

## SEPTEMBER - SUNDAY - 5:00 A.M.

Colleen Summers hurried across the street toward where the rest of the track team had gathered in the paved parking lot. She kept the gray hood of her sweatshirt pulled over her head, concealing her face, and directed her gaze toward the ground. There was no reason to pretend that she was welcome here because she definitely wasn't. It didn't matter that she was Triton University's fastest female runner in the 100-meter, 200-meter, and 400-meter sprints. Those statistics only guaranteed her a spot on the team. What truly mattered was that she didn't drive an expensive car, wear the latest styles, or converse with the etiquette that is instilled while attending private school.

This lack of the proverbial silver spoon shot Colleen straight to the top of the most undesirable list in the eyes of her teammates. A few took great joy in teasing her, whenever they had the opportunity, about the high-water sweatpants and tattered tennis shoes she always wore to practice. Colleen fully believed that a substantial part of the team's motivation for getting up each morning was to see how far they could push her until she would finally quit. They had a long way to go.

The newly erected steel square light poles, which were part of the university's security renovation project, flooded the student parking lot in a brilliant white glow. Colleen hurried past the high-end model vehicles, gleaming beneath the intense light, and the high-maintenance owners who were walking billboards for everything name brand, to a stretch of well-manicured lawn. She immediately started doing lunges, moving stiffly as if her leg muscles were as taut as guitar strings. No one needed to know she had found a new appreciation for the element of surprise and as a result, was in the best shape of her life.

In Colleen's initial commute to and from the city for her graduate studies, she noticed the number of homeless people on the street corners, alleyways, and city parks was on the rise. It wasn't long until their presence in residential areas was commonplace. Behind the safety of a bus window, Colleen would sketch them with an artist's eye, capturing their struggle to survive. In a city where the abundance of money meant every light post could've been made of solid gold, there never seemed to be enough of it to build a shelter for those left to endure the cold winter months. Even in Northern California, the winters were brutal without a warm place to sleep, the right apparel, and a nutritious meal now and then.

Five years earlier, Colleen lost everything she had ever loved in a house fire, and her unique kinship with the homeless men and women of Triton City kept her from feeling quite so alone in the world. She had memorized most of their faces and which part of the city they considered home. She worried if she didn't see one of them for a few days, suspecting that either they'd been arrested or become a victim of foul play. During

her journeys home each evening, she would maintain her constant vigil and count the ones huddled around the trashcan fires in the alleyways and parks. She marveled at the resilience of the human spirit, the way the homeless never gave up.

In March, Colleen noticed the homeless were disappearing at an alarming rate. Day and night, she searched the streets for their familiar faces until all that remained of their existence was what had been recorded in her sketchbook. One evening, on her way back from the university library, she peered down a darkened alleyway as the bus waited at a red light. She glimpsed three figures in the shadows and her heart soared when one of the men looked in her direction, revealing his face in the yellow hue of an old street lamp. It was one of her missing homeless and she was overwhelmed with relief.

The light turned green and the bus engine rumbled noisily as the diesel goliath rolled forward. Colleen's joy erupted in the form of giggles. She waved frantically at the homeless man. He took a hurried step toward the departing bus and reached out his hand. Colleen saw the desperation in his action, but before she could utter one word, the other two men viciously attacked him.

Colleen eyes were glued to the row of windows as she sprinted from her seat to the back of the bus. She pounded her hands against the thick glass of the last window pane and screamed at the bus driver to call the police. The bus driver averted his gaze from the rearview mirror and continued down the street. Colleen's last memory was of a man she'd never formally met being devoured by creatures she refused to define.

From that moment on, Colleen channeled all of her energy into improving her odds for survival in case the two creature-like men in the alley decided to come after her next. Each morning began with a three o'clock bus ride from the downtown transportation depot to a grocery store called The Market at the corner of Broadway and University Boulevards. Upon her arrival, she would help unload the trucks delivering the daily supply of fresh produce and grade-A meats to increase her upper body strength. Her laborious efforts were repaid with a light breakfast of wheat toast, a scrambled egg or two, and a cup of fresh fruit prepared by Lin Chang, one of the store's owners. The arrangement had been initiated by Lin's daughter, Julie, who had befriended Colleen at the university's library earlier in the summer.

