

THE FEAR OF FIRE

Book Two in **THE FEAR OF** Series

S.C. Sterling

“Talk to you later butthead,” Casey said, hanging up the phone.

Resting her feet on the coffee table, she stared out the patio door. It was snowing yet again. This was her third winter in Wyoming, and while she thought she’d become accustomed to them, she hadn’t. They were as brutal as everyone said, probably even worse. She couldn’t decide what she hated more—the cold, the snow, or the wind. Probably the wind—that was year-round.

Growing up, she’d always loved winter—it was her favorite season—but as she got older, she began detesting the cold weather and the snow. More and more, she daydreamed of moving to Arizona or Florida after graduation. Life in Laramie was temporary.

Leaning back into the couch, she closed her eyes, but just as she started to doze off, the phone rang. Inching one eye open, she glared. It finally stopped in the middle of the seventh ring.

It was probably her best friend Robin, calling to ask her to go to the Cowboy Lounge, and when Casey said no, it’d eventually turn into begging. That was their usual Friday night drinking location, and there was a guy Robin wanted to introduce Casey to, but she didn’t feel like being social.

All she really wanted was a Frosty and fries, but she was too tired to throw on a coat and drive the five blocks to Wendy’s, so her night was going to consist of a long, hot shower, a frozen pepperoni pizza, and watching *Beetlejuice* on her worn-out VHS tape for probably the fiftieth time.

A little after eight, Casey placed the pizza in the oven, set the timer, then went into the bathroom and turned on the water and slipped off her clothes. Within a minute, steam filled the room and the mirror was covered with a layer of condensation. Casey preferred her showers with nearly scalding water, the hotter the better.

As she was washing her hair, a loud bang startled her—it sounded like it was coming from the patio. Then another one, this time louder. Something, or someone, had crashed into her sliding glass door.

Pulling open the curtain, Casey stuck her head out. “Hello? Is somebody there?” Her voice barely rose above the sound of the water.

Through the half-open door, Casey watched the hallway and a portion of the living room. The noise gave her an uneasy feeling. She turned off the water. Then, with suds still in her hair, she grabbed a towel and stepped out of the bathtub.

“If someone is out there, I have a gun and I know how to use it,” she said, volume rising as she spoke.

That was a lie. She'd never even held a gun, let alone fired one. The closest form of protection in her apartment was her mismatched cutlery, but that was in the kitchen. If someone was in her apartment, her best line of defense would be screaming at the top of her lungs.

For about a minute, she stared into the living room. Nothing. She waited for about another twenty seconds, then scurried to the front door and checked the doorknob and deadbolt. They were both locked. Then she checked the patio door—also locked.

Standing in the middle of the living room, Casey stared at the kitchen wall, concluding that the noises had probably actually come from her neighbor Kyle, a gas station attendant who smoked enough marijuana for three people. As she walked back to the bathroom, she turned on the lights in the kitchen and hallway.

After finishing her shower, she ate half the pizza, accompanied by a beer, and then inserted the tape into the VCR. She curled onto the couch, and within ten minutes she was drifting to sleep. Later in the night, she awoke to static on the TV screen. Barely awake, she turned it off and made her way into the bedroom, then crawled under the comforter and closed her eyes.

Something woke her, and instantly she sensed that someone was in her room, next to her bed. Casey prayed that it was a dream, a nightmare. Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw the silhouette of a man hovering over her. He was donned in all black. Black pants, black hoodie, black gloves, and a black ski mask. Through the opening of the ski mask, she could see the whites of his eyes. Just as she was about to scream, he pressed the edge of a cold knife against her throat.

“If you scream, I’ll slice your fucking throat from ear to ear,” he whispered.

Casey didn’t recognize the voice, but he sounded older—definitely not a college student. Fear rushed through her body. This could not be happening to her. Not her.

Paralyzed, she faintly muttered, “Who are you?”

The man stood still for a long moment, then shook his head.

“What do you want?” she said, her voice quivering.

Again, he shook his head in a steady motion, remaining silent. Without him taking his eyes off Casey, the blade started inching down her neck, stopping at the crest of her sternum. Casey glanced down at the knife, then back up at the man.

As much as she wanted to cry, she didn’t want to appear weak. And as much as she wanted to fight, she knew her only option at the moment was to comply with his demands, no matter how vile

they might be. She'd wait for an opening to grab the knife or run out the front door. And if he forced oral on her, she'd bite down as hard as she could.

Searching for something to say, she blurted, "I have herpes. I do. I don't have a breakout right now, but if you fuck me, you'll get herpes, I promise."

That was another lie. She remembered reading a news story about a girl who'd said the same thing during an attack, and the man had released the girl without harming her. She prayed that this man would believe her and leave the apartment.

"Yeah, like you have a gun?" His voice was ice cold.

Shivers ran through her entire body. It'd been hours since she yelled that. He must've been watching her the entire night. She tried to think of a response, but her mind was blank.

"This'll all be over soon," he said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Casey saw a fist coming down on her. There was no time to react, so she turned her head and closed her eyes. In a fraction of a second, everything went black.

When she regained consciousness, her vision was blurry and her head was throbbing. The mattress was wet under her. Either blood or urine, maybe both. Her sense of time had vanished; she had no idea how long she'd been knocked out or if the man was still in her apartment.

