

PROLOGUE



SHE SENSES DANGER EVEN BEFORE SHE HEARS THE SOUND. It's a gorgeous morning, cloudless and just cool enough, perfect for a run. She left the house eager to be on the road, especially after skipping the day before.

But it seems weirdly quiet to her, quieter than it should be. The few houses she passes sit forlornly, their windows dark, and so far she hasn't encountered a single car or cyclist. Just up ahead there are woods on each side, and though the wind is moving through the tree leaves—she can *see* it—she can't hear the rustling. It's as if someone has turned off all the sound today, except that of her footfalls on the blacktop. And her breathing.

Her body feels off, too. She's been jogging for a mile, her white T-shirt already damp with sweat, and it's usually by this point that the endorphins have kicked in, or whatever it is that creates that floating, free-form sense of calm and elation she always runs to meet.

But elation hasn't happened. Rather, she feels a low-grade

unease, almost like a hum. An unexplainable instinct that she shouldn't be here on this road—this usually serene, peaceful place—at this exact moment in time.

I should turn back, she thinks. She's only done that once before, when she couldn't massage away a cramp in her calf muscle. She'd hobbled home, annoyed at herself for not having stretched enough beforehand, and held an ice pack to her leg. Within minutes the cramp had vanished and she'd deliberated going out again, but it seemed as if her chance had come and gone.

Yes, go home, she tells herself. Trust your gut. She'll run later, when people are home from work and out in their yards.

It's then that she hears the car come up behind her. She sidesteps to the left a little, still running, waiting for it to pass. But it doesn't. Instead, the car slows, as if *following* her. An image flashes in her mind of a mountain lion, stalking its prey, closing on its kill from the rear.

The driver's just worried about hitting me, she tells herself. She turns her head to see. But already her heart is pounding in fear.

CHAPTER I



THE PHOTO OF SHANNON BLAINE I'D COME ACROSS ON the website for her area newspaper reminded me of a woman I used to see running on my block in Chelsea, on her way to the west side jogging path: slim and fit and pretty, with long butter-colored hair, and—if appearances could be believed—totally at ease in her own skin.

On a warmish Monday morning in late September, Shannon had apparently set off for a jog along a series of roads near her home in Lake George, New York, a small town thirteen miles from Glens Falls and roughly two hundred miles north of New York City. Running was something she did most days, her me-time, I supposed, after dropping her two kids off at school.

Except, on this day, she never returned.

Here's what else I knew from the reading I'd done about the case: The first time anyone realized the thirty-four-year-old mother had vanished was at three o'clock, when she failed to collect her kids from school. The assistant principal, assum-

ing that the parents simply had their wires crossed about who was handling pickup that day, alerted the husband, Cody Blaine, thirty-seven. No mix-up, Cody told her. Though he said he hadn't spoken to Shannon since breakfast, he knew she planned to be there. After reportedly trying and failing to reach his wife himself, he arranged for his sister-in-law to head to the school as he raced home from his office. The front door was locked, Shannon's car was in the driveway, and though her cell phone was missing, her purse lay on the kitchen counter. There was not a single clue to indicate her whereabouts.

Along with two friends, Cody searched the roads within a roughly ten-mile radius of his home—this was later verified by the two male friends. Failing to find Shannon, Cody alerted the sheriff's department. Shortly afterward, an official search was initiated, which as of today, Wednesday, involved dozens of law enforcement members, hundreds of volunteers, police choppers, and also canines.

I'd covered several other cases in which a woman had gone missing, so I knew law enforcement was not only busting their butts searching for Shannon but also questioning registered sex offenders in the area. Sexual predators were known to patrol areas in cars for hours, hunting for an opportunity to strike, and one such predator could have spotted Shannon on the road while she was jogging and snatched her before she barely knew what was happening.

And surely they were also checking out Cody. Was he a womanizer? Had he recently doubled Shannon's life insurance policy? Was there a history of domestic troubles or abuse?

Cody, according to the paper, had only a partial alibi for Monday morning. After dropping off some paperwork with his assistant at his office, he supposedly drove about thirty minutes south to inspect a plot of land he was thinking of purchasing for his business. No one saw him on that site, but his assistant reported that he had called her twice from the road to touch base about work issues and had sounded “perfectly normal.”