After breakfast, Colleen either helped restock the shelves or swept the floor to allow her body plenty of time to digest her meal. Afterward, she would stretch in the privacy of the storage room before heading out for track practice. Her sprints from The Market to the university's new football stadium were continuously changing as she manipulated the overall mileage to improve her stamina. She pushed every muscle in her body to the point of exhaustion. She kept to the main roads and avoided taking shortcuts through fields and side streets. Today, as on every Sunday, she'd made sure to take the shortest route possible. There were always fewer cars on the roadway and a lot fewer people available to offer assistance in case one needed it. The past year's missing persons list also supported the claim that the university was no place to be alone, especially on God's day.

Colleen positioned her feet shoulder-width apart and started her toe touches in the soft, damp grass. She held onto her shoelaces and moved her hips from side to side stretching out her lower back. A sudden, foul stench filled the air. Colleen clenched her teeth together and resisted her body's insistence to throw up.

Her keen sense of smell was a direct result of growing up in rural Minnesota. She was thankful her senses hadn't been dulled by pollution and she could still enjoy the plethora of fragrances so abundant in California even if they weren't as sweet as the ones back home. Lately, though, there had been an unusual stench clinging like plastic wrap to the late summer air. She hoped when the Santa Ana winds kicked up in October, they would carry away the putrid smell from the city permanently.

However, the current odor invading her nostrils wasn't created by any force of nature. It belonged to her track coach, Professor Nathaniel Stein. She had to interact with him almost daily due to the team's rigorous training schedule and dreaded the encounter every time. Unfortunately, there wasn't much she could do about it. Her scholarship and its extension into her graduate studies were dependent on her being a member of the track team. Otherwise, she'd be pursuing her other passion, swimming, and avoiding Professor Stein all together.

Professor Stein stepped closer to Colleen and smacked his lips together. "I'm very impressed, Ms. Summers," he said. "You're firming up in all the right areas."

Colleen felt Professor Stein's hand momentarily caress her butt. He'd become more aggressive with his leering comments, but had never touched her. Now, her fear of getting kicked off the team and losing her scholarship from the repercussions that might follow for reporting his conduct was a secondary concern. She whirled around and raised her hand, intent on slapping him across the face. She altered her tactics, though, when she glimpsed something so terrifying protruding from his mouth that her mind refused to wrap around it. She forced a smile to spread across her trembling lips. "Thank you," she said, batting him almost flirtatiously on the arm.

"You should sign up for my communications class," Professor Stein said, reaching out and grasping her shoulder. "I could help you develop better interpersonal relationship skills."

Colleen felt an icy shiver explode up her spine as Professor Stein massaged his fingers suggestively into her skin. On instinct, she began rocking from heel to toe and pretended to contemplate his suggestion. She managed to break away from his grasp without being obvious. "I'll make sure to do that next semester."

Professor Stein sniffed the air. "By the way, I liked the other shampoo you were using in your hair. This new product smells too fruity. The other one had an almost intoxicating effect that could make a sane man want to gobble you up."

"I'll have to switch back," Colleen said, allowing her eyes to linger in the dark pools of death reflected in Professor Stein's brown eyes.

"Good," Professor Stein said, looking up and down Colleen's five-foot-six frame. "I'll be sure to notice." He grabbed the whistle that dangled from the lanyard around his neck and blew it loudly. "All right, team, we don't have all morning, so gather around."

Thunderous shudders erupted from deep within Colleen's soul and resonated outward. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and latched her hands onto her triceps, hugging herself tightly. *He's just a sick, old man*, she thought. *He's not one of those things from the alley.*

"You're such a freak," Bethany Hall said, purposely bumping into Colleen as she walked by with her boyfriend and fellow teammate, Calvin Whitmore. "Go masturbate at home."

Professor Stein whipped his head around and his eyes narrowed until they were tiny slits. “What did you say, Bethany?”

Bethany shrunk behind Calvin. “Uh, nothing, Coach.”

“It sure didn’t sound like nothing,” Professor Stein growled.

“She was commenting that she would rather be at home snuggling with Calvin this morning,” Colleen said quickly, dropping her hands to her sides.