Glancing down, she saw that her pajama top had been ripped open, and her breasts were exposed. The bedsheet covered her below the waist, but she assumed her bottoms had been torn off as well. Her lips were bound with duct tape, same with her wrists and ankles. She knew she'd been raped, but she didn't want to think about it. All she wanted was for the man to be gone.

The room was empty—no sign of him. Closing her eyes, she leaned toward the hallway and listened. The apartment was still. Silent. Ten seconds, nothing. Twenty seconds. Thirty. Nothing. After what felt like minutes of complete silence, she was certain the man was no longer in her apartment.

She attempted to scream, but her voice was muted. Another attempt, this time with every remaining ounce of strength to open her mouth, but her jaw barely moved and the scream was only audible to her. For a fleeting second, she thought she was going to vomit, but she managed to fight the urge. With her taped mouth, it could lead to death by aspiration.

Unable to scream, Casey knew no one could help her. She was alone. Completely alone.

Turning away, she stared at the courtyard light shining through the blinds and started cursing herself. If she'd only met Robin at the bar, the man would have found no one home and probably searched for another victim. She might have gotten drunk and stayed at Robin's apartment, or maybe she would've run into Jack, her ex-boyfriend, at one of the campus bars and gone home with him. Or maybe she would've gone home with another guy. Countless seemingly inconsequential events that could've changed the outcome of her life forever.

Then her thoughts shifted to Hannah. Thankfully, the blizzard had happened when it did, because if it had been a few days earlier or later, Hannah would've come up for the weekend like they'd planned. She would've been sleeping on the couch when the man entered the apartment, and she'd most likely be a victim by now. At least Casey didn't have to live her final moments knowing that. Better her than Hannah.

Just as she was about to attempt to roll out of bed, the toilet flushed and the faucet turned on. Casey forced her eyes closed, not wanting him to see that she'd regained consciousness.

Never a religious person, she nonetheless started to pray, a final hope to be saved. She prayed that a neighbor had seen the man break into her apartment and had called the police. She prayed a friend would show up unannounced, scaring the man away. She prayed the man would leave the apartment and never return. But she was certain none of her prayers would be answered.

The man crept into the room and stopped at the edge of the bed. There was a faint smell of cheap cologne, something a middle-aged divorcee would wear. As he hovered over her, he started humming a song, and at first Casey attempted to ignore it, but he grew louder and louder, and it became impossible. It took a moment to place the song, but finally she recognized it as "Cherry Cherry" by Neil Diamond.

Then, starting at her belly button, he slowly ran his finger up her stomach, over her breasts, and up her chin, where he began circling her lips.

"Look at me," he said, tapping lightly on her cheek. "I know you can hear me."

Casey didn't want to look into the eyes of the man who was going to kill her. After a second of silence, he leaned into her face, holding the knife under her chin once more.

"I said, look at me."

Casey turned, and their eyes met. Almost instantly, she looked away.

"What is this?" he said, lifting Casey's silver flower pendant necklace off her chest.

“No, no,” she muttered through the tape, her eyes becoming wet.

“I’m sorry, but you have no choice in the matter.”

Gripped by a paralyzing fear, she said, “Please don’t kill me.”

The man smiled, then ripped the necklace off and slipped it into his pocket. Then, without saying a word, he plunged the knife into her upper abdomen. She cried out and attempted to squirm, but with his other hand, the man positioned his rough fingers around her neck, beginning to squeeze the life out of her.

As she lay motionless on the bed, bleeding out, he stabbed her two more times, then with the knife still in her flesh, he twisted the blade to the left, then to the right, and back to the left.

Blood began cascading down the sides of her stomach, drowning the mattress. The pain was overwhelming, and in a final attempt for help, Casey screamed, but the cry was only heard by her and the man.

Just as she was about to black out, as if he knew the exact moment, the man released his grasp around her neck and removed the knife, then took a few steps back. He lit a cigarette and admired his work, like a painter admiring their masterpiece.

When he was finished, he dropped the cigarette onto the carpet, stomped it out with his boot, then picked up the butt and slipped it into his pocket. Then he backed out of the bedroom and disappeared into the hallway. Moments later, Casey heard the patio door open, then close. The man was gone, and she was alone.

With her remaining strength, she began rocking back and forth in an attempt to sit up, but she couldn’t. She was too weak. It felt like every heart beat was becoming fainter and further apart. The tape over her mouth made her feel like she was suffocating, a ship at the bottom of the sea, running out of air.

Any chance of survival was rapidly fading, and there was no question in her mind she was dying. Without a miracle, she’d be dead within hours. Her life over, before it even started, not even twenty-one.

Minutes passed like seconds, and hours passed like minutes. Sometime that morning, the sun shone down through the blinds, and she could hear voices in the courtyard and cars leaving the parking lot. People were going on about their day, going to work, going to school, going to get coffee.

Suddenly, everything she’d never experience again started running through her head. She’d never see another sunset. She’d never go on another hike. She’d never hear the laughter of another person,

never have another kiss. She would never put her feet in the ocean—and she'd never hear Hannah's voice again.

In those final moments, all Casey could think about was Hannah. She wanted to tell her that she loved her, and that she was an amazing sister and friend, and that she was going to miss her. All she wanted was to see Hannah one last time, to hug and hold her.

