

*Twenty-three years later . . .*

Daniel Boyle rubbed the rosary beads between his fingers as he watched the crime scene investigator, the attractive redhead who had helped Rachel Swanson out from underneath the porch, disappear around the corner. He had changed seats when she picked up the pay phone. He had listened to most of her conversation and was relieved to hear the police had found the footwear impressions he had left on the kitchen floor.

Once the blood from the hallway was processed through their CODIS system, they would get a hit for Earl Slavick. The FBI was looking for Slavick in connection with a string of missing women that started in Colorado.

The FBI didn't know Slavick was now a resident of Lewinston, New Hampshire. When Boyle decided to lead the police to Slavick's house, they would find a pair of Ryzer hiking boots, size eleven, in Slavick's office closet, along with some other valuable evidence connecting him to the disappearances of several New England women.

What was troubling Boyle was this business about the writing found on Rachel's arm. He had an idea what the numbers and letters meant, but it would be meaningless to the police unless Rachel woke up and started talking.

Boyle knew Rachel had already woken up once and attacked a nurse. If Rachel woke up again, if they could stabilize her long enough to pump her system with some antipsychotic medication, she might be able to tell the police about what had happened to her and the other women in the basement.

Boyle still couldn't figure out how Rachel had escaped. The two pairs of handcuffs were good and tight, the ball-gag still wedged securely in her mouth, when he left to get Carol. And Rachel was sick. She wasn't going anywhere.

When he came back, the van's back doors were open. The handcuffs were lying on the floor, along with the ball-gag.

Nobody had ever escaped before.

Boyle tightened his grip on the rosary beads. Once again, he had underestimated Rachel, forgot what a resourceful cunt she could be – which was, ironically, one of the things he absolutely loved about her. Rachel reminded him so much of his mother.

A little over two weeks ago, Rachel had faked being sick, refusing to eat for days, and when he went into her cell to check on her, she attacked him and broke his nose. He fell to the floor and she kicked him in the head until he passed out.

The keys she took from his pocket didn't unlock the padlock for the basement door. Those keys were in his office. And that was where he found her, tearing the place up, looking for his other set of keys, maybe even his cell phone. Maybe Rachel had found the spare set of handcuff keys. He hadn't noticed they were missing. He was still cleaning up the mess she made.

He should have left Rachel inside her cell. He should have come to Belham alone, as originally planned, grabbed Carol and then, after he returned home – *then* he should have made a separate trip to bury Rachel.

Instead, he had lured by the idea of burying Rachel next to his mother in the Belham woods around Salmon Brook Pond. He hadn't been to his old burial ground in years – so long, in fact, he had forgotten where he had buried her.

Boyle had made maps of all his burial spots. He couldn't find the recent map he had made showing where his mother's remains were buried. Boyle, never good with directions, had to rely on memory. It had taken nearly four hours to find the spot, followed by another hour of digging. When he left the woods, the idea of burying Rachel next to his mother had consumed him for days. He couldn't let it go. Now, because he had put desire before discipline, Rachel was lying in a hospital bed in Mass General.

The ICU doors and out stepped a *stunning* woman with shoulder length black hair and dark brown eyes. She was young, with a perfect face and flawless skin. She was dressed in snug but stylish jeans, hip black high heel shoes and a mid-drift shirt that showed a teasing hint of her soft, flat belly. Boyle guessed she was somewhere in her early to mid-twenties. The young woman stepped into the waiting room and picked up a box of tissues. The box was empty. She threw it in the trash. All the grieving men in the waiting room were watching her.

The woman was aware she was being admired. Instead of sitting down, she buttoned up her coat, turned around and gave them their back. Boyle's mother used to do that when she caught men she didn't like gawking at her. If they were handsome, she'd give them her full attention. If they were rich, she'd give them her body.

The young woman crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the ICU doors. She was waiting for someone. Not her husband. She had no rings on her fingers. Maybe she was waiting for her boyfriend. No. The boyfriend would have come out with her.

She was clearly upset, but she was not going to cry, not here, not in front of *these* people.

Boyle could get her to cry. Beg, too. He could make her shed that fake, WASPy exterior faster than a snake shed its skin.

He picked up the box of tissues next to him, stood and walked towards her. He could smell her perfume. Some women couldn't carry it well. She did.

Boyle held out the box. The woman turned around, looking angry at being disturbed. Her expression softened a bit when she saw his suit and tie, his nice shoes. He wore a wedding ring and a Rolex watch. He looked professional and put together. He looked trustworthy.

