

THE
13TH
VICTIM

Prologue

July 1996

Run, Run, Run.

Annie Garrett stumbled through the woods, slapping at tree branches that tugged her hair and scratched her face and arms. Her lungs burned; her heart jackhammered. Her chest felt as if it would explode. Annie's body screamed in protest as she pushed it beyond the limits of its endurance. She had no idea how long she'd been running or in what direction—it didn't matter. She was free.

But what about Heather?

Don't think about her. It's too late. There's nothing you can—

Annie cried out as she tripped over a tree root, hitting the ground hard and scraping her knees and palms. She lay there, heart thudding, the wind knocked out of her. She tried to pull herself up, but after five days with no food and little water or sleep, she couldn't make her arms and legs work. Her vision blurred. She swallowed hard and tasted blood. Chest heaving, she rolled over and glanced around. Dark, so dark—no moon to light her way. He could be anywhere and she'd never see him. How close was he? How long had it been since she'd escaped that godforsaken house?

He had shown Heather and Annie his collection of scalpels and knives, and the freezer and rows of jars that held his evil trophies. He had pointed at the two empty jars that had their names on them.

She squeezed her eyes shut as tears slid down her bloodied cheeks. An image sliced through her brain, sharp as the butcher knife he'd poised over Heather's chest. Annie stifled a sob remembering her friend, screaming, crying, pleading for mercy from a monster that would show none.

That's when Annie bolted.

Guilt tore at her heart because instead of grabbing one of the knives or scalpels and stabbing him, she'd left Heather there to die.

Oh God, I'm sorry, Heather. Please forgive me. I'm just so damned scared.

A sound made Annie jerk her head to the left. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She held her breath, listening, but couldn't hear anything over her own roaring pulse.

Get up! Keep moving!

She wouldn't end up like Heather and the others. She would survive. She drew a ragged breath, and the scent of rotting leaves and damp earth filled her lungs. Staggering to her feet, Annie willed herself to put one foot in front of the other.

Maybe she should find a place to hide—even for a little while, so she could rest. She could crawl beneath the branches of one of the evergreens. He wouldn't find her there. She needed time to think, time to plan. Maybe she could find the road, flag down a passing motorist. Maybe—

Annie screamed as his strong arm slid around her neck. He jerked her backwards, lifting her feet off the ground.

"Please, no, no, no." Sobbing, she struggled, but her arms felt heavy and useless.

He raised the knife.

An owl hooted overhead.

"Good-bye, sweet Annie," he whispered in her ear.

Chapter 1

December 2014

"All right you two, better hurry." Kate Turner glanced at the clock over the stove as she grabbed the gallon of milk and carton of orange juice from the table and put them in the fridge. "The bus will be coming soon."

"I'll be glad when school is out," seven-year-old Ben muttered, his bottom lip jutting out. He chugged the last of his milk and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "How long till Christmas vacation?"

Nine-year-old Rachel rolled her eyes. "Uh, you ask that question every day."

"That's because it changes every day," Ben shot back.

Smiling, Kate leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Three more weeks, buddy."

Still sulking, Ben grabbed the box of dog biscuits from the pantry. He opened the back door, and a blast of frigid air blew into the kitchen as Pongo, Apollo, and Sparky, all pups from a litter Kate had rescued a year earlier, came barreling into the kitchen.

Hard to believe those wiggling little balls of fur already weighed around ninety pounds. So much for Doc Everly's opinion that the dogs he called "a duke's mixture" wouldn't get much over fifty pounds. Each sat and waited as Ben doled out their morning treat. Chomping on them, the dogs trotted, tails wagging, to their corner of the kitchen and lay down.

The back door opened again and Kate's grandmother, Maggie Waters, stepped inside. "Shaping up to be a miserable day. Not supposed to get above thirty." She toed off her shoes and left them by the door. "I'm glad I installed that heater in the garage."

"Figure out what's wrong with the Corvette?" Kate asked over her shoulder.

"Nah. That old car has got me stumped." Gran shook her head as she shrugged off her heavy jacket and hung it over the back of a chair. "I may

have to give in and take it over to Ozzie Miller's place to have it checked out."

"Can I help you work on it after school?" Ben asked.

"I was hoping you would." Gran ruffled his dark hair. "Maybe you can figure out what's wrong with the darn thing."

"Okay, guys," said Kate. "Let's get your teeth brushed and your hair combed. You don't want to be late."

The children bolted from the room, the dogs right behind them.

Gran waited until their footsteps pounded up the stairs. She kept her voice low as she said, "When are you going to tell them about Janine?"

