



EVERY  
DEADLY  
SUSPICION

*A NOVEL*

JANICE CANTORE

## PRAISE FOR JANICE CANTORE

Be prepared to do nothing until you've finished reading this masterful suspense novel! I took a peek at the first page and couldn't stop until the last sentence.

**DIANN MILLS**, bestselling, award-winning author of *Lethal Standoff*,  
on *Every Deadly Suspicion*

A thrilling read full of heart-stopping tension and great twists. An awesome blend of suspense and romance. Don't miss *Every Deadly Suspicion*.

**DARLENE L. TURNER**, *Publishers Weekly* bestselling author of the Crisis  
Rescue Team series

At some point in our lives, everyone needs a hero. In *Every Deadly Suspicion*, Jared is Hanna's. From fighting fires to rescuing children and dogs, to tracking a serial killer, they find themselves once again drawn to each other—and learn a few lessons along the journey. Janice's books are always something I look forward to reading. She hooks you from page one. I highly recommend you hide somewhere fun to read this book because you won't want to be interrupted.

**LYNETTE EASON**, bestselling, award-winning author of the Lake City  
Heroes series

This timely police procedural from a twenty-two-year veteran of the Long Beach, Calif., police satisfies.

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY** on *Code of Courage*

In *Breach of Honor*, Janice Cantore tells a complex tale of deceit and backroom deals that leaves you wondering who the good guys actually are. . . . I could not wait to get to the end and see how it all tied together.

**HALLEE BRIDGEMAN**, bestselling author of the Love and Honor series

Janice Cantore has crafted an adventure filled with brutal crimes, heartbreaking injustice, shocking twists, a gentle romance, and hard-won faith. Words like *page turning*, *breath stealing*, and *pulse racing*, while accurate, don't begin to do it justice.

**LYNN H. BLACKBURN**, award-winning author of the Dive Team Investigations series, on *Breach of Honor*

A complex tale of murder, deceit, and faith challenges, complete with multifaceted characterizations, authentic details, and action scenes, even a subtle hint of romance . . . [all] well integrated into a suspenseful story line that keeps pages turning until the end.

**MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW** on *Lethal Target*

**EVERY DEADLY SUSPICION**



# EVERY DEADLY SUSPICION

JANICE CANTORE



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*Every Deadly Suspicion*

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*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

EPHESIANS 4:31-32

*Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

ROMANS 14:10-12

*What we are, and where we are is God's providential arrangement—God's doing, though it may be man's misdoing; and the manly and the wise way is to look your disadvantages in the face and see what can be made out of them.*

WILL SCHWALBE



# PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 1990

*“Joe, I’m pregnant.”*

Those three words had set Joe Keyes’s world spinning. The prospect of becoming a father changed his perspective on life. He and Paula had been married for two years and never talked about having kids. When she told him four days ago that she was pregnant, he’d fainted, cutting his head open when he fell.

Later at the hospital, while the doctor stitched him up, Joe felt as if the world had shifted, and he was leaning over the precipice of an abyss. If he pulled himself upright, he’d be the husband and father Paula needed. If he didn’t, if he went back to cooking meth, he’d fall straight down into the abyss. And the abyss was bottomless.

*“You can’t go to jail again, Joe. What will I do with a baby if that happens?”* Paula had pleaded with him.

She was right. He shoved his hands in his pockets. *“I do not want to go to jail again.”*

It was a cold December in California, and Joe could see his breath as he hurried along the path. Around him loomed snow-covered pines, branches drooping under the weight of new powder.

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The place he and Paula rented sat at the edge of the forest, and his favorite shortcut wove through the trees. He was on his way home to give Paula some news. It was the classic good news/bad news. He had a plan, and once he explained, she'd have to see that it made sense.

Since Paula had told him about the baby, Joe did a lot of thinking. As he adjusted to the idea, he liked it. At first, Joe hoped for a boy. He'd be able to teach a boy to be a good man. He'd certainly make sure his son got past the sixth grade. Yes, Joe would raise a good, strong boy who people would respect.

