

BORROWED TIME by Dänna Wilberg

Prologue

Amy Fitzpatrick sucked in her stomach, straightened her shoulders, and turned toward the Tabby cat sprawled across her bed. “What do you think, Rex?” Twelve weeks ago, she criticized her muffin top and super-sized chest. Today she relished the change. *Crossfit*. By summer’s end, her abs never looked better, her arms and legs, defined. *Thank God for pull-ups and squats.*

She slipped into a pair of stone-washed jeans, a silky white tank top, and scooted her feet into strappy sandals. “Too plain?” But Rex didn’t respond. He licked one paw and swiped it across his left ear. “I hope my date shows more interest than you, my friend,” she said, brushing her long cinnamon colored hair.

Amy thought about her date, an older guy she’d met online thirty pounds ago. He said he was coming to town and wanted to meet her in person. His name was Jeff, and he suggested dinner. *Sushi, my favorite.*

She sometimes wished she could go back in time. Reset the clock. She didn’t date much in high school, she preferred books to broken promises. When she graduated college and applied for a position at a local broadcasting company, she had no idea taking the job meant giving up the best years of her life. She ate her way through lonely nights and weekends. Starbucks became her new best friend and she discovered Venti

Frappuccino's with double whip. Coupons, received in the mail for pizza or buy one get one hamburger free, upgrades for supersize fries with a large soft drink purchase, gave her something to look forward to. Until one day she looked in the mirror and no longer recognized herself.

Joining the dating site gave her a new lease on life. Whittling her weight down from a size 10 to a size 6 improved her confidence. She was ready for a relationship. "You know, Rex," she said, "if this guy works out, you may find your lazy ass sleeping on the floor."

Rex yawned and stretched.

At 7:48 Amy pulled into a parking structure on 11th and K Streets. She drove to the designated level and parked near the elevator as Jeff instructed. She thought the directive was odd and wondered why he didn't agree to meet at the restaurant. *Maybe he wants to check you out before he wastes his evening wining and dining you?* She took one last look in her visor mirror. *Don't be silly.*

A handsome, dark-haired man stood near the elevator door. She recognized him immediately from his photo.

"Hello, Jeff."

He flashed a Hollywood smile. "Amy? Is that you?"

"Surprised?" Amy twirled around.

His lips puckered, and he whistled low. "Damn, you are even more beautiful in person!"

They rode the elevator to the ground floor and navigated their way through a courtyard with clusters of people enjoying Labor Day weekend. “This way,” he said, ducking into the first doorway they came to. “I reserved a table for us in the corner—where it’s quiet.” His hand rested at the base of her spine. “We can get better acquainted.”

The restaurant was nothing extravagant, but the food was spectacular. Jeff surpassed all expectations, and she wondered, *could he be the one?*

“This photo was taken last Thanksgiving,” he said, sliding his phone across the table. “That’s my grandma—she’s 86, but boy can she dance up storm. She’s holding my fur baby, Penny.”

Amy smiled at the photo, wondering if Penny and Rex would hit it off. She was getting ahead of herself, but he seemed to have all the qualities she dreamed of; funny, charming, attentive, talented and handsome. A career, family values—assets most girls put high on their wish list. *Almost too good to be true.* “Why are you still single?”

“Why are you?”

“I’m a workaholic?”

“I think we’re in the same boat. I love my job.”

“Does that mean we’re destined to be alone?”

“Let’s go to my place, we can talk about it there.” His eyes traveled to her breasts and back.

“No. I don’t think—”

His smile faded. His eyes turned cold. He slapped his hands on the table. “Hey, no worries,” he said.

Amy needed a moment to assess his mood swing and excused herself to the restroom. She wasn’t ready to have sex on their first date. Then again, maybe she was over-thinking the way he looked at her. A cartoon image of a wolf licking his chops came to mind. Maybe her mother had been right, maybe online dating wasn’t such a good idea. When they connected on the dating site, she thought he’d be more mature than guys she dated in college, because of his age. *Less pushy.*

When she returned to the table, Jeff had ordered more Saki.

“I have to get up early, Jeff, I don’t think I should—”

“Please, one more drink. I don’t want the evening to end. I’m sorry if I rushed things, but I really like you.”

He held her in his gaze until...

“Okay— I’m sure one more won’t hurt.”

Amy felt dizzy. Unsteady. Nauseous. “Where are we?” she asked. She didn’t understand why her limbs were filled with cement, why bees swarmed in her head. *I only took a few sips.* “I don’t feel right.”