“Is that so?” Professor Stein said, suddenly chest to chest with Calvin.

“Yes, sir,” Calvin replied, pulling Bethany closer as he squared his shoulders.

“How far are you really willing to go to defend little Miss Bethany?” Professor Stein said.

“As far as I need to,” Calvin said, adjusting his feet to optimize his range of maneuverability.

“Till death do you part?” Professor Stein hissed, leaning hard into Calvin.

Calvin didn’t flinch. “If need be.”

Professor Stein suddenly grinned like a madman. “Do you *really* think that you can survive one round with me?”

“Absolutely,” Calvin said.

Colleen saw Calvin’s jaw muscles flex and his hands ball up into fists. She was admittedly surprised by his refusal to back down from Professor Stein. There weren’t many students brave enough to do that. Even so, her mounting concern for Calvin and Bethany’s safety overshadowed her own fears. She tenderly placed her hand on Professor Stein’s arm. “Don’t waste your time,” she said. “There are more important things to spend your energy on.”

Professor Stein patted Colleen’s hand, then took a step back. “You’re right.” He turned around and blew the whistle again. “Okay, team, let’s get moving!”

Bethany eased out from behind Calvin. Her blue, wide-eyed innocence became a hateful scowl. “Freak-lover,” she whispered, strutting past Colleen.

“Knock it off,” Calvin said. “I’ve worked too hard to have your high school antics continually jeopardize my place on the team.”

“Ooh, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” Bethany said.

“Well, if you keep it up,” Calvin said, “I won’t be waking up on that side of the bed for a couple days.”

Colleen bit her lip to keep from revealing her enjoyment of Bethany’s scolding. She removed a set of earphones from the pocket of her sweatshirt and tucked the silicon buds into her ears. She dropped the cord between the layers of her t-shirt and sweatshirt and pretended to insert it into an electronic device clipped to her sweatpants. No one needed to know that she couldn’t afford the latest technology in downloadable music.

Calvin put his hands on his hips and looked back in Colleen’s direction. “Hey.”

Colleen snapped her head up and took a deep breath. Her hands trembled beneath her shirt. “Yeah,” she said, waiting to be ridiculed about her imaginary iPod.

“Thanks for diffusing the situation with Coach,” Calvin said, avoiding Bethany’s dagger-filled gaze. “Running is the one thing I excel at and I think you probably saved me from getting kicked off the team.”

Bethany walked up and wrapped her arms around Calvin’s neck. “You have such a soft spot in your heart for the lower class.”

“And sometimes you have no heart at all,” Calvin said coldly. He turned his back to Bethany and walked over to where the other team members were doing their last-minute stretches.

Bethany pulled her blond hair back into a ponytail and glared at Colleen. “I’d suggest watching your back.”

Colleen shrugged. “I always do.”

“Bitch,” Bethany scoffed. She waved her middle finger at Colleen and marched off in a huff.

*Now that’s a true testament to her maturity level,* Colleen thought, jogging up to the predetermined starting point for the early morning run. It was one of many entrances to the dirt trail that weaved around the lake, which was accessible to everyone even though it was on university grounds. It had been pounded into a decent running path by all who appreciated the tranquil setting.

The dawning sun peeked over the mountaintops to the east and the first of its rays touched the forest preserve that surrounded three-quarters of the lake creating a treacherous visual maze of light and shadow on the trail. Colleen stared out over the water and wondered about Professor Stein’s rationale behind selecting the lake instead of the beautifully designed track that looped around the football field. It had been their practice location since the finish of the stadium’s construction. She didn’t understand why he was violating the new security protocol either. There wasn’t supposed to be anyone on the university’s grounds before six o’clock in the morning unless the Triton City Police Department had been notified. Furthermore, the lake had been strictly prohibited to everyone between the hours of seven p.m. and seven a.m.

“We’re fifteen minutes behind schedule,” Professor Stein shouted. “Your time starts in three, two, one...” He pressed the start/stop button on the crown of his mechanical stopwatch.

