



COLD BLOODED



JANICE CANTORE

PRAISE FOR JANICE CANTORE

“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*

“Well-drawn characters and steady action make for a fun read.”

WORLD MAGAZINE on *Lethal Target*

“Readers who crave suspense will devour Cantore’s engaging crime drama while savoring the sweet romantic swirl. . . . *Crisis Shot* kicks off this latest series with a literal bang.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“A gripping crime story filled with complex and interesting characters and a plot filled with twists and turns.”

THE SUSPENSE ZONE on *Crisis Shot*

“A pulsing crime drama with quick beats and a plot that pulls the reader in . . . [and] probably one of the most relevant books I’ve read in a while. . . . This is a suspenseful read ripped from the front page and the latest crime drama. I highly recommend.”

RADIANT LIT on *Crisis Shot*

“Cantore, a retired police officer, shares her love for suspense, while her experience on the force lends credibility and depth to her writing. Her characters instantly become the reader’s friends.”

CBA CHRISTIAN MARKET on *Crisis Shot*

“An intriguing story that could be pulled from today’s headlines.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW on *Crisis Shot*

“The final volume of Cantore’s Cold Case Justice trilogy wraps the series with a gripping thriller that brings readers into the mind of a police officer involved in a fatal shooting case. . . . Cantore offers true-to-life stories that are relevant to today’s news.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Catching Heat*

“Cantore manages to balance quick-paced action scenes with developed, introspective characters to keep the story moving along steadily. The issue of faith arises naturally, growing out of the characters’ struggles and history. Their romantic relationship is handled with a very light touch . . . but the police action and mystery solving shine.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Catching Heat*

“Questions of faith shape the well-woven details, the taut action scenes, and the complex characters in Cantore’s riveting mystery.”

BOOKLIST on *Burning Proof*

“[In] the second book in Cantore’s Cold Case Justice series . . . the romantic tension between Abby and Luke seems to be growing stronger, which creates anticipation for the next installment.”

ROMANTIC TIMES on *Burning Proof*

“This is the start of a smart new series for retired police officer-turned-author Cantore. Interesting procedural details, multilayered characters, lots of action, and intertwined mysteries offer plenty of appeal.”

BOOKLIST on *Drawing Fire*

“Cantore’s well-drawn characters employ Christian values and spirituality to navigate them through tragedy, challenges, and loss. However, layered upon the underlying basis of faith is a riveting police-crime drama infused with ratcheting suspense and surprising plot twists.”

SHELF AWARENESS on *Drawing Fire*

“*Drawing Fire* rips into the heart of every reader. One dedicated homicide detective. One poignant cold case. One struggle for truth. . . . Or is the pursuit revenge?”

DIANN MILLS, bestselling author of *Burden of Proof*
and the FBI Task Force series

“This hard-edged and chilling narrative rings with authenticity. . . . Fans of police suspense fiction will be drawn in by her accurate and dramatic portrayal.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Visible Threat*

“Janice Cantore provides an accurate behind-the-scenes view of law enforcement and the challenges associated with solving cases. Through well-written dialogue and effective plot twists, the reader is quickly drawn into a story that sensitively yet realistically deals with a difficult topic.”

CHRISTIAN LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Visible Threat*

“[Cantore’s] characters resonate with an authenticity not routinely found in police dramas. Her knack with words captures Jack’s despair and bitterness and skillfully documents his spiritual journey.”