Jeff pushed a key into the lock.

“I have work tomorrow,” she slurred, leaning against the heavy wooden door frame.

“I know. This won’t take long,” he whispered.

Chapter 1

“Let’s put it over there,” said events coordinator Suzanne Cash, pointing to the blank wall across the hotel ballroom. Julien, her assistant, dragged a gigantic cardboard cut-out of a bunny peeking out of a top hat across the room and lifted it as high as his five-foot-seven frame could stretch. Suzanne nodded and clapped her hands. “Perfect.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, holding the cut-out in place.

“I’m sure.”

“You were sure the last *two* times. Are you positive this is where you want it?”

“One hundred percent positive.”

“You know these kids aren’t going to care if the purple letters in ABRACADABRA clash with the wall sconces or the carpet, they’re coming to see the *magic*.”

She buried her hands in the pockets of her maxi skirt. “Geez, Julien—don’t the kids deserve perfection in their imperfect world?”

“They’re kids. Not experts in Feng Shui.”

Suzanne brushed past Julien. “Did you get the black curtains I asked for?”

“Sure did. They will be hung tonight before I leave.”

“We have to be finished with the stage decorations and the props by three o’clock tomorrow afternoon. Catering starts their set-up at four. Doors open six o’clock sharp. Can you check the weather again? Someone mentioned rain.”

“Nothing until next week. We may be in for a wet Halloween.”

“Damn, I still have my dress to collect from the cleaners.”

“The kids are going to love you no matter what you wear. And I promise you, we will be done. Now scoot. You look bitchy with puffy eyes.”

Suzanne smirked. “Do you need anything before I go?”

“No. Get some rest. Recharge your batteries.”

She didn’t argue. Her eyes were puffy, her long auburn hair needed washing, and her make-up had melted off hours ago. She was beat. Her feet throbbed; she couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten. She was oblivious to everyone around her. Her bones yearned for bed. *I hate when he’s right.*

The wind stirred leaves along the walkway. The sun, long gone, left the moon in charge. *Nothing looks familiar.* She turned to go back inside the hotel only to find the door locked. Frustrated, she walked towards a fenced area, noticing the hotel marquee in the distance. “Making Magic for Wish Kids.” After tomorrow night she’d get her life back. *No hurry there.* She loved her work. Whether the kids went into remission, or journeyed into the next astral plane, she rallied for every dime that went towards helping them forget their illness, pain, and struggle.

Suzanne walked toward the pool area and paused. *Presto!* The moon disappeared behind the clouds. *Now you see it, now you don’t.* It was dark. *Too dark.* She must’ve

gotten turned around. She stopped to listen. *Footsteps?* “Don’t be paranoid,” she mumbled, and inched her way towards the pool’s eerie glow. She reached inside her purse for her phone, about to dial Julien, when an arm snaked around her neck and a large hand covered her mouth. Something hard pressed beneath her right shoulder blade. His hot breath seethed in her ear. “You shouldn’t’ve meddled.”

Then came a pop, and searing, hot, pain impaled her. A blow to the back of her head sent her reeling. She saw stars, heard a splash. Cold. Falling. Plumes of blood escaped her body as she descended to the bottom of the pool, her arms flailing like *snow angels*. Loving eyes acknowledged her despair. Tender arms enfolded her. She closed her eyes and listened to the familiar voice. “Don’t fight it”, he whispered, “relax.”

There was no mistaking the voice. *Jack*.

No longer falling. *Floating*.

Jack...my first love.

Chapter Two

Samson Metzger picked up the phone on the fifth ring. He hated being called in the middle of the night. Sleep was a commodity, not to be wasted. The desk sergeant’s voice shattered the final fragments of his R.E.M. state. “He’s at it again.”

“Son-of-a-,” Sam grumbled, pulling himself upright. “Where?”

“Diamond Springs, 515 Afton Street. I called the coroner. Johnson and Schuster are already on the scene. Dixon wants you there. Now.”

“Fine.” Sam plunked the phone back on its receiver. Twenty minutes later, he ducked under the yellow tape securing the scene. He flipped his badge at the officer standing vigil and donned the gear he had tucked under his arm. Once he was gowned from head to toe, he wiggled his fingers into a pair of nitrile gloves, dreading what lie ahead. He was well acquainted with the smell of death.

“What do we have?”

