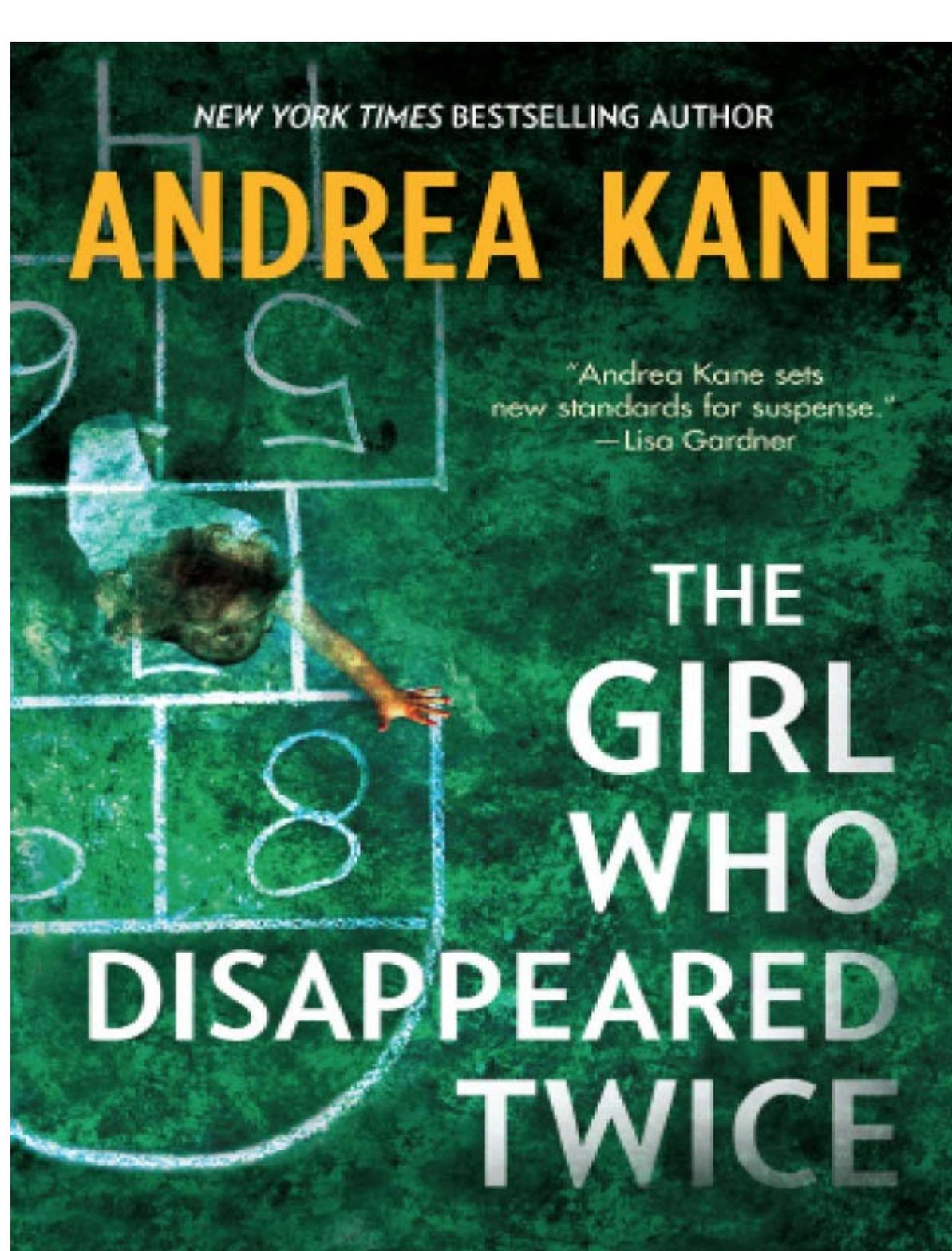


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**ANDREA KANE**

"Andrea Kane sets  
new standards for suspense."  
—Lisa Gardner

A young girl in a white dress is crawling on a green chalkboard. The chalkboard has white chalk lines forming a grid and some numbers like '9', '5', and '8'. The girl is positioned on the left side of the board, reaching out with her right hand towards the center. The background is a textured green.

THE  
GIRL  
WHO  
DISAPPEARED  
TWICE

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***IT HAPPENED ONCE.***  
***IT HAPPENED AGAIN.***

Despite all her years determining the fates of families, judge Hope Willis couldn't save her own. Her daughter taken, she's frantically grasping at any hope for Krissy's return.

Her husband dead-set against it, Hope calls a team not bound by the legal system.

Forensic Instincts: a behaviorist. A techno-wizard. An intuitive. An ex-Navy SEAL. Unconventional operatives. All with unique talents and personal reasons for joining Casey Woods's group, they'll do whatever it takes.

Able to accurately read people after the briefest of encounters, Casey picks up in the Willis household signs of a nervous spouse, a guilty conscience, a nanny that hides on her phone. Secrets beg to creep into the open.

Forensic Instincts will dig through each tiny clue and eliminate the clutter, working around the clock. But time is running out, and Casey's team knows that the difference between getting Krissy back and her disappearing forever could be as small as a suspect's rapid breathing, or as deep as Hope's dark family history.

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## Praise for Andrea Kane and *The Girl Who Disappeared Twice*

“Andrea Kane sets new standards for suspense.”

—Lisa Gardner

“Kane kicks off *Forensic Instincts*, her new series about a team of maverick investigators, with this fascinating story with sharply drawn characters, fast-paced dialogue, dark and dangerous minds—brilliant methodology and the types of cases mystery readers campaign to get.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“Kane is a skilled writer, so the romantic complications...between her intelligent and driven main characters never get in the way of the suspense.”

—*Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel*

“Andrea Kane delivers a spine-tingling tale.”

—*Strand Magazine*

“Smooth prose and engaging characters.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Kane is an adroit master at romantic suspense, and she keeps the reader guessing to the very end.”

—*Booklist*

“Andrea Kane delivers the kind of edgy suspense and romantic tension that will rev up your pulse and keep you turning the pages.”