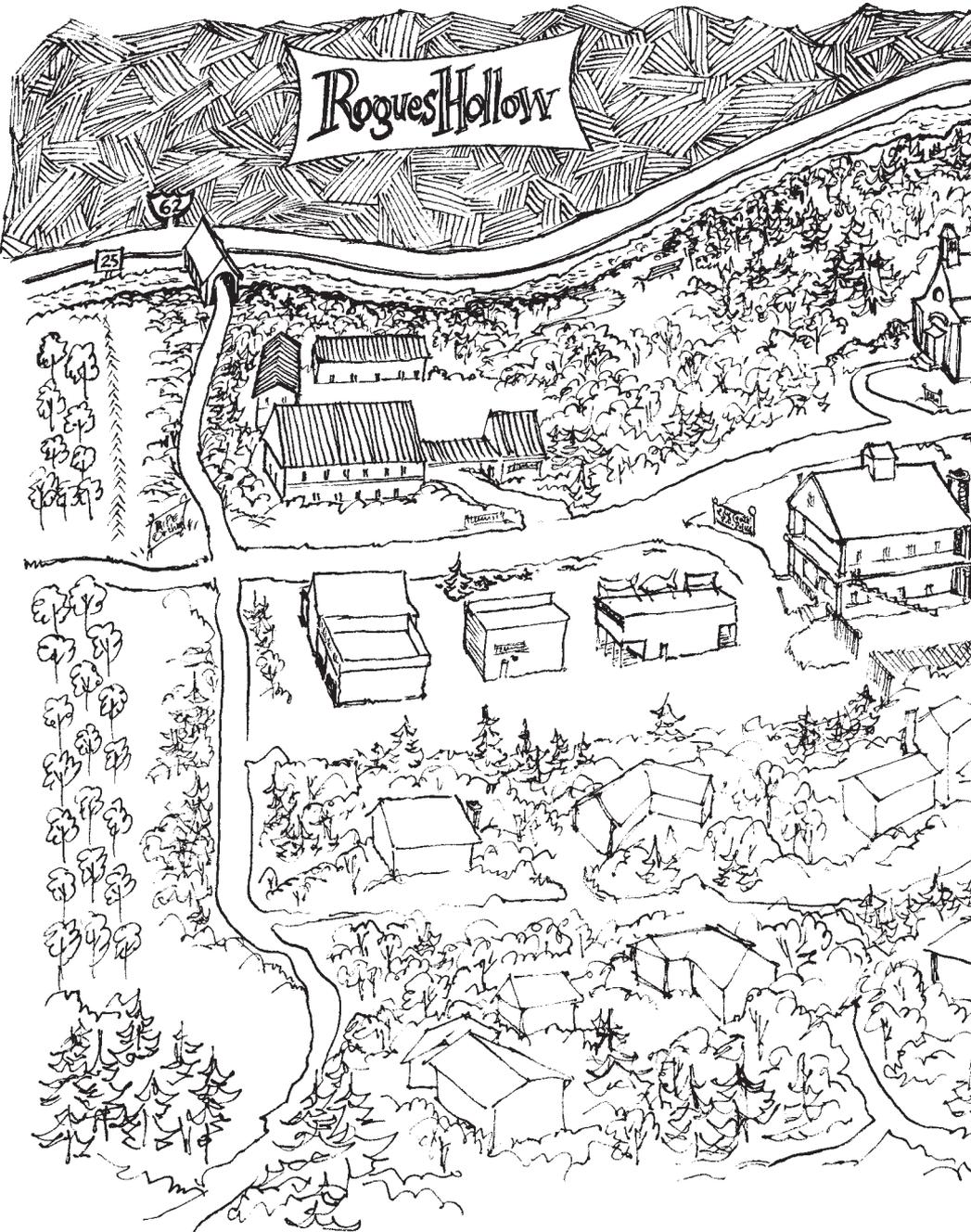
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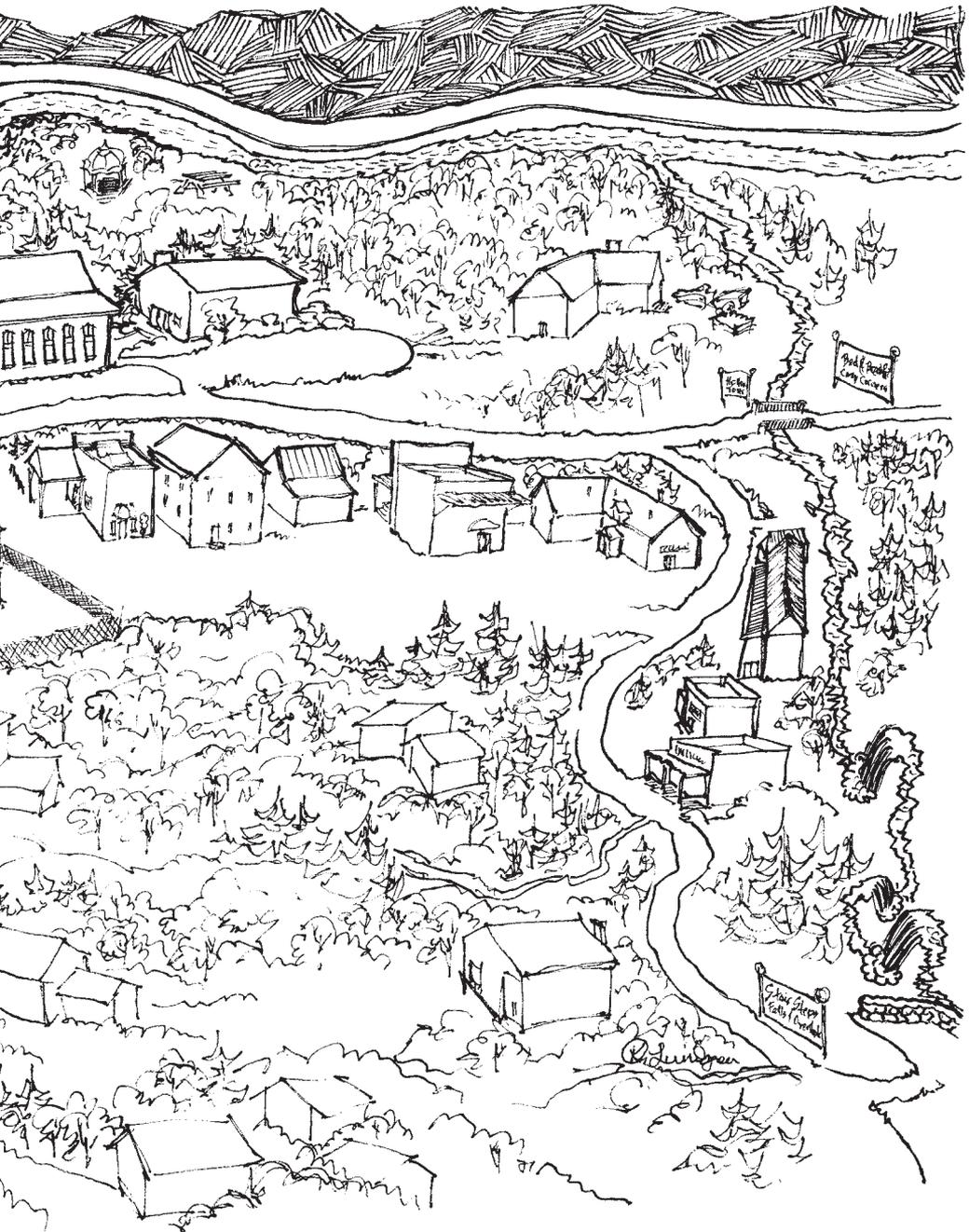