Kate caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She knew she should have already told the kids, but how could she explain to her them that someone they knew and loved had been kidnapped by a maniac who was going to...how could she keep them from being more frightened than they already were? In spite of Kate's attempt to shield them, Rachel and Ben had heard at school about the kidnappings and murders. They knew someone was missing now; they didn't know it was Janine.

"What am I supposed to say when Rachel and Ben ask why I can't save her?" Kate swallowed over the lump in her throat. Bracing her hands on the sink, she gazed out of the window. She had to keep a grip on her emotions. If she let loose now, she wouldn't stop crying, and then what would she tell the kids? She prayed Janine wouldn't end up like the four other girls who had gone missing. Kate had experience dealing with monsters, though. Prayers didn't help much.

She squeezed her eyes shut, picturing the young woman with the dark hair and infectious grin. During Kate's summer breaks from college, she'd babysat Janine. After Ben and Rachel were born, Janine had babysat them. The Phillips family attended the same church as Kate and her grandmother, and Kate was to be Janine's maid of honor for her upcoming July wedding.

"You shouldn't be working this case, honey." Gran's blue eyes were glassy with tears as she slipped her arm around her granddaughter's slender waist. "It's too hard on you. I heard you wandering around the house again last night. You had another nightmare, didn't you?"

Yes, the nightmares. They'd returned with a vengeance.

"Not as bad as usual." Kate laid her cheek on top of Gran's snow-white curls and inhaled the scent of lavender shampoo and motor oil. An odd mixture, Kate thought with a half-smile, but at seventy-eight, Maggie Waters

wasn't your typical cookie-baking grandmother. "You worry about me too much."

Gran pulled back and frowned. "I'll bet you've dropped at least ten pounds. You're not eating right, not sleeping. Can't Chief Cubbins see what this is doing to you?"

"I can stop the Butcher, Gran. I know how he thinks." Kate swiped at her eyes. Clearing her throat, she grabbed plates and glasses and stacked them in the dishwasher. Wiping the table she continued, "There's no one else in the department who can even begin to imagine what's in his head the way I can."

"Kate, honey, I don't doubt for a minute that you'll catch him, but at what price to yourself?" Gran stood on tiptoe and grabbed the newspaper from the top of the fridge. "I put this up here so the kids wouldn't see it. Did you read the article in this morning's paper?"

"I glanced at it," Kate said with a shrug. "Bill Crenshaw wants to sell copies of the Guardian. This kind of stuff sells."

"And that commentary Danielle Martin did on last night's news—" Gran shook her head as she shoved the newspaper into the garbage can. "It makes me sick."

"She's on her soapbox, as usual. So what?" Kate grabbed napkins from the holder on the table, put them in the kids' lunchboxes, and snapped them shut.

"You try to pretend you're not bothered by all this, but I know better. Danielle Martin is crucifying you on a daily basis, making you and the rest of the department sound inept because this nut is still on the loose. Like you're supposed to have some kind of magic bullet to stop him."

"She's trying to make a name for herself by sensationalizing these murders, and she's succeeding." Kate leaned one hip against the counter and folded her arms. "I heard a rumor she's writing a book about them. I'm sure she was thinking of potential sales when she decided to call the killer the Butcher of Briar Hills."

"Isn't that just like her to try and make money off of other peoples' tragedies." Gran pursed her lips and shook her head. "God, I'd like to throttle her. Everything she says throws more gas on the fire. Something should be done about her. Folks are scared out of their minds as it is."

Their conversation was cut short as the children raced back down the

stairs followed by the three barking dogs. They all headed for the front door where the dogs paced as Ben and Rachel donned coats, hats, and mittens. Kate gave them a once-over and, smiling, thumbed toothpaste from Ben's cheek. They scooped up their backpacks as Kate grabbed her own jacket from the closet.

"You three, back," she said to the dogs. "You have to stay here."

They barked in protest, but sat down, tails swishing across the oak floor of the entryway. Rachel and Ben kissed Gran and gave each dog a hug as Kate unlocked the door. The icy air took her breath away as she grabbed lunchboxes and followed the children onto the large covered porch. They exchanged quick kisses and "I love you's," as Kate handed them their lunches. They hurried down the flagstone walk, waved to her once more, then ran toward the corner where their friends waited.

Kate held her coat collar tight against the biting wind and watched her children from the top step. Normally, she left for work before the kids left for school. In a way, this morning was a small gift and she cherished it, but at the same time guilt nibbled at her. She thought of Brad and Vanessa Phillips who sat by the phone, waiting for news of their child.