—Jayne Ann Krentz

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*Also by Andrea Kane*

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Look for Andrea Kane's next novel *The Line Between Here and Gone* available July 2012

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**ANDREA KANE**

THE  
**GIRL**  
WHO  
DISAPPEARED  
**TWICE**



To Freddy, the heroic FBI Tactical Canine Dog who was killed in the line of duty. Thank you for protecting our country. I hope my bloodhound, Hero, is a fitting tribute to you and all the other brave service dogs like you.

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# **Contents**

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

---

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

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# Prologue

*Westchester County, New York  
Summer, thirty-two years ago*

When six-year-old Felicity Akerman went to bed that night, she had no idea that life as she knew it was about to change forever.

She settled under the light cotton blanket and put her head on the pillow, her long blond hair tied back in a ponytail because of the heat. She was wearing her favorite short-sleeve nightshirt with the bright orange soccer balls on it. She *had* to wear it tonight. It was like a gold star on a perfect spelling test. A prize. A big win.

That's what today's game had been. The doctor hadn't been too sure about letting her play. Neither had her mom and dad. But she'd talked them into it, and gotten the okay she was holding her breath for. No one understood how miserable she'd been, sitting on the sidelines all summer long since she broke her arm. But it was better now. No more cast. No more pain. No reason to wait.

She'd proved that today on the playing field at Pine Lake Soccer Camp. She'd scored three out of her team's four goals.

With a happy smile, she rolled onto her right side, reflexively protecting the left arm that had been in a cast for seven long, hateful weeks. Her smile widened as she remembered she didn't have to do that anymore. She wriggled her fingers and bent her elbow. Free. She was finally free. *And* finally her team leader again.

The bedroom curtains rustled as a warm summer breeze blew in through the window. Her mom had left it halfway open before she went out. The summer air felt good. It swirled around the room. It smelled like flowers. It acted like a lullaby.

Felicity shut her eyes, her fingers still wrapped around a fold in her nightshirt. Next to her, her sister said something in her sleep and flopped onto her back. She hated sleeping alone when their parents were out. Normally Felicity liked her room to herself—sharing the same face, same hair, and same birthday with her sister was enough. But tonight she was so happy that she didn't mind. Besides, they weren't alone. Deidre was right down the hall, listening to her cassette player and singing along. Her voice was really awful. The two girls giggled about that all the time. But they never said anything to Deidre. She was their babysitter, and she was very bossy. She was also eighteen and starting college. That made her practically a grown-up. And their mom and dad always told them they had to be respectful of grown-ups.

Even Deidre's bad singing wasn't enough to keep Felicity awake. Lots of physical activity after lots of sitting around had really worn her out. She drifted off to sleep.

She didn't see the window slide open the rest of the way. She didn't see the silhouette of a figure climb inside and cross silently over to the bed, going straight to her sister. Nor did Felicity see the intruder force a damp handkerchief over her face. But she did hear a whimper.

Groggily, Felicity rubbed her eyes and turned over. Still half asleep, she could vaguely make out a human form dressed in a long, loose black hooded sweatshirt. The person was leaning over the other side of the bed. As Felicity watched, her sister's whimpering stopped, and she went very still.

Felicity's small body went rigid, and her eyes snapped open. She was suddenly and fully awake.

Who was in their house?

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But there was no time to find out. The intruder straightened, and a gloved hand was clamped down over Felicity's mouth. She started to squirm, fighting with all she had. The sleeve of the sweatshirt brushed her forehead. Damp, with a funny smell. Like orange medicine.

The gloved hand lifted, and a wet handkerchief with that same orange medicine smell was pressed down on Felicity's nose and mouth. The smell was awful. Felicity wanted to scream. She couldn't. And she couldn't break free.

The room started spinning. Felicity caught a glimpse of her sister. It looked like there were two of her. And Deidre's singing sounded far away.

The stinky smelling handkerchief won.

Everything went black.

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# Chapter One

*Manhattan, New York*

*Present day*

The bar smelled like stale beer and sweat.

Casey Woods shifted in her seat, which was situated far away from the social hub of the place. She rolled her glass between her palms. It was filled with whatever was on tap that the waiter had brought her. Taking a sip, she looked nervous but wistful among the slew of college kids milling around the East Village hangout.

She was one of those kids. Or trying to be. She was a wannabe—a shy and naive misfit, on the outside, looking in. Hungry to be welcomed into the inner circle.

She reached around and fiddled with a strand of her long red hair, which was tied back, giving her more youthful appearance. Her gaze darted around, flickering, every so often, over her target. He was in his early thirties, perched on the first bar stool. Whenever she glanced his way, he was usually staring at her.

The time ticked by slowly. Casey made sure to openly, if shyly, eye the hunkiest-looking guys, changing her demeanor from hopeful to unsure or dejected. Every guy she focused on eventually left, either with a group of friends, or with a girl he'd hooked up with.

At just past three-thirty in the morning, the bartender started closing up, and the bar emptied out. With just a few stragglers left, Casey's hopes for the night were ostensibly dashed. Her lashes lowered in an expression of utter defeat.

Slowly, she rose, reaching into her messenger bag for some cash. As she'd planned, the bag slid off her shoulder and plopped on the floor, contents spilling everywhere. Flushed with embarrassment, she squatted down and began stuffing things back into her bag—her wallet, makeup, and fake student ID.

From her peripheral vision, she saw the man at the end of the bar rise, toss some bills on the counter, and walk out with the last few stragglers.

It was 4:00 a.m. Closing time.

Despite the pointed glare of the bartender, Casey took her time replacing the contents of her bag, rearranging them as she did. She kept her wallet out long enough to slap some bills on the table. Then she made her way to the door.

The bartender locked it behind her.

Casey sucked in her breath and turned, making sure to follow the same route she'd been taking all week. She'd set the pattern. But tonight she'd stayed at the bar later. The streets were emptier. The timing was right.

She steeled herself as she walked past the alley near Tompkins Square Park. She kept her gaze fixed straight ahead.

She heard Fisher's footsteps an instant before he grabbed her. His arm clamped around her waist, his free hand pressing a knife to her throat. Too hard. Too fast. No taunting. This was *not* how she'd planned it. And now he had her.

