

Charlotte (Charlee) Is Missing!

Ten Days of Terror

By

Harold J. Fischel

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Odin, a black Labrador with unusually long legs for a lab. Odin's exuberance and his pure joy in anything he did was an inspiration to us all. For Odin, every day was a good day. My fondest memory of that lovable dog was his dedication to his favorite game, "Go find Hal." He never failed to find me.

Chapter One

Date: June 7th, 2017

LOCATION Manhatta Restaurant

28 Liberty St. 60th floor

New York City

“What’s keeping her so long? I’m getting worried.”

“Come on Lily, she’s only been gone for about half an hour. Calm down and stop worrying!”

“Damn it. I won’t calm down. She’s only seventeen, and I’m responsible for her while she’s visiting me here in the city.”

“She told you she wanted to take some pictures of the views of the city. For a small town kid the view here from the sixtieth floor must be incredible. She probably got hung up taking a gazillion pictures.”

“I would have seen her. I’ve searched every part of this place including the ladies room, and I couldn’t find her. And it’s more than half an hour! She’s been gone over an hour.”

“Maybe she went into the men’s room by mistake.”

“Cut it out Ginger. That’s not funny! She’s naïve but she’s not stupid.”

“I’m sorry Lily. You’re right. It’s getting a little scary for her to be gone so long. What do you think Phyllis? Should we talk to the manager?”

“No! We should go to the police right now and report her missing.”

“Oh stop it Ben. You men are always so dramatic.”

“Phyllis don’t take this lightly. If Charlee looks even close to how Lily described her, we have a big problem. Lily get up, we’re going to the police to report Charlee as missing.”

Phyllis objected. “The police make you wait twenty-four hours before you can file a missing person report.”

That made Ben angry. “Movies and TV shows have spread the myth that you have to wait twenty-four hours before you report a missing person. That’s nonsense. You should file a report as soon as possible. The first twenty-four hours can be critical.”

Lily jumped up. “I’m not taking any chances. Charlee could be in real danger. Who knows what weirdo got hold of her. Let’s go!”

Chapter Two

Two weeks earlier

Date: May 24, 2017

LOCATION Apartment 56

105 Greenwich Ave

New York City

Phyllis planned a surprise birthday party for Lily and the guests are just arriving.

“Hey Camila, Alejandra, come on in. You two are the first.”

Phyllis took the two girls into the large living room decorated with ultra-modern furniture.

“Wow, this is one hell of a nice place you’ve got. Been living here long?”

“Just over a year now. You two still living together in Brooklyn?”

Before they answered, the doorbell rang and Phyllis was on her way to greet the next guest.

“Am I late? Is Lily here already?”

“No. Surprise, surprise. You actually got here on time. I was hoping you’d get here before Lily. We’re still waiting for Ben.”

“Ben? Why the hell did you invite him? You know Lily doesn’t particularly like the guy.”

“Yeah, I don’t like him much either but he’s our section supervisor so I felt I couldn’t leave him out. That would have been politically incorrect and very bad for my pending promotion.”

“I’m sure Lily will understand. Come on in, Camila and Alejandra are in the living room.”

“Alejandra? Who is Alejandra? Is she a friend of Lily’s?”

“No silly. Alejandra is Lex.”

“Oops, I never heard her called by her full name.”

“If you didn’t bury your head in your computer all day you might learn something about your co-workers.”

The four of them went into the kitchen where Phyllis had set up a bar with drinks. “Now all we have to do is wait for Ben to arrive and we’ll be ready to surprise Lily when she gets here.”

Lex and Camila also questioned why Ben was invited. Patiently Phyllis explained once again why she felt she couldn’t leave him out.

But Camila was not convinced it was a good idea to include Ben. “You do know he’s been hitting on Lily, right?”

“Of course I know. Look, Lily is a good looking girl and I’m sure she’s used to having men pay attention to her.”

Ginger had another reason. “He’s on thin ice making passes at her. As her supervisor he can get into big trouble.”

Phyllis laughed at Ginger’s concern. “Come on! His so called advances are quite innocent. Besides Lily is a grown up girl quite cable

of taking care of herself. She's a hot chick, almost every single guy in the building hits on her."

The group continued talking and had just gotten into some juicy office gossip about one of the downstairs receptionists and a much older guy from marketing, when the doorbell rang.

Phyllis was sure it was Ben. Lily never rang; she would just pound on the door, while announcing by text that she had arrived. As Phyllis suspected it was Ben. The three other girls were uncomfortable greeting him but that did not prevent them from sucking up to him. After all he was their boss.

They didn't have to wait long for Lily to arrive. Phyllis' cell phone beeped followed by loud pounding on the door. Phyllis instructed everyone to hide in the kitchen while she went to let Lily in.

As Lily entered the living room the whole gang came rushing out yelling *surprise*. The secret had been well kept and Lily became a little emotional when she realized it was a party for her birthday. She quickly went around the room giving everyone a kiss and a big hug. When she came to Ben she hesitated. She wasn't sure what to do: she certainly wasn't going to kiss him and she didn't want to hug him either. Awkwardly she stuck out her hand while murmuring something in the line of *so nice of you to come*.

