

FINAL STRIKE by Vanessa M. Knight

EXCERPT

She turned on the flashlight and sent its beam into the shadowed crevices of the bushes and trees lining the path. Without the warmth of the sun, the forest was dead cold. Sloppy leaves covered the path. The scent of pine and dirt coated the air. The temperature dropped further as she walked, but Julie didn't care.

"Julie, slow down."

She stopped, pointing the flashlight at the path behind her. Ben jogged up, carrying a map. "I thought we might need this."

"Thanks." She appreciated the map, but she needed to keep moving. She was finally helping look for her son, and she wasn't about to sit still.

"I grabbed another flashlight, too."

Julie nodded and started walking again.

Ben caught up to her, leaves crinkling, and the glow from his flashlight bobbed up and down. "Why don't you take the right, I'll take the left?"

"Okay." She trained her light on the right-hand side of the path. No movement. Nothing.

The radio crackled at her hip. "First connector trail, clear." Oops. She hadn't stuck around long enough to know when she was supposed to call in. She was sucking at this.

"Are you okay?" Ben asked.

"Fine." Julie paused when she caught movement off to her side. Just a swaying branch. Probably from the wind. Definitely not her son. Definitely not fine. He was still missing and she was still broken without him.