Turning to the blinds, she stared at the sunlight for a moment. Then, with no more strength to keep her eyes open, they slowly started to close.

ONE

About a dozen pronghorn grazed in the open field across the highway from the Motel 6. Hannah leaned against the railing and watched them for a long time, occasionally taking a drag off a cigarette. There wasn't a soul in sight, just her and the pronghorn. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen an animal in the wild—well, besides the occasional stray cat in a downtown Denver alley. It was tranquil, almost like she was watching an old-time Western.

Her alarm was set for seven thirty, but after tossing and turning all night, she'd finally decided to crawl out of bed a little after six. Like a kid on Christmas morning, she was excited for what the days and weeks would bring. She was also terrified that she'd find nothing and have to go back to Denver with her tail between her legs, no closer to solving Casey's murder.

After about five minutes, the pronghorn disappeared into the horizon and the rising sun. Even with the daybreak, the morning was frigid, probably only in the low twenties. Despite it being the second week in November, it felt like the middle of winter. Initially, her plan was to arrive in July or August to avoid the harsh weather, but temporarily closing the PI firm had taken longer than she'd expected.

After taking the final drag, Hannah dropped the cigarette butt, then stomped it into the second-floor walkway and turned back to her door. She stared at the room number: 224. All even numbers that, if multiplied, totaled sixteen, her second favorite number. A good omen.

Side-stepping a crack in the walkway, she entered the room, then fastened the chain. Lumpy queen bed, cheap fake wood nightstand and dresser, TV with tin foil wrapped around the antenna, and yellow, smoke-stained ceiling. It wasn't a five-star hotel, it wasn't even three stars, but it didn't matter—it was a place to lay her head and sleep. The plan was to be here for a few weeks, maybe a month tops, then never, ever come back to Laramie or Wyoming.

In the bathroom, she locked the door, turned on the shower, and waited three minutes until the water was hot. After the quick rinse, she barely dried herself, pulling her hair back and slipping on some clothes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she opened the nightstand drawer and removed her gun from where it lay next to the Bible.

Hannah made her way to the front lobby, where a lady, probably in her sixties, was complaining about a clogged toilet. The front desk clerk looked annoyed. After he gave multiple reassurances that maintenance would fix it within the hour, the lady stormed out, mumbling obscenities.

Approaching the counter, Hannah greeted the clerk.

“How can I help you this morning?” he said.

“I was wondering where I could grab some breakfast. Just looking for something simple, eggs and coffee.”

“Well, my favorite spot is Annie’s Diner. You’re not going to find a better meal for a better deal in town. I personally love the French toast.”

“That sounds lovely. Could you give me directions?”

The clerk looked up at Hannah and smiled. Then he grabbed a pen and started drawing a map of Laramie on a piece of motel stationery.

She drove the half mile to the diner and was soon seated at the countertop. A man wearing overalls, probably a farmer or mechanic, sat two stools to her left, while the two stools to her right were empty. She ordered a coffee and the Sunrise Special, which consisted of two scrambled eggs, two slices of bacon, hash browns, and an English muffin.

As she ate, she skimmed the *Fort Collins Coloradoan*. On page seven, a headline caught her eye: “Drunk Driver Dies in Single-Car Accident Outside of Wellington.” In the third sentence, the article listed the name of the driver: Cory Baker. That was a name Hannah hadn’t heard in a long time, and she instantly became nauseous.

Hannah and Cory had worked together at a Blockbuster Video in Fort Collins. At the time, she was barely sixteen and a sophomore—it was the first real job she’d ever had. Cory was two years older and a senior at a different high school.

After their first shift together, Hannah had developed a crush on him. Tall, with deep blue eyes, a perfect smile, and the funniest person she knew. But she’d seen his girlfriend and knew she’d never stand a chance with him. The other girl was beautiful and popular, and she came from a perfect family, her dad being the mayor of Fort Collins. Hannah, meanwhile, considered herself awkward, average looking at best, and her family was the definition of dysfunctional.

That didn’t stop him from flirting with her every time they worked together, and that didn’t stop her from daydreaming about them being a couple.

About three months after she started, they had a Saturday night closing shift together. After the last customer left and the doors were locked, he unzipped his backpack and pulled out a bottle of whiskey and a two-liter of Coke. He poured two drinks, offering her one. Without hesitation, Hannah grabbed the cup and took a large swig. She'd drunk before and been drunk more times than she could count, but it was almost always alone, pouring vodka from her dad's bottle and then refilling it with water.

Before they left the store that night, Cory invited her back to his house to drink some more. She declined at first, saying that she didn't think it was a good idea. Up to that point, she'd only kissed two boys, and no one she was romantically interested in had seen her naked. But Cory was persistent, and she finally caved and agreed to go.

That night, she lost her virginity. And the next morning, he barely said a word to her before kicking her out, using the excuse that his parents would be home soon and she couldn't be there when they arrived. When she said goodbye, she tried to kiss him, but he turned away. Being young and naïve, she daydreamed that he'd break up with his girlfriend and they'd start a relationship.

For the first time since Casey had been murdered, Hannah was happy—she felt like a normal teenager. And for the first time in her life, she felt like she was falling in love. Yet her calls to him went unanswered and unreturned, and the five or six times she drove by his house, his car was never in the driveway.