Rob Schuster lowered his mask. The camera around his neck dangled from a thick black strap. “If it isn’t sleeping beauty.”

“Not in the mood, Rob.” Sam stood in the doorway to the living room of the rundown Victorian performing his usual overview of the crime scene. Starting at the far corner of the room, he began working in sections. “Same guy?”

“Looks like it,” Rob said, holding up an evidence bag.

“Orange twine?”

“Yep. We’ll know more once we get all the samples collected. Johnson’s in the other room with the body.” Before Rob reseated his mask, he added, “She’s been here awhile.”

Sam navigated his way down the hall. When he reached the bedroom, he pulled his mask over his nose and mouth. Inside, Dove Johnson, Goldorado County’s finest crime scene investigator and forensic specialist, stood over the body of a young woman. Sam cleared his throat, and Dove jerked his head around.

“Hey partner—”

“Where’s Dixon?”

“It’s Friday night, probably bangin’ some cheerleader.” Dove shook his head. “Who knows? He said he’d be here. That was over an hour ago.” Dove maneuvered his way around the body like a ninja. He lifted the dead girl’s hand and carefully extracted an orange fiber embedded in her wrist. “This one fought like a hellion, just like the others.”

Sam scanned the room. “No signs of struggle here in the house?”

“Nope—drop off, just like the Wheeler girl. I imagine when we find the scene of the crime it’ll be horrific.”

Sam squatted next to Dove. His eyes traveled the girl’s body assessing decomposition and lividity. “How long?”

“Three to four weeks, give or take a few days.”

“What kind of sick fuck does this?”

“The kind we’d better catch quickly.” Dove nodded toward the girl’s pelvic area. “I extracted the broom handle for prints.”

Sam’s stomach clenched. He moved away from Dove and tore at his mask. “When can I expect a report?”

“I’ll be finished here in a couple hours. I should have something for you by midmorning.”

Sam reached his hand in his pocket and pulled out the cell phone vibrating against his thigh. A grimace flashed across his face. “Detective Metzger.”

“Just got a call from Mercy,” Kelly, Goldorado County’s bubbly dispatcher announced. “They pulled a body from the pool at the Marriott. She’s still alive. Dixon wants you to check it out.”

“It’s 2:00 freaking a.m.”

“I’m just the messenger—he said to get over there ASAP.”

“O.D.? Suicide?”

“Not unless she shot herself in the back first.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Sam hissed, flipping a page on his notepad. “Who called it in?” He scribbled the info on the page. “All right, I’ll get over there as soon as I finish here.” Sam clicked his phone off and slipped it in his pocket. “Like they say, no rest for the wicked,” he said, slapping Dove’s back. He took a last glance at the body. The girl was about his sister Audra’s age. He shuddered.

On his way out, Sam approached Schuster, who was down on his knees photographing the Persian rug. He squatted beside him. “Anything?”

“One hundred-seventy-eight knots per square inch. Doesn’t match the rest of the décor.”

Sam noticed the furniture in the house was mismatched, shabby or broken. He lifted one corner of the rug. “The floor isn’t faded,” he said.

“No.” Schuster snapped a series of photos. “Our guy carried the body here inside the rug, then staged the body in the bedroom.”

Sam balled his mask inside his fist. “I got another call. I’ll check in later.”

Suzanne's brother, Steven, perched on the edge of her hospital bed and held her hand. "Hey Suz, you had us all worried."

Across the room, her husband Ben sat engrossed in a magazine. He'd barely lifted his eyes when she regained consciousness.

"Hurts," she whispered. She felt weak, her head pounded, pain radiated from her back in places she couldn't pin-point. Brightly colored scrubs swam across her vision, poking and prodding her body. Pliable tubing snaked from an IV pole to the PICC line delivering medication directly to her heart. Tiny lights flitted into black space and pulsed along her peripheral vision. She struggled to keep herself from falling back into the abyss.

"Do you know where you are Mrs. Cash?" a woman's voice came from the blur of colors above her head.

She tried to speak.

Steven lifted her hand to his cheek. "You're at Mercy Folsom," he said. "They brought you in last night." His voice quivered, "You were shot, found floating in the pool at the Marriott." He paused, choking back tears. "We thought we lost you."

Suzanne's fingers closed around his.

Ben circled to the other side of the bed and loomed over her fragile form. She tried to turn in his direction but couldn't. Her head spun. She felt nauseated.

