

CHAPTER 1

FOUR DECADES OF detective work had taught Decker a thing or two. One of the delights of Missing Persons cases was that they often had happy endings. But sometimes not. Because people disappear for a variety of reasons.

Some individuals vanished by accident: a wrong turn on a hiking trail or a rogue wave that hit while sailing on otherwise navigable seas. Sometimes lives evaporated by wicked intent—a pickup gone awry or a stranded motorist meeting the wrong type of help. Sometimes souls perished in seemingly innocuous encounters that went terribly wrong, leaving the horrified perpetrators attempting to hide the evildoing, keeping a corroding secret that they were unwilling or unable to confront.

But sometimes people disappeared because they wanted to.

So far, no one was quite sure which reason fit Bertram Lanz—a thirty-five-year-old man with cognitive disabilities who disappeared from a field trip arranged by the Loving Care facility: a residential home. On the trip, there were fifty mentally challenged men

and women. Bertram was alive and well when chaperones herded the group back into the bus after a two-hour leisurely hike. But after a one-hour stop at a local diner, while boarding the bus to go home, the supervisors quickly realized that the head count was off by one. And no matter how many times the recount was taken, the Loving Care chaperones came up a body short. It took even more time to discover who was gone from the roster.

That was six hours earlier, and it was now ten in the evening. Since the call to Greenbury Police Station, officers as well as volunteers had been combing the nearby area for Bertram. Nightfall had now blanketed daylight: no moon and an inky sky pierced by a million pinpoints of light. The many forested areas were now as black as pitch and impossible to search. Even in the town proper, street lighting was more for atmosphere than for illumination. Detective Peter Decker had moved from the woods to the residential areas and he had been circling the streets for the last two hours, running into local citizens covering the same blocks. He was worried for the man's safety. Bertram wasn't ill and he wasn't on lifesaving medication, but his limited life skills probably hampered him from negotiating a complex world. Since it was summer, Bertram would at least have the advantage of a warmer night.

Fishing out his cell phone, Decker called his wife, Rina, who had joined the search party. In another life, five years ago, he had been a detective lieutenant with LAPD. He had retired from big-city life, but he still wanted to keep his foot in the door with something. And when a job at Greenbury PD opened up, he welcomed the opportunity to work in a sleepy little college town in Upstate New York. It wasn't that crime didn't exist here, but when it came, it was always unexpected.

She answered after two rings. He said, "Hi, darlin'. Anything?"
"I was going to ask you the same thing."

“No, unfortunately.” A pause. “Why don’t you go home, Rina? We’ve got help from neighboring departments now. There’s no reason for all of us to keep scouring the same streets.”

“Where could he have gone, Peter? The diner is in the middle of nowhere.”

“If he’s on foot, he couldn’t have gone too far. The problem is the woods. If he decided to go for a walk, it’s so easy to become disoriented even during the day. Right now, it’s too dark to search. We’re thinking that he might be holed up in some garage or cabin. You know how this town is. It’s filled with part-timers and no one’s home. We’re trying to get hold of the owners to ask permission to go inside the dwellings. All this takes time.”

“What did you mean by ‘if he’s on foot’?”

“There’s a possibility that this was planned. You have to consider everything even if it’s unlikely.”

“That might make some sense,” Rina said. “Otherwise how do you lose a person?”

“We’ve initially talked to the four chaperones albeit briefly. Once the bus reached the diner, it was a free-for-all. People piled inside, placing orders and looking for chairs. The diner has a maximum seating of thirty-five and there were fifty plus people.”

“They were in violation, then.”

“Yes, they were. But it’s a rural stopover and I suppose the thought of paying dinners outweighed the thought of being cited.”

Rina said, “Then the chaperones lost sight of him?”

“They weren’t checking off individuals. They were doing head counts. As the residents boarded the bus, they realized they were one short.”

“Have you talked to the other residents?”

“Not yet. Too traumatized.”

“I can believe that,” Rina said. “Are you coming home tonight?”

“I’ll be out here until they officially call off the search until morning.”

“When might that be?”

“Before midnight, but I might keep searching. I’m a little wired up.”

“Is Tyler with you?”

“No. Everyone in the department is riding solo. Don’t wait up for me.”

“I might,” Rina said. “I’m a little wired as well.”

“Try to get some sleep, honey. Call me when you’ve made it home.”

“I will. Love you. Stay safe.”

“Ditto and ditto.”

PULLING INTO THE driveway, Rina was taken aback to find it occupied—surprised but not scared because she recognized the car. A quick look around, then she dashed to the door and let herself in with a key. Gabe stood up when she came inside. “Hey, there.”

