

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE*

Heather Gudenkauf

Little Lies

*The prequel
novella to
Little Mercies*



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In this riveting prequel to her novel Little Mercies, New York Times bestselling author Heather Gudenkauf explores how even the smallest lies can have far-reaching consequences

When the body of a woman is discovered in a local park—with her bewildered four-year-old son sitting beside her—veteran social worker Ellen Moore is called in to assist in the police investigation. Positioned beneath a statue of Leto, the goddess of motherhood, the crime is weighted with meaning and, Ellen discovers, remarkably similar to one from a decade past.

Ellen's professional duty is to protect the child, but she's not equipped to contend with a killer. As she races to connect the dots, she knows her time is running out. And the stakes are high: if she fails, another mother is sure to make the ultimate sacrifice.

LITTLE LIES

Heather Gudenkauf



Also by Heather Gudenkauf

The Weight of Silence

These Things Hidden

One Breath Away

Look for Heather's latest novel, *Little Mercies*, coming in July 2014!

Dedication

In memory of Kimbra Valenti

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I'm used to getting phone calls in the middle of the night, like firefighters, doctors and priests. But the calls I receive aren't to put out a blaze, perform an emergency C-section or administer last rites to the dying. When my phone rings at 2:00 a.m., I know it's regarding one of my children. Not my biological children, but those that I come to know in my work as a social worker with the Cedar City, Iowa, Department of Human Services.

The late-night calls mostly bring news of violent domestic disputes when a child needs to be removed from the home for his or her safety. They are depressingly similar and rarely have positive outcomes: a father on a drunken binge could mean cracked ribs and broken bones, unsupervised children with access to lighters equal third-degree burns, a marital spat can turn into a gunshot wound to the head or knife wounds. All leave the children traumatized from the horror they have witnessed and reeling from being torn from the life they have known, no matter how dysfunctional and damaging.

So I'm not surprised when my cell phone on my bedside table shrills loudly. Though I'm still half-asleep, my hand automatically grabs to answer it before it can ring again and wake Adam, who is next to me, or my three children, who are fast asleep down the hall. "Hello," I grunt into the phone.

"Ellen," comes a gruff voice from the other end. I push the sheets and blankets aside and swing my legs over the side of the bed.

"Joe?" I ask in confusion. It's not Caren Regis, my supervisor at DHS, but Joe Gaddey, a detective with the Cedar City Police Department and one of my best friends.

"Sorry to wake you up," he says. His voice is tense but not at all apologetic.

"What time is it?" I ask, squinting at the clock next to Adam's side of the bed, but I can't decipher the numbers.

"One-thirty. Listen, we've got a situation here at Singer." Singer is a four-acre green space punctuated with sculptures purchased and donated by

Medwyn Singer, a wealthy Cedar City businessman. Twenty unusual and striking sculptures of various sizes and subjects once populated the park, attracting families and tourists, but during the floods of '93 water covered 1,300 city blocks, and Singer was submerged at one point under twenty-three feet of water, destroying several of the sculptures and much of downtown Cedar City. Despite efforts to refurbish the park, Singer never returned to its earlier glory, now attracting more unsavory types than families.

“What’s going on?” Moving slowly, trying to stay as quiet as possible, I creep from my bedroom into the hallway, pausing to peek into first Leah’s then Lucas’s room. They are both sleeping soundly.

“We’ve got a DOA in the park. Beneath the statue of the lady with the two kids,” Joe says, and I freeze just outside Avery’s room. Just five months old, my youngest has yet to sleep through the night.

“The Leto?” I ask, though I know that sculpture well, better than I want to. I don’t want to know what Joe is going to say next, though the twist in my stomach tells me I already know what is coming.

“Yeah,” Joe says. “Can you come?”

“There’s a child.” It’s not a question. We’ve been here before.

“Yeah,” Joe says again. “Looks like he’s three or four. Doing fine, just really cold. And confused.”

“I’ll be right there,” I say, shivering. It’s January and Iowa winters are brutal. My maternity leave ended just eight weeks ago, I’ve barely adjusted to my old schedule, but here I am, back in the mire of my job. I want to crawl into bed next to my husband, absorb the warmth of his body, but instead I dress quietly and quickly. Before I leave I gently rouse Adam, tell him that I’m going to check on an abandoned child.

“Be careful,” he says sleepily before rolling over again.

“Will you listen for Avery?” I ask. He grunts in response and I take it for a yes. I pause outside Avery’s bedroom door, fighting the urge to open it and kiss her goodbye. Even though she’s my third I still marvel at her tiny fingers, the way her eyelashes fan out, casting shadows on her cheeks, the sweet plumpness of her lips, pursed as if deep in thought. Instead, I blow a silent kiss through the closed door. It wouldn’t be fair to wake her and then leave. Adam is just as exhausted as I am and has to rise at 6:00 a.m. in order to take the kids to school and day care before he begins his day as a high-

school history teacher and coach. It's basketball season and sometimes he doesn't get home from out-of-town trips until close to midnight.

In the dark, I zip up my winter parka, pull on a wool cap and gloves, and step out into the bitter late-January cold. Dirty snow covers lawns and is piled into jagged dunes where shovels and snowblowers tossed the results of the last snowstorm. My breath emerges ghostly white beneath the streetlamps as I unlock my van that is parked in our driveway and turn the heater to High. I grab an ice scraper. We have a one-car garage, and since Adam has been the one to take the kids to day care and school, I insisted that he park his truck in the garage, so it will be at least somewhat warm when they leave in the morning. I slide the scraper against the windshield; the frost peels away in icy curls. The only sounds are my breathing and the soft rasp of the scraper sliding across the window.

Singer Park is usually a fifteen-minute drive from my house, and though I'm anxious to get there and have so many questions for Joe, I force myself to drive slowly. The streets are cleared of snow, but still there are slippery spots and I don't want to end up plowing into a tree or telephone pole. Cedar City is a different place in the middle of the night. By day, the bustling city is the second largest in Iowa with a population of just under 200,000. Like all communities of this size there are neighborhoods that hold families of all sorts: the large brick homes of the affluent, the more modest middle-and working-class communities, and the neighborhoods lined with narrow row houses converted into low-income apartments. There are the stark commercial areas with factories, car dealerships, restaurants, even a few strip bars. But on this Wednesday morning the streets of Cedar City are all but deserted and my hometown, the town I grew up in, appears peaceful.

By the time I arrive at the entrance of Singer Park, twenty minutes later, the heater has finally warmed the interior of the van and I'm reluctant to step out into the frigid air. A young, nervous-looking police officer, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, approaches my van and I roll down the window.

"Park's closed, ma'am," he says. "You'll need to leave."

I fumble in my purse for my license. "Detective Gaddey called me. I'm Ellen Moore, the social worker." I hand him my identification and he examines it carefully from behind the glare of his flashlight.

“I’ll be right back,” he says and steps away from the van, and I quickly roll up the window, but all the warm air has been leached away. I watch as the officer speaks into his radio and I know he’s checking to see if I’m who I say I am. After a moment he jogs back to the van and once again I roll down the window. “You can drive on in,” he says, returning my license. “Drive right up to the next set of yellow crime tape and park. You can’t miss it.”

I follow his directions and within a minute I see what he was talking about. Six police cars are parked in a half circle, their headlights facing the eerily lifelike statue, a rendition of the goddess Leto.

I put the van into Park and open the door. A biting gust of wind tries to slam the door shut again, driving me back inside, but I return the favor with equal force and clamber outside before it can gather its breath again. Another officer asks for my identification and once again I explain who I am. She nods somberly. “The kid’s in the ambulance.” She points toward an area not illuminated by the headlights, and just to the right of the statue I see the emergency vehicle. I crane my neck, trying to find Joe, but there are about a half-dozen people bundled up in thick coats, hats pulled down low, scarves wrapped around necks, making it impossible to tell who is who. Their attention is focused at their feet, their chins identically lowered as if in prayer. But I know better—they aren’t praying. They are assessing, scrutinizing a crime scene.

As if being pulled by an invisible thread I numbly move toward the group of police officers. It’s not that I want to see the body—I don’t—but to best take care of the child waiting in the ambulance I need to find out all that I can about the person who died. I’ve seen my share of death. In fact, fourteen years ago, my very first case as a social worker involved a set of six-year-old twin boys, a five-year-old girl, their mother, their father and a baseball bat. Only one of the boys survived. Joe Gaddey was the officer positioned outside the front door of the home. When they brought out the body bags, he held me up when I nearly fainted, and we’ve been friends ever since.

A large shape steps away from the group and I recognize Joe. He is a big man in regular clothes, but dressed in a down coat, knee-high winter boots, a hat and gloves, he is downright massive. Standing well over six feet tall and weighing at least two hundred and fifty pounds, an angry Joe could

make even the toughest criminal shrink in fear. But his baby face and shy smile are disarming and indicative of his gentle disposition. He takes me by the elbow, deftly trying to lead me away from the crime scene, but it's too late. I see the body of a young woman who appears to be in her early twenties and I shiver at the inadequacy of her dress even though I know she is well beyond feeling the cold. She is wearing leggings and a short-sleeve white t-shirt, something I might wear to bed. Her feet are bare. She is lying on her back, her long dark hair is fanned out in stark contrast against the snow, her eyes are opened wide and unseeing, a look of curious consternation on her face as if her final thought was, *This wasn't what I was expecting at all*. There doesn't appear to be any blood or obvious wounds that would suggest a cause of death.

"Can't see it from here, but it looks like blunt force trauma to her head," Joe says as if reading my mind. He has this uncanny ability to know what I'm thinking before I can even utter a word. "Looks like she was killed somewhere else and dumped here."

"Do you know who she is?" I ask, unable to pull my eyes away from the woman's face. Her t-shirt is pulled up to just below her breasts and I want to go to her and pull it back down to cover the twinkling belly-button ring in her navel.

Joe shakes his head. The tip of his nose is bright red and frost is collecting on his newly grown goatee. "No ID. A call came into Dispatch saying that it looked like a woman and a kid needed help in the park."

