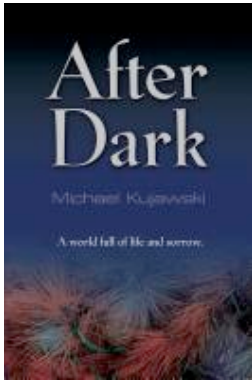


After Dark

Michael Kujawski

A world full of life and sorrow.





After Dark combines elements of a thrilling detective story and a modern romance tale. Unforgettable characters come to grips with critical issues in their personal lives. Noteworthy are the connections between the local news media and the global village, between the pleasant community and unexpected crime. With literary humor and sober insight, the narrative follows the fast pace of modern society. *After Dark* is a world full of life and sorrow.

After Dark

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AFTER DARK

A Novel

Michael Kujawski

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Second Edition

*With appreciation
to my family and friends
for their assistance.*

CHAPTER ONE

Adrienne gazed at Mark, his dark eyebrows knitted together in confusion. In the radiant starlight, he appeared modestly handsome, with lively hazel eyes and well-groomed black hair.

"Mark, I thought I heard some kind of strange noise, just off the highway."

"It was likely just the wind," he answered.

"Perhaps we should leave," Adrienne continued. "How do we know it's safe out here? Our evening visit to this heavenly forest could be ruined."

"I'll keep that in mind. Please remember, everybody needs time off."

"Especially two hard-working journalists," she agreed. Her eyes brightened in the fresh air. "It's very pleasant tonight," she mused. "An evening drive down U.S. Highway 38 to the Green Pines National Forest, only thirty minutes north of Kirkville.

Stargazing from this scenic overlook, we have a panoramic view of the wilderness.”

The view from the observation point was breathtaking. In the daytime, it was a sunny, pleasant gathering place for highway travelers and backwoods hikers. It included a small, modern visitor center, which was closed for the night. There were scattered picnic tables, cement fountains, restrooms, vending machines and a bank of pay phones. Unlike popular truck stops, there was no busy fast-food joint, no crowded gas station and no prevailing tourist attraction. Only the spectacular hilltop vista, vibrant ads for local restaurants and taxis, and a long list of tourist hotels and resorts.

Adrienne gestured to Mark. It was a private code between them, a sixth sense they had cultivated naturally. She was about to make a point.

“Tonight, you’ve taken on the romantic role of student of nature,” she encouraged. “A sanguine, compatible person who has the self-assurance to take a holiday from the newsroom.”

“This is only a break for fresh air,” he corrected, “to make certain we don’t become glued to the office computer.” Mark felt the cool breeze on his neck and hands.

She leaned back and grinned at him with light amusement.

“We’re just small-town reporters. We can watch the living things in the forest, big and small. We can listen to the sounds of nature. But we don’t have to write about worldwide problems.”

She nodded, but couldn’t help listening to a door creak. “The creatures of the night sing their own songs, in good tones of voice and bad,” she murmured.

The crisp air and absence of traffic congestion had prompted them to visit. Standing next to a guardrail, Mark drew closer to her and delicately squeezed her tender hands. She felt the warmth of his touch. She smoothed Mark’s shoulders before they embraced and kissed.

Pushing his tongue into Adrienne’s soft lips convinced him to forget the newsroom. But as he pulled away, he couldn’t help

noticing a look of anxiety on her face. "What's wrong?" he asked ingenuously.

Adrienne leaned gently into his strong arms, his solid chest. Living among rural people in the countryside, he seemed to be in fine physical shape.

Adrienne's brunette hair flowed over her trim, well-rounded figure. "When I started working as a reporter three years ago, I didn't know much about Kirksville or the Observer," she said good-naturedly. "You, on the other hand, were born and raised here. Now it's my home, too. But I worry, sometimes."

"About what?"

"About anything and everything. About run-of-the-mill things that cause ordinary people to lose sleep," Adrienne sighed. "Misplacing my cell phone, forgetting to pay the cable bill on time, getting caught in useless gridlock."

"Don't let that stuff bring you down. Traffic jams and cable companies come and go. Phone calls bouncing around the earth's atmosphere won't disturb your heart area until you're about eighty years old. Besides, I charged up your mobile phone before we left."

"Thanks. You're so thoughtful."

Mark was relieved by her praise, and Adrienne thought for a moment about his distinctive qualities. Most of the time he was a levelheaded person. Someone who demonstrated common sense and fair-mindedness. She was also careful to keep her own emotions under control. Maintaining a long-term relationship was foremost on their minds, despite their occasional quarrels.

Moonlight was falling from the black sky. She stole a swift glance at the spot on his belt where his cell phone holder should have been positioned. His mobile was missing. "So we accidentally forgot our mobile phones, right?"

"Yours is resting safe and sound in the cup holder in between the front seats. I hurriedly tossed my cell phone onto my living-room couch after the zipper broke on the carrying case. I've got a new cell phone pouch sitting around my apartment

someplace, exact whereabouts unknown. When I find it, I'll be back in business."

"It's good to know my mobile is in one piece."

"Cell phones probably don't always work from the deep forest, anyway," he snickered. "But text messaging is pretty amazing, especially when you get missives from foreign countries."

An unpleasant chill crept over her. "I guess there are more important things to worry about," she moaned. "I was thinking about us, our future together. Reporters come and go, and I don't like to think we're not making progress with our careers."

Mark nodded affectionately, trying to show concern. The breeze made a sad, desolate sound, and the silent moonlight shined silver. He listened to subdued voices in his head, then gathered his thoughts. He was careful not to look foolish because Adrienne mattered more to him than anyone. He'd assumed all along that as they scrambled through the career jungle, they would one day get married. He wanted to avoid making an incendiary comment. Although he had his suspicions about her tendency to worry too much, he said, "Over time, things will probably be okay." He smoothed the hair on the back of his head into place. "Sure, it's uncommon for a young couple to work together in the same exact office, to be committed to the same profession."

"It's a unique situation," Adrienne agreed. She took a deep breath. "Such a lovely old planet," she murmured. She glanced fervently at the stars. "It's true, we've experienced a lot of positive events in our lives. We take them for granted and should be thankful. But more importantly, we need something better than a sketchy career plan. We process all kinds of news and information every day. Think of how much we dash around the newsroom. Think of all the random topics we end up writing about -- local political wrangling, international terrorism, fighting in Afghanistan, national recessions, even common everyday events like births, deaths and marriages."

“These are merely failed attempts to impress the editors,” Mark snorted. “Your average news reader needs high-profile assassinations and violent political revolutions to get started in the morning, not just a cup of coffee.”

She smiled at Mark’s sense of humor. “Bin Laden and Pearl Harbor analyzed at breakfast, then off to work,” she murmured. “A history teacher’s dream lesson plan. But today’s news isn’t as dismal as it was decades ago.”

“I agree.”

She beamed at Mark. “You’re so sweet,” she said, looking deeply into his innocent eyes. She squeezed the palm of his hand. “You know what’s really bothering me tonight?”

“No.”

“To think that we gradually become like the victims in our stories, that in the long run everything won’t work out all right.”

His voice rose with curiosity. “You mean you’d rather be a correspondent covering the action, not a political player struggling out on the field?”

Adrienne searched the silvery darkness. “Wouldn’t it be awful to wake up one day and realize we’re inadvertently causing the terrible news we write about. Think about our erratic lifestyles, all the fast-food and coffee. Running out of time for serious exercise. Never knowing what the next story will bring, let alone the next day.”

“Well, Adrienne, I truly believe news reporters accomplish something worthwhile, like doctors and nurses. But people like us must have reasonable expectations.”

“I think you’re right,” she empathized. She felt committed to Mark. She could see he was also devoted to her. But she harbored a few doubts. She wondered aloud, “What about long-term career achievements, which can have an impact on marital and family goals? Right now we can’t even afford a legitimate home.”

“And you think the way we’re doing our jobs is causing this problem?”

“That could be.” She squared her shoulders. “Think about the newsroom. Look at all the awful things we write about. Are we really alleviating the world’s evils or causing them?”

“Or something in between?” Mark gathered himself. “We’re not always able to see black-and-white results from our daily reporting. We chip away each minute, each hour.”

“And in the long run, the ability to communicate with the public should turn out to be an advantageous skill,” she cut in. “Writing can be a lonely task. I wonder if it’s possible to love and hate something at the same time.” She exhaled. “I’m glad we at least have each other.”

He rubbed his chin. “Let’s face it, our worst critics find fault with the newspaper because they dislike reality. The readers who are most likely to contact the newspaper are also the most likely to complain. So to say the media is always part of the problem, I’m not so certain.”

“Neither am I.” She looked down the shadowy hillside, then stepped away from the guardrail. The melancholy expression on her face dissolved. “There’s a district superintendent who stops into the newsroom every week, saying how grateful the parents are for running student photos.” Adrienne deliberated for an instant. “Yet that supports my point. In that case, we’re just following the school’s public relations campaign. We’re white-collar print journalists. We’re taught in journalism school to investigate controversy. We’re expected to find news that’s vibrant and exciting.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Together we’ll get on top of this. I’ll contact my best news sources,” he continued. “I’ll ask if this superintendent cheats on his wife,” he laughed with derision. “We don’t know where he goes when he’s out of the office, right? How do we know he didn’t just return from a taxpayer-funded junket to a bikini-clad Caribbean beach? Maybe we can legally bribe the district bookkeeper -- attend all the home football games, live on hamburgers and diet Coke, and make a bunch of homecoming friends. We can target the gossip-mongers, people who keep an ear to the ground. Then

we can investigate, find out who's dipping into the school budget," he speculated.

"Mark, how can you make a joke out of this?" she said, her voice trailing off. "A powerful administrator can control the flow of news about the school budget. A superintendent's budget director can be his right-hand man. You think school district spokesmen would simply tell us over the phone about blackjack tables at a high school administrator convention in Las Vegas? Or that government officials hid a slush fund someplace in the district's financial statements?"

"No, but look at it this way: You say white-collar crime is less conspicuous than urban street crime. You say careless news reporting can make coverage of general corruption even more puzzling. Remember that in a small city we're not required to police the whole world. What goes on around here is pretty much the whole world. Everybody's business is everybody else's business."

"Who needs foreign intrigue when you've got Kirckville?" she agreed. "But we're not simply glorified stenographers. We graduated from college for the sake of our journalism careers, right?"

"Yes, that's not a bad way of looking at it. But here's what I think. The newspaper is published every day -- headlines, stories, photos. The editors and readers get a concrete result." Mark stopped for an instant. "I don't think we're habitually part of the problem," he murmured. "We're like lightning rods," he continued, whipping up enthusiasm. "And when we've paid our dues to newspaper publishing, when we're safe and cozy in a suburban home, it will be clear that our work added up to something."

"And over time, our commitment will grow," she comforted, "especially when we get on top of our newspaper careers and monthly bills." She squeezed his hand, truly thankful for his compassionate, earnest spirit. Her feelings drifted back to bygone days. Mark had been a bolt from the blue. They'd first met in college, only several years ago. He had easily fit into the

lively campus atmosphere. Mark was also a persuasive conversationalist, despite his occasional mumbo-jumbo. She wasn't sure back in college that their time together would blossom into a deeper relationship. But now she felt genuinely committed.

Mark Franklin and Adrienne Kaufman looked like a devoted couple, two people who didn't know what the future would hold. Although they'd been drawn together by their passion for work, they hadn't yet achieved conventional middle-class success -- a two-car garage, a baby crib and a genuine savings account. Mark seemed handsome and captivating to Adrienne, yet she couldn't imagine her wisecracking boyfriend jumping into a fast-track business career. He didn't drive a sports car to work or ride the elevator up to an office suite. Perhaps they were hurtling through space, destination unknown. Maybe satisfaction from the actual journey was the most important thing, not the final result. Adrienne and Mark loved their time together and longed for more.

