

Darkling
Chapter 1
Leslie
Thursday, October 15

As Leslie walked out of the city library toward her Jeep SUV, she had the oddest feeling that someone was following her. She turned around but saw no one behind her. Then she looked around the parking lot but didn't think she saw anyone watching her. Taking a deep breath of the October air, she walked briskly to the Jeep. She loved this time of year, early autumn. Leaves had started to fall, and she could feel that anticipation of the holiday season to come, starting with her favorite, Halloween.

Shrugging off the feeling of being watched, she tapped the key fob to unlock the SUV only to discover that once again, she'd forgotten to lock it. Shaking her head at her forgetfulness, she opened the rear passenger door and put her laptop bag on the floor, along with the books she'd checked out. There were two books for the twins, one for her (a mystery she'd had on request for months), and one of the more recent issues of an educational administrator journal that her husband Paul regularly read.

Checking the time on her Fitbit, she saw that she still had a few minutes before the dismissal bell rang at the elementary school across the street from the Rivermont library.

She got in the Jeep and once again looked around the parking lot. A few other people were getting into their vehicles, and Leslie thought she recognized a couple of elementary school parents on their way to pick up their children. The library, located across the street from the school, was a convenient pre-stop used by parents before picking up the kids. Leslie usually spent a couple of hours there a few times a week, as a change of pace, to do some of her writing there rather than in her office at home.

She was currently deep in the midst of writing her third mystery. The book was going well, and she thought her editor at the small mystery press here in Rivermont would be pleased. Her first mystery had focused on the strife between a husband and wife, resulting in the violent death of one of the spouses. That whole scenario had been a reach for Leslie. She and Paul seldom, if ever, experienced much strife. They had fun together and fun with their ten-year-old twins Thomas and Maria.

Her second book told the tale of two sisters locked in a battle over their father's vast estate. That scenario also stretched Leslie's imagination; she and her sister had never battled over anything, and both her parents were still very much alive and not wealthy at all.

Starting the engine of the Jeep, she turned off the CD player that came on. She'd been listening to a suspense novel by one of her favorite authors. It had some questionable language in the narrative that she didn't want the twins to hear. She knew they probably already knew all the words but she didn't want to reinforce them in their minds.

She drove out of the library parking lot and checked for oncoming traffic. Seeing none, she drove across the street that separated the library from Rivermont Elementary. The school parking lot was filling up, and Leslie's favorite spot by the sidewalk was already taken. She smiled to herself as she thought, "Someone's in my spot," as if the parking lot had assigned spots. She pulled into one of the few remaining spaces, and turned off the engine. Glancing at the clock on the dashboard, she saw that she still had a couple of minutes to wait before the final dismissal bell rang.

Today had been school picture day, and she was anxious to find out how the twins thought their pictures had gone. Both Thomas and Maria had worn their Sunday best. Thomas wore a pale blue button down dress shirt with a bright red tie. Maria was in her lavender silk dress that had been a birthday present from her

grandmother, Leslie's mom Eve. Before they left for school this morning, Leslie had done her own photo shoot with the twins, posing them in various poses on the back deck.

The dismissal bell rang, and Leslie got out of the car and walked to the sidewalk. She was hoping for a glimpse of Paul as he mingled with the students and parents, in his role as Rivermont Elementary principal.

As she headed toward the main entrance of the school, she was waylaid by two figures rushing at her.

"Mom!" called Maria. "You weren't in your regular place. We didn't know where you were!"

"I told her you'd be here but you know how Sis worries when she can't find you!" Thomas said.

Leslie gave each of them a tight squeeze as she said, "Someone else parked in my spot. I'm over there, a few rows back." She gestured toward the back of the parking lot. "Where's Dad?"

Thomas and Maria both turned toward the main entrance and pointed. "He's over by the front door with somebody," Thomas said.

"Somebody who?" Leslie said, straining her neck to catch a glimpse of Paul. So much for her plan to say a quick hello to him. He looked totally engrossed in his conversation with someone, and Leslie had no desire to interrupt whatever it was that had them both so intent on what they were discussing. She'd have to ask him when he got home about whom he'd been talking with.

Draping an arm around each of the twin's shoulders, she maneuvered them toward the Jeep. "So how was picture day? Did you both smile appropriately?"

"Oh, Mom," Maria said. "Of course, we did. Have we ever disappointed you on picture day?"

"Well, there was that year when you were missing all four of your front teeth, and you kept your mouth tightly shut," Leslie said with a grin.

"Oh, Mom," Maria said again.

The three of them reached the Jeep, and the twins climbed into the back seat, backpacks bumping the seats as they got in. Leslie decided to take the long way out of the parking lot and drive by the front of the school to see if Paul was still busy with whomever he was talking to. As she neared the front entrance of the school, she slowed down and looked over to where Paul stood, still talking to a man she didn't know. He saw her and turned to the man and held up one finger, then walked briskly over to the Jeep. Leslie lowered the front passenger window, and Paul leaned his head in.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said. "What's up?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to see who you were talking to," Leslie said, then added, "and find out who that is that you're so engrossed with."

Paul grimaced, shook his head, and said softly, "I'll tell you later." He turned to the twins in the back seat, saying, "I'll see you monkeys at home. Behave for Mom, and do your homework."

"Yes, Mr. Cartwright," the twins said in unison, laughing as they said it. Whenever their dad acted like a principal with them, they called him Mr. Cartwright as a joke.

They all said good-bye to Paul, and Leslie drove off the lot and toward home.

"Hey, Mom," Thomas said, "Could we stop for ice cream on the way home?"

"That's a great idea," Maria chimed in. "Wouldn't you like a hot fudge sundae, Mama?"

Leslie grinned when she heard Maria call her Mama, her toddler name for her mother. Both of the twins now called her Mom, or sometimes Mother, when they were exasperated with her. When Thomas wanted to tease her, he called her Ma, which irritated the heck out of her.

Leslie mentally debated the pros and cons of stopping for ice cream. But she knew full well that she was going to cave and stop at the ice cream shop on the way home, especially because of the mention of her favorite ice cream treat, a hot fudge sundae.

An hour later, Leslie pulled into their driveway and used the garage door opener to open the garage. She'd half expected to see Paul's car in the driveway or garage but it wasn't there. He usually made it home an hour after school dismissal but evidently not today. She herded the twins and their backpacks into the house and instructed them to go upstairs and change into play clothes.

"Mom, can we do our homework after dinner instead of before?" Thomas asked. Leslie had noticed that for some reason, Thomas had assumed the role of spokesperson for the twins, usually being the one who asked for things.

"Sweetie, you know the house rules about homework. We do it right after school and then we're done for the day," Leslie said. She heard groans from both twins as they trudged up the stairs, and it brought a smile to her face. She well remembered the same battles with her own parents when she was growing up.

She picked up the backpacks from the kitchen floor where the twins had dropped them and set them on the kitchen table. The daily ritual was the twins sitting at the kitchen table doing their homework while she worked on preparing dinner. Leslie enjoyed the ritual, just as she enjoyed helping them with their homework when they needed it. She dreaded the day when their math was so advanced that she couldn't be of any help to them. Hopefully, that was still a few years off. Also, maybe Paul would be able to help. She had a vague recollection of him minoring in math for his undergraduate degree, or maybe it was Spanish. She'd have to ask him when he got home. She'd also have to tell him about that weird feeling she'd had that afternoon of being watched or followed.

Then she laughed to herself. No, she wouldn't tell Paul about the feeling she was being stalked. He'd just tease her by saying that she was letting her mystery writing scare her again. And he might be right. Her new book did have a stalker in it, and maybe she was doing the transfer thing or the scaring the stuffing out of herself thing.

The homework sessions went well, with a minimum of complaining. In between helping the twins and preparing spaghetti for dinner, Leslie would glance out the kitchen window, watching for Paul's car, wondering what was keeping him at school so long. When his car finally turned into the driveway, he was almost an hour later than usual.

When Paul walked into the kitchen, Leslie felt a warm sense of relief. Now things were the way they were supposed to be.

Chapter 2
Cartwright Family
Thursday, October 15

After dinner, they all gathered in the family room. Paul was relaxing in what everyone called the Dad recliner, watching the baseball game. Leslie was curled up at one end of the sectional couch, reading through the pages she'd written that day and editing the day's work. Thomas and Maria were on the other section of the couch. Thomas was engrossed in a game on his tablet, while Maria was just as engrossed in the book Leslie had checked out for her at the library that day.

Every once in awhile, someone would make a comment or pose a question. Leslie asked Paul what he had minored in at college, hoping that he'd answer math so he'd be available to help the twins with their homework when they moved into the higher levels of math. Unfortunately, his answer had been Spanish, as she'd feared.

"And why do you ask, Mrs. Cartwright?" Paul had asked, his teasing tone getting the attention of the twins.

"Well, Dr. Cartwright, I was hoping your answer would be math so that you'd be available to help when the twins hit algebra, geometry and whatever comes next," Leslie answered. She noticed how closely the twins were both listening to their parents' discussion.

Paul laughed and said, "I see. Are you saying you're not up for helping with advanced mathematics?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Leslie said. "My math expertise ends with beginning algebra -- $x+y=z$ is as far as I go."

Thomas hooted with laughter and said, "Don't worry about it, Ma. I've got it covered."

"Please don't call me Ma, Thomas," Leslie said. "That makes me feel like a toothless old lady."

Maria piped up with, "Mama, you could never be a toothless old lady. You're a beautiful, smart, best-selling writer, just like I want to be."

Leslie smiled at her daughter and gave her a thumbs-up, then turned to Thomas. "What do you mean you've got it covered?"

"I'm really good at math, Mom. I won't need help, and I'll be able to help the pipsqueak if she needs it."

"Who are you calling a pipsqueak, baby brother? Don't forget, I'm eight minutes older than you," Maria said, a note of indignation in her voice.

A few moments later, Thomas returned to his tablet and Maria to her book. Thomas was quite the computer game expert and complained about the two-hour limit of screen time his parents had imposed on him. Maria could care less about her tablet and laptop, and Thomas tried to convince his parents that she was willing to give him her two hours of screen time.

The first time Thomas broached this proposal to his father, Paul had laughed and said, "Nice try, buddy, but no dice. Two hours for you and two hours only."

At 8 o'clock, Leslie stood up, stretched and said, "Okay, guys, time for showers and then bedtime."

A few groans met this announcement but after a moment, Thomas turned off his tablet and plugged it into a charger on a nearby end table. Maria put a bookmark in the library book and turned to her mother, asking, "Is it okay if I read for a few minutes in bed, Mama?"

"Sure," Leslie said. "I'll be up in awhile to tuck you both in."

The twins went upstairs, and Leslie sat back down on the couch. Half an hour later, the baseball game ended, and Paul turned off the TV.

"How was your day?" Leslie asked. "I never did ask what kept you so late."

Paul shrugged his shoulders and said, "The day was good, except that what happened at the end of the day is what kept me so late."

"Was it anything to do with that man I saw you talking with?" Leslie said.

"It had everything to do with that man," Paul said. He stood up and walked over to where Leslie was sitting.

"It's not worth talking about," Paul said, looking down at her. "Just another episode in my life, I guess." He held out a hand to Leslie and said, "Let's go tuck the monkeys into bed."

Leslie started to protest, wanting to know who the mystery man was and what he'd wanted. But instead, she stood and took Paul's hand. Sometime later, she'd manage to find out who the man was and why he was there talking to Paul.

They walked hand in hand to the stairs and slowly climbed the steps to tuck in the twins.

Chapter 3
Leslie
Friday, October 16

The next morning when Paul left for school at 7 a.m., Leslie still hadn't yet quizzed him about the mystery man. She'd have to remember to do it this evening. The twins didn't have to be at school till 8, otherwise they could have ridden with their Dad. But Leslie didn't mind making the drive to school. She enjoyed their back seat chatter, even though sometimes she thought of it as "twin talk." Today's topic was the school's upcoming Field Day.

The twins were in different fifth grade class rooms, and they had a bit of competition going on between the two classes for Field Day.

Thomas was boasting that his class had the best runners and would surely win the 100 meter dash. Maria wasn't having any of that.

"Thomas, you know my class has two really fast runners: Cole and me. We're going to win and that's all there is to it."

Leslie smiled, liking the fact that her girl stood up for what she believed in, even against her beloved brother.

At the school, Leslie pulled into the line of parents' cars waiting to discharge their passengers. She was almost at the head of the line, which was good for her because it meant she'd be on her way quickly. But the twins didn't like it because it meant they'd have to walk a few extra steps into the school's main entrance.

Leslie leaned her head over the back seat for good-bye kisses from the twins. They gathered up their backpacks and plastic water bottles and got out of the car, calling "Good-bye" and "Have a good day" to Leslie.

Leslie pulled away from the curb and drove out of the parking lot, feeling her daily qualm at leaving the kids behind. Part of her always wished she could keep them safe and sound at home with her, like when they were babies and toddlers.

On the drive home, she once again felt as though she was being followed. She took a roundabout way back to the house but didn't spot any suspicious cars. This being-followed feeling was really beginning to get to her.

Back at home, she fixed coffee in the Keurig, grabbed a granola bar and with her coffee and snack headed to her office upstairs. Paul's office was in the finished basement downstairs next to the family room. They'd flipped a coin to see who had the upstairs office and who had the downstairs office. Leslie was sure that Paul had manipulated the toss so he could have the office downstairs where he had a clear view of the huge flat screen TV on the wall opposite his office.

Sitting down in her comfy office chair, she woke up her desktop computer and switched on the warming pad for her cup of coffee. She was working on the beginning chapters of her new mystery and was still figuring out the plot. She sat there for a moment with her fingers resting on the keyboard, trying to conjure up the feeling of being watched and followed that she'd felt yesterday and today. Her main character was having the same experience, and Leslie wanted to describe the eeriness of thinking someone was watching you.

As she sat there, she tried to remember if she'd closed the garage door and if the door leading from the garage to the kitchen was locked. Then she mentally berated herself for being a scaredy-cat, just like Paul always teased her.

Deciding she wouldn't be able to concentrate until she'd checked on the garage door and the kitchen door, she took a gulp of coffee and a bite of granola bar and headed downstairs. She discovered that she'd left the kitchen door unlocked and the garage door open and was glad she'd come downstairs to check.. She closed the garage door and locked the kitchen door, then went around to the sliding glass doors leading out to the deck to make sure they were locked.

Lying on a circular rug in front of the deck doors was Maisie, the Cartwrights' five-year-old Maine Coon cat. The circular rug was Maisie's favorite place to nap.

Maisie spent her days with Leslie, following her around the house, sometimes jumping up on her lap when Leslie was at the computer writing, or hanging out with her in the kitchen or the laundry room. Leslie enjoyed the company of the cat and missed her when Maisie napped in front of the sliding glass doors to the deck.

"Hi, Miss Maisie," Leslie as she reached down to pet the cat. "It's time to go upstairs and write."

Maisie stood up, stretched and followed Leslie to the entry way. Leslie checked the front door to make sure it was locked, then looked out the window next to the door. The Cartwrights' lived on a cul de sac, and the house was situated so that none of the neighbors' houses were visible from the front of their house. Leslie was surprised to find herself regretting their house's semi-isolation. Perhaps she wouldn't be feeling so cut off from everything if she could see a neighbor's house.

Shaking off the thought, Leslie climbed the stairs with Maisie padding behind her. In her office, before sitting down at the computer, she walked over to the double windows across the room. A dense woods encircled the house, stretching out from their front, side and back yard. For Leslie, the woods had been one of the most appealing features of the house. She'd grown up near a woods and loved the trees and paths and wilderness. Thomas and Maria seemed to feel the same way about their woods. The Cartwrights didn't own the woods; they were common ground owned by the subdivision and belonging to all the subdivision's homeowners. Volunteers from the homeowners' association had created a walking trail that wound through the woods, and the path was quite popular with residents. The twins and Leslie walked the trail at least once a week. On rare occasions, they were able to coax Paul out for a hike. He preferred a round of golf to what he called an aimless tramp through the woods.

In addition to a variety of deciduous trees, cedar trees and pines populated the woods. The evergreens were thick enough that even in winter, the cedars and pines offered a snug density to the woods. The evergreens were particularly beautiful after a snowfall and reminded Leslie of a procession of frosted Christmas trees.

She'd never taken the time to discover what lay on the other side of the woods. The walking trail didn't go that far, and she and the twins had never ventured off the trail into the abundant undergrowth to explore what was on the other side. Maybe they would do that sometime on one of their walks.

She felt some ideas stirring in her mind and abandoned the windows for the computer. Looking out the window at the woods had given her the idea to include a woods scene in her mystery. Her heroine was something of a scaredy cat, like Leslie. Instead of enjoying the woods behind her house, the heroine Charlotte was leery of them and avoided spending any time in the woods.

To Leslie, Charlotte's dislike of the woods meant, of course, that the main traumatic scene of the book had to take place in the woods. She grinned as she thought about how she could use the woods and the stalker to scare the bejesus out of Charlotte.

She tapped away at the computer, getting lost in her story. When she finally looked up from the keyboard, she was surprised to see that it was early afternoon. She'd worked straight through lunchtime, and now it was almost

time to pick up the twins from school. And she was starving. The coffee and granola bar were long gone. She noticed that Maisie had deserted her. The cat was probably downstairs asleep on her circular rug in front of the deck doors.

Leslie saved her document, printed out the pages she'd written that day and turned off the laptop. She gathered up the pages and turned for one last look out the window. As she gazed out at the woods, she thought she saw something move in the trees. Was that a person? she wondered. Maybe someone was out walking the trail. Or maybe it was a deer. Quite a few deer made their home in the woods, and the deer often wandered out into people's yards. She leaned into the window, squinting a bit, trying to make out what it was that was moving out there in the trees. For a moment, she considered going outside and into the woods for a better look. But she discarded that notion when she realized it was time, past time actually, to go pick up the twins.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she grabbed a bottle of water and another granola bar and ran out to the car. She didn't want to be late picking up the twins. That had happened only once in the years they'd been going to Rivermont Elementary but the ramifications of her being late had been sufficiently horrendous that she couldn't afford to let it happen again.

When the twins were in kindergarten, she'd gotten the time for early dismissal wrong. She'd thought they were getting out at 11:30 but it was actually 11:15. When she'd arrived to pick up Thomas and Maria, they'd been standing by the front entrance with their kindergarten teacher, sobbing their eyes out. Leslie had raced from the car and had tried to comfort her children. She'd apologized to their teacher, then led the still sobbing Thomas and Maria to the car. They cried all the way home, and nothing Leslie said could stop their crying.

At home, when the tears finally stopped, the twins were sad and scared and not themselves at all. In their halting way, they told their mother that they thought she wasn't coming to get them. They were afraid that they'd never see her again.

Leslie tried to reassure them, and explained that she had the time wrong for their early dismissal. She told them, "You could have gone to Daddy's office, you know."

Thomas, as always the spokesperson, said, "But you're the one who's supposed to pick us up, not Daddy."

Leslie couldn't argue with his logic and decided she'd just have to do her best to comfort and reassure them. And most importantly, she could never be late picking them up again.

She pulled into the school parking lot with five minutes to spare, having driven ten miles over the speed limit on the way to the elementary school. She parked in her regular spot and watched the front entrance of the building looking for her little ones, who weren't so little anymore.

The school dismissed the classes by grades. Preschool, pre-K and kindergarten exited the building at a side entrance, and the parents waited for their children outside the entrance. The fifth graders were the second to last class to be dismissed at the front entrance.

She saw Thomas first, running toward the car, his hair blowing in the wind, the backpack banging against him. Maria followed behind, walking quickly but not running like her brother. Thomas, as usual, had his hands full of papers and textbooks. Maria, also as usual, would have tucked her papers and textbooks neatly inside her backpack,

Leslie greeted the twins with a big grin as they climbed into the back seat. One of these days, they would be old enough to call "Shotgun!" for the front passenger seat. The thought caused a lump in her throat. Her babies were growing up too fast.

Chapter 4
Terry Donovan
Friday, October 16

Terry Donovan stood at the sliding glass doors leading to the deck, looking out at the woods behind his condo building in the dimming daylight. It was getting dark earlier and earlier each day. In a few weeks, daylight saving time would end, and darkness would descend by 5 p.m.

He closed the vertical blinds covering the glass doors and turned toward the hall leading to the home office he'd setup in the condo's second bedroom. He had work to do.

Walking into the office, he flicked on the overhead light and sat at his desk. He turned on the desk lamp with its green shade and woke up the laptop. He opened one of his email accounts. He had several accounts, each of which he used for specific purposes. The account he'd opened was the one he used in his day trading activities. He was waiting for a colleague to let him know about a new stock offering.

"Rats," he muttered under his breath. "Still no word. What's wrong with Winters?" He started to close the laptop, then thought better of it. He'd check out the bitch's blog and see if she'd posted any new content. He typed Pia Kennedy into Google and got millions of results in seconds. "Google was the bomb," he thought.

One of the top results was the bitch's blog. He opened the home page and saw that there were no new posts since the one three days ago. He opened that most recent post and scrolled down the page. He'd already read it twice. He had to admit, despite his vicious hatred for the woman, it was fairly interesting and certainly well-written. She'd shared her opinions about the Senate hearings for a Supreme Court nominee. Her points were well-taken, shrewd and accurate, and forcefully expressed. Her liberal leanings were glaringly apparent but she still managed to present both sides of the discussion. He finished his re-reading of the post and sat there at his desk, considering whether or not to post a comment. "No," he thought. "As fun as that might be, it's too risky."

Pia Kennedy was the pseudonym she used for her blog and her mysteries. When Donovan discovered Pia Kennedy wasn't the name of a real person, he had contacted his tech guru Jameson for help in ferreting out her real name. It had taken Jameson a mere five minutes to find Pia Kennedy's actual name.

He closed the laptop, turned off the desk lamp and then the overhead light as he left the office and headed for the master bedroom. Over the past few weeks, he'd gotten rid of Cathy's things. He'd packed boxes and plastic bags with clothes, shoes, books, CDs, jewelry, stuffed animals, photos, all the detritus that someone accumulates in 30 years of living. Before packing her belongings, he'd made sure her name or any kind of identification wasn't on them. He'd made trips to several Goodwill and Salvation Army stores throughout the area. He'd also gotten rid of the few decorating touches she'd added to his condo after their marriage.

To his satisfaction, the condo was now free of any sign that Cathy Donovan had ever lived there.

He heard the buzz of the intercom and went to the condo's front door to answer it. His meal service delivery was here. He buzzed the delivery person in, then opened the front door. A minute later, a young man walked down the hall and handed Donovan a white plastic bag packed with Styrofoam containers. Donovan thanked the man and tipped him, then closed the condo door behind him.

He could smell the delicious aroma coming from the bag and wondered what was waiting for him inside the Styrofoam containers. He never looked at the website menu so he never knew what he was having for dinner. He liked the surprise aspect of his dinner arrangements. He'd started the meal delivery service the day of Cathy's abrupt departure several weeks ago.

He went into the kitchen and put the contents of the containers onto plates and into bowls. He was pleased to see that tonight's dinner was fettuccine Alfredo, one of his favorites. Accompanying the pasta dish was a Caesar salad, and cheese garlic bread. For dessert was a slice of New York cheese cake. Donovan put the cheese cake in the refrigerator and got out a bottle of Chardonnay. He slid the fettuccine plate into the microwave to heat it up.

Once everything was ready and set in place on the table in the condo's dining area, Donovan sat down and poured a glass of wine. He glanced out the sliding glass doors that led to the condo's deck and saw the city lights of downtown Rivermont off in the distance, a view he enjoyed.

Today had been a particularly successful day for his day trading, quite profitable actually. And if Winters ever got back to him, tomorrow might be even more profitable.

After dinner, he settled himself in the leather recliner in the living room. He began to read the research reports and technical analyses that he'd downloaded from the account he maintained at one of the country's larger brokerages. The firm's research arm was considered one of the best in the financial services industry.

At a little before 10 p.m., he left the living room and returned to his office to check whether Walters had emailed him. To his irritation, still no word from Walters. Donovan shut down the computer, turned off the lights and headed to the bedroom and a good night's sleep.

Chapter 5
Leslie
Saturday, October 17

On Saturday, Leslie got up earlier than she usually did on weekends. Her plan was to go over to her parents' house to check on her Dad, help out her Mom and devil her younger sister Tanya.

Six months ago, Leslie's father, Jared Walters, had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He was still in the early stages of the disease, so far suffering only minor memory lapses and occasional angry outbursts. A month after the diagnosis, Tanya had left her financial advisor job in Chicago to come home to Rivermont and help out with her father. She moved in with her parents and took a part-time broker job at a brokerage headquartered in the city, arranging to work from home. Leslie was incredibly grateful to her sister for putting her life on hold to help their mother take care of their father. Leslie visited for several hours a couple of times a week as a way to give Tanya and their mother Eve a respite, however brief.

Today, the twins were going with her, at their request. They loved their grandfather dearly and were desperately sad about his illness. When Jared was first diagnosed, Leslie had explained Alzheimer's symptoms to Thomas and Maria and let them know that Grandpa would be going through a slow but inexorable slide down hill. Tears had been shed, then the twins' built-in creativity and determination took over. They came up with games and activities to do with Grandpa. Today, they planned to color with him and then play a table top version of Tic Tac Toe that Maria had built, with some help from Thomas.

In the kitchen, Leslie packed up some of the chocolate chip cookies she'd baked last night, her Dad's favorite, and various snacks and drinks for her and the twins. She stopped for a moment to go over to the laptop on the kitchen counter to make some notes about her mystery in progress. Then she made some notes about a blog she was planning to do about a loved one suffering from Alzheimer's.

When she heard noises coming from upstairs, she closed the laptop and began to prepare breakfast for the gang.

An hour later, the three of them were on their way to Leslie's parents house. Paul had left the same time they did, on his way to the golf course. The twins were giggling in the Jeep's back seat, planning all kinds of mischief, Leslie assumed. As she drove, she used the car's sync function to phone her Mom to let her know they were on their way but got voice mail. She left a message, then tried her sister Tanya's number. That too went to voice mail. Leslie left another message. She wondered why neither her mother nor her sister were picking up their calls. Her doom mentality instantly went to dire situations, and it took a few moments to talk herself out of impending disaster.

The Walters lived about 15 minutes away from Leslie and her family. Her parents were still in the house Leslie and Tanya had grown up in. It was a two-story colonial with a wraparound porch and a huge fenced-in back yard. Leslie had loved living there, growing up there. When it came time for her and Paul to move from their first house, a little bungalow on the outskirts of Rivermont, Leslie had unconsciously leaned toward houses that were similar to her childhood home. The Cartwrights' house was also a two story colonial with a wraparound porch but with a smaller back yard and one added feature: a turret at one side of the house. Leslie had made the inside of the turret into a playroom for the twins. Window seats, ideal places for reading, lined the walls, and shelving held books, board games and toys. Two love seats, at one end of the room, were situated in front of a wall-mounted TV. Thomas and Maria loved their playroom and spent a lot of their free time in the turret. Leslie sometimes visited the twins there, bringing along a book she was reading and sitting one of the window seats or a love seat.

Leslie pulled into the driveway of her parents' home and was surprised to see her mother standing on the wraparound porch. Leslie could see Tanya down the block, walking on the sidewalk toward the house with her father, her arm wrapped around his shoulders. At the sight of them, Leslie had a bad feeling. Hopefully, Tanya and Dad were just out for a morning walk.

Leslie and the twins got out of the Jeep, and Leslie asked Thomas and Maria to carry their things up to the porch where their grandmother stood. "I'm going to go see Grandpa and Aunt Tee."

Leslie walked out to the sidewalk and headed to where Tanya and Jared were slowly making their way back to the house.