"Who would be here in weather like this in the middle of the night?" Joe doesn't speak and I study his troubled face. "You think it was the person who killed her?" I ask, taking a step closer to him.

"Don't know for sure," Joe answers and touches me softly on the back and guides me toward the ambulance. "The whole thing is very strange."

"And familiar," I add.

"Maybe," Joe concedes. "The little boy found with her looks like he's around three years old. Like I said on the phone, he doesn't appear to be hurt, but the EMTs are checking him over before they take him to the hospital and have a doctor take a look at him and give him a thorough exam."

I look curiously up at Joe. Typically, the ambulance would be long gone by now. "Has he said anything yet?" I ask as Joe lightly raps his knuckles

on the back door of the ambulance.

“Nope, he’s a little freaked out right now, and understandably so.”

“Ahh, you were hoping that I would be able to wield my magical child-communicating powers and get the kid to tell me who the bad guy is, right?”

The ambulance door opens to reveal a small child wrapped in a warm quilt. Upon seeing Joe, the boy begins to wail in fright. “Like I said, he’s kind of freaked out. Every time one of us gets near him he starts to scream.”

“You are kind of intimidating,” I say as I lightly nudge him from the child’s view. “I think it’s your hat.”

“What’s wrong with my hat?” Joe asks as he pulls the fur-lined aviator hat from his head and examines it.

“It looks kind of like a wild animal sitting on your head. Now stay here for a minute and I’ll see if he can at least tell me his name.” I remove my own hat and hoist myself into the back of the ambulance and pull the door closed behind me where I find the boy’s howls have dimmed to a mournful sob. I reach into my coat pocket and dig around until I find what I’m looking for: a small unopened package of animal-shaped crackers. “Is it okay?” I ask the EMT, who nods permission.

“Physically he seems fine,” the EMT explains. “I’ll give you a few minutes and then we need to get him over to St. Raphael’s.” The EMT moves to the front of the ambulance and I sit on a gurney across from the little boy, who is curled up on the padded bench that runs the length of the ambulance. I know I need to tread lightly in my interactions with this boy. Whatever he’s been through tonight has been incredibly traumatic. There are only two ways this can go: I can make it a million times worse, or I can make it infinitesimally better.

I pull my mittens from my fingers, carefully open the bag of crackers and shake a few into my hand. Sad little hitches of breath come from the boy’s mouth as he eyes me suspiciously. Strangely, unlike his mother, if that’s who the dead woman is, the boy is dressed warmly in a navy blue winter coat, gray mittens made of wool, a matching hat and winter boots. It doesn’t make sense. I pop a cracker into my mouth and chew for a few moments before speaking. “My name is Ellen. What’s your name?” I make a point to not stare directly at him for fear of frightening him. “I have three children. My oldest is eight years old. Are you eight years old?” The boy thinks

about this for a moment and shakes his head no. "My son is five. I bet you're five," I say with confidence. "You look like you're five." Again he rotates his head in the negative. "Are you two?" He seems offended by this question and shakes his head with vehemence. "Of course you're way older than two. Are you four?" He nods shyly. "I have two daughters. One is named Leah and the other one is Avery. She's just a tiny baby. My son's name is Lucas. Can you tell me your name?" I try again. He is silent.

"I help boys and girls who are scared and sad." Again, no response. "You seem like you're a little bit sad."

The boy's lower lip quivers and fresh tears begin to fall as his eyes swing to the window of the ambulance. "Mommy," he says thickly.

"What's your mommy's name?" I keep my voice light, conversational. He gives no response.

"Is that your mommy outside?" I ask, trying not to sound too eager. "Is your mommy the lady with the brown hair? She's wearing a white shirt?" The boy swipes the back of his hand across his runny nose and nods. I smile encouragingly at him and tilt the bag of crackers toward him. "Want one?" He shakes his head no. Despite the frigid air outside, the back of the ambulance is warm and I unzip my parka. The little boy's cheeks are bright pink and slightly scaly, as if windburned. "Can you tell me your mommy's name?"

I can barely hear him speak; his voice is soft and thick from crying. I lean in more closely. "Mommy's hurt?" He looks pleadingly at me as if begging me to say no, that his mommy is going to be just fine.

"Yes," I say.

He lets out a long, tremulous breath and begins to weep again, his eyes screwing tightly shut as if trying to block out all that he must have seen tonight. I move to sit next to him, but before I'm even seated, he is in my arms. His arms, thin even within his heavy coat, wrap tightly around my neck as the ambulance sets off quietly without its sirens blaring, so as to not alert the local residents of the violence that has occurred just outside their doors. The journey to the hospital is a short one, but by the time we arrive, my neck is damp with his tears and he refuses to release his grasp on me. Awkwardly, I climb from the back of the ambulance, still holding the child. We are greeted with a polar blast of air and flashing lights. A lone photographer is snapping our picture. I wonder how the press could have

learned so quickly about this. “Keep your head down,” I whisper to the boy. “The wind is cold.” I do my best to keep his face covered as we move to the hospital’s emergency entrance.

After much cajoling and reassurance that I’m not going anywhere, the boy surrenders to the care of a nurse. I should be contacting the emergency foster care family who is poised to step in during extreme situations such as this, but I delay the inevitable. I promised the boy that I would be nearby while he was being checked over by a doctor and I will. Right now I’m the only friend he has in the world. Fatigue sweeps over me and I sink into an empty chair to wait.

* * *

I wake to the sound of a crying infant and for a moment I think it’s Avery. I gather my bearings and quickly realize I’m still at the hospital. A thin gray light barely penetrates the windows and I glance at my watch. 7:25 a.m. “He’s sleeping,” the same nurse who took the child when we arrived says, pointing to an examination room. I stand, stretch and peek into the room, and the boy is tucked beneath a white blanket and sleeping peacefully in a toddler-sized hospital crib.

“He’s okay?” I ask. “Did he tell you his name?”

“He’s not hurt,” the nurse assures me, “but he wouldn’t or couldn’t tell us anything about who he is and where he came from.”

“Well, certainly someone will come looking for him today,” I say with more conviction than I feel. “I have to make a few calls. Will you come get me if he wakes up?” The nurse nods and I move toward a window in hopes of better cell reception. First I call Caren Regis, my supervisor at DHS, and fill her in as to what is happening, then I try to get ahold of Joe to find out if the woman in the park has been identified, but his phone goes right to voice mail. Finally, I phone Martha Renner, the foster mother that I hope will take the boy in for the time being. She has often worked with children who have been through unthinkable experiences. I don’t know what our world would be like if we didn’t have such selfless women and men step in to be surrogate mothers and fathers for these children. In fact, she was the foster mother of a child who appears to have gone through the exact same situation as our little John Doe. Thirteen years ago.

I sense a presence behind me and turn to find Joe. He looks as spent as I feel. "Nice hair," he says as he hands me one of the two cups of coffee he is holding. My free hand flies to my head and I self-consciously run my fingers through the matted mess, wild after being stuffed inside a wool hat all night.

"Nice hat," I shoot back, nodding pointedly at his own head. "You look like a Russian hunter."

He shrugs good-naturedly. "Keeps my ears warm. How was the kid's night?"

"He's still sleeping. Martha Renner, his temporary foster care mother, will be here in a few minutes. Listen, we've got to talk about this. The more I think about the similarities to..."

Joe holds up a hand and looks around the hospital hallway, now filling with doctors and nurses. "Let's go somewhere a little more private."

"I promised I wouldn't go far in case the boy wakes up." I shake my head in disgust. "We can't go on calling him *the boy*. We need to find out his name, find out who he is."

"We will," Joe assures me. "Someone will come forward soon. He was obviously well cared for. Clean, dressed warmly. A husband, boyfriend to the woman will call us looking for her."

"Unless he was the one who murdered her."

Joe nods thoughtfully. "That's usually the case."

"But you don't think so in this one?" I ask, fearing his response. Together we return to the area just outside the room where the boy is sleeping and sit down.

"You tell me what you're thinking," Joe says. "And I'll play devil's advocate."

"How about, *you* tell me what *you're* thinking and I play the devil's advocate," I counter. "You always get to play Satan."

"Fair enough." Joe drinks deeply from his coffee cup before speaking. "Thirteen years ago, a homeless woman and her five-year-old son were found in Singer Park. The woman had been murdered and her body placed beneath a statue of a nearly naked woman."

"It's a statue of a Greek goddess," I clarify. "And she's not naked."

"A Greek goddess," he amends. "The woman was identified as Nell Sharpe and her son, Jonah, who was unharmed, was put into foster care."

The crime was never solved.”

“All true,” I agree.

“Thirteen years later, we find the body of an unidentified woman and her unhurt son in the same park, beneath the same statue.”

“A body is found in that park at least once a year. Granted most aren’t murders, but it has happened,” I say in my role as devil’s advocate.

“The victim from thirteen years ago died from blunt force trauma to the head. This victim appears to have died in a similar way.”

“Coincidence,” I counter.

“I hope so—something we’ll have to look into anyway,” Joe says, standing and stretching his large frame. “How’s Jonah doing now? He has to be, what, nineteen years old?”

“He’s eighteen, almost nineteen. Never was legally adopted by anyone. Kept coming back to live with Martha Renner when he got kicked out of other foster and group homes. Good kid at heart, but made some poor choices.”

A nurse in bright pink scrubs approaches us. “The little boy is just waking up now,” she says. “I’ll make sure he gets some breakfast.”

I thank her and as Joe and I go to the examination room I reach up and pluck the fur hat from his head. “No need to scare him first thing in the morning.”

The boy is curled up in a tight ball, his thumb in his mouth, eyes opening and closing slowly, still heavy with sleep. “Morning,” I say in a whisper and he scrambles to his feet, fingers clutching at the rails of the crib. I reach down and lift him from the bed. “Are you hungry?” He nods, his eyes fixed uncertainly on Joe. “This is Joe,” I tell him. “He’s a police officer. He helps people.”