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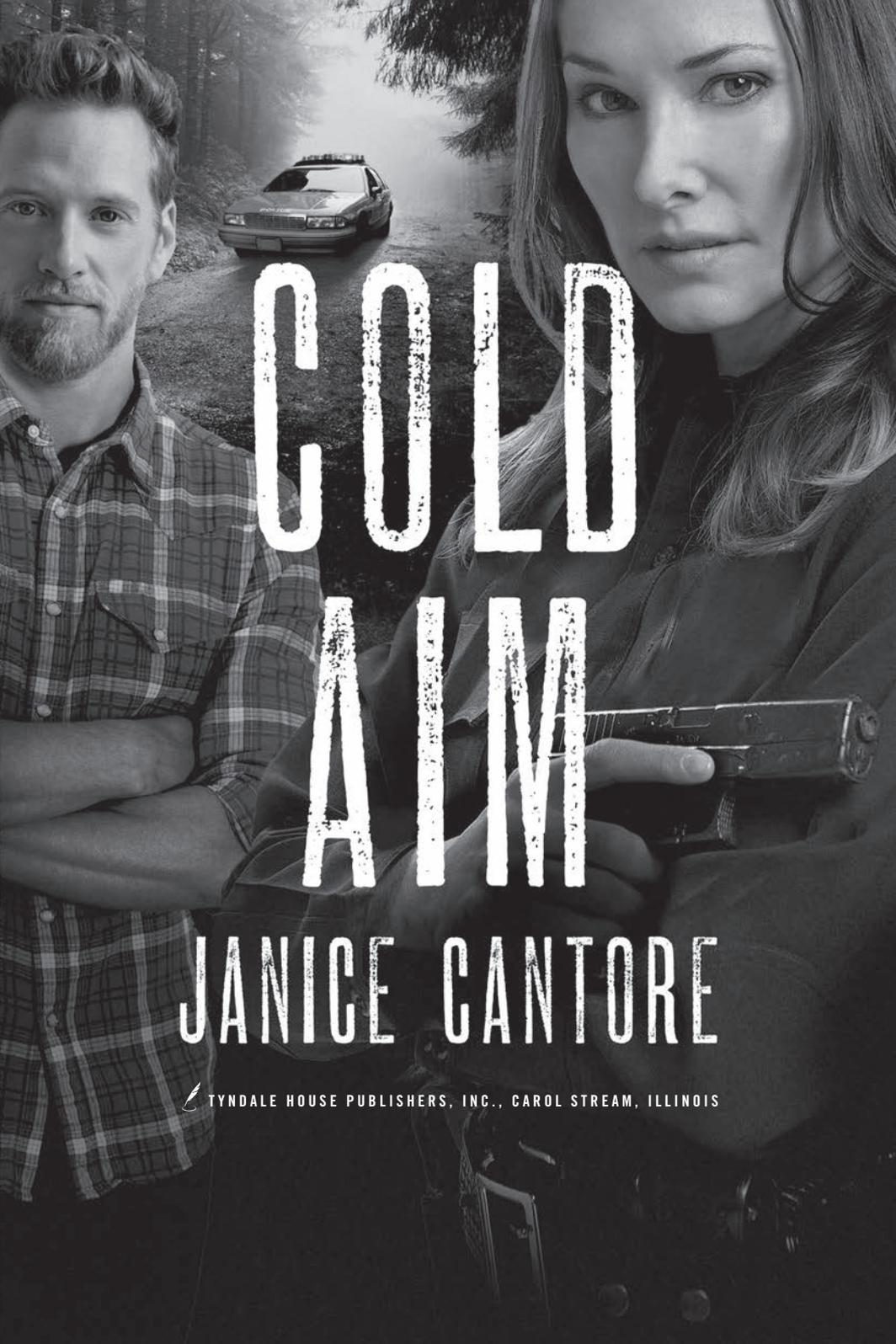