Steven covered her hand with his. “The doctor said you’re gonna be fine. You were in surgery for a good part of the night. The bullet nicked an artery. A centimeter to the left and—” Steven cleared his throat. “The Doc said you were lucky, the wound was clean, he said it would heal in no time. He also said you have a nasty concussion. I asked him how he could tell.”

Suzanne couldn’t laugh. Her brother always teased her about being the only “dizzy” brunette on the planet.

“What were you doing at that hotel?” Ben’s tone turned Suzanne’s blood to ice. Her eyes shifted to her brother, hoping he would intervene.

“How about if we go get some coffee Ben,” he said. “Let Suzanne get her beauty sleep. We’ll be back to check on you later, Sis.”

Suzanne’s lids closed, and she began to dream...

She was fifteen. A leaden sky, not unusual for December in Chicago, promised at least six more inches of snow. Suzanne trudged home from school. Three months into her sophomore year, and she wasn’t doing well. A misfit with poor grades, not a good start. Her dad worked long hours, her mom worked part time, but between Rotary Club meetings and bake sales, mother-daughter time dwindled. When Suzanne’s older brother, Steven, needed a favor he was her best friend, otherwise she didn’t exist. Destined to be invisible.

She didn't notice the Chevy parked on the street in front of her bungalow until it was too late. Upon impact, Suzanne was jolted from one type of pain into another. A goose egg formed on her knee-cap, and she swore under her breath, "Dammit God! Why me?" Suddenly, large wet flakes tumbled from the sky. "Oh great. Just what I needed," she said, and tromped inside the house.

"You're all wet," said the stranger sitting at the kitchen table.

"Is that YOUR stupid car out there?" Suzanne pulled at the torn fabric stretched across her knee. "My tights are ruined."

"I'd hate to see the other guy," he said, and bent down to touch her throbbing knee.

His touch took her breath away. It was gentle, soothing, contradictory to his tough guy appearance. His sagging jeans and worn leather jacket made her wonder if he was trouble. Trouble wasn't her type.

While Suzanne assessed his shaggy blond hair, the boy glanced up. She inspected his face; warm eyes, one brown, one green; dark lashes; faint freckles splashed across a nicely structured nose; a full mouth, centered on a square jaw. "I'm going to have a fat bruise," she said. The hand touching her knee had little nicks and cuts; the fingernails embedded with black grease. Casualties of maintaining the Chevy? Perhaps, but when their eyes connected, she felt kindness, generosity, and sensed a desire to know her better. The pain in her knee vanished.

"Who *are* you?"

"I'm Jack. And you—

Suzanne examined her knee as if she were part of a hoax. “How did you do that?”

“Energy healing. You know, physician heal thyself?”

“Aren’t you a little old to be playing doctor?”

Steven appeared from his room toting a classic car magazine. He flipped through pages, rattling off features of the new Mustang without acknowledging Suzanne’s presence until his friend spoke up.

“You didn’t tell me you had a sister,” Jack said, nodding towards Suzanne.

“Oh, yeah. Jack, meet Suzanne.”

She recognized the tone in Steven’s voice as her cue to leave the kitchen. She gathered her things and started for her room when Jack blocked her path.

“Drop something?” he asked, dangling a glove from his pinky finger.

“Are you flirting with me?”

She grabbed the glove, and brushed past him, grazing his thigh with the back of her hand. A soft moan rumbled in his throat.

Later that evening the storm let up, but high winds and drifting snow made it impossible to drive. Jack didn’t seem to mind being stranded. Jack, Steven, and Suzanne bundled up and went outside to shovel the steps, walkways, and driveway.

The boys were piling the last hour’s accumulation on the side of the drive when Suzanne threw the first snowball, hitting Jack on his right shoulder. It was war. Suzanne hid behind the mound of snow closest to the back door, and bombarded the boys, clearly having an advantage. Jack shielded his face against the onslaught of loosely packed ammunition.

“Wait till I get a hold of you,” he yelled.

She screamed, throwing snow quickly.

“Did you really think a little thing like *you* was going to stop *me*?” he asked, holding a handful of snow inches from her face.

“You underestimate me,” she said, batting the snow out of his hand.

“And you, young lady, underestimate me.”

“Steven, help,” she cried, knowing her brother wouldn’t come. *Don’t fight*. She pretended to weaken, but when Jack relaxed his grip, she pushed hard, sending him reeling into a deep drift of snow.

“I give up,” he said, brushing himself off.

“You want to call a truce?”

“Come,” he said, reaching for her hand. She didn’t resist. Something about him made her feel spontaneous, *daring*.