“Don't fight. Don't scream. Don't even breathe. Or I'll slit your throat.”

Casey complied. She didn't have to fake her trembling, or the fear that stiffened her body. Silently she talked herself down, reminding herself why she was doing this. She offered no resistance as Fisher dragged her into the alley. The psychopathic SOB shoved her down on the filthy concrete ground, kneeling over her, a glittering look of triumph in his eyes. He kept the knife at her throat, using his other hand to tear at her jeans.

The button popped. But the zipper never gave.

Marc Deveraux made sure of that.

Emerging from the shadows like a predator in the wild, he lunged at the would-be rapist with all the strength of his powerful build. He yanked Fisher's knife-wielding arm up and away from Casey, then slammed down on his forearm until Fisher's bones made a cracking sound and the knife clattered to the ground.

Fisher howled with pain.

"I'm just getting started," Marc promised menacingly. He dragged Fisher up and slammed his back against the wall. "You okay?" he called out to Casey, who was scrambling to her feet.

"A hell of a lot better than I was thirty seconds ago," she managed.

"Good." He turned his attention back to Fisher. "Talk," he ordered, one knee pushed into Fisher's groin and one elbow digging into his windpipe.

"The girl came on to me," Fisher said, then yelped, sweat beading on his forehead. "She—" His breath caught as Marc increased the pressure of his knee.

"Wrong answer. Tell me about your plans for this girl—and what you did with all the others." He leaned closer, until his face nearly touched the other man's. "You don't want to know what I am or what I'm capable of. Compared to me, you're a Girl Scout." His elbow shoved deeper, cutting off most of Fisher's oxygen. "Now tell me about the girls—all of them. And don't spare any details. I'm your captive audience."

It took longer than expected to get Fisher's confession. It took a Navy SEAL's thumb dug deeply into his collarbone, causing blinding pain that persisted long after the pressure was removed, and the threat that a repeat performance would increase the pain tenfold if that's what it took to make the perpetrator talk—assuming his neck didn't snap first. The bastard's cold-blooded confession had made bile rise in Casey's throat. He might be going to jail for a long, long time, but Casey wished they were throwing away the key for good.

"I'm done here, Marc," she told her rescuer. "Otherwise I'm going to be sick."

"Go," he urged quietly. "I'll wrap things up here and head over to the precinct. The bodies will be found. Any claim of coercion will be tossed. It's a murderer's word against ours. The confession will stick. Go home."

\* \* \*

Home was a four-story Tribeca brownstone that was residence and office combined. There was no beating that. One mortgage. One place that held all her worldly possessions. And no commute. It was ideal.

Of course, she rarely made it up to the fourth floor, which was supposedly where she slept. Her boyfriend was a casual acquaintance, if not a stranger. She virtually lived in her office. That was her choice. On the fourth floor she made every day. And she wasn't sorry.

With a quick glance around the reception level, she turned left and climbed the L-shaped staircase to the second floor. Directly ahead, she'd had French doors installed—doors that led out to a balcony

overlooking the manicured garden in a gated backyard. Colorful flower beds. A maze of closely trimmed shrubs. And a pair of graceful willow trees on either side, rippling in the breeze. The entire effect was both serene and eye-catching.

Pushing open the doors, Casey stepped outside for a moment, quickly shutting them behind her. She hoped the cool air would revive her. Sighing, she noted that the sun was now well above the horizon, and climbing rapidly into the sky. Her watch told her it was nine-thirty. The unofficial coercion Marc had inflicted had taken a lot longer than expected to work. To Casey, it had seemed like an eternity before they'd pulled it off and extracted a full confession from Fisher.

She could still feel the perv's slimy hands on her. He'd really freaked her out.

With a shudder, Casey reminded herself that they *had* pulled it off, and gotten both—Fisher *and* his confession regarding the other victims. Not a pretty business. Still, the haunting, disturbing feelings inflicted by such men were the very reason she'd formed Forensic Instincts, LLC to begin with.

She walked across the balcony and reached the second set of French doors that led back into the brownstone. She held her access card up to the card reader and punched her security code into the Hirsch keypad. Pushing the doors open, she stepped inside and shut the doors behind her. No time for rest—not yet. It was time for her team's post-op meeting.

Forensic Instincts had been just a dream at first. Now it was very much a reality.

It all started four years ago, and was still in its fledgling state. Casey had begun her quest to assemble an awesome team, with herself at the helm. Thanks to her extensive credentials working with both behavioral and psychological profilers, her innate talent at reading people, and her years of working in both law enforcement and the private sector, Casey had easily transitioned into an independent profiler. She held a master's in Forensic Psychology from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and a bachelor's in Psychology from Columbia. Most importantly, she was a natural at figuring out what made people tick.

Her two other team members were impressive as hell. She should know. She'd meticulously selected them. Assessed them. Recruited them. They were very different from each other. Both brought specialized capabilities to the Forensic Instincts team. The result was a growing track record of successfully solved complex criminal cases.

Their trio was unique, but still formative. Which meant they were sometimes welcomed, and other times regarded as a huge pain in the ass.

But, overall, they were earning a growing respect among law enforcement agencies and, more important, among their expanding client list. To those who hired them, they were the ultimate beacon of hope.

Her rules were few, but absolute. Unwavering loyalty, both to the company and to one another. One hundred and ten percent of themselves when they were on the job. Total candor, regardless of the cost—but only when they were behind closed doors. A low profile—which meant staunchly avoiding the limelight. As mavericks who pushed the boundaries more than conventional bureaucracy would allow, it was best to be unrecognizable. They were an eclectic trio, each of whom believed absolutely in his or her specific methods.

Three egos were involved. And none of them shy. That meant frequent debates, tons of constructive argument and—sometimes—stubborn unwillingness to budge. With the Fisher case, Casey had wanted to nail their perp by studying his interactions with college-aged women, then combining behavioral observations with her experience and sheer instinct. Marc had argued in favor of using statistics and past research to form a solid scientific base from which he'd work up a profile before going in for the kill. And Ryan was adamant about implementing game theory—getting inside Fisher's head, figuring

out his sick reasoning—where he chose to hunt, and the strategies he used to go after his prey. The twenty-eight-year-old guy was an awesome combination of technology genius and strategic thinker. He studied behavioral patterns through complex computer programming and crunching enormous amounts of raw data, and then applied it to his analysis of human dynamics.