BOOK THREE

Rogues Hollow







COLD AIM

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 TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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**DEDICATED TO THE VICTIMS OF HUMAN
TRAFFICKING, WITH PRAYERS FOR THEIR
SWIFT RESCUE AND RECOVERY.**

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**“FOR NOTHING IS HIDDEN, EXCEPT TO BE REVEALED;
NOR HAS ANYTHING BEEN KEPT SECRET, BUT THAT
IT WOULD COME TO LIGHT [THAT IS, THINGS ARE
HIDDEN ONLY TEMPORARILY, UNTIL THE APPROPRIATE
TIME COMES FOR THEM TO BE KNOWN].”**

MARK 4:22, AMP

— — —

**“BUT THE EYES OF THE WICKED WILL FAIL, AND THEY
WILL NOT ESCAPE [THE JUSTICE OF GOD]; AND THEIR
HOPE IS TO BREATHE THEIR LAST [AND DIE].”**

JOB 11:20, AMP

— — —

**“THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE, BUT PERFECT
LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR.”**

1 JOHN 4:18A

PROLOGUE

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Royal's knuckles were white with his grip on the door handle, nervousness and irritation jacking him up as if he'd just main-lined some speed. Devo, the skinny coke freak driving the car, kept rapping the same song lyrics over and over:

*“Now that the party is jumping,
With the bass kicked in, the fingers are pumping. . . .
Ice, ice, baby, too cold.
Ice, ice, baby, too cold, too cold. . . .”*

Royal hadn't cared for the song when it came out a couple years ago, and the fact that Devo was not a singer, had no rhythm, and kept repeating the same thing over and over while tapping on the steering wheel with his large brass ring was aggravating to say the least. But Royal bit his tongue. This gig was the biggest thing to drop in his lap ever, and he vowed not to fail. Devo had the experience and was leading the gig, so Royal would listen, follow instructions, and do the job he was hired to do, for more money than he'd ever seen.

"You have poise for a kid, so I'm trusting you here." The words of the man paying for the job echoed in his mind. They called him Boss Cross. *"I see big things for you, Royal, so prove yourself with this task. You do that, and the sky is the limit."*

At eighteen the praise and confidence the man put in him had Royal's chest puffed with pride. He'd do anything to make the man proud, anything. *"The sky is the limit."*

"It's ice time, baby." Devo came to a stop, and Royal refocused on him. They'd cruised through a quiet neighborhood in San Pedro, pulled into an alley, and parked next to a cinder-block wall. It was close to 2:30 a.m. on a pitch-black, moonless night, with cloud cover. Rain had just started to fall. Big drops splattered on the windshield. Royal heard in them the same rap rhythm Devo had been tapping.

"You ready, kid?" Devo asked.

Royal looked across the car and nodded. "I'm ready," he said, ignoring the silliness of the question because as soon as Boss Cross had found out from his friend the girl's secret shelter, they'd planned and practiced this job so many times that Royal was fairly certain he could perform his part with his eyes closed.

"Need a little boost?" Devo pulled a baggie out of his pocket and held it out.

Royal held a hand up. "No thanks, man. Want a clear head."

"Suit yourself." Devo dug into the bag, and Royal looked away as the guy snorted the coke. He wasn't even tempted to indulge. Royal felt as if he were stepping into a new life, and he was going to experience it all without being messed up.

Devo finished and sniffled, licked his fingers, then said, “Okay, check your watch. The two-minute rule applies. I kill the alarm, and once the door is open, we are in and out in two minutes—got it?”

Royal nodded and held his fist out. Devo bumped it and opened his car door. Royal followed, pulling his hoodie up as the rain pelted down. Devo made a stop at the back of the car to open the trunk. The plan was to grab the girl, toss her in the trunk, and get out of Dodge as fast as possible.

Devo then stepped up to a padlock securing a wrought iron gate in the center of the cinder-block wall. He cut the lock easily with the small bolt cutters he had with him, opening the gate to a modest, neatly kept backyard. They’d studied the target address extensively. Royal knew the layout by heart. Devo was inside the yard quickly with Royal on his heels. They reached the back door of the small, Spanish-style stucco dwelling, and Devo stopped. He held an index finger to his lips.

Royal nodded and drew a small five-shot .38 revolver from his waistband. Devo trotted off to disable the alarm—that was Devo’s specialty, anything electronic, any kind of lock—and Royal moved to the left of the back door, taking shelter under the eaves.