He led her to a patch of flat ground. “Turn around,” he said.

Suzanne stood with her back to the virgin snow, arms stretched wide.

Jack turned to her; his eyes filled with a promise of something more—*a future*.

“Ready?” he asked. “On my count—1-2-3.”

“Mrs. Cash?”

Suzanne didn’t recognize the voice. Her eyes refused to open.

“Mrs. Cash, I’m sorry to bother you,” the voice insisted. “I’m Detective Samson Metzger with the Goldorado County Sheriff’s Department. I’d like to talk to you about what happened.”

Suzanne’s ears strained to hear.

“Mrs. Cash, we’re losing time. We need to catch the person who did this to you. If you could answer some questions for me, I’ll be as brief as possible.” Sam pulled a chair next to her bed. “You were found in the pool at the Marriott, do you remember being there?”

She couldn’t speak. Caught between worlds, she chose the past.

It was her sixteenth birthday. She was swinging at the playground of her grammar school. Jack pushed her from behind. She pumped her legs to go higher.

“Go steady with me,” he said.

“Steady?” She gasped.

He released the swing and planted himself in her path.

She gripped the chains. “What are you doing?” She dragged her feet until she skidded to a stop. Dust and gravel sprayed on Jack’s shoes.

“I’m not moving until you give me your answer.”

“Why should I go steady with you?”

“Because I love you,” he replied. “I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you. I love everything about you.” His thumb brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. “Don’t you love me? Don’t you want to be my girl?”

“Of course, I do.”

Jack pulled his class ring from his finger and slipped it on hers. The ring was huge and wouldn't stay on her finger. Jack pulled orange twine from his pocket and wound it around the shank of the ring. He slipped it back onto Suzanne's finger and kissed her tenderly. "I will always, always, love you," he vowed.

"Mrs. Cash? Can you hear me?"

"Orange twine?" she mumbled weakly. *Funny. Why would Jack wrap orange twine around his class ring? He was a mechanic's apprentice. He always carried black tape.*

"Orange what?" The detective's voice sounded urgent. "Can you speak up? Were you meeting someone there?" Metzger pressed on. Suzanne's eyes fluttered. She fought to stay awake. "Tell me what happened, ma'am," he said. "Who did you go there to see?"

"Ki—" The word wouldn't form on her tongue. She wasn't making any sense.

"Were you there to meet a friend?"

She sensed his impatience. "Ki—" She repeated.

"Kids?" he said, remembering something about Wishes For Kids on the hotel marquee. "Is this about the fundraiser?"

She nodded.

"Did you *see* the person who attacked you?"

"Dark." As much as she wanted to cooperate, she couldn't describe the pictures in her head. She couldn't figure out if the drugs they were pumping into her system were the cause of her wooziness, or if her injured brain insisted on defaulting to sleep-mode. She wanted to explain to the detective that all the exits looked alike—somehow, she ended up in the rear of the building by the pool. *I needed to get home—on my feet all*

day. Lost. She envisioned her attacker's arm wrapped around her neck; the muzzle of his gun pressed between her shoulder blades. She remembered his foul breath, his accusing words—

“British accent”, she whispered, as a final “bang” rang out in her recall. Fear and exhaustion sucked her into an abyss.

Suzanne barely heard the detective rise from his chair. “I’ll be back when you’re feeling better,” he said. “If there is *anything* you remember from last night, please have one of the nurses contact me immediately. I’ll leave my card by the phone. You get some rest now.” His hand touched hers. “Take care.”

The sound of trays rattling on a metal cart in the hallway jarred Suzanne’s senses. The smell of food wafted into the room. A woman’s voice hummed a soulful tune. She heard rustling near her bed. The humming stopped.

“Mrs. Cash? My name is Veronica. I’m going check your dressing. Is there anything I can get for you? How is your pain, sweetheart?”

Suzanne saw Jack standing in the corner of the room, dressed in his Army uniform. *He looks so young.* He had that smile on his face, the kind that made her melt, and she wanted him to come closer. *Why is he here?* She raised her hand to beckon him, but plastic tubing restricted her movement. A beeping sound pierced her brain.

The nurse began yelling. “Mrs. Cash? Suzanne, look at *me.*”

Another nurse rushed into the room. The blood pressure cuff squeezed Suzanne’s arm. She felt a slight tug on her PICC-line. A warm sensation rushed over her, but she

couldn't take her eyes from the corner of the room. *Falling*. She willed Jack to come with her and he did.