More than anything, time was slipping by. After several years together, they were maturing into their work roles and growing professionally. Perhaps with planning and a bit of luck, their relationship would culminate in marriage.

Mark placed his hands on her shoulders. He tenderly massaged her back. For an instant, the world stood still. Adrienne's tough-minded facade could dazzle, but Mark also saw her affectionate side. She was attractive by most standards, by and large a social extrovert. Her body was well proportioned and her eyes seemed guiltless. But for Mark, one of her most compelling features was her razor-sharp mind, an asset for a newspaper writer.

Adrienne broke the silence. "Everything seems so tranquil and peaceful here," she said wistfully. "No deadlines, no pressure, no nine-to-five grind."

"And no self-appointed politicians running the newsroom," Mark added glibly. "No finger-pointing, no shrill arguments." He

looked at the dark treetops and inhaled the fresh air. “No shortage of firewood in this hamlet,” he finished.

“Yes,” she murmured, desperately wanting to believe in him. “I’m so incredibly delighted that you drove me here,” she said. “You’re quite the gentleman tonight,” she exhaled.

Mark bowed like a courtier. “Tis why I’m here, my love. To give you a reprieve from the ruling aristocracy. This evening we’re in harmony with nature. We’ve got dazzling stars shining overhead and crickets singing peacefully.”

She turned towards him. “Nature’s music is marvelous. And as Shakespeare once wrote, time is the nurse and breeder of all good.”

“And constant worrying about life’s injustice is out of place.”

She nodded slightly. “You have a superlative heart and the spirit of a decent man. But all is not just in Camelot, where the innocent have ended up in chains. The world is plagued by the tortures of injustice and inequality.”

“This evening, let’s put that aside.” He stopped himself, then couldn’t hold back. “I don’t mean to say there isn’t rampant immorality devouring the world. On the other hand, this lovely tract of forest is a true celebration of nature.”

“How strangely beautiful the stars and woods are tonight,” she harmonized. The night sky revealed an indistinct vision of the moon. They glimpsed fireflies and shadowy mosquitoes. They made out the mangled outlines of trees blown down slopes in thunderstorms. “The wilderness is an important part of our global ecosystem. Pure air, uncorrupted wildlife, no smog alerts. Our short-lived tryst with nature will really mean something to us when we’re older and wiser.”

A short period of silence passed.

“Let’s switch gears,” she said, “Did you read that report in Monday’s Observer about how an American company plans to market improved refrigeration of pork meat in China and the impact of this on the Chinese political system?”

Mark groaned. “Ah, that story in the business section! You’re not sympathetic toward it.”

She wrinkled her brows and pursed her lips. “I was confused by that story.”

Mark plunged in. “The story was puzzling, at least I think so. Behind the apparent questions about cleanliness in food processing, I suppose it was a piece about financial insolvency, about how global corporations are unable to cover their debts.”

Adrienne leaned forward. “More importantly, why do a number of critics want to sidestep a foreign administrative system? They must think Chinese officialdom causes the Chinese to squander money at a faster rate than Western governmental systems.”

“A fascinating point, especially since Asian countries are the most heavily populated in the world. Is an American businessman more likely to go broke or to hit the jackpot in a foreign country?”

A short time passed, and their eyes adjusted to the lack of light. Mark pulled out a small bag of potato chips. “As long as we’re talking about skinny people in foreign countries, let’s quench the pangs of hunger,” he said, splitting the bag with her. “This is the real deal, fresh air and junk food. American potato chips, candy bars and soda are sold at sidewalk shops and kiosks all across the planet.”

“I believe American food tastes the best even though it might be a bit high in calories,” she said. “We have farms, ranches and forests all across the country. But we don’t always have the hard, mountainous terrain necessary to build subways and skyscrapers. We don’t walk down sidewalks as much as we could. We don’t need to rely on motor scooters and taxicabs. But in spite of the growth of health clubs and golf courses, there’s currently a battle of the bulge raging, isn’t there?”

Mark snatched a glance at their bodies. “Flabby people versus the chunky, chunky versus the round, the round versus the fat, the fat versus the massive, the massive versus the . . .”

Adrienne broke in. “So were these news sources implying that foreign meat producers plan to follow the commercial practices of big corporations in America?”

“With all the skinny ethnics in China, for instance, do you think Chinese authorities can just run TV ads saying how trendy it is to wolf down thousands of Western-style calories at dinnertime?”

“No,” she said arbitrarily, “China is a good example of a nation that’s in between. It’s like the pastoral neighborhoods out here in the countryside. They’re smack dab in the middle of disconnected tracts of harsh wilderness and urban expansion. To me, mainland China is still a developing manufacturing realm with a need for American businesses and foreign investment money. It’s also an important, advanced culture in its own right, with ancient traditions.”

“As I understand it, American restaurant chains remain popular in many foreign countries,” Mark said. “Customers fill Starbucks and Burger King, places where it’s fashionable to dine out.”

“It’s true, the Chinese would love the taste of a Thanksgiving turkey and mashed potatoes, slathered in deep brown gravy. Even a frozen turkey dinner would do. But are heavily populated foreign countries, with their crowded subways and skyscraper apartment homes, able to accommodate widespread obesity?”

“I see what you’re driving at,” said Mark, steadying himself in the breeze. “The various questions international news stories and local media leave unanswered.”

“That’s my point. We shouldn’t be too quick to wink at news sources. Does a genuine newsmaker really understand his own thought processes and the politics of his own community, let alone global economics?”

Mark thought for a moment. “Uh-huh, I understand. You’re talking about the connections to the society at large, the global village.”

“When that guy in the pork story said starvation may cause a political revolution, my opinion is that he got the facts backwards. The political upheavals of the past one hundred years have contributed to a cautious approach to eating and drinking, to world culture. The sixties drug culture in America is

still wearing off. When I interned in South Korea, I noticed young ex-patriots and Koreans fiddling with their food. They were attempting to keep excess weight off. This revealed their tremendous self-discipline. This is the opposite of a seventies bar-time zombie wolfing down a submarine sandwich to undo the effects of drugs on his digestive system.”

“And if I voluntarily shave all the hair off my head,” Mark grinned, “it proves I’m a patriotic citizen, not a political terrorist who’d blow off a bomb in an outdoor grocery market.”

She raised her head to get a better angle on Mark’s facial expression.

“In addition to drinking bottled water and foreign soups, not to mention vodka and diet soda, I guess we’ll have to build better rapport with news sources,” he said. “We shouldn’t spread misinformation just because it makes readers hungry for more,” he sniggered.

Adrienne laughed along politely. “Come on, Mark! You’ve usually got a non-stop caffeine buzz going, plus the small amounts of vodka you slip into your drinks! I hear the ice cubes clinking in your glass in my sleep. Bottled spring water and calorie-free soup broth both finish last on your list of favorite foods.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” he snapped, mildly annoyed. “I guess this isn’t Russia. I guess this is the good ole’ USA. I imagine that we the people aren’t supposed to drown our sorrows in vodka.” He paused for an instant. “However, let me say that this is Kirkville, a land of neighborhood restaurants and fishing taverns, a place where beer and energy drinks are king.” His shoulders straightened like a military soldier’s. “I’m glad we’re alone out here in the woods, where no one is eavesdropping. I’m confident the readers in our town will learn about an array of vital news issues beyond the mere refrigeration of pork meat in China, regardless of whether we’re reckless in leaving questions unanswered.”

“That’s thought-provoking,” she said solemnly. “However, I’d greatly appreciate it if the newspaper would candidly investigate

controversial issues. Which type of diet is genuinely unsanitary -- high-calorie fast-food meals sold in many countries around the world, inventive restaurant buffets, modern-day frozen dinners, or old-fashioned combinations like streak and potatoes? Can anyone really say that a highly developed culture is more forward-looking than an old-fashioned place that's in tune with nature?

More questions than answers ran across her mind. "Mark, we have to eradicate underlying prejudices from Observer news articles, if possible." She was concentrating on the big picture. "We have to hit upon the worst problems of humanity, delve into their emotional and intellectual origins. We should try to find all possible solutions. We should attempt to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. We can't just live in our own selfish minds. We must think in terms of the society at large. We must have the commitment to find the truth and print it in the newspaper."

Her high standards left him feeling ill at ease, although her opinions seemed virtuous. "Commitment and perseverance are essential," he granted. He gazed at the dark forest, the individual trees and shrubs like peas in a pod. "It's important to get real world results, even in the newspaper business. It's a great feeling, like a kid waking up on Christmas morning and finding several gifts underneath the Christmas tree."

The evening breeze stiffened. "Kirkville's neighborhood Christmas decorations are beautiful," she said in a warm tone, "but no one has figured out how to make this forest's supply of Christmas trees limitless."

Mark mulled this over. "From a low-flying airplane, this vast wilderness is a sea of green. On closer inspection, though, every bit of wildlife defies imitation, like a fingerprint. There are scores of darkly wooded plateaus and emerald valleys, producing air for the planet. But in the long run, part of our woodlands will be cleared away for interstate freeways and urban municipalities. Are there any reasonable alternatives?"

Adrienne eyed him curiously, but welcomed his thoughts. “According to the math, at least three billion trees are lost every year. And for what purpose? To build skyscrapers and sidewalks and new neighborhoods?”

They exchanged knowing smiles. “I guess we’re both concerned about the inevitable impact of progress. Children need Christmas trees for joy, but the world needs flora and fauna.”

Mark nodded. “Two hundred years from now all the Christmas trees might be artificial. But we’ll still have holiday tales about Santa Claus and the classic religious explanation of the birth of Jesus Christ.”

“Okay, Santa and his magical elves build toys all-year-round in their arctic workshop. On Christmas Eve, Santa and his flying reindeer deliver gifts to kids around the world. And this bit of holiday folklore seems to have a strong impact.” She brushed the loose strands of hair from her face. “Let’s review. The first frosts of early October culminate with Halloween celebrations at month’s end. Then along comes November, with grey skies and leafless trees, and hordes of shoppers filling the malls on Black Friday. This gives way to December’s first snowfall. Shoppers scramble for last-minute bargains before Christmas morning arrives, then post-Christmas price reductions. At long last, the holiday season winds down with New Year’s Eve parties and New Year’s Day resolutions.”

He grunted.

Adrienne smiled faintly. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s make a point of remembering each other’s needs.” She took a deep breath. “The next time I go grocery shopping, I’ll try to remember to think in terms of pairs -- two loaves of bread, two milk jugs, two T-bone steaks, two heads of lettuce. Then I can deliver one grocery bag to your place and one to my apartment.” She was anxious to hear Mark’s response. “At least two of everything, right?”

“Everything in pairs, like Noah’s ark,” he murmured diplomatically. “And sometimes we’re forced to make changes, to cut down dead trees and plant new ones.”

“Progress,” she enunciated slowly. She studied the forbidding woods, which lay dark and empty. Then she spoke again. “We’ve got to take the future into consideration, and to make long-term commitments in our lives and careers.”

“Good idea,” he said, looking down a steep wooded ravine. The overlook was quiet except for the sound of wind humming across the countryside. The barren highway twisted into the forest.

The sun had set long ago, and she was cold and tired. “Hopefully your curiosity about this place is satisfied, at least for now,” she said. The night was growing chilly. “Why don’t we wrap things up?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Like we decided back at the ranch, this is only a breath of fresh air.”

Adrienne rubbed her arms, feeling the temperature dropping. The sweet glow of moonlight lit the forest, but she was making up her mind to leave. “No one can argue with healthy living, but that doesn’t mean we’re always safe out here.”

“I think we’re out of harm’s way tonight,” Mark said defensively. “Sure, there’s a negative side to everything, but places like the family farm I grew up on and this scenic overlook are less suspicious than they used to be.”

She shook her head, then gazed down a grassy slope at a dark stand of trees. “People attempt to obey the rules, try to do the right thing. And what happens? Even the best laid plans can backfire. So many things can go wrong.”