Each team member believed fervently in his or her methods. Fortunately, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Yes, they made quite a team—strong willed, but the best. Casey expected nothing less as she expanded the operations, and Forensic Instincts grew. Her grandfather would have been proud. She'd used her trust fund wisely and well.

Smiling faintly, she looked around. The second set of French doors had granted her entry to the second-floor conference room. It was the largest and most elaborate space in the brownstone.

As she walked in, an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling video screens began to glow. A long, green line formed across each panel, pulsating from left to right. Then, a soothing voice, that seemed to emanate from every cubic inch of the room, said, "Welcome back, Casey," bending each line into the contour of the voice pattern. It continued, "Warning. Heart rate elevated."

Casey started. She just couldn't get used to being greeted by Yoda, the latest incarnation of Ryan McKay—Forensic Instincts' brilliant techno-wizard—and his artificial intelligence system. Somehow the damned thing knew who was in the room. It even knew when something was out of the ordinary. Like now. No matter how many times Ryan tried to explain to her how Yoda worked, to Casey it still sounded like magic.

The conference room was pure class. Polished hardwood floors. A plush Oriental rug. An expansive mahogany conference table and matching credenza. And, most crucial of all, a technology infrastructure that was light-years ahead of its time in both design and operation, all hidden from view. Only the gigantic video wall was visible, covering the longest side of the room and allowing Ryan to assemble a dizzying array of information into a large single image or several smaller, simultaneous data feeds. Videoconferencing equipment, an elaborate phone system, and a personalized virtual workstation available to each member of the group completed the elaborate system.

And it was all controlled by Yoda, who unwaveringly responded to requests made by team members. Behind the "shock and awe" of Yoda was a server farm located in the office's secure data center downstairs. Like a proud papa, Ryan had named their custom-built servers: Lumen, Equitas and Intueri, from the Latin words for light, justice and intuition. The names had become so much a part of Forensic Instincts that they'd incorporated them into the company logo.

Casey still found herself awed by the sophistication, power and pervasiveness of the technology. Truthfully, she didn't understand the half of how it worked. But Ryan did. And that was all that mattered.

Heading across the hardwood floor, Casey paused at the edge of the rug, then pulled back a chair and sat down at the long, oval conference table.

Leaning back, she called out, "Yoda, please show me TV news."

"Would you like world news, national news or local news?" Yoda inquired pleasantly.

"Local."

"CBS, NBC, Fox, ABC or all?" Yoda asked.

"All."

Yoda carried out her command by simultaneously showing all four channels, each occupying one-fourth of the wall.

Casey pivoted her chair around so she had a direct view. Staring intently, she tugged off the hair band she'd worn tonight, shook out her long red mane and combed her fingers through the tangled strands. When Glen Fisher appeared on the Fox News screen, she instructed, "Yoda, Fox News full screen."

Instantly, Glen Fisher filled the entire wall. He was sweating and agitated, and quickly bent forward to hide his face as the cameras zoomed in on him being hauled out of the alley and into the squad car.

It was a media feeding frenzy. The female newscaster on the scene was superanimated, as excited about delivering the story as she was upset by its occurrence. Casey read the signs on her face, heard them in her voice, saw them in her body language. Acute energy—but mixed reasons for it. Chin held high, back ramrod straight, eyes bright with pride, but flickering away every now and then—she was already executing the steps necessary for her next promotion. But she felt guilty with her methods. She was a woman. Capitalizing on the violations and murders of other women wasn't sitting well with her.

She was talking way too quickly, rambling on about Fisher's shocking crimes, being sure to exaggerate all the colorful details—like the fact that he had a twisted, obsessive mind despite having had a stable childhood and an equally stable adult life. A decent job in a difficult economy. A wife who was devoted to him, though oblivious to the monster she was married to. And a lovely apartment in Manhattan, with neighbors who had no idea of the danger and depravity living among them. Even worse, he'd somehow found a way to elude the NYPD for months, staying so invisible that he wasn't even a blip on their radar, much less a suspect. Astonishing that it had taken the uncanny initiative of a young private organization like Forensic Instincts to zero in on Glen Fisher, and to set things in motion so this day of reckoning could come.

Irked by the melodramatic presentation and the digs at the NYPD, Casey cursed out loud and curled her hands into fists, making her nails bite into her palms. She was taking this whole case way too personally, which was unusual for her. But there were reasons for her lack of objectivity—what Fisher had done brought back memories that made her sick.

"Like the proverbial fly in the spider's web," said a masculine voice, interrupting her thoughts. "Clearly, you made the ideal bait."

Glancing over her shoulder, Casey watched as her trusty backup and fellow team member Marc Deveraux strolled into the room, eyeing the newscast and making a quick mental assessment. Not a flicker of emotion crossed his face, just an icy satisfaction in his eyes. Marc was Special Ops to the core.

He was also Casey's most heavily credentialed recruit—former FBI, former Behavioral Analysis Unit, former Navy SEAL. His heritage was diverse: Asian grandparents on his mother's side, and an extensive French lineage on his father's. As a result, he spoke three additional languages fluently: Mandarin, French and Spanish. With such a desirable, multifaceted background, Marc had been snatched up by the Bureau. At thirty-nine, he'd done it all and he'd done it fast. He was the sexy, brooding type—single and happy to stay that way. Most of all, when it came to the job, he was the real deal.

"I had an endless cosmetic makeover to become that ideal bait," Casey informed him. "You have no idea."

"A makeover?" Marc repeated with dry humor. "I'd sooner guess an acting coach. The thought of you as a socially inept wallflower...that's a reach."

"Very funny, smart-ass. But I haven't been eighteen in a long time. I needed a professional makeup artist to wind back the clock."