Colleen hoped the time she had spent in the shadows avoiding the intense brightness of the parking lot lights would help her differentiate between what was and wasn’t the trail. She sprinted forward, but eased into a comfortable pace after about two-tenths of a mile. She was familiar with the terrain, as the lake had been the perfect place to train after her classes each day. Its tranquil setting kept outside worries from dragging her spirits down. Today, however, she was mindful of the overall distance. It wouldn’t be a problem for her or the cross-country runners, but the majority of the sprinters would be ill-prepared and have to suffer through it.

“If you’re not going to run, get out of the way!” Bethany said, running up behind Colleen.

Colleen moved over to the right side of the trail. Even though her earphones were silent, she shouted to facilitate her facade. “I’d take it easy if I were you. It’s easily five miles.”

Bethany flipped up her middle finger as she passed by Colleen. A few of the other short-distance runners followed, but the rest eased their pace. At the very least, they respected Colleen’s knowledge of the trail.

Colleen continued her steady pace and refused to acknowledge the audible telltale signs of the struggle Bethany and her clan were enduring on the trail. She could hear bits and pieces of their bitter remarks as they stumbled over rocks and lost their footing in loose dirt. Self-righteous stupidity would keep them from slowing down unless Bethany

tripped over a tree root snaking its way across the trail or muscle fatigue sapped her energy and forced her to stop. Either way, Colleen knew she would catch up with them around the halfway mark.

“Bethany never listens to anyone,” Calvin said, striding up alongside Colleen. “We’ll probably have to pull her from the lake before it’s all over.”

“She’s *your* girlfriend,” Colleen said.

Calvin shrugged his shoulders. “You can’t choose who falls in love with you and vice-versa.”

“That’s true,” Colleen said.

Calvin remained quiet for a few steps. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

Colleen barely heard the question as her nose intercepted a subtle change in the early morning crispness. “Sure, what is it?”

“I’ve noticed your finishing times are getting substantially better,” Calvin said. “What’s driving you?”

The rancid odor grew steadily stronger and Colleen could hear her fearful heart thumping wildly in her chest. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you training so hard?” Calvin replied. “You’re already the fastest woman sprinter this university has ever had and you’ve broken all kinds of records. You pretend you’re less of an athlete during practices, but explode from the starting line when it really counts. So, what gives?”

Colleen offered a sideways smile. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me,” Calvin said.

Colleen wiped away the sweat that was collecting above her brow. “Why are you being nice to me?” she said, keeping a close watch on Calvin’s hands and the swaying shadows in the trees behind him. “You’re not going to shove me into the lake, are you?”

Calvin grabbed Colleen by the arm and pulled her over to the side. He waited for the rest of the track team to pass and gain some distance. “I’m not a total jerk.”

Colleen continued to jog in place. “I’m sorry,” she said, listening to the leaves rustling in the trees though no wind was blowing, “but you’re not usually Mister Nice Guy to me, either.”

Calvin removed his earphones and motioned for Colleen to do the same. “The truth is,” he said softly. “I wish I could be more like you.”

Colleen’s jaw dropped open. “A girl?”

“No,” Calvin laughed, shaking his head. “I’m definitely content being a man. Although there’s nothing wrong with being a girl,” he added quickly.

“Good recovery,” Colleen said.

“Hey, I have to stay on my toes with Bethany, remember?” Calvin said.

“I do,” Colleen replied. “So, why do you want to be like me?”

“I don’t want to have to worry about my family’s reputation every time I lace up my sneakers or decide to pursue some other aspiration,” Calvin said.

“And you think I don’t?” Colleen said.

“You do?” Calvin said, his eyebrows arching in surprise.

Colleen stopped jogging and placed her hands on her hips. “Yes,” she said icily. “The problem is if I work harder than anyone else at something, people think I’m trying to escape the supposed slums they believe I came from. They can’t fathom that maybe someone in my family had a rash of bad luck and every bit of money they had was used

to put food on the table. If that hadn't been the final nail in their coffin, then the faulty store-bought heater they used to warm the room where they were all huddled one cold night definitely sealed their fate."

"I'm so sorry," Calvin said. "I had no idea."

"Please don't pity me," Colleen said. "It's insulting. I just want one person to understand that my last name is all I have left of my family and it's as important as anyone else's."