— — —

Heather sat on the bed, arms wrapped around her bent legs, head resting on her knees. She was in a room decorated for a little girl because according to her benefactor, small female cousins usually stayed in the room. The decor was all pink and frilly, dolls and stuffed animals neatly arranged, and

while at eighteen she wasn't that far from being a little girl, she felt old, ancient, and devoid of any hope or joy reflected in the decor. Next to her on the bed was a calendar, days until the grand jury was seated marked off in black ink, only two remaining yet to be crossed off.

The closer the day came, the more her despair deepened. She was set to testify in front of a grand jury against the man who stole her innocence, the man who sweet-talked and conned her into the sex trade. At one time she believed and trusted him, maybe even loved him, until he crudely shoved her aside and sold her to the highest bidders, keeping her a prisoner for three long years, using and abusing her and letting others do the same. Ironically it was being arrested for prostitution that saved her. That and Sergeant Isaac Pink, the one cop who believed her, the one cop who pushed back on the charges against her and turned the focus of his investigation onto her captor, exploiter, and the real criminal, Porter Cross.

Heather knew Sergeant Pink had fought hard for her, and he still believed in the institutions she'd long since lost faith in.

"You testify, tell the truth, look into the jury's eyes, and this evil man will go down. I promise you."

Heather reluctantly agreed, and Pink even gave her shelter, housing her in his downstairs guest room to keep her safe until the grand jury.

But was she safe?

Tonight, fear kept her from sleep, kept her tense. Porter Cross was a rich, powerful movie producer, a famous and ruthless man. He had no shortage of wealthy, connected

friends who were equally wicked. If she did reach the grand jury, would those law-abiding, normal people truly believe her, a woman arrested for prostitution, over Cross?

Out of respect for Pink and all he had done for her, Heather dutifully crossed off the days until the jury convened, but now, two days out, her courage failed her. She'd packed a bag and was ready to flee, take her chances out in the world and try as best she could to forget Porter Cross. Would Pink understand?

In the end, it didn't matter if he understood. He thought that Heather's being here was a big secret. The trouble was, Heather knew big secrets never stayed buried.

Time ticked away as Heather waited for the sounds to subside upstairs, something that would indicate that Pink and his family had dropped off to sleep. She knew the alarm code, though he'd been careful not to show her, and she could quietly let herself out. One thing the past few weeks in Pink's house had taught Heather was that she had a gift for computers and electronics. Porter Cross had had a computer and he worked on it constantly, but he wouldn't let Heather touch it. Isaac Pink had one also, and Heather had spent hours learning from him how it worked and why. She wished she could take it with her.

It was important not to have to explain to Sergeant Pink why she had to leave because she knew she'd lose her nerve as soon as she saw his face. But she also knew that even if the grand jury believed her—and that was a big *if*—any trial for Cross would be a joke and the man would walk. Where would she be in Pink's eyes then? She certainly couldn't live with him and his family forever.

There were other reasons she had to leave. She'd heard Pink on the phone when she wasn't supposed to be listening. He feared that Cross was actively searching for her, trying to locate her hiding place, and if he found her, Cross would kill her. Pink didn't have to convince Heather of that; she was certain Cross would kill her when he found her, and there was nothing that would stop him from killing Pink as well. Heather was putting him and his family in danger the longer she stayed.

Sometime after two in the morning, Heather got up from bed. She peered out into the dark night and saw that rain was falling. Pulling on a thin Windbreaker over her sweater, she zipped it up and grabbed her backpack. Something fell onto the floor, sounding like a tremendous explosion to her oversensitive ears, and she held her breath before slowly picking it up. It was the small Bible Mrs. Pink had given her.

"Read it, dear. It will give you peace."

Heather had tried to read it. She'd even asked Mrs. Pink to explain a paragraph or two to her, and a couple of passages she'd read had warmed her heart. After all, God was supposed to defend the fatherless. But the book hadn't stopped her fear. Still, she opened her backpack and shoved it inside, then zipped it back up. Slinging the pack onto one shoulder, she opened her bedroom door and stepped into the kitchen, wincing when the floorboard creaked. After a minute, hearing no other sound, she continued forward.

She'd already written an apology note for Pink for what she was planning. Stepping into the pantry, she pulled down

the jar Mrs. Pink kept emergency cash in. There was a little over five hundred dollars inside, and Heather took it all, replacing it with the note and putting it carefully back on the shelf. She'd stuffed the cash into her jeans and turned to leave the pantry when she heard the stairs creak.

Someone was coming.

Sucking in a breath, Heather quietly pulled the pantry door closed and stepped as far back inside as she could, hoping that whoever was awake, it wasn't because they were hungry, and they wouldn't look inside the pantry.

"Gravy, I've got a bad feeling about this." Heather heard Pink's voice, a whisper. He was talking to his partner, Graves, a man he always called Gravy. He'd probably come downstairs so as not to wake Mrs. Pink.

Footsteps told her that Pink was in the small kitchen, pacing from one end to the other.