"I didn't mean to bother you," Boyle said. "I just thought you could use this. I've already gone through a box myself."

After a moment's consideration, she took a tissue and carefully dabbed at the corners of her eyes, not wanting to ruin her makeup. She didn't thank him.

"You have someone in there?" She nodded to the ICU doors.

"My mother," Boyle said.

"What does she have?"

"Cancer."

"What kind?"

“Pancreatic.”

“My father has lung cancer.”

“I’m sorry,” Boyle said. “Was he a smoker?”

“Two packs a day. I’m going to quit. Swear to God.” She made a sign of the cross to emphasize her commitment. “I’m sorry if I seemed rude. It’s just – it’s this goddamn waiting. I’m tired of waiting for my father to, you know, let go. That probably sounds cold, but he’s in so much pain. And then there’s the waiting for the doctors. They *love* to keep you waiting. I’m waiting for his highness right now.”

“I know what you mean. I wish I had family to lean on, but I’m the only child, and my father died years ago.”

“I’m in the same boat. My father is my family. After he goes –” she took in a deep breath to steady herself – “it’s just me.”

“What about your husband?”

“No husband, no boyfriend, no mother, no kids. Just me.”

Boyle thought about the empty cell in his basement and wondered if this woman would be missed if she disappeared. He hadn’t captured one so beautiful before. She had just the right amount of weight on her. The heavier ones lasted longer in the basement. The skinny ones never lasted, unless they were very young, like Carol.

“Do you live around here?” Boyle said. “I only ask because I think I’ve seen you around the neighborhood. I live across the street, in Beacon Hill.”

“I’m from Weston, but I come to Boston a lot. I have friends who live on The Hill. What’s your name?”

“John Smith. And yours?”

“Jennifer Montgomery.”

“Your father wouldn’t be Ted Montgomery, the real estate developer? He owns a bunch of buildings in my neighborhood.”

“No, he owns a perfume business.”

Boyle could easily find out his name and where he lived.

The ICU doors opened. A doctor stepped out, spotted Jennifer Montgomery and headed toward her.

“Good luck,” Boyle said, and slipped inside the ICU doors before they shut.

Boyle quickly took in his surroundings – the security cameras pointed at the desk, the medical equipment in the corner that monitored each of the ICU patients. Down at the far end of the corridor he saw the patrolman sitting in a chair set up in front of Rachel’s room. He wasn’t worried about the security cameras. He would change his appearance the next time he visited.

The nurse behind the counter was looking at him. “Can I help you?”

“Could I have a box of Kleenex? My cousin’s rather upset.”

“Of course.”

When the nurse reached behind her to grab a box of tissues, Boyle memorized the names on the clipboard holding the visitor sign-in sheet. He’d have to figure out a way to sign in without leaving fingerprints.

Boyle took the box of tissues, thanked her. “Which room is Cliff Montgomery? I’d like to drop off some videos for him tomorrow.”

“Mr. Montgomery is in room twenty-two. Just make sure you bring VHS tapes. We don’t have DVD players in here.”

Boyle checked Cliff Montgomery’s room. It was three down from Rachel’s. Perfect.

Boyle walked out of the ICU and headed down the corridors. He dumped the box of tissues in a wastebasket.

As he waited for the elevator, he thought about Jennifer Montgomery. She was young. That was important. The younger ones could go the distance. The women in their late forties to early fifties didn’t last as long. He didn’t like bringing them home, but he had to take women of all ages, colors and sizes so the police wouldn’t make a connection. It was important to randomly select his victims. Boyle had studied police work. There were many books on such things, and there was the internet. Information was everywhere.

Boyle thought about the crime scene investigator, the redhead. He had never abducted someone from law enforcement before. That one was definitely a fighter. Like Rachel.

The elevator doors opened. Boyle slipped his hands inside his pant pockets, his fingers feeling around the lips of the plastic sandwich baggies holding the chloroform-soaked rags. He always carried them in case he decided to abduct someone while he was on the road; and he always carried a bag in each pocket since that night years ago when he grabbed a young girl at the home of the friend who had seen him in the woods –

He stopped walking. That red hair, those striking green eyes . . . No, it couldn't be the same person.

Boyle pushed the thought aside. It would have to wait until he returned home. He went back to imagining all the wonderful things he could do with Jennifer Montgomery in his basement.