"I never thought about it like that," Calvin said.

"Well, you're not the first," Colleen said, trying not to gag from the smell of rotting meat that saturated the air.

"I won't make the same mistake again," Calvin said. "I promise."

Colleen inhaled a couple deep breaths to calm her emotionally overworked nerves. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to unload on you."

"You did nothing wrong," Calvin said. "You simply defended your family's honor."

"Thanks," Colleen said. "Now, let's go catch up with the others before I convince you that taking me to Starbucks for coffee is a much better idea than completing this run." She wiggled her eyebrows playfully and took a few steps down the trail.

"One sec, okay?" Calvin said.

Colleen turned around. "Is everything all right?"

Calvin sliced his foot across the trail, kicking up a cloud of dirt. "Did my pompous attitude ruin my chance to train with you from time to time?"

Colleen opened her mouth to speak, but felt the grasp of panic start to squeeze her throat shut. Her eyes darted between shadows and her ears honed in on contradictions of the lake's peacefulness. Each inhalation resulted in an onslaught of smells for her to decipher. The strongest of these scents had a coppery flare that coated the inside of her nose, mouth, and throat. The odor grew so strong that she could taste it and there was no denying her taste buds; it was blood. "Come on," she said, concentrating on her breath to keep from hyperventilating. "You don't need me to be your partner. You have Bethany."

Calvin jogged after Colleen. "That's true, except that I need a running partner who will actually push me to be better."

"Okay," Colleen said, refusing to slow down. "You have a deal."

"You mean it?" Calvin said.

"Of course I do," Colleen replied, stretching out her stride. She feared that this would be her last will and testament.

Calvin covered his mouth and nose with his hand. "Do you smell that?" He matched Colleen's quickened pace. "I thought we were close to a dead animal back there, but I think we're running toward it."

"I think you're right," Colleen said.

"Time for some intervention," Calvin said, putting his headphones back on and cranking up the volume.

"Good idea," Colleen said loudly, placing her set of silicon ear buds back into her ears.

Pain-wrenching cries for help echoed down the trail. Colleen skidded to a stop and turned her head in every direction. Calvin sprinted ahead a few meters before looking

back over his shoulder. He changed direction and jogged up to Colleen. “What’s the matter?”

“Shh,” Colleen replied. “I think the team is in trouble.”

“Stop jerking my chain,” Calvin said, removing his headphones. “I don’t hear…”

Another wave of blood-curdling screams caused Calvin and Colleen to jump into each other’s arm. There were so many voices pleading to be saved. One shriek, however, rose above the others.

“Oh my god, it’s Bethany,” Calvin said, breaking away from Colleen’s terrified embrace. “Hold on, baby! I’m coming!” He darted into the wooded preserve and called out to Bethany over and over again, trying to pinpoint her location.

Colleen dropped to the ground and searched the embankment. She hoped for a large rock, but only cold, slimy muck oozed between her fingers. Frantically, she crawled across the trail, whipping her head from side to side to keep from being easy prey. As her hands scoured the base of the trees, she tried not to think about her teammates. It was already too late for them, but she wouldn’t go down without a fight. Suddenly, a hand fell upon Colleen’s shoulder. *Shit!*

“They slit her throat in front of my eyes,” Calvin cried. “I couldn’t save her and now those things are coming this way!”

Calvin shook with such ferocity that Colleen could barely understand him. She raked her fingers across the ground one last time for a sturdy piece of wood, but to no avail. Calvin grabbed her by the arms and jerked her up to her feet. “We have to go!” he said, choking back his terror.

Colleen knocked his hands away. “We won’t be able to outrun them.”

“How do you know?” Calvin said. “We’re not that far from the parking lot. We need to warn Coach and get the hell out of here!”

Colleen thought back to her earlier encounter with Professor Stein. She was no longer able to deny what she had seen. “Coach is one of them,” she said, pulling Calvin toward the lake’s edge.

“He’s what?” Calvin said.

“A vampire,” Colleen replied. “I glimpsed the tip of a fang protruding from his mouth earlier.”

“Are you high?” Calvin said. “Vampires don’t exist. Even if they did, those things in the woods don’t look like vampires.”