They were walking back to her house from the playground. Jack was kissing her hand, admiring his class ring on her finger. "One day," he said, "you'll be wearing a diamond."

"A diamond?" she said, although she couldn't imagine being any happier than she was at that moment.

"I'm going to take good care of you Suz. We'll live in a nice house, have a bunch of kids." When she gasped, he gave her a nudge. "Okay, how about two?"

Suzanne didn't answer. Something was wrong. "This isn't my house." She turned to Jack, expecting him to explain. She'd never seen him look so intense.

"You have to go in there with me, Suzanne. We need to find out what happened. Don't be afraid, I'll be with you." The three numbers below the porch light caught her attention. 515. Panic rose before her hand touched the handle on the door. Her heart pounded in her chest, each beat— too hard, too fast. She knew what waited on the other side.

The girl's body wasn't cold yet.

“Suzanne, it’s Steven.” She opened her eyes. “How are you’?” he asked.

What’s with the scruffy beard? The last time she saw him he was clean shaven.

“You’ve been knocked out for the past couple of days.”

Days? She was here a few minutes ago with— “Where’s Ben?”

“Who knows, I’m sure he’ll stop by later. You’re pale again.” Steven poured water into a glass from the pitcher on the nightstand.

“Nightmare—” She shuddered. “It seemed so real.”

“Here, drink this,” he said, handing her the cup.

“What day is it?”

“Tuesday. Detective Metzger is still hanging around the hospital, says it’s imperative he talk to you. Are you up to it? The last thing you need is stress. The doctor said your heart’s been acting wacky. I can tell Metzger to go away if you want.”

“He’ll have to wait,” she said, her voice cracking. “I need to tell you something.”

She took a sip of water.

Concern wrinkled Steven’s brow. “What is it, Sis?”

“I saw Jack. He was here, in my room—I saw him as clear as day. He was in the pool too.”

“That’s impossible, Jack’s been gone since—” he said, choking down his emotion.

“He was my best friend. I would know if...he died in Iraq.”

“But he was there.” Suzanne pointed, “Standing in the corner.”

“Jack? A ghost? No way. You’re hallucinating—must be the morphine.”

“Maybe,” she said. Seeing Jack did seem preposterous. Still, *I know what I saw*. What she couldn’t figure out was why Jack had been with her since the night at the Marriott, she hadn’t thought of him in years. Head trauma and morphine could cause hallucinations. “He saved my life. How do you explain that?”

“I can’t—I—I’m just glad you survived.”

As if her physical pain wasn’t enough, she reflected on Jack’s last night on leave—the two of them together, his promise to write the moment he got to Iraq. Weeks went by without word. At first, she worried, and then she felt foolish. Weeks stretched into months and she wondered if he had jilted her. She convinced herself their love-making was something they needed to get out of their system, nothing more. She wrote to him every day, desperate for him to love her the way she loved him. When he didn’t respond, she knew it was over. Three days after she mailed her farewell, the news came. Jack had been killed in an explosion. Three months later, she married Benjamin Cash at City Hall.

She remembered their marriage started on shaky ground, Ben, a wanna-be rock star, struggled with undiagnosed anger issues. She still silently grieved for Jack, the love of her life. Ben put up with her moodiness—she patched holes in the walls. Ben bounced from one band to another. She buried herself in charity work. Dysfunction took its toll on their relationship. They separated many times but reunited because *that’s what dysfunctional people do*. Fifteen years of resentment and disappointment shaped their roles as husband and wife.

Steven interrupted her thoughts. “Ben off his medication again?” Her frown confirmed his suspicions. “Want me to have a talk with him?”

“Asenapine changes his pH, he doesn’t like the way it makes him smell. I don’t know, maybe he’ll listen to you. I’m not up for one of his tantrums.”

Steven nodded, “The detective asked him a few questions, now he’s obsessing about what you were doing at the Marriott.” Steven searched her face. “If you were—I mean, who could blame—you’d tell me, right?”

Her eyes grew large. “What?”

Steven knew better than to push. “Have you seen the doctor today?”

“Apology accepted, and no, I haven’t talked to the doctor. But the nurse explained the results of my MRI, and the tear in my artery.”

“Good news?”

“Yes. I’m healing nicely, she said.” Suzanne’s focus shifted to the corner of the room. “Scary. I don’t remember having any tests. They said the pain will go away eventually, but what about my memory lapses?”