"Dad!" Leslie said, patting her father on the shoulder. "It's good to see you."

Jared looked at Leslie, confusion evident on his face. He turned to Tanya and asked, "Do I know her?"

Tanya nodded and said, "Yes, Dad, of course you do. It's Leslie, your other daughter, my sister."

Leslie could feel the burn of tears in her eyes, and she turned her head away so her father and Tanya couldn't see the tears.

In silence, the three of them walked to the Walters home where Eve Walters stood on the porch with Thomas and Maria. Eve pulled Tanya to one side and whispered, "Where did you find him?"

In return, Tanya whispered, "He was standing at the corner, looking around. Fortunately, he willingly walked back with me."

Eve turned to her husband and took his arm. "Let's go inside, sweetheart. I'm feeling a little chilly." They walked inside, followed by Tanya, the twins, and Leslie bringing up the rear.

In the entry hall, Eve turned to Leslie and the twins and said, "I think Grandpa is going to rest for a bit. I'll take him back to our room and get him settled. Then I'll be back to play with my favorite grandchildren." As she turned to go, the twins laughed, and Thomas called out, "Grandma, I want to remind you that we're your only grandchildren."

Eve laughed in return and gave them a backward wave as she escorted Jared down the hall to the master suite. Leslie watched their progress and felt an overwhelming wave of sadness.

When Jared had been diagnosed, Eve decided it would be easier for him to be on the first floor of their house. She transformed what had been a huge sunroom at the back of the house into a master suite, complete with an adjoining bathroom. She furnished the room with furniture familiar to Jared: the king-sized bed from their upstairs bedroom, a couch and two recliners from the family room, and the wall-mounted TV Jared watched religiously. Bookshelves on one wall held Jared's favorite books. In one corner was a small, round dining table with two chairs where Jared and Eve often shared meals. Jared's physician had applauded Eve's idea of creating a comfortable, familiar space for her husband. Eve slept every night in the king-sized bed next to her husband of 45 years. She knew what lay ahead and was determined to live in the moment and not worry about future problems.

Eve got Jared settled in the bed, kissed him on the forehead, then set about closing the vertical blinds that covered the bank of windows across the back wall of the bedroom. By the time she tiptoed out of the room, Jared was already asleep and softly snoring.

Eve tracked down Leslie and the twins in the kitchen. Leslie was putting the chocolate chip cookies on a plate. She set them on the counter and said, "Okay, everybody, have a cookie."

The twins were first in line, of course, followed by Tanya. Eventually, Eve took a cookie, broke off a piece and put it in her mouth and chewed. "Wow, these are good cookies, honey" Eve said .

"They should be. It's your recipe, Mom," Leslie said with a grin.

Eve laughed and turned to give Leslie a hug.

The twins took their cookies and backpacks and went over to sit at the kitchen table. Thomas took out his tablet, and Maria took out her book. Leslie was going to tell them not to bury their faces in the device and the book but changed her mind and let it go. She wanted to talk with her mother out of earshot of the twins, and with them engrossed in their favorite things, this was a perfect opportunity. Leslie looked at her mother and then her sister and gestured toward the living room, The three women left the kitchen and seated themselves in the living room.

"Mom, Tanya," Leslie began but that's as far as she got.

Tanya said, "Les, evidently Dad had a episode a little before you got here. Mom and I were in the kitchen cleaning up after breakfast. We thought Dad was in his room. After we'd finished in the kitchen, Mom went in to see Dad but he wasn't there. We searched the house, downstairs and upstairs, and the garage, but couldn't find him. I finally went down the street and found him standing on the corner and brought him back. He couldn't tell me why he was out there or where he was going."

"Has this ever happened before?" Leslie asked.

Both women shook their heads, and Eve said, "He's never left the house like that before. In fact, we have trouble getting him to leave the house for doctor's appointments. That's why this was so strange."

"Mom, is Dad getting worse?" Leslie asked.

Eve nodded and said, "Yes, he is, sweetie. Every day you can see him drifting further away. He still recognizes Tanya and me, and that's a blessing. But I know the day is coming when he no long knows us. I dread that day."

For a moment, the three women sat in silence. Then Eve stood up, saying, "Let's go see what my precious grandchildren are up to." She headed toward the kitchen. Leslie and Tanya stayed behind, as Eve knew they would. She always let them tell each other the difficult truths that had to be told.

"So, Sis, what's the deal?" Leslie asked when Eve was safely out of earshot.

Tanya sighed, and said, "Daddy is getting worse every day. It's as though the disease is progressing at warp speed. He has a doctor's appointment Monday morning, thank heavens. Mom is beside herself with worry. Hopefully, Doc Mac will be able to calm her down." Dr. McArthur, otherwise know to the family as Doc Mac, had been the family doctor for years. In addition to Doc Mac, Jared also saw a neurologist, Dr. Jansen, who specialized in Alzheimer's and who practiced at the same hospital as Doc Mac.

"Let me know how the appointment goes," Leslie said, then stopped abruptly. "Strike that. May I go along with you Monday to the doctor?"

Tanya looked dubiously at Leslie and asked, "Are you sure you want to do that? Aren't you too busy?"

"I hope I'm never too busy for family," Leslie said softly. "What time is Dad's appointment?"

"10 a.m. We're leaving at 9:30 so if you can be here then, we can all go together," Tanya said.

"I'll be here," Leslie said.

"Thanks, Sis. This will mean a lot to Mom. And it means a lot to me," Tanya said.

"I'm sorry I haven't been as involved as I should have been. That stops now," Leslie said.

The sisters stood and hugged, then Tanya said, "Let's go get some of those chocolate chip cookies."

Chapter 6
Leslie
Saturday, October 17

Saturday night, after the twins were in bed, Leslie brought her laptop down to the family room. Paul was in his recliner, watching a program on the History channel. He looked up with a smile when Leslie came into the room.

"Okay if I join you?" Leslie asked.

"Absolutely!" Paul said.

Leslie sat on the end of the couch nearest him and opened the laptop on her lap. "Will my tap-tapping bother you?" she asked.

"Not at all," Paul said. "I'm glad for the company. What are you working on? Your mystery?"

"No," Leslie said. "I'm writing a blog about Alzheimer's."

"That's heavy," Paul said.

"Yep," Leslie said.

Earlier in the day, while the twins were in their rooms doing whatever it was they did in their rooms, Leslie told Paul about the episode her father had gone through. Paul had comforted her, knowing how difficult her father's condition and prognosis were for her.

Leslie hesitated, then asked, "Would you be willing to critique the blog before I post it?"

"Of course," Paul said.

"It's just that this is so personal to me, and I want to get it just right. I don't want it to sound as though it's some kind of plea for pity. I want to write a straightforward, honest message about what it's like to have a family member with Alzheimer's," Leslie said.

"And I promise to give you a straightforward, honest appraisal of your blog," Paul said. He stood up and walked over to where Leslie sat. He leaned down to kiss her, then straightened and said, "How about a glass of wine?"

"Sounds good to me," Leslie said, as she began to type on the laptop.

An hour later, Leslie had finished the blog. She carried the laptop over to Paul sitting in the recliner and handed it to him. "Here you go, sweetheart. Promise to be honest?" she asked.

"Always," Paul said as he began to read the words on the screen.

Leslie picked up the two wine glasses and headed for the kitchen. She thought about writing the blog. The words had come so easily, much more so than usual. She could remember only one other blog that had flowed so quickly and effortlessly. That had been the blog about domestic violence. That one had come easily but had

broken her heart, just as the Alzheimer's one had. The reason for that blog had originated from what had happened to one of Leslie's friends, a victim of domestic violence.

Suzanne Hamilton and Leslie had been college roommates but had lost touch after graduation. Leslie had been delighted when she discovered that Suzanne's daughter Pammie was in kindergarten with the twins. They'd renewed their friendship and had spent time each school day morning together at the coffee shop near Rivermont Elementary. At first, they chatted about the kids, the school, friends from college, all innocuous subjects.

From the start, Leslie had noticed that her friend wasn't aging well. She had dark circles under eyes, lines around her eyes and mouth. Her once-shining eyes were dull and dim. Eventually, Leslie came to believe that her friend was putting on a show for her, pretending that her life was good, that everything was all right. Leslie wanted to help but didn't know what to do. She didn't want to intrude but she hoped Suzanne would confide in her.

Finally, one day at the coffee house, three or so years after they'd reconnected, Leslie noticed an ugly bruise on Suzanne's wrist.

"Suze, what happened to your wrist?" Leslie asked.

"Oh, this?" Suzanne said, her voice nonchalant. "'It's nothing. I slipped going down the basement steps and landed on my wrist. It'll be all right in a few days."

"It looks bad," Leslie said. "Did you go to the doctor?"

"No, it wasn't that serious," Suzanne said.

Leslie dropped the subject and was about to tell Suzanne good-bye and head home to her computer when she noticed the tears in Suzanne's eyes. She reached across the table and took Suzanne's hand. "What is it, sweetie?"

Suzanne picked up a napkin and began wiping at her tears. Leslie sat patiently, waiting for Suzanne to talk to her.

Suzanne looked at Leslie and tried to speak but began to cry again. Leslie stood and said, "Let's get out of here." They left the coffee shop and headed to where their cars were parked.

"Come on home with me," Leslie said, standing by Suzanne's car.

"I can't," Suzanne said and started to turn away. Leslie reached out to put her hand on Suzanne's arm. To Leslie's surprise, at the touch, Suzanne flinched and took a step backwards.

The two women stood staring at one another for a moment. Then Leslie said, "Suzanne, what is it? What's wrong?"

Suzanne shook her head, and once again the tears were running down her cheeks. Leslie wrapped an arm around her shoulder and said, "Let's sit in your car."

Suzanne hesitated, then said, "Okay. But I can only stay a moment. I'm expected home." Her words brought on fresh tears.

The two women got into Suzanne's Lexus and sat for a moment in silence while Suzanne wiped away her tears and blew her nose with tissues from the console.

Finally, Leslie took a deep breath and said, "Will you tell me what's wrong? Maybe I can help."

"No one can help," Suzanne said, with a light hiccup in her voice. "It's hopeless."

Once again, Leslie reached out a hand to her friend as she said, "Nothing is ever hopeless. There's always something you can do."

"I wish that were true," Suzanne said. "But sometimes there's just no hope."

"Please tell me what's going on," Leslie said in a gentle voice.

Suzanne shook her head and said, "I can't."

"Sweetie, we've been friends for a long time. You can tell me anything. And it won't go anywhere. It will stay right here, between us," Leslie said.

Suzanne blew her nose again, then buried her face in her hands. Through Suzanne's fingers, Leslie heard the muffled words, "It's Russ."

"Oh, Suzanne, is her sick?" Leslie said.

Removing her hands from her face, Suzanne shook her head and said, "No, it's nothing like that."

"Then what is it?" Leslie said.

"He just gets so angry. He has such a temper. And sometimes, well, sometimes he gets what you might call physical with his anger," Suzanne said, careful to not look at Leslie as she spoke.

"He hit you?" Leslie said, disbelief evident in her tone.

"I'm sorry to say," Suzanne said.

"More than one time? Leslie asked.

Suzanne nodded and whispered a gravelly "Yes."

Leslie sat in stunned silence, not knowing what to say. She didn't know Russ Hamilton well but she never would have pegged him as an abusive husband.

"It started shortly after Pammie was born. She was a difficult child. First, it was colic, then it was nightmares. Russ had no patience with her. He would yell at her to stop crying and that just made her cry harder. I tried to calm him down but he would just get angry with me then," Suzanne said.

"He never hurt Pammie did he?" Leslie said.

"No, not yet. But I'm afraid that day is coming. That's why I keep thinking I have to do something but I don't know what to do," Suzanne said. Tears slid down her cheeks, and she brushed them away.

Leslie thought for a moment, then said, "You and Pammie need to come stay with us while we figure this out."

"No, thank you for offering but I couldn't do that. That would disrupt your life too much. And Russ would never let us go," Suzanne said.

"Well, you wouldn't let him know what you were planning. You'd just do it. And we wouldn't let him know where you were. Paul and I would help you get into some kind of protection program. And meanwhile, you'd be safe with us," Leslie said.

For a few moments, Suzanne was silent. Then she broke down in wracking sobs, burying her face in her hands and struggling to catch her breath. Leslie gently patted her on the back and gave her a handful of tissues. Finally, the sobs subsided. Suzanne looked at Leslie, her eyes red and bloodshot, her nose red, and said, "I don't even know what safe would feel like anymore."

Leslie finally convinced Suzanne that her only hope lay in getting out of her house and coming to stay with Leslie. Suzanne said she'd go home and pack some things for her and Pammie and then come to Leslie's house. Leslie wanted to come along with her but Suzanne said that wasn't necessary. Russ was at work and wouldn't know what she was doing. Leslie got out of Suzanne's car and waved as her friend drove away.

And that was the last time Leslie saw her friend alive.

After Suzanne's death, Leslie learned bits and pieces of the story from news reports and town intel and managed to put together a timeline of Suzanne's last hours.

Suzanne went home to pack and soon after, Russ arrived. Evidently, unbeknownst to Suzanne, Russ had installed hidden video cameras throughout their home, which he monitored using an app on his phone. When he saw Suzanne packing, he went home to confront her. A fight ensued, and Suzanne ended up at the bottom of the circular stairs leading to the second floor.

When Leslie heard about her friend's death, she talked to Paul about whether she should tell the police what Suzanne had told her about Russ's abuse. Paul said, "Let me run it by Detective Bob and see what he thinks." Detective Bob was a Rivermont detective who was assigned as a community liaison with the Rivermont Elementary school. Paul and Bob were friends, and Paul respected Bob's instincts.

Detective Bob had come by their house and took a statement from Leslie. He thanked her for stepping up and standing by her friend. Leslie wanted to ask the detective about the case and about Russ Hamilton. But she knew he wouldn't be able to tell her anything because it was an ongoing investigation. She knew that much from the NCIS and CSI TV shows she watched.

Russ Hamilton was arrested for the murder of his wife and was eventually convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole. The prosecution had used the video from his concealed cameras that showed him hitting Suzanne repeatedly, then grabbing her by the shoulders and hurling her down the stairs. The jury was only out for an hour of deliberations before rendering their guilty verdict.

Pammie went to live with her maternal grandparents in Texas. The twins were sad to lose their friend but Leslie told them Pammie was going to be very happy to be with her grandma and grandpa..

The domestic abuse had weighed heavily on Leslie's mind. The only way she knew to deal with it was to write about it. She'd recently started blogging on various things that interested her, and she'd been building a

respectable following. This topic was the most challenging she'd yet attempted. It seemed to take her an inordinate amount of time to write a 1,000 word blog. She ended up putting the blog aside while she did research on domestic abuse and what resources were available to victims. She began to wear one of the purple ribbons used to promote awareness of domestic violence.

Leslie put together a comprehensive list of resources for domestic violence and published it as a future link from her actual blog on domestic abuse. Then, she finally was able to finish writing the blog. She knew Paul would be glad the blog was done because he was concerned about her obsession with what Suzanne Hamilton had gone through and the way she'd died and the reason for her death. She followed her usual procedure of asking Paul for his input and was surprised at how strongly it impacted her husband. He told her it was perfect and that he was proud of her.

Leslie was also surprised at the level of response she received for the blog. Hundreds of readers commented on the message, and Leslie replied to all of the comments. One of the commenters, who signed her comments as Cathy, had shared an awful story of her abuse by her once-loving husband. She thanked Leslie for her message and told Leslie that the blog had given her the courage and the resources to end the relationship. Leslie had responded to Cathy with encouragement. But she never heard back from Cathy. She often wondered if the woman had followed through with her plan to escape her abusive husband. She hoped Cathy had managed to build a new life for herself.

Chapter 7
Terry Donovan
Sunday, October 18

After breakfast at the cafe in his condo complex, Terry jogged back home. He was planning on a day of reading the stack of company research reports waiting for him. But first things first. He went straight to the computer in his home office and booted it up.

He searched again on Pia Kennedy and again her blog was the first item in the search results. This time he was delighted to see she'd posted a new message. He opened the blog and began to read. "What a downer this one was," he thought. As he read, he shook his head. "Who cares about an old dude with Alzheimer's?"

But then an idea before to form in his mind, and he let himself go with the flow of his thoughts.

Chapter 8
Leslie
Monday, October 19

As Leslie drove home from her parents' house on Monday morning, she felt the tears slip down her cheeks. She brushed the tears away and thought about her father's doctor's appointment. To her surprise, her father's primary care physician, Doc Mac, had invited Dr. Roger Jansen, her father's neurologist to join them for the appointment. They'd all met in one of conference rooms on the first floor of Rivermont Memorial Hospital. There were six of them in the room, seated at one end of the long conference room table.

Doc Mac was the first to speak once they were all settled. Addressing his words to Eve Walters, Doc Mac said, "Dr. Jansen is here because he has something to suggest about Jared's treatment. Roger is spearheading a clinical trial of an Alzheimer's drug under development. The preliminary results of the drug testing have been positive. Roger, I'll turn the floor over to you."

Dr. Jansen set out to provide details on the drug with the unpronounceable name. "The researchers report that the drug reduces amyloid plaques in patients with Alzheimer's disease. It also provides a meaningful reduction in the worsening of clinical symptoms. The findings include fewer episodes of memory losses in patients on the drug. Those patients also had fewer episodes of emotional upset, anger and personality changes. As Dr. McArthur said, the preliminary results have been promising. I'd like to enroll Jared in the clinical trial," Dr. Jansen said. "I have a couple of slots left in this first trial, and I hope you'll agree to have Jared take one of the slots."

For a moment, the room was silent. Then Tanya spoke up, "When does the clinical trial begin?"

"In ten days," Dr. Jansen said. "If you all agree to have Jared participate, we would have him check into the hospital three days before the trial begins so we can do our observations, data gathering and testing."

"Would he be in the hospital during the trial?" Eve asked, a look of concern on her face.

"No, only for the three days prior to the start of the trial, and then for three days after the end of the trial. The last three days are to make sure there are no adverse reactions to the drug."

Leslie looked over at her father, who was sitting next to Eve across the table from Leslie and Tanya. Jared was staring out the window, seemingly oblivious to what was going on in the room. It broke her heart to see her once strong, indomitable father so broken.

"If it's all right with you," Dr. Jansen said to Eve, "we'll leave the four of you alone for a few minutes to discuss our proposal. I apologize for the rush but we need an answer right away."

After Doc Mac and Dr. Jansen left the conference room, Eve looked across the table at Leslie and Tanya, and said, "Well, girls, what do you think?"

Leslie and Tanya exchanged looks, and Leslie said, "Mom, this is really your decision for Dad. What do you think about we heard from the doctors?"

"Well, as Doc Mac said, the results from the previous clinical trials seem very promising." Eve leaned into her husband and took his hand and kissed it. "What do you girls think about what the doctors said?"

Once again Leslie and Tanya exchanged looks. This time Tanya spoke for the sisters. "The results sound good. I've done some reading on Alzheimer's, and the build-up of amyloid plaque is what they think causes the disease. So anything that reduces the plaque has to be good, right, Sis?" Tanya turned to Leslie as she spoke.

"I would think so," Leslie said. She turned to look at Eve across the table. "So Mom, what's your answer?"

Eve nodded, then wiped away the tears sliding down her cheeks. "I want to do everything I can for your father. And I know both of you want the same thing. Girls, I think we should do it, right?"

Leslie and Tanya looked at one another and said in unison, "Yes!"

The door to the conference room opened, and Doc Mac and Dr. Jansen came into the room. Doc Mac looked at Eve and said, "Well?"

Chapter 9
Donovan
Monday, October 19

Donovan's idea about the bitch's dad was rolling right along. He'd spent several hours Sunday evening researching the man. It was amazing what you could find out about people on the Internet. By the time he shut down his computer, he knew the man's name, address, phone numbers, educational background, work history, and family tree. His medical history was the only thing beyond Donovan's investigations, so far. He thought he might have a way to access the guy's medical information. He put the printouts with the man's background information into an expandable file folder. He thought of it as a dossier on Jared Walters. He liked that word and said it aloud, "Dossier."

He hadn't figured out his plan for the man and his family yet but he was working on it.

Chapter 10
Leslie
Monday, October 19

After dinner, the Cartwrights spent part of the evening together in the family room. At about eight o'clock, the twins decided to go upstairs to their rooms. Leslie was anxious to talk to Paul about her father and so didn't try to persuade them to stay downstairs awhile longer. They were in their usual places -- Paul leaning back in his recliner, and Leslie perched at the end of the couch nearest Paul and his recliner.

"I'll be up in half an hour or so to say goodnight and tuck you in," Leslie said. She could feel the eye rolls from the twins and laughed out loud, then said, "I know the two of you gave me eye rolls at that."

Thomas and Maria laughed as they left the room, and Paul joined in their laughter.

"So you're ganging up on me, too?" Leslie said.

"Not at all, sweetheart. I'm just enjoying the kids," Paul said. "Now tell me what's on your mind."

"How do you know I have something on my mind?" Leslie said.

"I've known you for more than 15 years so I always know when you have something on your mind," Paul said.

"Well, of course you're right," Leslie said. "So here's the deal. I told you things went well with my father's appointment this morning. But I didn't give you details. Dad's doctors want him to take part in a clinical trial of a new experimental Alzheimer's drug that's had really good results. Mom had to give them a decision this morning. Tanya and I gave her our opinions but told her the decision had to be hers. Ultimately, she decided to enroll Dad in the trial."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Paul said.

"Yes, I guess so," Leslie said.

"Then why aren't you happier about it?" Paul said.

For a moment, Leslie didn't answer. Then she said, "Mixed emotions, I guess. No matter how good the drug is, it can't cure Daddy. It can only delay the inevitable. I have to accept that."

Paul lowered the recliner, stood up and came over to sit next to Leslie. He reached out an arm and pulled her in close to him. For a few moments, they sat in silence. Then Paul asked, "When does the trial start?"

Leslie said, "Soon. Ten days from now. Daddy has to be in the hospital for tests and things three days before the trial starts. So he goes into the hospital a week from today. The trial lasts six months. At the end of the trial, he spends another three days in the hospital for follow-up tests to make sure there were no adverse side effects from the drug."

"What can we do to help?" Paul asked.

Leslie loved that he said we. "I was thinking that you and I could drive Mom and Dad and Tanya to the hospital next week if you can spare the time. Your Suburban is big enough to hold us all comfortably," Leslie said.

"Yes," Paul said. "I can definitely make that happen."

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, then Paul said, "I've been meaning to tell you something."

For no reason she could define, Leslie felt a frisson of fear at his words but said nothing.

Paul continued, "You remember that man you saw me talking to so intently the other day after school?"

"Yes, sure," Leslie said.

"Well, it turns out that it was Teddy's bookie, there to try to collect on Teddy's debts from me," Paul said.

"Turns out my fear was correct," Leslie thought. Out loud, she said, "Oh, no, Paul. Not again."

"Yes, again. I told the guy I wasn't in charge of Teddy's debts. Then he began threatening that Teddy might get hurt. Then he moved on to me and my family. I sent him away and told him not to come back. But I'm afraid we're not done with him. This has happened before."

"I know. That time you paid the guy off," Leslie said.

"Yes, that time I did because I could," Paul said. "This time Teddy's debts are so large that I couldn't do it even if I wanted to. We don't have the money."

"Oh, Paul, I'm so sorry," Leslie said. "Is there anything we can do to help Teddy?"

"I'm going to try to get him back in rehab for his gambling addiction but I don't know if he'll go."

"But what about the money he owes?" Leslie said.

"Teddy won't like it but I could go to his ex-wife for the money," Paul said. "Natalie has more money than she knows what to do with. And unfortunately for her, she still loves Teddy. So I guess my plan is to get Teddy into rehab and then go to see Natalie to get the money to pay off the bookie. I don't want to do it but there's no other way out. I don't want the mob or whomever to kill my kid brother."

Once again, they sat for a few minutes in silence. "Well, since it seems to be true confession time, I guess it's my turn," Leslie said.

Paul looked down at her with a quizzical look on his face as he said, "Your turn? What are you talking about."

"Well, I didn't want to worry you but since it happened again today at the hospital, I think I'd better tell you," Leslie said.

"Tell me what? Paul said, a definite note of concern in his voice.

"Last week, there were a few times that I felt someone was following me, watching me. Then it happened again today on my way home from Mom's. I haven't seen anyone but I just have this creepy feeling that someone has their eyes on me," Leslie said.

Paul pulled her in closer as he said, "Are you sure this isn't just your overactive writer's mind that's causing this?"

Leslie sat up and looked Paul in the eye, saying "Really?"

"Sorry," Paul said immediately, contrite at blaming Leslie's imagination on being responsible for her feeling of being watched and/or followed.

"I wasn't going to tell you about it. I didn't want you worrying. But when it happened today, I decided I'd better tell you," Leslie said.

"Do you want to report it to the police? That might be the best thing to do," Paul said.

"I thought about that but it's just a feeling. There's really not much to report," Leslie said.

Paul thought about it, then said, "Let me run it by Detective Bob and see what he thinks." In addition to working with Detective Bob in his role as a community liaison with the Rivermont Elementary school, Paul and Bob were friends. Paul respected Bob's instincts, and if Bob thought they should do something about Leslie's feeling of being watched, then they would do something about it.

A moment later, Thomas called downstairs. "Mom, we're ready for bed. Do you want to come tuck us in?" A burst of giggles followed Thomas's words.

Paul and Leslie looked at each other and grinned. They stood and headed out of the family room to the staircase. "Well, whom do I have the pleasure of accompanying upstairs tonight? Is it Leslie Cartwright or Pia Kennedy?"

Leslie gave Paul a gentle poke in the side, and said, "And which lovely woman do you want it to be?"

Chapter 11
Donovan
Monday, October 19

At almost midnight, Donovan was still at his computer in his condo's home office. He'd been there since after dinner. At first, he had been reading through online research reports and printing out those with particularly helpful information. When he was done with the reports, he switched topics, looking forward to refining his plans for the bitch. He pulled out his files and spread them out on the table next to his computer. He had the file on Jared Walters and his Alzheimer's. A file on Jared's daughter Tanya was next to her father's. The main file was on the bitch. That file was thicker than the other two.

Donovan opened the bitch's file and spread the contents across the table. Newspaper articles, photos, copies of her two mystery novels, printed copies of her online blogs, covered the table. At the top of the blog print-outs were the three blogs the bitch had written about domestic abuse. Donovan flipped through the papers, looking for a copy of the newspaper interview that appeared a few weeks ago in the Rivermont Times, the local newspaper.

In the article, the interviewer asked about the bitch's family. She told the reporter about her husband and twin ten-year-olds, then about her father, mother and sister, Tanya. The sister was what Donovan was most interested in at the moment. In the article, the bitch had said her sister returned to Rivermont from her home in Chicago to help with her father after his Alzheimer's diagnosis.

The article quoted the bitch as saying, "My sister Tanya was a financial advisor in Chicago, quite a successful one, in fact. She moved in with Mom and Dad and has been a lifesaver to both of them. She's working from home part-time with a local brokerage firm."

The article didn't give the name of the brokerage firm but it had been easy for Donovan to find all he needed to know about Tanya Walters on investor.gov. Last week he had set up an appointment for tomorrow with her to open an account with her brokerage. To conceal his real identity, he would use a set of false credentials. His plan was to first develop a client/broker relationship with Tanya Walters, then to develop it into a personal relationship. That would be the way for him to get close up and personal with the bitch and achieve his bottom-line objective of revenge.

His appointment with Tanya Walters would take place at the downtown headquarters of her brokerage firm. Donovan was vaguely familiar with the building, which was located near the riverfront. The building itself was quite the landmark. It was one of the tallest buildings in the city, a glass cube that towered over the downtown skyline. Donovan was looking forward to his encounter with Ms. Tanya Walters.