It’s true what you’ve heard, by the way. That the husband is almost always a person of interest in a wife’s disappearance and/or homicide, even if the cops don’t announce it. Maybe Cody had a temper or was having an affair with someone he’d managed to find even more tantalizing than Shannon and he knew that divorce would cost him a bundle or end up restricting access to his kids. Or a divorce might have even required that he step down from his position as president of Baker Beverage Distributors, which Shannon’s deceased father had founded and designated his son-in-law to run. There was a decent chance Cody had blood on his hands.

Or at the very least, blood in the trunk of his car.

I’d been handed the chance to cover the story on Tuesday night by a new online publication called *Crime Beat*. It was owned and run by a cocksure former journalist named Dodson Crowe, who’d inherited a bundle from his father and was using the cash to call his own shots now. I was impressed with the un-cheesy tone and quality of the site, and when Crowe had approached me, I’d eagerly agreed to freelance for him if the right story presented itself.

It had taken me about two seconds to say yes to this one.

“If we’re lucky, it’ll have a few nice layers,” Crowe had said on the phone. “Maybe not as crazy as *Gone Girl*, but there might be something weird or kinky going on. Especially with the husband.”

Yes, maybe, I thought. But I never believed in letting my imagination off the leash too soon on a story. Better to dig, listen, and see where all the threads led me to instead.

I’d spent a few hours that night scanning upstate media coverage of the case, much of it in the area newspaper, the *Glens Falls Post Star*, by a reporter named Alice Hatfield, though the Albany area TV stations were in on the action as well and had posted updates on their websites. I also watched a video of the press conference the county sheriff had conducted earlier that day, and searched for whatever I could find out about Cody Blaine, which turned out to be very little. He was originally from Texas and had served with the army in Afghanistan.

Finally, I searched to see if there’d been any other incidents of missing women in the area. Nothing noteworthy surfaced. About ten years ago, two twenty-year-old females had disappeared from a campground on the east side of Lake George, but the police never found any evidence of a crime and eventually concluded that they’d likely taken off for parts unknown in search of their next big adventure.

I left my apartment in Manhattan early Wednesday morning after espressos and bagels with Beau Regan, the man I’d been living with—mostly high on the blissful scale—for the past couple of years. (At thirty-six, I felt kind of goofy calling him my “boyfriend.”) Beau was also leaving the city

later that day, bound for Bogotá, Colombia, to make a documentary about several contemporary Colombian painters. I was going to miss him, and I welcomed the distraction of my assignment upstate. We kissed each other goodbye and hugged tightly before I left, promising to text each other when we'd both arrived at our destinations.

The drive north in my Jeep Cherokee, mostly along the New York State Thruway, took roughly four hours, and I found myself growing more pumped up with each mile. My first job after college, fourteen years ago, had actually been as a junior reporter for the *Albany Times Union*, an hour south of where I was headed. I'd been assigned to the police beat, covering everything from drug busts to hit-and-runs to homicides. From that time on, true crime became my genre of choice. I've never understood exactly why, but I'm drawn to tales of the dark things people do, fascinated by how needs turn twisted and monstrous and end up wreaking such havoc. And the puzzles of those stories captivate me, too—figuring out the who and the where and the how and the why. I have an insatiable desire to know, even if the answers sometimes chill my blood a few degrees.

After a stint in newspapers, I moved to Manhattan and began writing for magazines, but with print publications in free fall these days, I'd turned to writing true-crime books, most recently *A Model Murder*, based on one of the cases I'd covered. Though reporting for *Crime Beat* called for temporarily ditching the research for my next book, it also meant covering a story in real time again, something I hadn't done much of lately. As the scenery whipped by my window, I

realized just how much I'd missed it. The game was afoot, and it felt good to be in the mix.

What I didn't love was the fact that I'd be arriving two full days after Shannon had disappeared, but I had every intention of catching up fast. And with any luck, the story would feature the kind of riveting layers Dodson was itching for.