“Concussions take time to heal, Suz. In a few weeks, when the swelling is gone, you’ll be back to eh, normal.”

Suzanne touched the stitches on the back of her head. They were stiff and rubbed against the pillowcase when she moved. “I want to go home. Do you think you can arrange that for me?”

“I’ll see what I can do. What about Metzger? He has a toothbrush tucked in his breast pocket. He’s not going away.”

Suddenly she remembered. “The event! I’m the committee chairman for the Wish Kid Foundation, I need to call Elaine.”

“She called Ben, he explained what had happened.”

“Did she say how it went? Did the kids have fun? Did we reach our goal?”

Steven crossed the room and peeked through the blinds. “Looks like we’re in for a storm.”

“It took months to put it together. The kids were excited about wearing masks. The mystery we chose was brilliant – the pledges– all those prizes? Steven, you’re my brother, tell me—what happened?”

“Ben didn’t say much, only that some lady named Elaine left a hundred messages on the answering machine and used up all the recording space. He was pissed, he erased ‘em all. You know how he is.”

“I need to call—”

“Knock-knock.” Suzanne and Steven turned to face the man in the doorway. His voice was deeper than his stature called for. “Do you remember me? Detective Metzger. Samson Metzger. Sam. I’ve been waiting to speak with you, Mrs. Cash. I hope now is a good time.”

Suzanne waved him forward. Salt and pepper hair framed a face etched with laugh lines, complexity, and at least forty years of sunshine. Bright blue eye, fringed with black lashes sparkled beneath nicely shaped brows. His tone dipped another register, “Sorry for the interruption, but the last time we spoke, well, we really didn’t speak, I did most of the talking. You were heavily sedated.” He re-introduced himself to Steven and shook his hand. When he turned back to Suzanne, images flashed in her mind; cathedrals, palaces, cliffs, a winding river...a feeling of contentment came over her. It was as if she had

known him all her life. “Your father—he’s German descent, he migrated to Austria after the war,” she blurted. “Your mother was born in Sicily.”

Sam took a step back. “Whoa. Thought I was the one running background checks around here.”

“Sorry. That popped into my head. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I checked with the Wish Kid Foundation,” he said. “I was thinking how ironic it was that the person responsible for organizing a ‘Magical Mystery’ event is now subject to a mystery of her own. Can you tell me more about the man with the accent?”

How did he know? “Did I *say* he had an accent?”

“You don’t remember?” He moved closer. Spice, vanilla, and a hint of peppermint lingered in the air. “I want to find the person who tried to kill you before the town goes vigilante. People tend to freak out when the body count goes up.”

“515.” The number came out of her mouth like a hiccup. The detective moved closer still.

Steven stood up, ready to intervene, but Sam held up his hand.

“Say again?”

When Suzanne repeated the number, the detective pulled a notepad from his pocket and began to write. “What about 515, Mrs. Cash?”

“I don’t know.” She felt confused. “In the nightmare, it wasn’t my house—” Her stomach began to pitch. The color red flooded her vision. “515” flashed neon in her mind. She was caught in a series of violent images and gore.

“Tell me what you’re seeing.”

“A wooden floor. She’s face -down,” she heard herself say, “Her hands and feet are bound with orange twine. Her clothes, crumpled in a ball.”

“Go on,” the detective insisted, but it wasn’t him talking any more—it was Jack. He was there, like he had promised.

“What else do you see?”

“Blood,” she cried. “I see bloodstains on a white blouse, on faded jeans.”

The hospital door burst open, spitting Sam to the curb. Twenty years on the force, and *never* had he experienced anything like that. *Who the hell is she? What does she know about Amy Fitzpatrick?* More women had been found brutally murdered over a course of eight months: Twila Averose, Melinda Carlisle, Dillyn Wheeler, and Amy Fitzpatrick. The only people privy to the details found at the crime scenes were guys he had worked with for years. Nobody leaked a case. *Nobody*. How did she know about his father? His mother? *Austria?*

To make matters worse, she had an effect on him. Even in her injured state, she was beautiful. He dipped his hand in pocket and grasped the sobriety coin. *Ten years. Don’t blow it now.*

Alcohol had kept the demons at bay. Numbed his heart. Served as a catalyst between reality and the underworld. And then one day he was called to a scene, a child had been

severely beaten, set on fire, and thrown into a dumpster. After dowsing his anger with a fifth of whiskey, he had an epiphany. You can't medicate a conscience.