"No, no, I get that. I'm being an old woman, but I can't help it. I—"

The whisper stopped and so did the pacing.

"Hey, something's up. The alarm panel just went dead. I saw the light wink out. No, it's not the power—fridge is still on. I gotta go, man. Send me help."

— — —

The rain fell harder, and Royal pulled on gloves. His pulse increased, and he worked to calm the shudder in his hands. He was ready for this, he told himself. Failure was not an option.

Suddenly Devo was next to him, looking and smelling like a wet dog. "Child's play," he whispered. "Ice, baby, ice."

He went to work on the back door and had it open in a matter of seconds. Once Royal stepped inside, he knew the next few minutes would change his life forever.

Devo moved in first, two steps ahead of Royal. And that was when it all went wrong.

“*Boom! Boom!*” The report of a gun sounded like a cannon, and Devo went down. Somehow, somehow, the man had been waiting for them.

All instinct and reflex, Royal crouched and stepped to his right, firing back in the direction of the sound. He emptied his gun and heard a muffled “Oomph,” then a thud.

Breath coming fast and ears ringing from the gunfire, Royal stepped forward, *Get the girl* singing in his mind. A big man was down on the floor, moaning. Royal knew it was the police officer who lived here, the man hiding the girl.

Shoving his own small, empty .38 into his waistband, Royal ripped the man’s shiny revolver from his grasp and shot him again. The moaning stopped. He then pivoted toward the room off the kitchen, where they’d been told the girl would be.

Operating on pure adrenaline, internal clock telling him time was ticking away, Royal pushed open the door and clicked on the light. The room was empty. Eyes sweeping the area, he stepped forward and threw open the closet door. Nothing but clothes.

He heard the floor creak. Did someone call out? The girl must be upstairs. Swirling back out of the room, Royal jogged for the stairs. Ears ringing from the gunfire, he thought he heard someone, but he didn’t hesitate. When he saw a woman, the cop’s wife, Royal fired without hesitation, feeling

in a groove now. The woman went down, and he leaped over her. Upstairs, he found the couple's daughter hiding under the bed and he shot her.

But the girl he'd come for, the one he wanted, was nowhere.

- - -

Heather heard Sergeant Pink move again, but he didn't go back upstairs. She hunkered down, more fearful now. What was happening?

She struggled to stay still, to not fidget, and then she heard the back door open.

A floorboard protested.

Boom! Boom! Two shots blasted her eardrums, and Heather jumped, nearly wetting her pants and smacking into a shelf, knocking a container of cereal onto the floor. Even as she stiffened, gripping her backpack in front of her with both hands, Heather thought of poor Mrs. Pink having to clean up the mess.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. More shots, and Heather heard a thud, then groaning. Was it Sergeant Pink?

She held her breath as footsteps sounded in the kitchen. Another gunshot, and the groaning stopped.

The footsteps crossed in front of the pantry, toward Heather's room. The door was thrown open.

They were here for her.

It took all her strength to stay still. Very faintly, she heard Mrs. Pink call out, "Isaac?"

She wanted to scream a warning, something, anything, to save the woman who'd been only kind to her.

The footsteps passed in front of the pantry again, moving to the stairs. More gunshots.

Paralyzed by fear, Heather stood frozen, but the fear evaporated as a sense of self-preservation and fight or flight kicked in. She knew she had to move or be slaughtered. She opened the pantry door and darted out, stumbling when she saw the still form of Isaac Pink on his kitchen floor. Horror brought tears in a rush, and she bit her tongue to keep from screaming. But street-smart pragmatism told her there was nothing she could do for him or his wife.

She cursed Porter Cross and hurried toward the back door. There was another body there. *Devo*. He belonged to Cross. At least Sergeant Pink got one.

Trembling, she stepped over him and out the back door into the driving rain, taking her one brief chance to flee and save her life by never looking back.

- - -

Cursing, certain his two minutes were up, Royal did what life on the streets had taught him to do well: he thought on his feet. He bounded back down the stairs two at a time and returned to the kitchen, where he checked Devo, who was twitching. Putting his newly acquired handgun in the waistband at the small of his back, Royal grabbed Devo and swung the thin man up over his shoulder. Devo made no sound, not then and not when Royal dumped him into the trunk, where the girl should have gone, and slammed it shut.

He slid behind the wheel and forced himself to drive slowly out of the alley. The rain was pounding, a Southern California gutter buster of a storm, and even with the pummeling of

the water, he thought he heard sirens. Winding out of the San Pedro neighborhood, Royal found his way to the Gerald Desmond Bridge and back into Long Beach. He drove to Sixth Street, where he could park under an overpass, out of sight of traffic, got out of the car, and threw up.

When his stomach was completely empty, he stepped out from under the overpass and let the rain pound him until he was soaked through. Only then was his head clear enough to consider what he must do next. They'd failed where the girl was concerned, and Royal was not about to add to it by getting arrested. He checked on Devo again. The cokehead was dead, already cold to the touch.

