

KIDNAPPED IN THE WOODS

by Deena Alexander

EXCERPT

Creeping around the dilapidated shack in the woods bordering the Great South Bay in the middle of the night with a blizzard on the way and no backup was downright foolish. She never should have agreed to it. Wouldn't have, if the request hadn't come from Shannon, a frightened fifteen-year-old runaway Rachel had interviewed for a humanitarian piece about homeless teenagers a year ago. She'd connected with the young girl and given her a business card with instructions to call if she ever wanted help. Knowing how fearful Shannon was of authority, Rachel hadn't expected to hear from her, but she must have done something to earn the girl's trust since she kept the card and had finally reached out, her harsh whisper trembling.

Rachel checked her watch. Could it really have been less than an hour ago that Shannon had called, terrified for her missing friend—whom she'd referred to only as Jane, though Rachel had no clue if that was her real identity?

Although Rachel's first concern at the moment had to be for Jane, whose life was in immediate danger, she couldn't help fearing for Shannon's safety as well. If her current boyfriend—for lack of a better term for the loser she'd hooked up with—found out she'd overheard his conversation and relayed the information to Rachel, there was no doubt in Rachel's mind that Shannon would turn up missing as well. And if Shannon's information was accurate, which Rachel had no reason to doubt, her boyfriend, Alec, should be showing up anytime now with a more than likely unconscious Jane in tow ready to be sold to the highest bidder. But if Rachel intervened, and the men involved looked for the leak, it wouldn't be too difficult for Alec to figure out Shannon had been eavesdropping.

So, Rachel did exactly as Shannon instructed, even forgoing calling the police at her insistence. Though she'd only agreed to that because Shannon wouldn't give her the information unless she did. Besides, even if there had been time, which there wasn't, and even if she was sure of Shannon's information, which she couldn't be, it's not like the police hadn't failed Rachel in the past.

And now, Rachel Davenport was in trouble. Big trouble.

Sweat dripped down Rachel's back, despite the freezing temperature, as she crouched behind a skimpy bunch of branches and twigs that during summer months might have been a bush and actually offered some cover. As it was, if either of the two armed men dragging the slumped teenage girl toward the shack door glanced in her direction, they'd surely spot her and open fire.

Rachel sank lower, hoping the cover of darkness would be enough to shield her presence. She had to make an impossible choice. Risk being caught by turning on her cell phone to check for service and call for help, or chance losing the sixteen-year-old girl the men were currently hauling into the shack to backtrack through the woods and call the police from a safer distance.

The girl's head lolled forward. Scraggly long brown hair hung in limp strands covering her face, so Rachel couldn't tell if she was conscious or not. Although the girl was unusually thin, there was no way Rachel could carry her more than a mile back to where she'd parked the car, even if she could find a way to rescue her.

The low rumble of an approaching engine took the decision out of her hands. Once Jane was sold and disappeared, most likely on the approaching boat, there would be no way to find her again. Rachel already shouldered the responsibility for one girl's disappearance and ultimate death—no way she'd live with the guilt of failing another.

After dumping Jane inside the shack, the two men took up positions on either side of the open door and stood guard, eyes trained on the boat slowing down to dock.

Okay. It was now or never. She couldn't afford to wait any longer, and she didn't have time to go for help. At the moment, there were only two men to deal with. If she waited for the boat to dock, she had no clue how many there'd be. And she didn't plan on hanging around to find out.

She inhaled deeply, the fresh clean scent of the coming storm a reminder she needed to get the girl out of there quickly, and patted the handgun weighing heavily in the holster on her hip to reassure herself it was there—the weapon she always carried for personal protection since her work sometimes put her in dangerous situations, the weapon she'd diligently practiced with on the range but had never fired at another living being. Hopefully, that wasn't about to change. If she could even manage to grip the gun in her frozen fingers, never mind pull the trigger. Keeping the weapon holstered, she inched forward in a crouch, wincing at the crunch of the brittle, frozen leaves carpeting the ground.

One of the men glanced toward her.

She held her breath and lowered her face, willing herself invisible.

He continued to scan the area for a moment, then returned his attention to the boat with at least two men on board.

The breath shot from her burning lungs, and she lowered herself to the ground, lying flat on her stomach. As stealthily as possible, she crept forward, resisting the urge to move faster.