Fast-approaching footsteps pounded against the dirt trail. Whatever or whomever was coming would be upon them in under a minute.

“Trust me,” Colleen said, easing into the water. “I know in my gut that going back to the parking lot will only get us killed.” She slipped completely beneath the surface and swam quietly away from shore. She re-emerged about fifty feet away and looked back, half-expecting Calvin to still be standing there dumbfounded by her decision, but he was gone. *Good luck, Calvin.*

Suddenly, a single bubble broke the surface. *Please be a fish,* Colleen thought. She felt the rush of water as something rose from the depths behind her. There was no escaping it. A large hand clamped over her mouth and an arm encircled her waist. *Come on,* she thought, preparing to fight until her last dying breath. *Bite me, you bastard. I’ll gouge your fucking eyes out.*

“It’s me,” Calvin whispered, releasing his grip on her mouth.

Colleen closed her eyes as tears of relief trickled silently down her cheeks. “We need to remain quiet,” she said softly. “They might hear us.”

“Are you saying they can swim?” Calvin said, his voice cracking slightly.

“I have no idea what they can do,” Colleen replied. “I didn’t even know they existed until a few months ago. I’ve been running scared ever since.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Calvin said, pointing toward the embankment, “some of the guys got away. We have to help them.”

The sun was fully exposed in the eastern sky, but low enough that the trees still blocked out the majority of sunlight. Colleen watched as five of her teammates staggered up the trail toward the parking lot. Their clothes were shredded, hanging from their arms and legs in tattered rags. “We can’t help them,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Calvin said. “We have to help them.”

“Please,” Colleen said softly, “just wait for a second.”

Four creatures emerged out of the darkness and onto the trail directly behind the injured runners. They had the physiques of men, but carried themselves with their backs hunched over and their hands dragging along the ground. One of them lashed out with razor-like claws extending from his fingertips at the calf of Trenton Rivers, the slowest moving in the group. The creature tried again and again until it connected and ripped open a large piece of the flesh.

Colleen and Calvin watched Trenton collapse to the ground. “Get up,” Calvin said softly.

Sunlight penetrated the natural canopy of leaves and peppered the ground with tiny rays of warmth, enabling Colleen to see the fangs that protruded grotesquely out of the creatures’ mouths. “We should go,” she said, tugging on Calvin’s arm. “We’re wasting time.”

Two of the creatures passed by Trenton without pause and continued down the trail after the others. The two remaining circled him, snarling and hissing at one another. A taller creature stepped from the shadows, but its appearance resembled more of the legendary vampire figure that Colleen had read about in her obsessive research at the university library. With each step, she watched as it changed back into its human form and recognized him instantly, *Professor Stein*.

Professor Stein grabbed one of the creatures by the throat and lifted it off the ground as though it weighed merely thirty pounds. “Where is she?”

The creature clawed feverishly at Professor Stein’s hand clenched around its neck. It was obvious the creature wasn’t concerned about being suffocated, only consumed with desire to get back to its prey.

“Useless,” Professor Stein growled, throwing the creature back down. “If I find her dead, I’ll rip your heads off and drink the blood spurting from your necks.”

Calvin and Colleen glanced at each other, but said nothing. When they looked back, Professor Stein had vanished. The two creatures let out ravenous growls as though they were starving and tore into Trenton’s body. Their savagery was so intense that Colleen looked away to keep the images from being permanently embedded in her memory. She took comfort in knowing that Trenton’s lack of screams meant he had either died from a heart attack or from the leg wound, which was a deep enough laceration for him to have bled out within a matter of seconds.

“Let’s go,” Colleen whispered, tugging at Calvin’s shirt. “There’s nothing more we can do.”

Calvin closed his eyes. “I know.”

“We have to get as far away from here as we can,” Colleen said, “before Professor Stein notices we’re not among the dead.”

Calvin opened his eyes and in his periphery glimpsed one of the creatures tear a strip of flesh from Trenton’s thigh. “Oh my god,” he said, vomiting violently into the water.