Chapter 12
Leslie
Tuesday, October 20

When Leslie got home from taking the twins to school on Tuesday morning, she poured a cup of coffee, sat at the kitchen counter and called her sister.

Tanya answered on the first ring. "Sis, what's up?"

"Just calling to see how things are in Walters' household," Leslie said.

Tanya hesitated a moment before answering, causing Leslie's heart rate to speed up. "Well, Les, things are a bit confused here. When we got home from the doctor's appointment yesterday, Mom and I talked with Dad about what happened in the appointment and about the clinical trial. But, honestly, I don't think he understood a word of what we said."

"How did Mom react to that ?" Leslie said.

"Not well. She doesn't want to force Dad into anything so she's starting to waffle about the decision for Dad to participate in the trial," Tanya said.

"Hmm, I wonder if I should talk to the two of them," Leslie said.

"It couldn't hurt. I've told Mom it's her decision and that you and I will support whatever she decides," Tanya said.

"Why don't I bring lunch over today and talk to Mom?" Leslie said.

"Sounds good to me," Tanya said. "I have an appointment downtown this morning but I should be back by noon or so. I could spend time with Dad while you and Mom talk."

"You're going downtown?" Leslie said, with a grin in her voice. "that means you'll have to change out of your jammies."

"Smart aleck!" Tanya said. "And they're not jammies. They're high-fashion yoga pants, and they're sooooo comfortable. But, yes, I will have to wear my professional clothes. I have an appointment with a potential new client."

"Well, have fun. I'll see you around noon. And please let Mom know I'm coming with lunch."

"Will do."

Leslie ended the call, then refilled her coffee cup. Time to go upstairs and put in a few hours of work. Charlotte and her stalker awaited.

Chapter 13
Donovan
Tuesday, October 20

Donovan had dressed carefully for his appointment with Tanya Walters. His charcoal gray bespoke suit, crisp white shirt and muted blue silk tie sent the message of a well-dressed man of means. He left his townhouse condo carrying a leather portfolio under one arm. In the portfolio were the various papers he would use for opening the brokerage account.

He headed toward the condo parking garage, one of the complex's selling points to Donovan and home to his silver Audi convertible. He and Cathy had lived here since just before last Christmas. She'd wanted to buy a house but Donovan hadn't wanted the hassle of home ownership. He wanted a landlord to handle the hassles, not him.

The drive downtown took less than fifteen minutes on the nearby highway. As he drove, Donovan went over the background story he had planned for the initial meeting with Tanya Walters. Supposedly he was a software engineer who had inherited a substantial estate from his parents. He'd left his job, having decided to try a life of leisure, at least for awhile. He already had accounts at several other brokerages and was interested in seeing what Tanya and her firm could do for his money. His persona for Tanya would be a quiet but charming intellect, single, fairly new to the city and oblivious to his understated good looks.

Donovan thought about his online research on Tanya. One of his search results included photos showing that she was attractive, auburn-haired, green-eyed, with a slender, athletic looking figure. He'd compared the photos he'd found online of Leslie to Tanya's and she and her sister were similar in looks and could have passed for fraternal twins.

At the brokerage's eye-catching, glass cube of a headquarters, Donovan parked in the underground garage and rode the elevator to the 20th floor where Tanya had told him her office was. At the receptionist's desk on the 20th floor, Donovan gave the young woman his name and said he had an appointment with Ms. Walters. The receptionist made a phone call, and a few minutes later Tanya Walters appeared, hand outstretched, to greet him.

"Mr. Townsend, it's a pleasure to meet you," Tanya said as they shook hands. "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding us."

"No trouble at all, Ms. Walters," Donovan said.

"If you'll just follow me," Tanya said as she headed down a long corridor.

Donovan followed her, keeping up with her brisk strides. She was even more attractive than in the photos he'd found online. Her auburn hair fell around her shoulders, and she wore an above-the-knee black pencil skirt, a kelly green blazer with a matching turtleneck sweater, and black high heels -- very high heels.

Halfway down the corridor, she paused outside a glass door leading to a small conference room. She opened the door and gestured for Donovan enter. She followed him into the room and closed the door behind her.

"May I get you coffee or water?" she asked.

"No, thank you," Donovan answered. "I'm good."

"Please have a seat" Tanya said as she sat on one side of the small glass-topped conference table.

Donovan sat across from her, laying his portfolio on the table in front of him. In front of Tanya lay an assortment of papers, brochures and file folders.

They spent the first few minutes chatting about the weather. Then Tanya smiled broadly and said, "Time to get down to business, Mr. Townsend."

"Please, call me Cliff, Ms. Walters," Donovan said.

"Certainly," Tanya said, "but please call me Tanya. Now, in our initial phone call, you mentioned that you wanted to open a brokerage account with our firm. Why our firm and why me?"

Donovan grinned as he said, "You certainly do come to the point. I like that."

"I believe in being direct, along with total honesty," Tanya said, answering his grin with one of her own. "Now, why this firm and why me?"

"I did some online research on brokerage firms in Rivermont, and your firm seemed the most interesting to me. I currently have accounts at two firms in California but neither of them have offices in Rivermont. I plan to stay here, at least for the foreseeable future, and I wanted an account at a firm here in the city. As part of my research of your firm, I looked into the various advisors and financial planners your firm employs. Your background and experience in Chicago was interesting. And you seem to have a certain expertise in the technical sector, and that's where my interests lie also."

As Donovan explained the research he'd done on the firm and on her, he told her he'd thought the firm's investment philosophy and strategies mirrored his own. As if to prove his point, he opened his portfolio and drew out a file folder containing the information he'd put together on the firm and on Tanya's broker background information. He handed the file to Tanya, who'd flipped through the pages, reading parts here and there. After a few minutes, she handed the file back to Donovan with a nod.

"Very thorough," Tanya said. "I'm impressed. Now, why don't you tell me a bit about yourself. Your profession, your background, family, you know..." her voice trailed off, and Donovan picked up the conversation.

"I was a software engineer for about ten years in California. Then recently, when my parents died, I came back to the Midwest to settle their estate, and I ended up staying," Donovan said.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Tanya said. "Do you have any other family here in Rivermont?"

"No," Donovan said. "My parents moved here a few years before their deaths. They had close friends who relocated here to be near their children and grandchildren. Mom and Dad wanted to be close to their friends, which they were able to do, at least for a few years. I was an only child, so we were a small family." "

"And do you have a wife? Children?" Tanya said.

"No, I'm single. No wife, no children, no siblings, just me," Donovan said.

For the next half hour, Tanya had Donovan go through information on account choices, fill out various forms and papers and discuss options such as whether he wanted paper statements for his account mailed to him or if he wanted to access them online and how often he wanted Tanya to contact him.

Donovan was being his charming self. He smiled often, leaned in to the table as Tanya explained how their research division worked, and nodded as Tanya talked about the investment philosophy of the firm. Donovan asked questions, made comments and paid close attention to Tanya's words. He could feel her interest in him increasing, and he thought, "Gotcha!"

And of course, he didn't make the mistake of openly flirting with her. Time was on his side, and eventually he'd reel her in.

As the meeting was wrapping up, Tanya glanced at her watch and said, "I didn't realize how long we'd been meeting. I hope I haven't made you late for anything?"

"No, my day is completely open," Donovan said. "What about you?"

"Mainly just work," Tanya said. "But I am having lunch with my family in a little while."

"Your family?" Donovan said.

"Yes, lunch at my parents' house with them and my sister," Tanya said.

"Sounds pleasant," Donovan said.

"I hope so," Tanya said, and left it at that.

They scheduled another meeting for the following week, and Tanya walked Donovan out of the conference room and down the corridor to the bank of elevators. They shook hands, and Tanya walked back to the conference room.

As Donovan stood there waiting for the elevator to arrive, he thought about Tanya's lunch plans. On the spur of the moment, he decided to see if he could follow Tanya home. He hadn't found out yet where the Walters family lived so following Tanya would speed up that research. And it might give him the opportunity to follow Leslie again.

Chapter 14
Leslie
Tuesday, October 20

Leslie stopped at a deli near her parents' home and picked up several different sandwiches, along with an order of potato soup for her Dad. The soup was one of his favorites, and something that he could easily eat. When she got to her parents' house, Eve told her that Tanya hadn't gotten back yet but had called to say she was on her way. Evidently, her morning appointment had lasted longer than expected.

Eve and Leslie set the table in the dining nook and spread the food out in the center.

"Mom, should I heat up Dad's soup?" Leslie said.

"No, it's fine the way it is. It'll be easier for him to eat if it isn't too hot," Eve said.

Tanya came flying through the kitchen door, and gave Leslie a hug and then hugged her mother. "Hi, ladies!" she said.

"What's with you?" Leslie asked.

"I'm just in a good mood, that's all," Tanya answered.

"Wow, sis, you look great! I love your outfit, especially those shoes. I'm going to have to borrow them. Why are you so done up?" Leslie said.

"Well, you have to up your game when you meet with a potential new client, so that's what I did," Tanya said. Then she gave Leslie an evil grin as she said, "And boy, am I glad I did!"

Eve looked quizzically at Tanya and said, "Why is that, dear?"

"My potential client is a hottie, handsome, handsome, handsome. And charming to boot. And a bit shy, which I liked," Tanya said.

"Do tell!" Leslie said. "Give us all the details."

"Please wait till I return. I'm going to get your father for lunch," Eve said.

Tanya and Leslie brought glasses of ice water to the table and sat down to wait for their Mom and Dad. A few moments later, Eve and Jared came into the kitchen and sat at the table. Eve helped Jared get started on his soup, then unwrapped her sandwich and began to eat. The girls started on their sandwiches.

"So tell us all about this charming client of yours," Eve said. "What's his name? Where does he live? I'm assuming he's single or you wouldn't be so excited about him."

"Right. He's single. His name is Cliff Townsend. His parents lived in Rivermont and died recently. He came here to settle their estate. Evidently, it was quite a large estate, and he wants to open an investment account. He said he's an only child so he has no family, at least no close family." Tanya said.

"What does he do?" asked Leslie.

"He had been a software engineer, on the West Coast. But now he's a man of independent means, I guess. He's down to earth, open, intelligent -- I could go on and on. The time just flew by. I had scheduled the meeting for an hour, and we met for almost two hours," Tanya said.

Eve stood up and turned to Jared, "Let's get you settled in the family room, my love." Eve put her arm through Jared's as they walked out of the room. She turned back to Tanya and said, "Not another word till I return."

A few minutes later, Eve was back in the kitchen. "I've got your father settled in front of the television, watching *The Talk*. He does like that show. So tell us more about Mr. Cliff Townsend, sweetie."

"Well, I scheduled a follow up meeting with him next week, so I'll have more to report then." Tanya paused, then continued, "Seriously, guys, he just blew me away. I've never been so charmed by someone I've just met."

"I can't wait to hear the next chapter in this romance," Leslie said.

"Me either," Eve agreed.

"Keep your fingers crossed for me," Tanya said.

Chapter 15
Leslie
Tuesday, October 20

After lunch, as she and Leslie had arranged, Tanya joined Jared in the family room while Eve and Leslie straightened the kitchen. When they were done, Leslie said, "Mom, let's have a cup of coffee and sit here and talk."

Eve looked at Leslie, wondering what was going on with her oldest daughter. But as she thought about it, she had an inkling of what Leslie wanted to talk about.

Eve fixed two cups of coffee in the Keurig and brought them over to the dining nook. Leslie had placed chocolate chip cookies on a plate and put the plate on the table.

When she and her mother were settled, Eve said, "You and your sister arranged for you to have a chance to talk to me alone, didn't you?"

"Guilty as charged, Mom," Leslie said. "Tanya told me you're having second thoughts about enrolling Daddy in the clinical trial. What happened? I thought you were in favor of it."

"Well, I was. But then I started wondering if I was wanting this for your father just so that I could have more quality time with him. I just didn't want to force anything on him."

"Oh, Mom, I don't think you would be forcing anything on Dad. I think you would be trying to improve the condition of his life. I think if he were able he would thank you for doing it."

Eve was silent for a few moments, deep in thought. "Maybe you're right, sweetie. No, actually, I know you're right. I'll call Doc Mac and Dr. Jansen this afternoon and tell them I'd like to enroll your Dad in the trial."

Leslie stood and walked the few steps to where her mother sat. She leaned down and hugged Eve. Then she kissed her Mom good-bye and went into the family room to say good-bye to her Dad and Tanya. Jared was engrossed in watching TV but held up a cheek for her kiss.

"See you soon, Dad," Leslie said. Jared nodded but kept his eyes and his attention on the TV. Leslie felt the sting of tears in her eyes. It broke her heart to see her once vibrant father reduced to this declining man.

She turned to Tanya, who was sitting on the love seat next to her Dad's recliner and gave her sister a thumbs-up. "All is well, sis."

Tanya gave her a thumbs-up in return and said. "Thank you!"

"See you soon," Leslie said. Tears ran down her cheeks, and she wiped them away as she left her parents' home and headed for her Jeep. She sat behind the wheel for a few minutes, trying to get her emotions under control. Crying about her father's condition was not a positive thing to do. She wiped away the tears, blew her nose and reapplied make-up.

She glanced at her watch and saw that it was almost 2 o'clock. She had to be at the elementary school to pick up the twins by 3 o'clock. She decided to stop at her old standby, the library across from the school. She got on the highway and within 15 minutes was pulling into the library parking lot. She found a spot close to the main entrance and pulled in. She locked the Jeep and walked the few steps to the entrance. The weather was so

beautiful. She wished this Indian summer would last forever. But unfortunately, Rivermont's frigid winter was just around the corner. The twins would be delighted for snowy weather. They loved sledding, building snowmen and having snowball fights.

The automatic sliding glass doors whooshed opened, and Leslie walked through them and up the broad stairs to the main library area. For a moment, she paused halfway up the stairs and glanced behind her. She had the funniest feeling that there was someone behind her but when she looked around, the stairs were empty. At the top of the stairs, she turned toward the children's area to select books for the twins. Two books in hand, she went over to the main desk to check out the books. The library had a self-checkout area but Leslie was friendly with most of the librarians, and she preferred to go to one of her friends.

"Hi Bernie," Leslie said to the woman at one of the checkout computers.

"Hi, Leslie. How are you doing?" Bernie said. Bernie was short for Bernadette. She was the assistant head librarian and had been at the Rivermont Library for as long as Leslie had been going there, almost ten years now.

"I'm doing okay," Leslie said, handing the two children's books and her library card to Bernie. "Except for this silly feeling that I'm being followed or watched."

"Really?" Bernie said.

"Really. In fact, as I was walking up the stairs here, I was sure someone was behind me but when I turned around, no one was there. I'm beginning to think it's all in my imagination."

"Maybe, maybe not. Keep an eye on your surroundings, and be aware of what's going on," Bernie said.

"You sound like you know what I'm talking about," Leslie said.

"Well, that's because I do. A couple of years ago, I was having the same feelings you're talking about. I tried to ignore it, dismiss it. But it kept happening. Finally, I stopped in at the police station and talked to one of the police officers there. He arranged to have someone follow me, at a distance. And sure enough, there was someone else following me. It turned out to be some creep who'd seen me here in the library and decided to follow me. They arrested him but found out he had mental issues so he was committed."

"Whoa, what a story! That's a good idea, about having someone follow you to see if anyone else is following you. My husband is going to talk to the detective who's assigned to Rivermont Elementary about the situation, and I'll suggest having someone follow me."

Bernie checked out the books and handed them back to Leslie, saying, "Let me know what happens. By the way, how's your new book coming? I'm looking forward to reading it."

"It's going really well. And of course, there's a stalker and a follower in it. So maybe that's what's causing my problem," Leslie said.

"Could be," Bernie said, then laughed said good-bye as she walked away to help another patron.

Leslie headed down the steps and out to her car, still feeling as though someone's eyes were on her. She was a few minutes early to pick up the twins and was happy to see that her regular parking spot was there waiting for her. She pulled into the space and left the engine running, to keep the Jeep warm for the twins. To her surprise,

Paul came with the twins to meet her. She lowered the driver's side window, and said, "To what do I owe the honor, Mr. Principal?"

Paul leaned down and whispered, "Get out of the car for a minute. I have something to tell you that I don't want the twins to hear."

Leslie felt a rush of concern as she wondered what was wrong. The twins climbed into the back seat as Leslie opened the driver's door and got out. She leaned in the still open window and said, "I'll just be a minute, kiddos."

"What's wrong, Paul? You're scaring me," Leslie said.

"Nothing's wrong, sweetheart. I just didn't want the twins to hear what I'm going to tell you," Paul said. "I talked to Detective Bob today and told him about your problem. He wants to talk to you about it. He's going to come by the house tonight, around 9, after the twins have gone to bed."

"So he thinks I really have something to worry about?" Leslie said.

"Evidently. But not to worry. We're going to handle this, and everything is going to be all right," Paul said.

Leslie stood on her toes and kissed Paul on his cheeks. "Thank you, sweetheart. I can always count on you."

Paul leaned in the open car window and said, "Bye, twinnies. I'll be home soon."

Leslie got back in the car and drove home. As she drove, she thought about the upcoming meeting with Detective Bob. It scared her that he believed she had something to worry about.

Chapter 16
Donovan
Tuesday, October 20

Donovan stood at the main library desk and watched Leslie walk down the stairs. So, she was feeling followed, according to the conversation he overheard her having with the librarian. He hadn't known whether or not she was aware of being watched, but she was. He wasn't sure what he thought about that. He had tried to stay hidden but evidently he'd messed up somehow, somewhere. But at least she hadn't actually seen him. She'd just sensed him. Well, soon enough, she'd see him.

The library had been the main place where he'd been watching Leslie. He'd easily discovered that she usually spent some time there in the afternoon before picking her kids up from the elementary school across the street. This was the first time he'd been able to overhear any of her conversations with librarians. She seemed to be well-known here and well-acquainted with several of the workers.

He strode out of the main library area and down the broad steps. His plan was coming along nicely; things were falling into place more quickly than he'd anticipated. The appointment with Leslie's sister Tanya earlier in the day had gone well. He was going to charm her into a relationship, as a way for him to get closer to Leslie and her family. His revenge would take awhile but he had all the time in the world.

Chapter 17
Leslie
Tuesday, October 20

Tuesday evening, once the twins were settled in bed, Leslie paced the house, anxious about the upcoming meeting with Detective Bob. She assumed she would have to get used to calling him Bob rather than Detective Bob, the name the elementary school students knew him by. Earlier in the evening, while the twins and Paul were watching Ninja Warrior, she'd gone to her office to make some notes about the times and places that she'd felt under observation. She was surprised to find that most of them were at the library. That seemed like an unusual place to stalk someone. She'd put her notes in the pocket of her jeans and every once in awhile, would pull them out and read them over again.

She was unable to settle down. While Paul sat in the family room, reading the newspaper, she wandered from room to room, straightening things up, putting things away. Landing in the kitchen, she brewed a pot of coffee, and put some of the chocolate chip cookies on a plate.

She jumped at the sound of the doorbell and hesitated, wondering if should let Paul answer the door. Then, accepting that this was her deal, she took a deep, calming breath before heading toward the front door. She and Paul nearly collided in the entry foyer, with her coming from the kitchen and Paul coming from the family room. Paul grabbed her hand, and together, they walked to the front door. Paul opened it to a tall, broad-shouldered man standing on their wide front veranda. The porch light was on, and detective Bob's smiling, friendly face smiled down at them.

"Hi, folks," he said, his voice deep and resonant.

Paul knew him well, having worked with Detective Bob as the Rivermont Police Department's liaison with the school district for several years. Leslie's relationship with him was a different one, also over the past several years. She'd met Detective Bob Chase at a meeting of a crime writers' organization she belonged to. He'd been their guest speaker, and Leslie had been impressed with his knowledge and his outlook on law enforcement. He'd passed out his business cards and had invited the attendees to follow up with him if they had additional questions.

At first, Leslie had been reluctant to contact the detective, not wanting to be a pest. But in the midst of her first mystery, she ran into a police-related stumbling block in the plot. She'd done online research but hadn't come up with an acceptable solution to her problem. So, gathering up her courage, she'd placed a phone call to the detective. She'd gotten his voice mail and had left a message, giving her name and the fact that she'd met him at the crime writer's meeting. She explained the quandary she faced and explained that despite her research, she'd been unable to come up with an answer. The doubtful part of her doubted that she'd hear back. To her surprise, later in the day, she'd received a phone call from the detective. He gave her a credible, thorough answer to her dilemma, and she'd thanked him profusely.

As they were ending the call, Detective Chase had said, "By any chance, are you related to Paul Cartwright, the principal at Rivermont Elementary?"

Leslie had laughed and said, "Yes, I am. Paul is my husband. Do you know him?"

"Indeed I do," the detective said. He explained his responsibility as a liaison with the PD and the school district and his relationship with Paul. "Also, my son Derek is student at Rivermont Elementary."

"Derek Chase?" Leslie asked.

"Yes, that's my son," said Bob Chase. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, he's in the same class as our son, Thomas," Leslie said.

They'd chatted a few minutes about the boys, then Bob said, "I enjoyed answering your question. Please feel free to contact me any time you have questions or need information. I'd be happy to help."

From then on, whenever Leslie had a law enforcement related question, she'd called or emailed Detective Bob.

Now, with Bob at their front door, Leslie grinned and said, "Hello, Detective Bob. Come in, come in."

"Are you ever going to just call me Bob?" he asked with an answering grin.

Paul shook his head, and said, "If I know my wife, she takes great delight in calling you Detective Bob, and she's not going to stop any time soon."

A few minutes later, the three of them were settled at the dining room table with coffee and cookies. Leslie pulled out her notes, and started telling Bob about the instances when she'd felt that someone was following her or watching there.

Bob took a notebook out of his jacket pocket and began making notes. "So you've never actually seen anyone that you think is following you or watching you?"

"No, at least I don't think so. Whenever I looked around, I saw people but no one that was obviously looking at me or following me or so I thought," Leslie said.

"Did you ever think someone was following you when you were driving?" Bob asked.

Leslie thought for a moment, then said, "Well, I didn't include it in my notes because I wasn't sure about it. But one time last week when I was leaving the parking lot of the library that's across the street from Rivermont Elementary, there was a car right behind me, really close, right on my bumper. For a moment, I was afraid he was going to run into the rear end of my Jeep. He followed me across the street and into the school parking lot. I parked and looked around for him but couldn't find his car."

"Do you think he might have just been picking up a child?" Bob asked. "And wasn't following you at all?"

"Well, that's possible, of course. But one thing made me think otherwise. The man was driving a sports car, a small two-seater. I don't know what kind but it wasn't the kind of vehicle you pick up a grade school child in," Leslie said.

"Hmmm," Bob said. "You may have a point. And if I remember correctly, there's another way out of the parking lot. So rather than parking, the guy might have taken the other exit and just driven off."

"That's what I thought at the time," Leslie said.

"Great minds, and all that," Paul said with a laugh.

"You'd better believe it, hon," Leslie said.

"Do you remember what color the sports car was?" Bob said.

"Definitely," Leslie said. "It was a bright canary yellow. Eye-catching, to say the least."

Bob again wrote something in his notebook, then said, "I have an idea about something we can try for a few days. I'm going to have a plainclothes officer assigned to you, to follow you for a few days. That way, he or she will be able to see if there's anyone else following you. I'm thinking I'll see if I can find a female officer for this. That might work better."

"Bob, we really appreciate this. You're going above and beyond here," Paul said.

"I'm happy to do it. Our job is to protect anyone and everyone against crime," Bob said. "I'll be on my way but there's one last thing I want to do. Paul, could you accompany me how to the garage to Leslie's vehicle? I want to check it for any kind of tracking device."

"You think someone might have put a device on my car?" Leslie asked, the surprise obvious in her voice.

"It's certainly possible," Bob said. He stood out and extended his hand. Leslie stood also and shook Bob's hand. "I'll be in touch about your tail." The last was said with a wide grin.

"Thanks so much," Leslie said, as Bob and Paul headed toward the garage. She was tempted to trail behind them but decided it would be too upsetting to watch Bob search the exterior of the Jeep. She took the coffee cups and cookie plate in the kitchen and put the dishes in the dishwasher and turned it on. She stood at the sink, staring out the window, waiting for Paul to return.

After a few minutes, the door from the garage opened, and Paul walked through. Leslie turned and walked toward him, noticing the serious look on his face. "So?" she said.

Paul reached out his arms and pulled Leslie into a hug. "Bob found a tracking device behind the right rear wheel of the Jeep. He's familiar with the device and said it's one that uses an app on a smartphone."

"Do you have it?" Leslie asked.

Paul shook his head and said, "No, Bob took it with him. He's going to track it down. He said it's a fairly high-end model, and he might be able to find out where it was purchased and if we're really lucky, who purchased it."

"Paul, I don't understand this. Why would someone be following me? I'm not anyone special," Leslie said.

"Sweetheart, I beg to differ. You're the most special person in the world to me," Paul said, kissing the top of Leslie's head.

"By the way, Detective Bob said he would follow up with you in the morning about the plainclothes person he's getting assigned to you. I gave Bob your cell number. I hope that's all right?"

"Of course," Leslie said.

"Ready to go up to bed?" Paul said.

"More than ready," Leslie said.

Chapter 18
Donovan
Wednesday, October 21

Donovan spent most of Wednesday morning in his home office, following up on Winters' stock tip. Based on his research, Donovan concluded that the tip was valid and worth investing in. Once he'd placed his trades, he closed the laptop and sat back in his chair to think.

Something had gone wrong with the tracker he'd planted on Leslie's Jeep. This morning when he'd checked the GPS tracker app on his iPhone, he got a "Not Found" message. No matter what he did, he could no longer access the location of Leslie's vehicle. It must have somehow gotten dislodged. Well, he had a couple of back-ups, and he could easily install one of them -- just as he'd done days ago on the library parking lot. Perhaps he could even do it this afternoon, if Leslie made one of her usual stops at the library.

He'd been up too late the night before, and his lack of sleep was now catching up with him. He glanced over at the couch across the room and decided a nap was what he needed. He walked to the door and turned off the overhead light, then headed to the couch. He positioned one of the throw pillows under his head and closed his eyes. He set his internal alarm clock for 2 p.m., more than enough time to get to the library and plant a replacement tracker on Leslie's Jeep, if she was there.

As he started to drift off to sleep, scenes from his childhood flashed across his mind. Deliberately, he turned off the scenes and switched his attention to his meeting next week with Tanya Walters. He was looking forward to it, for sure. He thought about the phony background he'd given her and reminded himself to write down the details he'd told her in case he ever needed them again. As he slipped into sleep, once again his childhood came into his mind and once again, he ignored it.

Donovan had grown up in California, in a suburb of San Francisco. His father died when he was a toddler, and his mother had remarried a few years later. His stepfather, Ernest Youngston, was a surgeon, well-known in the city, and quite wealthy. His mother Melinda was a beautiful, charming woman, and at first the marriage went well. Then, Ernest began to criticize Melinda. He criticized the way she acted with his friends, he criticized what she wore, what she'd done with decorating his mansion. In public, he was the loving, devoted husband. But in private, the verbal abuse escalated. Donovan never knew exactly when the abuse turned physical but when he was about ten he started noticing bruises on her arms and a deep sadness in her face.

About that same time, Ernest had started paying attention to Donovan. Before then, the boy seldom saw much of his stepfather. He had a nanny until he started elementary school, and then he had a tutor, at Ernest's insistence. Donovan went to a private boys' school outside the city, and Ernest wanted to make sure the boy excelled in his classes, hence the tutor.