“Nice to meet you,” Joe says, offering his large hand to shake. The boy reaches out, but instead of taking Joe’s hand he pulls at the hat Joe is holding in his other hand. He takes it into his arms and hugs it as if it was a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. I smile. Joe will never get his hat back.

Joe sighs, but decides to play along. “His name is Cujo.” I elbow Joe in the ribs. “And I bet he wants to know what your name is. Can you tell Cujo your name? You can say it into Cujo’s ear if you want,” Joe suggests.

The boy holds the hat away from him as if trying to locate its ear. He presses his lips into one of the ear flaps and says softly, “Mason.”

I look with surprise at Joe. It worked. Just knowing the boy's first name is crucial in being able to find out who the woman in the park was, to finding Mason's next of kin. Joe smiles smugly.

An hour later Mason has eaten breakfast, Joe has left and Martha Renner has arrived. I do my best to explain that Martha is there to help him and that he gets to go to her house and play with some other nice children. Mason looks heartbroken. These transitions are never easy, even for me, a seasoned social worker who has made these handoffs time after time.

"How's Jonah doing these days?" I ask Martha as she straps Mason into the car seat of her SUV.

She shakes her head sadly. "Not great. Didn't end up graduating from high school last year, though I'm constantly telling him to go and get his GED. He works on and off for a construction company. Lives with a group of guys over on Laurel Street."

"Will you tell him I said hi?" I poke my head into the backseat of the car. "See you later, Mason. I promise."

He nods gravely and grasps Cujo.

Once they drive away I realize that I left my car back at Singer Park, having ridden with Mason in the ambulance to the hospital. Adam's in class teaching by now, but I send him a text telling him all is well and I'll be able to pick up the kids from school and day care. I consider my options for getting back to the park. Singer is three miles away—I can walk or I can call Joe and see if he is able to come and pick me up. Walking the three miles in the brutal cold sounds too daunting, so a little reluctantly I call Joe. Though I consider Joe one of my best friends, sometimes I think he wishes we could be more. His divorce came as a blow, his wife of ten years leaving him for their accountant, and he's never quite recovered. I know he's lonely and he often tells me that Adam and I have it all: a strong marriage, beautiful kids, a home, a perfect life. I encourage him to get out more often, have even tried to set him up with another social worker from the department and an algebra teacher from Adam's high school, but it doesn't seem to work out.

"Hey," I say when he answers, "I'm stranded at the hospital and was hoping you could give me a ride back to the park so I can get my car."

"I think I can manage that," he says, "but you're going to owe me."

I laugh. "Okay, I'll run into the café across the street and get you a coffee."

"Thanks, but not what I had in mind. I'll explain when I see you. Be there in fifteen minutes."

I thank him, puzzled at what I could possibly do to help him out. I zip up my coat and pull my hat over my ears and step outside. The sky is gray and the morning air is cold and pricks sharply at my lungs when I inhale. I cross a busy intersection and dash into a café and order a large black coffee for Joe, a hot chocolate for myself and two blueberry muffins. By the time my order is ready, Joe has pulled up to the curb. I pick my way across the icy street, carefully balancing the two steaming cups and bag of muffins, and climb in the passenger side of his car.

"Did Mason get off okay?" Joe asks, relieving me of the coffee and bag of muffins.

"Yeah, he's pretty dazed, but Martha is a pro. She'll get him settled in. No one has come forward about a missing woman and child?"

"No, but I got a guy working on digging into local birth records trying to find documentation of a little boy born four years ago with the first name of Mason."

"That could take some time," I say, taking a cautious sip of my cocoa.

"Not as much time as you'd think. Everything is computerized now. Just have to enter the name into the system and it sorts all the info."

"Unless Mason wasn't born in the county," I remind him. Joe tips his head in concession. "Now to the favor you need."

"I'm not ready to collect yet," Joe says cryptically. "I want to check into things a little more before I start barking up that tree."

"What tree is that?" I press as Joe pulls next to my van and parks.

Joe turns in his seat and regards me thoughtfully. "I shouldn't have said anything yet. It's just a hunch I have. Let me do some more digging and then I may need to ask for your help."

Something about the rigid set of his jaw and the weariness in his eyes causes me not to push further. "Okay," I say, patting him on the arm.

"Thanks for the ride. Will you call me if you find out anything more about the woman's identity or Mason's next of kin?" He agrees and I step out of the car and slide quickly into my van, where I turn the ignition and twist the knob controlling the heat to High. Joe waits until the ice that has collected

on my windshield melts away, and when I raise my hand indicating that I'm ready to go, he pulls away.

I have every intention of following Joe out of the park, but something keeps me there. It is deserted. All the emergency vehicles and personnel from the night before are long gone and all that remains is a scrap of crime scene tape tangled within a bush, a ragged yellow ribbon rising and falling with each gust of wind.

With the van idling, I leave the warm interior and step back into the icy air. I approach the marble sculpture, the same mottled white as the snow at its feet, and look up at her serene face. I don't know much about the figure carved expertly in the stone, but from the placard affixed to the base, scoured by years of exposure to the elements, and nearly illegible, I confirm the artist fashioned her after a Greek goddess by the name of Leto. Here Leto stands nearly ten feet tall, her lovely face cast downward at the two children who are at her feet. Somehow the sculptor was able to etch her face into an expression of pure adoration. The children are looking up at their mother in rapt attention as if Leto was whispering the secrets of the universe to them. I wish the mothers that I worked with could look at their children that way more often—as if there is nothing more precious in this world. It's not that they don't love their kids—I know they do—but something has distracted them; a boyfriend, alcohol, drugs or life has hardened them so that they aren't capable of expressing that kind of love. I don't know. Suddenly, even in daylight, the park emits a ghostly aura. There is no sound except for the bray of the wind.

Two women found murdered, thirteen years apart, in the same park and beneath the same statue, each with an unharmed child found at her side. My teeth begin to chatter and not just because of the cold. It could be a strange coincidence, but I don't think so.

I feel the weight of someone's eyes on me and I glance around. In the distance, beneath a cluster of shagbark hickory trees, stands a lone figure dressed in a baggy sweatshirt, the hood pulled up over his head. Male, I think, but that's all I can tell. His face is concealed within the shadows of the trees. My heart thumps with fear and I scurry back to the safety of the van and lock the doors. I quickly drive away as the man darts into the woods.

By the time I have collected Avery from the sitter's and turned onto my street, my nerves have steadied and I have convinced myself that it was just a curious gawker. No murderer would be stupid enough to return to the scene of the crime, I assure myself, but I make a mental note to tell Joe about the encounter.

I nurse Avery, admiring the tininess of her, the way she stretches languorously, her small fists waving like soft pink tulips bobbing in the wind. She is so beautiful and I know from experience how quickly they grow up. I long to keep looking at her, but a sudden lethargy overtakes me I lay Avery in her crib, set my alarm for 3:00 p.m. so I can pick up Leah and Lucas from school, and climb into my own bed.

Try as I might, I'm not able to fall asleep. Images of the women lying lifeless beneath the statue in the park keep invading my thoughts. Two women in thirteen years. How could it be a mere coincidence?

* * *

Thirteen years ago, on the day I met Jonah, I had received the initial call from the responding officer about a deceased woman and her child being found in the sculpture park. The first question I asked after being assured the boy wasn't hurt was if they knew the little boy's name.

"The woman has no wallet, no identification on her, just a backpack with a few clothes. Kid's not talking. Probably transient. She's a nobody, so's the kid," the officer said blithely. "When can you get here?"

I had to bite back the scathing response I longed to give the callous officer, but I learned, even that early on in my career, that I had to pick my battles. A time would come when I would need this officer's help and it was best not to anger him. "Well, someone must know who he is," I said instead. "I'll be there in twenty minutes." When I arrived, the scene was unnervingly similar to the one I witnessed early this morning. Though it took some time, the boy eventually told us his full name and as much as he could about his mother. Jonah Sharpe was five years old and his mother's name was Nell. They had only just arrived in Cedar City a few days before. He was able to tell us that he came from a town called Franklin. At first we were hopeful. There was a Franklin, Iowa, in far southeastern Iowa, but there was no record of a Nell and Jonah Sharpe. We quickly learned that

there were at least twenty-five towns named Franklin in the United States. Finally, we uncovered several arrest records from across the Midwest involving Nell. Public intoxication, drug possession, child neglect. No next of kin was ever found and Nell was buried in a Cedar City graveyard, her funeral and gravestone paid for by a local women's group. Jonah entered foster care and never found his way out.

* * *

Giving up on sleep, I throw the covers back and pad down to the kitchen. I still have an hour before I need to pick the kids up from school. I pull a mug from the cupboard and put water on the stove for tea. While I wait for the water to boil I retrieve my laptop from my briefcase and turn it on. First, I look up *Nell Sharpe* on Google and three links to articles from our local newspaper pop up. I click on the top one and a news article from the morning after the homicide appears along with a picture of the crime scene. It's a photograph of a small, bewildered-looking boy clutching the hand of an equally shaken-looking young social worker. Me. The accompanying article surmises that the murder was most likely a drug deal or a robbery gone bad. I always had my doubts. Jonah couldn't or wouldn't recount any details for us. He just knew that his mother was dead and was never coming back.

I know that this morning's paper won't have any information regarding the most recent murder, but sometimes the online version of the *Cedar City Courier* reports up-to-date breaking news. After a few clicks all I can find is a brief report of a deceased individual found in Singer Park. There is no mention of homicide or of a little boy. The whistle from the teakettle rouses me from my thoughts and I turn off the stove, pour the boiling water into a mug and absentmindedly drag a tea bag through the bubbling liquid. I take the mug and a plate of crackers that I've slathered with peanut butter over to the living room couch and turn on the television, alternating between taking sips of tea and bites of crackers, while watching for any updates on the murder on the local TV station.