As if they hadn't seen each other in ages the girls were chatting noisily while Ben stood by himself nursing a coke. Phyllis announced she had a birthday cake in the refrigerator and they all should come into the kitchen to watch Lily cut the cake. Lily made a nice little speech thanking Phyllis for organizing the party. Ben had been quiet but now he spoke up. "I realize we were not supposed to bring presents but there is something special I wanted to give you Lily." With that he handed Lily a package. When she unwrapped it, it turned out to be a bottle of St. Emilion, Chateau Grand-Pontet 2016 Grand Cru Classe.

“Wow!” Lily was clearly surprised and very pleased. “Oh Ben you shouldn’t have. You don’t have to spoil me like this.”

“I heard you’re a lover of fine wines and I inquired at the store where you frequently buy wine. They recommended this St. Emilion.”

This time Lily didn’t mind giving Ben a big hug. “That’s so nice of you. And that you went through the trouble of inquiring what I like is so sweet of you.” She gave him a second hug.

The others watched in amazement when Lily gave Ben, who she often complained about, that second hug. It was an unusual sight: six foot one Lily with the voluptuous body hugging the barely five foot nine, slender Ben.

Lex could hardly constrain her laughter. She whispered, “If she doesn’t watch out she’ll smother him.”

Ginger saw something else. “Hey Ben, I don’t want to be too personal, but how do you stay so slim?”

“I’m a member of a bicycle club. We ride anywhere from fifty to a hundred miles on the weekend.”

“Mostly guys I assume?”

“Yes, and most of them are bachelors.”

“That’s something for me. I could stand to lose a few pounds and maybe pick up a date in the process.”

“Oh stop it Camila. You’re just looking for a complement. You have a great figure and certainly don’t need to lose weight. As your roommate I know you have plenty of dates.”

Lily held up her hand. “Hey you two we don’t need to know all about Camila’s many dates. I’m sure they all are great guys but I have something important I need you to help me with. In less than two weeks my cousin Charlotte, we call her Charlee, is coming to New York and she’ll be staying with me. She’s the daughter of my father’s older brother, but she’s seventeen years younger than I am. She’s only seventeen, and as her high school graduation present her parents promised her a trip to New York.”

“Sounds great for the kid, but what do you want us to?”

“I need ideas as to what to do with her. She’s a real small town kid from my home town, Marquette, in Michigan. Marquette is the largest city in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula but the population is only around twenty thousand. Charlee isn’t used to a big town. She’s very naïve and unsophisticated; to give you some idea, she’s never even been to Detroit.”

Ginger could find nothing wrong with that. “I like unspoiled kids. Those bratty spoiled suburban youngsters aren’t for me.”

“Fine, but I’m responsible for her while she’s here.”

“So what!? We’ll help you take care of her.”

“The so what is that this innocent young lady is a real knock out. She’s six two in socking feet with a figure to die for. Thanks to our Swedish heritage, she’s got light blue eyes and hair that’s even blonder than mine. I’ve always been jealous of her legs. She’s got the longest beautifully shaped gams you’ll ever see! Unlike mine, her parents are very religious and as a good Catholic girl, she has been kept on a short leash.”

“So you’re Catholic like Camila and I?” Lex asked.

“Yes I am, but since I’ve lived here in the city I’ve drifted away from religion. More and more I question some of the Catholic doctrine.”

Since she was a confirmed atheist, Phyllis didn’t care about Lily’s religion but she did wonder how Lily got from Marquette to New York City.

“I know you’re as liberal as me, maybe even more so. But I never asked how the hell, coming from Marquette, you wound up here working for Horizon Financial.”

“Long story, really not very romantic.”

Ben was eager to know more about Lily. “Come on Lily, tell us. It may not be romantic to you, but we would love to hear it.”

“Okay, you asked for it. Here we go. Believe it or not as a teenager I was considered to be pretty bright, and unlike all the other girls in my class, I was interested in computers. My parents noticed that I loved playing with different computer programs, and they sent me to a boarding school where they offered computer science. On graduation, I won a scholarship to Stanford. In my senior year, recruiters from several big name financial service companies visited campus, and I was lucky to get an offer from Horizon Financial. I moved to their headquarters here in New York and never looked back.”

Ginger had an idea. “We should take Charlee to our office and show her around. Maybe she’ll follow in your footsteps. Does she have your knack for computers?”

Lily laughed. “Charlee and computers? No way! She’s into sports. That’s about the only thing that kept her in school. She’s a great athlete and can play any sport, but volleyball is her thing. If she’s lucky, she’ll get a volleyball scholarship to some university that doesn’t give a damn

about academics. Her father isn't as well-heeled as my dad, without some financial support she'll be going nowhere."

"What does your dad do?"

"He owns a computer service company which does the administration for a whole bunch of small companies in the Peninsula and upper Michigan."

Phyllis smiled at Lily. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Lex wanted to know more about Charlee. "Does your cousin have a boyfriend?"