Mark turned away from the scenic ravine below. “At this point in human history, I think the threat of sudden danger and crime is decreasing.” His voice trailed off. “It’s turning into an ancient fear,” he exaggerated, “a relic left over from the distant past.”

She looked across the moonlit wilderness. She smelled the fresh scent of pines. “The night leaves a dark veil over

everything,” she said unpleasantly. “Just take a hard look at the miserable news we bring to readers each day.”

Mark rocked on his heels. “When tragedy strikes, we have no choice but to cope with it.” He turned his gaze back to a tranquil grove. “I’ll be the first to admit that for a lot of folks, their lives don’t turn out as perfectly as expected.”

“No, it’s worse than that,” Adrienne said. “Think of how quickly your life can turn upside down. In your mind, you’re seeing friendly neighbors from childhood and mythical farmers tending their crops.”

“I guess I’ve mentioned them to you.”

She took a step forward. “Listen to this. I read a news column that claims when street crime goes down, white-collar corruption tends to rise. What do you think of that?”

“That’s disturbing, but sometimes that’s what we’re calling progress,” Mark said.

“You understand we’re living in a global village, and its worst evils don’t just go away by themselves,” Adrienne went on. “Wildfires and killing sprees, political exploitation and war, they’re in the news every day. I’m sorry to bother you with this, but we can’t just watch our lives slip away. We have to take action, crusade against injustice.”

Mark stiffened. “It’s true, every generation has its own cause, but the people behind any political battle are limited and incomplete. Their as prone to wrongdoing and corruption as anyone else. This is the dismal state of reality.” He tilted his head. “However, people are only people, one species among more than eight billion that inhabit the planet. I don’t know, maybe there are too many necessary evils. What do you think?”

“I think we have to overcome necessary evils and the dismal reality they can create. We can’t be afraid of making improvements,” she said, her voice turning hard.

“Who can argue with that?”

“And who can say that wrongdoing and corruption can’t be reduced in Kirckville? When there’s trouble, it affects the entire neighborhood, and every neighborhood impacts the whole

community, and communities around the world add up to a global village.”

Mark spread his hands. “I’m more worried about worldwide pollution and hot-headed drivers scrambling down the highway, about all the transient strangers overpopulating the countryside.”

Adrienne sighed heavily. “I guess the DA will have to get in the habit of prosecuting traffic violations involving transient strangers and yuppie vacationers,” she quipped.

“Let’s be logical,” Mark said. “No one is above suspicion. Texas County needs to stop any nut-job politician or hip mobster who plans to misuse the government and its public lands. We don’t want control freaks manipulating private citizens.”

“Exactly,” she said. “And the newspaper also has to stick to its guns. Wouldn’t it be interesting if the chaste modern-day peasantry, with its crowded interstate freeways, massive power outages and municipal trash recycling, was not blameless? In a global village, the world’s worst social problems can be blamed on anyone and everyone.”

“Let’s be more specific,” Mark corrected. “Breakdowns in the grand design can be caused by dope addicts cheating on their wives and listless zombies hibernating in windowless buildings, not to mention elite factions of international political and religious extremists.”

She couldn’t stop a derisive chuckle. “The entire planet is stuck in Orwell’s 1984,” she finished.

They were silent for a moment, absorbing the night. The breeze blew the sorrel curls in Adrienne’s hair, and her mood lightened. “What do you think?” she asked, smoothing her bangs. “I went to Eve’s Hair Salon yesterday.”

Mark’s face lit up. “Your hair looks gorgeous.”

“Glad you like it,” she replied graciously. She returned to the subject of dealing with tourists and strangers. She explained that she’d run into an abnormally hostile stranger at the hair salon. “After I walked into Eve’s, I noticed a woman with a

startled expression on her face. She was seated in the waiting area. We got to talking. It turned out she and her boyfriend were on vacation. Before I arrived, another customer who'd apparently waited in line a long time, lost his cool. He complained that his hair was cut much too short. He made a big scene. He yelled at the stylist, saying all the customers slowed him down. He complained that this woman's boyfriend should have gone downtown for an expensive eighty-five-dollar haircut."

Mark was dismayed. "What happened next?"

"They continued bickering. The disgruntled man probably felt like his hair would never grow back. The complaint mushroomed into a loud dispute. The hair stylist threatened to phone the police, and the irate customer stormed out the door."

"Too bad," Mark sympathized.

Just then, dim headlights appeared far down the highway. They came into greater and greater focus, like the bright lights of a locomotive reaching a railroad crossing. An eighteen-wheel semi whooshed down the asphalt strip, leaving Mark's Camaro quivering in its wake. Several minutes later, another vehicle, a pine-green Ford F-150, slowed down. The pickup pulled into the parking lot, near the spot where Mark and Adrienne were standing. The driver was a lank, dark-haired man. He lowered the power window on the driver's side.

"Need any help?" he barked in a shrill tone. "You look lost, man. I'd feel guilty if I left you stranded. Is your car stalled?"

"No, we're fine," Mark answered expeditiously. "There's nothing wrong, as far as I know." Mark paused, listening to the pulse of the pickup's tires vibrating on the blacktop. The wheel rims shined, but Mark couldn't help spotting corrosion near the undercarriage. "We just seem like we're lost because we don't come out here very often. We needed some quality time and fresh air. We're just gazing at the stars."

The driver nodded impatiently. "A pleasant night," he murmured. "It's good to be out, I guess, with the stars twinkling overhead." He breathed heavily, taking a quick look at the

conical hills and steep slopes. "Can't beat this outdoor stuff, not in the summertime."

"Mother Nature is a sight for sore eyes," Adrienne said ingenuously. The man piqued her curiosity, but she kept this to herself. Maybe they'd met before, but she couldn't remember.

"I'm taking my fishing gear back to my summer place, to my storage shed. I didn't mean to bother you. Just thought I'd pull over, make sure everything's okay. I've seen my share of folks blowing through here, and I've heard of tourists and backpackers ending up lost."

"What do you mean?" Mark reacted, a wave of panic sweeping over him. "Is someone missing?"

"No, not that I know of," the man stammered, his brow tightly furrowed. "Well, someone is always missing, is what I mean," he corrected. "If my memory is correct, the last serious incident took place a couple years back."

Mark rubbed his chin momentarily. "Tell me about it."

"Nothing to worry about," he said, his eyes becoming slits. "It involved Charlie Travers, if I've got the name correct. He's under the influence half the time, like a hibernating skunk."

Mark and Adrienne were amused. "Really?" she exclaimed.

"Nothing I'd think twice about," the man went on. "Damn fool got his canoe caught up in some backwater rapids," he said. "Heavy current swept him down river. He lost one of his oars before slamming into an outcropping of sharp rocks, which fractured the hull."

Adrienne noticed the crazy look in the man's eyes.

"Travers was gone, missing for almost a week, exhausted and delirious. I'd panic like hell if I had to go a few nights out here alone. It turned out he survived on bottled drinking water and a package of uncooked hot dogs." Suddenly the man flashed a frenzied thumbs up, as if he was addressing a crowd. "Bottled water," he repeated nonsensically. "Can't go without it."

"Wait a minute!" Mark interrupted, walking forward a couple steps. "We work for the newspaper."

The man pulled his head back and nodded.

"I vaguely remember reading about that incident," Mark said, his voice rising. "A farmer found him near his crops, lying on the ground. Travers was transported to Memorial Hospital, where he was treated for an injury to his arm. The Observer published a fairly substantial write-up about the incident. He said he wasn't sure he'd ever make it out of the woods."

"You bet," the man intoned. There was a buildup of saliva on the corner of his mouth. "I'm no reporter," he murmured. "I mean, I don't read the newspaper every day."

Mark rummaged around his memory. His polite smile dissolved, and his voice took on an excited tone. "The headline," he recalled, snapping his fingers. "It contained some information about a harrowing adventure."

The man's face appeared crimson in the glare from his headlights. "Well, I'm sure it was no picnic," he said, shaking his head. "Gave everybody quite a turn."

Mark kept his eyes on the stranger.

"I mean, there was almost nothing Travers could have done. The whole experience was terrifying. It wasn't his fault he wound up lost, although I don't think he had to be out in the woods all alone. Let's face it, nobody in town puts up with Travers, nobody understands him."

The man stared out at the dark forest.

The silver moonlight played off Adrienne's face. She looked at the man for a long moment. "These woods can be creepy," she said.

He shook his head. "The truth is, with progressive middle-class technology Travers could easily have had pizza delivered in the middle of the forest," the man said flatly. "Instead, he didn't care much about his own safety, so folks around here weren't deeply concerned. With all the newcomers moving in, all the political crap that goes on, it's no bombshell."

Mark wasn't sure that most people hiked through the woods with the latest technology. "But it was a harrowing adventure," he insisted, not revealing his suspicions. "In fact, when I wrote the headline, that was exactly how I described it."

The man gave Mark a cross look, but avoided any difference of opinion. "I guess it was harrowing," he acknowledged, "but so are they all." He looked bewildered, like he couldn't think of anything more to say. With a sudden jerk, he thumped the power button and the driver's window slid closed. Mark and Adrienne heard the pickup's heavy tires sputter over loose pebbles. The driver anxiously looked for oncoming traffic, turned onto the deserted highway and sped away. The pickup's taillights became a red blur.

Adrienne craned her neck, trying to see into the darkness. "You don't have to tell strangers about our jobs," she advised with an air of complaint. "I'm glad he took off and went on his way." Although Mark was often kind-hearted and congenial, she thought, several latent personalities fought for attention -- a loving boyfriend, a sometimes determined and sometimes flippant journalist, and a loyal native of Kirkville.

For her part, Adrienne could shift into neutral when she detected a story in the making. "I might have seen that guy before," she said, her curiosity mounting. "I can't remember his name, but he looked familiar."

"Familiar?"

Adrienne didn't say anything.

"You mean from the newspaper?"

"Probably, yes."

A dull silence as she searched her memory. "Well, no use staying any longer," she said.

Mark calmly reached into his pants pocket. His keys were still there, and he traced his fingers along the familiar metal grooves. Five keys on a Flamingo chain he'd once bought on a vacation to Vegas. He felt assured.

The night chill pinched them. Adrienne's stomach fluttered. "Let's get going," she said.

"Good idea," Mark answered. "I'm glad we came out here," he said. "We've got tomorrow night's party ahead of us. Hopefully we'll run into a lot of friendly folks."

Mark took her hand in his. The stars had shifted slightly, and the nighttime sounds were a kind of hypnotic song. They strolled from the scenic overlook to his car.

“Tomorrow morning, another sunrise,” she smiled, as they walked along.

“The promise of a new day,” he agreed. He pressed the remote button on his keychain, heard the doors unlock.

Beside her in the front seat, Mark trembled slightly. He took a clear look at her, in the gentle moonlight, her face fresh and innocent. She looked beautiful to him, and he was happy to be with her. There was a silent understanding, and he moved closer. They embraced, and he brushed his hungry lips against her soft cheek. She smiled in a way that comforted Mark. She pressed her wet lips hard against his, and the moment was electrifying. They kissed several times, breaking off when they realized that the hour was getting late.

He rubbed her shoulders affectionately. He contemplated their future together. “We’ve got it all in front of us,” he beamed.

“Uh-huh, that’s true.”

“We’ll want to talk, double-check our plans. I’ll give you a call, probably in the late afternoon before dinner.”

He pulled out of the narrow parking lot. Above them, the peaks of the pine trees formed a dark ceiling over the underbrush, leaving a mixture of natural scents in the air. The headlight beams crisscrossed the embankment and jutted off the rows of ancient trees. Mark steered his maroon Camaro down the highway toward Kirkville, and the overlook in the rearview mirror faded into the night.

CHAPTER TWO

Texas County Sheriff Corbin Lockhart stood next to Nick Williams. Corbin was a brawny man with thick arm muscles, a middle-aged paunch and charcoal hair turning grey at the temples. He had an air of authority and the sedate disposition of a county sheriff in the prime of his career. He was the department's most experienced member, a veteran of twenty-plus years.