The landline phone rings and I frantically leap from the couch and look at the clock, fearing that I have lost track of time and forgotten to pick up

Leah and Lucas from school. Two forty-five. I breathe a sigh of relief; I still have fifteen minutes before the dismissal bell rings.

“Hello,” I say, answering the phone.

“You’re home,” Adam says.

“I’m home,” I say, warmed by the familiar sound of my husband’s voice.

“You must be tired,” he empathizes. “I’ll be home by six. I promise.”

We say goodbye and I trudge up the stairs to get Avery. I hate the thought of dragging her back out into this cold, but this, unfortunately, is the life of a third child. They get carted around everywhere, naptime and bedtime schedules are wishful thinking, and pacifiers aren’t disinfected after they are dropped onto the floor, but are unceremoniously popped back into the third child’s mouth. She is gurgling happily in her crib when I open her bedroom door. I change Avery’s diaper, make sure that her leggings and long-sleeve t-shirt are covering any exposed skin, pull her hat over her ears, fasten her into the car seat and tuck a warm blanket beneath her chin.

Leah and Lucas’s elementary school is only six blocks from our house, but I’m not comfortable letting them make the ten-minute walk home by themselves yet. It’s silly, I know. There’s a large group of children who make the trek homeward through the neighborhood, but Leah is only in third grade and Lucas is in kindergarten. I know better than anyone about the bad things that can happen to children.

* * *

Revitalized by eight hours of sleep, interrupted only once to feed a hungry Avery, I’m in my office at the Department of Human Services reviewing my notes for a termination of a parental rights case that I have to testify in later in the day. I do my best to try and help keep families together, but once in a while there is no redemption for the negligent, sometimes evil actions of parents and they lose their children forever.

There’s a soft tap on my office door and I look up to find Joe accompanied by a woman of about fifty, with swollen red eyes and a tear-stained face, diminutive within the folds of a quilted, plum-colored ankle-length coat. “Morning, Ellen, this is Judith Newkirk. Ms. Newkirk, this is Ellen Moore, the social worker I was telling you about.”

“Please, call me Judith.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say as I extend my hand to Judith. Her fingers are thin and cold. She offers me a brittle smile though I can tell she is fighting back tears.

“Please sit down.” I indicate the two battered chairs that I managed to fit into my narrow office. “How can I help you?” I ask once they are seated.

“Ms. Newkirk called the police department this morning saying that she hasn’t spoken to her daughter Marissa Newkirk and her grandson Mason since Monday afternoon around one o’clock.” My mouth goes dry and I look to Joe for help. Joe clears his throat, “Ms. Newkirk confirmed that Marissa was the woman found at Singer.” A strangled moan comes from Judith.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, instinctively reaching for her hand. Two large tears fall from her lowered face and plop wetly onto my knuckles.

After a few moments, Judith is able to compose herself and fumbles in her purse, pulling out a battered wallet. With shaking fingers she retrieves a photograph from within a protective plastic sleeve and hands it to me. “Can you take me to him?” she asks hoarsely. I look down at the picture. It’s Mason and his mother. Marissa. She finally has a name. They are both grinning happily into the camera. Again, I look to Joe, seeking confirmation that he is sure this woman is Marissa’s mother, Mason’s grandmother. Almost imperceptibly he nods in the affirmative.

“Of course,” I tell her. “Of course, we’ll bring him to you right away.” I escort Judith to a private conference room and explain that after filling out some paperwork we will reunite her with her grandson.

Joe and I return to my office and I shut the door. “I can’t believe you found next of kin so quickly.”

Joe rubs a large hand over his face. “Actually, she found us. We had no luck in searching the county database for birth records for a male child named Mason born four years ago. Originally, Marissa is from Sioux City—that’s where her mother still lives.”

“Sioux City?” I ask in surprise. “That’s about a five-hour drive from here. How did she get here so quickly?” I check my watch; it’s only nine-thirty.

“When she couldn’t contact Marissa, she started driving. Said she got to the apartment and no one answered, so she came right over to the police station.”

“She identified Marissa then?” Joe nods grimly. “I don’t think I can fathom anything more horrible for a mother to have to do.” I think of my own children and quickly sweep the thought aside. “What about Mason’s father? Is he in the picture?”

Joe wriggles out of his winter coat and folds it over the back of his chair before sitting down. “Once Ms. Newkirk identified her daughter’s body, we were able to locate a copy of Mason’s birth certificate. No father is listed.”

“So Judith is the next of kin.” I think of Jonah Sharpe and his winding road through the foster care system. Waiting, hoping for a family to adopt him. It never happened. “Thank God she came forward. At least Mason will have his grandmother to take care of him.”

I dial Martha Renner, explain the situation and ask her if she is able to bring Mason to the office.

“And now that we know who Marissa is, hopefully we’ll be able to get a better idea of who could have done this to her,” Joe says after I hang up the phone. “We’ve got Forensics over at her apartment and some guys canvassing the neighborhood asking questions.” Joe stands, stretches his arms over his head and yawns.

“Have you gotten any sleep at all?” I scold.

“I’ll go home in a while.” He pauses before opening my office door. “We need to try and talk to Mason again about what he might have seen or heard the other night. Right now he’s the only witness we have to the murder of his mother.”

“He’s only four,” I remind him. “And traumatized. He may not be able to tell you anything helpful.”

“We’ve got to try.” Joe hesitates. “Mason really seems to trust you. Do you think you could be the one to interview him?”

“I can try,” I agree.

We make our way through the narrow hallway toward the conference room where Mrs. Newkirk is waiting. “Yesterday, when you dropped me off at the park to get my van, I saw someone.”

Joe whirls around, his eyebrows raised in concern. “What did you see? What did he look like?”

“I s-saw him just for a second,” I stammer. “I’m almost positive he was male. He was standing under some trees. We saw each other and we both started running.”

“Running?” Joe asks. “When I left, you were sitting in your van.”

“I got out just for a second,” I say in a small voice. “I wanted to look at the statue.” Joe is quiet; his stormy expression says it all. “I just can’t get past the thought that two mothers with small children were found dead beneath the same statue that happens to be a statue of a mother with two children sitting at her feet.”

“You got out of your van, all by yourself, at the scene where a woman who was brutally murdered was found?” Joe stuffs his hands in his pockets and paces the hallway angrily. “Are you crazy? There’s a murderer out there.”

“I was perfectly safe,” I protest. “Whoever it was was just as afraid of me as I was of him.”

“Exactly.” Joe’s voice raises an octave and he forces it down to a low undertone. “Now the possible killer knows what you look like, what kind of car you drive. Worst of all, he knows that you saw him at the scene of the crime and could identify him.”

I don’t know how to respond. Joe is absolutely right—it was a stupid thing to do. I should apologize, but instead I raise my chin in false confidence and open the door to the conference room where Judith is waiting. “Mason will be here shortly, Judith. Can I get you anything while you wait?”

* * *

An hour later Martha and a dazed Mason, holding Joe’s repurposed hat under his arm, step into the conference room. His eyes scan the unfamiliar room and then land on his grandmother, who is waiting with hands clenched together in expectation. “Grandma!” he shouts joyfully as he shakes his hand free from Martha’s and runs to Judith’s now open arms.

“Mason, Mason,” she cries and with great effort pulls him up into her thin arms. “Thank God you’re okay,” she whispers tearfully as she buries her face in his dark hair.

“We’ll give you two a minute,” I say and lead Joe and Martha from the room.

“Happy ending,” Martha says once we are in the hallway.

“Yes,” I agree. “We’ll take those whenever we can.”

We are all silent with our own thoughts for a moment until Joe says abruptly, “Martha, tell me about Jonah Sharpe.” I look at Joe nonplussed, but he continues. “When’s the last time you saw him?”

“Let me think,” she says, tapping her chin trying to remember. “It was two weeks ago. He stopped by the house for dinner. He does that once in a while.” Now her brow furrows in concern, “Why, is he in some kind of trouble? Both you and Ellen have asked me about Jonah. Do you think the murder of Jonah’s mother and Mason’s are connected?”

I’m about to explain the similarities between the murder case involving Jonah’s mother’s murder and the current one, but Joe gives me a warning look. “Just wondering,” he says casually. “His name comes up once in a while. Where’s he living now?”

“Down on Laurel Street, last I knew.” Martha peeks in the window of the conference room. “Do you mind if I go and say goodbye to Mason? Sweet little guy.”

“Go right ahead,” I tell her. “Thanks again for helping out in a pinch. You’re the best.”

When Martha steps back into the conference room I turn on Joe. “What was that all about?”

Joe falters before speaking. “Jonah Sharpe lives right next door to Marissa Newkirk’s apartment and just three blocks from Singer Park.”

I am rattled by this news. Not that I believe that Jonah has anything to do with Marissa’s death, but that he would, under the circumstances, knowingly choose to live just a few blocks from where his mother’s body was discovered. “That doesn’t prove he was involved,” I sputter angrily. While I can’t say that I know Jonah well anymore, there was a time when we spoke a few times a week when I was his case manager. “He’s had some problems, but Jonah isn’t a bad kid. If your mother were murdered and you were left an orphan you’d probably have some anger issues, too.”

Joe holds up a placating hand. “I’m not saying that he killed anyone, Ellen. I’m just saying we have to be thorough.”

“Ahh, your hunch,” I say, remembering the favor he has reserved for me for giving me a ride to my van yesterday. “What do you want me to do?”

“What I don’t want is to scare Jonah off. All I want to do is talk to him.”

“And you want me to set that meeting up.” Joe looks at me expectantly. “No way.” I fold my arms across my chest defiantly. “Jonah has been

dumped on his entire life. I'm not going to violate his trust by setting up a meeting with the cops under false pretenses."

"Whoa," Joe says indignantly, "I'm not asking you to mislead him or lie."

"I won't do it, Joe," I say. "I won't."

"Okay, okay, I get it," Joe says, throwing up his hands in defeat. "Will you still talk to Mason before his grandmother takes him back to Sioux City?"

"Of course," I say in a low voice. I know Joe is just trying to do his job. Trying to find out who killed Mason's mother.

