

THE NORTH SHORE, SIXTEEN MONTHS EARLIER

Her ankle burned. It still bore the marks of leg irons. Instinctively, she rubbed it with both hands. The night was black, interrupted only by a sliver of light from the moon. Sitting on a rock, surrounded by trees, Cassie Bandleson wondered where the hell she was. The opening in the hill that she had crawled from was several hundred yards away. Which direction? She didn't know.

Perspiration dripped from her face to the sleeve of her flannel shirt. She strained to see anything that would help her decide which direction to run, because run she must.

Sooner or later he would return and discover she was gone. She needed to put distance between herself and her prison. There had been no way of telling day from night, only her sleeping patterns helped her estimate the time. Her best guess was that she had been a prisoner of the man for four days.

Cassie stood. Trying to ignore the pain, she stumbled through the dark, brush tearing at her clothes, rocks smashing into her knees, and tree branches swatting her head. *My God, I've got to make it out of here! Run!*

Her legs pumped as her steeled heart ordered her body to move. She extended her arms and hands in front to protect her face from obstacles, seen and unseen. Cassie did not wonder how her body could take this punishment. When you're running for your life, you don't care. You just move.

She pushed forward. The forest seemed to rise up against her, tearing, clutching and ripping at her clothes. And then she tumbled, slamming into trees and boulders before coming to rest at the bottom of a ravine. Breathing heavily, she slowly tried to move her limbs, first her arms, then her legs. She laughed. *Nothing broken!*

Hearing the rumble of some sort of vehicle in the distance, her hopes rose. *That way.* She pointed with her left hand and limped toward the sound, but more carefully now. *Take it slow.*

Following the ravine, which seemed more like a cut in the hillside, she knew she was descending; her momentum was always downhill, even if she couldn't see well, she could feel it. The shallow walls of the ravine gave her a sense of being protected. She even started to believe it.

*Voices!* She heard voices. She was sure of it. Picking her way toward the sound, she could tell it was from a radio talk show, playing much too loudly. Maybe it was a couple of kids parked, making out, whatever. They were going to be surprised by a beaten up, struggling hiker. She smiled as she worked her way closer.

She stood in the shadows, looking for signs of life from the pickup. It was getting late. The radio talk turned to jazz. *No kids would be listening to jazz.* She turned and melted further into the forest, sneaking a worried look back at the truck. The dome light was on. Someone had opened the door. She started moving away faster and breathing harder. *It was him!* Soon she was flailing at branches and running, her heart pounding so hard she thought it would burst from her chest.