As it had been with his mother, Donovan's abuse by his stepfather began as verbal abuse. Ernest constantly hassled Donovan about his grades. Donovan regularly earned As and Bs but Ernest pushed him to earn honors grades. Ernest insisted that Donovan spend hours each evening and also on weekends with the tutor. But no matter how hard he tried, Donovan was unable to meet Ernest's expectations.

Ernest began his physical abuse of Donovan gradually, first with shoves and arm grips. Then he moved on to face slaps, and finally whacks with a wide leather belt. Donovan had appealed to his mother Melinda for help but to no avail. Years ago, Melinda had given up and retreated into an alcoholic haze. She stayed out of Ernest's way, to the best of her ability. She'd lost the will to do anything but drink -- and cry.

Donovan's hatred of Ernest grew exponentially as the years went by. His only hope of escape was going away to college, and he kept his eye ever on that prize. When he was a senior in high school, Ernest informed him that he would not be going away to college, that come fall, he would enroll at Rivermont University and live at home. Ernest had announced his plans for Donovan's college future at dinner one night. Donovan was broken-hearted and furious that he would not be escaping from Ernest's torture by going away to college. That news broke Donovan. He'd been hanging on by the slimmest of threads, looking to the day when he would be out of Ernest's house and out of Ernest's life.

Donovan had tried to hide his shock and dismay but did a poor job of concealing his hatred for his stepfather's plans and his hatred for Ernest. That night, Melinda had joined them for dinner, which she did infrequently. At dinner, she was already edging toward being drunk but was sober enough to express her happiness that Donovan would still be living at home.

"That's delightful news," Melinda said, her words slightly slurred. "I'm so happy that my boy will still be here."

Donovan noticed the disgust in Ernest's face as he looked at his wife. He couldn't understand why Ernest stayed married to Melinda. Donovan had long suspected that Ernest was a serial cheater so why didn't the man just dump Melinda and get on with his life.

That evening, Donovan begged off from the study session with his tutor, feigning illness. When his mother had gone to her room (she and Ernest had had separate bedrooms for more than a decade), Ernest left for the evening, Donovan sneaked out the back way and headed for a nearby bar when boys from his school hung out. The bar owner had no qualms about serving underage high school kids; their money was as good as anyone else's and the teens, always flush with cash from indulgent parents, willingly paid double for their drinks.

Two of the guys from his class were sitting in a booth toward the back of the bar, and Donovan joined them. He'd never made any true friends at school, just guys that he sometimes hung out with. Donovan ordered a beer, and when it came, chugged it down in a couple of gulps.

Ted Swensen, one of the guys in Donovan's chemistry class said, "Hey, man, what's going on? I've never seen you chug a beer like that."

"Oh, you know, this and that," Donovan said, gesturing to the bartender for another beer.

Donovan spent a couple of hours at the bar, drinking and listening to Ted and his other buddy, Jim Towers, trash talking and telling dirty jokes, living their easy, uncomplicated lives. As he let the buzz of the beers take over, he was plagued about his future, his ruined future. What was he going to do? What could he do?

At about midnight, Ted and Jim said they were going to call it a night. "See you tomorrow," Ted said.

"Later, dude," came from Jim.

Donovan ordered one more beer, not wanting to go home, not wanting anything but to get as far away as possible from home and Ernest. He sat there, nursing his beer and considering his options. Something had been niggling at him for quite sometime now. If only Ernest were gone, if only he would disappear.

Ernest's cruelty had awakened a matching streak of cruelty in Donovan. It would be so easy to get rid of Ernest. A blow to the head, followed by a fire in the bedroom, and he would be rid of Ernest.

At last, Donovan stood, then walked over to the bar and paid his tab, including a generous tip for the bartender. He quickly walked the short distance home, his mind roiling with thoughts of wanting to be rid of Ernest. Back

at home, in his room, in his bed, just before crashing to sleep, the words went through his mind, "Something to think about. Definitely something to think about."

At precisely 2 o'clock, as planned, Donovan awoke. He went downstairs and brewed a cup of coffee in the Keurig. He took the coffee back upstairs and drank it as he logged onto the computer and checked the status of his trades. Satisfied that everything was in order, he took one of the GPS trackers out of the middle drawer of his desk and put it in his jeans pocket.

Luck was on his side. As he pulled into the library parking lot, he saw Leslie's Jeep parked at one side of the building. He parked his Ford Ranger next to the Jeep, leaving the engine running. He jumped out, quickly planted the tracker out of sight on the inner side of the left front tire and got back in his car, all in less than 30 seconds. He drove out of the parking lot and across the street to the elementary school parking lot. He parked in a far corner, where he had a view of the spot where Leslie regularly parked. He still regretted that time last week when the Ranger had been in the shop, and he'd driven his yellow sports car on one of his tracking forays. He'd never before used the sports car when he was tracking Leslie; it was way too noticeable. Hopefully, she hadn't paid any attention to the yellow sports car on her bumper.

Chapter 19
Leslie
Wednesday, October 21

Detective Bob called Leslie on Wednesday morning, asking if he could bring the officer who would be trailing her over to meet her that afternoon.

Leslie hesitated, then said, "I'll have to find something for the twins to do. I don't want them involved in this. I don't want them to know anything about this."

"How about if I postpone our visit till tomorrow morning? That way the twins will be in school. Does that work for you?" Detective Bob said.

"That would work out much better. Thanks so much for your flexibility. I really do appreciate it," Leslie said.

"The officer's name is Pam Marshall. She heads up our newly formed Threat Assessment Unit." Bob laughed and said, "Actually, at the moment, Pam is the Threat Assessment Unit right now. She's currently the only staff member. It's just getting started."

"I look forward to meeting her," Leslie said.

"Does 10 o'clock work for you?" Bob said.

"Perfect," Leslie said. "I'll see both of you then."

The rest of the day passed quickly, with Leslie immersed in her novel. She decided she was going to use the Threat Assessment Unit in the book and was looking forward to the meeting tomorrow with Pam Marshall to learn more about the unit. In the meantime, she did some further online research on police stalking units and stalking in general, both for her book and for the meeting with Pam Marshall.

One of the ideas in the Wikipedia stalking entry really stuck with her.

"Unlike other crimes, which usually involve one act, stalking is a series of actions that occur over a period of time."

"I can't go through this for a period time," Leslie thought. "I can't stand the feeling of being watched, being followed, being stalked. Why is someone doing this to me? I don't understand."

At 2:30, Leslie saved her documents and turned off the computer. Time to pick up the twins. She planned to swing by the library to drop off some books and pick up one she'd put on request. Maisie had been curled up on her lap and jumped down when Leslie started to stand up.

"Come on, girl. Let's go downstairs. I think there's a special cat treat in your future," Leslie said.

Forty-five minutes later, Leslie was home with the twins, and the three of them were immersed in their regular after school ritual of homework and dinner preparation.

When Paul arrived home, Leslie immediately knew something was going on. He looked tired and stressed and his normal exuberant greeting to the twins was subdued. Leslie told the twins she had to talk to Daddy for a minute and that they should continue with their homework. Leslie led Paul upstairs to their bedroom and gently closed the door.

"Okay, mister. Tell me what's going on," Leslie said.

Paul sat on the edge of the king-sized bed, and Leslie sat beside him. "It's Teddy," Paul said.

"What about Teddy?" Leslie said.

"Someone tried to run him down today," Paul said.

"Oh, my heavens," Leslie said. "Is he okay? Was he hurt?"

"He was banged up a bit. The EMTs took him to Rivermont Memorial, and the docs patched him up. They called me to come pick him up. He's waiting downstairs in the family room. I hope it's okay but I told him I wanted him to spend the night here."

"Of course, it's all right. Let's go down and see him and tell the twins. You know how they love their Uncle Teddy," Leslie said.

"Just one more thing. I've convinced Teddy to go to gambling rehab and to let me ask Natalie for the money to pay off his gambling debts," Paul said.

"Well, that's good news, on both fronts, isn't it?" Leslie said.

"I guess," Paul answered. "I'm just at a loss. What if rehab doesn't work for him? What if he goes back to gambling? Those monsters could have killed him today."

Leslie reached out and patted Paul's knee. "Teddy has the best big brother he could have. You've always taken care of him, ever since you were little boys. I trust you, Paul, and I know everything is going to work out. Did Teddy report this to the police?" Leslie said.

"No, he said it wouldn't do any good. He didn't see the driver and the car was just a white sedan. And he didn't see the license plate. Actually, I think he's scared to report it," Paul said.

"I don't blame him," Leslie said. "These guys seem like bad news all around. Are you okay with not reporting this to the police?"

"No, not really, but it's what Teddy wants so I have to go along with it, I guess," Paul said.

"Well, let's go down and welcome him," Leslie said.

Arm in arm, Paul and Leslie walked downstairs and into the family room. Leslie walked over to the fireplace where Teddy was standing and gave him a big hug. "Hi there, I understand you ran into a car," Leslie said.

Teddy had a wide bandage on his forehead, and one of his hands was wrapped in gauze. "The car got the worst of it," Teddy joked.

"The twins are going to be so excited that you're here for dinner and staying the night. You're their favorite uncle, you know," Leslie said.

"I'm their only uncle," Teddy said.

"There is that," Leslie said, looping her arm in Teddy's and leading him out of the family room, with Paul trailing behind.

As predicted, the twins were over the moon to see their Uncle Teddy and even more excited that he was staying for dinner and would be spending the night.

Teddy sat at the kitchen table with the twins, and started examining their in-progress homework. Once upon a time, before gambling did him in, he'd been a high school math teacher. Paul joined them at the table, and called out to Leslie across the room. "You can stop worrying about helping the twins with their math. The expert is here."

"You'd better believe it," Teddy said. "I'll always be on call to help these whippersnappers with their math or anything else they need," Teddy said.

Leslie felt the sting of tears in her eyes at hearing Teddy's words. She loved her husband's younger brother and grieved over the horrendous problems he'd created for himself. She'd especially grieved the break-up of his marriage to Natalie, a world-renowned neurosurgeon based in nearby St. Louis.

Leslie began preparations for dinner. Tonight's menu featured make-it-yourself pizza, salad and cheese garlic bread. As she worked, she listened to the twins chattering to their Uncle Teddy. She wondered again if having children might have saved Teddy from gambling and saved his marriage to Natalie. Well, that was all water under the bridge or over the dam or whatever. What is, is.

After dinner, Leslie got Teddy settled in the guest room downstairs, next to Paul's office, then went back upstairs. After a few minutes, Paul came downstairs and turned on the huge flat screen TV on the wall opposite his office. He stuck his head in the guest room and said, "Hey, kid, come out here. I'm going to watch a basketball game."

In the dimly lit guest room, Teddy was lying stretched out on the queen-sized bed, staring up at the ceiling. He slowly sat up, then got off the bed and walked out into the family room. Paul and Teddy sat at opposite ends of the curved sectional, eyes glued to the TV screen. At halftime, Paul muted the TV and said, "There's something going on with Leslie that I want to tell you about."

Teddy sat up straighter and said, "She's not sick, is she?"

"No, she's not sick. It's nothing like that. The problem is that she's being stalked," Paul said.

"Stalked? That's weird," Teddy said.

"You better believe it. We've been working with a detective from Rivermont PD. Last night he found a GPS tracker hidden on Leslie's Jeep," Paul said.

"Good Lord," Teddy said. "Who would do something like that to Leslie?"

"We have no idea but the detective and another PD officer are going to try to find out," Paul said. "The detective and the head of the stalking unit are coming to see Leslie tomorrow morning, and they're going to figure this out."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Teddy said.

"I will," Paul said. The basketball game came back on, and Paul unmuted the TV. The brothers turned their attention back to the game but the atmosphere in the room had turned somber.

Chapter 20
Teddy
Wednesday, October 21

Later that night, Teddy lay awake in the guest bedroom of his brother's house. How had he gotten here? What was going to happen to him?

Teddy's gambling problem had started several years ago. He and Natalie had been having problems -- arguments that escalated into fights. Natalie wanted to start a family. Teddy didn't, at least not yet. He was still floundering around in his career, teaching high school math but wondering if there was something better out there for him. He wanted to be more established, more secure jobwise before they had children. Natalie's argument had been that she made more than enough money so they didn't need to worry about money.

The fights had always caused Teddy to storm out of the house and head for one bar or another. At one bar in particular he'd gotten corralled into a back-room poker game. He was a fairly good poker player, and at first, he'd done okay, winning more than he lost. Back when he was in college, his poker skills had helped pay his tuition.

But later, in the bar poker games, he'd gone wild, making outlandish bets and racking up debts. Paul had bailed him out several times but now, Paul didn't have the kind of money necessary to pay his debts. He hated the idea of Paul going to Natalie for the money, but there didn't seem to be any other way out. Teddy had given up, and was willing to go to rehab, willing to take Natalie's money. He didn't know what the future held for him. He'd screwed up so badly -- he wasn't sure there was a way for things to work out for him.

He closed his eyes, trying to fall asleep, but he had a feeling sleep wasn't going to come easy tonight.

To his surprise, he started to drift off to sleep. His last thoughts before he fell asleep were about Leslie. He wondered what was going on with Leslie being stalked. What an odd thing to happen to her. She was the most normal, straight-up human being he knew. There was no reason for anyone to stalk her. At least he didn't think there was.

Chapter 21
Leslie
Thursday, October 22

The next morning, Leslie dropped Thomas and Maria off at school, then drove home. Part of her was dreading the meeting with Pam Marshall and Detective Bob. Another part of her was anxious to find out what they could do for her.

At home, she brewed a pot of coffee and put the last of the chocolate chip cookies on the kitchen table. Those cookies had certainly come in handy the past few days. She would have to bake another batch soon.

She heard Paul's car in the driveway and walked to the front door to meet him. He had insisted on being at the meeting, and she hadn't argued with him. She wanted him there for moral support and for his logical mind.

Leslie opened the front door and immediately went into Paul's arms. He held her, and they stood there for a few moments. Then Leslie stepped back and said, "Okay, I'm all right. Sorry about that."

"You never need to be sorry for anything, sweetheart. I'm here for you, always," Paul said.

"I know that," Leslie said, taking Paul's coat from him and hanging it on the coat tree in the entry hall. "I set things up in the kitchen. Come on, and I'll pour you a cup of coffee."

They walked arm in arm into the kitchen. Leslie poured each of them a cup of coffee, and they sat at the kitchen table.

"May I have a cookie, ma'am?" Paul said.

Leslie grinned as she said, "Have you been a good boy?"

"Always," Paul said with an answering grin. Then he added, "Of course, that depends on how you define good boy."

Leslie poked him in the arm and then handed him a cookie.

"Where's Teddy?" Paul said.

"Downstairs. He came up a while ago for breakfast. I told him what was going on this morning, and he said you'd already told him about it, and he'd lay low downstairs until the police left. I told him he didn't have to but that's what he wanted. Paul, I feel so sorry for him. He's not himself. He's broken or something like that," Leslie said.

"I know," Paul said. "I'm hoping that the gambling rehab can help put him back together."

"When does he go?" Leslie said.

"He's got an appointment to check in day after tomorrow, Saturday morning" Paul paused, then continued in a lower voice, as if afraid that Teddy might overhear him. "I'm taking him. Teddy doesn't know it but Natalie is coming with us to check him in. I talked to her this morning before I left school, and she said she wants to come along. Les, she still loves him. And I know he still loves her. Maybe there's a chance for them."

"I hope so," Leslie said. "That would be --" Her words broke off when she heard the doorbell ring. She looked at Paul as they both stood up. They headed to the front door to greet Pam Marshall and Detective Bob.

Chapter 22
Donovan
Thursday, October 22

Yesterday afternoon, with the new tracker in place on Leslie's Jeep, Donovan had once again started following her on the app. She left the library parking lot and drove across the street to the school, then in a few minutes, headed home.

Thursday morning, once again in his office, he opened the tracking app and watched as the Jeep moved from the Cartwright house to Rivermont Elementary and then back home. "Good! The bitch is back in my sights," he thought.

He went to the kitchen for another cup of coffee, then headed back to his computer area. Sitting at the bank of computers he considered his command center, he placed a couple of trades, then started pacing the room. He wished he knew if someone had found the tracker or if it had somehow gotten dislodged on its own. If someone found it, they knew Leslie was being tracked. That wasn't good. If that was the case, his life had taken another turn for the worse, and he wasn't sure what to do about it.

His life had never been an easy one. His stepfather, Ernest Youngston, had been a monster to the young Terry Donovan. Ernest's vicious cruelty had slowly and inexorably snuffed out whatever goodness or decency existed in the boy. Donovan felt abandoned by his alcoholic mother and pulverized by his sociopathic stepfather. By the time he was a senior in high school, he'd lost all vestiges of humanity in an attempt to survive an unbearable home life.

The turning point in his life of horror had happened that night, the night he learned there was no escaping Ernest, unless, that is, he did something lethal about Ernest.

Now, he stopped pacing and went back to the computer and shut it down. In the condo entry hall, he opened the coat closet and got out a lightweight jacket. He shrugged into the jacket, then took a walking stick out of the closet. From the top shelf of the closet, he grabbed a flashlight and his high-powered binoculars. He was going on a trek through the woods behind his condo complex, and sometimes the dense undergrowth made it a challenge to walk through the bushes and tall grass. Hence, the walking stick and the flashlight to help him make it around fallen logs and treacherous sinkholes.

The binoculars? Well, those would allow him to spy on Leslie Cartwright, in her native habitat, so to speak. At the edge of woods behind the Cartwright house was a hillock that offered him a vantage point for peering into the house. Leslie's home office was at the back of the house and had two floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the woods. The hillock provided enough height to give him a clear view into the room.

As he walked out of the back door of the condo, he felt an avalanche of fury burn through him. He hated this woman. She had destroyed his life, just like his stepfather. She had destroyed his marriage and caused the only person he'd ever cared about to betray him.

But Leslie, or Pia, or whomever, would pay, would pay with her pitiful life. He crunched through the fallen leaves into the depths of the woods. His fury propelled him past the trees, many of them cedar or pine, past the fallen logs, over the almost dry gravel bed of the meandering creek, past the

As he neared the far edge of the woods, he once again saw the incongruous, somewhat bizarre structure he'd seen on previous forays into the woods. A cell tower soared over the tallest of the trees, looking vaguely futuristic and from outer space. When he first spotted the cell tower, Donovan had been amused and weirdly delighted by how out of place the tower was.

Just ahead of the cell tower was his vantage point, the hillock that provided a view into the Cartwright house. Donovan walked up the hillock and at the top of the rise, aimed the binoculars toward Leslie's house. His cover story, if anyone ever confronted him about what he was doing in the woods would be to hold up his binoculars and tell them he was a birdwatcher. He made a point of avoiding the manmade trails that snaked their way through the trees, and so far, he hadn't encountered anyone else in the woods but that probably wouldn't last forever.

The first story of the back of the house gave him a view into the kitchen and the family room. The second story of the back of the house gave him a view into Leslie's home office and what appeared to be a master suite, with a large bedroom and adjacent bathroom and a small sitting room. Because the windows looked out on the woods, the windows were most always uncovered, with the exception of the bathroom.

Through the binoculars, he was surprised to see four people seated around a table by the kitchen window. He recognized the bitch and her husband but had no idea who the other man and woman were. He adjusted the binoculars to get a closer view. The unknown pair both were dressed professionally, wearing navy blue blazers. The four were intent on their discussion, and the looks Donovan saw on their faces were serious and intent.

After a few minutes, the unknown man stood, stretched a bit and began to pace around the kitchen. As he turned toward the window, he removed his blazer and draped it over his chair. Donovan started when he saw what was at the man's waist. Hooked to his belt was a shiny gold oblong, easily recognizable as a law enforcement badge.

Donovan lowered the binoculars and stood motionless, thinking. Why were the bitch and her husband meeting with the police? Could it be what he was afraid of? That someone, somehow, had discovered the GPS tracking device that he'd planted on Leslie's Jeep?

As he stared at the foursome seated around the kitchen table, he felt the rage building inside him. His plan had been going so well until now. What should he do? Drop his plan to get revenge for what the bitch had done to him and his life? Hell, no!

In his mind, as he looked at the bitch and the other three, he ran through what he'd done so far. He'd purchased the trackers -- six of them -- using cash at an out-of-town electronics store. He'd placed both of the trackers on Leslie's Jeep when it was parked at the library. And both times, he'd been careful to stay out of sight from anyone while planting the trackers. He was certain no one had seen him in the woods surveilling the Cartwright house. To the best of his knowledge, he'd left no telltale tracks in his stalking or as he preferred to call it, his tracking of Leslie Cartwright. Sometimes he felt like a big game hunter after his prize catch, pleased at the anticipation of nabbing his trophy.

He deserved his revenge after what the bitch had done. He would continue on with his plan. But for now, he'd head back to the condo and do some trading, his surefire mental relaxant. Then tomorrow he'd be back on the trail of his prey.

Chapter 23
Leslie
Thursday, October 22

When everybody was settled around the Cartwright kitchen, with Pam Marshall and Detective Bob drinking coffee and eating cookies, Pam got down to business.

"Mr. and Mrs. Cartwright, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself and the Threat Assessment Unit. This new unit is my dream job, and I'm excited about the potential. I've been in law enforcement or related areas for almost 20 years. After college, I started out on the Rivermont police force and served there for five years, ending up a detective. Then I decided to go to law school. My mother is an attorney, and I guess that was an incentive for me. After law school, I joined Mom's law firm. But, after awhile, I began to get restless. I missed the action of the police force. Law school had been so demanding that I hadn't missed the force. But working in Mom's law office was actually --" here Pam paused, looking a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry to say it was actually boring."

Pam reached out for a cookie and took a bite, then continued. "Anyway, a friend of mine had joined the FBI, and he encouraged me to check out an FBI career. I did, and I spent five years with the bureau. Then, I came back home to Rivermont to marry my high school sweetheart, and I left the FBI and rejoined the Rivermont police force. Shortly after that, the Chief formed the Threat Assessment Unit and put me in charge. I'm about to hire the first detective in the unit, and I'm really excited about the possibilities of what we can do."

Bob looked at Leslie and Paul and said, "I asked Pam to give you folks the details on her background. I wanted you to be reassured about her abilities and experience. Even though the unit is new and just getting off the ground, Pam is one of the most experienced and expert members of the department."

"Now, let's get down to business. Mrs. Cartwright. Bob has briefed me on your situation, and we've come up with a course of action. First and foremost, I'm going to start trailing you so I can see who's tracking you," Pam said.

Leslie gave Pam a quizzical look and said, "But won't that tip the stalker off?"

Pam chuckled and said, "Yes, of course it would, if I were actually trailing behind you. But my plan is for you to give me details on where and when you're going places, and I'll be there ahead of you so I can watch for anyone trailing you."

Leslie thought for a moment, then said, "That's rather brilliant, actually."

Detective Bob nodded and said, "I told you so. You're in good hands with Pam."

"Another thing I want to do is spend some time with you, Mrs. Cartwright --"

Leslie interrupted with a wave of her hand. "Please call me Leslie," she said.

"And I'm Paul," Paul interjected.

There were laughs around the table. Then Pam continued. "I want to spend some time with you, Leslie. To get to know you, to know about your life, that kind of thing. Most stalkers aren't random. They have a reason for stalking someone. Revenge or infatuation or resentment or something like that. So I need to know what's going on with you to see if we can figure out who would want to stalk you."

"That's sort of brilliant, also," Leslie said.

Leslie and Pam decided they would spend the next several hours together, delving into Leslie's life. Detective Bob and Paul decided to get back to their regular lives and said good-bye to the ladies. They each took a cookie with them to go.

Leslie suggested that she and Pam move to the family room where it would be more comfortable.

Seated in overstuffed chairs facing the windows that looked out over the woods, Leslie said, "Before we get down to the nitty-gritty, I need to tell you that I'll probably be basing one of the characters in my mystery on you. I hope you won't mind."

Pam hooted with laughter and said, "Mind? I'd be extremely flattered. I'm one on your fans, and I'd be honored to be in one of your books." Pam grinned, then said, "In all honesty, Detective Bob, as you and your husband call him, warned me that you might want to do something like that. As a matter of fact, I think the detective in your second mystery is based on Bob?"

Leslie nodded and said, "Well, that might be the case. Detective Bob is too good a character not to use." She added, "And I may sometime in the future, if it's all right, check in with you when I have a law enforcement question or quandary?"

Again, Pam grinned. "Bob warned me about that also. He says he hears from you at least weekly when you're in the midst of writing. But he enjoys your questions and tells me I would too. So, I'm all in."

"That's great!" Leslie said. "Now, let's get on with this trailing ahead of me thing. How will that work?"

"We'll take it one day at a time. Or in the case of today, a half day at a time. You'll tell me in detail where you're going and what you're doing. I'll go to those places ahead of you and watch for anyone who seems to be following you. I'll watch for a pattern, any repeat suspects, that kind of thing. I'll be unobtrusive so I don't spook the stalker off. It should only take a couple of days to identify your stalker. However, before we start laying out the details of your activities, there's one thing I want to do. Can you show me your car? I want to check for a tracking device. Detective Bob told me he found one, and he thinks I should go over your car every day."

Leslie stood up, feeling anger roll over her at the thought of a further invasion of her privacy. In a severe tone, she said, "Please follow me."

The two women left the family room. Leslie led the way through the kitchen and then the combo laundry/mudroom out into the garage, turning on the garage overhead lights as she walked out the door. She stood by silently while Pam Marshall examined the Jeep.

Pam searched the car, starting with the right rear passenger tire, moving to the right front passenger tire and then to the front bumper. Next, she went around to the left front tire. After a moment, she raised a hand in the air and called over to Leslie, "Got one!"

Leslie walked over to where Pam stood and looked at the tiny device in the palm of the woman's hand. Once again, she felt the rage at having her privacy invaded. "How could someone do this to me?" she thought.

Pam pulled a small plastic bag out of her left blazer pocket and compared the device in the bag to the one in her hand. "Same thing," she said. She pulled another plastic bag out of her right blazer pocket; this one was empty. She slipped the device she'd just found into the empty bag. She put the first tracker back in her left pocket and pulled out a permanent marker from that same pocket. Bracing the plastic bag on the left front fender of the

Jeep, she quickly wrote something on the bag, then put it in her right pocket. The marker went back to the left pocket.

Leslie watched Pam's movements in fascination. This is what she needed to do: Watch a police detective in action. She'd heard of ride-alongs with police. What about walk-alongs? Something to consider.

Back in the house, the women returned to the family room. Leslie offered Pam more coffee but Pam said she'd had her quota of coffee for the day.

"You have a coffee quota?" Leslie said.

"Yes, indeed," Pam said. "My quota is whenever I start getting too hyper. And that's where I am right now. Of course, it might have something to do with that tracker we just found." Suddenly, Pam stood up and said, "I just realized I have to put the tracker back. I'm sure your stalker has some kind a tracking app so he'll see that it's gone. He won't be able to follow you. I'll be right back."

Pam hurried out of the room, and Leslie heard the opening and closing of doors as the police woman headed to the garage and the Jeep.

A few moments, Pam reappeared in the family room. She did a ceremonial dusting together of her hands, saying "Mission accomplished."

"Thank heavens you thought of that," Leslie said.

"Yep!" Pam said. "Now, let's get down to business."

For the next hour, the two women put their heads together, mapping out what Leslie would be doing the rest of the day, and then tomorrow and the next day. Pam had taken a small black leather notebook out of her oversized bag and had been taking notes.

At noon, Leslie offered to make them some lunch but Pam said she had to go back to the station to prepare for their afternoon activities. "I'm going to pick up a white service van with no markings rather than the unmarked police sedan I usually drive. I'm also going to change into something that looks like work clothes, what someone driving the service van would wear."