When we enter the conference room, Martha is saying her final goodbyes and patting Mason on the head. "You take care, kiddo."

After she leaves, I turn to Judith. "With your permission, I'd like to ask Mason a few questions about the other night."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" She glances down with concern at Mason, who is sitting on the floor sifting through a bin of toys we keep expressly for these purposes, Cujo close at his side.

"It could be very helpful in finding out who did this to Marissa," Joe says.

"He's just a little boy, I can't imagine that he'd be able to tell you anything, but if you think it might help," Judith says uncertainly, "I guess it's okay."

I lower myself to the floor next to Mason. "Hi," I say. "Can I play with you?"

Immersed in his play, Mason continues to run the wheels of the bright red sports car he is holding across the carpet. I reach into the bin and pull out a small toy ambulance. "Mason, remember the other night when we rode in the ambulance together?" He pauses in his play for a second, then moves his car in the opposite direction, making soft engine noises, turning his back to me. I stay where I am, keeping my voice soothing and low. "Do you remember what you had for supper that night? Before you were at the park?"

Mason stops and turns to look at me. "Mac and cheese and Kool-Aid."

Mrs. Newkirk makes a clucking noise. "I swear those two eat junk food every night." I think back to the frozen fish sticks I threw into the oven last night for my family and inwardly cringe.

“So you had mac and cheese and Kool-Aid. Then what did you do?”

Mason stops and thinks. “Then it was time for bed.”

“Okay.” I gradually scoot a little closer to him. “You ate mac and cheese, then you got ready for bed. Then what happened?”

A shadow crosses Mason’s face. “I think that might be enough,” Mrs. Newkirk begins to interrupt, but then Mason speaks.

“I heard my mommy crying, so I got out of bed.” Mason’s lower lip quivers. “It was dark.”

“Was someone making your mommy cry?” I ask.

“I really think...” Mrs. Newkirk says, but Joe holds up a finger to silence her.

Mason nods. “Did you see who it was?” I ask breathlessly. Mason shakes his head no. “Did the person hurt your mommy?” Mason looks confused.

“Did you see the person hurt your mommy?”

He shakes his head in the negative. “Medicine.”

“Medicine?” Now it’s my turn to be confounded. “Were you sick, Mason?”

“Gave me medicine and told me to go back to bed.”

“Who gave you the medicine, Mason?” I ask. “Did your mommy give you the medicine?”

He nods. “Then she left and I got sleepy.”

“Your mommy and the person who was making her cry left together?” Again, Mason shakes his head no.

I turn to Joe. “Maybe Marissa was talking on the phone to someone.” I return my attention to Mason and ask, “Do you remember who put your hat and coat on you? Do you remember who took you to the park?” No response. “Mason, at the park, do you remember someone hurting your mom? Do you remember seeing anything?” Mason squinches his face in concentration, trying to remember.

“Black boots,” he finally says. “Furry.”

“The person was wearing black boots with fur on them?” Mason nods.

“With a belt,” he adds.

“A belt?” I repeat. “Like the one I’m wearing?” I point to the belt wrapped around my waist. Mason shakes his head no. Understanding dawns on me. “Did the boots have a buckle on them? Can you show me where?”

Mason points to his ankle. “Did you see anything else? Did you see their face?”

Mason shakes his head and begins to sift through the toy bin again, determined not to answer any more questions and make the interrogation end.

I shrug my shoulders in defeat. “I’m sorry, Joe. I don’t know how helpful I’ve been.”

“Every bit of information is helpful.” Joe pats me on the shoulder reassuringly.

“Are we free to leave? Are we finished here?” Mrs. Newkirk asks.

Joe looks to me and I nod. “As far as DHS is concerned, you’re Mason’s next of kin and have custody of him.”

“We may have some follow-up questions for you. I have your number—we’ll be sure to keep you up-to-date on the investigation.”

Mrs. Newkirk rubs at her eyes. “I still need to clean out Marissa’s apartment, pack up her things.”

“I’ll double-check with the crime scene techs,” Joe says kindly. “Since, as next of kin, you gave them permission to enter the apartment, they’ll be able to get in, gather what they need in a matter of a few hours and get out. As long as there is no evidence that the crime was committed in the apartment you should be able to get in as soon as tomorrow.”

“And I’m sure that the landlord will work with you, give you all the time you need to get Marissa’s things together,” I reassure her.

“No.” She shakes her head tearfully. “It’s best to get it over with. Mason and I will stay at a hotel and I’ll clean it out tomorrow. We’ll head back to Sioux City as soon as we can.”

* * *

Together, Joe and I walk to our cars. I’m on my way to testify in the court case and Joe is heading back to the police station. “Are you thinking that whoever called Marissa told her to meet them in the park?”

“That makes sense, but why would she leave without her shoes and coat?” Joe adds. I had forgotten about that detail.

“And why would she give Mason medicine to make him sleepy and then take him out into the bitter cold? She must have not wanted Mason to be

able to know where they were going and who they were meeting.”

“Listen,” Joe says once we reach my van. “Can you meet later so we can talk more about this? I can’t help coming back to the possibility that Nell Sharpe’s and Marissa’s murders are connected in some way.”

“Sure. Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? See Adam and the kids?”

“You know I love seeing your family, but Marissa’s autopsy was scheduled for this morning and I’m going to meet with the medical examiner about her findings. I don’t think that would be good dinner conversation for Leah and Lucas.”

“I’ll check with Adam, but it should be fine. Where do you want to meet?” I ask. Before Joe heads to his appointment with the medical examiner and I make my way to the courthouse for the parental rights hearing, we agree to meet at the Blue Moon Café on Dodge Street at six.

* * *

As always, the termination of a parental rights hearing is brutal, but all too familiar. My only hope is that the two siblings will be placed in the same foster home and eventually adopted into the same family. I swing by the elementary school to pick up Leah and Lucas, who alternately chatter happily and grump noisily about their day on the way to get Avery from the babysitter’s. Once home, I put some baby carrots in a plastic bowl and pour glasses of milk for Lucas and Leah, and while I settle on the couch to feed Avery, I call Adam, hoping to catch him before basketball practice starts. He picks up on the first ring.

“Hi,” I say. “What time is practice done today?”

“Practice? El, we have a game. I’m on the bus on my way to Waterloo. We won’t be back until midnight.”

“Right,” I say apologetically. “I forgot. I just have some work stuff that came up. I’ll call my mom and see if she can come over.”

We hang up and before I can analyze why I didn’t tell Adam that the work stuff that had come up included Joe, I call my mother who is happy to come over and babysit. My father recently passed away and my mother has been struggling a bit. A pang of guilt comes over me. Sometimes it gets so

busy we don't see or talk to each other for days, so it will be good to set eyes on her.

* * *

While waiting for my mother to arrive, Leah and Lucas work on their homework at the kitchen table and I sit at the computer holding Avery and do some internet searches. The first thing I search for on Google is *Leto*, the goddess in whose image the sculpture from the park is made. I learn that Leto is the goddess of motherhood and the protector of the young. She was bride of Zeus, and the mother of the twin gods Apollo and Artemis. She was also known as a goddess of modesty. Thirteen years ago, as a new social worker, I missed these details, not making the connection between Leto, mothers and Nell Sharpe. I read further and learn that Leto was pursued by many: the jealous wife of Zeus, giants and other monsters. Leto's two children, Apollo and Artemis, were skilled hunters and often came to their mother's rescue. *Interesting*, I think, as I rub Avery's back in small circles. Beneath the goddess of motherhood two mothers are found dead. Murdered. How could that be a coincidence? A serial killer fixated on mothers? My body gives an involuntary shudder and the sudden movement causes Avery to squawk in dismay. "Shh," I say. "It's okay." Is it really considered a serial killing if the cases are thirteen years apart? Maybe there weren't only two cases. With one hand I awkwardly plink at the keyboard: *Cedar City, Singer Park, murders*. Instantly, hundreds of results pop up. I start to scroll through them, but quickly give up. There are too many. I can't believe that our Cedar City had that many murders, but quickly find my mistake. There is certainly more than one Cedar City in the United States and more than likely more than one Singer Park. I amend my search to *Cedar City, Iowa, Medwyn Singer Park, murder* and for good measure I add *Leto*.

Only two links appear. A story recounting the murder of Nell Sharpe and this morning's newspaper article about Marissa Newkirk.

The doorbell rings and both Leah and Lucas scramble to get to the door first. "Grandma!" they shout and Avery's arms flail in fright at the sudden sound.

“Poor Avery,” I whisper into my daughter’s ear. “How are you going to survive these wild animals?”

“Mom, thanks for coming,” I say, leaning in for a hug made awkward from the bags hanging from her wrists and the casserole dish in her hands. I give a silent prayer of gratitude that my mother brought food. All we have in the house is a frozen pizza, leftover fish sticks and a few boxes of macaroni and cheese.

After giving Leah and Lucas long hugs she turns to me. “Here, let’s trade,” she says, and somehow I safely hand Avery to her and end up with the tater-tot casserole, fresh fruit and chocolate cake in my arms.

I show my mother where I keep Avery’s bottles and diapers and she shoos me away. “Go have fun,” she tells me.

“It’s not fun, Mom,” I remind her. “It’s work.”

“I know, I know, then go and let me have fun,” she orders.

I thank her again and as I pull on my coat I pause in front of the computer. With one finger, I delete one word from my earlier search. One additional news story pops up. I lean in close and click on the link. *Got it*, I think as I scan the article and scrawl a few key details down on a scrap of paper. A third woman.

Joe is already at the Blue Moon when I arrive. He waves me over from the table in the far back corner and stands to help me off with my coat. He is freshly showered, his hair still damp, and is dressed casually in jeans and a sweater. He still looks exhausted and I’m certain he hasn’t slept more than a few hours in the last forty-eight.