Considering the car, which was stolen, and poor dead Devo, Royal had an idea. He knew how to get up on the bike path that ran along the flood control channel. With this rain, the channel would be rushing, engorged with runoff, if not now, soon.

Hopping back in the car, Royal drove up onto the bike path. He cautiously turned the car wheels down the steep concrete bank, toward the rushing water, which was halfway up the bank, left the car in drive, and leaped out, hitting the wet pavement so hard his teeth jarred. The vehicle rolled forward and down into the dark, debris-clogged water. In the darkness, the car disappeared quickly.

Royal didn't know where it would end up, but he knew the water and the elements would erase any evidence tying him to the car. As an afterthought, he tossed his little .38 into the water after the car. He examined the gun he'd taken from the cop. Shiny, it was a larger revolver with hard rubber grips, and it felt like it was made for his hand. *I'll keep*

this, he thought. Scratch off the serial number . . . it will be a good piece.

He then hurried away, back down to the access road and into downtown Long Beach. Royal was so wet he didn't even feel the rain anymore, which was showing no signs of letting up. He found a phone and called Boss Cross, the man he'd failed.

The boss listened as Royal told him everything that had happened, without embellishment or excuse.

"Sit tight. I'll send a car."

The car, a limo, came a while later, with a bag of dry clothes waiting for him in the back. The rain had finally lessened, and the sun was trying to brighten the sky. Tired and cold now, and wondering about his fate, Royal changed as the driver took him to a gated residence in Rancho Palos Verdes.

Hair still wet on his collar, Royal was led into the TV room, where Cross, his right-hand man Digger, and his business associate Cyrus, sat watching an early morning news broadcast. Royal didn't know Cyrus very well, but he admired what he did know. Cyrus was younger than Cross, and he had style. He was a big spender and liked a lot of the same stuff Cross did. Digger was a tough guy, a Vietnam vet and a martial arts expert, one of the scariest guys he'd ever met. Digger had taught Royal a few moves and promised to work with him more if Royal proved himself.

"You did good, kid." Cross held out a beer, Royal's favorite, and Cyrus beamed, nodding in agreement. Digger's expression, as usual, was unreadable.

Floored and a little speechless, Royal took the beer. "But we didn't get the girl and Devo is dead."

“Devo sacrificed himself for the rest of us,” Cross said. “But I’m impressed by the way you handled yourself, how you improvised. You didn’t panic. Well done.”

Royal swallowed, in awe now. “Th-th-thanks.”

He was offered a seat on the couch and he took it, chugging the beer. As he watched the news reports on TV, he understood. The cops had no idea where the girl was. She’d been a witness in hiding, and now the cop and his family hiding her were dead and she was nowhere to be found. The cops were clearly ready to blame the girl.

Cross laughed, and he and Cyrus clinked glasses. “We’ll find her eventually. But there’ll be no trial, that’s for sure. You certainly have proved that you have a cool head in stressful situations. You’ve earned yourself a nickname—given any thought to one?”

Royal considered the question for a brief moment. “Yeah, I have. You can call me Ice.”

1

PRESENT DAY

Today should have been the day of her baptism. But instead of being dunked in the cool water of the church's baptismal, Police Chief Tess O'Rourke coughed, eyes squinted and burning because of the hot smoke swirling everywhere. She wore a nose and mouth mask, but it barely helped. A lightning strike fire was raging. Half of Rogue's Hollow was under a mandatory evacuation order.

She hopped back in her patrol vehicle as the Coopers, the second-to-last holdout family on this rural road she was evacuating, grabbed their kids and a dog, climbed into their truck, and reluctantly left their property. The husband,

Garrett Cooper, wanted to stay and defend the home, and he'd slowed Tess down considerably, eating into her margin of safety.

"The house is a hundred years old—we can't just leave it!"

"Garrett, the house can be replaced, possessions can be replaced—your life can't be." Tess tried to reason with him and got nowhere. It was Janie refusing to leave without him that finally worked to change his mind. Tess witnessed a tense fight between the pair that ended when Cooper recognized that his wife wasn't going anywhere without him. And fighting to save a hundred-year-old structure on two wooded and brush-choked acres, with the wind driving the flames this way, was foolhardy to say the least. Finally common sense won out. The only way he'd save his brand-new pickup was to drive it out with his family in it.

Even now, in spite of helicopter and plane water drops, Tess could see the flames swirling and consuming on a seemingly unstoppable march. They were off to her left now, roughly behind Arthur Goding's place, and the wind was driving them along the ridge of hills that bracketed the boundaries of Rogue's Hollow. Arthur had left his home without argument, taking his dog and loading his livestock into a large trailer.

"Have to trust this all to the Lord," he'd said.