His stomach churned with butterflies when he considered the second option. What on earth could he teach a little girl? He considered a daughter. She'd be pretty, like Paula, with long, soft chestnut hair and warm green eyes the color of priceless emeralds. Eyes that would make a fella's heart stop.

*I'll protect her, I'll provide for her, and I'll keep her safe. She'll grow up smart and strong, and she'll be a daddy's girl.* He smiled at the thought. He didn't care if it was a boy or a girl. He just wanted to be a good dad, not like the man who'd raised him. That guy had been drunk all the time and rarely home. No, Joe would not be like his dad.

He arrived at home and hurried into the warmth, through the kitchen and into the living room. Paula sat on the couch with a book, bundled up in a blanket.

"I've got news." He sat on the coffee table in front of her.

"You got a job?" Her eyes sparkled with hope.

He tilted his head. "Good news and bad news. Yes, I got a job."

"What's the bad news?"

"It won't start full-time until spring. Ben Hodges hired me to do landscaping. It's only odd jobs right now, like clearing drive-ways and stuff."

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“What will we do until then?” Her gaze darkened.

He held up both hands. “I’ve got a plan. Hear me out. I’ve still got the trailer. No one knows about it, not even Blake and Sophia.” He threw his partners into the mix because sometimes Paula complained to him that they got too big a cut when Joe did all the work. “I’ll cook one last batch of rocks. If it’s just us, and I don’t have to split anything with them, I should make enough money to tide us over.”

Surprisingly, Paula didn’t object right away. He could tell she seriously considered the idea, tapping on the book in her lap with a fingernail while she thought. “Promise you’ll quit for good?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”



Two days later, Joe finished his last batch. He figured in his head that the amount of meth he’d made should net him about twenty grand. He broke it up into small rocks to fill individual packets: quarters, eight balls, and teeners. The quarter was the smallest and cheapest, weighing in at a quarter ounce; the eight ball the biggest at 3.5 grams. He weighed each bit and packed everything into separate little baggies. Once finished, he filled his backpack with the product.

Stretching, looking around his favorite kitchen, he admitted it felt good to be done. He shuffled around the empty battery-acid container and ignored the putrid pile of residue that accumulated during the cooking process. He’d let it all pile up inside instead of packing some of it outside.

The trailer was toast when he finished today. It was all going to burn.

He ran his hand through his hair, trying to clear his thoughts.

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It was late afternoon; he'd been busy here all day inhaling noxious fumes. Cooking meth did nothing to help a man think straight. Stopping now would be a good thing. When his child was born, Joe wanted a clear head and a clean slate. He slung the backpack over his shoulders and stepped toward the door.

Movement outside the sliver of a window next to the front door caught his eye and he froze. Craning his neck, he peered through the slit.

There it was again.

Stiffening, his heart rate spiked and his pulse pounded. No one else should know about this place. Not even Blake and Sophia.

He never had trusted them with his cooking spot. Blake had a big mouth, and he hung out with untrustworthy dweebs. Joe tiptoed to the bigger window, peeled back a bit of the foil that blacked out the light, and eyeballed what he could of the outside terrain. On the far right, he saw a blue hood and car door. A Jeep. Only a four-by-four would get up here. Chase Buckley drove a blue Jeep.

Joe had been betrayed.

Somehow Blake and Sophia had found him. And they told Chase.

Sure enough, Chase came into view. He walked to the front of the Jeep and stood, staring at the trailer, hands on his hips. Buckley's presence threw Joe for a loop. The guy's family practically owned the whole county, cops included. What did he want here?

"I know Joe's in there." Blake stepped up to Chase's side.

"Is he armed?"

It took a minute for the second voice to register. It wasn't Blake; it was geeky Marcus Marshall of all people. Joe caught Marshall flirting with Paula once and punched him out. A total loser, he hung out with Buckley purely for protection.

“Naw, Joe wouldn’t be dumb enough to have a gun,” Blake said.

Joe slapped his forehead. Marshall. Joe remembered seeing the geek at the 7-Eleven when he’d picked up some water. Marshall followed him.