The waitress comes to take our drink order. Joe orders a beer and though I vowed to have only a soda, when the waitress arrives with Joe’s beer and a frosty mug I ask for one, too. After we order our food, and Joe asks after the kids and Adam, and I ask about his black lab, Hawkeye, Joe pulls out two thin files.

“Do you want to talk about this before or after we eat?” he asks. I know exactly what he is referring to. Marissa Newkirk’s autopsy.

“Let’s do it,” I say gamely though my stomach flips over.

“This is Nell Sharpe’s autopsy from thirteen years ago,” Joe says, handing me the first file. I open it and on top is the medical examiner’s report.

The body is that of a normally developed Caucasian female measuring 67 inches and weighing 118 pounds, and appearing generally consistent with estimated age of twenty years. The body is cold and unembalmed. Lividity is fixed in the distal portions of the limbs. The eyes are open. Time of Death: Body temperature, rigor and livor mortis, and stomach contents approximate the time of death between 10:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m.

Immediate Cause of Death: Blunt force trauma. Manner of Death: Homicide.

Beneath the report are several photos, each showing Nell in death in various angles. In some of the photos she just appears to be sleeping, in others the brutality cannot be missed. She was so young.

I rearrange the photos back into the file and reach my hand for the second. Marissa's. Joe sits quietly sipping his beer while I read. It doesn't take me long. "They read almost exactly the same," I say, reaching for my own drink. "All you'd have to do is change the victim's name and the date and we could be reading the same autopsy."

"It is kind of bizarre," Joe agrees.

"I know, but thirteen years apart? What did Marissa Newkirk have in common with Nell Sharpe? She was, what, six or seven years old when the first murder occurred?"

The waitress brings our burgers and fries and Joe quickly sweeps the autopsy files and photos aside. "I did a little digging myself," I tell him as I squeeze ketchup onto my plate. "Nothing dangerous," I assure him. "Just an internet search." I explain the meaning behind the sculpture of Leto. "The statue obviously has some meaning in all of this. Leto is the goddess of motherhood and two women with children are killed and placed at her feet."

"Could be," Joe says. "Nell and Marissa have more in common than we thought. I looked more closely into Marissa's past and it's not all butterflies and sunshine."

"What do you mean? Marissa's mother didn't mention any problems."

"Moms are pretty protective," Joe says. "Plus, she's really broken up about Marissa's death. She probably only wants to think about the good side of her daughter. According to the detective I talked to in Sioux City,

Marissa was a party girl. Was arrested for underage drinking four times, possession of marijuana two times and shoplifting three times. Got pregnant with Mason when she was sixteen, dropped out of high school, would stay with her mom, they'd clash, she'd run away, then go back home. Finally, about a year and a half ago, when she was nineteen, she got her act together, got her GED and moved here to go to the community college."

"Has she been arrested in Cedar City for anything?" I ask curiously.

"No, record is clean as a whistle. She's worked at Philomena's, the gift shop near the courthouse for fifteen months, has been enrolled at the college for the past year."

"So both victims, by all accounts, have had a troubled past." I push away my plate, suddenly no longer hungry. "Nell was a homeless drifter and, according to the autopsy, a heavy drinker and drug user and Marissa was a runaway who dabbled in alcohol and drugs. Both had children whose fathers weren't in the picture."

"So maybe the killer has a thing against bad mothers," Joe suggests.

I reach into my purse and pull out the piece of paper with the results of my internet search scribbled messily across it and hand it to Joe.

"Devin Fallon," he reads out loud. "Who's this?"

I lean forward, elbows on the table. "Devin Fallon was found murdered in Singer Park five years ago."

"Yeah, but what makes you think it's connected to these other two murders? I checked. No other women were found dead beneath the statue. And no other women were found dead with their toddler sitting next to them."

"True," I say. "But what if the killer got interrupted? What if something happened and he couldn't finish the job properly? Nell and Marissa were killed somewhere else than where they were found, right?" Joe nods. "What if someone surprised the murderer and he had to leave Devin somewhere else? In this case at the south entrance of the park. Maybe he panicked and dumped her there."

"Okay," Joe says skeptically, "But there was no kid left at the scene. How do you explain that? I'm just not seeing a tight connection."

"One, according to this article Devin had a history of drug and alcohol abuse and was homeless." I hold up one finger. "Two, Devin was killed by a

blow to the head. Three, she was found in the park, somewhat near the statue.”

“Yes, but what about the lack of a child? That’s a huge detail.”

“Four,” I say, wagging my fingers at him, “Devin Fallon was seven months pregnant when she was killed.”

We spend the next hour discussing possible suspects. Joe suggests a deranged man who either loved or hated his mother too much. I offer the possibility of someone in the business of caring for children: a doctor or nurse, a social worker even. Someone who would be disgusted with a mother who raises a child amid homelessness, drugs and alcohol. Finally, Joe broaches the subject I know he’s been avoiding all night, but the true reason he wanted to talk: Jonah Sharpe.

“Jonah Sharpe has suddenly disappeared,” Joe says.

“What do you mean, disappeared?” I ask.

“I mean he’s nowhere to be found. We went to his work site and then to his apartment this afternoon. His boss said he hasn’t been to work in two days and his roommates said he just packed up his stuff and up and left early yesterday.”

“Maybe, he’s just gone on a trip. It doesn’t mean he ran away.” Joe doesn’t say anything. “What?” I ask testily. “You think that a kid who lost his mother the way that Jonah did would suddenly start killing women in the same manner? That’s really grasping at straws.”

“We showed the roommates a picture of Marissa. They knew her. *Jonah* knew her. She’d been to their apartment before.”

My heart starts pounding so hard I can hear it thrumming in my ears. It couldn’t be Jonah. It couldn’t be the sweet, lost little boy who drew me pictures for my office. Not the poor boy that was so hopeful in finding a family that would adopt him only to have his hopes dashed time and time again. “I don’t believe it,” I say with conviction. “Besides, what about Devin Fallon? Jonah would have only been thirteen years old at the time Devin died. Do you think that he killed her, too?”

Joe sighs heavily. “I don’t know, Ellen. I don’t know. I’m just trying to keep my mind open to all the possibilities. I don’t mean to upset you.”

My anger dims rapidly. Joe looks so tired. “I know you’re just doing your job. I just have a soft spot when it comes to Jonah. I watched him grow up.”

Joe insists on paying the bill, but I refuse. It would make this feel too much like a date. We split it down the middle and both leave a generous tip. I tell him that I have a connection at the Sioux City Department of Human Services and that I will give her a call tomorrow. See what else I can find out about Marissa's past. Joe says he will look into the death of Devin Fallon to see if there are any more connections between the murders. Joe sees me safely to my van and we both agree to talk in the morning.

It's only nine o'clock, but it feels as if it could be midnight. My mind is spinning with the thought that Jonah could be involved in this mess. The entire case is baffling. I pull into my driveway, turn off my headlights and just sit for a moment. Guiltily, I hope that my mother was able to feed, bathe and put the kids to bed already. All I want to do is tumble into bed myself. A sudden movement and a flash of color catch my eye through the van window. I frantically press at the automatic locks, but I'm not fast enough. The door is open and a hooded figure slides into the passenger-side seat. I scramble to open my door but a cold hand latches on to my wrist and I can't squirm away. With my free hand I try to reach my phone, but it's stowed away in my purse on the floor next to the intruder's feet.

"It's okay, it's okay," a frightened voice says. "It's just me, it's Jonah." I stop struggling and peer through the darkness, but the night is starless and the light from the streetlamps is too weak.

"Jonah?" I say breathlessly.

"It's me," he says disconsolately. It's then that I recognize his voice. Jonah, always so sad sounding. I used to call him Eeyore after the melancholy donkey from the Winnie the Pooh stories.

"What are you doing? You scared me to death," I exclaim.

"I'm sorry," he says hoarsely. And I can tell that he is near tears. "I had to talk to you. The police think I had something to do with that girl's death."

I think of what I learned about Apollo and Artemis slaying others to protect Leto. In some twisted way, did Jonah think he was protecting the memory of his mother, maybe protecting Mason by killing Marissa? I'm tempted to ask, *Did you? Did you kill Marissa?* But I stay silent. I don't want him to run away.

"I know her. *Knew* her," he amends. "But barely. I told her mother that. I told her I barely knew her, that Nichols was who she hung out with. I told her I didn't know anything about Marissa taking drugs, but she didn't

believe that either. I didn't hurt her. The police think I did, but I swear I didn't."

"Why do you think that, Jonah?" I ask softly. "I'm sure the police are talking to everyone who knew Marissa."

"Because I saw her that night. I saw her! But I didn't kill her."

"What time did you see her? Where?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even and calm.

"At the park, just before. Just before it must have happened."

"You were in the park? You and Marissa were in the park?"

"Not together." Jonah sniffs loudly. "Yeah, she was in the park and she was buying."

"Buying? You mean she was buying drugs? From who? Jonah, you have to talk to the police. You could help them find who really did this to her."

"No," he says resolutely. "I can't. They won't believe me. They think I did it. Because of my mom," his voice cracks. "Because of the way my mom died, they will think I did the same thing."

"No," I say, but it comes out weakly because that's exactly what crossed Joe's mind.

"I could never do that. Never."

"I know, Jonah, I know," I say soothingly. "I could go with you. We could go talk to the police together."

"No," he says and reaches for the door.

"Wait!" I exclaim. "I can help you."

"I just wanted to tell you. I wanted you to know..." Jonah says as he pushes the door open and the overhead light goes on. Jonah looks so much younger than his eighteen years, but he has seen more than most have in a lifetime. His eyes are wild and wide, a trapped animal.

"I know," I say, looking at him levelly. "I believe you." Before he is completely out of the van a thought strikes me and I ask, "Why would she be out in the park without her shoes?" Jonah's eyes fill with confusion and then he is gone.

On weak legs I climb out of the van and scan the street trying to see what direction he ran off to. He's disappeared into the night. "Be careful," I whisper after him. "Be safe."