“Nope.” Marc was never one to mince words. “For authenticity, all you needed to do was put on some teenage face gunk, and pull your hair back with a rubber band. Trust me, the rest of you worked. Just ask the horny frat boys ogling you. I saw them. I know the drill. If you hadn’t been playing the scared virgin, they would have been on line to score.”

“Sounds like you had a front-row seat.”

“I did.”

Casey shook her head in amazement. “I never even saw you.”

“That’s the point, isn’t it? I’m good at making myself invisible. *And* at making sure no one’s invisible to me. Including horny frat boys who—”

“Okay, enough on that subject,” Case interrupted, bringing the topic to a quick close. She was in no mood to be razzed. Actually, she was more interested in giving Marc the praise he deserved. “Let’s go to you. However you pulled it off, your timing was perfect. The delivery was terrifying. Even *I* almost lost it when you charged into that alley with murder in your eyes. And I have to admit I enjoyed watching Fisher freak out and humiliate himself—wetting his pants while he spilled his guts. It doesn’t get any better than that, catching the psycho *and* extracting a full confession. Kudos.”

Marc pulled back the chair beside Casey and dropped into it, folding his hands behind his head. “Sorry things got so ugly before I got everything I needed.”

“No apology necessary. It’s what the cops ‘unofficially’ asked us to do.”

“Yeah, but they’re not the ones who had Fisher’s knife at their throats and his hands ripping off their jeans.”

“Let’s drop it, okay?”

Marc shot her a quick sideways look. Then he pivoted toward the TV, watching and listening to the details he already knew firsthand. Three redheaded college girls, all reported missing, now found raped and murdered. Three seedy pickup bars with alleys half a block away. Girls who hung out at bars hoping for normal college experiences, but who always left solo.

Through Fisher’s confession, additional unknown victims had been identified and their bodies recovered. They were all kids new to Manhattan, either visitors or transfer students. Girls Fisher had done just enough research on to know that they had no friends or families to report them missing, but all of whom matched the descriptions of the known victims.

Marc blew out his breath. He was glad this case was solved. He hoped Fisher rotted in his cell. Now it was time to move on.

To Marc, moving on meant getting a few hours’ sleep, and then—before the next case descended on the team—enjoying some recreation time. And *that* meant recapturing the adrenaline rush of his days as a SEAL by taking on extreme sports that other people would consider insane. His current favorite was BASE jumping—the acronym of which said it all. Buildings, antennae, spans and earth—all the wildly dangerous fixed objects that Marc would plummet from, not just for the thrills, but for the knowledge that he could master the precarious free fall before opening his parachute and floating to the ground.

Eager to get going, Marc shifted restlessly in his chair. “Where’s Ryan?” he asked. “Down in his lair?”

“Nope. Upstairs. Right behind you. Ready to wrap things up so we can call it a day.” With that announcement, Ryan McKay strode into the room. The complete antithesis of every computer geek stereotype, he was not only a technical genius, he was also a gym rat, who worked out two hours each morning and whose athletic prowess included being a mountain biking pro and running ultramarathons—his preferred ones being in Death Valley and the Moroccan desert. Thanks to Marc, he’d recently

earned his skydiving certification and was enthusiastically starting to join him for several of his sports.

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Besides his six-pack abs, Ryan was tall and broad shouldered and boasted those smoldering Black Irish looks that made women drool. The ironic part was that the gushing types and the lavish attention givers irked the crap out of him. In fact, the very few women Ryan found the time for, and cared to pursue, were strong, independent and unimpressed with his physical attributes and accomplishments.

“Good,” Casey greeted him. “Does that mean you’ve left your precious robots long enough to deliver our visual wrap-up?”

“No robots. Not this time. I was testing our new digitally encrypted wireless communication system. So far, so good.” Ryan was already setting himself up at the touch-screen. His presentation would highlight the case details and emphasize areas that could impact future investigations, something he did at the conclusion of every case.

He lowered himself into a chair, shooting Casey a quick glance.

Like Marc, Ryan knew about their boss’s past. And, like Marc, Ryan knew that, whether or not she admitted it, this was exactly the kind of case that would bother her.

The room had grown deathly silent. There was nothing to say, and Ryan wouldn’t insult Casey by trying.

\* \* \*

Casey jerked awake from a fitful sleep filled with violence and nightmares, startled by the ring tone of her cell phone. Her gaze fell on the clock. Four-thirty in the afternoon. A perfectly normal time to call someone—assuming that someone hadn’t been awake for over fifty hours. She wished she’d turned off the damned phone before going to bed.

Well, she hadn’t. And now she was awake so she might as well answer.

She leaned over and picked up the phone.

The last thing Casey Woods wanted right then was another gut-wrenching case.

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what she got.

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## Chapter Two

*White Plains, New York*  
*Day One*

Family Court Judge Hope Willis had finished up the last case on her docket, made her ruling and dismissed the court. She was in and out of her chambers in minutes, pausing only long enough to shrug out of her judicial robe, gather some files and say a few words to her court clerk. Then, having made the transition from judge to mom, she blew out of the office and exited the building in record time.

She hurried through the parking garage, delighted to be on her way home earlier than usual. She'd actually get to spend some time with Krissy—hearing about her day at kindergarten, helping her with her homework and just seizing the opportunity to be silly together.

That was a rarity these days. Since Sophia Wolfe, the other family court judge in White Plains, had transferred, Hope's caseload had increased. So had her hours, thanks to the fact that Claudia, her former court clerk, had broken up with her fiancé. She'd then weirded out on Hope, becoming difficult and snappish, and so out of it that she kept screwing up the docket. Because of their long history together, Hope had given her scads more chances until, finally, she'd had to let her go. Training a new clerk was brutal, and taking up far too much time and effort. There was only so much of Hope to go around.

Which meant that her hours with Krissy were limited.

And Edward? Talk about a strained marriage, and an equally strained family unit. Hope's husband was almost never home. A defense attorney for a large, prestigious law firm with offices in both Midtown Manhattan and in White Plains, he worked obscene hours. In fact, other than an occasional and unplanned meeting in the courthouse, Hope seldom saw her husband, and Krissy saw him even less.