Half the boards on the shack's walls had rotted away, and most of the windows were broken. If she could circle around the back of the building, she might be able to get to the girl and get her out without being seen. How she'd get her from the shack back to the dirt road where she'd parked the car, she had no idea. But she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. *If* she came to it.

Trying to stay completely quiet, she inched forward. She took shallow breaths, wishing there was something she could do about the puff of vapor that accompanied each exhale. The odor of mold, dirt and dried leaves tickled her nose as she belly-crawled toward the side of the building, keeping her head low, resisting the overwhelming urge to sneeze.

The instant she was out of view of the guards, she sat up and scooted her back against the shack's side wall, then paused to take a few deep breaths of the frigid air. Between her heart hammering against her ribs and the lungful of ice-cold air, her chest ached.

The sound of the engine grew louder.

As she peeked around the corner, a light shone across the front of the shack from the bay, illuminating the guards.

They started across the clearing toward the dock, their attention drawn away from her.

Knowing it might be her last chance, Rachel shoved herself to her feet and bolted around the back and onto a rotting deck. A broken sliding door allowed a view through the interior of the shack and out the front windows. She tried the door. Locked. She reached in through the broken glass, fumbled around for the latch and released the lock. With a clock ticking away in her head, she yanked her arm out too quickly, slicing the back of her hand.

She almost cried out, caught herself just in time and hissed a few breaths through her teeth. The door didn't slide open easily, but she managed to wrestle it open far enough to squeeze through, wincing when it squeaked. Thankfully, the guards had walked far enough toward the dock, and the wind had picked up enough to cover the sound. Rachel called out in a harsh whisper. "Jane."

The wind carried the sound of men's raised voices to her. They were coming back. She was out of time.

"Jane. *Pssst.*"

Nothing. With the front door open and the light from the boat that was now docked shining into the shack, she could barely make out the silhouette of the girl lying on the floor beside the doorway.

She hurried across the open room, the boards groaning loudly beneath her footsteps. When she reached Jane, she knelt beside her and pressed her fingers against the girl's neck, then breathed a sigh of relief at the strong pulse. Rachel covered Jane's mouth to keep her from getting startled and crying out, then shook her arm and whispered, "Jane."

As the girl jerked away, her eyes shot open.

Rachel put a finger against her lips.

Jane nodded, her gaze skipping frantically around the room, out the front door and then back to Rachel.

Trusting the girl would remain quiet, Rachel removed her hand and gestured for Jane to move toward the back door.

She got as far as her hands and knees, then swayed. Drugged? Injured? Rachel didn't know, and there was no time to find out now. "Can you stand?"

Jane didn't answer, just fisted her hands against the floor.

Rachel's heart ached to slow down, comfort the girl, assure her everything would be okay. But it wouldn't be. Not unless she could get her out of there without drawing any attention. Her mind begged her to shove all compassion aside and move faster. She risked a quick peek out the front window. Bathed in the light cast from the boat stood six men. Four more had joined the two she'd already seen, presumably from the boat. Rachel started to turn away, but a familiar form caught her attention.

Ben Harrison. She'd recognize his stride anywhere, though the confident swagger she'd once found endearing, comforting even, now seemed more like an arrogant strut. For just a moment, her heart soared. Even if they hadn't spoken in years, surely Detective Harrison would help her and Jane out of this mess. Although, if he was undercover, she could be putting him in danger too. Unless...

She and her cousin Ben had been so close once upon a time. Growing up, he'd been her best friend, her confidant, the one person she trusted with all her heart. And then he betrayed her at the time she needed him the most. He'd taken up with a bad crowd and blown her off when she'd begged him for help finding her sister, Rebecca, when she went missing. Then, when Rachel had nowhere else to go for help when the police botched the investigation into Rebecca's disappearance, he'd turned her away. Her parents assumed Rebecca had run away and gave up on her, retreated into themselves until it was too late to save her. And in abandoning Rebecca, they'd all abandoned Rachel as well, leaving her with no one to depend on but herself.

When she heard he'd joined the police academy and then made detective, she'd hoped he'd left the bad crowd behind him, turned over a new leaf. She even held out hope he might reach out to her one day, apologize. Not that it could change what had happened with Rebecca. A niggling of fear crept in, raised goose bumps, and she slid deeper into the shadows.