A big chunk of the route north was fairly monotonous, but about twenty minutes from the end, I took a curve in the road and the Adirondack Mountains suddenly slid into view, these blue-green giants that made me catch my breath. During my stint in Albany I'd never managed to make it this far north, which I could see now was a shame. Since it was only late September, the trees hadn't changed colors yet, but many of the leaves were tipped with yellow and rust, and some of the tangled brush below was already vivid shades of burgundy and lipstick red.

As I neared the village of Lake George, I finally caught a glimpse of the lake, the lapis-blue water sparkling in the sun. But I probably wasn't going to see much of it today. My immediate destination was the hastily organized volunteer command center, a.k.a. Dot's soft-serve ice cream shop, which apparently had closed for business after Labor Day. I abandoned the highway at exit twenty-one and continued north on Route 9N.

It was noon when I finally pulled into the parking lot at Dot's, and I was lucky to find a spot—the place was packed with cars, vans, SUVs, and pickup trucks. Even with my window up I could hear the insistent buzz of a helicopter circling in the sky above. Instantly I felt a double dopamine

rush from simply being there. I was smack in the middle of a missing-persons case that was packed with not only known unknowns but hopefully some tantalizing *unknown* unknowns as well.

Before stepping out of my Jeep, I stole a couple of minutes to suss out the scene at the far end of the lot. Volunteer centers for missing-person searches, at least from my experience, were generally set up in church basements, hotels, or volunteer firehouses, any space big enough to handle the swarm of people coming and going. A soft-serve ice cream shop was a pretty surreal choice—I mean, there was a giant chocolate-dipped cone with two eyes and a smile greeting everyone from above the door—but the place reportedly had been offered by a friend of Shannon’s family.

I counted a half-dozen people inside the shop, and about thirty more milling around near the front of the building, under an overhang with cedar picnic tables arranged beneath it. They were dressed in jeans and sturdy-looking shoes, and for the most part their expressions were grim. Searchers, I assumed, who would be covering a broader area than had first been examined by authorities.

Of course that assumed Shannon actually *had* gone running Monday. At the press conference yesterday, the sheriff explained that Shannon’s oldest child, an eight-year-old boy named Noah, told authorities that when his mother dropped him and his six-year-old sister, Lilly, at school, she’d been wearing a white T-shirt, dark shorts, and running shoes, and Cody Blaine had reported that those items weren’t in her dresser. But so far the authorities had failed to locate a single

person who'd noticed Shannon on the road that morning. According to the owner of the Lake Shore Motel, who was interviewed by the *Post Star*, Shannon Blaine crossed the road in front of his establishment every day—but not this past Monday. He claimed to have turned over security camera footage to the police that backed up his statement.

Had Shannon changed her route for some reason? Had she been abducted before making it as far as the motel? Or had she never actually left her house for a run that day?

I squinted through my windshield, searching for anyone I might recognize from photos I'd viewed online. Cody Blaine didn't appear to be here. Nor was Shannon's mother. But I was pretty sure that a woman beneath the overhang was her older sister, Kelly Claiborne, who, I'd learned, worked as a reading specialist. As I watched, she yanked a handful of sheets of paper from a cardboard box and began to distribute them. I realized that the people gathered around weren't searchers after all but rather volunteers who would soon be tacking up or handing out flyers about Shannon.

It was time to get my ass in gear and cover as much ground as possible before the next press conference, scheduled for five o'clock.

When I swung open the door of my Jeep, I found that the air, laden with the scent of resin from the pine trees all around me, seemed about ten degrees cooler than it had been in Manhattan, a bigger change than I'd anticipated. I felt suddenly stupid in my pink cashmere tee, tan skirt, and suede mules. But I certainly wasn't going to take the time to drive to my motel to check in and change.

I grabbed a jean jacket from the back seat and made my way toward Kelly. She had long hair like her sister, though hers was brown, and pulled back today in a ponytail. She was tall—at least five ten—and fairly slim, dressed in jeans, running shoes, and a zipped navy sweater. From a distance, her stance and decisive-looking gestures gave her the look of someone organizing a political rally, but as I drew closer, I could see from her pinched expression how distressed she was.

“Who wants to head up to Ticonderoga?” she called out, waving a fresh stack of flyers. Next to her was a box loaded with thumbtacks.