"Nope. The only love interest is her stupid mutt. Actually I shouldn't say that about her dog. King isn't a mutt. He's a beautiful black Labrador with long legs like his owner. And he certainly is not stupid. Since the day she rescued him, King has been totally devoted to Charlee."

"She rescued the dog?"

"Yes, Ben, she really saved him. A couple of years ago Charlee and a group of her friends were out on a bike ride along the North Trails Loop. On their way home they passed a ramshackle log cabin. Charlee spotted an emaciated dog chained to the front porch. The poor thing was literally reduced to skin and bones, and his big black body was covered with mange. Charlee jumped off her bike, jumped the fence and raced up the rickety porch steps. According to her friends, she embraced the dog and said, 'I'll get you out of here!' Next she pounded on the front door. She kept that up till it finally opened. The guy who opened the door made hostile gestures for Charlee to get away from his porch. The friends waiting outside the gate got scared and shouted for Charlee to come back immediately. But Charlee was not about to abandon the dog. Unfazed by the man's threats she told him that if he didn't release the

dog and give him to her, she would report him to the police for his cruelty to the animal. The girls waiting at the fence were relieved and somewhat surprised to see the man unbuckle the dog's chain. Then he proceeded to shoo Charlee and the dog of his porch. Charlee walked back to the fence and the dog followed her. She grabbed the bottom of the rusty old fence and pulled it up. Without any instruction the dog crawled through the opening Charlee made and waited patiently for Charlie to climb over the fence and retrieve her bike. Charlee didn't have a leash or rope to hold on to the dog. She didn't have to; the dog followed her all the way home running loose next to her bike."

Ginger clapped her hands. "That's a great story. I already love Charlee, can't wait for her to get here."

"Wait, there's more of Charlee and her dog. The next day Charlee brought the dog, who she named King, to the vet. The vet pronounced King disease-free except for the mange that a shampoo would take care of, but he was dangerously undernourished. King got some medication for his mange, and the vet prescribed a diet for the next two weeks to help him slowly recover his weight. In a short time, King blossomed into a handsome, tall lab with a beautiful shiny black coat. Charlee and King became inseparable. They bonded so completely that it seemed like they have a mysterious mental connection. The family likes to demonstrate this by King's favorite game: 'Go find Charlee.' He'll find her no matter where she is."

Phyllis started it and the whole group started telling stories about the pets they had while growing up. Ginger topped everything by claiming to have had two pet raccoons that she would take for a walk together with her four dogs and a turkey.

Lily had heard enough. "Come on, fellows, let's get back to what we do for Charlee when she gets here in less than two weeks."

Like a first grader trying to get the teacher's attention Camila waived her hand. "I've got an idea. A guy I date named Jim, Lex thinks he's a real jerk, but he took me to a great place. It's called Manhatta. It's a restaurant downtown near the Battery. Not too far from our office. This restaurant is on the sixtieth floor and offers a fabulous view of the city. Jim knows I'm a vegetarian, and I had a great vegetarian meal there. Prices are reasonable, and if we go there we should get separate checks. Lily shouldn't pay for all of us."

Lily thought that was a great idea. "Do we need reservations?"

"Yes we should reserve our spots. I can do that if we all agree."

Everybody liked the idea, and Camila asked Lily for the date and time she should make for the reservation.

"Make it for June seventh at seven-thirty. That way Charlee can see the views during daylight and finish up when the lights come on."

Chapter Three

Date: June 7, 2017
Location: Room 105
1 Police Plaza Path
New York, NY 10007

Sergeant Morrison took them to his office on the fifth floor. “Give me as much information as you can. Even if you think details are not relevant include them. Every tidbit helps.”

The group had decided that Lily would be the spokesperson. “My cousin came to visit me. She lives in Marquette, Michigan, and we took her to dinner to a restaurant called Manhatta so she could admire the view of city.”

“Give me her full name and age.”

“Sorry officer. I should have started with that. Her name is Charlotte Mason. She goes by the nickname Charlee.”

“Describe her.”

“She’s six foot two, very blond, blue eyes, and slim figure.” The police officer nodded as he entered the information into his computer.

“Sorry I forgot to list that she wears her hair long, over the shoulders.”

“Any distinguishing marks?”

“No officer. She has no birthmarks or tattoos. Her legs are very long, but I don’t know if that is a distinguishing feature.”

“Who knows; it might help. I’ll add it to her description. I must warn you our detectives are not magicians. They do their best, but this is a big city and they’ll need some sort of lead to go on. I’ll put out an all points alert as soon as we wrap-up this report, and let’s hope someone has seen something that can help us find her quick. With her looks, your cousin might have run away to Hollywood.”

Lily’s face turned red she was so angry. If looks could kill the officer would have been a goner. In an ice cold voice she uttered, “Officer!”