That’s what Joe got for not being more careful. All he was thinking was that he’d be done with this for good. They’d found him and they’d want a cut of what he’d just cooked. He couldn’t go back to Paula and tell her he’d lost half of the money from this batch. Now what was he gonna do?

Muttering under his breath, Joe tried to figure a way out.

“We know you’re in there, Joe,” Chase called out. “Come on out. I’ve got a proposition for you. It could make us both a lot of money.”

Joe looked around the trailer’s kitchen, which had served him so well. He’d done a lot of stupid things in his life, but getting involved with Chase would be the stupidest. The guy was a loose cannon, a wild card, and Joe wanted no part of the spoiled, rich jerk.

“Joe, we found you. Other people will, too.” Sophia spoke now.

“You’ve been holding out on your partners,” Blake yelled. “You deserve to be spanked.”

“We’ll forgive you. But the only way out is to make a deal with us.” Chase again.

There was another way out. Joe already had planned to destroy the kitchen. The people outside would witness the destruction. The booby trap was dangerous for those standing too close to the trailer, maybe even deadly. Joe refused to consider the consequences. He didn’t invite them here. He flicked the booby-trap switch and hurried for the back of the trailer. With all the caustic chemicals, it would not take much to level the place.

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He lifted a hatch in the floor and dropped to the ground as he heard the front door get kicked in. Lying flat, his breath fled as the frigid air hit. He pushed himself out from under the trailer, stood as soon as he could, and then ran. Slipping and sliding in the thin layer of snow on the ground, Joe didn't dare look back.

He'd just reached his motorcycle when the trailer exploded. Joe flinched and looked back, saw the plume of smoke billowing. He shivered in spite of the exertion. At least Blake and Sophia were together. He could care less about Chase and Marshall.

Joe collapsed in a fit of coughing. That always happened after he cooked and then came out into the fresh winter air. For a minute he struggled for breath, his lungs burning.

One day all this cooking would be the death of him.

Slowly his breath returned to normal, and Joe hopped on the bike and sped away, heading for Dry Oaks, Paula, and his new life.



DEA Agent Gilly surveyed the burned-out trailer site. In the week since the explosion and fire, all the evidence had been collected by local police. Brett kicked through what remained in case they'd missed anything important. He found nothing. Rubbing his hands together, he regretted not having worn gloves.

The explosion was textbook meth-lab booby trap. Gilly could see it in his mind's eye—the cooker in the trailer was surprised, his lab had been discovered. He flipped the trap switch and fled as the lab blew.

Tuolumne County was fortunate the fire had been knocked down quickly. Light snowfall and cold temperatures had helped. Deep in the forest, on county land, the trailer fire could have caused lots more damage. As for the two people injured, they were

lucky as well. Sophia Carson got the worst of it, with second- and third-degree burns on her hands and arms and a serious case of smoke inhalation. Blake Carson was barely singed.

Deputies arrested him at the hospital where his wife was admitted for burns and smoke inhalation. They didn't believe his story, and because of his record, they wanted to charge him with the lab and the fire. He'd been in custody during their investigation, but ultimately they had to kick him loose because they didn't have enough evidence to hold him over for trial.

He was guilty, though. Gilly's instinct told him that. Carson had a rap sheet filled with drug crimes. He'd claimed he and his wife had wandered upon the trailer while hiking and made the mistake of opening the door. Neither one was dressed for hiking, and no hiking trails appeared anywhere near the trailer. The Carsons were driven to the hospital by Chase Buckley, who said he was in the area trying out his four-wheel drive. He heard the explosion, drove over to investigate, and rescued them.

Gilly didn't believe any of them.

He hated liars and he hated meth. Somewhere in this county his little brother had bought the first dose of meth that hooked him. Now he couldn't kick the habit, his life was wasted. Gilly was on a mission to put as many cookers out of business and in jail as possible. This burned-out trailer was half the prize—it would no longer produce—but he had to find the cook and put him behind bars.