The property next to Arthur's, a onetime pot farm, was vacant, so no worries there. Nearly everyone else, including Bart Dover, who owned the property at the end of the road, had already evacuated as well. Dover's farm was at the western boundary of Rogue's Hollow. He hadn't wanted to wait or to take a chance, so he left with his family at the first sign

of trouble. Tess wished everyone had been so easy. There was one last resident Tess had not been able to contact—at the end of Juniper, a gravel road that cut south, between here and the Dover place. Fighting with Garrett Cooper had put Tess on the razor’s edge of danger; the safe time cushion the fire captain had given her was expiring.

“*Edward-1.*” The radio crackled with her call sign.

Tess yanked off the mask to answer. “Edward-1, copy.”

“*Fire is advising that you hurry. The wind has shifted, and they can’t guarantee you won’t be cut off.*”

“I’ve got one more home. Five, ten minutes, max.”

“*10-4, will advise.*”

Tess wiped sweat from her brow as she pressed the accelerator, able to breathe again inside her air-conditioned SUV. She followed the Coopers’ truck down the long, bumpy driveway. They turned right to head to town and safety, while she turned left.

The last property on Juniper was the largest at 105 acres, and it backed up to a hillside that could erupt into flames any minute. Tess was barely acquainted with the person who lived there. A bona fide recluse, Livie Harp was sometimes the lead topic on all channels of the Rogue telegraph, the thread of gossip that wound itself everywhere through the Upper Rogue valley.

That gossipy thread told Tess that Harp had bought the property in cash, several years ago, before Tess came to Oregon. Everyone labeled Harp a “prepper” because she’d spent months having the property renovated and “fortified,” as Tess’s friend Casey Reno liked to say. The Harp property was as off the grid as possible with solar panels, well water,

a septic system, a greenhouse for vegetables, and no listed phone. Tess had heard that Harp even butchered her own meat.

Tess learned from Pastor Oliver Macpherson that Harp seemed to be trying to come out of her shell.

“Twice now she’s come to church. She comes late, sits in the back, and leaves early, but at least she’s putting her toe in the water.”

Tess had worked in the Hollow for over a year and had seen the woman only a couple of times, in her car, an old-style Land Rover that almost looked armor-plated, driving back to her place.

In southern Oregon, a lot of large properties tended to look like they were built—and stuck—in the nineteenth century. But Harp’s place was all twenty-first century. One of the improvements she added to her property was strong metal fencing and an equally heavy security gate. Tess had heard that she had an intercom system and cameras everywhere, and that when she transacted business online and deliveries came, they didn’t get past the gate. She’d provided a chute for packages to be pushed through, so they were safe on the other side of the gate. Livie herself would come and get the package only after the delivery person had left.

Tess wasn’t certain how much the gossip she heard could be trusted, but as she pulled up to the gate now, it was obvious that the security here was formidable. Mindful of the cameras on either side of the fence, she punched the intercom.

The minute or so before there was a response seemed like an hour. Tess was about to punch it again.

“Can I help you?”

“This is Chief O’Rourke. Ms. Harp, there is an out-of-control forest fire heading your way. I’m ordering a mandatory evacuation.”

“I have no intention of leaving.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me. There’s a raging fire—”

“I heard you. I’m not deaf or stupid. I’m also not leaving my home, my property.”

“Fire personnel will not be able to respond to your residence in the event you need help.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not asking for help. I can take care of myself. I have defensible space.”

The intercom clicked off. Tess had only a second of openmouthed shock before her phone rang. It was Oliver. He hadn’t wanted her to go, telling her that she’d already completed her duty when it came to warning people and facilitating evacuation. A recent fast-moving fire in northern California had amped up his angst; people there lost their lives when the fires moved toward them so fast they had no chance to get away. Putting herself directly in harm’s way was not in her job description.

“Tess, you need to get back here now!” The emotion in his voice touched her deep inside, making her wish she could hold his face in both hands and assure him that she was fine.

Tess heard debris smack her car, and she felt it move as a strong wind gust slammed into it. She’d been in a car pelted with sand during a sandstorm in the Arizona desert years ago, and that was what this felt like.

“I’m heading back now,” she said and then realized the phone was dead, the connection dropped. She plopped the phone on the seat next to her, frowning because she knew

Oliver was justifiably worried. Briefly, she considered a radio call to the incident command center so someone could let him know that she was okay.

Tess looked in her rearview mirror and saw a tornado of flames. She was certain the house she'd just left was lost. The flames were angry, clawing at the sky, and the smoke dark and ominous. She jammed her car into reverse as a large explosion rent the air, deafening even to her with her windows rolled up. The Coopers' propane tank must have exploded. As if shot from a flamethrower, fire squirted across the road. Tess was cut off.

She reached out and punched the intercom again. There was no choice but to hunker down with the recluse.

But would the woman open the gate?

Tess waited for a response even as her rearview mirror showed a wall of smoke and flames coming closer.