The officer realized his joke was not appreciated. “I’m sorry; that was out of order. I fully realize the strain you’re under, and I should know better than to make light of the matter. A missing person is an extremely important matter, but unfortunately, it’s a routine occurrence in this big city. None the less, I can assure you the New York Police Department will do her utmost to find your cousin. After I brief them, two detectives will visit Manhatta to try to find someone who can give us a clue as to how your cousin disappeared. In the meantime, please don’t play amateur detective. You could wipe out information we can get out of known informants. As difficult as it is, please go home and wait till you hear from me.”

The officer then gave each of them one of his business cards and escorted them back to the lobby. “Call me if you hear anything. Hopefully, you’ll get a call from her. If she’s in danger, don’t, under any circumstances, go pick her up. That’s our job!”

Once back on the street, Lily suggested they go into the coffee shop across the street to decide what they should do next. Ben didn’t agree. “Lily, I think it’s best if you go home and call your aunt and uncle. Maybe you should call your dad, too. There is nothing we can do

tonight but wait to hear from the cops. We should all go home, and if possible, get some rest. I'm afraid we're in for a trying time."

"You're right, but I'm dreading that call. Phyllis, you live close to here. Can you and I go to your place to make the call? I think I need you with me, or I'll procrastinate forever until I get my nerve up to call my family."

The others agreed to go home and meet Lily early the next day at the police station to hear what the detectives had found out.

Date: June 8, 2017
Place: 1 Police Plaza Path
New York, NY. 10007

Despite the early hour the lobby at the police station was very crowded. Lily asked the others to wait while she went up to the main desk to ask for Sergeant Morrison. The officer on duty called Sergeant Morrison, and he said to send the group to room 105 where he would meet them.

"Sorry, I have no news for you. The detectives found only five people who remembered seeing your cousin. They had no idea what might have happened to her. The only thing they remembered was how beautiful she was. One of them said she caught his attention because, as he put it, she was a striking young gal. What worries me is that that guy

said he did see her talking to a man. That's all he could tell the detectives, and I don't like what that might mean."

Phyllis was quick to ask, "What do you think that can mean?"

"I'm not going to worry you with some wild guesses, but, unofficially, I recommend that you contact Harry, Hatchet man, Dubinsky and his on and off partner Sandy Littlefield."

Ben found that a little curious. "Who are they and why contact them?"

"The two of them operate behind the scenes and have contacts all over the city. They get information from scum who won't talk to us."

Ginger didn't like the idea. "You're recommending that we deal with folks from what I would call the underworld?"

"They're not really part of the underworld. We deal with them on a 'don't ask don't tell basis.' Harry is a reformed ex-drug dealer. He served six years in prison, but now makes his living as a hard handed debt collector for jail bondsmen. Sandy is an ex-marine who works on a part-time basis with Harry. For the rest of the time, she serves as escort for several underworld big shots who we keep under surveillance. She's a tough cookie, but pretty enough to be in demand."

Lily was desperate enough to work with them. "Can you contact them for us?"

Sergeant Morrison laughed. "It doesn't work that way. Officially I can't even give you Harry's phone number, but I think he can find out more about what happened to your cousin than our guys. Here is his telephone number." He wrote the number on a slip of paper and handed it to Lily.

Chapter Four

Date: June 8, 2017

Location: The Ship

158 Lafayette St.

New York, New York (SOHO)

Lily called Harry, but he didn't answer the phone; she had to leave a message which felt uncomfortable for her so just let her name and number. Within a minute Harry called back. He told her to meet him near his home in Soho in a bar named The Ship.

When they arrived at The Ship, a man sitting at a table tucked into the back of the bar signaled them to come on over. "Hello, I'm Harry. You guys have a seat and tell me exactly what happened last night to your cousin."

Harry was a tough looking, stocky guy with a face heavily scarred by acne. But his disarming smile made him look less scary, and Ben felt they could trust him. He whispered to Lily, "He doesn't look it, but I think this guy will help us."

When they were seated, Harry ordered drinks. Even though it was still early in the afternoon, the girls ordered Bloody Marys. Ben had a coke. Lily began, with Phyllis filling in some details, to tell Harry exactly what had happened. She stressed how young and naïve Charlee was and that this was her first visit to New York.

“If your cousin is as good a looker as you say, you’ve got a big problem. I’ve seen this movie too many times. Anyway, if you hire me I know where to start.”

Lily was ready for Harry to start that very second. “What do you charge and when can you start?”

“My fee is one thousand bucks a day. That is if I work alone. If I do this together with my partner we charge fifteen hundred.”

“Will you be working with Sandy?”

“*Aha*, so Morrison told you all about us.”

“Yes he did. He said that if anyone could find Charlee, you could.”

“We do our best, and we have our ways, but I can’t guarantee anything. If, as I suspect, we are dealing with human traffickers, it will be hard to get usable leads. And we have to work fast.”

At the mention of human trafficking Lily let out a shriek. A horrified look came over her face, and her hand covered her mouth. Phyllis reached over and put her arms around Lily. Ginger didn’t help the situation by crying, “No, no. Not that!”

Lily recovered quickly. “My dad and I will cover all your fees and all your expenses. Can you start right now?”

“Yes, I’ll call Sandy, and we’ll get started. You can settle up with us later, but I need cash to pay informants.”