“Well, this is a treat.” Rina walked over and gave her foster son a mama-bear hug. Gabe had been with them since he was fourteen. A decade later, he now stood six two, lean and wiry. His light-brown hair was streaked with dirty blond. His eyes were saturated with shamrock green and peered out from behind rimless glasses. He wore a short-sleeved shirt festooned with cocktail glasses with black jeans and sandals.

Gabe returned the hug. “How are my favorite foster parents?”

Rina laughed. “Not much competition.”

“Then how about, how are my favorite set of parents?”

“Still not much competition.”

It was Gabe’s turn to laugh. “You never age, you know that?”

Rina gave him a skeptical look. She was in her fifties and wavered between feeling like a teenager and feeling like a centenarian. Most

of the time, youth won out. She was still trim, and that helped with her energy level. “That’s because I’m wearing a scarf on my head and you can’t see all the gray hairs.”

“All I see are your baby blues and your happy smile.”

“You charmer, you.” She gave him a gentle slug on the arm. “How are you doing, honey?” A glance at her watch. “When did you get here?”

“I got here about an hour ago. I know it’s late. Am I disturbing something?”

“No, of course not.”

“Where’s the big man?”

“The community is out looking for a lost man. He disappeared near the woods and he’s cognitively disabled. I’ve just come back from searching.”

“That’s awful. Can I do anything? I’ve got a car.”

“Not at all. I was just sent home. Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine. I ate before I came to Greenbury, and then I raided the fridge. I took the rest of the meat loaf. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay. Sit down. Tell me what’s going on in your life.”

They sat side by side on a blue-and-white print couch. Rina had originally decorated the rooms in multicolored chintz and florals. A year ago, she switched everything to prints in blues and whites. The house looked like a Ming vase with an occasional wood piece thrown in for contrast.

“Nothing much.” Gabe sat back into the cushions. “Just thought I’d stop in and say hello. I know it’s been a while.”

“It has.”

Rina smiled and waited for the shoe to drop. When Gabe chose to remain silent, she said, “How’s Yasmine?”

“Miserable.”

“Oh dear.”

“Not with me but with medical school. She’s either in class or studying.”

“I hear that the first year is the hardest.”

“Yeah, absolutely. Her parents keep bugging her to come back to Los Angeles and apply to pharmacy school. There are a ton of Persian girls who are pharmacists.”

“I thought her parents *wanted* her to go to medical school.”

“I dunno, Rina. Maybe they just want to get her away from me.”

“You’re engaged.”

“We are, but that doesn’t mean they’re happy about it.”

“You converted to Judaism.”

“Yes, I did. I even learned a little Hebrew and a lot of Farsi. But I’m not the guy they had envisioned for their daughter.” He smiled. “Although they do approve of the ring that I bought her.”

“Sparkle always wins them over.”

“Who doesn’t like bling? Yasmine is thinking about it . . . pharmacy school. I’d support her either way. I just want her to be happy, but I don’t suspect she’ll be any happier in L.A., living with her parents and away from me. But it’s her decision.” He looked at his watch. “I shouldn’t be keeping you up.”

“I’m fine, Gabe.”

“How did this man disappear?”

Rina sighed. “He lives in a facility. The residents were on a field trip to hike in the forest. The bus stopped off at a local diner off one of the rural routes. Apparently, it was a lot of people in a crowded space. When the group went to board the bus, he was gone. Peter and other local police departments are still searching. He’ll probably be out looking for a while.”

“Yeah, of course. Poor guy—the missing guy. Not Peter. Although I’m sure he’s working hard.”

She regarded her foster son. “What’s going on, Gabe? I know you

love us, but you don't take a three-hour trip from New York City without a reason. Do you need to talk to Peter?"

"Actually I came to see you, Rina." He looked up at the ceiling and blew out air. "My mother is in the States."

"That's so nice!" A pause. "Or is it?"

"I dunno. My mom and I have a spotty relationship."

"I thought you two had reached a rapprochement."

"Sort of."

"You're on speaking terms."

"We are . . . sort of."

"She took care of you for fourteen years, Gabe. Even when she was destitute, she always made sure there was food on the table and a roof over your head."

"I know, I know. I try to be charitable, but she did abandon me."

"Not exactly. She left you with us."

"Which, in retrospect, was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. But it still hurts."

"Of course. Where is she now?"

"In the city. She called me about two weeks ago when I was working in Chicago, so I had an excuse not to see her. But she must have gone on my website and looked up my concert schedule. She knows I'm in New York now and that I'm teaching a master class." A pause. "She wants to see me. Like sooner rather than like later."

"Do you know why?"

"No idea. But after eleven years of living in India with a man who hates me, it can't be because her maternal instincts suddenly kicked in."

"Do you want to see her?"

"Well . . ." He made a face. "I'd like to see my half sister and my half brother."

"They're with her?"