"Nooo," Suzanne cried out. The kink in her IV sounded an alarm. Jack hovered near the edge of the bed. His eyes sad.

"Mrs. Cash, calm down. *Shhhhh*," the nurse said, patting Suzanne's hand. I'm Belinda. You had a bad dream, that's all."

"I saw her—she's—" Suzanne said, catching her breath. "Is Detective Metzger still here?"

"No, I haven't seen him all morning."

"Morning?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cash it's morning."

"Can you call Detective Metzger for me? It's urgent."

Belinda called the number on the card Detective Metzger had placed on Suzanne's nightstand and handed her the phone. "Her name is Amy. I see her with a man, a dark-haired man. She's in trouble."

"I'll be right there."

"I don't understand, why come here? Find her before it's too—"

"She's already dead."

"But she can't be I just saw her—"

“Her body was found at 515 Afton Street.”

Suzanne dropped the phone. A small voice echoed in the distance, “Mrs. Cash? Mrs. Cash, are you there?”

Sam pulled up a chair and drew his pad from his shirt pocket. “Tell me what you saw.”

Suzanne ached more for the dead girl, than she did from her gunshot wound. “I saw her getting ready for her date. She lost thirty pounds and was excited about fitting into her new jeans. After dinner, he took her to a place—the hallway had green carpet with sort of a diamond pattern in the center. Small sconces lined the walls—she was wobbly.”

Metzger stopped scribbling on his pad, his gaze, hard around the edges.

Suzanne hiked her cover up an inch or two. “You think I’m making it up?”

“I’m trying to wrap my head around what you’re telling me. Go on.”

Suzanne felt sick inside. “What good is this information if she’s dead?”

“Amy Fitzpatrick died weeks ago. She was found in an abandoned house on Afton Street.”

“But I saw—”

“We did a thorough exam of the crime scene. She was murdered somewhere else. Green fibers were found beneath her fingernails. The house on Afton had hardwood floors.”

Suzanne's scalp tingled from the top of her head to the nape of her neck. Her stomach knotted. Jack appeared in the corner of the room; his arms tight across his chest.

"Have you talked to anyone else about your dreams, Mrs. Cash?"

"Suzanne, please."

"Deal, if you call me Sam."

"No, I didn't tell anyone about the girl," she said, diverting her gaze.

"There's more?"

"You'll think I'm insane."

"Try me."

"I have been seeing my dead boyfriend from long ago in these dreams."

"I see. And?"

"And—I see him here, in my room."

Sam raised one eyebrow. "And?"

"And—he's sitting next to you."

While Sam took an incoming phone call into the hallway, Suzanne dozed. She dreamt of the summer she turned sixteen, she and Jack were cleaning the pool. Suzanne was a poor swimmer. Jack insisted she learn to float.

"Suzanne, *floating* is part of *swimming*."

"I'm afraid," she cried.

“Of what?”

“Sinking.”

Jack’s face softened. “C’mere, let me show you.” He pulled her close and turned her around. “Lean back against me,” he said, placing one hand at the base of her head, and one on her lower back. “Relax.”

She obeyed, closing her eyes to the blazing sun. His touch made her shiver.

“No monkey business, this is serious.” His hand moved lower, resting too close to one of her “off limit” zones.

“No tricks—promise?” she said, moving his hand higher up.

“I promise,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers. His kiss, gentle at first, grew more urgent. It felt as though he was sucking air from her lungs. She tried to scream. *Rape*. The had sun vanished from the sky. *Darkness*. Suzanne struggled to free herself from the orange twine around her wrists, and feet. Something impeded her movement. Her eyes felt gritty. A damp earthy smell, a scraping noise. Realization hit her. *Buried alive*.

Suzanne woke with a start, tearing at her face, gulping in as much air as her lungs could hold. Sam took her hand. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t—I can’t breathe.”

It didn’t take Sam long to understand. “Jennifer Richmond’s body was found a half mile from the Kingsvale exit. The Goldorado County coroner determined her death as strangulation by suffocation. The Sheriff’s Department withheld news about her being buried. They didn’t share little details—like orange twine imbedded in her hands and

feet.” Sam paced once around the room and returned to Suzanne’s bedside. “An autopsy will reveal whether she was still alive when she was put in the ground.”

Suzanne winced. “She struggled.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I felt—” She gripped the side rails of her bed to steady her hands, she could still recall shovels of dirt filling the hole. “She was still alive.”