Colleen wrenched her attention from Calvin to the embankment. Both creatures stared directly at her and Calvin. Their menacing yellow eyes glowed with an evil that she thought only existed in the minds of the best horror-fiction writers, but this wasn’t a novel or a movie. The blood dripping from their mouths wasn’t ketchup or some cool special effect. It was real blood and Trenton was a real victim, just like they would be if they didn’t get the hell out of there.

“Are you a good swimmer?” Colleen asked, growing more certain of their death as the creatures crept toward the water’s edge.

“Yes,” Calvin replied in a voice that made him sound more like an eight-year-old boy than a college student.

“We need to get to the far end of the lake as fast as possible. If we’re lucky, we’ll be able to escape into the backseat of an early morning fisherman’s vehicle,” Colleen said softly.

“That’s your plan?” Calvin said.

“It’s the best I can come up with on such short notice. If you have a better plan, let’s hear it,” Colleen said.

Calvin remained silent.

“Look, going back to the parking lot is out of the question,” Colleen said. “And, it’ll only be a matter of minutes before this entire area is swarming with those little fuckers. Swimming underwater might buy us some time and put needed distance between us and them, but then again, they might be able to track us by our scent.”

“I have an idea that might help if that’s the case,” Calvin said, “but I’m not sure it’ll work.”

“What do we have to lose?” Colleen said, trying to sound optimistic.

Calvin remained silent for a moment. “Our lives.”

Colleen nodded. “What’s the plan?”

“Give me all your clothes except for your bra and underwear,” Calvin said, stripping off his shirt.

“Are you crazy?” Colleen said. “We don’t have time for this!”

“The extra weight will slow us down,” Calvin said.

“I know that,” Colleen said, kicking off her shoes. “besides that, how with this improve our chances for survival.”

“Trust me,” Calvin replied. “It’s all about diversion.”

Colleen looked back toward the trail as she slipped off her sweatpants. To her astonishment, Professor Stein stood at the lake’s edge, towering over the two creatures that lurched toward the water like chained dogs waiting for his command. “I hope your plan works, Calvin,” she whispered.

“Me, too,” Calvin said, offering a faint smile. “Hand me your clothes underwater and hold your breath for as long as possible. We’ll make the rest up as we go.”

Colleen took a few deep breaths and slipped beneath the water after Calvin. She stripped off her sweatshirt and handed it to Calvin along with her sweatpants. She peeled her t-shirt from her torso right before her ears intercepted the sound waves from two separate splashes. The creatures were now in the water.

Calvin took Colleen’s hand and pulled her toward the opposite side of the lake, which was directly across from where they had last seen Professor Stein. When they had swum at least thirty or so feet, he released their clothes and altered their course to the south, which was the direction Colleen had proposed earlier. He hoped the creatures would assume they had opted for the nearest shore, and discarding their clothes in that general direction might buy him and Colleen some extra time.

The sun was now over the trees. Colleen could feel the warm rays on her back and appreciated the light penetrating the dark waters. Her lungs, on the other hand, felt like they were burning from the inside out. When she was certain that she would drown if she didn’t take a breath, Calvin poked her in the side. He streamlined his body vertically, arched his head back, and swam upward. Only his lips and nose broke the surface of the water to take a breath of air. He swam back down and waited for her to do the same. For once, she was thankful to be so flat-chested.

With no time to lose, they continued in their life-saving pursuit and repeated their covert operation of getting oxygen almost every two minutes. It was a struggle to keep from breaching the water’s surface and the strength it took to do so was taxing their muscles. Colleen realized all her training and determination was being tested, and failure would result in death. If she survived the current waking nightmare, every day would be a gift. Professor Stein would hunt them down and she needed to be prepared, much more so than she had ever imagined.

They swam strong beneath the surface until the water grew shallow. Calvin grabbed Colleen by the hand and motioned for her to wait. He swam upward, but this time allowed his entire head to break the surface. He turned in a circle scanning the surrounding area. After a few seconds, he waved at Colleen to join him.

Colleen ascended quickly and took a welcome gulp of air. She searched the banks of the lake’s popular south side fishing and picnic area. “I’m so happy we’re almost there,” she said. “I want to get the hell out of this water.”

“Well,” Calvin said, looking around, “the odds are in our favor. The sun is out and there isn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“I’m not sure that matters,” Colleen said.