Their next shift together was a week after they had sex. That entire day, she rehearsed exactly how she'd act and exactly what she'd say, obsessing over the color of eyeshadow to wear and practicing her smile in the mirror, over and over and over again.

After pulling into a parking spot, she spit her gum into the ashtray, applied cherry-red lipstick—her favorite color—and smiled in the rearview mirror one final time. Then she stepped out of her car and skipped across the parking lot and into the store.

The moment she saw Cory, she ran up and attempted to hug him, but he kept his distance, barely acknowledging her. Throughout the shift, he ignored her every time she tried to talk to him, always escaping to the back room or outside for a cigarette.

Finally, she cornered him near the New Release section. “Are you mad at me?” The words rushed out.

“Just been really busy.”

“Umm, it feels like you're trying to ignore me or something.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, avoiding eye contact.

“Okay,” Hannah said uncertainly. After a gaping pause, she said, “I was wondering if you wanted to hang out tonight, if you don’t have any plans.”

“I can’t.”

“Well, maybe we could do something next weekend then, possibly?”

His eyes eventually settled on her, and she knew what he was going to say before he spoke.

“Listen, you’re a nice girl, but the other night was a mistake.”

Her legs went weak. “A mistake? You told me you liked me.”

“I was fucking wasted. I’m sure I said a lot of dumb shit.”

Her heart was slowly breaking. “But I thought we were going to be together.”

A smirk formed. “You really thought I was going to break up with Jackie to be with you? I was drunk, okay. We fucked, and that’s it. Nothing more. And I can promise it’ll never happen again.”

Unable to speak, Hannah watched Cory walk away, tears blurring her vision. Before he was out of view, she cursed him under her breath, then turned away and fled from the store, never to return or speak to Cory again.

On the drive home that day, Hannah had become numb, and much like being blackout drunk, she couldn’t remember the walk to her car, or stopping at intersections, or putting on her pajamas or grabbing the razor blade and resting it against her right wrist.

It wasn’t that Hannah was suicidal—she just wanted the pain to stop. The pain over how she’d lost her virginity in a drunken stupor, the pain of falling for someone who’d only used her for sex, the pain of never being able to see or talk to Casey again, the pain of her survivor’s guilt, knowing she should have been on the couch when the killer entered the apartment, the pain that her parents were broken beyond repair, her dad a full-blown alcoholic and her mother distant and detached, and the pain that she might never be as close to anyone again as she had been with Casey—she very well might be alone for the rest of her life. The thought of the blade slicing her flesh felt like an escape from all that pain. Over the next hour, she ran it up and down her arm, finally crying herself asleep.

She hadn’t thought about Cory or that night in a very long time, and seeing his name in the newspaper stirred up the hatred that had settled in her when she was sixteen. She felt pathetic that it still lingered. *Would it ever truly go away?* Probably not, some scars never fully heal.

For a fleeting moment, Hannah smiled, joyous that he was dead, but that quickly shifted to guilt. As much as she reviled him, she’d never wished ill on him, and she became queasy that the thought

of someone being dead brought a smile to her face. She placed her fork on the plate and stared at the half-eaten piece of bacon, feeling uneasy.

As the waitress walked by, Hannah looked up and said, “Excuse me, could you tell me where the nearest floral shop is?”

“Please, call me Nancy. And yes, swing a left out that door then left on third, then it’s like five or six blocks up. Can’t miss it.”

“Thank you.”

Nancy smiled and took three steps toward the kitchen, then abruptly stopped and walked back to the counter. “Wait a second, I knew I recognized your face from somewhere. You’re that girl that solved the Megan Floyd murder, right?”

Hannah offered a slight nod, then looked away, her face turning red.

“What is your name?” Nancy said.

“Hannah Jacobs.”

“That’s right. I bawled my eyes out watching that story. You did amazing work. And you gave hope to some people in these parts who have missing loved ones that those cases might be solved.”

Hannah had conducted one interview with Channel 4 in Denver, and she always regretted it at moments like this. She had never been one for accolades.

“Thank you so much, but I couldn’t have solved it without my partner.”

Nancy stared down at Hannah for a few more seconds. “Give me the check. Breakfast is on me.”

“No, no. I insist on paying.”

The woman slid the plate to the side and leaned on the counter, looking Hannah directly in the eyes.

“Can I tell you a story, Hannah?” Without waiting for a response, she continued talking. “My sister, Kelly, was in an abusive relationship for almost a decade. The piece of shit would come home from work, get drunk, then proceed to beat the living shit out of her. And then say how sorry he was and that he loved her and would never lay another hand on her again.

Like clockwork, this happened almost every weekend for the better part of their relationship. He put her in the hospital three times—a broken arm, three broken ribs, and a shattered eye socket. Hell, she was so good with her makeup that you could barely notice her black eyes.

I don't know how many times she called the cops, but they didn't do shit. Never. He'd say she was clumsy and tripped over something, or that she was drunk, or he'd make up some damn lie that he'd tell them. And those fucking cowards believed that bastard every single time."

The woman paused and glanced up, then took a deep breath. "Finally, with no other options, scared for her life, she summoned the strength and skipped town while he was at work. Two days later, he found her in a motel outside of Casper and put two bullets in her chest."

"I'm so sorry," Hannah murmured, barely audible even to her own ears.