Two sheriff's patrol cars were parked just off Highway 38. Sheriff Lockhart and Deputy Reggie Brinkman told Nick he was less than a mile from Crescent Lake and the Lakeview, the popular resort in Buchanan Bay where he was vacationing. He had been found in a state of near unconsciousness.

An eighteen-wheel semi-truck was idling stridently in front of the patrol cars. Deputy Brinkman informed Nick that the truck driver had spotted him lying in a small meadow in between the

barren highway and thick forest. The truck driver had called for emergency help, with Nick visibly panic-stricken, possibly in a state of near collapse. After the truck driver had communicated with law enforcement authorities, a second man waved him out of his cab. He was Kyle Murik, the resort owner and manager. Kyle claimed he'd overheard some kind of loud disturbance.

In dim shadows and patches of pale moonlight, they now witnessed a gruesome scene -- Rachel Konrad's corpse inside the shallow perimeter of the forest. A terrible crime had taken place.

Sheriff Lockhart quickly wiped the perspiration out of his hair. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I don't know," Nick answered, his heart pounding. Awful memories of the crime scene came into focus. He'd struggled with an unidentified assailant. "We were lost and desperate. We tried to track the river west, toward the lake. The harder we tried to find a way out of the forest, the more we became trapped," he muttered.

Nick glared uneasily at the sheriff. Small beads of sweat coursed down his willowy face. Regaining his senses, he struggled to recall how they'd split up. A series of questions ran across his mind: Why had Rachel taken off? Where had she gone? Who had attacked them? How did she wind up dead?

The sheriff paused for a moment.

"It suddenly dawned on me that someone was stalking us," Nick grimaced.

The sheriff raised his eyebrows. "You're saying it's likely your girlfriend, Rachel, was murdered?"

"I think so," he replied, holding back tears.

Corbin eyeballed him sternly. "Do you know who might have done something like that?"

Nick shook his head. "No, I don't," he said, his voice breaking. "We'd been together all day, horsing around. Every passing moment seemed to get better. We identified flowers in the wild -- bluebells, foxglove, honeysuckle. Plus the meadows, cliffs, waterfalls, caves and grasslands -- nature's back yard.

There's so much to see, so much fresh air. Then just like that, we were lost and in danger."

Corbin groaned, but kept his train of thought. "Were you quarreling?"

Nick was at a loss for words. "She didn't understand. I was trying to find a way out. She didn't trust me."

"You argued, correct?"

"Yes."

Corbin exhaled heavily. "Did you push her?"

"No, of course not," he replied indignantly. "She was such a lovely person. Rachel was my girlfriend, my best friend. I wouldn't harm her. I just wanted to hold her, spend time with her."

"But you screwed up," Sheriff Lockhart challenged, "and she blamed you."

"I told her we could hike back to the resort," he said, twisting his lips. "But she wouldn't listen."

"Is that why she tried to get away from you?"

His anger rose. "She still wanted to trust me," he defended.

Corbin could see he'd struck a nerve. "I guess your emotions are drained." He paused. "How about filling us in. What brought you to the lake in the first place?"

Nick glared at the sheriff, keeping his composure. "We're both undergrads at the University of Kansas. We needed to get away from the headaches of the city. Earning a college degree requires a whole lot of commitment, and loads of time and energy."

"So you decided to go on vacation."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," he told Sheriff Lockhart. "But we figured we'd get a kick out of traveling."

To escape the daily humdrum, they'd found Kirksville on an Atlas travel map. Located in the midst of celebrated tourist attractions, it seemed like a convenient location. On Nick's laptop computer, they'd calculated mileage before reserving a guest room for two weeks at the Lakeview. About twenty minutes north of Kirksville along the shores of Crescent Lake,

they located Buchanan Bay. They'd driven all the way from Kansas City, with Nick skipping out of his summer job early. By Thursday, he and his girlfriend had gotten a sun tan on the beach, and in the afternoon, there had been a run-in with a stressed-out weirdo in the barbershop.

Earlier on Friday, they'd cruised for over an hour on a boat tour around the lake and down the river. "The tour guide repeated local lore about settlers in the Nineteenth Century, Indian reservations, sunken ships and forest fires," Nick recalled. "He claimed there was once a fountain of youth -- a system of underground springs that produced water so pure it slowed the aging process."

It was well known that in the early nineteen hundreds, a full range of tourists, including celebrities and politicians, had flocked to Crescent Lake to receive the medicinal benefits of the fabled spring water. Since then, residents and travelers alike consumed bottled spring water and bathed in it, hoping to see improvements in their health.

"But some people met with disaster," the sheriff corrected. "They died in hotel fires, drowned mysteriously and vanished in the wilderness."

Nick gave the sheriff a strange look. "The tour guide also told another story, something about a mine collapse twenty years ago. This disaster shut down the mining company at Copper Creek, plus there were rumors it was deliberate, possibly sabotage. Some folks even blamed outer space aliens," he sighed.

The sheriff grunted. "Metaphoric tales about UFOs creating havoc are probably pure fantasy."

Nick pulled his head back. "Natural phenomenon, then, like a lightning storm."

"I see. Campfire stories, interesting subjects to talk about."

"I guess we planned on a romantic evening. We rented a motor boat. We were going to return before it got too late, but we ended up venturing farther down the river."

"The Blue River?"

"Yes. We stopped, disembarked. We wanted to experience a peaceful evening stroll down the shoreline." Nick paused, his cheeks a little red with embarrassment. In his mind's eye, he recalled Rachel's physical endowments -- her firm round breasts and smooth hips. He thought of her inner beauty, her eagerness to go on vacation, her sense of sincerity, and her warm personality. "We got carried away, spread out a plaid cotton blanket. We were like ravenous sexual creatures. A short time later, when we returned to the boat, our excursion began to fall apart. I tried to start the outboard motor, which should have been routine. I tugged on the pull-cord. It was futile. No sound, the motor never turned over. Only the smell of gasoline."

"Then what?" the sheriff gulped.

"As best as I can figure, after we'd left the boat place --"

"Which one?" Corbin interrupted.

"Bartelli's Marine Center," Nick responded. "Anyway, we sailed east from Crescent Lake down the river. To hike back to the resort, all we had to do was follow the shoreline west, the way we came. It was dark, but we had a flashlight. It should have been easy, no big deal. The evening wore on. Countless hours later, we reached a state of panic. We were definitely lost, no doubt about it."

To the sheriff, it sounded like a gratifying evening had turned into a disaster.

To Nick, everything -- the unfamiliar surroundings, the skeptical expressions of sheriff's officials, an apparent murder -- seemed strange. His girlfriend had been the centerpiece of his life, probably the best woman he'd ever known. And now she was gone. "

"The entire evening was pretty much backward, not what I expected."

Deputy Brinkman stepped closer. He'd been standing near the sheriff, listening intently. With the deputy's nose crinkled, it was easy for Nick to recognize the quizzical expression on Reggie's face, even in the darkness. "Someone was after you?"

“A stranger, a total nutcase was after us,” he stammered, “I accidentally ran into him. I had to fight off the bastard with a thick branch. But he must have stumbled across Rachel before I got there.”

The sheriff studied the young man. “Can you describe the suspect?”

His head still ringing, Nick replayed the scene in his mind. He tried his utmost to concentrate. “He was Caucasian, with dark hair.” With an overwhelming sense of defeat, Nick choked out, “I didn’t see him clearly.”

The deputy looked dubious, his thick mustache bunched over his upper lip. “Never saw this man before, huh? What weapon did he use?”

“As far as I know, he didn’t use a weapon,” Nick said. “Rachel and I had been on cloud nine. Then a few long hours later, somebody jumped me from behind,” he exhaled. “He was wearing work gloves, I think. I couldn’t see clearly, but I felt their grainy texture, the rough scrapes on my skin.”

Nick was still coming to grips with the whole thing. “He was one weird son of a bitch.”

“What do you mean?” the sheriff persisted.

“He was terribly violent, completely out of control, but he wasn’t necessarily . . . unprepared. Like he knew the forest, like he knew what he was doing.” Nick became self-conscious. “As you can see, I don’t know my way around here very well.”

“So the assailant had a dark sense of confidence, like he was familiar with the winding trails?” Reggie asked.

“I felt like he knew what he was doing.”

“Did you talk to this man?” Corbin said.

Nick paused, thinking. “The lunatic made up some bullshit story that Rachel and I had staged a loud argument, that in the long run she was going to dump me.”

“Is that true?”

“We were vacationing, that was all,” he countered, covering up his rage. “We just got lost, unexpectedly.”

“But you weren’t together,” the deputy double-checked. “You split up, correct?”

“Yea, we became separated.”

“After you quarreled?” the sheriff persisted.

“After we got lost, I did what I could,” Nick protested. “Rachel got pissed off and ran away, man.”

The sheriff looked worried. “Your girlfriend questioned your judgment, didn’t she?”

“We just wanted to experience the great outdoors. I suppose Rachel didn’t trust me because the boat malfunctioned. Maybe we should have known better, but that isn’t convincing evidence that I somehow caused her death.”

Two tourists who just happened to have a falling out in the middle of a vast tract of wilderness? Sheriff Lockhart reflected to himself. And somehow they’d accidentally run across someone with a motive to kill. A scary scenario, the sheriff told himself, made even more horrible by the lack of concrete evidence.

Sheriff Lockhart and Deputy Brinkman exchanged a look before the sheriff turned his attention to Kyle. In the darkness, Kyle had been looking on, listening to the interrogation. During the apparent homicide, he’d been jolted by shrill screams of terror. He told the others that he’d been on one of his frequent off-trail hikes with his digital camcorder. As a hobby, he kept a digital video inventory of countless species of wildlife. Plenty of tall pines and blazing maples. But he said he wasn’t convinced the camcorder had picked up tangible proof of exactly what had happened. He knew Nick was a guest at the resort. When the couple checked into Room 205, Nick and his girlfriend had listed themselves as married. Wishful thinking, possibly, but the truth was they were both single.

“I tried to call nine-one-one,” Kyle said. “There was too much static, my cell phone never connected.”

The sheriff glanced at Nick, pale and exhausted, then shifted his gaze back to Kyle. Behind them the heavy truck idled on the shoulder of the highway. The sheriff swung his head around, gazing at the truck. He motioned to Reggie.

"I'll question the driver," the deputy muttered, walking off.

Corbin raised his eyebrows and turned his gaze back to Murik. "Kyle, you're telling me you never met this couple before the day they checked into the resort?"

"No, not that I can recall. I worked the check-in desk the day they arrived."

"You weren't suspicious of anything?"

Kyle shook his head. "Nothing out of the ordinary, Corbin. Nick and his girlfriend were typical guests. They gave me the plate number for their vehicle. I handed them their key cards, gave them directions and told them about the facilities. The security camera mounted above front desk was operating properly. Guests were arriving in the lobby, the parking lot was busy."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "I've asked you this before, Kyle, but I need to double-check. Exactly what were you doing in the woods with your camcorder?"

Kyle hesitated. He formulated a reasonable answer. "Everyone needs to take a break from the rat race, to explore nature's mysterious treasures."

"An escape from the pressures of running a resort," Lockhart nodded. "Just a stroll in the woods, nothing else?"

"When I'm not busy with things like bookkeeping or delivering towels, I occasionally survey the grounds. I try to make it my business to know what's going on. I've been taking inventories of parking spaces, garbage containers, foot paths, and various forms of wildlife."

"Whatever miscellaneous tasks cross your mind," Corbin interjected.

"Sort of. I'd call it loss prevention, my own special outdoor security patrol."

"Wouldn't you be better off bringing a big, friendly German shepherd along?"

"I'm going to ask our whole staff to be more alert from now on," said Kyle, the black camcorder bag strapped over his shoulder. "As a manager, I've always got something to worry

about. I've got video evidence of stolen duck eggs, cracked windows, loose door knobs, uncollected litter and unknown persons tossing rocks around." He tapped the dark nylon bag with his fingertips. "Plus this gadget tapes at night."