There was evidence that someone else had been at the scene and fled. Not far from where the trailer was parked, tire tracks were found from a motorcycle. The bike had left in a hurry, digging a deep rut. The rut froze and left a perfect track.

Buckley and the Carsons knew more than they were saying, Gilly was certain. He also had a hunch that the cooker was Joe

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Keyes. For Gilly, it was simply putting two and two together. Keyes and Blake Carson were known associates. They'd been arrested twice together in the past. Keyes was known to own a motorcycle, but so far, the local cops had not been able to locate it. Gilly had met Sheriff Peterson, and he had to wonder how hard the guy had searched. He didn't appear to be very motivated.

The two closest towns to the trailer's location were Twain Harte and Dry Oaks. Carson and Keyes stayed in Dry Oaks. Buckley's family owned most of Dry Oaks.

While Gilly couldn't figure how Buckley fit in the puzzle, his thoughts drifted back to his interview with Keyes the day before. He'd found him at the small one-bedroom cabin he and his wife shared. Surprisingly, neither Keyes nor his wife had the look of drug users. Keyes was tall and lanky with a bushy handlebar mustache. His eyes were clear and his teeth good. Meth often destroyed the teeth of users. Keyes's hands were the only thing that gave him away. They were rough, stained, and scarred, most likely from the caustic chemicals he'd worked with.

Paula Keyes was easy on the eyes. A brown-haired classic beauty, almost elegant—until she opened her mouth. Then you saw the hardness in the woman. She'd be difficult to live with, Gilly thought. He concentrated on Joe, but Paula stayed in the room, arms folded, watching the interview while she leaned against the kitchen counter.

They both admitted they knew the area of the forest where the trailer fire had occurred, but that was all they would admit.

“Joe, you've been arrested with Carson, so don't pretend like you don't know the name.”

“He's bad news.” Keyes looked away and gave a disinterested shrug. “I stay away from bad news.”

“He wasn't in the forest hiking.”

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“You know everything. What was he up there doing?” Keyes smirked.

Gilly looked him in the eye and knew that behind the bravado was fear, and guilt. Keyes was his man. If only there were enough evidence to get him in an interview room.

“Cooking meth with you.”

Keyes forced out a nervous chuckle. Then his wife stepped in.

“Joe was here with me. I just found out I’m pregnant. We were celebrating. If you had anything on him, you’d arrest him. But you don’t, so leave now. Please.”

Gilly didn’t believe the story of domestic bliss. He decided that Keyes would be his project. Heaven knew the DEA didn’t have the manpower to cover all the Northern California forest and meth cookers and marijuana growers therein, but he could cover one person he was certain was guilty.

He’d be all over Keyes, that was for sure.

# CHAPTER 1

## PRESENT DAY

Monday morning Chief Hanna Keyes was in her driveway, ready to climb into her police vehicle, when she heard the faltering plane. Her gaze shot up by reflex. It was flying awfully low. The motor sputtered and didn't sound good, but Hanna didn't know anything about small-plane motors. It was Scott Buckley's plane; she did know that. When the weather was nice, he flew his plane around the area at least once a week. And today was a beautiful late-spring day.

*Vroom, sputter, vroom, sputter . . .* It almost sounded like a car when you accelerated, then took your foot off the gas, then accelerated again.

That couldn't be right. Hanna stood with her door open, her eyes tracking the plane's trajectory. The single-engine plane made a lazy circle, seemed to drop, then stabilize. The engine sounded normal now, yet the flight path was anything but.

Scott was losing altitude.

The closest airport was Columbia, about sixteen driving miles away, and he was headed that general direction. *He's way too far*

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*from the airport to land.* She began to feel anxious for Scott. He was a prominent figure in Dry Oaks, a vocal supporter of police and financial supporter of many charities in town.

She got in her SUV and started the engine. As she backed out of her driveway, she leaned forward and looked up for another glimpse of the aircraft. She watched in horror as the plane pointed almost straight down, then looped up slightly and swung back down again. Scott would not make it to the airport.

He was going down.

