’m a certified medical coder. The money is good and I make my own hours. After a while, everyone moved on and people left me alone.”

Freya asked the question that brought her there.

“Hannah Baker looks like your daughter. Is that why you took her?”

She smiled then, for the first time. She exhaled and her body relaxed. She sat down and Freya sat beside her.

“I’m moving to Seattle. Did you know that? I’m taking a job as a compliance officer at a hospital out there. I went to school there and always liked

the area. But when I married, we moved here because my husband was born here. My house has already been sold. I leave after Thanksgiving."

Freya tried again.

"Why did you bring her back?"

The question surprised Ivy. But, in Freya's mind, it was the only question worth asking. It was obvious why the child was taken – to replace the child stolen from her five years before. But, why did she return her? If she did plan to move across the country, why not take Hannah with her and start over? Other women have done that.

Freya asked again.

"Why return Hannah? Why not take her to Seattle and start over? Hannah liked you. She told me."

Ivy's eyes glistened and she turned away and faced the wall. Freya remained quiet and waited. Sometimes in journalism, it was a waiting game. Sometimes, the best thing a reporter could do was be patient. Eventually everyone talked. It was human nature to engage. Only the truly sociopathic remained alone and isolated by choice. And Ivy was not a sociopath.

Ivy turned back to Freya. She looked more composed. She crossed her arms and held them there, like a shield.

"I gave her back because she wasn't mine. I couldn't make another parent feel the way I did after she was gone. Oh, I wanted to keep her and I know she loved me. I knew her mom was a doctor. I saw them in the park one day last summer. They were at a puppy obedience class. Her mother was such a bitch! Yelling at her, grabbing her arm, and even pulling on her braids. I thought to myself, that woman doesn't deserve to be a mother. So, I followed them home and found out where they lived. Then, one day last fall, I drove through the neighborhood and there she was. All by herself, except for her puppy. I stopped and asked her about the dog and she answered. She seemed lonely to me. I told her I was going shopping and asked her if she wanted to come along?" Ivy laughed to herself. "She jumped right in my car! Just like that. I couldn't believe

how easy it was. Then I took her home and she was all mine for six glorious weeks."

"Then what happened?" asked Freya.

Ivy exhaled. She suddenly seemed very tired.

"She missed her dog and her toys. She even said she missed her mother. So, what could I do? I brought her back." Turning directly toward Freya, she asked her a question.

"So, how did you find me? I was so careful."

Freya explained how she tracked her down and the woman just shook her head.

"A receipt? I thought I threw that out. Oh well, its water under the bridge now. So, what happens? Will I go to jail?" She suddenly resigned to her fate. Freya explained.

"It's not my job to be judge and jury. But, I think you've suffered enough. I'm not going to say anything."

"You mean you're not going to write about this? What about the paper?"

Freya had already made her decision. There would be no story. Sensationalizing a tragic event was not something Freya aspired to do. It wasn't what being a journalist was all about. Ivy had suffered enough. And right now, Hannah needed time with her family. Fame would not benefit either.

"Thank you, I appreciate that. I know I did something wrong and I'll never do it again. I put those parents through hell. I hate myself for doing that but I swear I will never do that again."

"I don't think you will either. So, that's all behind us now. Focus on the future. My motto is – Go Forward."

"Go Forward. I like that."

Freya said good bye and drove to Wainsbridge. She had just enough time to meet Duke and Ramirez there. As she drove she thought about Ivy and what a terrible thing she had lived through. She lost her daughter. No, not lost, her daughter was stolen from her. And she was probably dead. What an awful thing

to live through. But people do it every day.

According to the statistics, over 2,000 children in America go missing every day. Some are kidnapped by relatives while others are taken by strangers. Over 80% are female and often sexual abuse occurs after being taken.

Freya arrived at the academy and parked in the visitor parking lot. She texted Duke and waited. He texted her back.

> On my way. See you soon.

She turned on the radio and listened to the weather report. Thanksgiving was next week and snow was predicted for the next ten days. Freya like shoveling as much as she liked root canals and pap smears. But she lived in New England and that went with the territory.

Duke's vehicle pulled into the parking lot with Detective Ramirez following behind. She hopped out of her Escape and joined them. They entered the side door leading to the administrative offices. No one knew they were coming.

Ramirez would do the questioning and Duke would be the backup. Freya hadn't met Brandon yet. She looked forward to seeing him taken in for questioning. Now that Molly Raju had filed a formal complaint, the police had what they needed. They walked into the waiting room outside the head masters office. Ramirez asked for Headmaster Gabriel. His secretary immediately got up out of her chair and went to look for him. Less than a minute passed before he appeared, face flushed and sweating heavily. He was dressed for the gym.

Ramirez introduced Mott and Freya and then asked to see Brandon. She explained the complaint against him. Gabriel stammered and stuttered but eventually calmed down enough to have someone bring Brandon to his office. Five minutes later the boy appeared.

He was the epitome of a spoiled rich boy. Rude, sarcastic and even petulant, but he agreed to come in for questioning if his lawyer and his father were notified. And he asked in that order, lawyer first, father second. Freya thought

that was very telling. With her background in psychology, she couldn’t help but diagnosis him.

An antisocial narcissist with a borderline personality disorder. A sociopath too, she surmised. He was a rapist, but a murderer? Well, they would find out very soon. She watched as Ramirez put him in the back seat of her car without hand cuffs. She caught him looking at her. He eyed her up and down and smirked, as if she weren’t his type.

No, I’m too old for you aren’t I? You like 12 years olds don’t you?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Girls, I want your essays on Little Women handed in this Friday. As you know, we have a holiday next week and the entire week off from school. I’m sure you all have plans so I wish you a very happy Thanksgiving and a safe one too. And don’t eat too much. Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins!”

Sister Grace Mary was petite and had a very pretty face with large brown eyes and small lips. The girls at St. Bernadette’s School often wondered why she became a nun in the first place.

“She could have been a model or an actress. Especially with her face and figure. What a waste! No one becomes a nun anymore,” admonished Anya with a shake of her head.

The girls rushed off to their last class of the day. It was their favorite too. French with Sister Veronique. Their classroom was decorated with pictures of France and especially Paris, Sister Veronique’s birthplace. The room was always bright and cheery. A tall, slim nun with a narrow face and lovely grey eyes stood before them.

“Bonne après-midi jeunes dames. Veuillez prendre vos places. Aujourd’hui on apprend la grele mar yen francais.”

“What?” whispered a clueless Anya.

“She wants us to take our seats. We’re learning the Hail Mary today,” whispered Megan.

The girls took their seats and the class began. Sister Veronique stood in front of the class with the blackboard behind her. The prayer was written in French in lovely cursive handwriting. She began to recite in French.

Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grace.
Le Seigneur est avec vous.
Vous etes benie entre toutes les femmes,
Et Jesus, le fruit de vos entrailles, est beni.
Sainte Marie, Mere de Dieu,
priez pour nous, pauvres pecheurs,
Maintenant et a l’heure de notre mort.

Now, speaking in English, she said,

“Girls, I want you to form groups and practice saying it out loud to each other. No fooling around now. What I can’t see, God can.” The nun sat down at her desk and Anya, Arielle, and Megan formed a group.

“So, did Molly take the day off to go the police station? I didn’t see her in chemistry,” asked Megan.

Anya nodded. “Yeah, she and her sister filed a police report today. And then, the police were going to Wainsbridge to pick up Brandon. I wish I could see his face! I hate that bastard.”

SHHHHH! Said someone from the back of the classroom.

“Talk softer Anya. For Christ’s sake, the nun will hear you,” said Arielle.

When the class finished, the girls went to their respective lockers. They regrouped at the bike rack. Arielle was sleeping over at Anya’s the entire week. Her dad was away on business. But she knew the truth. He was with his new girlfriend, and she didn’t like kids.

“I’ve got to get home. My grandma’s here from Florida. Call me, okay?”

Megan pedaled off toward her home and Anya and Arielle took route to Anya's house. The girls peddled down the hill leading to their neighborhood. But something wasn't right. Anya mentioned it to Arielle.

"What guy? I don't see anyone."

"That bald dude over there." Anya pointed to a man with a bad head and wearing a flannel jacket. He looked like any old man.

"What about him?"

"I swear I saw him this morning on my way to school. And now I see him again. How do we know he's not some pervert?"

Arielle said nothing as they peddled into the cul-de-sac where they lived. Going directly to Anya's garage, the girls locked their bikes inside and entered through the kitchen door, locking it behind them. Since the blue envelopes started arriving, Anya had taken extra care to make sure all the doors were locked at her house. Today was no exception.

As soon as they got to Anya's bedroom, she pulled something from her tote bag. It looked like a crude handmade doll. She tossed it at Arielle who caught it and tossed it on the bed.

"What the hell is that thing?"

"That is a poppet."

"And that is?"

"A small figure of a person used in magic," answered Anya.

Arielle rolled her eyes. Ignoring Anya she started to remove her books from her back pack and arranged them on the table she was using as a make shift desk. Arielle was accustomed to doing her homework as soon as she got home from school. As she sat down to work, Anya rushed over.

"Aren't you even going to ask me why I have one?"

The look on Arielle's face said it all. She was a non-believer. Arielle was not a religious child other than her Catholic upbringing. She had no interest in the occult and thought it silly. She didn't voice that to her best friend. She saw no harm in her friend believing in magic as long as she didn't try to use it to hurt

anyone.

“What do you need a poppet for?”

Anya smiled. Now the center of attention, she explained her goal.

“Well, I made it at school in sculpting class. It’s made from clay and cloth. I just need one final thing to make it perfect though. Then maybe you’ll understand.”

She walked over to her closet and pulled a book down from the overhead shelf. It looked like a year book. As Arielle looked closer, she recognized last year’s Wainsbridge Academy year book. Anya opened it up to a page and showed Arielle. The page displayed the football team and its star quarterback – Brandon. Now it all made sense. She was going to hex him.

Arielle watched in fascination as her friend cut the picture and very neatly removed the head of the boy from the photo. She removed a glue gun from her desk drawer, dabbed the back of the photo, and pressed it firmly to the head of the poppet. She held it fast for thirty seconds, stood back, and surveyed her work. She smiled in appreciation. Waving it in Arielle’s face, she spoke.

“Now it’s complete.”

She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and began chanting over the doll.

> I invoke the wrath of the spirt world against this man who has revealed himself as a danger to women.
>
> I invoke the magical energies in the universe to curse Brandon Cambridge.
>
> I ask the Goddesses of Light and Darkness to avenge our friend’s death by punishing this man – Brandon Cambridge.
>
> I call on all the negative energy in the universe to punish Brandon Cambridge.
>
> I curse you Brandon Cambridge in the flesh and in the spirit.
>
> May all the ills of the world befall you.
>
> May you suffer as you have made others suffer.
>
> May pestilence sicken you. May your health fail you.
>
> May these pins inflict pain and suffering upon you as you have made others suffer.

May you never know a moment’s peace.

Anya inserted a large pin vertically though the head of the poppet. Another pin into the belly of the figure and another into the lower back. Then, a pin inserted into the bottoms of each foot.

Laying it on her desk, she took a piece of paper and Arielle watched as she printed very neatly the name- Brandon Cambridge and folded the paper twice into a small square. She opened a drawer and pulled out a black candle in the shape of a man, genitalia, and all. She lit the candle and burned the square while repeating the chant.

May you never know a moment’s peace.

She dropped the remnants of the burning paper into a small black iron cauldron. She wrapped the poppet in a piece of burlap, stuffed it into her bottom desk drawer, and locked it. Then, she turned to Arielle.

“I’m hungry. Let’s order a pizza.”

She grabbed her cell and pressed speed dial and the ordered a small pepperoni for Arielle and a medium sausage and mushroom for herself. She pocketed her phone.

“Thirty minutes. I’ll wait downstairs.”

Anya left the room and Arielle remained standing by the desk still looking at the black candle and the grey ashes in the bottom of the cauldron. *Where did she get a cauldron?* Probably at that magic shop, she’s always talking about. For the first time since knowing Anya, Arielle was actually afraid of her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Local Boys Charged with Attempted Rape
Freya Barrett

A recent accusation of attempted rape has rocked the Agatha Falls community. Two local boys from Wainsbridge Academy have been accused of attempted rape. The accuser is a 12 year old student of St. Bernadette's School for Girls. The alleged attack took place last summer at a party attended by students of both schools.

The accuser, who will not be named in this article because she is a minor, said she was grabbed and thrown onto a bed by two boys on her way to the bathroom. The accused, Brandon Cambridge and Mike Chancellor are both 17. They allegedly attacked her and another girl, Sydney Sanders, the former Miss Junior Connecticut who was found drowned in Raven's Pond on Halloween night.
Ms. Sanders was able to get away and run for help.

The accuser's sister was also present at the party. She witnessed the attack and stated, "My sister was lying there on the bed and the boys were taking turns jumping on her. Her pants were pulled down. Her bra and panties were torn off. Her shirt was ripped in half and thrown on the floor. She was crying and they were laughing. If Sydney hadn't told my boyfriend and me what happened, and we didn't show up in time, my sister would have been raped."

Cambridge and Chancellor deny everything. Their defense counsel, Dabney Cohen stated, "These children are lying out of spite and jealousy towards these students. These boys are wealthy and popular. If anything happened between my clients and the accused, she

consented to it. This is a case of he said- she said. Nothing more."

However, the police disagreed and found enough evidence to charge Cambridge and Chancellor with attempted rape. Both boys are now under house arrest. Both live in Agatha Falls and attend Wainsbridge Academy. Both are on the football team and serve as altar boys at Trinity Church.

Earlier this week, emails, texts, and letters were submitted exposing threats and harassment against the accuser and Miss Sanders. The emails appear to have originated from Cambridge's private computer. Since the murder last month of Ms. Sanders, the police have been unsuccessful in finding the perpetrator. Law enforcement is now reviewing the emails in hope of finding a connection between the attack and the murder of Ms. Sanders. Mr. Cambridge's cellphone is now under review by the Agatha Falls forensics team.

It has also been alleged that rape parties occur and young girls as young as 12 have been assaulted. These parties are given by students of Wainsbridge and the young female students from St. Bernadette's are often invited. One Wainsbridge student who asked not to be named in this article stated, "We like the girls from Bernadette's because their clean. You know- virgins!"

Requests for an interview were ignored by the administration at Wainsbridge Academy. But Sister Evangeline from St. Bernadette's School for Girls said, "God sees all. He knows the truth. If these men think they can get away with this they are wrong. They may be able to beat a court of law. But God will not let this go unpunished."

If anyone has any information about the murder of Sydney Sanders, please contact Detective Dianna Ramirez at the Agatha Falls Police Department. If anyone has been raped or assaulted at any of these rape parties, please call the rape hotline. If you would rather speak to me personally, please call me at the Beacon. You are not alone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The snow fell in big flakes covering the front lawn and sidewalk. Freya had removed her thirteen Jack-O-Lanterns last week and smashed them in her back yard for the forest animals to eat. She noticed the remnants of seeds all over her yard and smiled to herself. No wonder her cat, Dexter had gone crazy all week in his window tree. The squirrels and chipmunks must have had a feast with all the pumpkin seeds. But Freya didn't care about the mess.

Today was Thanksgiving. And Freya was spending it with her friend Ali and her dad. They were eating at the new Canterbury Club. She thought of it as new because it had been totally remodeled since the fire last year. She still had nightmares of being caught in that fire.

She looked forward to dinner with her friend Ali. She'd also be seeing her other friend, Enid Prager Jones tonight. She was the local historian who was helping Freya write her first book. The Canterbury Club was located on the outskirts of town at the local country club. Ali Park, Freya's best friend since high school was a member, as was her father, Dr. Park. An urologist, he was

well-known throughout New England as a premier urology specialist.

Freya waited by her front door. She periodically glanced out her window for her ride. Enid was picking her up today. Her brother Jake was eating Thanksgiving dinner with his fiancé's family. He worried when he told her he'd be eating somewhere else this year. But Freya wasn't hurt or even bothered by it. Things had changed. Jake was getting married next June. Freya now lived in her own home. They weren't kids anymore. They were adults and they lived adult lives.

A shiny navy blue Ford SUV pulled up in front of Freya's house. It certainly wasn't Enid. She drove a 1930's style Bentley. You couldn't forget the lovely car once you saw it. This definitely was not Enid. The SUV parked and a tall man wearing a charcoal grey overcoat got out of the vehicle. His hair was brown and he appeared to be in his late twenties. He was lanky but muscular in build. Freya was shocked when she saw him. She immediately opened the front door and walked outside despite the cold.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked at her skeptically and sized her up. She was going out for the evening, that much was obvious. She was wearing a knee length black velvet wrap skirt with black tights. A black lace blouse and black ankle boots completed her look. Her hair was down and freshly washed and blown dried. She wore a long red silky scarf loose around her neck. Her usual wardrobe consisted of jeans, khakis, and casual tops. He smiled and winked.

"Are you going out with your other boyfriend? Should I have called first?"

He was joking but Freya didn't see the humor in it. She was ready for him. She had planned exactly what she would say if she ever saw him again.

"Actually, a phone call would have been nice. After all, you were gone, what, almost an entire month without calling me? I would have thought my boyfriend would at least call me, say, once a week. So, yeah, you should have called me. But since you didn't, I made other plans."

Before he could respond, a black Boucheron Bentley pulled into her

driveway. An elegant woman dressed all in red and wearing a small fur stole got out of the car. She reminded Freya of someone from a 1930's movie. Enid loved old movies and right now, she looked like she had walked out of William Wyler film.

"Erik! Welcome back! Where have you been? It hasn't been the same around here without you," she said as she threw her arms around him. He hugged her back and they quickly walked into Freya's house.

"Oh, it's cold! I should have worn something warmer."

"Enid, you look great. Come inside and warm up a bit," offered Freya.

Still ignoring Erik, she went into her kitchen to get Enid a hot coffee. Erik followed. She began the coffee and assembled a tea tray. Erik watched in silence. When the coffee was done, Freya carried the tray into the living room and placed it on the coffee table. She poured two cups and offered one to Enid and the other to Erik. After a few awkward seconds, small talk began.

"So, Erik how was your trip?"

"Thanks for asking Enid, it was great. How about you? How's the new book coming along?"

And it went like that for a few more minutes until Erik turned to Freya. She looked him square in the eye.

"Where's your truck?"

"Traded it in."

"Why?"

"It was time."

"Hmmm."

Enid, sensing an argument, suggested they leave for the restaurant. Erik followed them.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Enid explained their plans.

"The Canterbury Club. I've never been there before. Is the food good?"

He bantered with Enid until they reached the driveway. Then, he looked at

Enid and she looked back at him and gave a little nod.

“Freya, why don’t you ride with Erik tonight? My heater isn’t working very well. You know how old cars are. I’ll meet you at the club. Toodles!” She jumped in her vehicle before Freya could respond. She roared off leaving them alone on the snow filled driveway. Erik extended his hand.

“Shall I escort you to my new vehicle?”

Freya walked ahead of him. He opened the door for her and she got in the passenger seat. He got into the driver’s seat and fiddled with the seat belt. He took his time as he arranged the belt. After he was satisfied with that, he moved on to the GPS. Finally, Erik broke the silence.

“I read your article. It was great.”

She said thanks but offered nothing more. He turned to her. “Freya, I admit it, I suck at communication. I’m sorry I never called but I was extremely busy. My grandfather died and left me as the executor of his estate. I texted you every week though so it’s not like I totally ignored you,” he said defensively.

“Erik, if I went away for a month and never called you and only sent a weekly text giving only the skimpiest of messages, you’d be pissed. So don’t give me any crap about you being busy. I’m busy too. The whole world is busy,” she answered hotly.

Taking a deep breath and counting to ten, she calmed herself down enough to attempt a civil conversation. After all, he did apologize and today was Thanksgiving. Not being one to hold a grudge, she patted his arm casually.

“Just forget it. Today is a holiday and I’d like to enjoy it. So, you liked my article? Well, I’m happy to say that I received a nasty letter from one of the accuser’s lawyers. My boss at the paper said not to worry though. He gave it to the legal department. I didn’t do anything illegal or unethical. But I’m happy knowing I shook up their beautiful little world. Why do the rich think they can do anything and get away with everything? Why are they not expected to be accountable like the rest of us mere mortals?”

Her diatribe ended, she exhaled and turned on the radio. Christmas music

was playing.

“Because they can.”

“What?”

“I said, because they can. The rich can and do get away with everything. Look at the President. Look at what he has done. Look at his family. Very rich people live a different life than the rest of us. But it’s our fault because we live in a celebrity culture. In this country, the rich are treated like celebrities. They get away with it because we let them.”

He was right, thought Freya. Her friend Ali called it the Kardashian effect. If a person was a big enough celebrity, they got special treatment. *Well, Brandon and Mike are not getting away with this.*

They arrived at the Canterbury Club. Freya spotted Enid’s car immediately in the lot. They walked to the front entrance and admired the new décor. The club had only been partially destroyed by fire last year. But, the owners decided to take the opportunity to remodel and expand. The new design was Spanish revival. An odd choice for a New England club but it worked.

The look was classic but distinct. Curves and arches, a white stucco exterior and lots of hand-painted tile. Four large tower-like chimneys emerged from a roof covered in terracotta tiles. The front door was wooden and covered with an iron scrolled decorative gate. The entry way was enhanced by a scrolled stair railing leading to the second floor restaurant. She and Erik entered the large room and looked around for their friends.

“Freya! Over here!”

She turned toward the voice and saw her friend Ali sitting with her dad at a large round table. Enid was there with Donal, her literary agent. They approached the table and sat down.

The room was large but the décor added a cozy elegance with its muted tones and brightly colored Persian rugs. Wrought iron, Gothic candlesticks, oil paintings, and glazed, decorative Catalina tiles completed the look. The overall effect was striking.

The table was set for six. A waiter in a bow tie and a black vest poured mineral water into a glass and asked Freya if she preferred something from the bar. Not yet 21, she politely declined. For the next hour and a half, she didn't think about her job or school. She ate, visited with friends, and relaxed. At the end of the evening, Erik pulled her aside.

"We need to talk."

Oh no.

"About what?"

"Can we talk at your house? It's important."

He looked so serious. She told him yes. They could talk at her house. But her anxiety remained. Dessert was served and Freya only picked at her pumpkin pie. Ali kicked her under the table. When Freya looked up, Ali caught her eye. *What's wrong?* Freya nodded but her friend knew better. Ali stood up.

"Freya and I need to use the powder room."

"Oh, me too! I can't wait to see their bathrooms," said Enid.

The new ladies bathroom was very different from the former one. Freya felt uneasy as she entered the room. The last time she'd been there, a fire had been set and she caught inside. The arsonist was also a killer she had been taunting with her weekly articles. It was only 11 months ago, but Freya still shuddered at the memory.

The new bathroom design was also Spanish revival. Large ornate iron gates capped the two bay windows facing the forest. No longer a balcony outside, the windows occupied almost the entire wall of the room. Three wooden benches covered in brightly colored cushions stood against the remaining tiled walls. The four sinks were porcelain and the mirrors suspended above them were outlined in mosaic tiles. Three small mini chandeliers hung over them casting a subdued pink light. Soft classical guitar music was playing from somewhere overhead. She sat down on one of the benches. Ali sat beside her.

"So, what's up?"

Freya told her. Ali nodded knowingly but listened and said nothing. She

knew that sometimes the best thing friends could do for another friend was listening. When Freya finished, Ali took her hand.

“Freya, just listen to what he says, okay? It’s probably nothing. You know how guys are. They don’t communicate like women. And don’t doubt yourself about your article either. You wrote the truth. You are exactly where you are supposed to be right now in your life. You own a beautiful home; have a great career, friends, and family. You have your health and my God, - your book – you are writing a book! And you are only 20 years old. Speaking of that – what do you want to do for your birthday. It’s seventeen days away.”

Freya laughed out loud. “You counted? My God, you are too funny. It’s just another day.”

Ali nodded vigorously. “No, 21 is a big deal. I am going to plan a girls night out. You, Lorna, Enid, Dolores, and me. Where is Dolores, by the way?”

“Las Vegas. She’s spending the holidays with her relatives. Yeah, a girls night out sounds fun. Plan it and I’ll go. Thanks Ali.” Freya hugged her friend just as Enid emerged from the stall.

“Can you believe Donal texted me to ask me what was taking so long? Men!”

The three women returned to the table as Erik stood up. “You ready?”

Freya said yes and conferred her good byes to Ali, Enid, Donal, and Dr. Park. She drove home with Erik. He talked non-stop about his family in Montreal. He sounded happy – a feeling he normally didn’t convey. Freya was worried.

“So, have you ever been to Montreal?” he asked all of a sudden.

Freya explained her last trip to Montreal consisted of a bus trip with Ali to the Botanical Gardens while in high school. He smirked.

“That’s not the real Montreal. Do you think you could get some time off from work soon? I know school is over for the term. We could go up there and you could meet my family and see where I grew up. How about it?”

Freya didn’t answer immediately. She wasn’t sure what to say, so she

stalled.

“Um, let me see. I’ll talk to Lou. I’ll let you know,” she answered evasively.

Erik smiled and pulled his vehicle into her driveway. He seemed satisfied with her answer. That worried her even more. Her cat Dexter met her at the front door with a loud MEOW.

“Dex, are you hungry again? Come here sweetie, I’ll give you a snack.”

Erik and the cat followed her into the large open modern kitchen. She slid off her coat and hung it in the closet. Taking the cat food bag from the cabinet she poured a little into a small dish and placed it on the floor. The cat ate greedily. Freya and Erik walked into the living room and sat on the sofa. Freya had started decorating her artificial tree and the unopened boxes of ornaments sat piled up on her coffee table. Erik picked up a small box of ornaments and looked inside.

“This one is pretty.”

Freya smiled. “That was my mom’s favorite.”

She took the glass ornament with the hand painted poinsettia and hung it on a branch. She still found this time of year difficult. It reminded her that both her parents were dead, killed by a drunk driver almost five years ago. But, life must go on. So, she put up a tree and decorated it. She wondered if she would ever be able to celebrate a holiday without thinking of her parent’s sudden death.

“Freya, do you ever think about your future?”

Startled by the suddenness of the personal question, she was speechless. Yes, she thought about her future a lot. But she had the impression he meant something else.

“Yes, I have plans, doesn’t everyone?”

“I don’t mean career plans. What about marriage and kids? Do you ever think about that? I know you’re young but we’ve never discussed our future. We are in a relationship but it’s not a priority for you, is it?”

“Well, is it for you? I mean, you’re young too. Twenty-eight isn’t old. What’s the hurry all of a sudden? What has changed?”

“Well, that’s just it- nothing has changed for us in the past year. We go out, sometimes I sleep over, but that’s it. I just wonder what the future holds for us, don’t you? I guess I want something more. Do you?”

Freya shook her head at the irony of his questions. Just one year ago, Freya gave Erik an ultimatum and he turned her down. She thought it was the end for them. But things worked out. They had been together ever since but he was right. Her career came first, just as his did for him. She reminded him of that.

“Yeah, but that was last year. Don’t throw that in my face,” he admonished her. “You know a lot happened last year and I wasn’t in a good place to be in a relationship. I just think that we should have a discussion about the future.”

A discussion.

“Erik, did something happen in Montreal?”

Before he could replay, Freya’s cell phone rang. She looked over at the phone lying on the coffee table. Erik saw her eyeing it.

“Go ahead, it might be important.”

Freya answered the phone.

“Freya, I hate to bother you on a holiday but something happened and I knew you’d want to know,” said Duke.

“No, go ahead.”

“Brandon Cambridge is in the hospital. He had a seizure tonight and went into cardiac arrest. He’s in the ICU at Mercy Regional. That’s all I know for now. I’m on my way there. I’ll call you later when I know more. Good night.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mercy Regional was a 100 bed hospital specializing in outpatient services. Serving the southwestern portion of the state's needs, the hospital promoted wellness and preventative care. Its intensive care unit provided specialized treatment to patients who were acutely unwell or required critical care.

Brandon was placed in the Level 3 CCU, cardiac care unit. Patients placed there were considered high dependency and thus the unit was known as the High Dependency Unit. Anyone needing two or more organs supported or needing mechanical ventilation was placed under level 3 surveillance. Since Brandon had a cardiac arrest, he was placed in the cardiac care unit of intensive care. For heart attack patients, the first 24 to 48 hours were crucial. It is the time span where their health would be most unstable.

Brandon had sustained a cardiac arrest due to poisoning from cyanide. The lab results confirmed that. But where did the cyanide originate? The young man was celebrating Thanksgiving with his family and a host of friends. The meal was a catered affair and no one else had been poisoned. So, why him?

This was the question Detective Ramirez asked herself as she stood outside the boy's room. Brandon collapsed at home in front of his family during dinner.

He was resuscitated by his uncle, a retired physician who happened to be at the party. He awakened briefly only to fall into a comatose state and remained that way. Since cardiac arrest is rare in someone young and healthy, opiate poisoning was suspected. Opiate addiction poisoning can lead to cardiac arrest and cause both metabolic and structural damage to the central nervous system. But the boy's father was adamant his son was not an addict. Toxicology reports confirmed that Brandon had consumed an almost lethal dose of cyanide. But from where? The food catered from Green Creek Catering had tested negative for cyanide. So, how did the boy ingest it? And, who poisoned him?

"So, what have I missed?"

She jumped at the question. She was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't notice Duke Mott. She gave him a quick update.

"That's all I know for now. He's having an EEG now to confirm brain activity. It doesn't look good," she added. Just then, Brandon's father emerged from the room. Staring Ramirez in the eye, he quickly walked past her.

"He does not like you," said Duke.

"Hmm, well, I don't care for him either," she quipped.

They watched through the glass window as the EEG tech attached electrodes to Brandon's head. He reminded Ramirez of the character Pinhead in the horror series, Hellraiser. Her cell phone pinged. She had a text from the police lab.

> Lab results show cyanide breakdown
> from mass amounts of apricot seeds.

Apricot seeds. Where did he ingest that? Ramirez googled apricot seeds and sure enough, if a person ingested enough of them while crushed, the amygdalin in them broke down into cyanide. According to the article, apricots contained vitamin B17 and the seeds were often ingested whole but not crushed. Like apple seeds and cherry pits, amygdalin was contained. If crushed, the human

metabolism broke down the components into cyanide. Enough cyanide in the body could lead a person to cardiac arrest and then stroke. Worst case scenario – a comatose state. Bingo. Brandon was intentionally poisoned. But by whom?

She relayed the information to Mott and they left for the police lab. As they exited the CCU, Brandon's father observed them and grabbed for his cell. He made a call and spoke quietly into the receiver. When he was done, he pocketed his phone and reentered his son's room. He watched the EEG technician and the doctor read the results. He could tell from the look on their faces it wasn't good.

"So Doctor, how's my boy?"

The doctor knew the truth. But how do you tell a parent their only child is in a prolonged vegetative state?

"Mr. Cambridge, his brain activity is very weak. But, it is still early. Let's hope for the best and see what happens in the next 48 hours." The physician walked briskly out the door and down the hallway leaving Brandon's father alone in the room.

If I ever find out who did this to my boy, I'll kill them myself. It wasn't the first time he'd made that promise to himself and he never broke a promise – never.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As quietly as they could, the intruder entered the house unnoticed. This time of day, no one was home. They went up the stairs directly to the boy's room. They had at least an hour before anyone arrived home. It was the day before Thanksgiving, the perfect time to set their plan into motion.

Looking around the large bedroom, they immediately went over to the lap top. It was sitting on the desk facing the window. They turned it on, sat down at the desk, and began downloading the information that would seal this young man's fate. Wearing gloves, they typed a few emails and hit the send button. After ten minutes, they were done. It was such a short period of time and yet it would cause so much damage.

Then the intruder looked around the room again. Where to stash it? It needed to be in a place the authorities could easily see it. Hmmm, what about the desk itself? Opening a drawer and peering inside, they saw enough room for their cache. They left it there, shut the door, and stood up. Then, just to make things easy for the cops, they decided to leave some obvious evidence in the

bathroom too. So, they deposited more of their reserve on the sink and floor by the toilet. Now, that looked right. The cops will think he tried to flush the evidence down the toilet.

Pleased with themselves, they exited the room, walked swiftly down the stairs and into the kitchen. Using the remainder of their cache, they added it to a bottle of Gatorade and stashed it in their backpack. That was it. The entire affair took less than half an hour. But, more than enough time to ruin someone's life. They left by the back door and walked into the dense forest behind Mike Chancellor's home. Their plan was almost complete. Now, all they had to do was get inside Brandon's home and place the bottle of Gatorade in his refrigerator. Feeling confident, the intruder walked the short distance to Brandon's home.

The house looked deserted. Today was arraignment day. Brandon would be at the courthouse with his dad. The family had a security system but that was no problem. All one had to do was capture the codes being sent to the security box. The intruder was astute enough to have purchased a software program that detected the password used to disarm the system. Using their I-pad, they downloaded the password. It took less than five minutes. Entering the security code at the back door, they walked in and went directly to the kitchen. They opened the refrigerator door and spied the other bottles of Gatorade. They added their bottle to the batch on the shelf. It fit right in. No one would know that it was filled with poison.

Shutting the fridge, they quickly left. They disappeared into the dense forest behind Brandon's home. Feeling elated, they walked through the woods until they saw their house. They casually entered through the front door as if they had done nothing more than return from an early morning jog. After all, the neighbors were familiar with their routine -a jog every morning without fail. So, no one would expect anything nefarious. Besides, it was their experience that everyone was only concerned with themselves and their lives.

We live in a selfish world. We don't speak to each other face to face anymore. We email, we text or we skype. We don't interact. We don't engage.

We are all living in our own little worlds. Why, a person could commit murder in broad daylight and no one would ever be the wiser.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Agatha Falls had experienced much change in the past few years. The little New England town with the idyllic postcard scenery was now gripped with its own opiate epidemic. Like other small towns across America, the ravages of drugs had taken its toll.

Rural and small town America had been hard hit by the drug crisis and Agatha Falls was no different. The effects were felt both economically and personally. The local police department advocated for treatment for those under incarceration. They introduced education into the high school and middle school. Officers were trained to recognize the signs of abuse or dependence in people with substance abuse disorders. But, in spite of their efforts, death by overdose was common. In the last five years, Agatha Falls had suffered a dozen drug overdose deaths.

The town's residents wanted so much to blame the death of Sydney Sanders on such a person. It was easier for them to accept her death that way. They wanted to believe that the boys who raped and harassed the girls at St. Bernadette's were drug users. Many couldn't accept that their rape parties were fueled by cruelty and hatred toward females, not drugs. This was one more example of the rape culture that existed in America today. It was easier to accept drugs as the reason for rape. Thus, the act of rape became normalized and substance abuse was blamed instead of the individuals who committed the act.

Freya Barrett knew many of the people who felt this way. Some of them were even her college friends. Rape on college campuses was often normalized as a drunken mistake. Some of the male students used the word rape as a verb. For example, “I raped that exam.” Freya hated hearing that expression from the male coeds. It frustrated her to acknowledge that even at an institution of higher learning people could be so stupid. Now, with Brandon in the hospital, she thought that was the end of it. But, last night, his best friend, Mike Chancellor was arrested for his attempted murder.

Crushed apricot seeds found in his desk and bathroom led police to believe that Mike added them to Brandon’s Gatorade at some point before the Thanksgiving dinner where Brandon ingested them. Searches were performed on his home computer. They revealed over two dozen articles on the dangers of crushed apple and apricot seeds had been downloaded. Once ingested, the crushed seeds broke down into cyanide after the human body metabolized them.

Someone anonymously called the tip line and gave Mike’s name as the perpetrator. They said he was jealous of his best friend and wanted him out of the way. A warrant was issued and the house searched. Voila! Murder suspect arrested and jailed, all in one day. Case closed. But was it?

As much as Freya disliked both Brandon and Mike, she felt the whole thing was a little too neat. She had one of her hunches that maybe the whole thing was a set up. After all, there were plenty of people who hated both boys now. But, with no proof to go on, it was just a hunch. She scheduled an upcoming meeting with Detective Ramirez to share her suspicions. But for right now, she had other business to confront and it was personal.

Erik was driving her crazy! Suddenly he had transformed into a very needy person. She felt suffocated. He called her and texted her every day. He stopped by her house almost every night. Freya hated needy people. She herself was an island. She hated weakness in others but had the empathy to understand that not everyone was like her. Some people needed people. They needed relationships to complete them. They needed marriage to validate them. But Freya was different.

She really didn’t need anyone. And the realization scared her. She knew Erik was intuitive enough to notice that. So, he became needy. She presumed his need came from his abandonment issues and his younger sister’s murder. But she didn’t want that in her life right now. Her career and education came first. And her book was almost finished.

Her publisher, Donal wanted to release the book at the beginning of the summer. Books sell best then. People are searching for things to read over their vacations and school breaks. He also planned a small book tour. He envisioned a college tour capitalizing on her being a college student.

Freya was excited by the tour but hadn’t told anyone about it yet. She worried what her boss; Lou would think if he found out she had written a book. Her best friend, Ali was supportive and so was her brother. But she hadn’t shared the information with anyone else. It was her secret.

With her birthday tomorrow, she felt like maybe that was the time to share the news. She planned a small dinner party at her home for tomorrow night. She invited a small group of people, including her best friend, her brother, and his fiancé, and some people from work, including her boss. She’d break the news to him then. She exhaled at the thought. Lou was tough but fair. She’d just have to deal with it.

Freya looked forward to her birthday. She would be twenty-one. Ali sent her a card that read; when you turn 21, you can legally do all the things you’ve been doing since you were 15. It made her laugh. She looked inside her fridge. The bottle of champagne was chilling and a bottle of red and white wine sat beside it. She was making her famous lasagna and garlic bread. And for dessert, birthday cake. But this time she was baking her own.

Ali had fallen in love with the show, The Great British Baking Show. She adored Paul Hollywood, the famous baker who hosted the show. Freya binge watched the first three seasons on Netflix last weekend. Watching other people bake was very entertaining and relaxing at the same time. Freya was a great cook but not a baker. But after watching the show, she longed to bake something. So,

today was the day.

Ali was coming over later to help her bake a birthday cake. She knew exactly what she wanted to bake too. She found the recipe online and it paired her two favorite flavors, chocolate, and peanut butter. The formal name was the crunchy milk chocolate-peanut butter layer cake. The original recipe called for rice krispies for the crunch but she was substituting roasted peanuts. The cake would be three tiers and she intended to decorate with spun sugar.

She'd purchased a sugar thermometer and two pairs of gloves. The sugar must reach 105 degrees before you can shape it. So gloves were a necessity. While she cleaned her kitchen in preparation for her bake off with Ali, she heard a knock at her back door. Her cat Dexter turned from his cat tower to look at her.

"Don't worry Dex, I'll get it. You just lie in your cat tower and stare out the window."

As if on cue, the cat turned around to resume his watch on the back yard. Freya looked out the back window to see Duke. She smiled when she saw him.

"Hey, I thought you were in Boston."

"I was. I just got back an hour ago."

He walked in and took a seat at her kitchen table. He playfully tugged at Dexter's tail. The torbie cat batted him with a paw, rolled over, and glared at him with one eye open. Freya laughed. She handed Duke a flavored water and sat beside him. She could tell he wanted to talk to her. He seemed a little anxious.

"What's up?"

He exhaled. Then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "Read this."

She took the paper from him and read the typed sheet. She looked at Duke.

"What is this?"

"It's the lab results of the stuff found at Mike Chancellor's house. It matches the poison found in Brandon's blood stream."

"And?"

"Nothing. It looks like Mike did it. He claims he's innocent but every guilty

person says they are innocent too." He shrugged and took a sip. "Hey what happened to the Diet Coke?"

"I'm trying to give soda up. It's not good for you anyway."

They both turned to look at the driveway as a car pulled in. It was Ali. Dexter stood up in his cat tower and stretched. Ali always brought him treats. He looked anxiously at the door. Freya opened it and yelled out to her.

"Hey, you're early."

Ali walked in carrying two grocery bags and set them on the counter. She immediately gave Dexter a rub and handed him a cat nip mouse. He grabbed it, jumped down from the cat tree, and ran off toward the living room.

"I was excited, so I came early. Why? Is there a problem?" she asked, looking at Duke.

Freya assured her there was no issue and asked Duke if he wanted to stay and help. To her surprise, he accepted the offer. She handed him a pink apron and he put it on. Both girls laughed and the bake off began.

Less than forty-five minutes later, the cakes were in the oven and the sugar work underway. Spinning sugar was much harder than it looked and much messier. Freya had spun sugar in her hair, on her apron and all over her gloves. She removed them to wash her hands and take a little break. She observed Duke and Ali at work.

Ali was a natural baker, Freya hated to admit, and even Duke was a natural. Okay, so baking was not her thing. You can't excel at everything, right? But, it was fun and she like spending time with her best friend. Now that they were in college, they were no longer the inseparable twosome they once were. She rationalized that as a sign of maturity and growth. After all, she hated being suffocated by people. Realizing that reminded her about Erik again and her mood dropped. She was seriously considering breaking up with him. Ironically, his truck roared into the driveway. *Oh no*.

Duke looked toward the back window and then at Freya. Like the mind reader he sometimes appeared, he removed the apron and waved goodbye.

“Well, ladies, it’s been fun but I’ve got to go.”

He went out the front door as Erik opened the back door. It all happened so smoothly, it almost made Freya feel like she was having an affair. But she wasn’t.

“Well, what’s going on? I didn’t know you baked.”

“Apparently I don’t bake very well. Ali is the star baker. We’re attempting to bake a birthday cake. Ali is a wiz at spun sugar. Look at the butterflies she made.”

Erik examined them and nodded his approval. Ali smiled and went back to her sugar work.

“I saw mail in your box, so I brought it in for you.”

She took the pile and sifted through them. Mostly junk mail except for one envelope with no return address. She didn’t recognize the writing. Then, all of a sudden, she felt a knot in the pit of her stomach.

“Will you excuse me for a moment?”

She walked into her bedroom, shut the door behind her, and sliced open the envelope. She removed the contents with a pair of tweezers, and read the typed message inside.

> Hi Freya,
>
> You didn’t think I’d miss an important day like your birthday, did you? Happy birthday! I’ve been keeping up to date on your career. I love your articles in the Beacon. You’ve done very well in such a short time, but that’s talent isn’t it? Or is it luck? Well, either way, you’ll find out soon.
>
> Your greatest fan,
>
> Abby

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

With Christmas a few weeks off, St. Bernadette's School for Girls, choir practice was daily now, in preparation for Midnight Mass. Both Anya and Molly were sopranos and Megan a contralto. Only Arielle was absent from school that day. Her gymnastics competition was in Stamford. Her team was ranked first in New England.

The girls were alive with gossip about the recent arrest of Mike Chancellor for the attempted murder of Brandon. And Brandon was no better. His coma continued and word had it that he wouldn't last through the month.

"I hear Brandon is in a coma," whispered Molly.

"He's braindead, a vegetable, and soon will be buried. Forget him. I hate that guy anyway. He got exactly what he had coming," remarked Anya.

"Shhh! The nuns will hear you!" Megan grabbed Anya's hand and squeezed it. "What's wrong with you? Where's your empathy?"

Anya rolled her eyes. "Meg, for Christ's sake, are you serious? That guy harassed our whole school, raped underage girls, sold drugs, and cheated on every test he ever took. He drank, partied, and cheated his way through life. I

haven't received any more anonymous threatening notes since he was poisoned. So he must have sent them. I checked with Arielle. She hasn't gotten any notes either. And you want me to feel empathy? No! I won't allow myself to feel that for him. Where's our empathy? Where's Molly's empathy? And what about Syd?"

Megan backed down immediately. She was no match for Anya.

"No, I agree! He is a monster. But, still, the way you talk sometimes, you have so much anger. I just wish you'd…." Megan stopped. Walking towards her was Sister Evangeline and she looked very upset. *Oh no, the nuns heard us!*

The girls turned around to see the nun before them, panting and red faced. She took a deep breath and grabbed Molly's shoulder.

"Dear, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Molly gasped. "Oh my God! What's happened?"

"I'm afraid your father was attacked while he was leaving his office today. Two men beat him up. But they were stopped before they could do any real harm. The security guard and a couple of your fathers co-workers intervened. Your father has been taken to Mercy Regional. Your mother called and asked if your sister could drive you both over there now. You're excused for the rest of the day."

Molly immediately began to cry and the nun put her arm around the troubled girl. "There, there, God was watching him. He's always watching. He made sure no harm was done. Now, dry your tears and get your things. Your sister is waiting for you in my office. Megan can you walk your friend over there? I need to speak with Miss Andersen a moment."

Anya braced herself. *What could it be now? Did she find out that I've been going to the Magick Shop downtown? Or did she hear me say those things about Brandon? Either way – I don't care what she thinks.*

To Anya's surprise, the nun was kind. She actually complimented her on her recent Teen Time show. The subject was teen rape. Anya interviewed a local psychologist who gave advice on how to handle the aftermath of an attack. Then,

she interviewed Duke Mott from the Agatha Falls police department about rape prevention. He even demonstrated how to physically defend yourself from a frontal assault.

Then, her piece de resistance; Molly Raju. She interviewed the girl and let her explain how her attack affected her life. Anya was sensitive yet curious, asked all the right questions in the most professional and compassionate way. The show was outstanding, according to Sister Evangeline.

“Anya, you have true talent. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if you ended up on 60 Minutes one day.”

The nun walked off leaving a very shocked but happy Anya Andersen. A few moments later Anya looked up to see her friend Megan running down the hall towards her. Her chubby face was bright red and she was perspiring.

“Anya! OMG! It’s on the local news. Brandon Cambridge is dead! He died this morning.”

And before either girl could say anything, an announcement was heard overheard on the loud speaker.

> Attention – attention please. We have an announcement to make. We have received word that Brandon Cambridge passed away at 7:15 this morning due to complications from cardiac arrest and stroke. He was a student at Wainsbridge Academy.
>
> We realize that some of you knew him socially and others may have only learned about him from what you read in the papers. Regardless, we ask that you offer up a prayer for his soul. Only God can truly know what is in a person’s heart and we ask you to keep your commentary to yourself.
>
> Please give Brandon’s family the peace they need to accept his passing. Thank you. Please return to your classes.

Ding dong, the rapist is dead! whispered Anya to herself. She didn’t care what the nuns said. In her opinion, he was a rapist and a killer. He had it coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Freya reread the card. It was from her old nemesis Abby. *Well, bring it on.* She returned it to its envelope and slipped it into her knapsack. She told Ali and Erik she wasn't feeling well. Ali got the hint immediately and left. But Erik took longer to get the message. Finally, she convinced him it was a female thing. As she watched him back out of her driveway, she glanced at her birthday cake sitting in the middle of her table.

Ali had decorated the top with butterflies made from spun sugar. Written in purple icing were the words, FREYA 21! It was beautiful. She wondered if she should cancel her plans. Maybe having a party right now was not the best idea.

Picking up her cell, she dialed Ramirez's number and left a message asking her to call immediately. *Should I call the FBI?* Thinking that was best, she called Agent Margo Bent's number too and left a message. She was brief. Abby was back. She's contacted me. Call me. That should do it.

She was just about to clean up the kitchen when she heard a tap at her back door. It was Duke.

She opened the door without saying anything.

"What's happened? You look nervous."

She told him what happened.

"Did you call the FBI?"

“Yes, yes I already did that. And I called Ramirez too.”

“She’s in Stamford right now at a conference but she’ll be home Monday. I’m here. You could have called me,” he said dejectedly.

“Duke, this all happened minutes ago.”

“Why did Michaelson leave in such a hurry?”

Duke never referred to Erik as Erik but by his surname. Maybe it was a law enforcement thing or maybe it was to keep the distance between them. Either way, the men disliked each other. Both were jealous of the other and resentful of Freya’s attention. She wasn’t in the mood to prop up any man’s ego right now so she told Duke she was tired.

“Oh no, you’re not going to be alone tonight. I’m sleeping on the couch. I’ll be right back,” he said as he rushed out the back door and across the street. He returned a few minutes later with a paper bag.

“Is that your lunch?” she asked sarcastically.

“No, my toothbrush and shaving stuff. Why? Did you expect me to bring an overnight bag?”

Freya didn’t answer. To Duke she looked like a lost child. She could never be described as a damsel in distress. But she looked so upset he had to do something. Before he lost his nerve, he embraced her.

Freya was not expecting a hug. She was not a hugger. And yet, it didn’t feel unnatural or wrong. She stood there, letting him embrace her and she returned the embrace. She could hear his heart beating through his flannel shirt. She could smell soap on his skin. She could feel his hand as it slowly ran down her long hair. Then, they looked at each other and kissed.

It expressed all of the pent up longing they had secretly hidden from themselves and others. Freya’s hands ran up Duke’s back to grab the hair over his shirt collar. She felt one of his hands rub the small of her back. They separated for a moment to look into each other’s eyes.

“I never realized your eyes are green with tiny gold flecks,” he said softly as he bent to kiss her again. The kiss went on for a few more seconds until the

buzzing of a cell phone could be heard. Freya let go first.

“My phone- it could be the FBI.”

Reluctantly, he let her go and she grabbed her phone. It was Margo Bent. Freya had met the agent last year when she was investigating the murder of Joey Taylor, a local teen-age girl who had been strangled and left for dead in the Old North Woods near Freya’s childhood home. Initially, the women did not get along but had eventually become friends. Agent Bent told Freya more than once that she would make a great agent. Flattered by the idea, she chose instead to remain a journalist. She quickly explained about the card she’d received and listened to the agent’s response. The news was worse than she thought. Abby was free.

According to Bent, Abby Vale was a very wealthy woman with influential family connections. Interpol tracked her to a London apartment after living in Denmark. But last week, they lost her. The FBI suspected she had somehow slipped into the U.S under an alias and in disguise. *She’s in disguise. That’s just great.*

Bent told her she’d contact local law enforcement on her behalf. She would need around the clock police surveillance. Abby was close. She might try to attack Freya in her home. So, she wanted her to sit tight for the time being. Freya thanked her and hung up. She relayed her conversation to Duke. Now, even he looked nervous.

“Fine, now we know. Well, I’ll make up the sofa for the night. Where do you keep your sheets?”

“You can stay in my spare bedroom. It’s across the hall from my room. I’ll show you.”

Freya gave Duke a brief tour of her home and then the two settled on the couch to watch TV. The evening news focused on the death of Brandon and the arrest of his best friend for his murder. With all the Abby business, Freya had forgotten the boy passed away that morning. She recalled the arrogant young man with the smug look on his face. Rapist, murderer, and only 17 years old.

What a world.

After the news, she flicked through the channels until she came to the Travel channel. There was a Dead Files marathon on. *This is exactly what I need right now.* They watched for close to an hour until Duke spoke.

“Freya? About what happened in the kitchen? Um, what about Erik? Are you two still together?”

Hmmm, that’s a good question. But she didn’t want to discuss one man with the other so she changed the subject. Freya knew exactly how she felt about Erik and Duke, for that matter. But, right now, she wasn’t in the mood to discuss her romantic future.

“I’m starving. Let’s go to Gill’s and pick up a couple grinders. I haven’t had a hot Italian in a while. How about it?”

Gill’s Delicatessen opened in 1964 and was still going strong. Family owned and operated the restaurant was famous for its grinders and cold salads. Gills had the distinction of using cabbage in its sandwiches instead of lettuce. Freya’s favorite was the Hot Italian, which featured hot ham, salami, provolone cheese, tomato, cabbage, hot peppers and oil.

Duke agreed. On the drive there, they talked about the weather, the upcoming holiday, and their jobs. And when there was silence, that was okay too. They both felt comfortable enough with each other that they didn’t need to speak to fill in any gaps. The gaps were okay. On the drive back to Freya’s house, she told him about her upcoming book tour plans. He congratulated her and she was happy to be able to share her news. Erik was not always happy to hear about her job or her writing. He was funny like that.

They ended up eating their grinders on Freya’s couch and watching episodes of the Dead Files long into the evening. Eventually, fatigue won out and they stood up, stretched, and walked toward the hallway.

“I’ll leave the night light on in the bathroom. It’s to the left of your room. Good night.”

She walked into her room and shut the door behind her. She heard the door

across the hall close too. As she lay there in her bed waiting for sleep to come, she relived her kiss earlier with Duke. It felt different from her kisses with Erik. Not that Erik wasn't a good kisser. But, with Duke, there was a comfort level that didn't exist with Erik. Erik was so intense. Sometime, too intense. She realized what she had to do. Tomorrow night would not be easy. She rolled over, turned out her light, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The storm continued without pause. The wind blew and the snow squall did not abate. But Freya continued to set the table for her dinner party. Storm or no storm, the party was not being cancelled. Ali arrived early with her boyfriend Lincoln. She had four wheel drive and never let the weather influence her one way or the other. Jake texted that he and Lorna were on their way and Lou never said no to a free dinner, so she had at least half of her guests on their way. Enid, Donal, and a few of the reporters from the Beacon completed the group.

The lasagna was in the oven and the garlic bread heating up beside it. The wine was resting at room temperature and the champagne was on ice. Her house immaculate, her cat in his tree and the decorations finished, she sat back on her leather sofa and switched on the local news.

The attack on Azban Raju was the lead story. He was attacked on his way home from work by two men wearing white hoods and carrying baseball bats. The attack was interrupted by a security guard and a couple of fellow employees.

One of the attackers was caught but the other ran off. The police took the man into custody but no more information on his identity was mentioned in the news broadcast.

The company he worked for, Norton Electronics was a high security campus. Two men dressed like the KKK were sure to be noticed. The news report showed the security film of the attack and sure enough, the attackers were dressed like clansmen.

Freya wasn't shocked. Since the election of Donald Trump, hate crimes were on the rise in New England. Maine, Connecticut, and Massachusetts had recently reported anti-sematic and racist symbols showing up in their bigger cities and even their smaller towns. Neo-Nazi groups took to the streets openly now. Even in Burlington, Vermont, one of the most progressive cities in the United States, a white supremacy group had paraded down the popular Church Street near the University of Vermont campus.

Since the president's election, every racist, every bigot, and every neo-Nazi came out of the woodwork. Trump's continual hate speech made it okay for people to wear their racism and xenophobia in the open. As a result, it was not uncommon to hear of attacks on Blacks, foreign students and homosexuals on her college campus. Agatha Falls wasn't what it used to be. And Freya blamed a lot of that on what she called, the Trumpism of America.

According to the news, Raju was admitted for observation but discharged from Mercy General that evening. It was reported that he had sustained only minor injuries. Freya turned the TV off and looked out her front window at the snow falling. She wondered if the attack on Molly's dad had anything to do with her rape attempt. Word had it that Brandon's dad was out for blood. He wasn't taking his son's death well but who would? What parent wants to see their child die before them? And Harris Cambridge was a rich and powerful man with connections. If he wanted to send a message, he had the means to do so.

Her cell phone pinged and she jumped at the unexpected sound. It was Erik. He was on his way but would be detained by a small accident on Route 4. A

school bus was rear-ended by a Federal Express truck. Thankfully, the school bus was empty and no one had been hurt. But the detour would make Erik about a half hour late. She told him not to worry and to drive safe. They would wait for him. He told her he loved her but she said nothing. She turned her phone off. If he asked her what happened, she'd blame technology. But she knew what she had to do tonight. She was going to break up with Erik.

She'd decided last night as she lay in bed. Jake's wedding was in six months. She and Lorna had a dress fitting next week. Seeing her brother since his engagement was proof she was doing the right thing. She didn't feel for Erik that way he felt for Lorna. In fact, she didn't feel for Erik the way she felt for him last year. It seemed like a lifetime ago but so much had happened. She'd matured a lot since then. And she'd outgrown the need for a boyfriend or a man friend as Ali called him. Erik was almost thirty years old and in spite of the age difference, Freya believed she'd outgrown him.

A car pulled into her driveway and woke her from her reverie. It was Enid and Donal. Both over dressed as usual, they exited the Bentley and strode into Freya's house, arm in arm. They each hugged Freya and made small talk. Soon the other guests began arriving. Everyone was happy and in a good mood. Christmas was a few weeks off, it was snowing, and Freya's house smelled of Italian spices. Everyone mingled and snacked on appetizers until Erik arrived – almost thirty minutes late. He kissed her and handed her a small box wrapped in gold foil.

"Open this after everyone leaves," he said seriously. "I need to speak to you in private. It's very important." Uh- *oh*. Freya nodded and sat down at the dining room table.

The guests sat down and the meal began. Freya knew nothing brought people together more than good food. They ate in silence for a while but eventually it was Lou who mentioned the elephant in the room.

"So, that Cambridge kid died. And I heard from the warden in the jail, that Mike Chancellor was ruffed up last night too. They have him in isolation.

Supposedly, there's a hit planned for him. My sources tell me Harris Cambridge ordered it. Freya, how are coming with your article?"

"It's done. I emailed it just before you arrived. I'm calling it- Death of a Golden Boy."

"Golden Boy? Huh! What a joke. That kid was trouble from the moment he was born," said Jake. "One of the guys I work said his daughter went to a party a couple summers ago and he followed her into the bathroom and almost raped her. He complained to the school and they said – boys will be boys. Can you believe that? I'm telling you, if I ever have a daughter and some punk tries that crap, I'll kill him myself. And I won't use apricot seeds either!"

The entire conversation from that moment on was centered on Brandon and Mike. With the exception of Lincoln, Ali's boyfriend, everyone thought both boys were evil. Lincoln went to middle school with Brandon and Mike and he remembered them as fun and easy-going but that was years ago and people change, thought Freya.

"Okay, who wants dessert?"

Freya was excited for them to see her cake. She lifted the cover off the cake plate and the room was filled with sounds of approval.

"You made that kiddo?" asked Jake. "Maybe you can make my wedding cake," he joked.

"Speaking of weddings, Freya don't forget we have a fitting on Tuesday at Penelope's Bridal. We'll do lunch after. How about Five Guys?" asked Lorna.

"Sounds good. And if I can have everyone's attention for a moment, I have an announcement to make."

Everyone in the room looked straight at her and suddenly she felt nervous. She took a deep breath.

"As many of you know I've spent the last few months writing a book. And- well- it's finished! My book tour begins April 5th and ends on May 10th. So, I'll have plenty of time to help with the wedding. Ali, can you take care of Dexter

while I’m gone? I’ve already spoken to my professors and I’ve arranged to finish my work online. Now Lou, I thought I could do a weekly article about my college tour. Donal has planned a tour for all of New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The tour will begin here and will end at Emerson College in Boston. I’ll do podcasts, local news, radio shows, and social media of course. So, that’s it, that’s my announcement,” she finished and waited for a reaction.

At first, stunned silence filled the room. While everyone had heard Freya talk about her plans to write a book based on the Coalesce Cult and the Joey Taylor murder, no one actually thought she’d do it. Everyone always talks about doing things but rarely do they complete them. Life happens and things are put off. But Freya was different. When she said she was going to do something, she did it. When no one spoke, she looked at her brother Jake first. He looked back at her and grinned.

“Well, well, well, my sister the author. I’m happy for you. I don’t know where you get the time to write books when you go to school full-time and work part-time. But, that’s the way you’ve always been. You always do things that other people would never attempt. You’re brave that way and I am very, very proud of you.”

By time he finished, Freya had tears in her eyes. Then, like an avalanche, everyone started congratulating her and asking her if she’d sign his or her copy. After a few minutes of that, everyone settled down as Ali lit the cake. Atop the chocolate masterpiece sat a huge white chocolate number 21. Freya sat still as her guests sang her Happy Birthday. Almost feeling embarrassed at the attention, she blushed and then hurriedly blew out the candle to rapturous applause. She cut the cake and began handing out huge slices of the chocolate-peanut butter cake.

“Let’s hear it for the college journalist, amateur sleuth and now published author!” roared Ali.

Freya laughed as the tabled erupted in the cheer but she stopped smiling

when she noticed Erik. He was just sitting there looking at his cake. No smile, no cheer, just sitting there as if he were alone and not at a party with a dozen other people. She wondered if her surprise had trumped his. She hoped he didn't have a diamond engagement ring in that little gold box. Oh well, it's best to be honest. And as soon as everyone left, she knew what she had to do.

An hour and a half later, Freya's guest began to leave. The storm had ended but deposited three inches of snow in its wake. That was nothing for anyone living in New England. The evening temperature was a comfortable 43 degrees.

Freya hugged her brother and his fiancé as the got into their vehicle. Lorna once again reminded her of their upcoming dress fitting. Freya again reassured her that she would be there. Enid and Donal gave her a hug and promised to speak to her soon about her pending book cover.

The cover would be ready in a week and she was excited to see it in the flesh. She had designed a black matte cover with a white tracing of a waterfall and a balsam tree. Her name would be on the bottom of the book and her title, **Agatha Falls** would be at the top. On the back cover was a professionally taken photo of her in her office at the Beacon. She's sitting at her desk surrounded by piles of papers, her hair is in a French braid, and she's wearing a red sweater. Ali did her make up that day and she was happy with the results.

She immediately began clearing the dishes from the table. Ali was in the kitchen with Lincoln and Erik was sitting at the kitchen table reading the sports page. Ali was chattering away and Lincoln was his usual quiet self. As she entered, she noticed a large pink box with a white bow on her table. Looking at Erik, he pointed to Ali.

"Ali, what did you do? I told you no gifts this year."

But Ali cut her off. "What's the point of being rich if I can't spend it on my friends?" Freya exhaled loudly, shook her head, and looked at the box wondering what was inside.

"Just let it go. She always gets her way anyway," said Lincoln under his breath.

Ali whipped him playfully with a dish towel.

“Open it. I want to see your face when you open it.”

Freya tore open the pretty pink paper and gasped when she saw the Cuisinart ice cream maker.

“Ali, this is expensive! I almost bought this but talked myself out of it.”

“I know. I was with you that day. So I went back and bought it. It’s awesome and worth the expense. It makes ice cream, sorbet, and yogurt. Just think of all the fun you’ll have making ice cream this summer.”

Freya hugged and thanked her friend. Ali and Lincoln left soon after and finally Freya and Erik were alone. They made small talk for a few minutes and then Freya walked with him into her living room. She sat down on her Italian leather sofa, her one extravagant piece of furniture, and waited for Erik to talk first. He looked so serious. It must be important. *My God, if he gets down on one knee, I’ll faint.*

But he didn’t, and instead sat down opposite her in the large antique leather Morris chair that Jake and Lorna had given her for a housewarming gift. Besides her sofa, it was her favorite piece of furniture. Erik made that face he always made when he had to say something he found difficult. Freya felt compassion and decided to break the ice.

“So, what do you want to talk about? Is everything okay with your business? Are you sick? Come on, you’re making me nervous.”

“No, I’m not sick and business is pretty good these days. I want to tell you about my trip to Montreal a few weeks back. As you know, my grandfather died and left me as the executor of the estate. But, he also left me quite a bit of money too. I don’t know how you’ll take this but I’m moving to Montreal after Christmas and I want you to come with me. I want to remodel homes in Montreal. I inherited my grandparents’ home and it’s beautiful. My brothers live nearby with their families and my parents are there too. I want you to meet my family. So, Freya, how about it?”

Well, it wasn’t a wedding proposal but he did ask her to live with him. So,

that’s close enough. Freya took a moment before she spoke and then she spoke from her heart.

“Erik, I’m very flattered by your offer. I admit I wasn’t expecting this. I’m happy that you will be able to have the kind of business you’ve always wanted. I know you’ll do great. And you’ll be able to live near your family. I think that will be very good for you. But not necessarily for me.”

She stopped there and waited. His expression hadn’t changed. She needed to be more direct.

“I have a life here and my career is here too. I just bought a home and my book is out soon. I believe that I’m exactly where I need to be right now. I’m not ready to live with a man. And I’m not ready to take this relationship to the next level. I love you. But, I think it would be best if we broke up.”

Silence. Freya waited. Then, Erik spoke.

“It’s that cop, isn’t it? Duke Mott- you want him now, don’t you?”

Before Freya could answer, Erik continued.

“No, you don’t have to say anything. I saw it coming, months ago. You want to be with him now. Is that why he moved across the street from you?”

He was speaking louder than usual and more animatedly. He was upset and she empathized with that. She’d had someone she once loved break up with her. She’d never forget that day. She’d hoped they could remain friends but that might not be possible now. The best thing was to be honest.

“Erik! Calm down. I need to be on my own right now. There is no one else. Duke is a friend and a neighbor. I’m not breaking up with you for someone else. We want different things. We have a different future in mind. But, I want us to stay friends. I hope that’s possible.”

She waited for a response and she got one. He stood up, walked over to the back door, and grabbed his coat off the coat rack. He picked up the little gold box off the table and tossed it to her. She caught it with one hand.

“Well, I guess you won’t need those now. They’re the keys to my house in Montreal.”

He opened the door and walked out into the night. She heard his truck roar as it backed out her driveway. Not knowing what to do, she decided to clean. Cleaning always relaxed her.

She went into the kitchen and placed the remainder of the Italian bread in the bread box. Then, she began wiping down surfaces. If anything could calm Freya down, it was cleaning her kitchen. She inherited her love of cleaning from her late mother Rita. She often joked that her mom was Felix to her dad's Oscar. The Odd Couple, one of her favorite TV shows from the 1970's about a neat freak and a slob who were roommates. She smiled as she remembered her parents. Oh, how she missed them. A tap at her back door brought her back to the future and she tossed the wash cloth on the counter as she went to the door. Expecting it to be Duke, she swung the door open wide.

"I left you a piece of birthday cake. I had a feeling you'd stop by."

"Why thank you! I'd love a slice of cake."

Freya stepped back suddenly from the door. Her face was white with shock. The person standing in front of her was not Duke at all – but Abby Vale.

"You look surprised. Didn't you get my letter? I told you I'd see you soon and I never make promises I don't intend on keeping." She walked in quickly and shut the door behind her. She appraised the kitchen and nodded.

"Yes, I like what you've down. French country, is it? I love the white cabinets. And look at this cake! It looks delicious. Well, aren't you going to invite me to sit down? We have a lot to talk about."

Freya did not intend to let Abby into the rest of her home. *And where were the police? The FBI had two unmarked police cars parked on her street. What happened to them?* She backed up into the kitchen and let Abby walk ahead of her. Abby looked into the living area at her Christmas tree. It was huge. Normally Freya had a small table top tree but not this year. *Go big or go home.*

Freya had planned for this event. It would not be the first time someone had invaded her home and tried to attack her. Last Christmas, murderer Lukas Trott broke into her home and tried to rape her. She fought back and with Erik's help,

apprehended him for the police. This time would be no different.

While Abby was looking at the six foot tall Blue Spruce, Freya reached behind her and pulled out her gun. Her dad's Glock had saved her before. As soon as Freya learned that Abby was back, she'd taken to keeping the gun on her person. She had a permit to carry a weapon and did target practice at least monthly. She was a great shot. She wasn't afraid of guns and she knew she could kill if it came to that.

Abby turned around and the look on her face told Freya all she needed to know. She wasn't expecting Freya to be prepared. She raised her hands over her head.

"Now Freya, what's this about? When did you get a gun?"

Ignoring her question, Freya walked toward her with the gun pointed directly at her. Abby soon found herself up against the refrigerator.

"Sit down on the floor – now!" she ordered.

Abby remained standing. Her expression was blank. "I mean it, sit down and then lie down – face down on the floor. If you don't, I'll shoot you," said Freya as calmly as she could.

Abby reluctantly obeyed and began to slide slowly down the refrigerator. But before she met the floor, her hand shot out and grabbed Freya's arm. Soon, the two women were thrashing around the room, both holding the Glock. Freya kicked Abby in the groin and the woman screamed. Freya kicked again and threw her body on top of Abby, using her extra weight against the slim woman. *I always knew those extra pounds would come in handy!* In the distance, police sirens could be heard. Then, her back door flew open and Duke appeared with his own gun.

"Back away Vale! I swear to God, I'll blow your head off!"

Abby knew she was beat. She lay down on the floor face down and with her hands spread out in front of her.

Duke bent down and zip tied the woman's hands together. A quick search of Abby revealed, a hand gun, a knife, and a hypodermic needle filled with a light

blue liquid. Duke picked the woman up and held her as four police officers rushed inside. The two police officers guarding her home had been found unconscious but alive in their vehicles. As soon as the police left with Abby, Freya jumped up and hugged Duke tightly.

“Thank God for you!”

Duke smiled. “Hey, don’t thank me, thank my appetite. I was too lazy to make dinner tonight so I thought I’d come over here to see what you had for goodies. Hmmm, what’s this – a big chocolate birthday cake? Can I have a piece?”

“A piece? Duke, you can have the rest of it.”

He sat down at the table and cut himself a big slice. “I noticed a woman in your bushes and I put two and two together. So, I went back and got my gun and radioed for help.” He bit into the cake and smiled.

“Delicious. Oh, and by the way, happy birthday. How does it feel to be 21?”

Freya laughed. “Alive. I’m just glad to be alive. Now, how about some lasagna with that cake?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Local Reporter Nabs Serial Killer
Kerry Quinn

Beacon reporter, Freya Barrett caught serial killer, Abby Vale in her home last night. The woman showed up armed with a lethal substance and several weapons, intending to kill Ms. Barrett who solved the mystery killings last year surrounding the Coalesce Cult, of which Vale was a co-founder. Barrett apprehended Vale assisted by neighbor, Douglas Mott of the Agatha Falls Police Department Forensics Team.

Last year, Barrett went undercover in the Coalesce sex cult to bring Martha and Sebastian Wolcott to justice. The brother and sister team were inveigling rich young girls into the sex cult for money. Once inside the cult, girls were molested, abused, starved, and branded. Sebastian Wolcott was murdered in prison and his sister Martha was murdered by her former lover, Abby

Vale, who was eventually found responsible for the murder of at least six women. Vale escaped last year and has evaded arrest until now. Vale is being held without bail.

Freya Barrett, a college student, reporter for the Beacon and a soon to be author of her new book, Agatha Falls, has resided locally since moving to town at the age of twelve. Her parents, Rita and David were killed by a drunk driver when Barrett was sixteen. She has one older sibling, a brother Jake who owns a local contracting and home remodeling business. Barrett attends Claremont College and is journalism major with a minor in psychology.

She begins a nationwide book tour in April to promote her first book, Agatha Falls based on her experience in exposing the Coalesce cult and revealing the murder plot behind high school student, Joey Taylor's strangulation. The amateur sleuth has great crime solving abilities and according to FBI Special Agent Margo Bent, "Freya Barrett would make a hell of an FBI agent. Journalism's gain is the FBI's loss."

Barrett is single and shares a home with her cat Dexter. Right now, according to Barrett, "Dex is the only man in my life."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A week passed since the night Abby Vale showed up at Freya's house unannounced and in disguise. The woman, once blond haired and blue eyed now sported short dark hair with blunt bangs and dark brown eyes, courtesy of contact lenses. If Freya passed her on the street, she'd never have recognized her. No wonder Abby was so successful at evading law enforcement – she had transformed herself into a different person. But the voice was the same. Freya knew it as soon as she heard the soft, melodic voice. It was Abby.

Now, the FBI had her and according to Freya, good riddance. She was done with the murderous fiend and just wanted to get on with her life. Her motto, Go Forward, served her well. Freya had the capacity to handle extremely stressful situations and then go on to something else immediately. Maybe, Margo Bent was right about her, maybe she was meant to be in law enforcement herself. But, she'd miss writing and felt compelled sometimes to just sit down and write. After the writing frenzy hit, she wrote until she felt empty and then afterwards she felt cleansed. Writing was cathartic for her. She couldn't imagine her life without it.

Last night, she'd stayed up late to watch a movie about J.D. Salinger. The recluse took to his cabin in New Hampshire to write stories well into old age but refused to publish them. This confounded his publisher and when asked why he wrote at all if he did not intend to see his latest work in print, he'd answered sincerely. He said he wrote just to write. He found joy in the process of writing and storytelling. When the story was finished to his satisfaction, that was enough for him. He didn't write to be published, he wrote because of his pure love of writing itself.

Freya understood. She didn't care if anyone read her book or even liked it. She knew it was good. Her confidence in her ability would not be shaken by the petty criticisms of others who could never write a book. She thought to herself, if they think writing a book is easy, than do it. But, she knew in her heart, they never would. Writing a book is about so much more than actual writing. It's planning, organization, research, and discipline. Especially allowing oneself the time to build a plot, create characters, and keep the reader engaged. Not everyone could do that. Not everyone could write.

She felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and answered it. It was Lorna. She was on her way to Freya's house. Their first dress fitting was today and she could tell Lorna was anxious. Freya made a point of not having had any breakfast that morning. She heard her stomach grumble and thought about their planned lunch at Five Guys after the fitting. They'd pig put afterwards and Five Guys was the place to do just that.

Freya, not normally a meat eater, would order a cheese burger and fries. The fries were soft and went well with either white vinegar or ketchup. The restaurant had opened recently in town to great fanfare and the manger had bragged that they earned over $16,000 in its opening day. For a town the size of Agatha Falls, that was quite a feat.

Freya heard a horn honk and looked out her front window. It was Lorna. Freya threw on her coat, grabbed her bag and yelled out, "Bye Dexter, I love you," and locked her front door.

The girls were off and soon the conversation turned to all things bridal. Lorna had transformed into a bridezilla. She told everyone she met she was being married and wasted no time in letting everyone else know that the wedding was ‘her day.’ Freya never had a sister so she obliged the older girl.

They arrived at Penelope’s Bridal a little early. Lorna’s seven other bridesmaids and her maid of honor traveled to Agatha Falls from all over the country, some as far away as Oregon. Freya was happy to have been chosen as a bridesmaid and looked forward to meeting the other girls.

They entered the bridal salon and were immediately greeted by Patty, the salon’s owner. She greeted them warmly with a hug and ushered the girls out back to the dressing area. Lorna had previously arranged that her bridal party would be the only one there that day. Patty agreed since the party was so large. Ten women in a dressing room large enough for three at the most was challenging to say the least. But as the girls arrived, a few at a time, the fittings went surprisingly well.

Lorna had chosen a color scheme of dusty blue and blush for the bridesmaid dresses. The style was A-line with a dusty blue chiffon skirt with beaded matching sweetheart top and long chiffon sleeves. The style was flattering and the color brought out the best features in all the girls, who were varied in their complexions and hair colors. From black haired and brown eyed to red haired and blue eyed to blond haired and green eyed, the dusty blue color complemented them all.

The girls were relieved when they saw the dresses. Many had been bridesmaids before and as any bridesmaid will tell you, the bride often chooses the ugliest dresses so she will stand out as the loveliest on the wedding day. But Lorna was not like that. The bouquets would be blush with periwinkle blue flowers and their shoes a matching dusty blue.

Lorna’s dress was yet to be seen. She was saving it until today to reveal it to her friends. As she emerged from behind the curtain in her trumpet mermaid V-neck court train tulle lace wedding dress, her bridal party was in awe. There

were gasps, a few OMG's! and eventually clapping as all the girls were unanimous in their admiration for the dress. Freya couldn't believe a wedding gown could be so beautiful and felt suddenly sad because she secretly feared that she would never have the chance to wear one of her own. But, she pushed those thoughts aside since this was her friend's day. She smiled with the other girls and no one would have known that she was hurting inside.

All that was left was to choose a veil for the bride. After an hour of trying on short veils and long veils, a medium length veil with a beaded tiara head dress was chosen. The bridal party took pics of each other on their cell phones promising not to share with the groom and then the group left for lunch.

They arrived at Five Guys to find that it was busy as usual. Freya heard someone from behind the counter shout, 'number 86 please, number 86' and she knew they were in for a long wait. Thankfully, there were some vacant tables and the girls grabbed them and sat down before anyone else could take them. Freya sat down so quickly she almost fell down. She heard laughter and turned around to see some familiar faces. It was Anya and Arielle. She smiled when she saw them. She hadn't seen the girls since before Brandon died. She asked how they were doing.

"You haven't heard the latest then?" asked Anya.

Freya nodded. "No, what happened?"

"Mike Chancellor is dead. He hanged himself last night in the jail. He left a note and admitted that he and Brandon both lured young girls to their parties, drugged them and raped them. But, he said he and Brandon were not murderers and he did not kill Brandon. Mike said he was set up."

Freya said nothing for a moment. *Not murderers? Then who did kill Sydney Sanders? Was there a killer still on the loose? Why would the boy admit to rape but not murder?*

"What do you guys think? Do you think Brandon and Mike murdered Sydney?"

The girls looked at each other and both shook their heads. Arielle spoke for

the both of them.

“Brandon was sick. And he was probably a sociopath too. But how would he know that Sydney and Logan had a date that night and they would stop at Raven’s Pond? It’s so far out of town and no one goes there anymore. The only way they’d know is if they were already there waiting for them and then that would mean either Sydney or Logan told them. Why would they do that?”

Why would they indeed?

Arielle went on to explain that she was moving to Minneapolis with her dad. He was engaged to marry his girlfriend. They were leaving at the end of the school year, so she had the next few months to say good bye to her friends. Freya could tell the girl wasn’t happy so she shared her own experience of having to move to a new town at just about her age. She was honest. It wasn’t easy. But she could Skype and there was social media. The girl eventually seemed lighter in mood and Freya hugged her and Anya.

Before she walked away, Anya grabbed her and whispered something in her ear. She heard what the girl said and looked her in the eye. Anya nodded. Freya squeezed her arm and walked over to the counter to give her order. She went back and sat down with the bridal party but a wedding was the last thing on her mind. If what Anya had told her was true, Agatha Falls had a killer still out there. Freya considered her next move. She had to be careful. By time she had finished eating her lunch she had a plan. Now all she needed was a little help from a friend. She pulled her cell phone out of her bag and texted them. They answered back almost instantly. Her plan was too long and involved to explain in a text. She told them that she’d be by soon to explain everything. They agreed and she turned her attention back to the bridal party who was now having a heated discussion about centerpieces.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“What did you whisper in her ear?”

Anya responded to Arielle’s question but not truthfully. She had an idea who the killer might be and knew that if anyone could find out for sure, it was Freya. Anya was an observer of people and their reactions. She loved to people watch. Recently, she had a conversation with someone that knew something about Syd’s murder that they couldn’t possibly have known unless they were there that night in the woods when she and her friends went looking for Sydney. If that person were there, they must have had something to do with her death. Maybe they were the one who killed her. As much as she hated Brandon and Mike, she didn’t think they were killers after all. Rapists, drug users, liars and cheaters, but not murderers. Since both boys were dead now, the real killer might relax. They might think they were in the clear. Now was the perfect time to catch them. If anyone could do that, it was Freya Barrett.

Anya finished her hamburger and threw the wrapper in the trash. She grabbed Arielle’s hand and pulled her outside. She was losing her best friend in six months. First Syd and now Arielle. She wanted to spend as much time with

her friend as possible. Now that gymnastics was over for the season, Arielle had plenty of free time.

"Hey, I've got an idea, come over to my house and we can binge watch 13 Reasons Why . I know your dad won't let you watch that. He thinks it'll teach you how to commit suicide."

The girls took off on their bikes toward Anya's home. Anya had another reason for wanting to keep Arielle busy for the next few hours. She wanted to give Freya time to follow up on her lead. And she knew once Arielle found out, she'd probably never speak to her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Freya asked Lorna to drop her off at her home and then she drove her Ford Escape directly to the police department. Ramirez was waiting for her. Freya told her the plan and Ramirez liked it but suggested they get back up. This person may try to run and they needed to make sure they didn't.

They drove directly to Wainsbridge Academy and asked for the student by name. He was in the gymnasium. Even though school was out on Christmas break, he had special permission to use the gym for fencing practice. Freya and Ramirez entered the gym and found him wearing the white protective clothing and mask that obscured his face. A white jacket, underarm protector, a body and mask cords, knee socks, gloves, and knickers completed the ensemble. He ignored the women and continued to thrust his foil forward into the air.

Freya had tried fencing once in high school and found the sport to be difficult. She recognized the foil, a light thrusting weapon with a maximum weight of 500 grams. The foil targeted the torso, but not the arms or the legs. He

threw the foil aside and picked up the epee, a thrusting weapon like the foil but much heavier at 750 grams. In epee, the entire body is a valid target. He turned around and faced the women. They stopped where they stood, about ten feet from him.

“Logan Bell?” asked Detective Ramirez. “We’d like to question you about the death of Sydney Sanders. We’re here to take you to the police station. I’ve notified your father. He’s meeting us there.”

Logan remained in place; the epee still thrust forward pointing towards both women. Ramirez placed her right hand on her holstered weapon.

“Mr. Bell, I won’t ask you again. You need to come with us to the police station. If you don’t come willingly, I will arrest you. Is that what you want to happen?”

Suddenly without warning, the boy thrust his weapon forward and ran toward Ramirez. His epee pierced her abdomen and she screamed in pain. Freya looked on in shock. Blood spurted from Ramirez’s wound as the woman sank to the floor. The masked figure looked at Freya, tilted his head like a dog, and then ran toward her with his epee pointing straight out. Freya ran around him in a frenzy. She screamed.

“Help! Help!”

The boy followed her as she ran toward the exit. She ran for her life. As clichéd as it sounded, her life flashed before her eyes. She saw her mom raking leaves, her dad teaching her how to ice skate and her brother diving into their old swimming pool back in Chicago.

Suddenly, two strong arms caught her, lifted her in the air, and swung her around. She landed on her feet. It all happened so fast! She couldn’t see who lifted her but heard a whacking sound. She turned around to see where the noise came from.

Logan was on the floor face down and Duke was straddling him and cuffing him from behind. Two other officers ran into the gymnasium to check on the fallen detective. Freya ran over and ripped off his face mask. The young

handsome face came into view. It was Logan, after all. Freya hating believing it but Anya was right.

“You killed Sydney!”

He said nothing. But Freya was not done.

“You drowned her, didn’t you? Why? She loved you. She was only 13 years old for God’s sake. Why would you do that?”

“Because she was going to tell! She was going to ruin everything. I tried to get her to stop but she wouldn’t listen. She never listened to me!”

He said nothing more and Duke read him his Miranda rights, picked him up, and walked him out to the waiting police car.

Freya ran back into the gym and saw Ramirez sitting up. She was still bleeding. Freya sat with her until the ambulance came and rode with her to Mercy Regional. Neither woman spoke. Right now, Freya just wanted Ramirez to be okay. She thought of her little girl. Freya lost her mother at sixteen and that was hard enough. The paramedics wheeled the sketcher into the Emergency Department and past the triage area. Freya sank into the first seat she saw in the waiting area. She texted Duke and waited.

An hour passed before Freya even saw a nurse again. Finally, one approached her and asked if she was Freya Barrett. Freya said yes and the nurse asked her to come with her. Freya followed her into the acute area of the Emergency Department. She walked down the hall to Room 8 and knocked.

“Dianna, it’s Linda, may I come in? I have Ms. Barrett with me.”

Freya heard a voice say yes and the door was opened to reveal Dianna Ramirez sitting up in a hospital bed with her torso covered in bandages. She was attached to an IV and was on her cell phone. It was obvious she was speaking to her daughter.

“Yes, I’m fine. And I’ll be home tomorrow morning. So, you get to sleep over at Tracey’s house. Now, be a good girl, brush your teeth, and say your prayers. Okay? I love you too, munchkin. Can you put Tracey on?” Ramirez spoke with her baby sitter for a few moments longer and then ended the

conversation.

“Sorry about that. I had to make sure I had someone to watch my daughter tonight.”

Ramirez explained the extent of her injuries. The weapon had just missed her liver. She was very lucky. Other than that, her wound was superficial. They were keeping her overnight for observation but advised her to have an EKG in the meantime due to her history of arrhythmia. She was waiting for the results of the EKG.

She shared with Freya that she’d spoken to Duke and he and the sheriff were waiting to question Logan. His father and a family attorney had been contacted but not arrived at the station. The woman spoke for a few more minutes and then they heard a knock on the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Dr. Marsha Sanders entered. She was smiling and holding a file in her hand. Her smile disappeared when she saw Freya. For a moment, Freya felt uncomfortable. She knew when to take a hint.

“Dianna, I’m going home now. Call me if you need anything. Good night.”

Freya shut the door behind her and walked back to the waiting area. She just remembered she had no way to get home. She’d ridden to the hospital in the back of the ambulance. Taxi’s and buses did not run at night in Agatha Falls. She called Ali but it went to voice mail. Then she tried her brother Jake. He answered on the second ring and told her he’d be there in fifteen minutes. At first, he thought something was wrong with Freya since she was calling from the hospital. But she explained as quickly as she could what happened earlier at the Wainsbridge gymnasium. As usual, Jake was upset.

“I can’t wait until you go on your book tour so you’ll be out of town. I swear this town will be the death of you.”

Freya laughed to herself as she pocketed her phone. She looked up to see Dr. Sanders walking towards her. She looked like she wanted to speak with her. Freya braced herself.

“Freya can we talk?”

Freya said yes and the two women sat down in the waiting area. It was empty and the only voices that could be heard came from the TV on the wall. An old episode of Law and Order was playing.

“Freya, Dianna wanted me to tell you that’s she’s going to be fine. She’ll be discharged tomorrow.”

“Thank you Dr. Sanders. I’m glad to hear that.”

Freya didn’t mention anything about Logan being questioned in the death of her daughter. She was leaving that to the police.

“I hear you have a book coming out soon. I hope you didn’t write anything about my daughter.”

Freya was caught off guard. She wasn’t expecting that.

“No, it pertains to the Joey Taylor murder and the Abby Vale murders.”

“Good, my husband and I have suffered enough in this town. You might as well know now, we’re leaving after the holidays. We’re moving back to New York City. My sister lives there. My husband will be taking a teaching job at the University and my sister and I will be traveling throughout Europe. I always intended to take Sydney with me when she turned 18. She was going to take a gap year. But now----.”

She said no more and Freya hunted for something to say to fill the void.

“I’ve always wanted to travel myself. Where in Europe are you going?”

“France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. My sister has a home in Barcelona so we’ll eventually end up there. I don’t ever want to see this town again,” she said bitterly.

Without thinking, Freya blurted out, “Well, with both Brandon and Mike dead now, at least you’ll have some closure.”

The woman looked at her. Her expression was undecipherable. “Yes, one hanged himself out of guilt and the other died by drinking poisoned Gatorade. How ironic,” she smirked.

Freya’s phone pinged. It was Jake. He was in the parking lot waiting for her.

Freya stood up.

“Well, my ride is here, I have to go.”

She walked off as quickly as she could and practically jumped into Jake’s truck. Her brother asked her a million questions about Logan and Detective Ramirez. Finally, Freya told Jake she was tired so the interrogation ended as he pulled up in front of her home. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, promised to call him tomorrow, jumped out of the truck, and ran inside. She immediately checked on her cat, turned on the TV and made herself a pop tart.

As she sat and watched the news, she perused her pile of junk mail. Her cell phone went off and she saw that it was a text from Duke.

> Get to the police department ASAP.
> I want you to see something.
> Use the back door.

Freya texted back.

> I’m on my way.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Freya drove as quickly as she could to the police station. The last thing she needed right now was a ticket. She parked in the lot and went to the back door and texted Duke. He was there in seconds. He must have been waiting for her arrival. He led her down the hallway to his office and shut the door behind him. He pulled his lap top around and turned it on.

“I want you to see the interview. Listen to Logan’s confession.”

Freya sat down and watched as Logan was interviewed by Sheriff Carmichael. He sat across from the boy, his father, and attorney. Freya didn’t recognize the lawyer. He must be from out of town. Maybe even Stamford or Boston. The Bell family could afford the best and most expensive lawyers.

The sheriff videotaped the interview. That was wise. Sometimes, when people were questioned by the police they alleged all sorts of unethical or illegal behavior. So, the police videotaped their interrogations as a form of protection against such accusations. Freya watched with keen interest.

“Mr. Bell, can you tell us what happened on the night Sydney Sanders was found dead? You were the last person to see

her alive."

"I picked her up for a dinner date. It was Halloween night and she was at a sleep over. So, I picked her up and we drove to the restaurant."

"So, what happened after you picked her up?"

"We stopped at Raven's Pond and got out to talk. At first, everything was great. We kissed a little. But then, she told me she was going to report Brandon and Mike as the two boys who had sex with her last summer. She didn't call it rape because she let it happen. They were harassing her friends and she offered to take their place. I know how that sounds but Sydney was like that."

"So, what happened next?"

"We got into an argument and she slapped me."

"And then what? Did you slap her back?"

"I hit her. I didn't mean to but she made me so mad."

"How hard?"

Logan shrugged. "I don't know but she fell down and had a hard time getting back up. I tried her help her up but she wouldn't let me. Her head was bleeding. Maybe she hit it on a rock or something."

"Then what did you do?"

"I told her to get back in the car and she told me to - well, she told me to go to hell. I got mad and left and drove back to town. I left her there."

"Was she alive when you left her?"

"Yes."

"So, then what did you do?"

"I called Brandon and told him. He was pissed. He told me to go back and get her. He said if I didn't, he would. So, I went back but I couldn't find her."

“Then what?”

“I started to drive home but before I got there, I drove back to the pond. I felt bad about what happened earlier. I walked around. And then - I found her.”

“Where did you find her?”

“She was lying on the ground near the pond. I shook her but she didn’t move. I f felt for a pulse but couldn’t find one. I was scared so I called Brandon and he told me to throw her in the pond. He said either way we were in trouble. She’d tell on him for the rape and me for hitting her.”

“So, Brandon told you to throw her in the pond. Was she alive when you threw her in?”

Logan was crying now. Tears streamed down his face. “I picked her up and she wasn’t moving. I tried for a pulse again but I couldn’t find one. I thought to myself – you killed her! I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t think I hit her that hard!”

“Okay, so, you picked her up and she wasn’t moving. How did you throw her in? Did you toss her like a bag of trash or did you wade in and let her go in the water? “

“I walked into the water with her. And then when I thought it was deep enough, I just let her go. I let her go! And she just floated for a bit. I thought I heard someone so I ran off. It was her friends. I saw Arielle, Anya, and another girl. Somebody picked up her purse and then I ran back, got in my car, and drove to Brandon’s house. He said not to worry. He said the police would think it was Clyde Embry the child molester. And then we played video games all night.”

Freya had seen enough.

“Turn it off.”

She felt numb. It wasn’t the confession she was expecting. It wasn’t neat and clean but disorganized and messy.

“So, now what? Are you arresting him for murder?”

“Yes, we’ve arrested him but I don’t think the murder was planned. If anything it was second degree murder but the cover up is worse. And with Brandon dead, he has no witness. And don’t forget about the attack on Ramirez though. He’s in big trouble. Hey, Freya, how did you know it was him?”

“It was Anya. She said that he mentioned something about the girls finding Sydney’s purse. The police never released that to the public. And the girls never told him that. So, when Anya heard that, she figured out he was there, watching them. She said she felt like she was being watched that night.”

“So, he spoke off the cuff and it got him in the end.”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, he thought he was in the clear and blabbed to the wrong person. Sometimes people are their own worst enemies.”

Suddenly, Freya remembered something. She had to speak to the sheriff.

“Is the sheriff here? I need to ask him something.”

“Yeah, he’s in his office. Why”

“Oh it’s nothing important. Hey, what are you doing New Year’s Eve?”

Her question caught Duke off guard.

“Ah, nothing why?”

“Would you like to attend my friend Ali’s New Year’s Eve party? Her dad is out of town so she has the whole house to herself. I have to warn you – the theme is Disco! I’m serious. She’s having a disco themed party. Why don’t you come with me, it’ll be fun.”

“I’m not much of a dancer. Do I have to wear a white suit like John Travolta?”

“No, of course not. I’m wearing jeans and I’m no dancer either. Think about it and let me know. Good night.”

Freya walked down the hall to the sheriff’s office and knocked on his door.

“Sheriff, can I ask you a question?” Freya walked in and shut the door behind her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Freya awoke with a sense of dread. Her conversation the night before with the sheriff confirmed her worst suspicion. Now- what to do about it? Her head told her one thing, but her heart another. She normally chose her cerebral side but this time was different. This time she felt as if her heart were winning out.

She decided she would wait until she actually confronted the person. She knew she was stalling but somehow it felt right. She got up and dressed quickly. She had no appetite for breakfast this morning. The temperature was warmer today and most of the snow had melted. She fed her cat, locked her front door behind her, and drove directly to her destination. No holiday decorations adorned the Georgian colonial. It was a grand home but lacked warmth. She rang the doorbell and waited.

The door was opened by a woman she had not seen before. Where was Dalisay? Freya did not inquire but did ask for the lady of the house. The woman nodded and asked her to wait in the foyer. Freya took in her surroundings. Gone were the paintings and the artwork. Only bare ivory walls remained. Gone were

the silk divans and leather chairs. One small sofa remained with only a table beside it. Freya looked up as the woman approached her. She was surprised to see her. Her face said it all.

“Freya, what are you doing here? The police already called me about Logan. I know what happened.”

Freya wasn’t sure how to broach the subject so she decided to be quick and direct. Her old way of going for the jugular just to see people squirm didn’t seem to fit the occasion this time. Maybe she had matured and her style along with it.

“Dr. Sanders, when we spoke the other night at the hospital, you said something that I needed to clarify.”

The woman looked calm but confused.

“What? What is it?”

“You said that Brandon had died from ingesting poisoned Gatorade. Do you remember that?”

Dr. Sanders shrugged her shoulders. “No, I don’t remember that? Why? Why does that matter?”

“Well, here’s the thing – that was never released to the public. So, how did you know the apricot seeds were in the Gatorade?”

Freya watched the woman’s eyes. Cast down, they darted back and forth. She was thinking. Her psychology background taught her that pupillary response could convey a person’s thought process. And right now, Dr. Marsha Sanders was thinking up an excuse or maybe even a lie. When Freya heard her say glibly that Brandon drank poisoned Gatorade, it hadn’t registered at that moment. But after watching Logan’s interview and recalling what Anya had told her, it clicked.

“Well, Dr. Sanders? Did someone tell you about the Gatorade? If they did, we need to know. That information was confidential and if the police department has a mole, we need their name,” said Freya using a different tactic. Maybe the doctor would fall for the bait and try to throw someone under the bus.

The doctor took the bait. “Yes! I think maybe one of the officers said it

down at the police station but I can't for the life of me recall who it was – sorry. Well, if that's all, I'm busy. I have an appointment and then my husband and I are very busy packing up our offices for the move."

She stood there expecting Freya to leave but she remained where she was standing.

"Dr. Sanders, I understand you have a minor in botany. Is there a connection between plants and heart conditions? Like, Brandon for example. The apricot seeds caused a heart attack, isn't that right?" She stared straight at her now. Freya wanted her to know that she knew she did it.

Dr. Sanders stared straight back. The woman was no longer afraid and her next words reminded Freya that there was nothing stronger than a mother's love.

"Look- I just learned that my daughter's boyfriend hit her and probably drowned her and left her for dead. And that his friend told him to do it. Then, they watched video games all night."

"I don't care how Brandon died or even who did it. Whoever poisoned him did the world a favor. And do you know why? Because he wouldn't have stopped. He would have kept on raping and eventually killing. So, Ms. Barrett, whatever you are insinuating, you had better have damn proof. I don't think the people of Agatha Falls would appreciate a college reporter harassing the mother of a dead girl just to sell books! Now, get the hell out of my house before I call the police!" The woman continued her tirade as Freya stood there not saying a word.

"People like you make me sick. You love to write about other people's pain and suffering. Well, one day you may have a child and what will you do if someone takes their life just because they can? Why don't you write about that?"

Freya backed up and put her hands out in supplication.

"Dr. Sanders, this is between us. I have no intention of going to the authorities. I happen to agree with you. I'm not a vigilante and neither are you, but sometimes wrongs have to be righted. I just wanted to stop by and tell you I hope that someday you will find peace again, if that's possible. Good bye Dr.

Sanders.”

Marsha Sanders stood in her doorway and watched her as she drove away. Freya couldn’t tell if the look on her face was relief or shock. Either way, it was over.

EPILOGUE

Fire trucks blared in the distance but the party goers were unaware. All they could hear were the strains of Saturday Night Fever. Freya and Duke did their best impersonation of John Travolta and his partner. Ali looked on in pity.

“Lincoln, look at them. They are the worst dancers I’ve ever seen. You know what I think?” But, Lincoln cut her off.

“Ali, shut up.” She looked up at him in shock.

“Just leave it, they’re having fun.”

And they were having fun. Until Duke’s, cell phone vibrated in his back pocket. He read the text.

Wainsbridge Academy is on fire.

He showed Freya the text but she wasn’t surprised. Just that morning, the police arrested the players for both the football and lacrosse teams. After Logan Bell confessed to the murder of Sydney Sanders, his private lap top was searched. The police found over 150 hours of video revealing the drugging and raping of underage girls by the older Wainsbridge athletes. The girls were students from St. Bernadette’s and Evergreen Middle School. There was talk of

the school closing. Who wants to send their son to a rape academy, as it was now known?

“Do you want to drive over? I’m sure it’ll be quite a story,” teased Duke.

But Freya walked over, picked up a slice of Ted’s pizza, and took a huge bite.

“Nope, let Kerry Quinn cover this one. I’m on vacation.”

Across town, on the edge of the forest, a young girl stood and watched as the flames rose. Once the fire was well established, she ran to the road, jumped on her bike and pedaled the seven miles to her home. The temperature was unusually warm and the snow had melted. She rode easily to her neighborhood. Once there, she locked her bike in the garage and ran up the back stairs to her kitchen.

Her aunt and uncle were at the country club celebrating New Years. Her baby sitter was a very ancient and half deaf woman who was now snoring soundly on the large sectional sofa in the game room. Anya took pity on the old woman, covered her with a blanket, and turned off the TV. She ran up the stairs, tore off her clothes, and threw them in the washing machine. Then she jumped in the shower and washed herself clean.

After dressing in a pair of flannel pajamas, she went into her uncle’s office and turned on his police scanner. The police were speaking with the new Fire Chief, Don Mancini. Chief Mancini was a recent transplant from Stamford.

“Yes, it’s a shame for a historical building like that to be destroyed by a professional arsonist. We’re just lucky the fire didn’t spread into the surrounding forest area.”

John Brody, Chief Arson Inspector concurred.

“Yeah, the school is a total loss. The arsonist started the fire in the gymnasium and then the thing spread like wild fire. We think they used Molotov cocktails. Thank God, the school was closed and no one was in the building. The security guard was across campus when the fire started so either he was just lucky or the arsonist waited for him to leave the main buildings - we just don’t

know. They also spray painted the security cameras so we have nothing on film that we can use to identify the person or persons."

Anya laughed aloud. Professional arsonist? She liked that. Feeling buoyed by the news report she decided to celebrate with a movie. But, which one? She scrolled through her catalog. She had over 5oo movies on her lap top. Now, which one fit the mood of the evening? And then she saw it. It was perfect. FIRESTARTER.

The 1984 Stephen King story about a little girl with pyrokinesis. Charlie McGee was her name and was played by the actress Drew Barrymore. Anya settled back on her Ralph Lauren pillows and watched for over an hour. But just before the climatic ending, she jumped out of bed, ran over to her desk, and pulled something from the bottom drawer. It was her poppet.

She looked at it for a long time before she suddenly tore the thing to pieces and threw them into her cauldron. She lit a match and tossed it in. She watched the little doll burn and when it was nothing more than a pile of ashes, she flushed them down the toilet. Returning the cauldron to its hiding place, she jumped up and down on her bed like a trampoline for a few seconds. Then she turned her attention back to her movie. It was the end - the best part.

Anya watched as Charlie concentrated all her energy on destroying her enemy. But for Anya, the enemy was not the George C. Scott character; it was Logan, Mike, and Brandon. And any other boy who had harassed her and her friends for the past school year. She watched as Charlie caused a conflagration that incinerated her enemies and their government building, known in the story as the 'Shop.' She laughed aloud and cheered when the building burst into flames.

For just a second she felt sad and a little bit lonely. Arielle, her best friend wasn't speaking to her anymore. When she found out that Anya had tipped off Freya Barrett about Logan, that was it. Their friendship was over. But, Anya believed that once everything had calmed down the girl would come back to her. She hoped anyway.

A tear formed in her left eye. She forced herself not to feel sad and certainly not to cry. She hadn’t cried when her parents died. She hadn’t cried for Sydney and she refused to cry now. Instead, she imagined herself as the Charlie McGee character and fantasized about incinerating Logan, Mike, and Brandon.

To herself she chanted - burn baby burn.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I hope everyone enjoyed Pretty Girls as much as I did writing it. It's my favorite of the three books. It's not easy writing and self-publishing three books within two years but that's exactly what I did!

I want to thank Lynn Williams from Divine Designs on her fantastic cover. It's exactly how I imagined Sydney would look.

A big thank you to my sister Patty Mancini Heleba for reading all three stories. Her gentle advice and encouragement made all the difference. Thank you Patty.

Thanks to my dad, Don Mancini for your continual love and support.

Thank you Lorna Chapleau Davis for your friendship.

Thank you Aunt Charlotte for your wisdom.

Thanks to all the people who purchased the Freya Barrett series.

Read **Agatha Falls**, **Murder on Main Street** and **Pretty Girls Die Last**, all sold at Amazon.com.

Cheers,

Lisa