I don't want to alarm my mother or the kids. I take gulps of fresh wintry air and try to compose myself before going into the house. After a few

moments I know what I need to do. With a heavy heart I pull my phone out of my purse and call Joe. It's not that I'm sure that Jonah could have done this. I don't believe he has. I'm more afraid that Jonah will get himself into more trouble by running away.

"Missed me already, huh?" Joe asks by way of greeting.

"Joe, listen," I begin, "Jonah was here."

Instantly, Joe becomes serious. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say impatiently. "He's scared to death. He said he saw Marissa in the park the night of the murder. She was buying drugs."

"Did he say who she was buying from?"

"No, listen. I'm trying to tell you Jonah didn't know about Marissa's bare feet. He's not running because he killed her, but because he's afraid of you. Or maybe he's afraid of the person that did kill her. He mentioned a guy named Nichols or maybe Nicholas, I don't know. The drug dealer maybe. He must have seen him, too."

There is silence on the line. After a moment Joe says, "I have to send a car out looking for him."

"I know, but treat him like what he is—a witness, not a suspect."

"Fair enough," Joe says with a sigh. "Thanks for calling me, Ellen. I know that wasn't easy for you."

"Will you call me if you find him? Joe, he's so scared I'm afraid he might do something desperate."

Joe promises to call me the minute Jonah is found and I promise to call him back if Jonah tries to contact me again. When I turn the key and push open the front door, I find my mother sitting on the couch rocking a dozing Avery. The house is silent, all the toys have been stowed away, the kitchen is spotless. My mother is amazing.

She puts a finger to her lips and murmurs, "She's almost asleep."

"I don't know how you do it." I gingerly sit down next to her, trying not to startle Avery. "You make it look so easy." She blushes with pleasure and waves the compliment away.

"It's getting late," I say, looking at the clock on the wall. There's a murderer out there somewhere and I don't want to send my mother off to fend for herself. "Why don't you just spend the night?"

"It's not that late. Besides, I can't leave Dolly home alone all night." I know better than to argue with my mother. Dolly is her ancient dog, a

German shorthaired pointer that has become her best friend since my father passed away. I lay Avery in her crib and walk my mother out to her car. Once she pulls away I scan the street looking for any sign of Jonah, alternately hoping that the police have safely picked him up and that he's escaped somewhere far away.

Once in the house I check on the kids one more time; each is curled beneath their covers, sleeping soundly. I'm tempted to climb into my own bed, but I know that until Jonah is found safely, sleep will not come. I pad down the stairs, pausing to turn up the thermostat a few degrees and return to my spot in front of the computer. First, I pull up my email and send a note to my colleague, Christina Gordon, at the Sioux City Department of Human Services with an inquiry about Marissa Newkirk, and for good measure add my cell phone number, telling her she can call me at any time, day or night, to just please call.

Next, I do another online search, looking for any other cases that even remotely resemble the deaths of Nell, Marissa and Devin Fallon. Nothing. I'm tempted to call Joe to see if there has been any sign of Jonah. I run our brief encounter over and over in my head. So Jonah knew Marissa—so did a lot of people. Jonah insisted that he barely knew Marissa, even told Marissa's mother that. I sit up straight. When did Jonah and Judith talk? Must have been when Judith couldn't get in contact with her daughter and drove from Sioux City to her apartment. Jonah also mentioned someone named Nicholas or Nichols.

I open my Facebook account and search for Jonah's profile. Unsurprisingly, like so many young people, Jonah has no protections on his account. With just a few clicks I'm able to search through his friends list. All nine hundred and four. I decide to check to see if Marissa has a Facebook page and am relieved to see that she only has two hundred and seventy-nine friends. Most of her contacts are other young adults around her age. There is a Nicholas, a Nick and a Ryan Nichols. I jot down each name on a piece of scratch paper. I also notice the photos of three older men. What had Joe said? *Maybe it was someone who had something against bad mothers?* The murderer, if he had killed Nell, Marissa and perhaps even Devin, would have to be at least in his thirties. I write the names of the three men and try to click into their profiles. Two are locked, but I'm able to

open the third. Robert Camire, forty-one years old, who lists his profession as a drug and alcohol counselor. I put a star next to his name.

My phone buzzes and I snatch it from the tabletop, hoping that it might be Joe with news about Jonah or, at the very least, Christina from Sioux City. I check the caller ID. It's Joe. "Hello," I say anxiously.

"Ellen." Joe's voice is terse.

"You found him?" Surprisingly, I feel relief. I know that at least Jonah is safe in custody of the police.

"No, there's no sign of Jonah. It's about Marissa. We found her coat and winter boots."

"What do you mean?" I ask. "I thought she wasn't wearing them."

"She was definitely wearing them. They were found in a Dumpster behind the Kmart just a few blocks from the park."

"How do you know they belonged to Marissa? Are they the black boots that Mason mentioned?"

"No, these were gray with a herringbone pattern. From C.C. Watson, that expensive outdoor gear store. The boots were wrapped up in the coat and the hood of the coat was filled with dried blood. The DNA will be tested, but we're pretty certain they belong to her. We found some photos in her apartment where she was wearing the same type of boots and coat, but we'll have her mother take a look at them and see if she can tell us they belonged to Marissa."

"What does that mean? What do you think happened?"

"Initially we thought she was killed indoors and transported to the park and carried to the spot in front of the statue, but now it looks more and more like she was killed outside. Maybe even in the park."

"That makes sense with what Mason said about his mom leaving the apartment the night she died and with what Jonah said about seeing her in the park," I add.

"The autopsy didn't say anything about a sexual assault?" I scan my memory trying to recall the details of the medical examiner's report.

"No, just the blow to the back of the head. I'm thinking that whoever did this wanted us to think that Marissa was killed somewhere else and dumped in the park."

"It just keeps getting stranger and stranger," I murmur. "Thanks for calling. You'll still let me know when you find Jonah, right?"

“Of course,” Joe assures me. “I’ll touch base with you in the morning.”

We say our goodbyes and, try as I might to stay awake until Adam returns home, I fall asleep on the couch, my cell phone clutched in my hand.

* * *

When I wake in the morning I’m covered with a down blanket and the smell of coffee fills the air. I sit up with a start, realizing that I hadn’t heard Avery cry once during the night. “It’s okay, she’s sleeping,” Adam says, handing me a cup of coffee. “I fed her a bottle when I got home last night. You were completely zonked out and I didn’t have the heart to wake you up.”

“Thanks, you’re the best,” I say, taking a sip from the mug. “You must be about ready to drop, too. Did we win? What time did you get home?”

“We lost by five and got home around midnight. I’m okay. It’s basketball season—I’m used to exhaustion.” Adam helps me rouse the kids and get them ready for the day.

Adam leaves to drop Leah and Lucas off at school and Avery at the babysitter’s house and I head to work. It’s blissfully quiet at the office. I spend the morning working on paperwork and waiting for Joe to call me with word about Jonah. He doesn’t. Finally, around noon I decide I can’t sit around anymore. I pull on my coat and gloves and step outside. Large flakes are softly falling, covering the dirty old snow with a soft new layer, giving the city streets a clean, hopeful countenance. I brush the snow from my van windows and drive the five short blocks to Singer Park. Stepping carefully from the van, I shuffle over the icy path to the statue of Leto. A thin veil of snow covers her solemn face and inexplicably, I want to brush the flakes from her eyes. What did she see that night? If her children at her feet, carved from stone, could speak, what would they say? What could they tell me? It seems so clear to me now: the answer lies with children and what they saw. Not Artemis and Apollo, Leto’s children, but Jonah and Mason.

I need to talk to both Jonah and Mason again. It isn’t that Mason doesn’t know what happened to his mother. I just don’t think I asked him the right questions. The night his mother died, he saw more than he probably even realizes he did. Marissa’s apartment is only a few blocks from the park and

I decide to take the chance that Judith and Mason are there packing away Marissa's things. Despite the snow, it's a relatively mild day for January, so I decide to walk to her apartment, an old row house that has been refurbished into two apartments, each with a separate entrance.

As I walk, my cell phone vibrates and I'm glad to see it's Christina from the Department of Human Services in Sioux City. After exchanging pleasantries and inquiries about children, husbands and work, I get down to business.

"You heard about the murder?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's been in the papers here. We all feel terrible about it. We knew the Newkirk family very well a few years ago. Marissa was hell on wheels when she was in high school. She became part of our caseload after she had Mason."

"Do you remember anyone from back then who might have had a grudge against Marissa? An old boyfriend, maybe?"

"I don't recall anyone specific, but I think there were probably a lot of old boyfriends. She very nearly lost that little boy forever, but she got her act together and by all accounts was doing a great job. Last I'd heard, Marissa was going to school to become a respiratory therapist."

"What was the turning point? What made her finally turn it around?" I ask.

"Her mother made her turn it around. Threatened to take Mason away from her if she didn't stop the partying, the drinking, the drugs. There was even a custody hearing set up. During the hearing the two sides came to an agreement and Marissa promised to get help for substance abuse and go back to school. That's all her mother ever wanted, for Marissa to pull her life together, make a future for herself and Mason. I really thought this was going to be a case that actually had a happy ending."

"Thanks for the info—I really appreciate it," I tell her and prepare to hang up when Christina stops me.

"You know, now that I think about it, I do remember a boyfriend, if you could call him that. Marissa had some real trouble with him. Police reports and restraining orders."

"Do you remember his name?" I ask eagerly.

Christina is quiet on the other line, thinking. "No, I can't remember, but I'll check the records and give you a call back."

We disconnect and I continue my trek through the slushy streets until I reach Laurel Street. I go around to the back where a set of steps leads up to the second-floor entrance. Judith, dressed in old clothes, meets me at the door. "Mrs. Moore, is it?" she asks, opening the door wide so I can come in.

"Please, call me Ellen." I look around the small apartment. Judith hasn't gotten very far in packing up Marissa's things. A few boxes, their contents spilling over, are on the floor along with several large garbage bags.