With the clock running out, Kate wanted to be on the street right now, searching, following leads. She had only been home a few hours—long enough to shower and doze on the sofa. She was running on coffee and energy drinks, grabbing food on the fly. Afraid to stop, afraid to lose one precious minute that could mean life or death for the missing young woman.

Kate felt chilled all the way to her bones, and it had nothing to do with the weather. It was the knowledge that if the Butcher held true to his MO, Janine's body would be found some time over the next forty-eight hours. Then Kate would have to tell Brad and Vanessa Phillips their daughter was dead. Would she see the same accusation in their eyes that she had seen in those of the other parents?

Dammit, I should be at work right now.

Instead, she had to take another statement from Mitchell Goodspeed. The elderly man had witnessed a mugging last week from his living room window. He'd already given a statement to the police, but he'd since recalled something else. Goodspeed no longer drove, so Kate was to stop by his home this morning at eight thirty sharp. She hoped the task wouldn't take long and that she'd be at the station by nine fifteen at the latest.

Why Cubbins thought a mugging should take priority over searching for Janine was beyond Kate. Obviously, he wasn't thinking straight. The media would have a field day if it got wind that she, the primary detective for the Butcher murders, was spending time searching for a mugger who got away with twenty bucks. The public already thought the police weren't doing enough to catch the killer terrorizing the town.

But how do you catch someone who hides in plain sight?

Kate believed that's what the Butcher was doing. He was an average looking man, holding an average job, living an average life. The kind of guy who helped his neighbors and coached his son's little league team. Friends and family would shake their heads in stunned disbelief when the police finally caught him.

"We had no idea," they would say. "He seemed so normal."

And normalcy was the perfect camouflage.

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Detective Sam Farrell of the Illinois State Police arrived at the station at 5:30 A.M., as usual. He liked getting there early, when there were few other people around and before the noise and chaos of his seven o'clock shift began. It gave him a chance to catch up on paperwork or go over cases he was working on. Lieutenant Lyle Jordan was in as well. His office door was open, and Sam could see him bent over his desk.

As if sensing someone watching him, Jordan looked up. Sam averted his gaze. He was in no mood for conversation and hoped the lieutenant stayed in his office. Sam headed for the locker room and went straight to the mirror over the sink. Bloodshot brown eyes stared back at him—in spite of the drops he'd used. His head felt like some evil little man was inside pounding on his brain with a sledgehammer. Covering his nose and mouth with his hand, he blew into it and sniffed, but wasn't sure if he smelled booze or not.

Sam scowled as he opened his locker and pulled out the bottle of mouthwash stashed at the back of the top shelf. Almost empty. As he went back to the sink and swigged the green liquid straight from the bottle, he made a mental note to buy more. He rinsed his mouth, straightened his tie, and smoothed back dark hair that held no hint of gray. His hair might not give away his age, but Sam's time spent lately with his two new best friends, Johnnie Walker and Jack Daniel's, was taking its toll—making him appear

older than his forty-nine years. He was getting thick around the middle, too, Sam thought, noting that his belt was up another notch.

"I'm giving up the heavy stuff for good," he muttered, putting the mouthwash back in his locker.

He went into the break room and grabbed his mug from the cabinet. Dumping sugar into the mug, Sam filled it with what he assumed was coffee, since it came out of the pot, but the dark brew reminded him more of the gunk drained from his Explorer during an oil change. If this crap didn't clear his head, nothing would.

He settled at his desk just as Lieutenant Jordan came out of his office. His starched white shirt looked crisp as usual, the creases in his trousers, sharp. He wore the smile of a Cheshire cat as he strode toward Sam.

"Got a plum assignment for you." Jordan perched on the edge of Sam's cluttered desk and handed him a file. "We're going to participate in a task force for the Butcher murders in Briar Hills. A meeting's set for seven o'clock this morning at the police station there, so you'll have plenty of time to make it."

Sam opened the file and glanced at the first page. "We want jurisdiction?"

"Not yet," Jordan said, picking a piece of lint from his tie. "But I'm sure that's down the road. For now you'll lend assistance, give them direction to make sure they don't muck shit up any worse than they probably already have."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but there are other people who aren't retiring who would love this assignment." Sam jerked a thumb at the empty desk across from his. "Carlucci would give his right arm to get in on something like this."

"Carlucci is good, but you're the one I want at that meeting this morning. Besides, Briar Hills' police chief asked for you. Said you had a good working history with the primary on the case."

"And that is?"

"Kate Turner."

Sam arched a brow. He would hardly call his last experience with her, or her partner, good.