Nancy swallowed hard, then rested her hands on top of Hannah's. "Please, as a token of my appreciation for finding that piece-of-shit woman killer, let me buy you breakfast. It's the least I can do, honey."

"Of course, thank you so much."

"No, thank you, sweetie. And be safe out there. This town doesn't seem dangerous, but looks are deceiving. There are a lot of men living here in sheep's clothing."

Nancy smiled, knocked on the counter twice, and then walked away.

When she disappeared into the kitchen, Hannah placed a twenty under the coffee cup before slipping out of the diner.

On the sidewalk in downtown Laramie, the morning was quiet, the only sounds coming from vehicles on I-80 two miles to the east. The stillness made Hannah uncomfortable. She was used to the sounds of Denver: truck engines, car horns, dogs barking, and drug addicts screaming at the top of their lungs. The chaos of the city eased her demons. In the quiet, it was far too easy to get lost in her thoughts.

It took her about five minutes to get to the flower shop, and after browsing the display, Hannah selected the "In Loving Memory" arrangement, which had an assortment of white roses, white cremones, lilies, and snapdragons. She requested the bouquet be delivered to the funeral home in Fort Collins on the day of Cory's funeral.

"What would you like the card to say?"

Hannah gave the florist a blank stare; she hadn't considered the question. "Umm, how about, 'Please accept my deepest condolences.'"

"That's lovely," the florist said.

On the walk back to the car, Hannah stepped into Bart's House of Music, where she began thumbing through CD bins. After about ten bins, the man behind the counter said, "Can I help you find something, sweetie?"

She looked up, taking in his disheveled beard. "Honestly, I have no idea what I'm looking for. Do you offer recommendations?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?"

Hannah grinned. Her dad had said that for as long as she could remember, and it always filled her with joy.

"Give me something in the vein of Radiohead."

The man started stroking his beard. "Ever heard of a band called Muse?"

Hannah shook her head slowly. "Can't say I have."

"Three-piece out of England. They just released their debut back in September. A lot of critics have been comparing it to *The Bends*."

"Really? That's my favorite album of all time, so if it's half as good as that, I'm sure I'll love it."

"I'll tell you what, if you buy it and don't like it, you can bring it back and exchange it for any other CD in the store."

"Deal."

After leaving Bart's House of Music, Hannah walked back to her car, then drove across town to the Sage Creek apartments. She reversed into a parking spot directly in front of the leasing office.

Hannah remained in her car for a solid twenty minutes, studying the office and the surrounding buildings and courtyard. The residents were a mixture of college students, parents in their late teens or early twenties, and retirees. A strange combination, but housing in Laramie was limited, and the complex catered to the low-income.

The buildings were canary yellow, a different color than she remembered, probably part of the rebranding effort after the murder. Just like the renaming of the complex, and the new landscaping, and the repaving of the parking lot. Nothing like a new, pretty sign and a fresh coat of paint to mask a brutal unsolved murder on the property.

Hannah walked across the parking lot and onto the pathway between two buildings, then past the swimming pool, a route she'd followed slews of times before. She could almost navigate it with her

eyes closed. The closer she got to the apartment, the more she wanted to turn around, but she continued, though with slower and shorter strides.

Then, across the courtyard, she saw the patio of Casey's apartment. She stared at it for a long while, maybe two minutes, maybe five. The last time she'd seen her sister was on that patio. Casey was waving to Hannah and yelling goodbye as Hannah left to return home to Fort Collins. That memory was heartfelt, but it soon faded.

As she approached the patio, the glare from the sun diminished, and gradually she could see inside the apartment through the open blinds. There was no furniture in the living room or kitchen; all the doors were open, and all the lights were on. A sense of relief washed over Hannah as she realized the apartment was unoccupied.

As much as she wanted to see inside, she would've felt guilty lying to the tenants, and she wasn't about to tell someone about the horrible event that had occurred in the same room where they slept. Lying to a leasing agent, on the other hand, would never bother her—it was a requirement for the job.

Just then, a couple kids ran across the grass laughing, startling Hannah. She glanced over her shoulder and watched them until they disappeared around a building. Then she started across the courtyard to the leasing office.

A girl not much bigger than her, probably no older than twenty-two, looked up from the computer screen as Hannah walked in. After a quick introduction, Hannah sat down across from the girl. Her name was Rachel, and she smelled of Juicy Fruit.

"How can I help you today?" Rachel said.

"I was wondering if I could see an apartment."

"Are you looking for a one or two-bedroom?"

"I'm actually interested in seeing a specific apartment."

The girl looked sideways at Hannah for a moment, then whispered, "101 in building five?"

Hannah nodded. "I just took a peek, and it looks empty."

"It is, and it has been since that *Dateline* episode aired. The tenants who were living in it demanded to move apartments, and we haven't been able to rent it since. It's been vacant for almost two years," Rachel said.

"Well, at least it probably makes the job interesting."

Rachel nodded feverishly. “Oh, it definitely does. And if I’m being honest, I’ve kinda become obsessed with the murder. I’ve probably been in that apartment at least two dozen times.” The girl blew a bubble. “And I heard this rumor that someone is in town writing a true crime book. You know like in the style of *In Cold Blood*. I sure hope it’s true—this town could use some excitement.”