They arranged that Pam would get to the library 15 minutes ahead of Leslie. She'd enter the library before Leslie and position herself so she'd be able to spot whomever came into the library after Leslie. "I'm also arranging for a patrol car to park near the library parking lot entrance. I'll have him or her video the cars entering the lot before and after you."

Leslie thanked Pam as the police woman left, feeling a sense of relief that someone was in charge of what was happening to her. She fixed a ham and cheese sandwich and took it upstairs to her office. But she was too keyed up to work on her manuscript. One thing she definitely wanted to do was to make some notes about all she'd learned from Pam Marshall that morning.

Chapter 24
Donovan
Thursday, October 22

In his office, Donovan wrapped up his afternoon trading activity. Juggling stocks had once again calmed him down, as it always did. He knew this was an unusual consequence for trading stocks. Usually, in most people, trading activity had the opposite effect. He closed down his computer system and was about to leave his office when he decided to check the tracking app.

He was shocked when he opened the app on his iPhone and found that once again, there was no signal from the tracker. The message flashed on the screen, "Subject lost." Fury coursed through him. Had someone found the second tracker?

He closed the app, then reopened it. This time, the app loaded more slowly than the first time. Then the app reported the location of the tracker: at the Cartwright address. So it must have just been a brief glitch in the system. He took a deep breath, relieved that all was well with the tracker. He sat there for a few more minutes, thinking about his plan for Leslie and what had led to his obsession with getting revenge against her.

He blamed Leslie for the death of his wife Cathy. His Cathy. The only person in the world who'd ever meant anything to him. He'd met Cathy Ballantree when he was 25. Donovan was a finance lecturer at a public university in St. Louis, and Cathy was one of his students. University ethics guidelines strictly forbade faculty members from dating students; faculty would be terminated, and students would be expelled. So when he started falling for the bright-eyed student who always sat in the front row, to protect Cathy from expulsion, Donovan decided to quit his teaching job and start day trading.

That fateful day, he turned in his resignation and his university employee badge and headed to Cathy's dormitory. She was up on the roof with friends, lying out in the sun. She started in surprise when Donovan came out of the stairs that led to the roof. He walked to the chaise where she lay, leaned down and took her hands. He pulled her to her feet, looked into her eyes, then kissed her.

Cathy moved into Donovan's apartment the next day. They were married six months later. For the first year or two, things went well for them. Cathy wanted children but Donovan didn't, definitely didn't. At one point, Cathy left him, not thinking she could give up motherhood. But she discovered that her love for Donovan was stronger than her desire for children, and she came back.

Cathy Ballantree had been the first and only person in his life who meant anything to Donovan. He'd been 18 when his parents died in that catastrophic house fire. Donovan had felt nothing but relief at his stepfather's death. About his mother, he briefly felt guilt but buried that under the blackened embers of the burned-out house.

But after Cathy left and then came back home, things with Donovan changed. He became critical of her and what she did. She'd finished college and was now a kindergarten teacher in one of Rivermont's little Catholic grade schools. Donovan resented her dedication to the job and her students and told her so frequently, in one way or another.

The tension between them increased, and Donovan became more verbally abusive every day. Cathy was not a fighter and hid her hurt from him, telling herself his behavior was temporary, and she probably deserved how he treated her and that things would go back to the way they'd been before she left.

Somewhere deep inside, Cathy knew their relationship was toxic, knew that she should leave, again, and knew that Donovan's abusive behavior would escalate rather than getting better. She recognized that her love for Donovan was obsessive, not healthy or good or what it should be. But it was strong enough that she couldn't or wouldn't break free.

Eventually, Donovan's behavior reached the point where he fought with Cathy every day, yelling at her about what she was doing wrong, how stupid she was, how she needed to shape up. Cathy never fought back; she just left the room and went somewhere to cry. She began having trouble sleeping and eating. Her teacher friends at school noticed and commented on the dark circles under her eyes and her obvious weight loss but Cathy had dismissed their concern and said she was fine, just fine.

The daily fights intensified, and Donovan found it difficult to keep from hitting Cathy. The urge to punch her in the mouth was almost intolerable. The culmination of one particularly vicious fight was Donovan reaching out and slapping his wife. She drew back in shock and horror, never thinking that Donovan would ever resort to violence and physical abuse.

Later, after Cathy's death, Donovan had gone through all her things and had found what he was looking for in the search history on her laptop. He'd found a blogger's site that she had visited frequently in her last days. Authored by someone named Pia Kennedy, the site featured a series of posts from the Kennedy woman about a close friend of hers who'd suffered through verbal abuse that then escalated into physical abuse and ultimately turned into horrendous beatings. As a result of the worst of those beatings, the woman had died. The Kennedy woman had applauded the abuser's fate; he'd been found guilty by a jury of his peers.

Kennedy encouraged anyone who was the victim of abuse to immediately get away from the abuser. In her posts, she provided resources, websites, and phone numbers for abused women to turn to. She excoriated any human who abused another human and begged the victims to run as far and as fast as they could, to save their lives.

The posts infuriated Donovan. He realized that it had been these posts that emboldened Cathy to gather up the courage to try to leave him. He never could have let that happen.

Now, still sitting at his desk in what he thought of as his command center, Donovan cleared his mind of thoughts of Cathy and what had happened. He glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was close to dismissal time at Rivermont Elementary. He quickly left the room and went down the stairs through the kitchen and laundry room to the condo's garage. He'd see if he could track down the bitch and see what she was up to. As he was getting in the car, his cellphone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw that it was Tanya Walters. He considered letting it go to voice mail but changed his mind and answered the call.

"Tanya! How are you doing?" He put a note of enthusiasm in his voice.

"I'm good, Cliff. How are you?" Tanya asked.

"Doing well, doing well. What can I do for you?" Donovan said.

"Well, if you're in any way a hockey fan, I can do something for you. My firm has a private box at the hockey arena where we host clients, and I scored two tickets. The tickets are for this Saturday evening, if you're free and if you're interested," Tanya said.

"Let me check my calendar," Donovan said. He waited a minute or so, then said, "Well, it looks like this Saturday evening is wide open. I'd be delighted to accept your invitation. If you'll give me your address, I'll pick you up." Donovan said.

Tanya gave him her parents' address, which of course he already knew, and suggested a time for him to pick her up. Donovan thanked her for the invitation and told her he'd see her at 7 on Saturday evening.

Ending the call, he sat in the car for a few minutes. He would have missed Leslie at the pickup but it no longer mattered. The call from Tanya had fit perfectly with his plan to develop a relationship with her. He could use Tanya Walters as a perfect way to get up close and person with Leslie. Things were working out better than he had anticipated. He got out of the car and walked through the parking garage back to his condo, whistling as he went.

Chapter 25
Tanya
Saturday, October 24

The hockey game was quite a success. The home team won, and Tanya was an enthusiastic, knowledgeable fan who could share an impressive recitation of statistics and hockey facts.

Cliff had picked her up at 7 sharp on Saturday evening and came in to meet her mother. Later, during the game's halftime, Tanya told Cliff about her father's condition, thus providing an understandable explanation for why he hadn't been introduced to Jared Walters. Cliff had expressed his sympathy at the situation, and the sincere tone in his voice brought the sting of tears to Tanya's eyes.

The group in the box suite included several of Tanya's colleagues who had each brought clients. Introductions were made all around, and they'd soon developed a camaraderie as they rooted for their team.

Amenities of the box suite included a buffet and open bar. Tanya was surprised and a bit pleased that Cliff stuck to sparkling water rather than any of the liquor. She'd stretched her two glasses of pinot noir over the evening. The food was delicious and a bit elegant for a sporting event: shrimp, lobster, mini rib eye sandwiches on croissants, stuffed mushrooms, a cheese and fruit tray and other assorted finger foods. Tanya was pleased that Cliff seemed to really enjoy the food. She noticed that he tried something of everything but avoided the shrimp and lobster. She asked him about it, and he confessed that he had a strong allergy to any seafood.

He told her about the time as a boy when his family vacationed in New Orleans. One of their evening dinners was a huge shrimp feast with relatives, an aunt and uncle, who lived near Lake Ponchartrain. He'd had an immediate allergic reaction, going into anaphylactic shock. His uncle had called 911, and he was rushed to the hospital. He'd spent several days in the ICU. And then another couple of days in a step-down unit.

"So the bottom line is that I stay far, far away from shrimp and lobster. In fact, to be safe, I avoid all seafood," Cliff told her.

As they walked out of the hockey arena, Cliff thanked Tanya for the evening. "Great game, great food and great company."

Tanya smiled up at him and said, "You're more than welcome. I'm glad you had a good time."

In the parking garage, Cliff opened the car door for her. Tanya liked his good manners, liked his ability to visit with the other people in the suite, liked that he wanted to have a nightcap with her. In fact, she liked everything about him. He was good-looking, dressed well, had been charming to her mother. What wasn't there to like?

On the drive home, they chatted about the hockey game and then started discussing the current state of the stock market. Tanya was impressed with his knowledge and insight. She enjoyed their conversation and was sorry when he pulled into her parents' driveway. He got out of the car and went around to open the passenger door. To her surprise, he walked her up to the front door.

"Thank you again for a delightful evening. Next time, it's my turn to treat you," Cliff said with a grin.

Tanya felt a surge of pleasure at the thought of a "next time" with Cliff. She unlocked the front door and said, "Good night, Cliff. I'll talk to you soon." He gave her arm a gentle pat and said, "Goodnight, Miss Tanya." He walked down the sidewalk and over to his car.

The house was dark except for the light in the entry foyer. Her parents must be in bed. Tanya turned out the foyer light and headed to her apartment downstairs. As she descended the stairs, her phone pinged, indicating she'd received a text message. She pulled the phone out of her jacket pocket to read the text. It was from Leslie and said, "Hey Sis -- If it's not too late, give me call. I can't wait to hear about your "date."

Tanya grinned and thought, "Leave it to Leslie to want the details about my non-date." Downstairs, she hung her coat in the closet, kicked off her shoes and quickly shed her sweater and slacks. She slipped on a Mizzou sweatshirt and a pair of pajama pants. Before calling her sister, she went into her home office to check her work email, in case there was anything she needed to deal with. She had clients on the West Coast who had the habit of emailing her with questions or suggestions, even when it was two hours later in Rivermont. She was happy to find only one email waiting for her. It was from Cliff Townsend and read, "Thanks again for a superb evening. You'll have to let me repay the favor. Sleep well."

Tanya sat in her desk chair for a couple of minutes, a wide smile on her face. Cliff Townsend was quite the man. Still with the smile on her face, Tanya turned off the overhead light and went into her adjoining bedroom. There, she settled herself in bed, propping several pillows behind her and called Leslie.

Leslie answered on the first ring, not bothering to say Hello but plunging right in with, "So how was it? How was he?"

Tanya laughed and said, "Great and great."

"Tell me everything, Sis," Leslie said. And Tanya proceeded to do just that.

She told Leslie how Cliff had picked her up at home and had come in meet her mother. "We didn't try to introduce him to Dad."

Tanya told Leslie how charming Cliff had been with her and with the other guests in the suite. "He showed such sincere interest in them, and everyone he talked with seemed absolutely fascinated by him."

Leslie cleared her throat and said, "Wasn't there anything wrong with him?"

Tanya laughed again and said, "Not that I could find. He sent me an email after he dropped me at home. The email said, 'You'll have to let me repay the favor.' Isn't that delightful?"

Leslie agreed that it was, then said, "It's getting late. I'd better let you go." Then she added, "Tanya, I'm really happy tonight went so well. You deserve some happiness in your life, after all you've been through."

The sisters said good-night and hung up their phones.

Chapter 26
Leslie
Saturday, October 24

After ending the phone call with Tanya, Leslie leaned back on the bed and lay there looking up at the ceiling. Paul was in his home office, working on this week's principal's newsletter. The twins were safely tucked in and fast asleep.

Leslie lay there thinking about Tanya, hoping that her sister was not going down the wrong path again. Tanya's track record with men was a series of bad choices and wrong decisions, mixed in with bad luck and one overwhelming tragedy. Leslie felt a rush of gratitude for Paul; she couldn't have found a better, kinder, more reliable man.

The bedroom door opened and that best of all men walked through it. He headed straight to where Leslie lay on the bed and leaned over to kiss her thoroughly. She reciprocated the kiss and wound her arms around him. He, held her as he sat on the edge of the bed and then pulled her onto his lap. They sat there for a few moments, safe in one another's arms. Then Leslie stood up and said, "I'm worried about Tanya."

It took Paul a moment to adjust his thinking from holding his wife to her worry about her sister. Finally, adjustment made, he said "Why are you worried about Tanya?"

Leslie began to pace around the bedroom as she spoke. "She went out to dinner with a client tonight, and I think she's falling for him."

"Isn't that against some financial law or something? Dating a client?" Paul said.

"I don't think so," Leslie said. "But it should be. And Tanya should know better. With her track record, she should never date again."

"Come on, Les, it's not that bad," Paul said.

"Yes, it is that bad," Leslie said. "She's made bad choice after bad choice when it comes to men. Fortunately, only one of the choices ever had long-term, life-altering effects. But they were bad enough for me to worry now whenever a new man appears in Tanya's life."

Paul hesitated before speaking, wanting to say the right words, words that wouldn't cause Leslie to think he didn't trust her judgment or insight. He decided to go with a request for clarification rather than a comment on Tanya's questionable love life. "So what did Tanya say?"

Leslie proceeded to give him details on her earlier conversation with her sister. When she finished, she stopped her pacing and came to sit next to Paul on the side of the bed. "She's so excited about this new guy. And everything she told me about him makes me see why she thinks he's the one she's been looking for."

"Hmmm," Paul said, once again trying to come up with the right thing to say. Finally, he said, "I trust your instincts, my love." He paused, then said, "How did you leave it with Tanya?"

"Well, I didn't want to rain on her parade so I didn't express any of my considerable reservations." Leslie paused, thinking. Then she said, "In fact, I sort gave her my approval. Rats! I gave her my approval. I didn't mean to do that!"

Paul couldn't hold back the laugh that erupted out of his mouth. Leslie threw him a baleful look, and he managed to limit himself to the one outburst. He reached out and put his arm around Leslie and pulled her in close. Leslie leaned her head against his shoulder, then said, "I can hear the words you're not saying to me. You're saying, 'Les, back off a bit. Tanya has had one date with this guy. Who knows where it will go? Just give it time and relax about it. Things may work out on their own.' "

Paul chuckled, then said, "I'm a wise son of a gun."

"Yes, you are," Leslie said. "Come on, wise one. It's time for bed." She stood up, stretched, then turned back to Paul. "By the way," she said, a hint of mischief in her voice. "How are you doing as the sexiest principal around?"

Paul gave her a pretend punch in her arm, and said, "Cut it out. I am not sexy."

"I would disagree with that and so would many other elementary moms. I see how they look at you, how they hang around after school, hoping to talk to you." Leslie grinned at him, then walked in the adjoining bathroom, wiggling her fingers in a suggestive wave as she went.

Chapter 27
Tanya
Sunday, October 25

Tanya slept later than usual on Sunday morning. When she finally surfaced from a deep sleep, it was almost 10 o'clock. She stretched, yawned and considered going back to sleep when she heard a soft knock at her bedroom door.

"Come in," Tanya called out. The door opened and her mother came into the room.

"Good morning, sleepyhead. I'm just checking to see if you want to go to church with your father and me," Eve said.

Tanya yawned again and said, "I think I'll pass this week. Give my best to Pastor Jacobson." Tanya thought a moment, then said, "Mom, I changed my mind. It'll just take me a few minutes to get ready. Can you wait for me?"

"Of course, darling. I'll see you downstairs," Eve said and left Tanya's room. Tanya could tell that her mother was relieved that Tanya was going to church. When Tanya had passed on going to church with them, she wasn't thinking about the fact that her mother would struggle with getting Jared out of the house and into the car.

Forty-five minutes later, the Walters family was in the car, heading to the nearby church. Tanya was driving, with Eve in the passenger seat and Jared in the back seat of the SUV. It had taken both Eve and Tanya to guide Jared out of the house and into the car. Tanya hoped they'd be able to manage Jared when they got to the church. This might be the last Sunday she and her mother could get him to church.

As they drove, Eve turned to Tanya and murmured, "How was your dinner last night?"

"Excellent! I had a wonderful time, Mom. Cliff is a really great guy. I'm glad you got to meet him when he picked me up," Tanya said.

"Good," Eve said. "You deserve happiness in your life." Her words hung in the air between them. Tanya felt a sting of tears in her eyes.

Chapter 28
Leslie
Sunday, October 25

The weather on Sunday was unusually mild for late October. After church and a chili lunch, Thomas and Maria were out on the trampoline, taking advantage of the nice weather. Paul and Leslie were in the dining nook, drinking an after-lunch cup of coffee and watching the twins' antics.

"They do love that trampoline," Leslie said.

"Yep, it was a good investment. I think they'll still enjoy it for a few years," Paul said.

They sat in silence for a moment, then Leslie said, "You know, for the past few days, I haven't felt like I was being followed or that someone was watching me. I wonder if whoever it was is now finished with me -- or maybe I was just imagining things."

Paul hesitated for moment before responding, then said, "You know, I've been thinking. I wonder if there's a possibility that your "stalker" might have something to do with Teddy's gambling debts."

Leslie looked at Paul in surprise and asked, "Why would you think that?"

"Well, Teddy's problems are the only off-kilter thing in our lives so it make a crazy kind of sense that maybe the stalker and the bookie are one and the same."

"But why stalk me?" Leslie said.

"When the bookie waylaid me that day at school, he did threaten Teddy and his family, and you're part of his family," Paul said.

"You know, I stopped feeling followed right around the time that Natalie paid off the gambling debts. You may be on to something. It would be wonderful if the stalking was over and done with," Leslie said.

Chapter 29
Tanya
Monday, October 26

Tanya sat behind the glass-topped desk in her downstairs office, thinking about the three phone calls she'd just had. It was mid morning but she felt as though she'd worked a complete day.

The first call had been the most welcome one. Cliff had called to say good morning and to invite her to the Rivermont Symphony performance this coming Saturday evening. Tanya had accepted his invitation, trying to mask the delight she felt at the prospect of another evening with Cliff. They'd agreed to talk later in the week about details. Tanya had hung up from that call with a huge grin on her face. But the grin eventually turned to a frown as she thought about the situation she found herself in. Those thoughts led her to call her manager, Cecile Alexander.

"What's up?" Cecile had said instead of hello.

"Do you have a moment?" Tanya said. "I have something I want to discuss with you."

"Sure. What is it?" Cecile said. "And I'm in a good mood for a Monday morning, so this better not be something I won't like."

Tanya laughed, then said. "It's just a personal matter for me." She proceeded to tell Cecile about inviting Cliff to the hockey game in the firm's private suite over the weekend.

"I had a really good time, and I think he did also. He just called me and invited me to the symphony. The hockey game could be considered a business event but not the symphony. I know there aren't really any company rules against dating clients but I don't feel comfortable with it." Tanya paused, waiting for Cecile to say something but the line was silent so she continued.

"Here's what I'd like to propose. I'd like to transfer Cliff's account to Jeff Taylor. Jeff and I share similar investment philosophies, and I think the personalities of the two men would be quite compatible.

"Are you sure you need to take such an extreme step?" Cecile said.

"Yes, I'm sure. I really like Cliff, and I'd rather have him as a significant other than a client." Again, Tanya paused, waiting for Cecile to chime in, but nothing happened.

"So is it all right if I talk to Jeff and explain the situation. If he's in agreement, I'll talk to Cliff, and then start the paperwork process to transfer Cliff's account to Jeff," Tanya said.

"Fine with me," Cecile said. "I trust your judgment, and if you think this is the best thing to do, then do it."

They set a time for a follow-up call, then hung up.

Tanya called Jeff Taylor and explained the situation. She liked Jeff the best of all her colleagues at the investment firm. He was a few years younger than her, married with a three-month old daughter. His wife had brought the baby to the office on one of the days Tanya was at the office. Tanya was pleasantly surprised to find that she knew Jeff's wife Zoe from Rivermont High School. They hadn't been close friends but had both played in the school orchestra. Zoe played the clarinet, and Tanya played the piano.

Jeff asked some questions about Townsend and seemed satisfied with Tanya's answers. Tanya said she'd call Cliff and explain the situation to him, and then she'd set up a meeting for the three of them to discuss the transfer of accounts.

Before calling Cliff, Tanya went upstairs to see how her mom and dad were. They were sitting in the family room watching some awful TV program about a race or something.

"Anything I can do for either of you?" Tanya asked.

"We're fine, dear. How's your day going?" Eve said.

Tanya was tempted to tell her mother about transferring Cliff's account but decided to wait till later in the day when her dad was napping. He tended to get upset when there were conversations going on around him that he didn't understand.

"Good, my day is good," Tanya said in answer to her mom's question. "I'll get back to it." She started out of the room when her mother called after her. "I made cupcakes. Why don't you take one downstairs with you."

"Sounds good. Do you or Dad want one?" Tanya said.

"No, thank you, dear. We already had one," Eve said.

In the kitchen, Tanya selected a chocolate cupcake with cream cheese frosting and got out a paper plate. Her mother was an excellent baker, and Tanya knew the cupcake would be delicious.

Downstairs, she sat at the little round table in her dining nook and ate the cupcake, slowly and reverently. Her downstairs apartment had a galley kitchen, a living room, a bedroom, an office and a bathroom. It had everything she needed,

Finished with the cupcake, she went back to her office to call Cliff. She got his voice mail and left a message asking him to call her when it was convenient, telling him it was about his accounts.

While waiting for Cliff's call, Tanya did some filing, her least favorite task. Her investment firm had basically gone paperless but Tanya still kept hard copies of some client records. One of the files was Cliff's, and she flipped through the pages, reading his answers to the investment questionnaire he'd filled out. His handwriting was difficult to read, which surprised her. He seemed such an organized, orderly person that she would have thought his handwriting would be perfect. Well, evidently not.

Filing done, she stood and paced around the office. She didn't want to start another project until after she'd talked with Cliff. She felt a bit apprehensive about telling him she was transferring his accounts to Jeff Taylor. She and Cliff had agreed on most investment ideas and approaches, and she was worried that he would resist the transfer. What would she do if he refused to accept the transfer? She didn't think he would but it was a possibility. She wished he'd return her call so she could get this over with.

When her cell phone finally rang, she sighed in relief and said, "Hi, Cliff. Thanks for calling me back."

"It was good to hear from you. What can I do for you?" Cliff said.

Tanya hesitated, then said, "I have something I want to discuss with you, and I'd rather not do it on the phone. Would it be possible for us to meet for coffee somewhere convenient for you? It won't take much of your time but I'd feel more comfortable doing this in person."

There was silence on the line, and Tanya was afraid they'd been cut off. But then Cliff said, "I could meet for coffee." His tone was brisk, and Tanya thought he probably was curious and hesitant about her request.

"Where's a convenient place for you?" Tanya asked.

"How about the café in the Rivermont Bookstore at the mall? I think it's about half-way between our homes," Cliff said.

They arranged to meet in an hour and ended the call. Tanya went to change out of her pajamas into something suitable for a business meeting. Not having to get dressed up was one of her favorite things about working from home.

Chapter 30
Donovan
Monday, October 26

After ending the call with Tanya, Donovan leaned back in his desk chair and thought about her request. He didn't like the sound of this. What could she want to discuss with him that she couldn't do on the phone. Was she going to cancel their date for Saturday? That would throw a monkey wrench in his plans. But that must be it. He couldn't think of anything else she'd want to discuss in person.

He decided to take a quick shower and change out of his jeans and tee shirt into business casual clothes.

All during the shower, he let himself feel a burgeoning anger at Tanya. How dare she interfere with his well-laid plans.

Showered and dressed, he made an effort to tamp down his anger. It wouldn't serve any good purpose to go in with guns blazing. He needed to be patient, not jump to conclusions and carefully find out what was on Tanya's mind.

He left the condo and was tempted to take his sports car but talked himself out of it. Best to stick with his boring SUV.

Chapter 31
Tanya
Monday, October 26

Tanya arrived at the bookstore café before Cliff. She found a table for two near the café entrance, and ordered a pumpkin spice latte and a Halloween cookie decorated like a ghost. The bookstore and café both sported Halloween decorations, and Tanya realized she'd completely forgotten the holiday was coming up soon. She wondered what the twins were going to be this year. Something creative and out-of-the-ordinary, she was sure.

It was a family tradition to get together on Halloween night and take turns going trick or treating with Thomas and Maria and handing out candy. This would be the first year that Dad wouldn't be participating in the fun. Tanya pushed that sad thought out of her mind and looked around the café for Cliff but he hadn't arrived yet.

She saw a man approaching from the mall entrance and squinted to see if it was Cliff. Yes, it was. As he drew closer she saw he was dressed in a black turtleneck shirt, black slacks and a gray wool blazer. He looked really good, she thought.

She lifted a hand in greeting as he headed toward her table. At the table, he extended his hand for a handshake and gave her a wide smile. He sat across from her and said, "Hello, good to see you."

Just then, the waitress appeared with Tanya's coffee and cookie, and said to Cliff, "May I get something for you, sir?"

"Yes, you may. I think I'll have what the lady is having," he said, giving her a grin.

"Now, ma'am," Cliff said. "You must satisfy my curiosity. I can't even guess what you want to discuss with me."

Tanya took a deep breath and plunged in. "I enjoyed our time at the hockey game, and I'm sure I'll enjoy our night at the symphony."

"As do I," Cliff said. At that moment, the waitress appeared with the coffee and cookie and placed them in front of Cliff. He thanked her with another one of his smiles, and took a sip of coffee and a bite of cookie. Then he said, "You were saying?"

Tanya took another deep breath and continued. "But I feel uncomfortable seeing you and being your financial advisor. My company doesn't have any regulations about advisors not dating clients but I'd rather not cross that line. So if it's all right with you, I'd like to transfer your accounts to my best colleague, Jeff Taylor."

She watched Cliff's face, trying to tell what his reaction was. But there was no expression on his face, and he didn't say anything.

Tanya continued, "What I'd like to do is set up a meeting for the three of us so you can meet Jeff and see if you could work with him as your financial advisor."

Still Cliff said nothing.

"I was thinking we could meet at the office downtown at the end of the day, whenever it's convenient for you. Then perhaps the three of us could have dinner at a nearby restaurant," Tanya said.

And still there was nothing from Cliff. Finally, Tanya said, "Cliff, you're not saying anything. Please, tell me what you think of this idea."

At last there was a reaction from Cliff. He smiled broadly at her and said, "I'm still stuck back on when you said something about we're dating. I want that so of course you can transfer my accounts to this person, whoever it is."

"His name is Jeff, Jeff Taylor, and I think you'll really like him," Tanya said. She felt an overwhelming sense of relief at his reaction. She'd been afraid he would be upset by the prospect of transferring his accounts from Tanya to some stranger. She'd thought he might even pull his accounts and go elsewhere.

"So you'd be all right with the account transfer? Depending, of course, on whether you could work with Jeff," Tanya said.

"Yes, depending on Jeff. But, Tanya, I must say, I trust your judgment, and if you think Jeff and I would be a good fit, then so be it," Cliff said.

"You can't know how relieved I am to hear you say that. I was concerned that you would reject the transfer out of hand and go elsewhere with your accounts," Tanya said.

Cliff reached out and took her hand. She felt a tingle go down her spine at his touch. "What's most meaningful to me is that you want us to have a personal relationship rather than a business one. I was hoping you would feel that way," Cliff said.

"Yes, I would like that very much. Now, let's get this meeting set up. Let me know what evenings you might be free this week, and I'll set something up with Jeff," Tanya said.