"Lieutenant, I'm retiring next June. We both know a case like this could go on for months, if not years."

"Come on, Sam, how long have we known each other, twenty, twenty-five

years?" Jordan waved at him. "Who do you think you're kidding with this early retirement crap? You're too young, and what's a guy like you gonna do if he's not working, anyway?"

Sam sat back and laced his fingers behind his head. "Fish, lie in a hammock, and fish some more."

"That's when it's warm. It's as cold in Michigan as it is right here; and it gets more snow. What are you gonna do in the middle of winter?"

"Ice fish."

"Right." Jordan laughed. "You're not wired to take it easy. You live and breathe this job. Even if you don't like it anymore, it's a part of you."

"Lieutenant, you need someone who's going to be around longer than I am." Sam closed the file and laid it on the desk. "I've given all of the time to this job that I'm going to."

He wanted to add that he had also sacrificed his wife and three kids. He kept that thought to himself, though. The bottom line was Sam had been willing to make those sacrifices at the time. It was only now, as he was getting older...

"We'll see," Jordan said, interrupting Sam's thoughts.

"No disrespect, sir. I'll take the assignment if I have to, but whether we've caught this guy or not, I'm outta here in six months."

"Like I said, we'll see." Jordan grinned and clapped Sam on the shoulder. "I've got a hundred bucks that says you'll hang around till this thing is over, and long after that."

"I'll take that bet," Sam said. "I can always use the extra cash."

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Kate arrived at the station at 9:20 A.M. to find the parking lot full of official vehicles from different towns and agencies. As she pulled into a spot in the back row, a sinking feeling hit her in the pit of her stomach. No, Cubbins wouldn't do this to her, would he? As Kate climbed out of her Tahoe, the drivers of the other vehicles spilled out of the front door of the station house. Some spoke on cell phones while others flipped through manila folders or talked to each other.

Kate hurried past them, pushed through the heavy glass doors, and ran, literally, into Brenda Litrell, Chief Cubbins's secretary. The files cradled in Brenda's arms flew into the air and scattered at their feet.

“Oh, Brenda, I’m sorry. I’ll help you get them back in order.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Brenda’s blouse inched its way out of her skirt as she bent over to retrieve the errant files. “Accidents happen.”

Kate scooped up papers and handed them to her. “What’s going on here today?”

“You didn’t get the e-mail?” Brenda’s brown eyes widened and blinked rapidly. “Chief Cubbins sent them out to everyone himself.”

“Nope, didn’t get it.” Kate’s lips pressed into a thin line. “This is about the Butcher murders isn’t it.”

“The chief called an emergency meeting to form a task force.”

“Dammit, I knew it.”

Kate and her partner, Zoe Stanton, had begged Cubbins to form a task force after the discovery of the first victim. That was at the end of February, and he refused to listen. The Briar Hills PD, his PD, as Cubbins always referred to it, could handle the situation. Now, ten months, three bodies, and one missing girl later, he finally decided to listen. What changed his mind, and why had he failed to discuss his decision with Kate? It was her case. More important, why wasn’t another detective or a patrol officer sent to Mitchell Goodspeed’s this morning?

Brenda juggled the files and shifted from one foot to the other. “The meeting was scheduled for seven o’clock. It just broke up, but I guess you already figured that out.”

“Where’s the chief now?” Kate asked, wishing with all her heart that Dan Hillard were still the police chief.

“He’s in his office behind closed doors with somebody from the state police. I don’t know who.”

“That can’t be good,” Kate muttered. She and Zoe had a run-in with the state police over jurisdiction in another case the previous year. The state had won. Uneasiness washed over Kate. Was another fight looming?

“I’m sure everything is fine,” Brenda said.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway and Kate turned around, hoping it was Cubbins. Instead, she saw Officer Taryn Levoy and her partner, Hank O’Brian.

Levoy secured her blond hair with a clip and slipped on her patrol cap. Her perfectly arched brows knit together as she zeroed in on the roll sagging over the waist of Brenda’s skirt. “Oh, sweetie, you really should wear tops

that cover up that fat. You look like you're wearing a life preserver. It's not very flattering."

O'Brian laughed, and Kate shot him a look as she said, "Knock it off, Taryn."

"That's my little tip of the day for Brenda. I give her advice like that all the time, don't I?"

Color rose in Brenda's cheeks. She hugged the files to her chest and cast her gaze at the floor. "It's okay. I don't mind."

"See there. She appreciates my help." Taryn gave Kate a hundred-watt smile. "After all, Wonder Woman, we girls have to stick together in this male-dominated workplace, don't you think? Hey, that reminds me, how's your old partner, Bat Girl, doing since she had her wings clipped?"

