

CHAPTER 1

Dr. Emily Hartford burst through the Freeport police station doors, leaving behind a driving wind that had picked up over the lake on this aging winter season late in March. The short trip across the parking lot had frosted her face, and her eyes were tearing from frigid temperatures and biting gusts. She wiped her watery eyes with the back of her glove and Detective Ishkode Aditson came into view as he met her in the police station lobby.

His Chippewa name meant fire, he'd once told Emily. He was of Ojibwe origin, a First Nations tribe that inhabited Canada and Michigan. A tall lean man in his mid-thirties who wore his jet-black hair in a low bun, he was in speech, manner, and education more mainstream American than Native American. But he kept close ties with his ancestors up north, observing their traditions and practices when he wasn't serving the public as a peace officer.

"Got your text. Back so soon?" he said. She had alerted him ten minutes ago after crossing into Freeport city limits. "Please tell me you're here to accept my offer," Aditson joshed, referring to a proposal he'd suggested after the McClelland case that he'd

love to see her return to Freeport and take over her late father's Medical Examiner post.

"Didn't even have time to unpack at home," said Emily shaking from nerves and the thirty-two-ounce coffee she'd nursed on the four-hour drive up to Freeport from Chicago. "Jo told me you sent her home. That couldn't have been easy. She put up a fight?"

"Had to get another officer to drive her there," he said. "I'm surprised you came here first."

"I wanted to stop by and check in with you—not that I'm trying to interfere with your efforts or step out of bounds. I'm here to play the role of Jo Blakely's best friend," said Emily. "And honestly I have no idea how to help her in this situation. Please, what do you know? Did you find anything on the beach?"

Aditson led her into his office and shut the door.

"The boy's sister Jessica was hiding out in one of those cement tunnels on the playground waiting for her mom," said Aditson, offering Emily a seat. "She was able to tell us a little bit."

"Jo said she dropped them off there while she went to run some errands in town," said Emily.

"She left her kids in abandoned playground?" Aditson questioned.

"Freeport's safe. And the kids love playing there. It was just for an hour," Emily defended. But saying it out loud crumpled her confidence in the argument. No place was safe anymore. "Did you find anything to trace him?"

"Nothing of Jeremiah Blakely's. We did find tracks from his boot prints. They went from the playground, across the beach, to the lighthouse. They pick up again along the shore for about fifty yards, then . . . just disappear."

"Kid's boots?"

"Yeah. The ones leading down to the water are."

“That makes it sound like . . . he went in,” Emily said with a shudder.

“Maybe. But we found another set of boot prints trekking to the parking lot from the area where the boy was last seen.”

“So, you think someone picked him up and carried him?”

“It’s plausible. Weather doesn’t stop Michiganders from being outside. You remember being a kid growing up here.”

Emily nodded. She and Jo used to love playing outside, no matter the weather. Rain. Sleet. Snow. Wind. None of it bothered them as long as they were together on some adventure. In fact, inclement weather often made the adventure more exhilarating. And surviving it made them feel like little warriors. When she thought about it, Emily didn’t remember the wet or cold bothering her and Jo at all. Their focus was on the task at hand. Creating a forest fort together where they could play games or read books out loud to each other. Finding the tallest hill to sled down. Or hiking through the woods by Emily’s house to get to the frozen lake where they could ice skate.

“What have you told Jo so far about the prints?” asked Emily.

“We’re not sharing information with the parents right now,” said Aditson. “I took impressions, and they’re already at the state crime lab with a rush order on them.”

“Who else has been notified?”

“All the state police offices, the local FBI office, Coast Guard. It’s all over the wires, but we’re holding off on the press for now.”

“If I know Jo, she’s posted it all over her socials,” said Emily, who didn’t do socials.

“We can’t stop her from doing that. And often it’s actually helpful.”

“What were the water conditions when Jeremiah disappeared?”

“A strong rip current formed yesterday late morning. There were red flag warnings all up and down the lakeshore. It’s rough out there. Typical winter waters.”

“Has anyone searched the lake?”

“Not yet. The Coast Guard is sending up a chopper in a few hours to survey the shoreline,” said Aditson.

Emily’s anxiety level was on the rise. “You have me curious,” said Emily, hoping he would give her more.

“Not gonna fall for that one, Dr. Hartford,” he said. “You’re tight with Jo Blakely, and I don’t want to spread panic.”

“I get that. But what degree of hope can I offer her?”

“Freeport, for the most part, is a safe community. We don’t generally have kidnapers prowling about,” said Aditson. “And on the rare occasion that a child abduction does happen, it’s usually an irate divorcee trying to exact revenge on a partner.”

“What I’m hearing is that you think it’s likely Jeremiah was swept into Lake Michigan and drowned,” stated Emily, an edge of frustration creeping into her voice.

“I’m not saying that. We don’t know enough yet to draw any conclusions,” said Aditson. “Go be with your friend. Do what you can to calm her.”

“But if you do find him in the lake . . .” Emily couldn’t say the “D” word again. “I want to . . . handle it.”