Hannah had never understood the fascination with true crime and murder. It sickened her that people got pleasure out of seeing the darkest, final days and moments of someone’s life. Apparently, one person’s tragedy could be another’s entertainment.

“Do you think you could let me in for like ten minutes? I promise I’ll be in and out.”

After a short pause, Rachel said, “Wait a second. Are you the one writing the book?”

Hannah considered the question, then leaned in and whispered, “Can you keep a secret?”

Rachel leaned over the desk as well and spoke at an even softer level. “Yes, yes. Of course. I pinky swear I won’t tell a soul.”

“I’m doing the preliminary research for a book that is scheduled to be published late next year.”

“Oh my God, that is so cool. If I let you take a look around, would you mention my name in the book?”

“Of course,” Hannah said, forcing a smile.

Rachel opened a drawer, grabbed a set of keys, and offered Hannah a business card.

“And here’s my card—it’s got my home and work number. Feel free to call me anytime,” she said with a wink.

Standing at the apartment door, Hannah could feel her pulse racing and her palms getting sweaty. She closed her eyes and could see the yellow crime scene tape still hanging across the door.

It’d felt like a lifetime since she’d stepped foot in the apartment. Ten days after the murder and three days after the funeral, Hannah and her dad had driven up to Laramie to pack Casey’s belongings. At first, he’d vehemently objected to her joining, but Hannah insisted, knowing he didn’t have the strength to do it alone.

As they walked past the living room down the hallway, the smell of iron became unbearable, and for a moment, she thought she was going to vomit. When they entered the bedroom, the mattress was leaning against the wall, soaked from head to foot with dark red blood, a color reminiscent of horror movies.

“They told me they got rid of the mattress,” her dad whispered.

For the next seven hours, there was little conversation as they packed almost every last possession Casey owned, placing it in the back of a ten-foot U-Haul. Clothes, shoes, books, pictures, CDs, knickknacks, makeup, kitchen items, the coffee table and kitchen table and chairs. The only items that didn't go into the U-Haul were the mattress and couch. Those, they dropped next to the dumpster after dark.

Unlike the funeral, packing Casey's life into cardboard boxes was something Hannah hadn't been prepared for, and even a decade later, she wished she could forget.

"Go on in," Rachel said, gesturing into the apartment.

Hesitant, Hannah placed her left foot on the carpet, then her right. Rachel said something, but Hannah didn't comprehend it. White noise, in one ear and out the other.

The farther she walked into the apartment, the more the memories became alive. Casey teaching Hannah to shotgun a beer, watching movies and laughing so much their stomachs hurt, seeing who could eat the most pizza in one sitting, and lying in the courtyard and staring up at the stars. Casey had taken an astronomy course in college, and could identify almost every constellation in the night sky. With each one, she'd grab Hannah's hand and trace the pattern over and over while slowly pronouncing each name.

"There's Pegasus, the winged horse. Oh, and there's Ursa Major, also known as Great Bear—or the Big Dipper."

As much as it pained her to return, Hannah had always known she'd start her investigation in the apartment. And it wasn't about finding new or undiscovered clues; the chances of that were zero. It was about reconnecting with Casey and the murder.

Methodically, Hannah made her way down the hallway, then stepped foot in the bedroom and leaned against the doorframe. She looked over the room, which was going in and out of focus. Visions of carrying the blood-soaked mattress infiltrated her thoughts. The misery of that day had never faded, not one bit.

Finally, she turned back to Rachel. "Do you know if anyone still lives in this building from when Casey lived here?"

"No, not anymore."

"Anymore?" Hannah said, eyebrows raised.

“Well, Ms. Dorothy Bennett lived directly upstairs for almost twenty-one years, but she had a bad fall last year, so her family moved her into an assisted living facility. I think she was damn near eighty.”

“And you think they lived in this building at the same time?”

“I’m positive they did. We had a little celebration for her twenty-year anniversary at the complex. Cake and soda, you know? And she told me she’d been here since 1978, in the same apartment. She seemed pretty proud of it, but I don’t know why anyone would be proud of living here that long.”

“Do you know where she moved?”

“Yeah. Gables Nursing Home. I had to forward her mail like once a month for a while,” Rachel said, nodding.

“Is it in town?” Hannah said, pointing to the ground.

“Oh yeah, about ten minutes away.”

A name of someone who might’ve been upstairs the night of the murder. She might’ve heard something or seen someone. Or she could have dementia and not even remember her own name. Still, it was a lead, and it was more than Hannah had when she woke up.

Cutting Rachel off mid-sentence, she made an excuse about having to be back at the hotel in twenty minutes for a call with her publisher. Graciously, she thanked Rachel for her time and started to the front door.

“Of course. And Hannah, if you have any more questions or want to see this place again, or just want any juicy gossip about people in this town, I’m the girl to call. Remember, my number is on the card, so please don’t hesitate to give me a ring.”

Glancing over her shoulder, Hannah offered a fleeting smile and then continued to the door.

At the first gas station, Hannah stopped next to a payphone then frantically started flipping pages in the phonebook until she found the number to the nursing home. She pulled two quarters out of her pocket then dialed and leaned into the phone booth, waiting for someone to answer.

On the third ring, she hung up. Odds were they wouldn’t allow unsolicited calls to residents for safety reasons, and on the off chance they did transfer to Dorothy’s room, Hannah knew she couldn’t convey the reason for the call.