“How much cash do you need?”

“We’ll need at least ten thousand to get started.”

Lily was dismayed. “I’m not that liquid. It will take me at least a full day to get that much cash.”

Ben shushed her. “My bank is a few blocks from here. Harry, if you come with me we’ll go and get as much cash as you think you may need.”

Ben’s gesture caught Lily by surprise. “Ben that’s very sweet of you, but this is my problem. I’ll call my dad to wire me the money.”

“Harry has to get started as soon as possible. He needs the cash now. We can settle this later between you and me, but now Harry and I are leaving to get the money!”

Chapter Five

Date: June 10, 2017

Location: Harry's apartment

380 Grant Street, New York, NY.

Ben instructed Camila and Ginger to go back to work. They hadn't proven to be very useful in the search for Charlee. Besides, their department at Horizon should not be left unstaffed too long.

Lily, Phyllis, Lex, and Ben had arranged to meet Harry early at his apartment to meet Sandy and to hear if they had dug up any leads as to who took Charlee. In the lobby they rang Harry's apartment and he told them to come on up. Harry met them at the door. He wasn't fully dressed yet, and when they entered the apartment they could hear Sandy shuffling around in the bedroom. They weren't there to judge what the two had been doing. They were just anxious to hear what Harry and Sandy had found out the previous day.

"Well, I got good news and bad news. The bad is that the Hung gang has Charlee. They're known to be involved in human trafficking. The women and girls they kidnap are auctioned off to the highest bidder. The good news is that Simon Tan, their local operative, doesn't transport his victims. He holds them locally while the gang arranges buyers for the auction. After the local auction, the gang arranges transportation to the buyer's home country. Usually, but not always, somewhere in Asia.

Sandy entered the living room and introduced herself. Sergeant Morrison was right. She was quite attractive and looked young for her age. Her layered, jet black hair was either dyed or a wig. Her tattooed, muscular arms would make you wonder if Sergeant Morrison was right when he speculated that she had received a general discharge for the Marines.

Sandy exuded self-confidence and quickly made sure the group understood that she and Harry could handle Simon Tan and his bunch of scum. “We have no trouble taking down crooks that jump bail. I don’t care how tough they consider themselves. I’d love to get my hands on that shit-head Simon. Anyone who takes a woman against her will deserves to be shot.”

Lex was afraid their rough methods could endanger Charlee. “I don’t care what you do to those bastards. Just don’t put Charlee in more danger. All we want is for you to find her, to make sure she comes back to us safe and unharmed.”

Harry had gone into the bed room to get dressed. He returned to join the conversation right at this emotional part. “Our goal is to find Charlee as soon as possible and return her to you safe and sound. What Sandy means is we won’t shy away from a fight with those guys. They won’t scare us away.”

Ben had a practical question. “Since your informants told you Simon and his gang took Charlee, did they give you any indication where they’re keeping her?”

“Unfortunately, no. That’s what Sandy and I will try to find out today. I’ve contacted a few of our snitches and we’ll start shaking them down today. Sandy is chummy with a guy who’s got his finger on the pulse of much of what happens in this city.”

“Yeah I’ve made a date with him for tonight, and I’m hoping for some informative pillow talk.”

Harry laughed. “Sandy is great at it. She gets these old fellows hot, and they spill whatever she wants to know in exchange for her favors.”

Lily seemed a little shocked, but Ben told her with a nod, “Whatever it takes to get Charlee freed.”

Sandy overheard Ben. “Your friend is right. You can’t be squeamish if you want us to find your cousin. Anyway, honey, I’ve done a lot worse than sleep with some old gangster.”

Harry was ready to get started. “Look I don’t want to kick you out, but Sandy and I should get started on making a few more calls. We’ll contact you when we know more and let you know if we need you.”

Chapter Six

Date: June 11, 2017

Location: Street in New Jersey

Vernon Ave, Newark, NJ.

Early on the morning of June 11th, Harry called to tell them that an informant had told them that Simon was seen in Newark. He had been seen around Vernon Street. Harry asked Lily if she and her friends wanted to join the search for Simon. If so, they should come to his apartment as quickly as possible.

In two cars with darkened windows they cruised around the area asking questions. Harry was at the wheel of one car and Sandy was driving the other. Nobody had seen or heard anything unusual. Harry had called Sergeant Morrison to share the information, and several detectives were also covering the area.

Nothing was found that day, and by nightfall they all returned home disheartened. Harry promised Lily he'd be on the phone all night contacting more informants. Sandy made a date with another of her sugar-daddies.

Lily got a call from Ginger asking how the search was going. Lily told her they knew the general area but could not find where Charlee was kept. Ginger said time was running out and they should get King, Charlee's dog, to come and help. "You told me he likes to play Find Charlee. Dogs have a much more powerful instinct than people. By now,

he surly misses her terribly. If you bring him to the city, I bet he'll find her!"

At first, Lily thought it was a ridiculous suggestion, but Ginger kept urging her to get King. Finally, she said. "How do I get him here all the way from Marquette?"