Cliff pulled out his iPhone and scrolled through his calendar. "Looks like we're in luck," he said. "The only thing on my calendar this week is Saturday night at the symphony with you."

"Excellent!" Tanya said. "I'll just call Jeff and see what his schedule is." She got her phone out of her purse and tapped in Jeff's number.

When he answered, she said, "Jeff, I'm here with Cliff Townsend, the client I'd like you to take on. I want to set up a meeting at the end of the day sometime this week. Both Cliff and I are free any evening. I thought we might all have dinner together after our meeting. So would you look at your schedule and see what day would work for you?"

A few moments later, Jeff said he was free Thursday afternoon and evening. Tanya turned to Cliff and said, "Thursday?"

"Thursday is fine," Cliff said.

Tanya turned back to her phone and said, "Thursday it is. Let's say four o'clock in the small conference room overlooking the park. I'll reserve it as soon as I get off the phone. Thanks, Jeff. I appreciate your flexibility."

They ended the call, and Tanya said, "Just one more minute while I reserve the conference room." She opened the office scheduling app on her phone and reserved the small conference room for four p.m. on Thursday.

Tanya and Cliff talked for a few more minutes. She noticed that he ignored his latte and cookie, while she'd finished both of hers. They must not have been to his liking. Too bad, she thought. Hers had been delicious.

Chapter 32
Donovan
Monday, October 26

Donovan left the café with a smile on his face. This was working out better and faster than he'd expected. He'd thought it would take longer for Tanya to fall for him but it looked like it was happening already. At the meeting on Thursday, he'd plan on being a bit hesitant, sorry to give up Tanya as his financial advisor, unsure of the new guy. But eventually he would accept the transfer of accounts and move on with Tanya in a personal relationship.

He planned on doing a deep dive on Jeff Taylor just to make sure their approaches to investing were aligned. It would be interesting to see what he could find out about Taylor and how he could use that information. He was looking forward to the game.

Chapter 33
Tanya
Thursday, October 29, 2022

Tanya awoke earlier than usual on Thursday morning, before the alarm went off. She lay in bed for a few minutes, thinking about the afternoon meeting with Cliff and Jeff. She was looking forward to the meeting and the subsequent dinner. She and Jeff worked well together, and she was certain Cliff would enjoy working with him.

After a quick shower, she dressed in jeans and a St. Louis Cardinals jersey and went upstairs to see her mom and dad. Eve was in the kitchen, fixing scrambled eggs and toast for Jared, who was sitting in the dining area, looking out the window. When Eve saw Tanya, she asked, "Eggs? Toast?"

"You bet!" Tanya said.

Eve served Jared his breakfast and started over again on Tanya's breakfast. Tanya sat at the kitchen island and said, "I have some news."

"What's that, dear?" Eve said.

"I was concerned about the optics of serving as Cliff's advisor and dating him at the same time. So I talked to Cecile about transferring Cliff's accounts to one of my colleagues. She was fine with it, and so was Jeff. I talked with Cliff about it on Monday, and I think he's on board also. The three of us are meeting this afternoon at the office to discuss the transfer and handle the paperwork. Then we're going to dinner, somewhere nice downtown."

"That sounds good, Tanya. I hope it all works out for you," Eve said, placing Tanya's eggs and toast in front of her daughter.

"Mom, are you all right? You don't seem quite yourself this morning," Tanya said, concerned about her mother's mood.

"Well, there is something I need to talk with you and Leslie about," Eve said. She poured herself a cup of coffee and came to sit beside Tanya at the kitchen island.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," Eve began and paused to take a sip of coffee. "Your father seems to be getting worse. He's having trouble finding the words to tell what he needs. And I've noticed him stumbling and swaying when he walks. I'm going to call Doc Mac this morning to talk to him about it. I'm afraid this change in his condition might affect his eligibility for the clinical trial."

"Oh, Mom, I hope that's not the case. Yes, be sure to call Doc Mac right away this morning. When is it that the trial starts?" Tanya said.

"It was supposed to start today, but Dr. Jansen postponed it till Monday, November 2. Your father is still enrolled but I don't know what this change might mean for the trial."

"Why don't you try Doc Mac's office now? If he's not there yet, you can leave a message," Tanya said.

Eve nodded and said, "Would you keep an eye on your father while I go in the other room to make the call?" Eve said.

"Of course," Tanya said. "I'll get a cup of coffee and go to sit with him."

Eve left the kitchen, and Tanya poured herself a cup of coffee and went to sit at the table with her father. As she sat down, he looked at her with a smile and said, "Hello, young lady. Thank you for coming to sit with me."

For a moment, Tanya felt a flicker of hope that her father had recognized her. But then he said, "Do I know you? You don't look fam --" he paused and looked around the kitchen, as if trying to find the word he wanted but to no avail. "You don't look like somebody I know. What's your name?"

"My name is Tanya. It's good to see you. Is there anything I can get for you? Another cup of coffee, perhaps?" Tanya said.

Jared looked puzzled, seeming not to understand her words. Tanya reached out and took his hand, saying, "We can just sit here together. We don't have to talk or do anything." She felt the sting of tears and turned her head away so her father couldn't see them.

Just then, Eve returned to the kitchen and joined them at the table. The three of them sat there for a few minutes, then Eve said to Jared, "Sweetheart, let's get you situated in the family room. We can find something for you to watch on TV."

Eve and Jared left the kitchen, and Tanya got up to get another cup of coffee. When her mother returned to the kitchen, Tanya said, "Were you able to contact Doc Mac?"

"Yes, he'd just arrived at the office when I called. I told him about the changes in your father, and he wants me to bring him in for some tests to make sure he's still a candidate for the clinical trial. He said he could see him this morning, if you'd be able to come along to help me with Daddy. I know you have that meeting this afternoon so I could call Doc Mac and set it up for tomorrow,

"Yes, of course," Tanya said. "If you want to go today, I have plenty of time until my meeting. It isn't until four this afternoon."

"Great," Eve said. "I'll go get your father ready."

"Good, idea," Tanya said.

An hour later, Eve, and Tanya were seated in Doc Mac's office. Jared was still in the exam room, being helped to dress by one of the nurses. Doc Mac had done a thorough examination of Jared, and now listened to Eve's concerns about Jared's deterioration.

"Eve, you're right to be worried," Doc Mac said. "Jared has gone downhill considerably since his last exam. I don't know what brought this on but it's certainly not good news. I'm going to contact Dr. Jansen about the clinical trial. My recommendation would be for Jared not to participate. I think it might do him more harm than good because of all the things he would be required to do."

Tanya and Eve sat there in silence, absorbing Doc Mac's words. Finally, Tanya said, "Doc Mac, you're sure about this?"

"Yes, dear," the doctor said. "I don't see any reason to put your father through the requirements of the trial when it probably wouldn't help him."

Tears filled Eve's eyes, and she reached in her handbag for a tissue. "Well, part of me is relieved about that," Eve said. "I've been anxious about the trial, and I agree with your decision."

Several hours later, home from the visit to the doctor, Eve put Jared down for a nap, and then Eve and her daughter did a conference call with Leslie. They let her know that Jared would not be participating in the clinical trial for the Alzheimer's drug.

Leslie was disappointed but agreed that it was the right decision and in the best interests of Jared.

After the phone call, Tanya went downstairs to her office to prepare for this afternoon's meeting. Sitting at her desk, Tanya pulled out the file she'd started on Cliff when they first met. As she flipped through the pages, she realized how little she really knew about the man. He'd told her the bare bones of his life, how his parents had passed away and left him well off, so that he could choose to work or not. He told her they'd been Rivermont residents, having moved to the city because they had friends living here.

Tanya made a note to herself to see what she could find out about where his parents lived in Rivermont and who their friends were. She'd try to ask Cliff about without seeming nosy or like a stalker. Maybe some of it could come up as part of this afternoon's meeting, trying to give Jeff background on Cliff. She'd have to think it through and figure out a way to make it seem natural.

Chapter 34
Tanya
Thursday, October 29, 2022

The meeting with Jeff and Cliff was scheduled for 4 p.m. Tanya left the house at 3 p.m. so she could have a few minutes with Jeff before Cliff arrived. She thought she'd come up with a way to get information about Cliff's personal life without him thinking she was hunting him down.

At the office, she stopped by Jeff's office and asked if he had a few minutes to talk before their meeting with Cliff.

"Sure, come on in. Have a seat," Jeff said.

Tanya took a seat in one of the two guest chairs in front of Jeff's desk. She set her coat, handbag and briefcase containing Cliff's files on the other chair.

"What's up?" Jeff asked.

"I just wanted to go over our agenda for this afternoon's meeting," Tanya said. "I think it would be a good idea for you and Cliff to get to know one another, to know each other's background and history. I can't be much help providing that for either one of you. So what I'd like to do is ask you to give Cliff a fairly in-depth overview of your life -- where you grew up, where you went to college, where else you've worked, your wife, your children, everything, all of that."

"Do you really think that's necessary?" Jeff asked.

"Yes, I do. It's important to me that Cliff feel comfortable with you as his financial advisor. I'm feeling guilty about transferring his accounts, and I want to make sure he knows who he'll be working with," Tanya said. "We can start the conversation by getting Cliff to share his background with you. I can be an interested third party and ask questions of both of you and get you to elaborate on parts of your background."

"That seems a little overboard to me, Tanya. We don't usually share much personal information with clients. At least, I don't," Jeff said.

"I usually do. I find it establishes a strong working relationship between advisor and client if each one knows about the other," Tanya said.

Jeff looked doubtful and shook his head slowly. "Well, we can try it if you want," he said.

"Thanks, Jeff. I appreciate your cooperation. Trust me, this will be a good thing for your interaction with Cliff. I think he has the potential to be one of your better clients." Tanya said.

She stood up and gathered up her coat, handbag and briefcase. "See you at 4," she said as she left Jeff's office.

As she walked down the hall, she once again thought how much she liked working for this investment firm. She definitely enjoyed the flexibility of working at home when she chose. At the end of the hall, she entered the "hotel" office she'd reserved for her use this afternoon. As a work-at-home advisor, she didn't have a permanently assigned office but had access to the "hotel" offices.

Inside the office, she set her briefcase and handbag on the desk, then hung her coat on a coat rack in the corner. Seated at the desk, she opened the briefcase and pulled out the file she'd set up on Cliff. She scanned through the pages and found her handwritten notes from their first meeting.

One of the notes caught her attention: Has accounts at two firms in California.

Cliff didn't seem like a California guy, Tanya thought. He wasn't flashy or over-the-top. She wondered how he had avoided a California personality.

He'd said he had been a software engineer for about ten years in California. She wondered what he'd done before that. He was in his early forties so there must have been another career before his ten years as a software engineer.

Well, she'd have a chance to find out if her plan for the sharing of their backgrounds worked out for Cliff and Jeff.

Chapter 35
Donovan
Thursday, October 29, 2022

The receptionist led Donovan down the hall to the conference room where he was meeting Tanya and the broker he was being forced on. The door to the room was open, and as Cliff walked in, he turned to thank the receptionist for her help.

The man in the room stood from his seat at the small round conference table and extended his hand to Cliff.

"Hi," the man said. "I'm Jeff Taylor. Pleased to meet you."

The two men shook hands, and Tanya said, "Hi, Cliff. Good to see you. Have a seat, please."

"Hello, Tanya," Cliff said, as he took a seat at the table next to her. He'd brought along his portfolio and set it on the table.

"Does anyone want coffee or water?" Tanya asked. Both men said no, and Tanya said, "Well, then, let's get started. Cliff, I was telling Jeff that I'd like the two of you to get to know one another. I think that would be beneficial for your broker / client relationship. So, Cliff, let's start with you. If you don't mind, why don't you tell Jeff about yourself."

Cliff smiled and said, "All due respect, Tanya, do you really think that's necessary?"

"Not necessary, of course, but I think it's a good approach for a beneficial working relationship. Tell you what - I'll participate, too, and I'll start," Tanya said. She took a deep breath and started.

"I'm 33 years old, and I recently relocated to Rivermont from the investment firm's headquarters in Chicago. My father was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's, and I came home to help my mother. I had worked in Chicago almost 10 years. I started at McKenzie Investments shortly after I earned my MBA at Washington University in St. Louis. I also got my undergraduate degree in finance at Wash. U," Tanya said. She paused a moment, then continued.

"I'm single, never married. I have no children but I do have a delightful niece and nephew -- my sister Leslie's twins, Thomas and Maria. Leslie is a mystery writer; she uses the pseudonym of Pia Grant. Her husband Paul is principal of Rivermont Elementary," she finished.

"Any questions?" she asked.

Jeff shook his head and said no, but Cliff nodded and said, "I'm wondering how you got to Chicago."

"Well, that's sort of a fun story. While I was working on my MBA, I started dating one of the other students in the degree program. At first, I didn't know he was a fairly well-known professional hockey player with the Chicago Blackhawks. I think he was trying to keep a low profile and just be another student. I eventually found out about his hockey career, and I started getting interested in the sport. Before I met Jack, I knew nothing about hockey. When we graduated from the MBA program, he was heading back to Chicago, and we'd gotten somewhat serious, and he invited me to come along, and I did. He was instrumental in me getting an interview at McKenzie Investments. They handled his finances, and they were grooming him for a position there once his hockey career was over," Tanya said. "Sorry this is such a long story but it's done. I was hired at McKenzie and the rest is history."

"What happened to Jack?" Cliff asked.

Tanya hesitated before saying, "He got traded and went on his merry way. He never did go to work at McKenzie Investments. I heard he got a better offer from another firm."

Both men were silent until Jeff said, "My turn. I'm 29 years old, and I grew up in Rivermont, just like Tanya. I went to Rivermont University for my undergraduate and master's degrees in finance. I'm married to my beautiful, brilliant high school sweetheart Zoe, and we have a three-month-old daughter Madison. My wife plays the clarinet for the Rivermont Symphony. In fact, Zoe and Tanya went to high school together and were in the orchestra together. Shows you what a small world we have here in Rivermont."

Jeff looked at Cliff and said, "Okay, man. It's your turn."

All of a sudden Tanya had the feeling that Cliff was going to stand up and walk out of the conference room. But instead, he nodded slowly and said, "I don't agree with all this sharing of personal information but I don't see what harm it can do so here goes."

He cleared his throat and began. "I moved here to Rivermont to settle my parents' estate. They had moved here several years ago to be close to my dad's cousin and his wife, and all their family. I had lived in Seattle for about 10 years. I was a software engineer there, working on a small firm's security software."

Tanya could hardly believe what she was hearing. It was so different from what Cliff had told her about his background at their first meeting. The only part that was the same was that he was a software engineer. What was going on here?

"My parents' estate was substantial enough that I was able to leave my job and not have to work. I found Rivermont to be a really good place to live and plan to stay here indefinitely," Cliff said. He looked at Tanya and smiled.

Tanya tried to put her thoughts in order and gain control of the meeting. She looked at both men, then said, "Thank you both for participating. I do appreciate it. Now, let's get to work on this paperwork."

An hour later, they'd finished the paperwork and were ready to leave for dinner. Jeff excused himself to go back to his office and wrap things up there.

Tanya was deeply concerned about the discrepancies in what Cliff had told them about his background, compared to what he'd told her at their first meeting. Part of her wanted to confront him about the inconsistencies but another part, the suspicious part, wanted to find out why he'd put forth two differing backgrounds. She decided not to say anything and to see where things went. And she would do some investigating on her own.

Tanya had chosen one of downtown Rivermont's premier restaurants for their dinner. The restaurant was located on the top floor of a 20-story circular building overlooking the riverfront and was within easy walking distance of McKenzie Investments. Tanya had been looking forward to the dinner, at least until Cliff's disconcerting background information. Now, she wished she could just go home and forget about everything.

The maitre de seated them at a banquette overlooking the river. Tanya asked the men if it would be all right if she ordered a bottle of wine, and they agreed. But even the wine didn't relax her. She felt like she was going to jump out of her skin as she tried to chat with Cliff and Jeff.

They ordered dinner, and Tanya excused herself to go to the restroom. In there, she reapplied her makeup and stared at herself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror that covered one of the walls in the restroom. She was doing her best to hide her dismay from Cliff but wasn't sure how well she was doing it. Taking a deep breath, she left the restroom, determined to put on a good show but also determined to find out the truth about Cliff Townsend.

Chapter 36
Donovan
Thursday, October 29, 2022

Donovan and Jeff stood when Tanya returned from the restroom. She smiled at them, saying, "What gentlemen you are!"

Donovan could feel the tension emanating off Tanya. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out what was wrong. At the beginning of the meeting with Jeff, Tanya had seemed her usual self. Then somewhere along the line, she seemed to disconnect from things. He could tell she was doing her best to pretend nothing had happened but he could see right through her. What was up?

As they ate, Jeff talked on and on about his daughter and the vacation plans he and his wife were making. Tanya said very little until they'd finished eating and were having an after-dinner drink.

She turned to Donovan, and said, "At our meeting, when we were all talking about our backgrounds you mentioned your 10 years in Seattle as a software engineer. What did you do before that?"

Donovan groaned inwardly, not knowing how to answer the question. He'd never been a software engineer. His only career had been as a finance lecturer at a public university in St. Louis. And why was she asking about it? Quick! Think of something logical to say.

He nodded and said, "It's a bit of an interesting story. After earning my undergraduate degree in economics, I decided to go to law school. I did well in school and was hired by one of the large Seattle firms. At first, all was well. Then the long hours I had to work started to wear me down."

Donovan paused to take a sip of his drink and to think of what to say. "And unfortunately, after I'd been there a couple of years, I learned that the firm's ethics policy was just a piece of paper. I learned that the firm had gotten involved in some quasi-criminal legal work for a local mobster."

"Oh no," Jeff said. "That's awful."

"It sure was," Donovan agreed. "I didn't know what to do. I assumed that the managing partner and all the other partners were aware of what was going on. So I handed in my resignation and went to the FBI with my suspicions. They followed up, and the bottom line was that the law firm closed down, and the managing partner and a couple of the other partners were tried and convicted and are now serving prison terms."

Again, Donovan paused, and this time he finished his drink. "I wanted to get as far away from the law as I could so I enrolled in computer science and earned a bachelor's and a master's degree and became a software engineer."

He saw from Tanya's expression that she might be buying into the load of crap he'd just put out on the table.

"Interesting story," Tanya said. "I'll have to share it with my sister, the mystery writer."

"Your sister is a mystery writer?" Jeff asked, his surprise evident in his voice. "Why didn't I know that?"

Tanya laughed and said, "Jeff, I don't tell you everything."

"What's her name? I like mysteries. I'll check her out," Jeff said.

"She uses the pseudonym Pia Kennedy," Tanya said.

"Thanks," Jeff said. "Cliff, are you a reader?"

Donovan nodded and said, "But I'm more into nonfiction. Politics, science, economics. I don't have much time or patience for pretend."

He thought he saw a fleeting frown on Tanya's face and realized he shouldn't have dissed her sister's work. This evening was not going as well as he'd hoped. In fact, it wasn't going well at all, and he didn't know what had gone wrong or how to salvage it.

A few minutes later, following some desultory conversation, Tanya paid the bill and stood, saying that she was taking off. Jeff stood also and said he'd walk back to the office with her.

Donovan stayed seated and said he'd call an Uber. Neither Jeff nor Tanya offered to give him a ride or wait with him till his car came. They said their good-byes and left.

Donovan ordered an Uber and left the restaurant to wait outside for the car. He felt Tanya slipping through his fingers, and he didn't know what to do.

Chapter 37
Tanya
Thursday, October 29, 2022

Tanya and Jeff parted ways in the parking garage. Tanya pulled out of the garage and drove to the highway entrance ramp. Her mind was racing, thoughts tumbling one after another in no order and making little sense.

What was going on with Cliff? Less than two weeks ago, he'd told her he was from California. Tonight he'd said he was from Seattle.

As she drove, she tried to figure out what to do. Should she confront Cliff? Should she leave it alone? Should she leave him alone. What was the answer?

As if in answer to a prayer, her phone rang and she saw that it was Leslie. "Thank heavens," Tanya whispered, then answered with a "Hi there!"

"Hi there, yourself! What's going on?" Leslie said.

"What isn't going on?" Tanya said.

"What's wrong, sis?" Leslie asked, concern in her voice.

"I don't even know where to start. I'm driving home from a ghastly dinner with Cliff Townsend and Jeff Taylor, the financial advisor I'm transferring Cliff's accounts to," Tanya said.

"Yeah, Mom told me about that. She said you didn't feel it was appropriate to date a client," Leslie said.

"Now I'm wondering if it's appropriate to date Cliff," Tanya said, a harsh note in her voice.

"Good Lord, what happened?" Leslie asked.

Tanya took a deep breath, then said, "I'm coming up on the exit near your house. Would it be all right if I stopped in and talked to you about this?"

"Of course, sweetie. The twins are fast asleep, and Paul is working on his weekly newsletter. I'd be glad of the company," Leslie said.

"Thanks," Tanya. "See you in a bit."

Chapter 38
Tanya and Leslie
Thursday, October 29, 2022

Ten minutes later, Tanya was seated in Leslie's family room, waiting for her sister to return with glasses of wine for each of them. She couldn't stop rubbing her hands together, as if to warm them up. The family room was comfortably warm, with a fire burning in the stone fireplace so her hands weren't really cold.

Leslie brought the wine on a tray with some crackers and cheese and set the tray on the large coffee table in front of the sectional where Tanya was sitting.

They each sipped at their wine, and Leslie ate a piece of cheese on a cracker. Finally, Leslie said, "Okay, tell me what's going on."

Tanya sipped more wine, then said, "I met with Cliff and Jeff Taylor this afternoon at the downtown office. Somehow I got the idea that it would be a good thing for Jeff and Cliff to get to know one another, to know about each other's personal life. I went first, telling them about me, then Jeff told us his story. Cliff finally agreed to tell us about his background, although he said something about not seeing the point of it but figuring it couldn't do any harm. Well, that couldn't be farther from the truth."

"What do you mean?" Leslie said.

"What I mean is that the story he shared this afternoon with Jeff and me is significantly different from what he told me less than two weeks ago," Tanya said.

"How so?" Leslie said.

"When we first met at the downtown office almost two weeks ago, he told me he was from California, had been a software engineer there for 10 years. Today, he said he was from Seattle. At our first meeting, he said his parents moved to Rivermont to be near some long-time friends. Today, he said they moved here to be close to his dad's cousin," Tanya said, sipping her wine again.

"Did you confront him? Did you ask him about the discrepancies?" Leslie said.

Tanya shook her head and said, "No, I was too taken aback to say anything. I didn't know what to say. I would have had to accuse him of lying at one time or another. Later, at dinner, I asked him what he had done before his 10 years as a software engineer -- I deliberately didn't mention California or Seattle. He told us some long involved story about getting a law degree and working for a law firm -- in Seattle, mind you, that turned out to be involved in some corruption. He said he left the firm and reported them to the FBI."

"Wow, that's some story. Did he give you the name of the firm?" Leslie said.

Tanya smiled and said, "Your mind is going exactly the same place as mine. I'm looking for any detail I can check online to either verify or disprove what Cliff told me. So to answer your question, no, he didn't give me the name of the law firm. I don't know if I have enough information to do any checking."

"I can help you with that," Leslie said. "I have mad research skills. I also have a friend at the library who can find anything or anybody, if we can't find anything."

"Thanks, sis. I would appreciate any help you could provide," Tanya said.

"Tell you what," Leslie said slowly. Why don't you come over here tomorrow evening, and we can put our heads together and see what we come up with?"

"Sounds like a plan," Tanya said. "Oh, and please don't say anything to Mom about this. She has enough on her plate already, and I certainly don't want to add to her worries."

Chapter 39
Leslie
Thursday, October 29, 2022

Leslie walked out with Tanya, giving her sister a big hug as they stood in the driveway. "See you tomorrow evening," Leslie said as she walked back into the house.

She turned out the porch light, then headed downstairs to Paul's office. As she had expected, he was watching the hockey game on the big screen TV outside his office.

"Finished with the newsletter?" Leslie said.

"Yep! All done and ready for your expert proofreading skills. I emailed a copy to you," Paul said. "Did I hear someone upstairs?"

"It was Tanya. She stopped in on her way home from a client dinner with another financial advisor and that guy I told you about, Cliff Townsend," Leslie said.

"Because?" Paul said.

"Something concerning came up during the meeting they had at the office before the dinner. Evidently, Cliff gave conflicting information about his background, and it has Tanya really upset," Leslie said.

"Conflicting how?" Paul said.

"At their first meeting a couple of weeks ago, Cliff said he was from California. At today's meeting, he said Seattle. Weeks ago he told Tanya his parents relocated to Rivermont to be near some close friends. Today, he said they moved here to be close to his dad's cousin. So naturally Tanya is concerned about the discrepancies," Leslie said.

"Did Tanya confront him about the discrepancies?" Paul said.

"No, she didn't. I think she was hesitant because there was another financial advisor with them," Leslie said.

"So what's she going to do?" Paul said.

"She's going to try to gather more information about Cliff Townsend and try to figure out what's going on. She's coming over tomorrow evening, and we're going to put our heads together and see what we can find out," Leslie said.

Paul chuckled and said, "That sounds dangerous. You, my dear, are one of the best researchers I know, almost to the point of rampant stalking, I would say."

"I beg your pardon! I prefer to think of it as information gathering, my dear," Leslie said. She hesitated a moment, then said, "And if we strike out and can't find anything, I can always call on my secret weapon at the library."

At first Paul didn't say anything. Then he sighed as he said, "You mean Samantha?"

"Exactly!" Leslie said. "If anyone can get to the bottom of this, it's Samantha."

"Are you sure you want to do that? I'm not sure that Samantha adheres to the right side of the law in some of her research," Paul said.

Leslie dismissed this with a wave of her hand. "Oh pish tosh! Samantha gets results and that's what matters to me. Anyway, there's nothing illegal about trying to find out the truth about someone."

"Well, just be careful. It's easy to go overboard on these kinds of things," Paul said.

"I'll be careful. I just want to make sure that Tanya doesn't fall into a mess again. Her past hasn't been the best, you know," Leslie said.

"I know," Paul said. "Time to hit the hay, lady."

"I'll be there in a minute. I'll stop by my office and do my thing with your newsletter," Leslie said.

"You're the best!" Paul said, giving her a kiss on the cheek and taking her hand to walk upstairs.

Chapter 40
Leslie
Friday, October 30, 2022

Friday evening, Tanya arrived at Leslie's home a little after 8. Paul and the twins were watching TV in the family room, and Tanya spent some time talking to the three of them.

"You're coming tomorrow evening, right, Aunt T?" Thomas said.

"You bet! I wouldn't miss Halloween with you guys for anything," Tanya said. "So what costumes are my favorite niece and nephew wearing for the big night?"

Thomas and Maria exchanged glances, then Thomas, as usual the spokesperson for the two of them, said, "We can't tell you."

Tanya looked at him quizzically and said, "What do you mean?"

"It's a secret," Maria chimed in.

"You'll find out tomorrow night. You'll just have to wait till then."

Just then, Leslie walked into the room and asked, "So what's going on?"

"What's going on is that your children won't tell me about their costumes. They said it's a secret, and I have to wait till tomorrow night to find out what they're going to be. Can you imagine?"

"I certainly can," Leslie said with a laugh. "The only reason I know about their costumes is that I had to help them make the costumes. Even Paul doesn't know."

"What about the Halloween parties at school? Didn't you find out then?" Tanya said.

"Aunt T, we're too old for Halloween parties at school. That stops in kindergarten," Thomas said.

"Oh, pardon me," Tanya said, laughing.