There was a definite void there. So today was about Hope spending quality time with her five-year-old.

She'd hurried through the parking lot, slid behind the wheel of her GMC Acadia and driven off toward Route 287 and their Armonk home.

Naturally, there was traffic. These days, getting out of White Plains was almost as bad as getting out of Manhattan.

Hope crawled along, finally reaching the highway, where she took advantage of the opportunity to rapidly accelerate. Eager to get home, she exited 287 and cruised onto Route 684 North.

It was at that precise moment that Hope's life changed forever.

Everything might have been different.

*If* Hope had glanced out her window. *If* she'd spotted the other SUV passing by, headed in the opposite direction. *If* she'd seen the small passenger in the backseat, slapping and yanking at the door handle in an attempt to escape—and failing, the door secured with a childproof lock.

*If...*

But Hope did none of these. Her mind was on getting home to Krissy.

So, like two ships passing in the night, the two SUVs went their separate ways. Hope never saw the other driver. And the other driver never saw her.

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Focused on the road, Hope had no way of knowing what she'd missed, or how close she'd come to averting the hell that was about to begin.

\* \* \*

She was almost at the Armonk exit when her cell phone rang. A quick glance at the navigation system display told her that it was Liza Bock calling. Hope frowned. Liza's daughter, Olivia, was in Krissy's kindergarten class. And it had been Liza's turn to drive the afternoon car pool that day.

With a mother's sense of unease, Hope pressed the button that connected the call. "Liza?"

"Oh, Hope, thank goodness I reached you. I was afraid you'd still be at work." Liza's agitated tone did nothing to calm the growing distress knotting Hope's gut.

"What's wrong?" she demanded.

"Is Krissy with you?"

"With me?" Waves of panic. "Of course not. I assumed you'd picked her up after school today, and dropped her home with Ashley." Ashley was the Willises' nanny, and had been since Krissy was born.

"She's not." Liza's voice was trembling now. "I just spoke to Ashley. She was very worried, so she called me. Krissy's not there."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I got to school, the kids all said you'd picked her up," Liza explained. "I double-checked with the faculty members on bus duty, and they confirmed. Everyone saw Krissy leave the school, and everyone heard her call out, 'My mommy's here!' and run to your car. They recognized your silver Acadia. It never occurred to them...or to me..."

"Are you saying Krissy's gone?" Hope could hardly breathe.

"I don't know. I called all the other kids' houses. No one's seen her. I don't understand."

"Liza, hang up and call the police. Tell them what happened. I'm calling Edward." Hope disconnected the call.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, she arrived home to mass pandemonium. Cops. Friends. Neighbors. Ashley, weeping when she ran up to Hope and announced that Mr. Willis had spoken with the U.S. Attorney, who'd contacted the FBI. As a result, specialized agents were on their way, both to the house and to Krissy's school. Local police were already at the school, questioning everyone, including all the car pool parents, who'd been summoned back to the crime scene.

Hope barely heard her nanny's words. She pushed past everyone—including the cops who were clearly waiting for her to show up so they could talk to her—and raced upstairs. She ignored the yellow tape that read "Do Not Cross," ducked under it and burst into Krissy's bedroom.

Pristine. Nothing disturbed. Nothing missing.

Nothing anyone else would notice. Only Krissy's mother. She noticed.

Oreo, Krissy's beloved stuffed panda, was gone. She slept with it every night, and left it on the center of the bed, covered by a tiny fleece blanket, while she was at school.

Hope raced over to the bed and flung the pillows aside. Then, she dropped to her knees, peering under the bed to see if the panda had toppled beneath it. She groped around, praying. When she found nothing, she tore off the comforter and sheets, shaking them out like a wild animal. Nothing. She

began rummaging through the closet. She opened the bureau drawers and dumped clothes onto the rug.

“Judge Willis—stop it! We’ve sealed off this room.” Officer Krauss, a member of Armonk’s North Castle Police Department, hurried in. Having overheard the commotion coming from Krissy’s bedroom, he sized up the situation, stalked over to Hope and blocked her frantic motions with his forearm. “You’re contaminating personal items that could lead us to your daughter. We need her linens, her clothes—whatever we can use to find her. We also need you to provide us with a recent photo, a description of what she was wearing today, a full health history—and any information that might tell us who abducted her. We need you to focus and talk to us, not go ballistic.”

Hope shoved his arm away and whirled around, whipping her head back and forth. “Talk to you? You’re supposed to be finding my child. Why are you all here instead of combing the streets looking for Krissy? She’s only been gone an hour. Now is the time to find her—before it’s too late. You need her personal things? Take whatever you want. Photos, yesterday’s clothes, her toothbrush. Check her comforter for prints. I doubt there’ll be any. This SOB is too smart not to wear gloves. But try. And what about Krissy’s school? That’s where she was abducted. Did the outdoor cameras pick up anything? Do you *know* anything?”

“Nothing from the security cameras. But we have an entire team interviewing every member of the faculty.” Krauss narrowed his eyes and stared at Hope. “But I have to wonder why you’re tearing Krissy’s bedroom apart and insisting we check her comforter for fingerprints, when you yourself just said she was kidnapped from her school. What aren’t you telling us?”

“Nothing you shouldn’t already have figured out!” Hope snapped back. “This was no random kidnapping. It was meticulously planned. For God knows how long. Obviously, the monster who abducted my baby researched the make, model and color of my car so he could pass it off as mine. He also took the time to study Krissy, and to learn what meant the most to her. Then he got his hands on it, and used it to dupe her into getting into that car with him....”

“What did he get his hands on—specifically?”

“That’s why I’m tearing up her room. To find it. But it’s gone....” Hope’s voice cracked as she stared at the overturned bedding. “He was here. Today. But not to take Krissy. To take...” Hope buried her face in her hands.

Before Krauss could demand that she finish her sentence, Edward swung his legs over the tape and strode into the room.

“Hope?” His gaze darted wildly around, as if by visually covering every square inch of the bedroom, he’d spot his child. “What have you found out?” He turned to the cop. “Officer...?”

“Krauss,” the other man supplied.

“Officer Krauss,” Edward echoed. “Have you heard from the kidnappers?”