Hanna activated her SUV's light bar, then picked up her radio mike to contact dispatch as she accelerated down the street. "It's Chief Keyes. I think there's a plane going down. It's headed toward the field at Pine and Baseline."

"10-4, Chief. We're getting calls on that as well. Fire is rolling."

Hanna replaced the mike and concentrated on her driving. The plane dropped below the tree line, and her heart sank. She rounded the corner just in time to see it pull up slightly, then list to the left and come down at an angle so the left wing hit the ground hard, causing the plane to cartwheel across the field. It broke apart as it did so, pieces flying everywhere. The fuselage skidded to a violent stop in the middle of the grassy field. Smoke and dust swirled up, but Hanna didn't see flames yet.

She jumped the curb and angled her SUV across the field from the north as a pickup truck crossed from the south. They met at the plane. Hanna jammed the vehicle into park and leapt from the front seat as the driver of the truck got out.

Jared Hodges. He was a firefighter-EMT, but he was obviously off duty. His presence set her back a bit. Their history together reared up in her thoughts like a wild stallion.

"You have a fire extinguisher?" he called out to Hanna.

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She nodded, jolted from her memories, then hurried around her vehicle to the back hatch. She opened it and jerked the extinguisher from its clips.

Jared arrived at her elbow, grabbed it from her, and jogged to the plane, where tongues of flames started to lick at the dry grass underneath.

Hanna followed, just now hearing the blare of the approaching fire truck sirens.

Jared expertly aimed the suppression liquid at the flames. A spurt here and a spurt there as he doused all the flames. The acrid odor of airplane fuel assaulted her nose, causing a grimace. Could Scott have survived such a horrendous impact? Hanna looked back to where he'd first hit the ground. The plane's debris stretched at least a hundred yards across the field.

Jared got down on his hands and knees and peered into the wreckage. He peeled away what would have been the door, and Scott's body was exposed. Hanna knelt next to Jared and gasped at the sight of poor Scott. He was still strapped into his seat, his body completely limp. Blood smeared the instrument panel and was dripping from his head.

"Scott, can you hear me?" Jared asked.

No response.

All she could think was *How am I going to tell his father?*

The arriving fire truck cut its sirens, leaving the rumble of a diesel engine and the pop of air brakes to announce its arrival. Uniformed firefighters exited the rig and set about preparing their equipment for the task at hand.

Jared pressed his fingers to Scott's carotid artery. She doubted he would find a pulse, but the step was necessary. She pulled back, stabilizing herself on her knees.

Jared sat back as well. "I got no pulse."

“It was quite an impact.” Hanna coughed as the smoke and fumes seared her nose.

Jared coughed as well and swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “Saw it on my way to work. He flew straight into the ground.”

“You checked it out, Hodges?” Paul Stokes, a senior firefighter, jogged up and asked.

Jared faced Stokes. “I couldn’t find a pulse. We need to move him. I think the fire may flare up again.”

Stokes signaled for the men manning the hose to start the water flow before returning his attention to Jared. “Okay, stand back. You’re not geared up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hanna stood and moved back with Jared to let the on-duty firefighters finish their work. Two of them brought up a hose and began to work on the fire, which as Jared had warned was already flaring back up. The ambulance had been on the heels of the pumper, and the medics climbed out, pausing only to remove their rescue equipment from the sides of the truck. Once on the ground next to Scott, they carefully cut the harness holding him in the crumpled plane and then gently removed him from the fire danger.

They did their assessment and began CPR. In a few minutes, they put him on a gurney, slid it into the rig, and drove away code 3, using lights and sirens. The closest trauma center was in Sonora.

Maybe there was hope. Scott was engaged to be married. She prayed that he’d live to see his wedding day.

A crowd started to gather along the fringes of the field. The chatter on her radio told her a patrol unit was almost on-scene. She got on the air and requested mutual aid from the sheriff’s department. Hanna’s department was competent but small. And the size

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of the area they needed to contain would keep all her personnel busy. They needed help.

“Half the town probably saw the plane go down,” Jared noted, following her gaze.