"Really?"

"Well, the focus isn't always good," he admitted.

There were no suspicious marks on Kyle's exposed skin, Corbin speculated, and his clothing was neat and clean. "The resort doesn't normally make you agonize a whole lot about life and death, right?"

Kyle flinched. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about possible homicide," Corbin shrugged. "One of your guests is dead."

Kyle balled his hands into fists, opened them and stretched his arms. He patted the small paunch above his belt, a symbol of his middle-aged build. "My wife has never claimed I've got enough muscle to drag dead bodies around the woods. I doubt I could hide that type of activity from her. It's not like playing golf, you know."

"I'm just asking," Corbin defended.

"As long as you're curious, Corbin, the great outdoors controls my health. My middle-aged lungs crave the fresh air."

"I hear you, man," Nick interrupted. "You're not the only one who appreciates the high quality of life in terms of warm sunshine and clean air." He paused, then lamented, "But what a terrible trip this turned out to be." He felt a deep chill penetrate his bones. He understood the look of skepticism on Sheriff Lockhart's face. He knew the sheriff was considering the possibility that he was the guilty party.

Both Sheriff Lockhart and Deputy Brinkman observed a deep gash across Rachel's head, leaving her hair crusted with blood. A thin string of bruises circled her neck, possibly from strangulation. Nick also displayed visible bruises and sores.

"After the engine conked out, we bickered," Nick resumed. "We got lost." His eyes opened wide. "The killer must have heard us," he realized. "I couldn't help thinking we'd find our way

back, that everything would be okay.” Nick closed his eyes in despair. A vision of Rachel, lost and alone, flooded his conscience. He felt frustrated and upset, the tears beginning to stream down. “We ran out of luck. The stranger heard us, followed us. It was terrifying. I could hardly wait for it to be over, to see the sun streaking over the pines from our hotel window, telling us everything is okay.”

Nick forced himself to gaze ominously in the direction of the spot where Rachel’s lifeless body was found. It was as if he’d just woken up from a terrible nightmare. “My God,” he gasped, “I fought the son-of-a bitch, but I didn’t get a good look at him. He ran away, and I was too exhausted to reach the highway.”

At this point, Kyle replayed his digital video. The audio had clearly picked up unmistakable sounds of harsh footsteps and Rachel’s shrill screams, sheriff’s evidence that something very suspicious had taken place. Even with the camcorder’s low-light sensitivity, the visuals were too dark. Kyle had captured daytime close-ups of woody locations, but the night audio only verified the time of the incident. Corbin also planned to retrieve the security tape from the mounted camera in the resort lobby. And there was the matter of the preliminary report from the county medical examiner’s office.

“Good job on the audio,” Corbin said. But he added in a dissatisfied tone, “Unfortunately, we still don’t know exactly what the hell happened.”

“Night filming,” Kyle murmured, shaking his head. “It’s certain you’ll need to investigate further, sheriff.”

In the near term, at least, Nick was at the center of the case. Who was the assailant he described? Why would anyone want to harm Rachel? The sheriff couldn’t make many assumptions. “I suppose this location is pleasing in the daytime,” he commented.

“When I get back to the resort, I’ll double-check my video archives, see if I can find anything,” Kyle contributed.

“Thanks,” the sheriff said distractedly. He was concentrating on analyzing the evidence with his deputy. After several

minutes, Sheriff Lockhart and Deputy Brinkman agreed that Nick had to be transported to the sheriff's office for further questioning.

The bright fluorescent lights of the large interrogation room shined off Nick's perspiring face. Heedfully, he recalled images of Rachel -- youthful and kindhearted, wavy blonde hair flowing over her lean shoulders. "You know I'm not the only suspect. Half the out-of-town travelers and local residents around here possess enough pent-up hatred to have done it."

"I just want to be sure," Corbin said apologetically.

"I know what you mean," Nick sympathized. For a moment, he stared straight ahead like a zombie, as if the overwhelming shock of Rachel's death would be too heavy a burden. At least he wasn't brooding.

Seated in his office chair, Sheriff Lockhart explained he needed to pinpoint where the couple became lost and what route they tried to follow out of the woods. More importantly, he had to get a statement about what triggered such a brutal argument between Rachel and Nick, what apparently caused them to split up and go their separate ways. "At this point, we're not even close to possessing serious evidence. Tell me about the boat."

Nick shifted in his chair. "I guess we started to squabble about the boat, then which direction to go. How the hell were we supposed to make it back?"

"What about money?"

Before making up their minds to take a vacation, they'd double-checked the credit limits on their charge accounts. Neither had a heap of hard cash on hand, but splurging for a vacation didn't seem like a big deal. Nick reiterated his main point: the malfunctioning boat caused them to split up. "Damn!" he whined, pounding his bare fist on the table. "I checked the

gas gauge, the tank was three-quarters full. I couldn't figure out why the piece of garbage wouldn't start."

"Don't get stressed out," Corbin suggested calmly. "Vacation time means quality of life and the sunset splashed across the sky."

Nick dug into his backpack, which was sprawled across the long, narrow table. He removed a plastic compass, then watched the red directional needle float into place. He also examined his flashlight, as if it might provide a clue. "Something was wrong, very wrong."

"It's the homicide I'm worried about," said Corbin in an authoritative tone. "We'll have to wait until a search party finds the boat, as evidence."

As Nick described it, the river's shoreline had turned into a confusing wall of brush and trees. This had ultimately caused the couple to split up. "I guess the river trip shouldn't have been a big deal. I steered east from Crescent Lake down the mouth of the river. After the motor stalled, all we had to do to hike back in the direction of the resort was follow the shoreline the way we came. That shouldn't have been a big deal either. We had a thermos, flashlight and food we'd brought along. I doubted we were farther than five miles from the harbor."

"You mean you planned to hike all the way back to the resort, chilly and tired?" Corbin squealed. The sheriff thought this bordered on ridiculous. "That would have taken all night!"

Nick, exhausted and at wit's end, didn't reply.

Corbin rested his elbows on the table, browsing through Reggie's report. "And to make matters worse, you forgot your cell phone."

"We left it someplace, probably in the car."

"And you didn't bother to bring a map?"

"Right. We we're in a hurry. The river excursion was a last-minute thing. We wanted to avoid heavy traffic and throngs of tourists. We didn't want to get stuck in a crowd. We probably shouldn't have been out after dark."

"And you were supposed to have returned the boat two hours earlier?"

"Look, I did what I could," Nick moaned. "I can't believe we never ran across a hiking trail. Portions of the Pine Valley Trail run parallel to the river. We had a decent chance of running across it. We had to do something before the entire night was wasted. We couldn't have been far enough from the Lakeview not to have made it back on foot, even if it took hours. It was one thing that the fucking motor malfunctioned. But it was quite another that we ended up searching for a trail throughout the night."

"How could you see through the heavy underbrush?"

"We found openings between trees that dotted the riverbank. We pushed low-hanging branches out of the way. It was easy to lose track of exactly where we were located."

"After hiking for twenty-five minutes, the river disappeared from sight, is that correct?"

"Uh-huh. We were on the wooded eastern slope of a steep ravine."

"And it was possible that on the opposite side of the ravine an assailant heard you approaching."

"Heard us arguing. We didn't know our way around," he said, becoming upset. "Don't you understand what a terrible mess we'd gotten ourselves into?" he blurted out, panic rising in his throat.

"Just keep your cool," the sheriff returned.

Nick rose from his seat, pacing back and forth from wall to chair. He cursed silently, in a whisper. After several minutes, he sat down again.

"So Rachel wasn't willing to follow your plan?"

Nick shot Corbin a warning look. "Rachel gave up and followed her own line of thought," he exhaled. "I started after her. I told her not wander off by herself. I shouted at her, frustrated by the lack of control. I advised her not to give up, that we'd make it back. I tried to encourage her, but it was too late and she took off." He paused. "She must have figured she was

safer without me around," he said glumly. "Before I knew it, she was gone."

The sheriff looked baffled. "Did you hear the truck that pulled off the highway?"

"No."

"Did you run into Kyle?"

"No. It was too dark, I couldn't see clearly. Only an unidentified person. When I realized he definitely wasn't Rachel, my heart began pounding. The stranger lunged at me. I quickly found a large branch. I struck him hard several times before he ran away."

Corbin asked if the assailant carried a gun or knife. Nick said he never saw a weapon. "I whirled around and staggered toward the highway. I felt like I was going to pass out, ended up on the ground somehow. To my utter relief, I spotted the semi-truck."

Corbin ended the session, planning only to detain Nick for questioning. The details of his account struck the sheriff as a legitimate alibi.

Later that morning, Corbin was back at work in his sheriff's office. Kyle sat across from his stately sheriff's desk. In addition to small clutters of paperwork on the broad desktop, was a large volume about firearms. Hanging on the wall behind Corbin were glass-framed pictures of his wife, Tammy, and their two children, twelve-year-old Justin and eighteen-year-old Sandy. Thank God he had a wife and children, genuine motivation to put on his sheriff's cap each day. Plaques and glass photographs of former Texas County sheriffs hung along the wall, including an aerial picture of Kirksville, population twenty thousand.

The sheriff shifted his attention to Kyle. When Kyle had first arrived in Kirksville, residents struggled against an irrational urge to hold his prison record against him. Most refused to make him

into a scapegoat, or to shun or avoid him. Kyle had turned his life around. He had successfully launched a second career as a respected business owner. But what did the sheriff really know about Kyle?

Corbin glanced at him, flashing a sly smile. "Kyle, it's been a long time since I've asked you, but now I need a clearer picture. It's true, nobody thinks you're a bad guy and you served your time --"

"I guess I learned a lesson the hard way," he interrupted. "I fell into bad habits," he added sullenly. "The sad part is I didn't even know it until it was too late."

"What brought you here?"

Kyle turned somber, mulling over the hodgepodge that had once been his miserable world in New York City. As a high school kid making his way through turbulent times, Kyle had succumbed to the unwholesome habit of throwing his money away. It was called compulsive gambling, a reckless habit in which one thing had led to another. "Don't you think it might be monotonous to listen to my life story?"

"No," Corbin shook his head.

Kyle took a moment to figure out where to begin. "Behind bars, I had no freedom, I was nobody. You get used to the food, but not to being locked up."

Corbin lost his patience and interrupted. "I'm sure it wasn't a walk in the park," he said. "What I meant was, what led you to set up shop here?"

"I had to start over." Kyle felt a heavy headache swirling around inside his head. "Do you know how outraged you feel living behind bars, living on the edge of panic, knowing there's no way out? I couldn't stand it -- all the aggravation and disillusionment. These gloomy emotions accumulate over time. They wear you down, and you think you've lost. Fortunately, this stage ends."

"So you made a fresh start."

"I couldn't just let things ride. I needed to overcome the misery of my past life," he concluded.

"I heard you're troubles began a long time ago, about twenty years, right?"

"Yeah, they snuck up on me. I paid no attention to the warning signs, didn't realize I was on the wrong track," he said with remorse. "But my sorrows multiplied until my life was wildly out of control. In the end, I threw money around like there was no tomorrow," he ejaculated. "Poker, slot machines, any opportunity to rake in fast cash. Friends joked about my secretive nature and erratic behavior. But careless gambling habits got the best of me. I owed everybody. It was a huge debt for a businessman in my supposedly sound financial position."

"I hear gossip about bankruptcy every day," the sheriff growled suspiciously.

"Not like this. I was like somebody who started taking pep pills and wound up addicted to cocaine. I started off with hope, but couldn't stop my own self-indulgence." He exhaled heavily. "Stealing money from the company budget, tax evasion, they were like amphetamines. I had to keep going, had to keep taking bigger and bigger risks."

"Business risks!" the sheriff belted out.