"Hey, that's pretty good." O'Brian laughed again. "Bat Girl, wings clipped."

"You find it funny that Zoe Stanton was almost killed in that car accident?" Kate asked.

"Of course not." The smile faded on O'Brian's face. "It's just that—"

"Turner!" Chief Cubbins's voice boomed from the other end of the corridor. He stood outside of his office, a scowl on his weathered face. As always, his dark, thinning hair was plastered in place by God only knew what. Kate thought Cubbins could go through a hurricane and emerge with every strand in place. He rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. "Where the hell have you been? Get in here. And O'Brian and Levoy, move it."

The two cops hurried for the front door and Cubbins went back into his office. Kate started down the hall but stopped as Detective Wally Rayburn stepped out of the conference room. In one hand was a cup of coffee, in the other was a jelly-filled doughnut. From the powdered sugar on his tie, Kate guessed it wasn't the first pastry he'd had that morning.

"These are pretty good," Wally said, holding up the oozing doughnut. "You should have one. Think of it as a last meal before the execution."

"Thanks, you're making me feel so much better."

"I hope you have a good excuse for not showing up here this morning." Wally took a generous bite of doughnut. "Otherwise Cubbins is going to roast you on a spit and have you for lunch."

Kate lowered her voice. "Before I left last night, he ordered me to see Mitchell Goodspeed this morning. Cubbins didn't mention this meeting to me then, and he didn't send me the e-mail, either."

"Seems to me like he didn't want you here for the meeting. No surprise

there. You know he lives to give you a hard time.” Wally lifted a brow and licked jelly from his fingers. “Good luck. He’s in a pissier of a mood.”

“Turner!” Cubbins leaned out of his office.

Kate stalked toward him. “May I talk to you alone for a moment, sir?”

He stepped into the hallway, closed the door over, and jammed his fists at his hips. “Well?”

Kate glanced up and down the hallway. *This* was not her idea of alone. She kept her voice low. “Sir, yesterday when we spoke about Mitchell Goodspeed you didn’t inform me of this morning’s meeting. I didn’t receive the e-mail everyone else seems to have gotten, either.”

“I hadn’t decided for certain I was going to call this meeting when I told you to stop at Goodspeed’s.” Cubbins’s eyes narrowed. “Regardless, it’s clear you felt he was the higher priority since you ignored my e-mail giving explicit instructions to be here at seven sharp.”

Kate bit her tongue to keep from calling him a liar and unloading on him. There had been tension between them ever since he took over last year when Dan Hillard retired. Cubbins was a good old boy who believed women should be hairdressers, nurses, or librarians. He deliberately left Kate out of the loop about the meeting, and she had a feeling he was setting her up for something. She didn’t know what, but she caught a definite glint of satisfaction in Cubbins’s eyes.

“Now, if that’s all, Detective, we need to address more pressing issues.” He went back into his office without waiting for a response.

Kate took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and followed him.

Cubbins settled at his desk and rested his elbows on the green blotter. Across from him sat someone Kate assumed was the person from the state. Dark haired and wearing a gray suit, he had his back to her, but even from behind there was something familiar about him.

Her uneasiness kicked into high gear.

He turned in the chair and smiled.

Kate sucked in a breath as a string of expletives shot through her mind. This was shaping up to be a hell of a day, and it was just starting.

“Sit down.” Cubbins scowled again at Kate. “You’ll have to be briefed since you didn’t grace us with your presence this morning.”

Kate clenched her jaw as she stalked to the other chair in front of the chief’s desk. She sat on the edge of the seat, hands fisted in her lap.

“You remember Detective Sam Farrell,” Cubbins said. “He tells me you and Detective Stanton worked that triple homicide with him in April of last year.”

Kate rolled her blue eyes and snorted. “I wouldn’t call what we did working together. Detective Farrell took over the case, and Zoe Stanton and I did little more than play gofer.”

“Drop the attitude, Turner.” Cubbins gave her a warning look. “There’s no room for it, or inflated egos when it comes to this case.”

Kate’s brows shot up. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. God, she wanted to pop him one. He had put his ego before what was in the best interest of the whole town when he refused to form the task force sooner.

“With all due respect, Chief, I’d like to know if Detective Farrell is here to take over again.”

“Briar Hills still has jurisdiction, but you and Detective Farrell will be working together.”

Kate stiffened and slid a sideways glance at Sam. “Working together how?”

Sam shifted his weight and crossed one leg over the other. “I’m your new partner.”