"Damn it Lily; it's worth trying. You don't seem to have much else to go on. For Charlee's sake, find a way to get King here!"

Lily called Harry and asked if a dog would be helpful. "Of course, police use dogs all the time. But they need some clothing or other thing to give the dog some scent to go on. We have nothing like that, that's why the cops are not using dogs. If a dog can find his master in a place he's never been is doubtful. However, if you can get him here, it's certainly worth a try."

Lily called Phyllis to see what she thought about getting King.

"It's like searching for a needle in a haystack. Harry explained that the police aren't using dogs because they don't have a scent to go on. But Ginger thinks King can find her."

Phyllis wasn't convinced. "He'll be lost here in the city. The totally different surroundings would confuse him, he may even get loose and we could lose him too."

"It's worth a try."

"How the hell would you get him here? He's all the way in Marquette. That's a four hour trip to Detroit and then waiting for a flight

to New York. Traveling in a cage by himself would upset the dog; he'd be useless."

"Not so fast. I have an idea. An ex of mine, Travis Degenhardt, is a licensed pilot, and he has a plane."

"But that's a long haul for a small private plane."

"His plane can make it. It's a small jet. His father is stinking rich, and he has lots of great toys. Fancy boats, the latest model sports cars; you name it, Travis has one. He's a conceited dork and somewhat of a bore; that's why I broke up with him. But it *is* worth a try. We have no other way to get King here. I'm going to give him a call."

"Hi Travis, it's me Lily."

"Hey Lily, haven't heard from you in ages. How is my old heart-throb?"

"Not so good Travis. My young cousin is missing. We are almost positive she was kidnapped while visiting me."

"When did that happened?"

"Sunday evening. We were having dinner at Manhatta and she disappeared. The kid is only seventeen years old."

"If she's as beautiful as you, you have a real problem."

"Travis I'm desperate. I'm begging you to help me."

“Lily you don’t have to beg. Maybe we’re not lovers anymore, but we’re still good friend. Of course I’ll help. What can I do? Money for ransom?”

“No, not that. We need to get a dog from Marquette, Michigan, and I’m hoping you’ll fly me there and back to get the animal.”

“You got it! Strange request, but of course I’ll help you. I’ll call Teterboro Airport to get my plane ready. The weather is lousy. Flying back and forth to Marquette by myself isn’t a good idea. I’ll hire Joe Hanson, the local flight instructor, to be my copilot. He can start filing the flight plan. It’s only twelve miles for me to get from here in mid-town to Teterboro. But there’s no good public transportation to get there. I’ll call Danny to bring my Corvette, so I can drive out to Teterboro. On the way, we’ll go past my garage, so he can get the Range Rover to drive you to the airport.”

“Who is Danny?”

“He’s my new driver.”

“What happened to Carl?”

“Got rid of him.”

“Why on earth? He worked for your family for ages.”

“Yeah he did. But he made too many remarks about me dating a young Play Boy Bunny. He kept on reminding me that if the Play Boy Club found out she was dating a customer, she’d get fired. I repeatedly told him to lay off; that was her problem not mine.”

“Didn’t you care?”

“Nope. New York is full of pretty young girls who would love to date a rich guy.”

“Does that include me?”

“Don’t be silly. Of course not. You’re the stubborn one who got away. But don’t worry, I still love you. When you get to Teterboro, will you remember how to find my plane?”

“Of course I remember. It’s not that long ago since we took trips together. I’ll be ready to go when your man Danny gets here. Travis, you’re a sweetheart to do this. It may save my cousin’s life.”

“I don’t know why you need that dog to help. But I would never refuse you a favor.”

Next, Lily called her uncle.

“Lily, any news?”

“Sorry Uncle Jeff, we still have nothing to go on. We think King can help, and I’m coming to get him. I need you to bring him to Sawyer International Airport. You know that place; it’s about seventeen miles out of town. Bring a cage; he can’t be loose in the plane. We’re coming in Travis’ private plane. You probably remember Travis from the time we visited a couple of years ago? He had just bought that cute little jet. I guess we’ll be there in approximately four hours.”

Sitting in back of the Range Rover on the way to Teterboro, Lily thought back to the day she and Travis went to Duluth, Minnesota, to take delivery of his new plane from Cirrus Aircraft. Travis had spent some time during the previous month to become fully qualified to fly the jet by himself. For a guy whose father would buy him almost anything to

be so excited about this small jet surprised Lily. During the following year they made numerous trips together. Travis even took her to visit her parents in Marquette. Even though he was very flashy and boasted a little too much about his business dealings, her conservative family was very impressed by the rich New York bachelor. When Travis and she left to return to New York, Travis promised to send everybody a case of wine from his famous vineyard in Virginia.

At Teterboro, Lily went straight to the hangar where Travis kept his plane. To her surprise, he was nowhere to be seen. She walked back out of the hangar, and on the runway she spotted Travis and Joe, next to one of the rental planes, talking to the ground crew. Quickly, she trotted over to them.

Travis greeted her with a big hug. "I'm so sorry someone took your cousin. I hope this dog we're getting will help locate her."