“You’ll be the first person I call,” Aditson assured her.

Emily hoped that call would never come.

CHAPTER 2

Jo Blakely entered her eight-year-old daughter's bedroom and found her exactly where she'd left her three hours ago with the babysitter; curled up on her bed with puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks, clutching a white teddy to her chest.

Jessica looked up to her mother as she sat next to her on the bed.

"Did you find Jeremiah?" Jessica said, snuggling up to her mom.

Jo shook her head, and her daughter burst into sobs.

"It's going to be okay, darling," said Jo, trying to soothe Jessica by running her hand up and down her narrow back. As a nurse, compassion and comfort came naturally to Jo. But now it also came with searing pain because she could not truly assuage her child's agony.

"I looked for him, Mama. I turned around," said Jessica.

"I know you did," Jo said. "And tell me: what did you see? Tell me again what happened."

"I already told you," Jessica whimpered. "Don't you believe me?"

“Of course, I believe you, sweetie. I just need to hear it. Once more.” She kissed her daughter on the top of her head.

“Jeremiah wanted to go out to the end of the pier. To the lighthouse. I told him we shouldn’t. But he didn’t hear me.”

“And then you followed him out there?” said Jo.

“I was scared. The waves were coming over the pier, and we were getting wet. And cold! He went all the way to the end. I told him he was stupid.”

“Did he hear you?” said Jo.

“Yeah. He told me that *I* was the stupid. I yelled at him that I was going back to the beach.”

“What did he do?”

“He said, ‘Okay.’ And then I ran back down the pier to the shore.”

“Did he follow you?” asked Jo.

“No. He was at the end of the pier,” said Jessica. “I shouted at him, but he didn’t hear me.”

“Was there anyone else on the shore?” asked Jo.

“No.”

“What did you do then?” So far Jessica’s retelling of the account was consistent with the first time she had told it to Jo.

“I went to the playground,” said Jessica. “To wait for you.”

“Why didn’t you wait for Jeremiah?” Jo struggled to hold back the welling accusation. She didn’t blame Jessica, of course. But why hadn’t the two stuck together like they knew they were supposed to?

“I thought he would come,” said Jessica sniffing. “That’s where you told us to meet you.”

“Were there any adults around the playground?” Jo pressed.

“No.”

“Any one at all?”

“Just me.”

“Did you see any cars in the parking lot?”

“I went into the tunnel,” said Jessica referring to the cement structures on playground. “I was cold.”

“I know, baby. That’s okay. You sure you didn’t see or hear anyone at the beach?”

“I don’t know, Mommy,” said Jessica, on the brink of tears again. “I’m sorry.”

“No, sweetie. Nothing to be sorry about.” Except for the fact that her brother didn’t stay by her side as he’d promised to! Jo dismissed the rising anger, knowing it stemmed from anxiety.

“Are you mad at me?” Jessica’s forehead was forming beads of sweat.

“No, honey, I’m just . . . trying to figure it out.” She patted the sweat with the sleeve of her arm. “You feeling okay?”

“Why don’t you believe me?” said Jessica.

“I do. I do believe you, sweetie.” Jo hugged her daughter close. “You’re so warm. I wonder if you’re getting sick.”

“Did I do something wrong?” said Jessica.

“No, my love. You did nothing wrong.”

“I went where you said.”

“I know you did. Good girl.” Jo ran the tips of her fingers along her daughter’s spine.

“I know you’ve been talking to the police,” said Jessica.

“How do you know that?”

“Babysitter told me.”

That little wench. She had no business putting that distressing information into a little girl’s head.

“Is Jeremiah in trouble?” Jessica’s lower lip quivered. A waterfall of tears was certain to follow if Jo didn’t handle this perfectly. She maneuvered her way around her question as she peppered her response with levity. “I’d say there’s a good chance he won’t be getting his allowance this week.” Her joke deflated.

So, she flat out lied, “No, sweetie, he’s not in trouble. He probably just went wandering down the beach. I’m sure he’ll turn up any second.”

Jessica pondered the answer for a second.

“When will Daddy be home?”

“Soon. He’s on his way.” Jo bit back a harbored bitterness against her husband, Paul, who’d spent more days on the road than with his family over the past eighteen months, due to his sales job of farm equipment.

“Tell me the truth, Mommy,” said Jessica. “Is Jeremiah dead?”

“What? No! Sweetie, your brother is not dead!” Jo was too abrupt with her response. Jessica would know she was bluffing.

Jo would never share with Jessica the horrible possibilities swirling in her imagination. She and Paul often called Jessica their bullshit meter. The kid was a lie detector in human form. Jo suddenly felt like she wouldn’t be able to continue this conversation with her daughter much longer before breaking down.

She was given an out when frantic knocking at the front door startled them both. Jessica jumped off the bed. “Maybe that’s the police? Maybe they found Jer!” She sprinted out of the bedroom. Jo went after her, inhaling her daughter’s hope.