"Actually, I pocketed money from wherever I found it. I didn't think I'd get caught. The evidence was mostly on paper, in a computer tube. Management figured out I'd essentially stolen company funds to feed my gambling habit. This involved more than just numbers on a computer screen. Paul Brady, the founder of the Navassa Bay Clothing Company, had discovered thousands in cash missing from a private safe in his home. It was after I'd taken off from a party at his place. He figured out who stole the money. After I was found guilty in the court system, I served my time."

The sheriff understood implicitly. Kyle had misappropriated funds on the job. But he had also replaced them. When he'd stumbled, he left too much evidence.

"When powerful executives get caught bilking their corporations for millions of dollars, the public and the news media express moral indignation. But the truth is, American

business is rife with pilferage and theft. Silent lepers in the business jungle reckon the company is fucking them over, so they decide for the company to even the score.”

“You wanted to retaliate against the company because you deemed they were screwing you.”

“I was like a closet sixties drug freak. My desire to build up job security and eventually financial power was like a never-ending drug addiction.” Kyle told Corbin he had been in the habit of sitting at his office desk, filling calculators with computations of transactions he didn’t report to the company. They hadn’t been detected because he was extremely cautious, despite almost missing deadlines and surreptitiously losing productivity. He was convinced he had to appear to coworkers as an employee who maximized profits. But when customer traffic dropped off or the economy slowed down, he placed bets. This leisurely pastime eventually grew into a compulsion. His wagers came in all shapes and sizes.

“Although pathological gambling brings in money for private businesses and the government alike, it can turn into a vice that destroys individuals. I became a problem gambler,” he said. “I visualized myself as a prototypical businessman. The truth was I was a desperate son-of-a-bitch. An enormous amount of cash can move through any Vegas-style casino. All you have to do is sit in the right spot with a large invisible net. I was like a non-genetic alcoholic who has a civil right to drown his sorrows in hard liquor. Instead of a piece of apple pie, I wanted to award myself the whole thing.”

“Money,” said Corbin, his eyes narrowing. “Exactly where did you find it?”

Kyle leaned forward, his body tightening. “Spreadsheets, gaming tables, computer files, almost anyplace I looked. I --”

“What?” the sheriff interrupted.

“I felt like I was on top of the world,” he went on, “like I would strike gold at any given moment. I carefully analyzed the company’s budget. I bled expense and travel accounts. I rerouted funds earmarked for public relations. I told

management that my department was devising its own unique ad campaign.”

“But instead, you used company money for your own eccentric purposes,” the sheriff cut in.

“Unfortunately, that’s true,” Kyle admitted. “When the prize money outpaced my losses, I was on Easy Street. I borrowed money like it was water. Business financing from fraudulent lenders, the big boys. One blunder led to another, but even mob-style loan sharks can turn naïve. They really believed I’d turn a big profit. Either way, they made a bundle of money.”

The sheriff grunted and crossed his arms in disbelief.

“They used me for negative advertising. They needed to squeeze big bucks out of their prey.”

“Did you think these loan sharks could become psychotic bill collectors?”

“I wasn’t worried. I was on a roll, thought I could snow these guys. But the percentages caught up with me. In the end, I owed everybody who was anybody in shady deals.”

Kyle breathed an audible sigh. “They demanded every penny of their money back – with inflated interest. At one point, a fist landed in my jaw. One of these hoods lost control and slammed my back into a wall mirror, then sat on my stomach choking my throat. He was certain my constricted throat couldn’t be used as courtroom evidence. A short time later, after I punched his nose a few times, he came to his senses. My gangster comrade wasn’t raking in big dollars that day, so he took off. There really wasn’t enough evidence in terms of cuts and bruises on my body. My inflamed gums bled a little and my stupid jaw hurt like hell, especially when I rolled over on my pillow that night. Needless to say, I told my pals at work not to be overly concerned, I’d only paid a long overdue visit to the dentist.”

Kyle quickly pressed his lips together, then licked them before resuming. “The whole gambling shebang was like suffocating under some anonymous hood’s pillow. I was gobbling up cash at an alarming rate. Before I knew it, I owed one hundred sixty-eight thousand dollars. For me, it was a

staggering amount. I would need something like a miracle to get out from under. I worried constantly about my bad reputation destroying my career. I knew these swindlers were unforgiving. I even saw visions of the police dredging my stinking corpse out of a murky inner-city river."

"So you planned to sidestep the authorities," Corbin surmised.

"Correct."

"And you knew these corrupt lenders had you under surveillance."

Kyle confirmed Corbin's suspicions: He'd actually attempted to steal thousands in cash from his boss's luxurious home. Like a drug addict, he hadn't been able to control his obsessive craving to lay all his cash down in a card game. "I planned to place several sure-thing bets while Brady and his wife were traveling, win twenty thousand dollars, maybe even fifty thousand, and replace the money before they even realized it was missing. One night Brady's wife was getting loaded and she dropped her guard. Standing some distance away, I remained inconspicuous. I watched her remove a handful of cash from her husband's freestanding office safe. I memorized the combination – eight, twenty-seven, three. I made small talk, bided my time. I put on a good front, a poker face. I never showed my feelings of desperation. When the coast was clear, I made a ridiculous snap judgment to help myself to their hard-earned stash. I rationalized it was a necessary evil, an innocuous and predictable business risk."

Kyle paused. "It turned out to be a terrible mistake," he admitted.

"I was convinced that when I gambled, I always got something in return. After I'd been gainfully employed for a couple months, I once claimed eighty thousand dollars in winnings in a single weekend. As a show of strength, I expedited seventy-two thousand right back to the loan sharks." Kyle said he had remained intrinsically suspicious, fearing if he made a wrong move, he might never walk the Earth again.

Principal, interest, equity – Kyle told himself he just needed time to pay it all back. “From a lender’s standpoint, I was easier to get along with than a gun-toting bank robber. In aggregate, the big boys were raking money in. They had everybody cornered, thought they knew all the angles. There was little risk. If my corpse turned up, it was negative advertising, a cruel message.”

The sheriff realized the truth was that Kyle had once been a lonely and irresponsible man, someone who wasn’t able to effectively restrain his compulsive risk-taking. After all, this was an age of online gambling and widespread gaming. An emerging body of research had even suggested that obsessive gambling could be viewed as a psychiatric disorder stemming from bad brain chemistry. But Kyle’s past had also tweaked the sheriff’s curiosity, so he enquired how the resort owner had gotten started.

“Within a year of graduating from high school in 1974, I worked my way up from part-time salesman at Manchester Clothing to store manager,” said Kyle, his face brightening. “I earned twice as much on commission as the competition. I attempted to be glib and informative with customers. I committed to memory the locations of specific merchandise in the stock room. When the store manager was transferred to Pittsburgh, the company followed its tradition of bringing salesmen into management. After working with the regional sales manager during the year, I was picked for the store manager slot,” he continued with fervor.

“During five years as store manager, I learned the business -- men's and women’s professional attire, sports outfits and casual wear,” Kyle recalled. “I filled my filing cabinet with spreadsheets. I strove to be resourceful in arranging window displays for sidewalk customers. I read all the advertising and trade articles.”

Off the job, Kyle wasn't always a clear thinker. On any given day, the quality of his life could disintegrate. He needed escapes, stuff like gambling and diving headfirst back into his work. "In 1975, our company's chief competitor, Strickland,

collapsed. It wasn't very intriguing, like reading about Lehman Brothers falling apart. I was frightened, I thought any clothing company could go bankrupt, so I analyzed the whole situation. I concluded Strickland hadn't earned enough customer loyalty, in part, because of all the price competition from popular worldwide retailers. Remember, this was before the public emergence of international retailers like Wal-Mart. Today Wal-Mart is, by far, the largest retailer in the world, but a smaller specialized clothing company like Strickland needed customers who were willing to pay a little more for a longer-lasting result. Who wants to walk all around a shopping mall looking for socks that won't shrink?"

Kyle marveled at the twists and turns in his own career. "I was twenty-one and single, so it came as no surprise that I needed time away from the daily grind," he said with only a shrug. "I continued to hit the gambling circuits, mostly poker and billiards. The self-defeating possibility of throwing away money went hand-in-hand with binge drinking, compulsive cigarette smoking, overeating at junk-food shops, stuff like that. From time to time, I took a spin down to Atlantic City or caught a cheap flight to Vegas. Here and there, slick con men left some big holes in my wallet. When I was convinced I should have been winning, I ended up losing," he said. "Yet I saw the inherent risks in gambling as the ultimate escape, almost like virtual reality."

Then Kyle ran into Vince Stapleton, the public relations director for Navassa Bay. Like Kyle, Vince was in his late twenties, and he'd never earned a college degree. When the pair went out for a few drinks, they railed about how studying excessively for college courses could turn into a waste of time. They also complained about all the shifty people they'd met after their school days had ended.

"From my perspective, Stapleton had it made," Kyle said. "Although his job title was director of public relations, he was really one of Brady's top assistants. After several years on the sales floor, I accepted the newly-created position as

aide-de-camp to Stapleton. But an unforeseen event took place. Stapleton was walking around the clothing plant's back loading dock. He was taking photographs for the employee newspaper. As he was lining up a shot of workers unloading supplies from a truck, he slipped and fell, breaking his leg," Kyle related.

"Like a football coach, I promptly received an injury report. Stapleton was expected to be out of action for at least two months," he said. "Just like that," Kyle continued, snapping his fingers, "I took over as department manager." He inhaled deeply. "I was responsible for arranging business conferences and social gatherings, putting out the monthly employee newspaper, determining the department's budget and assisting Brady with errands."

Kyle rubbed his temples. "The whole thing was strange, like a dream. When I came to Crescent Lake, I was finally able to put it out of my mind. I had to or I would have gone crazy."

The sheriff subscribed to the theory that almost no one in a growing homicide investigation could be fully trusted. Could Kyle, who'd risen above his tainted past, have had logical reasons to commit a violent crime? It was doubtful. Could he have been an accomplice? Also unlikely. Had he witnessed any events he took for granted, potential evidence that would be significant to a sheriff? To Corbin, this was a probability. The woodlands that crisscrossed the countryside in the vicinity of the victim's body were a hindrance to communication. Many different guests booked rooms at the Lakeview, and Kyle hadn't been seen at the resort at the time of death. The sheriff couldn't anticipate any demonstrative evidence in this line of thought, though.

He decided he'd heard enough about Kyle's troubled past. He changed the subject. Where exactly was the resort owner when the young woman was stalked and murdered? Very close to the crime scene, Kyle admitted, but the thick mass of underbrush got in the way.

The sheriff's mind kept working. "Beyond what we've learned about the victim, are you aware of suspicious activity at the resort?"

Kyle was uneasy. "Off the top of my head, I can't recall a serious incident. Minor stuff accumulates over the years. You know, an irate couple arguing at the top of their voices. A skeptical guest rudely questioning his bill. A stranger loitering. Screwballs letting air out of a guest's tires in the parking lot."

"I take it you don't like driving around with a flat tire," the sheriff quipped.

"No, not really. I've been lucky, though. Nobody has ever vandalized my car."

"No drug activity, no stolen cars?"

"Not at the Lakeview, sheriff. You've got to remember, the hotel-motel business is where people want safety, not highway robbery. A guest needs to feel protected, in addition to staying within his budget. Common everyday occurrences piss people off. Lost keys, slow internet, heavy luggage, malfunctioning vending machines and ill-mannered guests -- these are common complaints," Kyle confided. "Visitors have a right to stay in high spirits and to take their memories with them."

"They also need police protection," the sheriff returned. Corbin looked baffled. "There are a couple all-night convenience stores within a two-mile radius, correct?"

Kyle understood his reasoning. "Actually there are three when you include the Shell food shop."

"Is that so?"