Lily gave Travis a pick on the cheek. "Thanks for doing this. Will we be able to leave anytime soon? Your plane is still in the hangar."

"We're not using my little Cirrus SF Vision. As you know, that small jet could make the trip but Joe thought it would be better to use this larger Cessna Citation CJ3+. It's faster, and we won't have to waste time refueling in Marquette. The airplane rental company Joe works for acquired her last month, and just last week Joe took me up in her to teach me the controls."

Lily frowned. "That must cost a bushel to rent."

Travis shook his head. "Lily, if I taught you anything at all, it's not to worry about money. It's all taken care of." Joe smiled and nodded.

Four hours later, looking out of the large windows of the Cessna, Lily spotted Marquette. Ten minutes later, they were on the ground.

Almost all of Lily's family was there to meet them. Lily hugged her mom and dad and then turned to her uncle and aunt. Her aunt was crying, and Lily embraced her. "I'm so sorry. I have no idea how this could happen. We were having dinner in a restaurant we picked so she could see the view. There was a whole group of my co-workers there. She left us to take some pictures and totally disappeared."

Her uncle Jeff placed his hands on Lily's shoulder and pulled her into his chest. "None of us blame you Lily. Please don't feel guilty. The whole town has prayed for her, and God will help us find her."

After greeting Lily, the family went over to speak to Travis and Joe. Lily's family knew Travis from previous visits, and they introduced him to the local priest who had come out to the airport to support Charlee's parents.

Charlee's mom tearfully thanked Travis for doing this and hugged him tightly while repeating, "God bless you, God bless you, for getting King. King will find her!"

Lily's uncle took her aside. "Can we come along with King? Your dad bought tickets for us for a flight out of Detroit tomorrow afternoon. We're all packed to go. If we can go with you we'll get to New York much sooner."

Travis overheard them. "Of course you can come. The plane holds nine; we have plenty of room."

Due to a strong tailwind the flight back to Teterbore took less than three hours. While they were in the air, Lily's dad booked a hotel room for his brother and sister-in-law at the Park Central Hotel in the city. He figured if they were staying in a central location their room could serve

as the command center for the search for Charlee. King would stay with Lily.

Chapter Seven

Date: June 12, 2017

Place: Lily's Apartment

1524 Sheepshead Bay Road

Brooklyn, New York

Early in the morning, Lily's phone rang. She had hardly slept a wink; King spent the entire night restlessly roaming through the apartment. By his soft whimper, he signaled Lily that he was looking for Charlee.

Wiping the sleep from her eyes Lily picked up the phone.

"Miss Mason?"

Lily bolted straight up in her bed; she hoped it was a call from a person holding Charlee. Her voice trembled, "Yes, this is she."

"This is Sergeant Morrison, sorry about the early hour, but I have the following."

"News about Charlee!"

"Sorry to disappoint, no. The NYCP entered her case in the NCIC."

"What's that?"

“That’s the missing person file of the FBI. The FBI contacted me and they want me to arrange a meeting between their local agents and your family.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible. You don’t have to go to them; they’ll meet with you in a place convenient for you and your family.”

“My aunt and uncle arrived yesterday. They are staying at the Park Central Hotel. That would be the best place to meet.”

“Can I tell them eleven this morning?”

“Yes, I’ll call my uncle and aunt to let them know. They’re in room 202. I have to make sure I can bring our dog into the hotel. I can’t leave him here by himself.”

Date: June 12, 2017
Place: Room 202
Park Htel, 870 7th Ave
New York, NY.

“We’re not comfortable with Harry Dubinsky and Sandy Littlefield working on this case. Especially Sandy, she’s too closely connected to the underworld. They could spook the person or persons

holding your daughter, and that would make it even more difficult for us to find her.”

“My niece hired them, and she thinks it was the right thing to do. Lily, why don’t you tell these two gentlemen why you hired Harry?”

“The NYPD didn’t have any leads to go on. It took Harry less than twenty-four hours to find out who kidnapped Charlee. If it’s up to me, we stick with Harry and Sandy. Naturally, we also want the FBI to join the search. Can you cooperate with Harry?”

The FBI agents looked at each other. One nodded his head and said, “It’s totally up to you. If you want the team of Harry and Sandy to continue the search, we will fully cooperate with them, and of course, the NYPD will stay on the case.”

Four hours later they we’re back cruising the streets in New Jersey. Lily, her uncle, and Lex were in the car driven by Harry. Her aunt, Phyllis, and Ben were in Sandy’s car. King was in the back seat between the aunt and Phyllis.

They continued searching for four days without results. Harry worked the phones at night hoping to squeeze some information out of the many smalltime crooks who, for a small reward, would get him the information he needed. Sandy slept every night with yet another well-connected big shot.

On the fifth day, they started out full of hope. Simon had been spotted. They zeroed in on the area where the informant had seen him. A second informant claimed to have seen him enter an apartment building at 1301 Wall St., W. Lyndhurst, New Jersey.