You don’t know me, but you lived above my sister who was murdered a decade ago, and I’m calling to see if you remember anything about that night.

No, this conversation would have to be done in person. Hannah grabbed the quarters out of the change return and began flipping a coin while walking back to her car.

On the drive to Gables Nursing Home, she deliberated how she could enter the building, get past the check-in desk, and avoid the security guards—as well as probably another half dozen employees—and then find and enter Dorothy’s room.

Lying would be difficult, if not impossible. Nursing homes usually required an ID, and that name had to match one on the approved visitor list. She considered herself an excellent liar, but pleading that she was the woman’s granddaughter probably wouldn’t get her past the lobby.

The next idea was to sneak in through an unlocked door. The chances of a maintenance or cafeteria or janitorial worker forgetting to lock a door were high, and that would give her access to the building, but finding the correct room while staying undetected after would be a tall order. The building could have fifty or a hundred rooms, and probably with no nameplates on the doors. She’d need access to the directory.

Then it hit her—she could impersonate an employee.

Once she arrived, Hannah watched the nursing home and parking lot from across the street for almost an hour. Activity was minimal. About half a dozen residents on walks, a nurse pushing someone in a wheelchair, and two other nurses or orderlies smoking on the side of the building. After the cigarette, one went back into the building while the other walked out into the parking lot, retrieved something from a car, and then headed back in as well.

Hannah kept her attention on the parking lot. It was on the south side of the building, out of view from the main entrance. Seven cars were spread out across the lot, all of them probably belonging to employees.

A little after twilight, Hannah grabbed her backpack, crossed the street, and made her way into the lot. She strolled by the cars, inspecting each one, searching for a pair of scrubs, an embroidered polo shirt, an apron. Anything that would give her the right appearance.

In the third car, she found a pair of scrubs folded neatly on the backseat. Unzipping her backpack, she removed a Slim Jim, popped the lock, opened the door enough to grab the scrubs, tossed everything in her backpack, and started back to her car. It had taken less than thirty seconds to break into the car, and she was in the parking lot for less than three minutes total. She was confident that nobody had seen her, and that no one would know she’d been there.

After driving about ten blocks north, she parked in the back of an apartment complex between two minivans. She scanned the lot, the building, the street, and the alley. It seemed like a good location to hide her car for a few hours.

Reaching down to the passenger floor, she grabbed her backpack and removed the scrubs, placing them on the steering wheel. Excitement instantly faded when she saw the “XL” printed on the tag.

“Fuck,” she said, shaking her head.

The scrub top could almost double as a dress on Hannah, and even after putting it on over her shirt and tucking it deep into her jeans, there was still about six inches of garment hanging below her waist. It’d have to do. She didn’t even bother with the bottoms.

Back at the nursing home, Hannah studied the building again for almost ten minutes. Not a single person entered or exited, though two cars had left since she was in the parking lot earlier. The day shift was over, and the night shift was on. Most likely a skeleton crew. And generally, night shift and graveyard workers didn’t have a high regard for their employer compared to day shift workers, so getting into the building and finding Dorothy should be easier in the evening than in the morning or midday.

Hannah started preparing herself mentally. In theory, the plan was simple—enter the building through an unlocked door then find a resident who could tell her Dorothy’s room number, all while attempting to avoid any real staff members. And if she did run into an employee, she’d learned from a previous experience that the crucial key to not getting detected was to act like you belonged there. Don’t avoid eye contact, but don’t stare too long. Say hello, smile, then go on about your fucking business.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was a little after six. Dinner had probably just ended, and most residents were probably either in an activity area or in their rooms. The perfect time to sneak in.

Hannah made her way to the back of the building then up the pathway to a door. Carefully, she placed her fingers around the handle and pulled. It was locked. Hoping it needed a little extra force, she tried again. No luck.

“Strike one,” she whispered.

The second door was also locked, but the third door opened. After looking back to the courtyard to make sure no one was watching, she opened it wide enough to slip inside, then eased it shut behind her.

Death was in the air. It reminded Hannah of visiting her grandma in hospice three days before she died. During that visit, Grandma had thought Hannah was a nurse and asked who she was about a dozen times, her eyes full of confusion. After she died, Hannah made a promise to herself that if she was ever diagnosed with dementia, she'd hike deep into the mountains, place a gun into her mouth, and pull the trigger.

The corridor was narrow and about fifteen feet from what she surmised was the main hallway. The only light came from an exit sign on the ceiling. Stepping back into the corner, she was confident that she was nearly invisible.

She tapped her thigh in a rapid rhythm, studying the residents walking past. She watched for about three minutes without seeing a single person in scrubs. That was a very good sign.

Hannah darted to the main hallway, and when the fluorescent lights hit her eyes, they momentarily blinded her. After a couple of frantic seconds of blinking, the blind spots faded and she saw a group of four women playing cards in a room across the hall.

"Excuse me, I was wondering if one of you could tell me what room Dorothy Bennett is in?"

They stared at each other and were speechless for so long that Hannah became certain they knew she was an impostor. Then one of them looked up at her and said, "Dorothy, I think she's in room 42." The rest of them nodded in agreement. "Yes, room 42," they said in near unison.

Hannah thanked them and scurried across the tile and up the hallway, keeping her head down. After passing two rooms, she realized she was going in the wrong direction. She turned around, and as she passed the group of women playing cards again, she smiled and nodded.