"Almost anyone can give in to bad impulses and turn into a trouble-maker," Kyle said. "I think it's vital to spend time getting to know your staff. I suspect I'll never truly understand the town's economy or the customer-service end of my trade. These aren't times in which an old-fashioned local innkeeper caters to a customer's every whim, though I think this is still a valid strategy. The current breed of traveler worries about time and money," Kyle supposed. "He's infatuated with his own schedule, loses track of the outside world. Finally, he staggers

into the hotel lobby, grouchy and exasperated, desiring the supple warmth of a bed piled with blankets and pillows. I worry about my hotel's guests when they're out on the highway, but I don't need to work up a sweat over the internet connection or bath towels. With weight rooms and microwaves, the motel industry has an important role in the national economy," Kyle observed pleasantly. "Migrant workers, ranch hands, truck drivers, salesmen, the unemployed, divorced spouses, ex-cons, visiting relatives, tourists -- late at night, they're all looking for a place to sleep."

Corbin exhaled fretfully. "You're positive that on the night of the murder no one reported anything suspicious, like tools stolen from a pickup or guests drinking and carrying on excessively?"

"Nothing I know about," said Kyle, shaking his head.

Corbin had a grim look on his face. "Is it possible there's a connection between the Lakeview and the crime scene?"

"I can't think of anything."

There was an oppressive silence as the sheriff reviewed the evidence, a mental checklist running across his mind. "There are times when any law enforcement officer could use a crystal ball," he said.

Kyle seemed to be a bystander. Certainly he was no criminal mastermind secretly gloating over his precision in hunting human prey. The sheriff decided to wrap things up. "If you think of anything, let me know," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Adrienne received an unusual telephone call at her apartment on Saturday morning. The *Observer's* city editor told Adrienne the bad news about two lost tourists who had been piloting a rental boat when the engine apparently malfunctioned. Tanya Mitchell described how Rachel Konrad had turned up dead and how Nick Williams had been discovered near the scene. A torn piece of Nick's shirt had been found hanging from a branch near the woman's corpse, and Nick had been taken to the county sheriff's building for further questioning.

Meanwhile, sheriff's officials continued to investigate. Their suspicions about Nick probably stemmed from the fact that the investigation was in its early stages, Tanya said. Since the couple were from out-of-town, deputies hadn't been able to locate anyone with a clear motive.

Tanya got to the point. "I'm shorthanded at the moment," she told Adrienne. "Would you mind running down to the sheriff's office to do a write-up for the Sunday edition?"

Adrienne swallowed hard. "I guess it all depends on how much time I'll have."

"I'd like to have the story in my computer file by three o'clock. We owe it to the readers to have something in tomorrow morning's paper," Tanya reiterated.

Adrienne choked out a sigh, barely audible. "This is short notice, but I don't have anything important on my agenda," she said. "I'll try to find out whatever I can and turn in at least one story."

"Okay," Tanya cackled. "I'll look for it in my sheriff's file. If you need help, let me know."

"I will," Adrienne promised. She hung up, took a deep breath and walked across her living room. She covered Kirkville's troubles and controversies, and now her frenzied schedule added to the sense of adventure.

She sat down on her supple leather couch, the trendy centerpiece of her living room. From the glass coffee table, she picked up yesterday's *Observer* and thumbed through the pages. What if there really was a dangerous killer in the neighborhood? She recalled the demographics of intentional homicide. Over four hundred fifty thousand homicides worldwide annually, according to Wikipedia. And police made millions of arrests for less important crimes. But who would have suspected that a tourist's corpse would turn up near the pleasant overlook?

Today this story of an apparent homicide would control her schedule. She glanced at her wall clock, couldn't help listening to the seconds coldly ticking away. She planned to grab a quick breakfast and tidy up her apartment before visiting the sheriff's office. She began to prepare a mental checklist of questions, careful to stay calm in order to organize the facts in her mind. The biggest unanswered question was the killer's motive. She

dialed the sheriff's number, and attempted to set up an interview.

The dispatcher told her the sheriff had obtained only sketchy information. However, he was free to talk to Adrienne around noon. This was okay with her.

The apparent homicide had taken place last night, she repeated to herself. The same night Mark had driven her to the observation point. It turned out she had been right about staying safe. A horrible tragedy had taken place, she reflected, her worst fears had been confirmed.

She telephoned Mark, telling him everything. The probability of violent law-breaking was indeed startling. "I'm sorry to hear about it," he sympathized, "but everybody in the local media will be interested. I guess all the citizens aren't as good-natured and law-abiding as I'd believed," he added.

"We were much better off playing it safe."

"Yeah, luck was on our side," Mark admitted.

Adrienne leaned into the receiver. "Perhaps a horror movie psycho thinks it's amusing to torment lost hikers. Thank goodness we left in time, unlike that poor lost couple."

"Do you feel all right now?"

"I guess so," she answered, feeling her throat tighten. "A tragic, unexplained death in the general vicinity of the overlook, the Lakeview and Kirkville. The story should definitely be front-page material. I'm also planning to work up a feature story about the balance and harmony our society seeks in preserving the natural scenery and serving the public. I believe in democracy and the will of the majority. I support citizens who want to fight rural crime and at the same time protect public lands."

"To be fatally pushed over the edge of a rock outcropping, that's certainly a strange turn of events."

"And is anyone else in danger?"

"We can't be certain. Perhaps this could happen to anyone," Mark said. "Subtle changes in the topography from the suburban neighborhoods of Kirkville to remote forest tracts. One

minute you're in a neighborhood park and only a short time later you can find yourself in the middle of nowhere."

Adrienne agreed. "It's similar to traffic gridlock. You're driving down a deserted highway and all of a sudden you run into a logjam, all the anxious tourists arriving on Friday and leaving on Sunday, all the people going to work on Monday. Before you know it, you reach an empty highway again, and you ask yourself where everyone went?"

"Too bad this couple didn't stay together, didn't stay closer to town."

They both fell silent for a few moments before Adrienne suggested Mark meet her after work for dinner. By then, she would be finished with at least one news story, the major piece outlining the growing investigation.

When Adrienne entered Sheriff Lockhart's office, she ran into a couple reporters who were leaving. For a moment she experienced job-related insecurity. Adrienne didn't relish the notion that she might have been scooped. Interviewing the sheriff, she wanted to touch all of the bases.

Growing up in a big family with four brothers and three sisters, Sheriff Lockhart had been an active youth, plus his childhood had been filled with an abundance of chatter and sibling rivalry. Adrienne remembered he had played offensive tackle on the high school football team, and he was still in decent shape. About twenty years ago, Corbin started out as a green-horn deputy, unaware his outstanding performance in the field and all-around leadership skills would take him into the sheriff's role.

With pen and notebook in hand, Adrienne pulled up a grey office chair and sat down on the other side of Sheriff Lockhart's desk. Her mind's eye had conjured up a gruesome scene of the victim's body, but she concentrated on getting a news update about the homicide investigation. She opened with an easy

question to get the sheriff talking before she hit him with any zingers. She asked if Nick had confessed, knowing he likely had maintained his innocence.

“No confession,” Corbin belted out. “During several rounds of questions, Williams insisted he was attacked by an unidentified assailant.”

“Do you have a description?”

“He was possibly an outdoors type, a fisherman or hunter familiar with the rough trails and waterways. We showed Williams most-wanted mugs, people under suspicion. He said it was too dark, and he didn’t get a clear view of the assailant’s face.”

“What else do you know?”

“The position of the body and the amount of blood on the boulders is evidence that leads us to suspect homicide,” Corbin answered. “No money appears to have been stolen from Konrad’s purse. Now we’re scouring the exact location where the crime apparently took place.”

Adrienne needed a fundamental logistical fact. She asked for a description of the contents of Kyle’s video tape.

“I reviewed the final stages of the tape. The audio picked up sounds of matted twigs and tangled branches snapping, and a woman screaming, probably Konrad,” he hesitated, shaking his head. “But the video is too dark and fuzzy to clearly identify anyone.”

Her expression turned grim.

Corbin swung his hand in explanation. “Every tiny piece of the puzzle is a step forward. The sounds and images on the video indicate the high probability that a violent confrontation took place. It’s unlikely the quarrel was between Konrad and Williams, but we’re not certain. Murik’s view was completely obstructed.”

“The apparent homicide was a tragic turn of events,” Adrienne summarized. “The quality of life in Kirkville and surrounding communities has improved, but the rate of violent

crime increased last year. Do you think the homicide rate is even more vulnerable to another increase at this time?"

The sheriff cleared his throat. "The crime rate isn't perfectly predictable, as you know. It can go down one year and rise the next, with criminologists blaming everything from the local climate to the national economy to daily astrological forecasts. The sheriff's office must ferret out hard facts to successfully investigate real-world cases. We solve hundreds of cases every year. It's our job to bring guilty parties to justice. It's imperative that we neutralize the crime rate. The citizens of Kirkville won't tolerate anything less than a safe community."

Adrienne floundered for a moment. "Do you have any serious witnesses or suspects other than Williams?"

Corbin straightened his back. "At the present time, we do not. But we're in the earliest stages of the investigation. We're doing everything in our power to keep our streets and neighborhoods protected."

Adrienne's voice dropped. "Are deputies actively searching for a specific witness or suspect, or a particular weapon?"

The sheriff pinched his eyes. "I think you understand we're seeking every conceivable form of evidence, including statements from potential witnesses and suspects. Of course, we hope no other bodies are discovered. Killers are capable of making careless mistakes, like anyone else. They can do illogical things. We don't know what results a widespread investigation will yield until it's finished. But we intend to learn the identity and motivations of the guilty party."

"Do you think the guilty party is a stranger or an acquaintance of the victim?"

"We try to investigate as many legitimate leads as we can," Corbin exhaled. "At the moment, we're in the process of contacting the couple's relatives, friends and acquaintances. We're asking citizens in Kirkville who might know anything about the death to contact the sheriff's department. In addition, police officers in our investigative unit have instructions to scour the Pine Valley Trail."

"What are they doing there?"

"Based on information Williams gave sheriff's officials, they're responsible for finding definitive proof of a third party," Corbin said. "We don't accept unsolved cases as a final answer. We have to approach this case with enough determination to successfully protect the innocent. Williams says a white Caucasian man with dark hair assaulted him, presumably around the time Konrad was killed. He believes this assailant took the life of his girlfriend. We have to fully investigate every possibility."

Adrienne mulled over the sheriff's remarks. "If the loss of life resulted from murder, do you have any reason to suspect it was premeditated?"

"It's a sorry excuse, but the truth is we just haven't had enough time to find the culprit," Corbin said. "A psychopath might kill a person simply because he doesn't like him. To my way of thinking, that isn't very clever. Murder for profit is another matter. So is revenge. If this murder was planned, there must be a trail of evidence someplace."

"What about the scenario that Williams and Konrad got caught up in a full-blown argument that mushroomed out of control, that Williams invented a story to cover his tracks?"

"I can only reiterate that we're making every reasonable effort to investigate." The age lines on the sheriff's face seemed to deepen. "Without the benefit of autopsy results, it seems to me that Konrad appeared to have died from a traumatic blow to the head, possibly caused by contact with a mass of boulders located next to her body."

Corbin also pointed out that there were signs of a violent struggle. This detracted from the unlikely possibility that the death was purely accidental. In addition, Nick had told sheriff's investigators about the irate customer at the hair salon. But the man had failed to sign the customer log book at the new salon, and Nick hadn't gotten a straight-on look.

Short on time, Adrienne flipped back a few strands of hair and focused her eyes on her notes. She'd asked the sheriff

questions to the point that he was beginning to repeat himself. They both decided to call it quits. Adrienne plucked up her notepad, abruptly rose from her chair, thanked Corbin and headed for the door. On her way out she couldn't help thinking that Rachel hadn't seemed like the type who had ever asked for trouble. A spur-of-the-moment murder might have resulted from a squabble between Rachel and Nick. Yes, that was a possibility, Adrienne told herself. More likely, though, Corbin's hunch was correct and a vicious killer was still on the loose. Someone who had been watching. Someone who had preyed upon the young couple. Someone who had given Adrienne a weird feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Sheriff Lockhart stood inside the county medical examiner's laboratory with the door firmly closed behind him. He'd been detained after lunch by a traffic jam. With a proverbial mountain of paperwork on his desk, the sheriff didn't want to fall behind schedule. Although Corbin had received a hasty phone message from Kathy Nelson, the medical examiner, he wanted to examine Rachel's body himself. Nervous people were part of the realm of crime and law enforcement, and at this juncture Corbin was one of them. He choked out a sigh.