Harry notified the NYPD and the FBI. An army of police cars arrived at the scene. They waited for the SWAT team to arrive before searching the building. A thorough search of the building turned up nothing. The local police wound up apologizing to the irate tenants whose apartments were subjected to the search.

One of the FBI agents blamed Harry for coming up with false information. “Stop wasting our time and resources on phony information dreamed up by a snitch who took your money and ran.”

Harry swore he’d get the son of a bitch but in the meantime they were back to point zero but couldn’t give up.

Chapter Eight

Date: June 15, 2017

Place: Monarch Apartment Complex

100-120 Schindler Court

East Rutherford, New Jersey

The night Simon kidnapped Charlee, he and two of his gang members brought her back to their large apartment right on the border of New York City in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

The very next day, the Hung Gang started contacting its worldwide customer network to notify them they had a young female beauty ready to be auctioned off. The date of the auction would be June 15th. The rules would be the same as always. Buyers had to attend in person. A fee of \$50,000 was required for the right to bid. The fee had to be deposited in Nengyi Hung's account before the start of the auction. The girl would be delivered to any address listed by winning buyer. The total amount of the winning bid must be in Nengyi's account before delivery would be completed. All participants were reminded not to bring cash to the auction.

On the day of the auction twenty men, mostly Asian, gathered in Simon's large living room. Two beefy men brought Charlee in. She was crying and trying to pull away but could not break the hold of the two muscle-bound guys. An older woman who had been taking care of Charlee for eight days followed close behind.

Rayyan Teoh the auctioneer explained that the auction would be conducted in English. Translators were requested to whisper in the ear of their employer. Rayyan opened the bidding at \$50,000, the amount that would be credited to the winning bid. The bidding rapidly passed \$200,000.

Gilbert Low, seated in the back grumbled, “I won’t pay that kind of money for that girl. She’s hardly got any tits.”

Simon knew others had heard the comment so he jumped to the front of the room. “That’s not true! We’ll show you.” He turned to the old lady and instructed her to take Charlee’s clothes off. Charlee fought like hell, and the old lady showed some sympathy by leaving her bra and panties on.

Simon reached over to show the size of Charlee’s breasts. The old lady sprang up and smacked his hand away. She glared at him and took a protective stance between Simon and Charlee. Rayyan spoke to Simon in an angry voice. “You’re out of order! You know Nengyi’s order. Never touch the merchandise that way!”

Simon grumbled something to the effect that Charlee was his catch and the others just profited from his work. That caused a few laughs among the assembled crowd. Gilbert raised his hand.

“Okay, I can see it now. She’s got nice tits; I bid \$500,000.”

In the end, the winning bid was made by a tall, beautifully dressed gentleman. He appeared to be an Arab, but could also have been from

southern Europe. He was new to this type of auction, and nobody had seen him before.

Rayyan whispered to Simon, “Watch your step. This guy is a close friend of Nengyi. He can get us fired if we piss him off during the delivery.”

After the buyer had closely inspected Charlee and quizzed the old lady about who would take care of her delivery, Charlee was taken back into one of the bedrooms. Rayyan informed the buyer they would start delivery in two days when a special crew arrived to handle shipping and that payment in full was expected immediately.

Chapter Nine

Date: June 17, 2017

Place: Monarch Apartment Complex

100-120 Schindler Court

East Rutherford, New Jersey

After the raid on the apartment complex, Harry gathered the group in a coffee shop down the street. He offered his apology for the mishap and assured Lily that the money he gave to the phony informant would come out of his own pocket. Sandy said she was running out of honeydudes but she would keep trying. Lily's aunt questioned how she could get herself to sleep with all those different men.

Sandy laughed it off. "It's a job. It helps pay the rent. I make sure they're clean."

Jeff Mason was shocked and quickly put an end to the conversation.

They got back into the two cars and started back to the city. When they crossed Schindler Court in East Rutherford, New Jersey, King started barking like crazy. Lily's aunt could barely restrain him. She shouted for Sandy to stop the car. "Stop! Stop! King has found Charlee!" She opened the door and, holding on to his leash, she let King drag her a few blocks. He sat down in front of one of the entrances to the Monarch Apartment Complex.

Sandy pulled her car up to the front of the building King was trying to enter. Harry parked behind her. He didn't question King's instinct. "Everybody stay in the car. I'm calling the FBI and the police. I want that SWAT team back immediately. If that dog is right, they're holding her in this building."

After the last false alarm, neither the FBI nor the police would agree to commit assets to a raid; certainly not based solely on the action of a dog not familiar with the area. Harry was outraged.

"Stupid bureaucrats. This is outside the usual, so they refuse to act. The hell with them. We're going in!"

He pulled his revolver from the holster strapped around his chest and told Sandy to draw hers. Next he instructed Lily's aunt to let King enter the building and to hold onto his leash and follow him without letting him get too far ahead them. King ignored the elevator. He led the way up three flights of stairs and straight to apartment 304.

Harry waived everybody except Sandy back. He took off King's leash, motioned for Sandy to aim her pistol at the door and he rang the bell. Nothing happened and he rang again. