



from veteran police officer

Janice Cantore

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Critical Pursuit

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PROLOGUE

THE HEAT OF THE DAY evaporated as a curtain of dark descended across the desert floor. Now the breeze had an icy edge, and six-year-old Brinna Caruso shivered. The thin, oversize T-shirt she wore offered little protection. Tears and dirt were dry and caked on her face, and all that was left of her voice after hours of screaming for help was a weak whisper.

She hugged the rough pole to which she was handcuffed and hiccuped sobs, unable to comprehend why she'd been left out in the middle of nowhere, barefoot and terrified.

“Jesus loves me; this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

She repeated the words over and over, a tuneless song recited between hiccups, wondering if anyone in the dark desert would ever find her.

The roar of an engine bubbled up in the sky, faint at first and then loud enough to sound to Brinna like something large and vicious, coming to swallow her whole. She craned her neck and sniffled, looking up.

A light blinded her; then dust began to swirl all around, the pings of pebbles hitting the ramshackle building behind her sounding like gunshots. The sting of sand pummeling her bare legs made her fidget, but there was nowhere to hide.

Is the mean man coming back? Where are Daddy and Mommy and Brian? What is happening?

A thousand questions overloaded her six-year-old brain as she squeezed her eyes closed to shut out the dust and sneezed as grit forced its way up her nasal passages. She couldn't run; she couldn't scream.

All she could do was strain at the handcuffs and wait for the monster to attack.

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SEVENTY-FOUR PERCENT of abducted children who are murdered are dead within three hours of the abduction.

The grim statistic rumbled around in K-9 Officer Brinna Caruso's brain like a hand grenade without the pin. There was no evidence that six-year-old Josh Daniels had been abducted, yet the statistic taunted her.

Brinna and her K-9, Hero, a four-year-old Labrador retriever, were part of a team of officers fanned out across El Dorado Park, the largest city park in Long Beach, California, searching for Josh. He'd disappeared from an afternoon family picnic two and a half hours ago.

The huge park successfully created the illusion of wilderness, dense in some places, open in others. There were a thousand places to hide—or be hidden. Brinna normally loved the park, the smell of pine trees and nature, the illusion of pristine innocence and safety. Today all she could think about was how quickly innocence could be lost or, worse, stolen.

Hero trotted ahead on a well-beaten path, panting in the summer heat. Brinna and Officer Maggie Sloan followed a few feet behind. Maggie had left her partner back at the picnic site with the boy's family.

"You are so intense it's scary," Maggie said.

"What?" Brinna glanced from Hero to Maggie, who regarded her with a bemused expression. She wasn't just another officer; she was Brinna's confidante and best friend on the force.

"I'm just keeping an eye on my dog," Brinna explained, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "He's definitely following a scent."

"That's good news, isn't it?" Maggie asked. "It means we should find the boy. Why the frown?"

Brinna shrugged. "I want to find a boy and not a body."

"Harrumph." Maggie waved a hand dismissively. "There's no indication Josh was snatched. The best guess is he got lost playing hide-and-seek. El Dorado is to parks what Disneyland is to carnivals. He could be anywhere. You always imagine the worst where kids are concerned."

Brinna gritted her teeth. "Because you know as well as I do, if a kid is abducted, the chances are overwhelming that they will be a victim of murder."

Jaw set, Brinna returned her full attention to the dog. She'd had this conversation before, with Maggie and others, almost every time a child went missing. The guys on her team liked to say that since Brinna didn't believe there was a God watching out for kids, she'd given herself the job.

"The operative word is *if*. You're such a glass-is-half-empty

person.” Maggie slapped Brinna’s shoulder with the back of her hand. “What about the ones found alive? Elizabeth Smart, Shawn Hornbeck, Brinna Caruso?”

“For every three of us rescued, there’re nine who die,” Brinna shot back. “You know my goal is 100 percent saved.”

Maggie snorted in exasperation. “All the time you spend riding rail on registered sex offenders and monitoring any missing kid case flagged suspicious.” She shook her head and wagged an index finger. “You can’t save them all.”

Brinna said nothing, hating that truth. Hero came to a stop, and like dominoes, so did Brinna and then Maggie.

“Maybe I can’t save them all,” Brinna conceded to Maggie. “But it certainly won’t be for a lack of trying.”

Maggie followed Brinna’s gaze to Hero, then turned back to her friend and smiled. “You sure earn your nickname, Kid Crusader.”

Brinna watched the dog. His nose up, testing the air, Hero trotted off in a more determined fashion than before. When he caught a scent, the hackles on the back of his neck rose ever so slightly. Brinna felt her own neck tingle as if there were a sympathetic connection between her and the dog.

“He’s got something stronger.” She stepped up her pace after Hero, Maggie on her heels.

They jogged to the left, into an area thick with tall pines and full oaks. After about a hundred feet, Hero barked and sat, turning toward Brinna. It was his practiced alert signal. Brinna’s heart caught in her throat. If her dog had just found Josh, the boy wasn’t moving; in fact, he wasn’t even standing.

She followed the dog's gaze to a pile of leaves and held her breath.

When she heard muffled sniffing coming from the leaves, Brinna exhaled, rolling her eyes in relief. Then she saw the toe of a small tennis shoe sticking out. The boy was hiding. Turning to Maggie, she pointed at the shoe. Maggie smiled.

Brinna spoke to the quivering mass. "Josh, Josh Daniels. It's the police. Is that you?"

A half sob and an intake of breath emanated from the pile. The leaves moved, and a dirty-faced blond boy peered out at her.

"The po-police?" He cast an eye toward Hero. "That's not a coyote coming to eat me?"

Kneeling, Brinna bit back a chuckle. The boy's fear was plausible. He'd wandered into a particularly dense section of the park. The only things absent were dangerous animals. She understood a lost boy's imagination getting the best of him.

"Nope, it's my dog, Hero. Hero is a police dog. He doesn't eat little boys. He helped me find you."

Josh sat up and the leaves fell away, revealing a little boy smudged with sweat, soil, and grime. He sniffled. "I was playing and I got lost. I called and called, but my mom didn't come. Then I heard noises. I was afraid of wild animals, so I hid."

"Well, your mom and dad sent us to find you," Maggie said. "Are you ready to go home?"

Josh nodded vigorously and stood, brushing off dirt and leaves as he did so. "Can I pet your dog?" he asked Brinna, the tears already drying.

“Sure,” Brinna said as she stood, ignoring the triumphant smirk Maggie shot her. Brinna pulled out her handheld radio and notified the command post that the situation was code 4, all over and resolved. “We’re on our way out.”

Brinna smiled as she took the boy’s hand. “Do you like Beanie Babies, Josh?”

He looked up at her and nodded.

“I’ve got one for you in the car,” she said with a smile as the statistic tumbling around in her mind disappeared in a poof, like a dud.

* * *

“Officer Caruso, Officer Caruso!”

Brinna groaned. Tracy Michaels, the local police beat reporter, was hailing her. Brinna had almost made it to her car avoiding all contact with the press. She wished Maggie were still with her. Maggie always knew how to talk to the press. But Maggie was with her partner, seeing to the happy family reunion.

“Officer Caruso! I have the okay for an interview.”

Brinna stopped at her K-9 unit, a black-and-white Ford Explorer, and turned, counting to ten so she didn’t say anything she’d regret. Reporters only wanted bad news. They thrived on tragedy. She faced Michaels, a young, eager woman who approached with a pad and pen in her right hand.

“Tracy, we found the kid in a pile of leaves, alive and unmolested—not much excitement in that story.”

The reporter shook her head. “I don’t want to talk

about Josh Daniels. I want to talk about your upcoming anniversary.”

“My anniversary?” Brinna frowned.

“Don’t tell me you don’t mark the day in some special fashion,” Tracy said, hands on her hips. “Next week, it will be twenty years to the day that you were rescued after being abducted.”