"I think I'll rescue Aunt T from the two of you. We'll be upstairs in my office if you need us," Leslie said. She turned to Paul and offered, "There are brownies in the kitchen if you and the guys want a snack."

"Brownies?" Tanya said. "I have to make a detour on my way upstairs."

"Lead the way," Leslie said, following her sister out of the family room.

A few minutes later, the sisters were seated on the loveseat in Leslie's upstairs office, eating brownies.

"So what's our plan," Tanya said, her mouth still full of brownie.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Leslie said automatically, then laughed. "Sorry, I guess I'm still in Mom Mode."

"Did you bring all of Cliff's paperwork with you?" Leslie said.

"Yep!" Tanya said, opening her oversized purse and pulling out two file folders. She put them on the coffee table in front of the love seat and spread the papers out in front of them.

Leslie reached out and took some of the papers and flipped through them. Then she put them back on the table and reached for the rest of them. One of them grabbed her attention. "Fingerprints?" she said.

"Yes, it's a new requirement of the firm to stay ahead of any money laundering attempts," Tanya said.

"What does the firm do with the fingerprints?" Leslie said.

"Nothing, as far as I know, until there's some suspicion of money laundering. Then they turn the fingerprints over to the FBI," Tanya said.

"Hmmm," was Leslie's response.

She picked up another one of the papers and said, "This says Cliff's previous address is in Los Angeles, California. I guess that's as good a place to start as any."

"Start what?" Tanya said.

"We'll do some online searching -- and don't call it stalking, like Paul does," Leslie said.

They both walked over to Leslie's computer, Leslie carrying the piece of paper with Cliff Townsend's Los Angeles address. Leslie sat in her office chair, and Tanya pulled one of the other chairs next to her sister.

Leslie started typing, and Tanya tried to keep up with her but the pages flew by so fast she wasn't sure what she was looking at.

"Well, as far as I can tell, there's no Cliff Townsend in Los Angeles, especially not at the address he gave you. That address just doesn't exist in Los Angeles. Let's try Seattle," Leslie said.

Again, Tanya watched the rapid keystrokes and the pages flashing by. And again, Leslie said, "No Cliff Townsend in Seattle." She tapped her fingers on the desk, thinking. She stood, picked up the piece of paper she'd brought with her to the computer and walked back over to the coffee table. She put the paper back in the file folder, then brought both files back to the computer with her.

She flipped through the papers again and stopped at one of the forms. "Here's a social security number. Let's see what I can find out," Leslie said.

"Where can you look up social security numbers?" Tanya said.

"Well, I really can't. But I can look in the death index to see if this number belongs to someone who's deceased. A dead person's social security number is what identity thieves sometimes use," Leslie said.

She typed the number into the death index and said, "Eureka!"

"Okay, Archimedes. What did you find?" Tanya said.

"The social security number Cliff Townsend belonged to someone named Clifford James Townsend who died 20 years ago. So it would seem your Cliff took over this other Cliff's identity," Leslie said.

Tanya shook her head and said, "What a mess! I don't know what to do."

"What do you mean, what to do?" Leslie said.

"Well, all of the account paperwork is now invalid. The person doesn't exist -- he's dead," Tanya said.

"Let's not worry about that part of it yet. I want to see if we can find out who this Cliff Townsend really is," Leslie said.

"How can we do that? It seems like we're at a dead-end," Tanya said.

"Maybe not. I have a super-secret weapon that might be able to help," Leslie said.

"Tell me more," Tanya said.

"I can't really. It's someone who knows how to find people and things but sometimes skirts the edges of legality. So I'm sworn to secrecy as to this person's identity. Let me see what I can find out. May I keep these files, at least for a little while," Leslie said.

"Yes, you can keep them. They're copies," Tanya said. "I don't know what to do about talking to Cliff or going to the symphony with him. We're supposed to go tomorrow night."

Leslie thought for a long moment, then said, "I have an idea. I don't want you going anywhere with him. Why don't you invite him over here for our Halloween dinner? You can pretend it's dinner before the symphony with a chance to meet the rest of your family. I'd like to get a look at this guy and scope him out. I want to see just how dangerous he might be. I definitely don't want you alone with him. Once we're through with dinner, you can say you're not feeling well and can't go to the symphony. We'll get him to leave and then decide what to do."

Leslie paused, then said, "Paul and I have some police contacts that might be able to tell us what to do. I'll talk to Paul and let you know what he says. And I'll get in touch with my super secret sleuth and see if she can discover anything about this guy."

Chapter 41
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

First thing on Saturday morning, Leslie drove to the library to see if Samantha could help her find out more about Cliff Townsend. The library lot only had a few cars parked there, and inside the library, Leslie discovered that as far as she could tell, she was the only patron. In her briefcase, she'd brought along the Cliff Townsend files Tanya had given her, along with two library books that she returned. That done, she headed toward the research area in search of Samantha. In a moment, she saw her sitting at one of the computers behind the research reception desk.

She'd decided to give Samantha an edited version of the truth about why she wanted to find out who Cliff Townsend really was. She didn't want to actually bring Tanya or the investment firm into the discussion so she'd leave their names out of it. She'd blacked out the investment firm's name on the papers from Tanya and also Tanya's signature throughout the documents. So now there was nothing on the papers to link Cliff Townsend to Tanya or the investment firm.

"Hi, stranger," Leslie said.

"Hi, yourself," Samantha said. "It's been awhile."

"Long enough for your to abandon your Goth look. Sam, I must admit I liked it and sort of miss your intense Goth phase," Leslie said.

At one time, Samantha had dressed all in black and wore heavy black eye make-up. She had sported a burgundy streak in her dark hair and multiple body piercings with the requisite jewelry.

Now, the burgundy streak had grown to encompass all of Samantha's hair, which she was wearing in a spiky ponytail. Her make-up was more natural, except for the matching burgundy lipstick she wore. She was dressed in bell bottom jeans and an AC DC tee shirt. The only things leftover from the Goth phase were the multiple body piercings with the requisite jewelry.

"Can I help you with something?" Sam asked. Leslie nodded and flashed a grin at the girl, then said, "Let's step into your office."

Leslie motioned toward the cubicle that Samantha called home. The two women walked over to the cubicle, Samantha in front, with Lee trailing behind her. Leslie noticed that the research area was almost deserted this morning, with Samantha the only staffer on hand.

Samantha sat behind her desk, and Leslie took one of the guest chairs in front of the desk.

"So what's the deal?" Samantha said

"Well, a close friend of mine who's a financial advisor came to me with a problem, Leslie said. 'She knows I'm into research, and she asked if I could do some checking on a client that she was getting interested in personally. He'd given out two different versions of his background, and she was concerned about the duplicity. She didn't want to involve the firm unless it was absolutely necessary. I did some preliminary searching online and found out there was no record of the man in either place he said he came from. Then I found that he's using the social security number of someone who died 20 years ago.'

"Hmm, identity theft. That's not good," Samantha said. She nodded toward the file folders Leslie had pulled out of her briefcase. "You have paperwork?"

"Yes," Leslie said, handing the folders across the desk to Sam.

Sam paged through the papers slowly, making notes on a yellow legal pad as she read.

"So I take it we're assuming this guy's real name is not Cliff Townsend?" Samantha said.

"We're fairly certain that that's not his real name," Leslie said.

Samantha pulled a packet out of the file folder and said, "Fingerprints? That's unusual," she said.

"I was told it had something to do with money laundering," Leslie said.

"Well, that's helpful. If, that is, our guy has his fingerprints in some database somewhere," Samantha said.

Leslie hesitated before she asked Samantha the fingerprint question, then just plunged in. "Do you have access to any of the fingerprint databases?"

Samantha smiled and said, "There are some questions I can't answer, and that's one of them."

"Oh," was Leslie's only comment.

"Let's just say the dark web has everything one might need to seek out someone's true identity and leave it at that," Samantha said.

"Okay," Leslie said.

Samantha reached under her desk and picked up a computer bag. She pulled a laptop out of the bag and set it up on her desk.

"I can't use the library's computers for any of this," Samantha said as she turned on the laptop and entered something on the keyboard.

"Sam, I don't want you to do anything for me that might get you in trouble," Leslie said.

"Not to worry. It's all completely anonymous and can't be tracked," Samantha said. She opened the fingerprint packet, then took out her phone and snapped several photos of Cliff Townsend's fingerprint record. She turned back to the laptop and uploaded the photos.

"How quickly do you need this information?" Samantha said.

"As quickly as possible. I want to protect my--" Leslie almost said sister but substituted "friend. This afternoon?"

"Yes, I can do that. Why don't you come back about 2 p.m. and I'll have your information for you," Samantha said.

"I can't thank you enough, Sam. Like I said, though, I don't want to get you in any trouble," Leslie said.

"And like I said, not to worry. I'm not doing anything illegal. I'm just accessing databases that someone else illegally put on the dark web. You would be amazed at what's out there," Samantha said.

Leslie thought for a moment, then said, "When things calm down, would it be all right if I came back for a tutorial on the dark web? I'd like to use it in one of my mysteries."

"Sure, anytime," Samantha said.

Leslie stood, picked up her briefcase, thanked Samantha and left. As she walked out of the library, she wondered if she was doing the right thing.

At 2 p.m., Leslie was back in the library in Samantha's cubicle. On Samantha's desk was a stack of printouts. Her laptop was open, and a look of concern was on her face.

"Well, Les, I found your guy but it's not good news. He's a total bad guy, potentially a criminal and your friend had better stay as far away from him as possible. Here, come look at this screen," Samantha said.

Heart pounding, Leslie walked around behind Samantha's desk and looked down at the laptop screen.

Across the top of the screen were several pictures, all of the same man at various ages, with various haircuts, two with facial hair and the others clean-shaven. The names under the pictures were all the same: Terry Donovan.

"Why don't you pull up a chair?" Samantha said.

Leslie did so, grabbing one of the guest chairs and pulling it around the desk so she could sit next to Samantha. She was amazed to see the level of detail on the screen. The data revealed his addresses and jobs for the past 30 or so years, along with information on his travels, both national and international.

Most glaring was the fact that as a teenager he was considered a person of interest in the house fire that killed his mother and his stepfather. At one point, he was arrested, but eventually the charges were dropped because of a lack of evidence. Another pressing issue was the evident recent disappearance of his wife. She seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth.

Lee was frantic about the data she was seeing and hearing about. This guy was exponentially more dangerous than she'd ever anticipated. And how on earth did Samantha have access to all of this?

She asked that question. "Sam, how do you have all this information?"

"Just between the two of us?" Sam said.

"Of course," Lee replied.

"I do computer coding on the side, mostly as a hobby although maybe someday I'll switch careers. Anyway I developed an aggregator program that can go online and grab data from a variety of databases."

Sam paused then continued. "What's really going on here, Les? You're not giving me the whole story."

Lee hesitated, debating whether to stick to her original story or to tell the truth to Sam. She decided that since Sam had been so open with her, she would do the same.

"Well, I must admit I fudged a bit." Lee said in a sheepish tone. "Everything I told you was the truth. The part I left out is that the friend is my sister, and I'm trying to protect her from this man. So there's definitely a personal angle here."

Sam threw her a look, and Lee bowed her head and said, "Sorry."

"Not to worry," Sam said. "But with me, the truth, nothing but the whole truth, is always the best way to go."

"Sure, will do," Lee said.

"So what you're seeing here is just the surface stuff that's easily available on the Internet. The next several pages are from the deep web and the dark web, not the Internet," Samantha said.

"Whoa, just a minute. You're going to have to explain to me what the deep web and the dark web are. I have no idea what you're talking about," Leslie said.

"Sure, I can do that," Samantha said. She pulled open a desk drawer and drew out a file folder. "Most of this information here is from Wikipedia. Let's start with the deep web." She started reading from the stack of pages in the file folder.

"The deep web is part of the World Wide Web whose contents are not indexed by standard web search-engines. The content of the deep web is hidden behind login forms, and includes uses such as web mail, online banking, restricted access social-media pages and profiles, some web forums that require registration for viewing content, and pay-walled services such as video on demand and some online magazines and newspapers. The content of the deep web can be located and accessed by a direct URL or IP address, but may require a password or other security access to get past public pages," Samantha read from the Wikipedia printouts.

She selected another page from the file and read, "Again, according to Wikipedia, the dark web forms a small part of the deep web, but requires custom software in order to access its content. The dark web is the World Wide Web content that exists on darknets: overlay networks that use the Internet but require specific software, configurations, or authorization to access. Through the dark web, private computer networks can communicate and conduct business anonymously without divulging identifying information, such as a user's location. The dark web forms a small part of the deep web, the part of the Web not indexed by web search engines, although sometimes the term deep web is mistakenly used to refer specifically to the dark web."

"Wow!" Leslie said. "I had no idea."

"Most people don't," Samantha said. "Now, in addition to the deaths of his mother and stepfather and the disappearance of his wife, this guy has a background of financial shenanigans."

Leslie smiled at Sam's use of such an antiquated word.

"I won't go into detail -- you can see all the particulars in the printouts I made for you. But he's a wheeler dealer, and he's made himself a fortune in the stock market. From what I'm seeing on the dark web, I'm assuming there's been some insider trading, some cyber-fraud, some e-fraud and who knows what else," Samantha said. She put all the papers back into the file folder and handed it to Leslie. "You can have this," Samantha said. Leslie took the folder and went over to her briefcase and put it inside.

She stood by Samantha's desk, looking down at her. "Sam, I'm going to have contact the authorities about this. I won't use your name in any way. I'll keep you out of it completely. I'll tell them I found the information myself."

"Les, I'm not sure they'll believe you," Samantha said.

"I'll figure out a story they'll believe. No matter what happens, I don't want you getting in any trouble," Leslie said. "Thank you so much for doing this. You may have just saved my sister's life. I'll let you know what happens."

Samantha said, "I'll walk out with you. After all this, I need some fresh air."

Chapter 42
Tanya
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Tanya had called Cliff first thing on Saturday morning and invited him to dinner at Leslie's house before their symphony outing.

"It's a family Halloween tradition -- dinner before trick or treating. I know my sister Leslie and her husband Paul are looking forward to meeting you. And my Dad will be there so you'll have a chance to meet him, too," Tanya said.

There was silence on the other end of the line, and Tanya thought perhaps the call had dropped. "Cliff? Are you still there?" she said.

A moment passed before she heard, "Yes, yes, I'm here. I'm just surprised about your invitation. I wouldn't want to intrude on a family tradition."

"It wouldn't be an intrusion at all. I'm sure my family would be delighted to have you join us for dinner," Tanya said.

"In that case, I would be honored to have dinner with you and your family tonight. What time?" Cliff said.

"Why don't we say 5:30? The twins leave for trick or treating at about 6:30, the same time we need to leave for the symphony, so that works out well," Tanya said.

"I'm looking forward to it," Cliff said. "See you tonight."

They ended the call, and Tanya was surprised that her hands were shaking. It had been difficult to act as though things were fine with Cliff, when that definitely wasn't the case. She hoped Leslie would be able to gather some valid information about Cliff today from her super secret sleuth.

Chapter 43
Donovan
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Donovan pocketed his cell phone after ending the call with Tanya. He was in his "command center," checking on his latest trade.

He'd been more than surprised at Tanya' invitation. But it fit in perfectly with his plans for Leslie, even though it sped up his timetable for her exponentially.

He put his computer system in sleep mode and stood, looking around the room. After Leslie was taken care of, he would be moving on. He'd liked the nest he'd built here but he could easily replicate it anywhere else in the world -- and he would.

He walked to his bedroom and began getting clothes ready for his evening out. He'd decided to wear a suit and tie; he felt as if he wanted to look his best for what lay ahead. On the bed, next to his tie and belt, he put his "equipment" for tonight's activities, including the exceedingly sharp hunting knife in its leather sheath and a handful of plastic zip ties. He went over to the chest and from a plastic bag on top of the chest took out a length of coiled nylon rope. From the chest, he took out two snowy white handkerchiefs. He put the rope and the handkerchief on the bed next to the knife and zip ties. When he dressed, he'd put the handkerchiefs in his one of his trouser pockets. One would be his regular handkerchief; he'd use the other one as a gag for Leslie's mouth. In another pocket, he'd put the nylon rope and the hunting knife. He put on his blazer and opened the chest once again. Out of the top drawer, he pulled out a small flashlight and put it in one of the pockets of the blazer.

Somehow he would get Leslie out in the woods. He thought for a moment, then decided he had to somehow lure Leslie away from the house. There had to be a way for him to make that scenario happen.

Chapter 44
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

As Leslie drove home from the library, her heart thudded and her breathing was ragged as she processed what she'd learned from Sam about Cliff Townsend, whom she now knew was Terry Donovan. She called Tanya to let her know what the super sleuth had discovered. When she got Tanya's voice mail, she left a voice message with the information Sam had provided to her. Leslie knew that Tanya was going to freak out, just as she had.

After hanging up from Tanya's voice mail, she called Paul but got his voice mail also. What could he be doing that he didn't answer his phone on Halloween afternoon. She left a long, rambling message filling him in on what she'd learned about Cliff Townsend. She ended the message by saying, "I'm calling Pam Marshall from the Threat Assessment Unit to get her advice about what we should do."

She ended the call and called Pam. To her dismay, she got Pam's voice mail. "What's wrong with people that they don't answer their phones," she said to the empty car. Once again, she left a lengthy message, giving Pam the same details she'd given Tanya and Paul.

She ended the call by saying, "Call me crazy, but I'm beginning to wonder if this Cliff or Terry or whomever might be my stalker. Please give me a call at your earliest convenience. We really need your help."

Arriving home, she pulled into the garage, surprised to see that Paul's car wasn't there. Where could he and the twins be? She checked her phone and saw a text that she'd missed. Evidently, Thomas's Halloween costume was missing a sword so they'd gone in search of one.

"Rats!" Leslie said. She needed Paul's help with this mess she and Tanya were in or had created or whatever. In the house, she was greeted by a yowling Maisie, who was waiting for her in the kitchen. "Did we forget to feed you, kitty? Well, here, let me take care of that."

Leslie filled Maisie's food bowl and gave her fresh water. Then, for good measure, she gave the cat a handful of her favorite treats.

Leslie checked the crockpot to see how the white chicken chili was coming. She gave the fragrant dish a stir, then tasted it.

"Yum," she said. She was using her mother's favorite recipe and was hoping her parents would enjoy the dinner and the family time. She was starting to deeply regret her plan to have Tanya invite this Donovan creature over here. It would absolutely disrupt their Halloween dinner.

"How could I have been so stupid and thoughtless?" she groaned.

She went upstairs to change clothes and touch up her make-up. It was a little after 3 p.m. She wished Paul and the twins would get home. She needed to talk to him, to get his advice and most of all, his support.

Upstairs in the bedroom, she pulled the papers Sam had given her out of her briefcase and put them on the dresser. She wanted Paul to read them, to know what she now knew.

She felt grungy and decided she needed a quick shower. When she was done with the shower and dressed, she checked her phone but saw no text from Paul, no missed call from Pam Marshall and nothing from Tanya.

Her heart continued its incessant thudding, and she tried to relax, to calm herself down. But the mess she had created felt overwhelming. She went back downstairs and began to set the table for dinner in the dining room. That accomplished, she got the bags of Halloween candy out of the pantry and put the candy in a colorful witch's hat that served as the container for their candy.

In the kitchen, she checked again on the chili. As she worked, she kept checking her phone to see if there were any messages from Paul, Tanya or Pam Marshall. What was wrong with everybody, not responding to her rather frantic phone voice mails?

Finally, her phone rang, and she grabbed it out of her pocket, almost dropping it in the process. "Hello?" she said, not looking at the screen to see who was calling.

"Hi, dear," came her mother's voice over the line.

"Rats," Leslie said to herself. What was she going to say to her mother? Why couldn't one of the other three have called her instead of Eve.

"Hi, Mom," Leslie said. "How's it going? How's Dad?"

"Pretty much the same. I told him we'd decided against the drug trial, and he didn't know what I was talking about," Eve said.

Leslie sighed and said, "I'm looking forward to seeing the two of you at dinner tonight. Did Tanya tell you she invited Cliff Townsend to join us for dinner before they go to the symphony?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to seeing him again," Eve said. "He seems like such a nice young man, and Tanya's quite impressed with him."

"I know," Leslie said, wishing she didn't have to pretend with her mother. Well, it would all be over sometime this evening.

Eve and Leslie ended the call, and Leslie began pacing around the kitchen, waiting to hear from someone.

Finally, she heard the opening of the garage door. She hurried out to the garage to meet Paul and the twins.

"Where have you been?" Leslie said. "Why didn't you call me?"

Paul looked puzzled as he said, "I didn't know I was supposed to call you. Didn't you get my text about going to get a sword for Thomas?"

"Yes, eventually. Somehow I missed seeing it or hearing the text tone. So you didn't get my voice mail?" Leslie said.

"No," Paul said, pulling his phone out of his pocket and looking at the display. "I left my phone in the car when we went into the costume shop to buy the sword."

The twins were getting out of Paul's SVU, Thomas with a package in hand. Leslie turned to them, and said, "Hi, guys. You can go on in the house. I need to talk to your Dad for a minute. The Halloween candy is out so you can do a taste test, if you want."

Thomas hooted and said, "If we want? Are you kidding, Ma? Come on Sis. Let's go check out that candy."

When the twins were out of the garage, Leslie turned to Paul, and said, "I have something serious to tell you." She gave him a much more succinct recitation of the facts about Cliff Townsend than her original voice mail message. She ended with, "I called Pam Marshall to ask for her help and advice. But I got her voice mail, too, so I don't know if she got the message."

Paul reached out his arms and pulled Leslie into a hug. "I'm so sorry I missed your call. This is really a mess. And this guy is coming here for dinner, tonight?"

Leslie said muffled "Yes," her face buried in Paul's chest.

Paul released Leslie from the hug and said, "Look in the driveway, sweetheart."

Leslie looked out in the driveway and saw Pam Marshall getting out of her car. She turned and rushed out to greet her.

"Pam, thank God you're here. I don't know what to do," Leslie said.

Pam reached out a hand and patted Leslie's shoulder, and said, "Let's go inside and come up with a plan."

Ten minutes later, Paul, Leslie and Pam were seated in Paul's downstairs office with the door closed. Paul had sent the twins upstairs to play video games, telling them that they needed to talk with someone who had come to see them. "We'll be done in a bit, and then we'll see about getting your costumes ready for tonight."

The twins had grumbled about being banished upstairs but finally trudged up the steps.

In Paul's office, Pam asked Leslie to tell her again the details of what she'd learned about Cliff Townsend.

Leslie went through the details again, then handed Pam the papers she'd brought with her from upstairs.

Pam thumbed through the pages, every once in awhile writing something in the small leather notebook she'd pulled from her handbag.

Leslie made a mental note to remember that police detectives did still use leather notebooks. They didn't all tote around an iPad like the detectives did on TV.

"How did you get all this information?" Pam said.

For a moment, Leslie was tempted to tell Pam about Samantha but she didn't want to get her friend in trouble, in case whatever online research she was doing was somehow illegal. Instead, she went with the story she'd decided would suffice.

"Because of my mystery writing, I've had to do a lot of online research. I've become quite an expert, actually," Leslie said. She ignored Paul's throat clearing and continued.

"Recently, I've been exploring the deep web and the dark web. Those two entities are the source of much of the information I discovered about Terry Donovan," Leslie said, again ignoring Paul's throat clearing. She was not going to tell Pam about Samantha, no matter how many times Paul cleared his throat.

Pam looked from Leslie to Paul and back to Leslie. Something was going on here. Pam put it aside. Time was growing short so she couldn't follow up on whatever was going on with Paul and Leslie. Terry Donovan and Tanya Walters were due in two hours.

Pam stood and took her phone out of her jacket pocket. "I'm going in the other room to call Detective Chase and arrange for a patrol backup."

She left the room, and Paul said, "Why didn't you tell her about Samantha?"

"I didn't want to get Sam in trouble," Leslie said. "I don't know if everything she did is legal."

"Well, we're certainly in a mess here," Paul said.

"I know. I'm so sorry. I never expected something this bad. I'm going to try Tanya again," Leslie said. She took her phone out of her jeans pocket and called Tanya. Once again, she got Tanya's voice mail. When was her sister ever going to answer her phone? She left a message for Tanya, telling her that Pam Marshall and Detective Chase would be joining them, along with a patrol back-up. "Pam and I are thinking perhaps this Terry Donovan was my stalker. Please call me back as soon as you get this message. This is a real mess, Sis."

Leslie ended the call just as Pam returned to Paul's office.

"Bob is on his way here, and so is the patrol backup. When Bob gets here, we'll figure out how we're going to handle the situation," Pam said. "Is anyone else coming besides your sister and Donovan?"

"My parents, Eve and Jared Walters, were supposed to join us. My Dad has Alzheimer's and I don't want anything to upset him," Leslie said.

Pam began to pace around the office, then sat down again, and said, "I don't like the idea of your children or your father being here. Is there a way we can have them be elsewhere?"

Leslie and Paul looked at each other, and Leslie said, "Paul, maybe you could take the twins over to my parents' house for trick or treating." She said, "We could tell my Mom that neither of us is feeling well and that we would really appreciate it if she could take over our Halloween duties?"

"That's a good idea," Paul said. "I'd feel a lot better if the twins were not here for whatever happens."

Leslie turned to Pam and said, "I'll call my Mom. Once everything is settled, I'll tell her the truth about what's going on. I just don't want to worry her unnecessarily. She has enough on her mind, as it is."

Paul stood and said, "I'll go talk to the twins. I'll explain that you and I aren't feeling well, that it's nothing serious, but that we thought they'd have a better Halloween with Nana and Poppo. I'll get them into their costumes and take them over to your parents' house." He thought a moment, then said, "I'd feel a lot better if they spent the night at your parents' house. What do you think?"

"I agree," Leslie said. "Can you please help them pack toothbrushes, pajamas, a change of clothes and whatever else they think they might need. I'm sure they'll want to take their Switch video games. My Mom will be overjoyed to have them for a sleepover."

Leslie went into the family room to call her mother, and Pam took the opportunity to call her husband and let him know she would be late getting home.

When Leslie returned to Paul's office, Pam said, "Everything set?"

"Yes, I had to do some fast talking to prevent my Mom from coming over here to take care of Paul and me. But it's all settled now. As I expected, she's delighted to have them spend the night. I just wish Tanya would call me back. We need her to know everything that's going on," Leslie said. She heard Paul and the twins coming downstairs and went out in the family room to say good-bye. Pam followed her, wanting to see the children's Halloween costumes.

"Mama, you're going to miss Halloween! It's your favorite holiday!" Maria said, liberally sprinkling exclamation points in her sentences, as usual.

Maria was dressed as Lady Guinevere from King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Standing next to his sister, Thomas was dressed as King Arthur and had his sword Excalibur in hand. Leslie and Eve had spent hours making the twins' costumes, and Leslie was happy with the way they'd turned out. She took out her phone and snapped several pictures, including a selfie with Paul and herself and the twins.

"Have a wonderful time with Nana and Poppop," Leslie said. "And be sure to tell us everything that happens when you come home tomorrow morning. You guys look great. Daddy and I are so sorry to miss the fun. But there's always next year."

The twins hugged Leslie, then followed their Dad up the stairs.

Leslie and Pam went back into Paul's office and sat down.

"Detective Bob should be here any moment," Pam said.

Leslie laughed, "Do you always call him Detective Bob?"

"Once I heard that that's what the school children call him, I had to use it. Fortunately, he has a sense of humor and just laughs at me. I'm sure one of these days he'll come up with something equally funny to call me," Pam said.

Leslie's phone rang, and seeing that it was Tanya calling, she answered it saying, "Thank God, you called back!" She put the phone on speaker and set it on the coffee table in front of where she and Pam sat.