After making one more wrong turn, Hannah was standing in front of room number 42. It'd been less than five minutes since she entered the building, and to her surprise, she still hadn't seen a single employee.

She gave three soft knocks on the door, then waited ten seconds, then knocked three more times.

A frail voice on the other side said, "Hello."

Hannah inched the door open and took a step into the room. "Ms. Bennett?"

The lady was perched on the edge of the bed, watching the local news. Almost in slow motion, she turned around and looked up at Hannah. "You're not Betty," she said with a touch of trepidation.

Hannah gave the door a gentle nudge to close it, then walked in and sat down next to Dorothy. She sensed the lady was moments from yelling for help. *Speak in a soft and comforting voice, and don't make any sudden movements.*

“Are you the Dorothy Bennett who lived at the Sage Creek apartments?”

“Yes, I lived in apartment 201 since 1978. I was forced to move here by my daughter after I slipped and broke my ankle.”

Hannah nodded, keeping her face serene. “I was wondering if I could ask a couple questions about your time living there.”

“I’ll do my best, darling, but I turn eighty-two this year, and my memory isn’t what it used to be.”

“That’s perfectly fine. Anything you remember will help immensely,” Hannah said. She held up a picture of Casey. “I was wondering if you remember this girl.”

The lady studied Hannah for a moment, then lowered her eyes to the picture. “Oh my gosh, I haven’t seen that lovely face in such a long time.”

“So, you remember her?”

“I do. What was her name? Kelly? Katie?”

“Casey.”

“Yes, that’s right. Bless her heart, bless her heart. It was such a tragedy what happened to her. I think the entire town was in shock for months. Years. I had friends who started locking their doors who had never locked their doors before. It scared a lot of people.”

Hannah inched closer. “Ms. Bennett, I’m Casey’s sister, Hannah. And I’m trying to solve her murder. I’m searching for any clues that could help me find the person who did it.”

“Please, call me Dorothy,” she said.

“Okay, Dorothy,” Hannah said with a smile. “I know this happened over ten years ago, but do you remember if you saw anyone or heard anything out of the ordinary on the night of the murder? It was a Saturday—January 21, 1989, if that helps.”

“I wasn’t home when it happened.”

“No?”

“No, I was in Europe with my sister. I think we left that Tuesday before it happened, and we were gone for almost four weeks. Would you like to see pictures?”

“Maybe another time.” Hannah smiled again. “Before you left for Europe, do you remember seeing any suspicious people who seemed out of place? Like they didn’t belong there?”

Dorothy interweaved her fingers and leaned back. “Well, about a week or two before my trip I do recall this man walking away from our building. There was something about him that gave me the heebie-jeebies. I thought he might’ve been trying to break into an apartment so I watched him all the way to the parking lot. He never looked back, just climbed into his truck and sped away so fast that he almost hit someone walking their dog.”

“Did you happen to get a good look at him?”

“Kind of. He was white, average height, probably in his thirties, with a long, full beard. And he was wearing sunglasses. I thought that was strange because it was night outside.”

“Did you ever see him again?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“Did you happen to see what kind of truck he was driving?”

“I think it was a black or blue Ford F-150.”

“Did you ever give a statement to police about the man in the truck?”

“Oh no, I never talked to any police officers. When I got back home the apartment was empty, and then a neighbor told me what happened and I couldn’t believe it.”

Just as Hannah was about to ask another question, the door flung open. A nurse hovered in the doorway.

“Ma’am, who are you? What are you doing in this room?”

Hannah leaned in, kissed Dorothy on the forehead then whispered, “Thank you for everything.” Standing up, she said, “I’m just an old friend who’s leaving.”

The nurse turned down the hallway. “Security, we have an unauthorized visitor in Room 42.”

Hannah didn’t want to explain why she’d broken into a car, stolen a pair of scrubs, then broken into a nursing home to question an elderly resident. She wanted to keep a low profile for as long as possible, and ending up in a police station would ruin any attempts at staying anonymous.

As she stepped away from the bed, she weighed her escape options.

First option: Try to lie her way out of the situation. Say she was an old family friend passing through town who just wanted to say hello. That might’ve worked if she was wearing street clothes, but there’d be no feasible way to explain the scrubs.

Second option: Escape through the window. But with it being a ground-floor room, there could be a locking mechanism that wouldn't allow someone, even someone of Hannah's size, to fit through the opening.

Third option, and in Hannah's opinion, the best and only viable one: Rush the nurse, and flee the building before security arrives. The nurse probably had about twenty pounds on her, but she'd be no match for an unexpected full-sprint shove.

"I can explain. Let me find my credentials," Hannah said, reaching into her pocket.

Then she sprinted toward the door, and with arms out, elbows locked, she shoved the nurse, making the woman fall hard onto the tile.

"I'm so sorry!" Hannah yelled.

As she sprinted down the hall, Hannah spotted a fire exit sign and ran straight toward it. Turning down a corridor, she barged through a door, then across the courtyard and across the parking lot and across the street, never looking back.

After four blocks, she slipped into an alley and crouched behind a restaurant dumpster. Once she caught her breath, she pulled off the scrub top and tossed it into the dumpster. Then she continued up the alley and was back to her car within minutes.