Krauss didn’t ask why Edward Willis assumed this was a ransom case. He just filed the information away for later and shook his head. “No contact whatsoever. But it’s early.”

“Early?” Edward snapped. “We’re not talking about a morning stroll. My five-year-old daughter’s life is at stake.”

“We’re aware of that, sir. Our sergeant and two officers are at your daughter’s school, as are detectives from the Westchester County Police and FBI agents from the White Plains Resident Agency. They’re all questioning Krissy’s teacher, principal and the entire staff. More FBI agents from Violent Crimes are on their way over here to join us locals. So is the county’s CSI team. We’ll comb through your house for clues, and branch out to widen the investigation.”

“I called the U.S. Attorney. He alerted the FBI’s New York Field Office,” Edward announced. “I also made my own personal call to the field office. I have a contact there who specializes in Crimes

Against Children.”

“That wasn’t necessary, sir. As I said, we notified the FBI to request their assistance as soon as we got Mrs. Bock’s call. They were already aware of the situation. The hotline reached the local RA, who contacted the CAC squad in New York. Their Assistant Director in Charge contacted FBI Headquarters, and requested a Child Abduction Rapid Deployment Team. That team is en route. So is the team from the New York Field Office. They’ll be setting up an off-site command post, and working with us to safely recover your daughter. Plus, an Amber Alert’s been issued.”

“What about the NCIC Missing Person File?” Edward pressed on, referring to the National Crime Information Center’s entries. “Did you—”

“An entry was made immediately,” Krauss interrupted quietly. “Being an attorney, sir, and familiar with the law, I’m sure you’re aware that there’s no waiting period in a child kidnapping. Our police department may not be the size of the NYPD, but we know our jobs. And we do them—well.”

Krauss’s point struck home, and, abruptly, Edward realized what an overbearing tyrant he was being. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to attack you. But under the circumstances...”

“I understand. You’re going through hell.”

“Ed.” Hope interrupted, clutching her husband’s forearms. “Who would do this? Who took our baby?”

“I don’t know.” He drew Hope closer in a protective gesture. “But we’ll find out. And we’ll bring Krissy home.” Again, his gaze swept the room. “Who trashed her bedroom?”

“I did.”

Ed drew back, his brows knit in confusion. “I don’t understand. You told me Krissy disappeared at school. That she was taken right after the bell. So why...?”

“Your wife was about to answer that very question for me,” Officer Krauss interceded. “We checked this room out first, before we sealed it off for the Westchester County Forensic Investigation Unit. Everything seemed to be in order and completely untouched—at least until your wife turned the place upside down. Your nanny confirmed that she arrived right after you left this morning so she could do the laundry, bake cookies for your daughter’s after-school snack, and catch up on her own studying. She assured us that no one was at the house, or in this room, today.”

“Ashley’s wrong,” Hope countered. “So are the police.” Tears glistened on her lashes. “Whoever took Krissy was in this room. *Today*. During the time that Krissy was in school. Ed—” she turned to command her husband’s attention “—I looked everywhere. Oreó’s gone.”

His gaze snapped back to the bed. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. He and his blanket are both missing. The kidnapper must have come specifically to get them.”

“Dammit.” With a hard swallow, Edward turned to explain to Krauss. “Oreó is my daughter’s stuffed bear.”

“Panda,” Hope corrected.

“Panda. She drags him all over the house. The only time she puts him down is when she goes to school. Then, she covers him with a little blanket. It’s...” He paused to think.

“Lavender fleece,” Hope supplied. “It came with one of her dolls. She gave it to Oreó. She said she was afraid he’d get cold when she went to school and wasn’t there to hug him, so she tucked him in every day...on her bed....” With that, Hope finally, completely broke down. She bowed her head, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

Edward touched his wife’s shoulder, but she backed away, wrapping her arms around herself in a determined attempt to withstand this emotional ordeal on her own. Still weeping, she drew inward,

seeking comfort where none existed.

It was like reliving a nightmare. Only worse. Now she was grown. And now the victim was *her* child, her precious little girl.

Officer Krauss was scribbling notes onto a pad. “You’re sure the bear was here when Krissy left for school?”

“Positive,” Hope managed. “I saw him when I came in to get Krissy’s jacket. She was already waiting for me at the front door. We were running late. I took her directly to school. She never went back upstairs.”

“Which means she never reentered her bedroom.” Krauss double-checked the bedroom windows. “As I said earlier, no sign of forced entry.” He was already heading for the door. “My men and I will recheck the security system and every door and window in the house. Then, I’ll need those personal items and information we talked about.”

There was a long silence when Hope and Edward were alone.

“The FBI should be here any minute,” he said at last.

“I’m sure they will. They’ll set up Command Central, waiting for a ransom call, while they grill us. They’ll start with our relationship, since we’re Krissy’s parents and the primary suspects. Then, they’ll move on to every human being who holds a grudge against us—which will take days, given our careers. Meanwhile, Krissy’s out there somewhere. Scared. Alone. And God knows what else.” Hope’s hand was shaking as she whipped out her cell phone. “So, yes, I’m glad we have the police and the FBI on board. But it’s not enough.” She punched in directory assistance.

“Who are you calling?”

“Forensic Instincts.”

Edward blinked. “The profilers?”

“Yes,” Hope confirmed. “You know their track record. It’s unbelievable. Five cases. Five successes. They find criminals. Serial killers. Rapists. And kidnappers. They’re on the fast track. And they don’t have a dozen other cases they have to work at the same time.”

A scowl. “We should check with the FBI first. What if the involvement of an independent organization puts Krissy in more danger?”

“It won’t.” Hope was talking so fast she was tripping on her words. “I’ve followed their work. They know just how to handle things. Your friends at the FBI might not like it, but I don’t give a damn.” A hard look at Edward as her index finger hovered over the send button. “I’ve been through this nightmare before. I’m not losing Krissy.”

“I know what you went through. But you can’t compare the two traumas. It’s over three decades. Law enforcement’s capabilities have grown by leaps and bounds.”

“I don’t care. I can’t survive this again. Especially not when it comes to my daughter.”