Pam listened intently as Leslie expanded on the details about Terry Donovan that she'd left in the voice mail to Tanya.

"I can't believe this!" Tanya said. "I thought something was wrong but nothing this bad. So what do you want me to do?"

Leslie looked at Pam questioningly, and Pam said, "Tanya, this is Pam Marshall from the police department. I'm here with your sister, and we have another detective and a patrol back-up arriving momentarily. Leslie thinks Terry Donovan might be her stalker, and I tend to agree. Mr. Cartwright took the twins to their grandparents so they're not involved in what's going on. I'd like you to come here just as you'd planned but I'd rather you take an Uber rather than having Donovan or Townsend pick you up. I don't want you alone with him. I think he definitely has the potential to be dangerous."

"All right," Tanya said. "I'll call him and give him some excuse about having to get here early. I'll come right away."

Leslie ended the call and stood, listening closely. "I think I heard the doorbell."

"That's probably Detective Bob. Let's go upstairs," Pam said.

The two women quickly walked up the stairs, and headed to the front door. Detective Bob was standing there, along with a uniformed patrol officer.

Leslie opened the door wide and ushered the two men inside.

"Leslie, Pam, this is Office Van Meter, from the Rivermont Police Department. His partner is in an unmarked car parked two houses down the street. They're going to keep an eye on things and be available at a moment's notice if we need them," Bob said. He reached in his jacket pocket and drew out two walky talkies. Bob handed Pam one of the walky talkies and said, "With these, we can be in constant communication."

The officer nodded at Leslie and Pam, then left.

Bob said, "Fill me in, please. Where do things stand?"

"Let's go into the kitchen," Leslie said. "I need to stir the chili and maybe you both would like coffee."

In the kitchen, after stirring the chili, Leslie put on a pot of coffee. The three of them sat at the kitchen counter, and when the coffee was done, Leslie poured them each a cup

Pam said, "To answer your question of where do things stand, Mr. Cartwright took the twins to their grandparents house. He'll be back soon. Leslie's sister Tanya is on her way over as we speak. I asked her to come on her own, not to get picked up by Donovan. I don't want her or anyone else alone with him."

"So we need to come up with a plan," Bob said. "Pam, any ideas?"

"I've been thinking about the best way to go about this, and I think we should tell this guy everything we know and everything we suspect." Pam turned to Leslie and said, "I would like you to show him all the documents you showed me, about his background and possible illegal activities. We can give him a chance to explain himself, although I don't think that will happen. If things turn ugly, Bob and I are both armed, as are the patrolmen outside."

Chapter 45
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

The kitchen door opened and Tanya walked in. Leslie introduced her to Bob and Pam, and filled her in on where things stood.

Tanya shook her head and said, "This is awful. I had no idea what I was dealing with." She turned to Bob and Pam and said, "Thank you so much for your help with this. Hopefully, it will be over soon."

"Yes, hopefully," Pam said. "I was just saying that I want us to tell Donovan all that Leslie has discovered about him and his past, including showing him the documents she has."

"I'd like to see those, if I may," Tanya said.

"Of course," Pam said. "They're downstairs in Mr. Cartwright's office. I can go down and get them..."

Tanya interrupted, saying, "No need. I'll go down and get them."

"Let me," Leslie said. "You stay up here and have a cup of coffee. I'll be right back."

Leslie headed toward the steps leading downstairs. As she passed one of the side windows, she looked out and saw a jazzy yellow sports car parked down the street. The sight of the car brought back a memory of being tailgated by a similar-looking yellow sports car when she was picking the twins up from school. At the time, she'd wondered if the tailgater might be her stalker. Now, as she looked at the car, she felt a chill go down her spine. Laughing at herself, she shook it off and headed downstairs.

She walked into Paul's office, turned on the overhead light and picked up the file folder with the Terry Donovan documents. At the door as she turned out the light, she felt something around her mouth. Realizing someone had put their hand over her mouth, she tried to wriggle free from the grasp of what seemed like a strong hand. Next, she felt something shoved into her mouth, a wad of cloth that would prevent her from screaming. A moment later, the man had grabbed her arms, shoved them behind her back and wrapped something around her wrists.

He grabbed one of her arms and headed toward the sliding glass doors that led out to the downstairs patio. Leslie noticed that the doors were open and realized they must have left them unlocked and that's how this monster got in.

Dragging Leslie behind him, the men headed toward the woods. Struggling to break free of his grasp, Leslie felt a blow to her jaw. The man had socked her. For a moment, she stopped struggling, then renewed her efforts. Once again, he hit her, this time across her face. She saw stars and felt like she was going to faint. She bent over, and the man pulled her upright and walked faster as they entered the woods.

Stumbling along the path, Leslie felt like any minute, she was going to fall down. The man headed off the path into the dense undergrowth. Leslie could feel the bushes scratching against her as he dragged her along behind him.

So far, he hadn't said a word. She knew it must be Terry Donovan, her stalker, the owner of the fancy yellow sports car.

"Oh, God," Leslie thought. "What am I going to do? How am going to get away from this monster?"

The man kept plunging through the undergrowth, paying no attention to the scratches the bushes were causing. At one point, a branch of a small tree snapped back into Leslie, and she fell to the ground. The man yanked her to her feet and again pulled her along behind him.

"Where was he taking her?" Leslie wondered. She'd never been in this part of the woods. She and the twins stuck to the man-made trails and never ventured off the paths. The woods were getting denser and it was rough going to get through the underbrush.

Finally, they reached a small clearing. Leslie was shocked to see a tall metal installation in the middle of the clearing. The sun shone through the trees and glinted off the metal bars that reached toward the sky. "What on earth was this?" Leslie wondered. After a moment, she remembered awhile back Paul mentioning that one of the cell phone companies had installed a humongous cell tower in the woods behind their house. That must be what this was.

The man shoved Leslie toward the cell tower, throwing her against one of the broad metal beams. He reached in his pocket and drew out a knife in a case. He pulled out the knife and sliced through the zip ties binding Leslie's wrist, cutting her arm in the process. She cried out in pain but the man ignored her. Out of one of his trouser pockets he pulled a coil of nylon rope and used it to tie Leslie to one of the metal legs of the cell tower. She could see blood dripping from her cut arm to the ground and tried to keep from feeling faint or nauseous. It was crucial that she not feel any weakness if she was going to get herself out of this horror show.

The man stood in front of her, his face a mask of rage and hatred. He stood there, thinking, then said. "My real name is Terry Donovan, not Cliff Townsend, My wife was Cathy Donovan. And you're responsible for her death." He pointed to a raised hillock about twenty feet away from the cell tower and said, "My beloved Cathy is buried just over there."

Leslie's mind was racing. Why was he telling her this? What did it have to do with her?

Chapter 46
Paul
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Paul came in from the garage through the kitchen door to be greeted by Tanya, Pam and Detective Bob sitting at the kitchen counter.

"So what's the plan?" Paul said, getting right to the point.

Pam spoke up. "My idea is that we confront this Cliff Townsend or Terry Donovan or whomever with the documents that Leslie came up with and see what he says about what she found out. I'm assuming he'll deny everything but we'll see what he says when we take him down to police headquarters for questioning."

Tanya got and walked over to where Paul was standing. "How did it go with the twins?" she said.

"They weren't too happy about this change in plans, to say the least. They were trying to put a good face on it but I could tell how disappointed they were that the Halloween tradition got cancelled. And of course, they were worried about Leslie and me being sick. I wish we hadn't had to tell them that. But hopefully everything will soon be okay. Your Mom has arranged for a neighbor to come sit with your Dad while she takes the kids out trick or treating." He looked around the kitchen and said, "By the way, where is Leslie?"

Tanya pointed to the stairs leading downstairs and said, "She went downstairs to get the documents about Cliff or Terry or whatever."

Bob stood up and said, "She's been down there for a bit. I'd better go down and check on her."

He hurried down the stairs. A minute later he called up, "Everybody get down here. Leslie's gone."

Paul, Pam and Tanya raced down the stairs. Bob was standing by the open patio doors.

"What's going on?" Paul said.

"Leslie's not down here, and I found the doors open. I'm afraid something is wrong," Bob said. He walked out on the patio and looked around. Paul followed him outside and said, "The patio furniture is knocked over."

"I saw that," Bob said.

"What are we going to do?" Paul said.

"I'll call for more help. We'll set up a search party," Bob said.

Paul pulled out his phone and said, "I may have something that could help locate Leslie. If she has her phone with her, that is." He tapped on the phone, bringing up the app he was looking for. He put in some information, then waited a moment while the app processed the information.

"What is the app?" Bob asked.

"It doesn't have a name yet," Paul said, speaking quickly. "The computer teacher at school does app programming on the side, and he gave me this beta version of the app to see what I think about it. What it does is locate someone by finding their cell phone, like a lot of the apps do. But the different thing about this app is

that it provides you with the longitude and latitude location of the person and gives you a map to follow. The app also tracks your own longitude and latitude so you know exactly where you're heading. Let's just hope Les has her phone with her."

Bob, Pam and Tanya were gathered around Paul as he looked down at his phone. "Great!" he said. "Les has her phone, and the app has located her. She's at the far end of the woods, away from the trails. Let's go."

Bob said, "Pam and I will go. I'll radio the patrolmen to come after us. Paul, you stay here with Tanya."

"Hell, no!" Paul said. "This is my wife, and I'm going after her."

Bob considered for a moment, then said, "All right, let's go. I'll radio the guys as we go."

Tanya stood there alone as the three of them walked out the open patio door. Paul closed the door behind them and waved to Tanya. She felt something warm and furry against her ankles and looked down to see Maisie winding herself around Tanya's legs.

"Hi, Maisie. Thanks for coming to be with me. We'll wait down here till they come back with Leslie." She pulled a chair over by the patio door and sat down. Maisie jumped up in her lap and started to purr. "I agree totally," Tanya said.

Chapter 47
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Donovan paced in front of Leslie, then turned to confront her. "You're the reason my beloved Cathy is dead. You and that goddamn blog of yours."

Leslie listened in horror as Donovan carried on.

" You had to get on your high horse and write about how women should leave their husbands. You filled Cathy's head with your horrible advice, and she tried to walk out on me. And then the terrible accident happened. She fell down the stairs and hit her head on the newel post at the bottom. She was gone. My beautiful girl was gone."

Hearing Donovan's words, Leslie couldn't catch her breath. She remembered one of the commenters on her blog was named Cathy. The woman had written that Leslie's posts about abused women had given her the courage she needed to leave her husband. Leslie had messaged her with good wishes and an offer of help. She'd given the woman her cell phone number and her direct email address but had never heard any more from her. Could this be the same Cathy as Donovan's dead wife? My God, was she actually to blame for the woman's death like Donovan believed. She wondered if Cathy's fall down the stairs had truly been an accident or if Donovan had taken his anger out on his wife and shoved her down the stairs.

Leslie felt the sting of tears as she thought, "I'm so sorry about her death." With the gag in her mouth, she couldn't say the words out loud.

Unexpectedly, Donovan reached out his hand and slapped Leslie viciously across the face. "You wrote those blogs to drive women away from their loving husbands. You're an evil person, and you're going to get exactly what you deserve."

Donovan paced in front of Leslie, holding the hunting knife in one hand.

Unbeknownst to Donovan, Leslie had found a sharp edge on one of the metal legs of the cell tower where she was tied up. Ever so slightly, she moved the rope on her wrists against the sharp edge, hoping to weaken the rope to the point where she could get her hands free.

As Leslie worked at the rope, she realized that she had her legs free. What if she could kick the knife out of Donovan's hand? Then she thought better of that plan. It wasn't good enough. What if she could kick Donovan in the head hard enough to knock him out. Maybe by the time he regained consciousness, she could have gotten the rope loosened and her hands free.

Donovan continued to pace back and forth in front of Leslie. She tried to gauge how close he had to be in order for her kick to land a hard enough blow to knock him unconscious. She was in good physical shape from daily workouts and jogging on the treadmill and was confident she could kick hard enough and wide enough to knock Donovan to the ground.

There came a point in Donovan's pacing where he was close enough to Leslie that she was sure she could land a kick against his head. She took a deep, determined breath and flung her right leg as far and as hard as she could. To her relief, her booted foot struck Donovan on the right side of his head, and he hit the ground. Leslie held her breath, waiting to see if her kick had had sufficient force to knock him out.

Chapter 48
Paul
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Paul, phone in hand, led the way through the underbrush. It was easy to see which way Donovan and Leslie had gone, from the bent bushes and broken branches. The three of them tried to move as fast as they could but the dense vegetation hindered their progress.

"We're getting close, according to the longitude and latitude readings I'm getting on the app," Paul said. He looked up and thought he saw something glinting in the late afternoon sun.

Bob noticed it, too, and asked, slightly out of breath from their rapid trek through the woods, "What's that glint over there?"

"It's a cell tower one of the cell phone companies installed awhile back. We never come to this part of the woods because it's so impassable. We stick to the trails." Paul realized that he, like Bob, was short of breath. Only Pam seemed to be doing just fine. She must be in better shape than the two fortyish men.

All of a sudden, Bob pitched forward and hit the ground with a thud. Paul and Pam turned to see what had happened. Bob lay sprawled out on the ground, one leg caught in a huge tree root.

Pam knelt beside Bob and said, "Bob, what's hurt?"

Bob seemed to mentally check the status of his body, then said, "I tripped over that root, and I think I may have twisted my ankle."

Pam rolled up his pants leg and took off his boot, then his sock. "I think you're right," Pam said. "It's starting to swell." She took the walky-talky out of her coat pocket and called Officer Van Meter.

"Van, this is Pam Marshall. Bob tripped over a root and twisted his ankle. I don't think he's going to be able to walk on it. We're going to need paramedics with a gurney to get him out of here."

Officer Meter replied that he'd contact Emergency Services. "I think we're getting close to your location. One of us will stay with Bob, and the other one can go on with you and Mr. Cartwright. I'll send Emergency Services a pin for Bob's location."

Moments later, the two patrolmen appeared. Van went with Pam and Paul, and the other officer stayed with Bob.

Paul handed his phone to Pam, and she and Van took the lead. "Careful with these roots. We don't want another man down."

Chapter 49
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Donovan was still motionless on the ground in front of Leslie. She was frantically yanking the rope against the sharp edge of one of the metal struts of the cell tower. She thought the rope felt a little looser but she couldn't be sure. She had to get free before Donovan regained consciousness.

It was getting late in the day, and she didn't want to be here in the woods in the dark. As she worked on the rope, she kept her eyes on Donovan, praying that he stayed out until she could get herself loose. All of a sudden, she felt the rope give a bit. She yanked harder and was able to slip one hand through the rope and then the other one. She was free! Thank God. She grabbed the gag in her mouth and pulled it out, gasping for breath.

She unwound herself from the rope and started back the way she and Donovan had come, through the beaten down underbrush. She thought she heard voices up ahead and stopped to listen. She yelled a loud "Hello" but heard nothing in return.

Suddenly something slammed against her back, and she sprawled on the ground. She screamed and kept screaming. Donovan was on the ground next to her, pounding his fists on her back and shoulders and head. She kicked backwards at him, then managed to roll herself away from him. Getting to her feet, she began to run through the woods, determined to escape from this murderous madman.

As she ran, she called out, "Is anybody out there? I need help. Help!"

Chapter 50
Paul
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Paul held his hand up and stopped walking as he listened intently.

"What is it?" Pam asked.

"I thought I heard something," Paul said. "It sounded like a scream."

The two of them stood motionless, listening.

"I guess not," Paul said. "Sorry." He plunged forward through the underbrush. Pam had tried to take the lead from him, but Paul had refused. "I have to do it," he said.

Pam unwillingly agreed but said, "When we're within sight of your wife and Donovan, you have to hang back, Meter and I are armed, and we'll be the ones to take down Donovan."

Paul had agreed but wasn't happy about it.

Paul checked the locator app on his phone, and said, "We're almost there. Come on in front of me."

Pam edged her way past Paul, into the lead. Officer Meter brought up the rear.

They kept going, with Paul telling her which way to go.

At the sound of a scream, all three of them stopped to listen. This time, the scream was loud and easily distinguishable. Someone was yelling "Help!"

Paul turned to Pam and said, "That's Leslie! We have to hurry."

They half walked, half ran through the bushes toward the area the locator app had pinpointed as Leslie's location.

As he ran, Paul yelled as loud as he could, "Les, we're coming! We're coming!"

Chapter 51
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Leslie stumbled through the dense undergrowth of the woods, hearing Donovan's thudding footsteps on her heels. She feared feeling him slam into her again or worse, hitting her over the head with something.

She heard Paul's voice off in the distance, yelling, "Les, we're coming! We're coming!" Her relief was so great that she began to sob big choking sobs. She could still hear the thud of Donovan's footsteps behind her but her terror lessened because rescue was within reach.

She saw the bushes moving ahead of her and then she saw Pam Marshall emerging from the undergrowth, pistol in hand, with Paul and a uniformed officer close behind. In her relief, Leslie slowed down a bit, just enough for Donovan to catch up with her and grab her. He wrapped his arm around her neck in a choke hold and squeezed tight.

Pam had her pistol out, and she yelled, "Let her go or I'll shoot."

Donovan held up his hunting knife and yelled back, "I'll slit the bitch's throat. Get out of our way. We're getting out of these fricking woods once and for all."

Again, Leslie gave Donovan a mighty backward kick, this time hitting his left knee. He groaned and fell to the ground clasping his knee. Leslie ran into Paul's arms, sobbing.

Pam didn't hesitate. With Officer Meter close behind, she whipped out her handcuffs and headed to where Donovan lay sprawled on the ground. She picked up the hunting knife he'd dropped and handed it to Meter. Then she handcuffed Donovan's hand in front of him. She took out the walky-talky and called Emergency Services, telling them they needed another gurney. "We have two men down in the woods behind the Cartwrights' house. I'll send you a pin for the exact location of the second man."

Chapter 51
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

Two hours later, Donovan was in jail at police headquarters. The paramedics had wrapped his knee in a compression knee sleeve and ignored his demands that he be taken to the hospital. Detective Bob was fitted with a boot for his twisted ankle and had been driven back to the Cartwrights' house by Pam Marshall. They wanted to get a preliminary statement from Leslie and had agreed to take the statement at the Cartwrights.

When Leslie got home, her first action had been to call her mother to see how the twins were doing with Halloween and their sleepover at their grandparents' house. It was almost 8 o'clock, and Eve told Leslie the twins had finished trick or treating and were in the process of going through their candy haul.

Leslie gave Eve a quick overview about what had happened and said she'd tell her all the details tomorrow morning when she and Paul came to pick up the twins. "Out of earshot of the twins, of course," Leslie said.

Then, Nana had put her phone on speaker, and gave the phone to Thomas who told his mother they'd dumped their candy bags on Nana's living room floor. They were sorting through the candy and doing some trading with each other.

"I'm putting aside the bubble gum for you, Mom," Thomas said.

Marie chimed in, saying "I'll save you a Payday candy bar, Mama."

"Thank you, babies. You know how to take care of your Mama. Could you please let me talk to Nana again?" Leslie said.

"Are you all right, dear?" Eve asked, taking the phone off speaker.

"Relatively speaking," Leslie said. "At least that monster is locked up. Pam Marshall and Detective Bob will be here any minute to take my statement. Or preliminary statement, I guess. I think I have to go to police headquarters tomorrow sometime to give them an official final statement. I'm not sure how these things work."

"I'm so glad you're all right," Eve said. "Tanya is beside herself thinking that she's the cause of all of this."

"Please tell her that's not true at all. Donovan was after me. He just used Tanya as a shortcut," Leslie said.

"I'm sorry to say that she's upset enough that she headed over to your house. I tried my best to stop her but you know how Tanya is when she gets an idea in her head," Eve said.

"I know!" Leslie said. "Well, she deserves to know what happened and what Donovan is all about. So don't feel bad about not being able to stop from coming over here." Changing the subject, Leslie asked, "How's Dad?"

"He's pretty much the same. I had my next door neighbor Tim Walton sit with your father while I took the twins trick or treating. Tim's dad suffered from Alzheimer's so he knew what to expect, Eve said."

"That worked out well," Leslie said. "I can't thank you enough, Mom, for taking the twins and doing so much for them. You saved Halloween for them, and I'm eternally grateful."

"You know I'd do anything for the twins, any time," Eve said.

"See you in the morning, Mom. Love you," Leslie said, ending the call.

Chapter 52
Leslie
Saturday, October 31, 2022

After her call with her mother, Leslie headed for the family room. Paul had settled Detective Bob in the recliner with a hassock to prop his booted footed on. Bob had put a recorder on the end table next to the recliner. Pam was seated on one of the sofas, having set up her recorder on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Paul had pulled one of the chairs up next to the coffee table, on which he'd put coffee, cups, napkins, sugar, cream and spoons. He'd also put out the last of the chocolate chip cookies.

Leslie walked over to where Paul sat and said, "The munchkins are fine. They have their Halloween candy spread out all over Nana's living room floor."

Paul reached up a hand and squeezed Leslie's arm. "Are you ready for this?" he asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," Leslie said. She sat on the sofa next to Pam. "Where do you want me to start?"

"At the beginning," Pam said. "Start with what happened when you went downstairs to get the documents about Donovan."

"Okay," Leslie said. "When I was going down the stairs, I happened to look outside, and I saw a bright yellow sports car parked out on the street. One of the times I felt like I was being stalked, a bright yellow sports car was tailgating me on the library parking lot. At the time, I wondered if it might be my stalker. It turns out I was right. Donovan was my stalker."

"So what happened when you got downstairs?" Bob asked.

"I went into Paul's office and got the papers. When I turned to go out the door, a man grabbed me. He shoved a gag in my mouth, then put my arms in back of me and bound my wrists together with zip ties. He dragged me out the open patio door. We must have left the patio door unlocked and that's how Donovan got in. I tried to break away from him, and he hit me in the jaw. The next time I struggled with him, he slapped me so hard that I saw stars and thought I was going to faint." Leslie paused, breathing deeply.

Paul stood and came over to sit beside her on the sofa. "Let me fix you a cup of coffee." He poured coffee, added cream and sugar and handed it to Leslie. She took a couple of sips, then was ready to continue her story.

Just then, Tanya came through the door of the family room. She stood there for a moment looking around at everyone.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't know anyone was going to be here."

Paul took over and introduced Tanya to Detective Bob and Pam Marshall. He pulled up a chair next to his and offered it to Tanya. Before sitting down, she walked over to where Leslie was sitting on the sofa and reached down to hug her sister.

"I'm so sorry about all of this," Tanya said. "Are you all right?"

"Relatively speaking," Leslie said, echoing her words to her mother. "Except for some bruises on my face and lots of aches and pains."

Tanya sat on the sofa next to her sister and put her arm around Leslie. For a brief moment, Leslie leaned her head against Tanya's shoulder, then sat up straight again.

"I was just telling Pam and Bob about how Donovan snatched me. He must have come in the patio door. He grabbed me, put a gag in my mouth and zip ties on my wrist," Leslie said, repeating what she'd already told Pam, Bob and Paul.

"Donovan dragged me out in the woods, off the trails. We ended up by the cell tower. He tied me to the tower and took out a knife. I was sure he was going to stab me, and the only thing I could think of to do was to kick him in the head. Thank God, it worked. It knocked him out," Leslie said, a triumphant grin on her face.

"He eventually regained consciousness and came after me again, this time holding a knife at my throat," Leslie said. "I kicked him again, this time the kick landed on his knee."

"I'm so proud of you, Les," Tanya said, "Who knew your kicks could have such power?"

"Certainly not me," Leslie said. "But thank heavens, the kicks worked."

"What I don't understand is why Donovan wanted to kill you?" Tanya said. "What reason could he have had?"

"Actually, he told me," Leslie said. "Evidently, his wife read my series of blogs about domestic abuse. Donovan said she took them to heart and tried to leave him. He claims that while she was trying to leave, she accidentally fell down the stairs and hit her head on a newel post at the bottom of the stairs, killing her instantly."

"Oh God, that's awful," Tanya said.

"Yes, awful," Leslie said. "I don't believe that it was an accident but I guess we'll never know. He told me she was buried near where we were, by the cell tower." Leslie paused a moment, then continued. "I think she wrote to me on my blog. Someone named Cathy wrote that what I'd written had given her the courage to leave her husband. And Donovan said his wife's name was Cathy." "

Leslie paused to take a sip of coffee, then shook her head as she continued, "I gave her my phone number and email address and offered to help in any way I could, but I never heard from her again. Now I guess I know why."

For the first time since Tanya's arrival, Pam spoke up. "We have a forensic team out in the woods with a cadaver dog searching for a body."

Bob sat up straighter in the recliner, pulled his phone out of his pocket and read a text. Then, looking around the room, he said, "I had someone back at headquarters digging into Donovan's background, and he just texted me. What you found on the dark web and deep web seems spot on, Leslie. He was considered a person of interest in the house fire that killed his mother and stepfather. Back then, the police were unable to find any evidence against him so no charges were ever filed. My guy also found evidence of cyber fraud and insider trading in his financial services background. And that, plus his attempted murder of you, Leslie, will be enough to put him away for the rest of his life."

Pam reached out and turned off her recorder and put it in her pocket. A moment later, Detective Bob did the same thing. Pam stood up, and turned to Leslie, "I think we have enough for now. I'd really appreciate it if you could come downtown to headquarters tomorrow when it's convenient so we can take an official statement."

"Of course. Will the afternoon be okay? Paul and I will want to go pick up the kids and spend some time with them." Leslie turned to her sister and said, "Tanya, would it be possible for you to come by tomorrow afternoon and stay with the twins while we're downtown?"

"Of course!" Tanya said. She stood up and reached out a hand to Pam. "Thank you so much for all you did for Leslie. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"You're very welcome," Pam said. "I'm just sorry you and your family had to go through this."

Tanya walked over to the recliner where Detective Bob sat, and reached out a hand to him. "And a big thank you to you, too, Detective Bob."

Bob chuckled as he shook Tanya's hand. "I don't suppose I can get you to stop calling me Detective Bob?"

Tanya laughed in return and said, "Not a chance." She kept hold of his hand and asked, "May I help you get up?"

"Someone's going to have to," Bob said, as he awkwardly made it to a standing position.

Paul stood and said to Bob, "I have a walking stick in the foyer closet. I'll get it for you. I think it'll help."

Paul left the room, and Tanya and Bob stood smiling at one another. Paul returned with the walking stick, and Bob took it, saying, "Yes, this will really help."

Pam said a quick, "See you tomorrow," to Leslie and walked over to Bob. "Come along. I'm taking you home."

"Gladly," Bob said. "It's been a long day."

Bob and Pam said their good-byes to everyone and left, with Bob leaning heavily on the walking stick. Before Tanya left a few minutes later, she hugged her sister tight, saying, "I'm so grateful you're all right." She promised to return tomorrow afternoon to take care of the twins.

Later that night, as they lying in bed, Paul held Leslie close, not wanting to let her go.

"Congratulations on your kicking prowess," he teased. "You saved your life with those well-placed kicks."

"I'll never complain again about going to the gym for a workout. I think the torture the trainers put me through actually did save my life."

For a minute they lay in silence, then Leslie said, "Say, did you notice that moment between Tanya and Detective Bob?" She paused, then continued, "You know, I wonder..."

Paul sat up abruptly, "Les, you're not doing any matchmaking. Promise me."

It took awhile for Leslie to answer but finally she said, "Well, no matchmaking, I guess."

"Good!" Paul declared and laid back down in bed. "Goodnight, sweetheart. I'm so glad you're here, where you belong, and safe."

"Goodnight," Leslie echoed. She lay awake for awhile, thinking about Tanya and Detective Bob and how she might be able bring them together.

THE END