Gabe nodded.

“What about Devek?”

“He’s not with her. That’s a plus. The loathing goes both ways.”
He licked his lips and stood up. “I need some water.”

“I’ll get it, Gabe. Plain or sparkling?”

“Plain is fine.”

Rina went into the kitchen and retrieved a glass of plain water and a cold can of sparkling water. She liked to swig it directly from the container because it was refreshing that way. When she came back, Gabe was standing near the piano, looking at the many family pictures on top of the baby grand. Even though he wasn’t at the keyboard, proximity to the instrument seemed to calm him down. He came back to the couch, sat, and drained the water.

He said, “Devek and my mom are having problems.”

“Your mom told you that?”

“Not her. Juleen.”

“You talked to your sister, then.”

“Briefly. Juleen’s a stoic kid, but she sounded upset. She told me that her parents barely talk to each other. And she also told me that this trip was very sudden and without her father.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it doesn’t. My mom ran away from a bad marriage once. I don’t put it past her to run away again. Her choices in men are debatable.”

“Did your mom say anything to you about her marriage?”

“Not a word. She asked about my dad. She wanted to find out if he was still living in Nevada . . . which he is. She did tell me that if I talked to him not to mention her being here . . . in the States. She’s worried that he still carries a grudge.”

“Understandable.”

“Actually, he’s pretty happy in his current life. Chris would never hurt her. He still carries a torch for her. He’s told me several times

that he'd take her back in a heartbeat. But he'd probably just make her life miserable again."

"He beat her up."

"Yeah, that was bad. Thank God I walked in while he was slapping her. He stopped when he saw me. He was angrier than I've ever seen him."

Rina nodded. She knew what had happened. Chris Donatti had thought that Terry had aborted his child. Lord only knows what would have happened if he had found out then that she was pregnant with another man's child.

Gabe said, "I realize now that she had to leave, but it still hurts."

"I know it does. But that was over a decade ago. Maybe it's time to put it behind you. Both of your parents tried. They just have . . . shortcomings."

"That's a nice euphemism. Chris is a psycho. If he had lived in the 1930s, he would have been executed for a variety of felonies a lot worse than domestic abuse. I'm his son and he still scares me. *But* . . . at least he's been in my life for the past eleven years. That is way more than I can say for my mom."

"You've been in contact with her."

"A bit, yes." He sighed. "Getting back to the original question, I would like to see my mom in the flesh. But I have a feeling there's more to this than a filial visit. I know she's going to inveigle me into something."

"Like what?"

"Some kind of favor I don't want to do."

"You're not fourteen anymore, Gabriel. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. And it could be that she wants to see you without Devek. Since there's friction between the two of you, maybe she's being considerate."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Or maybe you're wrong and I'm right. I suppose there's only one way to find out."

Rina waited.

Gabe said, “Can you be there with me when I visit her? I know that sounds very childish, but if she sees you, she’ll act more . . . measured. Less likely to bamboozle me. And if I am getting bamboozled, you can point it out.”

“Yes, Terry is good at bamboozling.”

“I know. Try not to hate her.”

“I don’t hate Terry and I don’t hate Chris. They’re your parents, and they produced a fabulous child.”

“Does Peter hate her?”

“Of course he doesn’t hate her. He wasn’t happy when she left you with us without a forwarding address—for your sake, not for ours. You’re part of our family now. Everyone considers you part of the family.”

“I know.” Gabe bit his lip. “And I do appreciate everything.”

“Your appreciation is not necessary. Concert tickets are another thing.”

Gabe smiled. “You know, I talk to Hannah almost every day when I’m in the city. When I was telling her about the situation, she told me to ask you what to do. She said you were very wise.”

“Funny.” Rina laughed. “My daughter has never said that to my face.” A sigh. “When are you meeting your mom?”

“I said that I’d call her when I had a free day. What works for you?”

“Next week is okay, but I do want to run it by Peter.”

“I figured that. I hope he doesn’t try to talk you out of it.”

“Peter has never been able to *talk* me out of anything. I suspect that’s a husband’s lament.”

“Husband, boyfriend, fiancé . . . it’s a guy’s lot in life.”

Rina laughed and stood up. “I’ll get the guest room ready for you.”

“I’ve already moved in, clean towels and all.” He stood up. “I’m really sorry about that missing guy. How could they lose him?”

“Four chaperones for fifty adults. Not a good ratio.”

“But you’d think they’d find him right away. I mean how far could he go?”

Rina threw up her hands. “Hopefully, they’ll find him in the morning and none the worse for wear.”

“Unless he doesn’t want to be found,” Gabe said. “It can’t be fun, being an adult and living in a home. Poor guy. I suppose that even a disability isn’t a barrier when the heart yearns for freedom.”