“I understand. But—”

“Look, Edward, three decades ago or not, some things haven’t changed. Like the fact that an investigation can remain active for only so long. The last time the case went cold after two years. I’m not chancing that again. Not with my baby. Don’t bother arguing with me. I’m doing this. I’ll get them to drop anything they’re doing. I’ll pay them whatever fee they ask for.” Hope was finished waiting. She punched the green button and put the call through.

“In Manhattan, I need the number for Forensic Instincts, LLC.” Hope reached for a pad and pen.

“Fine. If you feel that strongly about it, go ahead,” Edward reluctantly conceded. “But I want them working with law enforcement. Not independently.”

“If that’s possible, great. If not—” Hope shrugged, scribbling down the number. Having gotten wh

she wanted, she disconnected the call, and began furiously punching in the telephone number. “The truth is, I don’t give a damn about the cops’ or the FBI’s internal politics. I don’t give a damn about *anything*—except getting Krissy home safe and sound. So if Forensic Instincts’ methods are too unconventional to suit you—hello?” Hope put her lips to the mouthpiece, her throat working as she spoke. “Is this Casey Woods?”

“Speaking,” a weary voice answered. “And this is...?”

“My name is Hope Willis. Judge Hope Willis. I live in Armonk. An hour and a half ago, my five-year-old daughter was kidnapped from her elementary school. The police are here. So is the FBI. But the minutes are ticking by. And the suspect list is way too long for them to tackle alone.”

“Really. And why is that?”

“Because I’m a family court judge, and my husband is a criminal defense attorney. We’ve racked up more grudge-holders and enemies than we can recall. We’ll try to compile a list, but it’ll be long. Plus, there are special circumstances involved that make this even more unbearable. I need to hire Forensic Instincts. Now. On an exclusive basis.”

There was a prolonged silence at the other end of the phone.

Special circumstances. An interesting and succinct choice of words. Plus, Casey could hear the repressed note in Judge Willis’s tone. The woman might be going through hell, but she was clearly holding something back. Half-assed candor didn’t fly for her—no matter how dire the circumstances.

“I’m terribly sorry about your daughter,” Casey responded. “But my team and I are just coming off a very intense, draining investigation, and we have other cases that have been back-burnered because of that, and now require our attention. I’m sure the FBI and the police will be on top of—”

“They’re not enough,” Hope interrupted. “I need more than conventional methods. We can’t afford to waste a second. Please. You know how crucial these first three hours are.”

“Yes,” Casey replied soberly. “I do.” *And they’re slipping away*, she mentally noted.

“Then will you come? I’ll do anything. Pay anything. Follow your instructions to a tee.” The last semblance of Hope’s facade cracked. “Please, Ms. Woods. I’m begging you. Find my baby.”

Casey had to cave. And not just because this case would mean big bucks for the company. But because instinct told her that the honesty and trust would come when they met in person. If not, the team would walk.

For now, a five-year-old child was missing.

“Okay. Stay calm. We’ll do everything we can,” she assured Hope, her entire demeanor softening. “Hang on.” A rustle as she snatched up a Post-it and pen. “Give me your address. Then give us an hour.”

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## Chapter Three

Forensic Instincts showed up at the Willis house at the same time as the FBI. Watching them pull into the driveway, Casey immediately recognized the four special agents who'd been contacted and deployed by the Crimes Against Children Unit at FBI Headquarters in D.C. They were one of the two Child Abduction Rapid Deployment teams in the Northeast, and consisted of specially trained agents from several different field offices, each of whom had dropped everything and taken off the instant they'd been contacted. Aware of how crucial these first postabduction hours were, the CARD team was here to assist C-20, the New York Field Office's CAC squad, in tracking down Krissy Willis and bringing her home.

The team members now jumping out of their car consisted of Supervisory Special Agent Don Owens, and Special Agents Will Dugan, Guy Adams and Jack McHale. And Casey knew exactly which of them would be smiling at the sight of her team's arrival, and which of them would be exceedingly pissed off to see them.

"Hey, Don." As she climbed out of the driver's seat, Casey waved at the seasoned agent who had to be nearing fifty-seven and mandatory retirement. He was hard-core, married to the Bureau, and yet he was more open-minded about Casey's team than some of the younger squad members. Go figure.

"Casey Woods. Why am I not surprised to see you here?" Owens acknowledged her with a slight smile, his trim gray mustache curving with his lips. "I'm lucky I sped to Logan, and that my shuttle flight from Boston arrived early. Otherwise, you would have already set up the FBI's Command Post and canvassed half the neighborhood."

"Damn straight," Ryan muttered under his breath.

Casey rolled her eyes. Ryan was cranky. He hadn't gotten any of the sleep he'd anticipated after closing the last case. Functioning on zero rest was Casey's specialty. She could operate on empty and make it seem full. She was able to push past her fatigue and get the job done. And Marc was a Navy SEAL to the core. He could run on sheer adrenaline. So Ryan was the cheese who stood alone. He was a royal pain in the ass when he went without sleep. At times like this, barring essential needs to communicate, Casey and Marc avoided him like the plague.

"This place is going to be a circus," Ryan continued to mumble. "The CARD team. The Feds. The county police. The locals. Can't we send them all back to their desks?" A grunt. "You know, leave us alone.... I'll hack into the little girl's computer. Casey, you can run down the list of suspects, interrogate the right ones. Marc can beat the crap out of the scumbag who did this. Then you'll size up his reactions until we figure out where he hid the poor kid. And Krissy Willis will be safe in her own bed before the miserable prick who took her can do his worst. After that, we can all go home and crash."

Before Casey could reply, Ryan spied the tall, slender woman who was squatting down just outside the Willises' garage. Her brow was furrowed in intense concentration, and her delicate fingers were gliding over the streamers that dangled from the handlebars of what was clearly a little girl's bicycle.

"Oh, great," Ryan complained more loudly. "Look who's here. It's Claire-voyant—the cops' favorite psychic, doing her thing. Now, we'll be grilling suspects, and she'll be clutching Krissy Willis's dirty socks trying to get up in her head. I can hardly wait."

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