“I can take that area if you want,” a middle-aged guy volunteered. “You want me to just tack these to trees and stuff?”

“Trees, utility poles. But even better is getting them into shops and restaurants. That’s where the real traffic is.”

“Gotcha.”

“Talk to the manager or owner, engage them. Tell them about Shannon if they don’t know already. Encourage them to call if they’ve seen anyone remotely fitting her description.”

She had a real no-nonsense style and a precise way with her words, perhaps reflecting how she worked with her reading students.

I hung back, waiting for Kelly to go through the procedure with a couple dozen people. After the last one departed, she let out a tense sigh and I stepped forward.

“Kelly, hi, my name is Bailey Weggins.”

She ran her gaze over me, somewhat distractedly.

“Great, thanks for coming,” she said. “But do you have any other shoes? Those are gonna be a bitch to canvass in.”

“I’m actually a reporter. With *Crime Beat*. I was hoping you had a few minutes to talk.”

“Is that a TV show?”

“No, an online publication. We want to cover the story, of course, but we’re interested in getting the word out about Shannon as well.”

She scrunched up her mouth and nodded at the same time, one gesture almost contradicting the other. I assumed she had mixed feeling about doing interviews. They took up time she could be using to corral and organize volunteers, but she was also eager for Shannon’s image to be displayed as widely as possible.

“Give me a couple of minutes. I need to check in with a few people inside, and then we can talk.”

I thanked her, and as she hurried into the building, I plucked a flyer from the box. The word *Missing* ran boldly in red above two color photos of Shannon, both solo, which captured her gorgeous blond hair and grass-green eyes. At the very bottom was a promise of a reward—\$15,000 for any information leading to her whereabouts—as well as the tip-line phone number and email address.

“Well, well,” I heard a sly male voice announce behind me. “Look who’s in town.”

I spun around to discover Matt Wong, an obnoxious reporter who was now doing his own stint at the *Albany Times Union*. He’d recently taken a gig there after years of freelancing in New York City, where we’d sometimes crossed paths. I should have known he’d turn up here.

“Hi, Matt. How you doing?”

“Really, really well. . . . Shannon’s not a friend of Kim’s, is she?”

“Kim?” I asked, having no clue what he was talking about.

“*Kardashian*. I thought you only reported crime stories when there was a celebrity hook.”

He just couldn’t resist making a dig, could he? It was as natural to him as swallowing.

“Oh, come on, Matt. You know I don’t work for *Buzz* anymore.”

A few years back I’d covered celebrity crimes for one of those weekly tabloid magazines, the kind that features heart-stopping headlines like “JLo Suffers Spray Tan Tragedy.” I know, what the hell was I thinking? But I needed the paycheck.

Wong gave a playful shrug.

“That’s right, thanks for the correction. You’re an *author* now. Thinking of turning this little story into your next book?”

“I’d tell you,” I said. “But then I’d have to kill you. How’s your new job going?”

“Great, they love me there.”

“Good to know. Anything you can tell me about the situation here?”

“You mean, do I think the husband did it? Probably. But you’re getting a little bit of a late start on the story, aren’t you, Bailey?”

“Oh, you know what they say, Matt. It’s not where you start, it’s where you finish.”

Jeez, I was on a roll with the comebacks, wasn't I? If crime writing fell through, I might be able to find work as a mug writer. At that moment, thankfully, Kelly slipped out of the building and cocked her chin in a gesture that indicated she was ready for me.

"Oops," I said. "Gotta run. Talk to you later."

"Just remember, sometimes even the sweetest-looking sisters hate each other's guts."

With Matt, it was always hard to tell if a comment like that was a friendly tip from one reporter to another or a red herring meant to throw you off the real scent. I ignored him and hurried toward Dot's.

As I reached the building, the small bunch of people who'd been inside began to file out. The last, a middle-aged, barrel-chested man with shiny black hair, held the door for us.

"I'm gonna grab a sandwich," he told Kelly. "Be back in about twenty."

"Thanks, Hank." She motioned for me to enter ahead of her.

"I didn't mean for you to have to chase everyone out," I told her. "But I appreciate the chance to talk."