As Ben strode straight toward the shack barking orders, the others fanned out behind him. But if Ben was undercover, why would he appear to be the one in charge? She'd stopped talking to him years ago because she didn't trust him. No sense changing that opinion now.

"Come on, Jane. We have to go." She grabbed Jane beneath the arm and hauled her up to stand. "Now."

Jane staggered but stayed on her feet as Rachel propelled her toward the door through the narrow gap she'd managed to open and out onto the deck. Hopefully, the cold air would help Jane regain her senses enough to run.

All they had to do was make it across the clearing and they could disappear into the heavily wooded Pine Barrens. Maybe. Flurries started to fall, fat white flakes drifting lazily to the ground. A deceptive start to the forecast storm that would soon grip Long Island in its bitter fury.

With a firm hold on Jane's wrist, Rachel hurried across the deck and started through the stiff dead grass, ignoring the loud crunching sound each footstep made. The girl's captors would be on them any minute. Stealth wouldn't do them any good now. Only speed might save them.

Rachel started to run, prodding Jane to move faster, half dragging her by the arm.

A gust of wind carried the sounds of raised voices. A man shouted from inside the shack.

Jane stumbled.

They weren't going to make it to the tree line, and there was nowhere to hide in the open clearing.

"Run straight for the woods. Go." She shoved Jane forward. "Now."

Dazed, Jane glanced over her shoulder toward the shack. Her eyes went wide, and tremors tore through her. Like a deer caught in headlights, she froze, vulnerable.

Six black-clad figures emerged from the shack with Ben in the lead.

The two men who'd been guarding Jane flanked him with their very large guns trained on Rachel and Jane.

Ben poked a finger against one man's chest. "You were paid to watch her, not dump her in an unsecured shack so she could escape."

"But we drugged her." Keeping his weapon level, trained on Rachel, the man turned his head toward Ben. "She was out cold a minute ago."

“Yeah, well, she’s not now, is she?” Ben pointed his weapon at the man’s chest and fired.

The man crumpled to the ground.

Rachel wheezed in a breath.

“Hey.” The other man started backing up, his gun still aimed at the women. “Hey, dude, I was just the—”

Ben’s second gunshot dropped the man midsentence. Ben gestured for one of the men to go back toward the front, then started forward with the remaining three. “We need the girl alive.”

Bile surged, burning the back of Rachel’s throat. He’d just killed two men. Two of his own men.

She turned to Jane, gripped her shoulders and stared into her unfocused eyes. She shook her once, hard. “You have to run.”

The girl nodded, her eyes seeming to clear a little, then turned and fled toward the woods.

Rachel yanked her weapon from the harness as she ran after Jane.

More shouts reached her. The men were almost on them. She was going to have to turn and fight.

A shot rang out.

Jane went down hard on her stomach, barely getting her hands under her in time to catch herself.

No, no, no! “Are you hurt?”

Jane didn’t answer.

Crouching beside her, Rachel searched desperately for an escape route.

Another shot hit a tree not far from them. Either the gunman was a lousy shot, or the two shots fired so far had been meant as a warning, which was probably the case. If Shannon was correct, and she had been so far, and Jane was set to be sold, the girl was worth too much money for them to shoot to kill. And Ben had said to take the girl alive. He hadn’t said the same about her companion. In the darkness, made even more so by the thick cloud cover and the flurries, they most likely couldn’t tell the two apart. Once they got closer and that changed, Rachel would be expendable.

Another shot sent Jane scrambling to her feet and bolting toward the woods. It seemed the bullets whizzing by her had finally cleared some of the stupor.

Rachel followed, keeping her head down.

Shouts followed them, along with the sound of a car engine turning over. Ben must have sent the guy to get the SUV out front. It would only take a few seconds for them to make it around the small shack to the clearing and join the others chasing them on foot. She had to try to stop them. Or at least slow them down.

Jane dove behind a tree.

“Keep going. I’ll be right behind you.”