Calvin’s eyebrow shot up. “I thought sunlight kills them.”

“I didn’t see any of them run off and hide at daybreak, did you?” Colleen said.

“No,” Calvin replied, searching the tree line. “I guess we could wait it out and pray for someone to arrive soon.”

“Let’s not forget the two creatures that are probably still combing these waters to find us,” Colleen said. “By now, I’m sure they’ve figured out that they were duped.”

“Good point,” Calvin said.

Colleen and Calvin dove back beneath the water and swam until there was no room left between their bellies rubbing the lake bottom and their backs breaking the

surface. They crawled on their hands and knees up onto the grassy embankment of the south side picnic area. They waited breathlessly, but the passing minutes were agonizing.

“Maybe we should make a run for it,” Colleen said.

“Listen,” Calvin said, his voice cracking slightly.

Colleen cocked her head to the side. The roar of an approaching vehicle’s engine scrambled her thoughts into a simmering pot of endless possibilities. Through all the emotional chaos, one question rose above the others. “What if it’s Professor Stein?”

“We’re dead then,” Calvin said, “and all hope is lost.”

Colleen swallowed hard as the muscles in her legs seemed to dissolve into jelly. Fear had wrapped a straight-jacket around her ability to think and she couldn’t move. A gentle breeze swept over them, and in its wake a familiar rancid odor. She looked behind them, expecting the two creatures to emerge from the depths with Trenton’s blood still dripping from their fangs, but the water only lapped against the shore. It didn’t matter. The odor was unmistakable and it was growing stronger. She knew the creatures were gathering and waiting to make their move.

A white van pulled up to a four-way stop less than a quarter-mile away. Calvin squeezed Colleen’s hand. “It’s now or never.”

Colleen heard Calvin, but the subtle change in the water’s rhythm breaking against the embankment behind them allowed her to form only one word. “Run!”

They took off toward the van, frantically waving their arms and screaming for help. In her periphery, Colleen saw three creatures spring from the tree line to her right. They were gaining ground with lethal efficiency. She didn’t want to contemplate the closeness of the other two that had emerged from the waters behind them. Her sole focus was on the person driving toward them. She feared that no matter how brave the driver might be, he or she would alter course and haul ass the other way, especially since the mutated versions of the most famous horror creatures of all time were chasing them.

The van barreled toward them. At the last second, the driver slammed on the brakes and cranked the steering wheel to the left, power-sliding into a perfect 180-degree turn. The back doors flew open and a large black man stepped out with a high-powered rifle. He was slightly taller than six-foot-three and easily weighed over two hundred pounds. Colleen noticed there was an uncanny resemblance between him and the missing quarterback from Triton University. She would know; she had followed the news updates about the ongoing investigation religiously.

An unseen man from within the van shouted to keep running and not stop for anything. Colleen saw the black man raise the rifle and aim it in her direction. Closing her eyes, she heard the crack of a round being fired and something fall to the ground directly behind her. She refused to look back, and opened her eyes in time to sail into the cargo area of the van with Calvin right beside her. A second blast from the rifle followed and she glimpsed another creature crumble to the ground a few feet from the van’s bumper. She could only assume that these were the creatures from the lake, which had tracked them so efficiently that she was almost their breakfast.

The black man placed the muzzle of the rifle against the creature’s head and pulled the trigger as it struggled to get back on its feet. The human quality of the creature’s face could not be denied as it slumped to the ground. It appeared as though some experiment had gone horribly wrong, but who was the so-called mad scientist behind it? *Surely not Professor Stein*, Colleen thought.

“Go, go, go!” the black man shouted, jumping back into the van and slamming the doors shut.

The driver stomped on the gas and hurled their rifle-wielding savior back against the doors, but he regained his balance swiftly. Through the monitors that were fastened securely along one side of the van’s interior, Colleen saw at least ten creatures giving chase.

“Don’t look so worried,” the driver said, glancing in the rearview mirror. “I promise you’re in good hands.”

“Who the hell are you guys?” Calvin said, shivering uncontrollably.

“My name’s Lawrence Williams,” the black man said, handing each of them a blanket. “My friend up there is Antonio Maggiano. We’re your new best friends.”