"I actually have no clue what anyone besides Hank is doing hanging in here," she said, quickly tugging the elastic from her ponytail. She smoothed her hair tightly in place and then wound the elastic back around it. "They're supposed to be finding Shannon, not gossiping like a bunch of ninth graders. Sit wherever you want, okay?"

At first glance, Dot's looked to me like it'd been designed during the JFK administration and not touched since. As

Kelly and I both slid into seats at a metal table, strewn with flyers and used cardboard coffee cups, I took a better look at her. She was a fairly attractive woman, sharing some key features with Shannon—the green eyes, strong straight nose, and high cheekbones—but they hadn't come together in the same stunning way. It made me think of shots I'd seen in *Buzz* of celebrity brothers and sisters who bore a strong resemblance to their famous siblings but had not been tapped by the remarkable-beauty fairy themselves.

"I know the police have an intense search going on," I began. "Anything turn up today?"

She quickly shook her head. "Not yet, no. And that's why we need to get the word out further. So that if anyone spots Shannon, they'll call the tip line. You can run the number in your story, correct?"

"Of course. When was the last time you spoke to Shannon?"

"I called her Sunday night, around seven o'clock."

"Did the two of you talk about anything in particular?"

"I was just asking her to drop off dinner for our mother the next day. It's usually my turn on Mondays, but my husband was out of town, so I was the only one who could go to my daughter's soccer game that afternoon."

I couldn't help but pick up on the odd flatness to Kelly's tone. Maybe staying detached was helping her cope with her sister's disappearance. Maybe stress and fear had bled all the emotion out of her voice. Or maybe I was seeing a hint of what Matt Wong had alluded to.

"And there's still no sign of Shannon's phone, right?"

“No. And they can’t get a signal because it’s off or out of power.”

“I read there was at least one call on Monday morning but the police haven’t been able to contact the woman.”

“That would be J. J. Rimes. Shannon’s cell phone records show Shannon spoke to her that morning, but apparently J.J. left later in the day for a camping trip in the Adirondacks and no one’s been able to reach her.”

“Does that seem like an odd coincidence?” It sure did to me. “Both of them gone the same day?”

“Not necessarily. J.J.’s ex-husband says she told him about the trip a while ago because she needed him to take the kids. . . . Here’s what my family and I think—that Shannon’s probably injured. That she might have fallen when she was running and hit her head and she’s now walking around in some kind of fugue state.”

That was a possibility, of course, though it seemed like a really slim one.

“If that’s the case, let’s hope the searchers find her soon,” I said, nodding sympathetically. “Shifting gears a little, had Shannon mentioned any concerns to you lately? About someone watching her or following her?”

“Definitely not. Stuff like that doesn’t happen in a place like this.”

“Being a mom can be stressful. Is there any chance that things became overwhelming for her? That she needed to escape for a while?”

The question clearly annoyed Kelly—I could read it in her eyes—but she took a breath, tamping down her irritation.

“I know you’re just doing your job asking that,” she said, “but it’s totally off the mark. Shannon loves her kids and would never abandon them, even for a short time.”

“She’s a stay-at-home mom?”

“Basically, yes. She stopped working full-time when the kids were born. She wanted to take them to school, make unicorn-colored cupcakes for their birthday parties. That sort of thing.”

I wasn’t sure why exactly, but something about the cupcakes comment came off like a tiny dig to me.

“And her marriage—how’s that?”

“It seems fine. Cody runs our family company, and my father—Stan—left it in brilliant shape. They have a nice life.”

Hardly a ringing endorsement of her brother-in-law.

“Do—”

“Like I said, we think Shannon could be injured and requiring immediate medical help. She loves the outdoors, but that doesn’t mean she can cope if she’s broken a leg. Fortunately, I’ve been able to take off work to help, but my family needs as many people as we can get to assist with the search.”

“Speaking of your family, it would be great if I could speak with your mother.”

That elicited another hard shake of the head.

“She’s not up to speaking to anyone at the moment.”

I sensed I was starting to press my luck with Kelly and decided to back off for now. After all, I’d want the chance to circle back to her later.

“I’ll let you return to your work here, but before we finish, what’s the best way for people to help?”