“I wonder how many people filmed it.”

Jared let out a rueful laugh. “That’s kind of a given nowadays, isn’t it? How are you, Hanna?”

She turned away from the wreck and the crowd to face Jared. Her feelings for him were complicated. They were close friends from seventh grade through college, then Jared left town ten years ago—breaking Hanna’s heart. He’d only recently returned, and he was immediately hired by the county fire department. The four-month-long fire academy had kept him busy.

Jared was several years older than most fire department rookies, and she’d wondered how he’d do. From everything she’d heard, he’d done well. While she’d made no effort to rekindle their friendship, when he’d been assigned to the only station in Dry Oaks, well, it was a small town. Hanna’s hearing gossip about him had been unavoidable. She still didn’t know what to make of his return.

When he’d first left, she prayed and prayed that he’d come home. With time, her hope had faded and she’d moved on. At least she thought she had.

*I’m thinking about him an awful lot for someone who has moved on.*

“I’m fine, Jared. How’s the job?”

“Suits me, I think.”

Stokes called out to Hanna, and she stepped toward him.

“We need to make the wreckage safe,” Stokes said. “Clean up the fuel, make sure nothing flares up.”

She knew what he was asking. Scott was seriously hurt; this crash would be investigated by the NTSB. If Scott didn’t make it, the plane and all of its parts would be considered evidence.

“If you have to move the wreckage to make it safe, move it,” she said.

Stokes nodded and instructed his men. His radio crackled, and he held it to his ear. He then walked to where Hanna stood, keeping his voice low. “Chief, Buckley didn’t make it. They tried to revive him, but he flatlined.”

“Thanks.” Hanna’s heart fell as hope was dashed.

Sergeant Asa Parker and Officer Jenna Cash, Hanna’s day-shift people, had just arrived. From the radio she knew some county deputies were also on the way. All personnel were needed. Since this was a fatal crash now, the scene needed to be kept secure until federal investigators arrived. Dry Oaks had one investigator, Terry Holmes, and he would be called out as well.

The Buckleys were a wealthy and influential family in Dry Oaks, indeed in all of Tuolumne County. If something was amiss in the crash, Hanna wanted to know.

“Secure the scene,” Hanna told her officers. “Jenna, move your patrol vehicle to the north end of the debris field, tape off the area. I can see gawkers already walking through debris.”

“On it.” Jenna turned and jogged to her car.

Hanna turned to Asa and pointed to the people approaching the main wreckage. “Tape this off now so we get as little contamination as possible.”

A county deputy joined them. Hanna acknowledged him with a nod. “I’m not sure how long it’ll take the NTSB to respond. Every bit of the wreckage is evidence. Secure it all.” She sighed. “This will be a long day.”

“You got it, Chief.”

Commotion to the left of the field caught her eye. Marcus Marshall appeared, walking up the field along the debris path. Hanna groaned inwardly. She’d known Marcus since she was in

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the first grade. Back then he confused her; now he simply irritated her. In the ensuing years, he'd hopped from job to job in Dry Oaks, from newspapers to radio stations to a local news feed. At one time he'd aspired to become a bestselling author. Despite three self-published books, his aspirations had never been achieved.

Currently he wrote a crime blog, assisted at the local paper, and usually drove law enforcement crazy by following the scanner and trying to get a "scoop." A tall man, he stood out in a crowd. Over the years, he'd lost most of his hair, save for a long gray braid that went halfway down his back. He held up his phone, recording the activity, no doubt. He'd want gory pictures for sure. She was glad Scott was no longer on-scene.

"Chief, can I get a statement?" Marcus yelled.

Asa took off across the field to intercept him before he encroached any more on the scene around the main wreckage.

Hanna ignored Marcus and turned to speak to Jared, but he was gone. Sadness bit with sharp teeth, bringing on a sigh of loss. Was it for Scott or for Jared?

There was no time to ponder the question. She'd have to try and get to Everett, Scott's father, before Marcus or any news media did, and tell him what had happened. The bright spring day had suddenly turned very dark.