The plea for God’s help popped unbidden into her head. She caught herself, remembering the last time she prayed, begged God to return her sister safely, He hadn’t answered. It had been more than fifteen years since Rachel had prayed, and if only for her own sake, she wouldn’t pray now. How could she ask God to help her after she hadn’t trusted Him in so long, after she’d turned away from Him at the moment she’d probably needed faith the most? *Please, help me save this child. I failed Rebecca. Please, don’t let me fail Jane.*

Despite her hand shaking wildly, Rachel crouched beside the tree and aimed her weapon. She could do this. She had to. Inhaling deeply, she waited for the SUV to round the corner, then sucked in a deep breath, held it and aimed straight at the front of the SUV now barreling toward her. She squeezed the trigger, heard the sound of the bullet striking metal. Gunfire split the night air as the three men running toward her opened fire.

Rachel ignored it, aimed at the guy closest to her and shot him.

If his moans were any indication, she hadn’t killed him. Thankfully. She didn’t know if she could live with another death on her conscience. It was bad enough she hadn’t been able to save Rebecca.

As the wounded man fell, Ben and the other guy fled for cover, barreling into the woods on the sides of the clearing. The SUV stopped where it was—whether because it was disabled in some way or the driver was awaiting instructions from Ben, she had no idea.

And she wasn’t hanging around to find out. Not wanting to wait for them to regroup, Rachel turned and ran after Jane. It was easy enough to follow her footprints in the light dusting of snow that had already accumulated. A fact that would be a problem as soon as their attackers got their act together.

She couldn’t think about that right now. Couldn’t think of anything past this moment. She found Jane leaning against a tree, sucking in deep lungfuls of the frigid air and coughing.

How was she going to get the girl to safety? Her car was on the other side of the shack. She couldn’t very well turn around and go back. She had to assume the men who’d dove into the woods for cover would be coming after them, probably flanking them, so there was no way to circle around. The thought that even if she somehow managed to lose the men, they could easily find her car and identify her began as a small niggle at the base of her neck, but she shoved it aside. One catastrophe at a time.

She gripped Jane’s arm, keeping her voice barely above a whisper. “We have to keep going.”

When Jane looked at her and nodded, her big brown eyes filled with the same terror Rachel felt, her heart broke. She wanted nothing more than to stop for a moment, reassure the young girl everything would be okay. She didn't have that luxury. Stopping now would be a death sentence. Who knew? Maybe her death sentence had already been signed.

They started through the woods. There was no way to walk quietly, so they just plowed on, moving as quickly as possible, every footstep echoing through the silent night.

Though the shouting had stopped, the sounds of pursuit moved closer. At least the crunch of their footsteps and harsh, ragged breaths allowed Rachel to keep track of their progress.

The frigid air burned Rachel's lungs. Tears leaked out of her eyes and froze on her cheeks. The bitter cold stung her face, and her toes had gone numb what seemed like hours ago. Their time was up. If they didn't find shelter soon and couldn't get help, they weren't going to make it.

She inhaled deeply and fought the urge to cough. The faint scent of smoke filled her lungs. A forest fire? Probably not. Surely she'd see the telltale glow of flames if that were the case.

The smoky odor increased. Light flickered ahead in the woods. A fire after all? No. A small A-frame cabin sat amid a circle of grass. Hope surged. Had God answered her prayer for help this time?

She pointed toward the cabin and signaled Jane to run ahead. Rachel ducked behind an SUV parked out front. Using the vehicle as cover, she aimed at the section of woods where the sounds of pursuit were coming from. She struggled to regulate her breathing, slow her racing heart. If she could just buy Jane time to find help.

Ben Harrison burst from the woods, gun held ready. He looked right at her. A spark of recognition flared in his eyes before he shuttered them and took aim.

She didn't want to shoot him. Didn't want to make that choice. She'd loved him once, probably still did, in spite of the pain, anger and sting of betrayal. How could she shoot Ben? Could she kill her own cousin? And for the second time in fifteen years, she prayed. *Please don't let me have to do this.*

Her hesitation gave Ben the upper hand. He squeezed off a shot. It hit a tree not a foot from her head. Splinters of bark ricocheted into her cheek.

She knew Ben was an excellent shot since he was the one who'd taught her to shoot and spent hours on end at the range helping her improve. Had the increasing wind or the instant of recognition for a family member he'd once loved thrown off his aim? Or had he missed on purpose?