With preliminary test results held tightly in her hands, Kathy left her glass-walled office and greeted Corbin next to the examination table. Her cognitive thought processes reflected a combination of medical analysis and police calculation. Kathy paused a moment, then pulled back the white coroner's sheets. With consternation, Corbin observed dark bruises and long gashes on the victim's back, neck and head.

"How long was she dead?"

"Not very long," Kathy answered. "The body was still warm when it arrived."

Corbin arched his back. "Can you give me an estimate?"

"From my preliminary exam, I'd say an hour at most."

The sheriff and the coroner hypothesized that the assailant had worn work gloves. To Corbin's mindset, the random appearance of the wounds was a conventional argument against premeditated murder. It was certainly possible that Rachel had been killed in a spontaneous act of rage, judging from disheveled underbrush and traces of footprints near the body.

Kathy sighed. "The severe trauma could be interpreted as an indication she was shoved with a great deal of force. It's very unlikely she merely stumbled."

Corbin gazed at the victim's obvious physical endowments – skinny hips, good-looking face, silky hair. The whole thing was a shame, Corbin thought. The sheriff maintained his composure as Kathy slipped the white medical sheets back over Rachel's head.

"I doubt murder victims always know exactly how and why they were killed," Corbin observed.

The medical examiner rolled her eyes.

Kathy told Corbin she'd try to turn in her complete findings as soon as possible, and she escorted the sheriff to the door. The sheriff walked down the congested main hallway and out of the white-brick Texas County structure to his cruiser.

In the parking lot, he ran into Lorena Hurst, a deputy. "How did it go?" she asked, her russet hair flowing neatly from underneath her cap.

"A sad, frustrating story," Corbin exhaled heavily. "Early on, the questions outnumber the answers."

Lorena nodded, her long mouth and viscous lips slanting across her face. "No clear DNA match?"

"No clear evidence yet. Perhaps it's a personal vendetta. What do you think?"

"I'd say whoever the killer is, he got out of control."

"Not pre-meditated?"

Lorena wiped sweat from her forehead. "Probably not."

Corbin had to agree. "Let's get this case in better shape," he said. "I'm going to take a closer look at the crime scene. We

need better evidence for the crime lab. Would you mind watching the store while I'm gone?"

"No."

"Keep me updated."

The sheriff was in a hurry. She watched Corbin drop snugly into the front seat of his sheriff's cruiser. He started the engine and gripped the steering wheel.

Corbin pulled out of the parking lot, analyzing what little he had to go on. Driving toward the crime scene, he lifted his eyes from the black ribbon of highway. Along the route was a lakeside golf course, two campgrounds, a wide spectrum of country homes and farm properties interspersed with woodland. There were dozens of manufacturing plants, equipment yards, condominiums and small businesses. Abandoned buildings, brand-new industrial facilities, tract neighborhoods, and gas stations with convenience stores also populated the area.

In the early afternoon, through one canopy of shady treetops after another, Corbin watched the world roll by. He had a homicide to solve, a case that left him feeling like he'd been punched in the stomach.

Across Ponderosa Pine Road, which intersected Highway 38, was the well-maintained farm home of Norman and Cheryl Franklin. His mind jumped back in time. Norman and Cheryl were the young reporter's parents, and he knew that Mark and Adrienne had been in the general vicinity of the crime scene on the night of Rachel's death. Nothing for the sheriff to be suspicious about.

Next, Corbin gazed through a tangle of maple limbs at another farm property. Stan Welchpool's youngest son had decided to attend college in Nebraska, so he worked the farm fields alone. Again, nothing to arouse suspicion. The sheriff heaved a sigh, moved his foot to the brake pedal. He slowed down to gaze at a house. Behind a stand of trees was a blanched, wood-frame building. Although it resembled a long-forgotten boarding house, it was Vernon Nolan's farm property.

The sheriff exhaled deeply. Rumor had it the Nolan clan were a distinctly unusual bunch. Years ago, Vernon's wife had abandoned her husband and son, to the best of Corbin's recollection. Brenda had apparently flown the coop to a glamorous playground like Vegas, or maybe it was the Big Apple. Vernon and his only son, Jake, remained at the farmhouse, but Corbin assumed domestic disturbances had been the underlying cause of Brenda's disappearance. Perhaps the seemingly quiet farmhouse had been the scene of family violence. Corbin didn't know. The personal relationship between close family members, like a husband and wife, or a father and son, could suddenly take a sharp turn for the worse, even in middle-class Kirkville.

Corbin caught a glimpse of the old Nolan place. It was in a state of deterioration. It looked a little strange. It reminded the sheriff of old episodes of Rod Serling's Night Gallery. But a declining farm wasn't police evidence. Jake and Vernon hadn't bailed like Brenda, hadn't run away to a far-off place, like so many others who'd come and gone over the years. Corbin made a mental note. Perhaps there was more here than met the eye.

Farther back underneath the forest canopy, behind the Nolan farm, was the rural home of Charlie Travers, a reclusive man. He had a reputation as a binge drinker, a lost soul who disappeared for days on end. After drinking, he might black out and wake up in an unexpected place.

There were all kinds of rural properties around, not to mention the back roads and hiking paths. Up and down the shores of Crescent Lake, buttressing the wilderness, was a curious mix of tourist spots, residential homes, farm land, fishing cottages and thick underbrush. The combinations ranged from rural poverty to middle-class to well-to-do, depending on the location.

Corbin tightened his grip on the steering wheel, then checked his speedometer. About fifty-five miles per hour.

Maybe it was too much to expect a straightforward solution to a homicide case. A sheriff could never fully trust anyone, not

even himself. Over the years there'd been dips and rises in the numbers of crimes reported to the sheriff's office. The community had gone through good times and bad. The number of residents with criminal histories, with jail or prison records, was now easily tabulated. So were estimates of firearms in the county.

Sheriff Lockhart recalled a cop who told him years ago that the challenge for police was to arrest the guilty, not the innocent. Corbin couldn't assume that certain personality types were automatically suspects, as a handful of courtroom judges did. He couldn't jump to the conclusion that an unemployed war veteran on pain medication or a stoned high school kid with a bad reputation were under greater suspicion. The police couldn't arbitrarily put undesirables in jail. Cops couldn't assume that John Doe was likely to commit a crime in the future, or jump to the conclusion that Fred Flintstone had skeletons in the closet. A sheriff is supposed to serve the whole public, not simply hand out fines, he reasoned.

Most gun owners arrested for violent crimes were cleared of the charges. A law-abiding populace? For the most part, the majority of county residents obeyed the law. Even citizens living in neighborhoods with high crime rates.

And in this case, Corbin had no evidence of a weapon. A hard shove down the steep slope of the hill might have comprised Rachel's final moments.

The clock was always ticking, relentlessly. The sheriff hated to waste time. His plan for tomorrow would be to remind the deputies at the office. Any number of residents might be able to shed some light on the tragic events of Friday night, the sheriff told the dispatcher on the police radio.

"No two cases are exactly the same," Corbin advised, fear tugging at his chest. "This one's going to take some getting used to."

The sheriff concentrated on the road ahead. However, he was growing tired, feeling the onset of fatigue and a tension

headache. This was a reason to quickly stop at a drugstore on his way back.

"Any hunches?" the dispatcher broke in.

"No, not yet," Corbin responded. But he didn't fully accept his own words. "This might be a nut with a personal vendetta, a tale of vengeance."

How long this might take was uncertain. Corbin knew he had work to do. He checked his wristwatch, groaned to himself. He pushed down on the gas pedal.

The sheriff was thankful for the mild weather. He needed to examine the crime scene in daylight, before another set of circumstances took him away. He'd agreed to meet Deputy Reggie, plus the two reporters. Adrienne had phoned back, saying she'd neglected to get important information about Nick. Since the sheriff was engrossed in the case, it was the only opportunity she'd have to interview him before the deadline.

Corbin approximated the spot where the victim's body was discovered. It was cordoned off with yellow police tape. In the overgrowth of vines and foliage, there was no explicitly marked trail. "There's sort of a path of ripped branches and damaged underbrush," said Corbin, marching forward.

"What's this?" Adrienne asked.

"Minor debris from an apparent scuffle, leading to the rock outcropping where Konrad died, hypothetically speaking."

Adrienne and Mark gathered in the tranquil shade. "Last night, I said there might be a stalker on the loose. I thought it was a clever remark, not a shocking coincidence," Adrienne admitted to Corbin and Reggie. "As you know, Mark is a product of the local farm community. Purely as a safety precaution, he drove me back home before the hour grew too late."

Deputy Brinkman asked if they knew anything else.

"Don't ask me who or what that was Friday night," Mark said. "All sorts of creatures, big and small, scuttle up and down the

shores of Buchanan Bay and the Blue River. Including people. But at least we have a lower crime rate than a lot of places. We don't have backed-up toll roads, massive power outages, major earthquakes or severe hurricanes."

Adrienne interrupted, repeating that before they'd left the observation point they ran into the stranger who offered to give them a lift.

"It may have been a Godsend that Adrienne was concerned," Mark supported. "Apparently, I underestimated the level of crime here."

"Sheriff, we need more background about what Konrad and Williams were doing at the lake," Adrienne said.

Corbin was preoccupied with conjecture running through his mind, but he took the time to fill them in. "Aside from vacationing, the couple planned to visit Nick's brother. He lives in River Heights, and they were going to meet him for dinner at his place early next week. As I understand it, they'd visited the area on two previous occasions, stayed at a Days Inn near Kirksville and the Huntingdon in Fulton. They'd already visited tourist hangouts like the casino. This was their first time alone on community waterways, their first stay at the Lakeview."

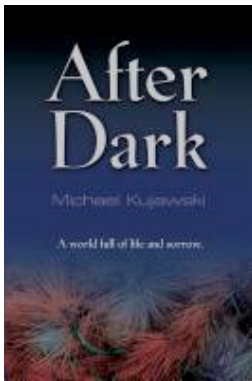
The sheriff stepped up to a massive boulder sticking out of the ground, one of many remnants of the Ice Age. Corbin examined a splatter of dried blood on the rock's hard surface.

"What a shame," Reggie gulped. After a long moment, the deputy said Nick had dropped out of the University of Iowa after his freshman year. It had something to do with drug and alcohol abuse. He'd played one season on the freshman football team, a walk-on at wide receiver. He spent a year at home, working for a construction contractor. Then he resurfaced with his girlfriend at the University of Kansas.

"It turns out Konrad's father is a business executive in Kansas City," Reggie said. "He sells sophisticated machine parts for Kellogg. Last night at the station, Williams complained Konrad's father never spent much quality time with her."

With a burst of static, the dispatcher came over Reggie's walkie-talkie. It was a report of a domestic disturbance at a residence in Waldwick, a barely noticeable hamlet along the highway in between Kirkville and the scene of death. The sheriff dispatched a deputy to check it out.

Mark and Adrienne decided to return to the newspaper office. Out in the field, they experienced a tinge of fear. The workday hours were slipping past. Their last memories were of the sheriff searching the crime scene for footprints, his eyes fixed to the ground.



After Dark combines elements of a thrilling detective story and a modern romance tale. Unforgettable characters come to grips with critical issues in their personal lives. Noteworthy are the connections between the local news media and the global village, between the pleasant community and unexpected crime. With literary humor and sober insight, the narrative follows the fast pace of modern society. *After Dark* is a world full of life and sorrow.

After Dark

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