“They can check the sheriff’s website each day, or stop by here to see where the searchers are meeting. If searching outside is too strenuous for them, they can pick up flyers here to distribute to restaurants and businesses. They can reach out to me or Hank Coulter, who’s running our volunteer operation. He’s the former chief of police here in town.”

“Great, I’ll definitely include that information in my article. And if anything else occurs to you, I’d love to hear from you.” I reached in my shoulder bag for a business card, and as I slid it across the table to her, I heard the front door swing open with a whoosh.

Cody Blaine had just entered the building.

He was as handsome as his photos suggested, about five ten and well-built. His hair and eyes were dark brown, but his skin was extremely fair, creating an intriguing contrast. He wore his beard and mustache close-cropped, and despite how ragged he looked today, there was a worldly air about him. Maybe that came from serving time in Afghanistan.

I turned back to Kelly and saw her shoulders tensing before my eyes.

“Hi,” she said bluntly. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to check in before I join the next search,” Cody said. “They’re organizing something closer to the lake, starting in about fifteen minutes.”

“Why *there*?” Kelly demanded. “Do they have a reason?”

“No, simply a next step.” If Kelly’s tone irked him, he wasn’t letting on.

“Where are the kids right now?”

“With your in-laws.”

I'd risen by this point and taken a few steps toward Cody.

"Cody, hello, I'm Bailey Weggins with *Crime Beat*," I said, offering him a business card as well. "Can I grab a few minutes with you before you leave? We're planning to do whatever we can to spread the word."

"Sorry," he said. "I'll be part of a search line, and I need to leave at the same time as everyone else."

"How about later today?"

He sighed wearily. "Okay."

"I'm staying at the Breezy Point, so it would be easy enough to drop by your house."

"No, I'll swing by here after the search is over, sometime around dusk." His expression darkened. I had the feeling he was going to add a comment like "Unless we hear news," but decided to skip it.

"Thanks, I'll wait for you here. And best of luck with the search."

This was good. I would be able to include quotes from Cody in the post I filed later today. And I'd also be able to work with whatever the sheriff coughed up at the press conference later in the afternoon. Anything else would be gravy.

After the door closed behind him, I pivoted back to Kelly. Her face was a blank, but I could almost feel hostility coming off her, like heat from a stove. I opened my mouth to bid her goodbye when the door opened again and a sandy-haired, fortysomething guy—a volunteer, I assumed—strode in. He immediately fixed his gaze on me.

"Are you about finished?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" I said.

“I’m Dr. Claiborne, Kelly’s husband, and I think she’s done enough press for today.”

“Doug, please, it’s fine,” Kelly said.

“Not a problem,” I said. No point in rocking the boat. As I took him in, I saw that he was nice-looking enough, but nowhere in the same league as his brother-in-law. He had what to me was a Ken-doll blandness, but hey, some women dug that kind of thing. Clearly Barbie did, right? “Thanks for your time, Kelly.”

There were still a few hours until the press conference, so I made a quick trip to the Breezy Point Motel, which I’d booked online last night and was only two miles north of Dot’s. My room had been done in classic Adirondack style—rough-hewn wood furniture, birch-bark lampshades, and mounted deer antlers over the door, a kitschy but refreshing change from the mauve-and-green color schemes and Naugahyde chairs I’m used to in the motels and hotels I usually bunk down in for work. There were even some cute toiletries in the bathroom.

I changed into jeans and wolfed down a sandwich I’d packed in a small cooler. I considered making a fast trip to the local elementary school to see if I could talk to any moms who were there for pickup and might know Shannon, but it seemed smarter to save that for tomorrow morning and instead keep an eye on the action at the volunteer center.

Upon my return, I saw that Hank was back in the building, thumbing through papers on one of the tables. I headed over and introduced myself, handing him a card. As I did, I realized that his jet-black hair, which was either defying age on its own or with some help from Grecian Formula, had led

me to assume he was younger than he was. He had to be close to sixty, though overall in good shape.

“You come all the way up here from the city?” he asked.

“That’s right.”

“Well, I bet the networks aren’t far behind, are they?”

“You’re probably right. Do you have any theories about what might have happened to Shannon?”