"It's so hard," Judith says, bringing a rough red hand up to her eyes. She looks so frail. Her thin shoulders are hunched in grief. Her legs are stick-thin in jeans that hang loosely on her hips.

"I can't imagine," I say with feeling. I think of Leah, Lucas and Avery and the thought of losing them sends a surge of terror through my veins.

"How are you holding up? How is Mason doing?"

"He's confused, scared, sad," she says despondently. "Doesn't understand that his mother is never coming back. I mean, how do you explain that to a four-year-old?"

I shake my head and don't respond. As a social worker I have tried to explain these things to young children whose parents have died, gone to jail or have abandoned them. It's not easy. It's never easy. "I was wondering if I could speak with Mason one more time."

Judith's brow creases, "About the other night?" she asks. "Is Detective..." She pauses, trying to remember.

"Detective Gaddey," I supply.

"Yes, that's right. I'm sorry, I'm not thinking straight. Is Detective Gaddey coming over, too?"

"No, no," I say quickly. "I was over at the park and walked over. I thought I'd just see if you were still here. I just can't help thinking that Mason might know more about what happened than we think."

"Please, sit," Judith invites. With difficulty she lifts a large box filled with what appears to be clothes and sets it on the floor next to a half-filled plastic garbage bag. We both sit down and she regards me with eyes so sad it hurts to look at them. "I'm not sure what else Mason could say about...about it. He's already been questioned by you and the police officers. He's pretty much said the same thing each time."

"I know and I'm sorry to bring up such a painful topic, but I'm just hoping that Mason, could, I don't know...tell us more," I finish lamely.

“I wish the same thing.” She looks forlornly at a closed door. “He’s taking a nap now. He’s not been sleeping well at night. But I guess I could go get him.”

“No, no, don’t wake him,” I say, suddenly feeling like a villain for interrupting this poor woman’s grief.

“Did they find that young man they were looking for? Jonah, I think his name is?” Judith asks. “Detective Gaddey said he might be involved.”

“No, I don’t think they’ve found him yet,” I say. “You know Jonah?” I ask.

“Oh, heavens no. Marissa mentioned him a few times though. Said his poor mother was murdered in the park when he was young.” Tears glitter in her eyes. “You don’t think maybe he snapped and did the same thing to Marissa as what happened to his mother, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I say as a glint of silver from within one of the plastic garbage bags catches my eye. I lean forward to try and get a closer look. A pair of black winter boots with a silver buckle at the ankle.

“I mean what are the chances of two young women being found dead beneath that same statue—” she begins to tremble “—and their children right next to them?”

“I know, it’s a strange coincidence.” I pull my eyes away from the plastic bag and look at Judith. She is looking at me with concern.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Fine,” I say, shaking my head to clear it. “I’m fine.” I glance back down at the garbage bag. Marissa’s winter boots were found in a Dumpster wrapped up in her winter coat. Would a mother, working part-time and going to college, have two pairs of winter boots?

“Excuse me.” Judith stands and gives me a watery smile. “I’m going to get a glass of water. Would you like one?”

“No, thanks.” When she turns her back I poke at the garbage bag with my foot, exposing the boots more clearly. They are black and trimmed with fur. Something that my mother might wear. “So you’ve never met Jonah Sharpe,” I ask again. “Never talked to him about Marissa using again?”

Judith turns back to me, stricken-faced. “No, why? That life was behind Marissa. She’d never do anything to hurt Mason.”

“I’m sorry,” I say contritely. “What about an old boyfriend? The man from Sioux City with the restraining order, maybe?”

“How did you know about that?” she asks sharply.

“I... I...” My palms begin to sweat. Then it all begins to fall into place. I could get up and run out of the apartment. I know I’m faster than she is, but that would mean leaving Mason alone with his grandmother. I slide my hand into my coat pocket blindly pushing buttons, hoping to connect with someone. “Somehow you found out that Marissa was drinking and using drugs again and you followed Marissa to the park that night.”

Judith’s gaunt face hardens, but she doesn’t speak. In her hand, at her side, is a knife. The blade isn’t particularly long, maybe three or four inches, but it’s sharp and could do a lot of damage. She inches toward me. I stand, searching for an escape route. If I could just get to the room where Mason is sleeping, I could lock or barricade the door, then dial 911.

“She promised me,” Judith says, her face twisted in grief. “She promised me she was done with that life. I stopped fighting for custody of Mason because she said he was the most important thing in her life.”

“Judith, I know you love Mason. It’s obvious you want what’s best for him. Please, think of Mason. Let me call Detective Gaddey. He’ll listen to you.”

“No!” Judith exclaims, taking another step toward me. With a shaking hand she lifts the knife.

“Okay, okay,” I say, raising my hands in supplication. I need to keep her calm, keep her talking. “Please, Judith, I’m trying to understand. You suspected Marissa of using, of neglecting Mason again, and when you couldn’t get ahold of her on Tuesday you drove here from Sioux City.”

Judith’s shoulders sag. “When I got to the apartment, the door was unlocked, but Marissa was gone. Mason was in his bed, barely conscious. She nearly overdosed him on cold medicine so he would stay asleep so she could go buy drugs.”

“Why didn’t you just call the police? You would have been given emergency custody of Mason,” I ask, slowly stepping backward, trying to create more distance between the two of us.

Judith shakes her head. “I was so angry. I wanted to go find her, tell her I was taking Mason away from her forever.” She looks at me pleadingly. “All the lies she told me. Why couldn’t Marissa have been a good mother? I was a good mother to her.”

“That’s when you went next door to Jonah Sharpe’s apartment and demanded to know where Marissa was. He told you he saw her in the park. You went looking for her there.”

“I can’t lose Mason—he’s all I have left.” Judith straightens her spine as if preparing herself for what she has to do next.

“You drove around with Mason in the backseat, looking for Marissa and ended up in the park. But what I don’t understand is why you had to kill her.”

“I found her sitting in front of that statue. It was freezing cold, but there she sat, high on something. Hydrocodone probably,” Judith says bitterly. “She was irritated that I had driven all this way to check up on her, called me terrible names. Told me she was never going to let me see Mason again. It didn’t matter to her that her four-year-old son was so drugged he couldn’t keep his eyes open.” Judith lets out a choked sob. “I told her I was going to call Social Services and that they would take Mason away from her. Marissa started to go to take Mason out of my car and I snapped. I grabbed a beer bottle from the ground and hit her on the back of the head.” Judith covers her face with her hands and begins to weep. “I hit her so hard.” She looks helplessly at me. “I was just so angry. I couldn’t let Mason stay with her anymore. It wasn’t safe.”

The creak of a door causes us both to look toward the bedroom. A bleary-eyed Mason stares quizzically at the knife in Judith’s hand. “Grandma?” he asks in a little whisper.

* * *

At the police station I sit in an interview room across from Joe. “What I don’t understand is why she removed Marissa’s shoes and coat.”

“We haven’t formally interviewed her yet. She’s asked for a lawyer,” Joe explains, “but I think she wanted everyone to believe that Marissa was killed somewhere else and transported to the park and laid in front of the statue. No one would think such a frail woman could kill someone and then carry the body somewhere else. Because Marissa had her hood up, the blood collected there. All Judith had to do was remove the shoes and coat and leave her in front of the statue.”

“You know, I thought Judith might be crazy, but now I don’t know. Judith was so angry with Marissa for being a bad mother she murdered her, then tried to put the blame on an innocent teenage boy. That doesn’t sound so crazy. It sounds evil.”

“Plus,” Joe adds, “she had to leave Mason at the scene, otherwise we’d have known that Judith was already in Cedar City when the murder occurred. She made the anonymous call to 911 and then when she was sure that Mason was safe, she showed up at the police department saying her daughter was missing.” We both sit in silence, contemplating what Judith had done, had almost gotten away with.

“You’re lucky that Judith didn’t kill you,” Joe says with sudden fervor. “You should never have gone over there.”

“I only wanted to talk to Judith, talk to Mason one more time before they left town. I would never have figured it out if I hadn’t seen Judith’s boots in the garbage. I knew they couldn’t have been Marissa’s. Mason was so drugged up from the cough medicine Marissa gave him—the only real clue that he was able to give us was about a pair of black boots.” I shake my head sadly. “Before Judith was taken away by the police, she begged me to never tell Mason that she was the one who killed his mother.”

“What did you say?”

“She was hysterical. I lied and told her that no one would ever tell Mason the truth about what really happened.” Shakily I get to my feet. “All the lies, they never seem to stop.”

“Will you tell Mason then?”

“If he asks, of course I’ll tell him the truth.” I look questioningly at Joe. “Wouldn’t you?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Joe admits. “He’s so little. Would he understand anyway?”

We both are silent for a moment with our own thoughts. As much as I would like to protect the children I work with from the truth, I learned very early on that lies, big or little, eventually destroy, or at the very least, erode their faith in the world.

“What happens to Mason now?” Joe finally asks.

“We’ll search for next of kin, but for now he’ll stay with Martha Renner in foster care.”

“Jonah Sharpe all over again,” Joe says. “And we still don’t know who killed Nell or Devin Fallon.”

“Jonah still hasn’t shown up?” I ask sadly, knowing that Joe would have told me if he had been found.

“No.” Joe shakes his head and stands up. “Not yet. Ellen, you need to get home and get some rest. You’ve had a terrible day.” Impulsively, Joe gives me a brief, tight hug. “Glad you’re okay.”

The soft snow that had been falling earlier has transformed into tiny, hard pellets that strike angrily at my face. Just as I climb into my van, my cell phone buzzes. It’s Adam. “Guess what?” he says excitedly.

“What?” I ask wearily.

“I canceled practice because of the snow. I’ll pick up the kids from school and grab a pizza.”

I start the van and drive toward home, to my husband and children. “That sounds perfect,” I say with a smile.

* * * * *

About the Author

Heather Gudenkauf is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling novels *One Breath Away*, *These Things Hidden* and *The Weight of Silence*, which sold more than half a million copies and spent twenty-one weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. She lives in Iowa with her family.



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