He smiled but not the kind that fell into the super-friendly department. “I’d like to help you, Ms. Weggins, but I’m just here to supervise volunteers. That’s really a question for the sheriff. Why don’t you ask him at the press conference?”

“Fair enough. Kelly mentioned you’re a retired cop. Has anything remotely similar happened here in recent memory?”

“I haven’t been on the force in five years, so as I said, it’s best to direct those kinds of questions to the sheriff.” His phone buzzed, and he checked the screen. “Sorry, but I’m gonna have to take this. Hank Coulter.”

Okay, so *that* was a bust. I left him to his phone call and set up shop on the hood of my Jeep. As volunteers came and went, collecting flyers or reporting to Kelly or Coulter, I managed to snag a few dozen of them for comments. They seemed to be a mix of stay-at-home moms, retirees, and employees from Baker Beverage whom Cody had given the day off to help in the search. Almost everyone seemed eager to offer their two cents, but no one I encountered claimed to know Shannon more than casually, though many pointed out that she seemed “perfectly lovely.” It was pretty clear that the situation had most of them seriously alarmed, particularly the women.

Just after four, the action began to heat up, clearly in anticipation of the press conference. Several Albany-area network TV vans rumbled into the parking lot and reporters spilled out, smoothing their clothes and fluffing their hair. Matt Wong resurfaced, too.

I snaked my way through the crowd of press, lingering volunteers, and what appeared to be good old-fashioned rubberneckers, and grabbed a spot close to the front. I was surprised to see that the sheriff's department hadn't yet set up a podium, so there was no place for the TV and radio crews to position their microphones. In fact, there was no sign of *anyone* from the sheriff's office.

At two minutes to five we found out why. A sole member of the sheriff's team, a female deputy, arrived and announced to the crowd that the press conference was being postponed until 10:00 a.m. tomorrow. She then hurried off without taking any questions.

There'd been a development, I realized, maybe something big, but they weren't telling us. I glanced inside Dot's. Hank was on the phone, his face expressionless, and Kelly was stuffing flyers back into a box. At least for the time being, they were as out of the loop as the rest of us.

Since I'd signed up to receive automatic news alerts from the sheriff's department, I'd hear eventually if anything major had gone down. But this meant that I'd have zip from law enforcement for the post tonight. I breathed a sigh of relief that I at least had my interview with Cody coming up.

As the media vehicles departed with a roar, I parked

myself against my Jeep again, nursing a bottle of lukewarm water and watching the daylight fade. There were still a few volunteers milling around, but eventually they took off, as well. And so did Hank and Kelly, locking the door of Dot's behind them.

I was alone in the lot now, accompanied by nothing except the sound of cars whizzing behind me on Route 9N. Finally the truth smacked me in the head. Cody was a no-show.

Damn.

The only thing I could think of at this point was to head to his house and see if he'd talk to me there, which would also provide my first chance to see part of Shannon's usual jogging route. I'd already programmed my GPS with the family address on Wheeler Road, which ran between Route 9 and Route 9N.

The area turned out to be heavily wooded, with homes set far apart. I'd seen the word *successful* used to describe Cody Blaine in the news coverage, and the house at 192 Wheeler backed that up. It was a large modern design of glass, stone, and what appeared to be cedar, set fairly far back on the quiet road, with woods rising behind it in the rear. The only light was the one burning just above the front door. Maybe Cody was picking up the kids at Kelly's in-laws. Or perhaps he wasn't staying here at all, avoiding the press who'd show up if they knew he was in residence.

Odd, though, that no one would be stationed at the house in case Shannon staggered home in that fugue state her family had envisioned.

I pulled into the Blaine driveway, backed out, and headed toward Route 9N. Wheeler Road had a fairly wide shoulder, and it was easy to envision Shannon running here, breathing in the crisp air, thinking about how to decorate the next batch of cupcakes she'd make for her kids.

And then, rounding a bend, I *saw* her. A woman in dark shorts and a white T-shirt, streaking up the road in the same direction I was going. Even in the waning light I couldn't miss her long blond hair, tied in a ponytail and bouncing hard behind her with each step.

It was Shannon Blaine. And it looked as if she was running for her life.

HARPER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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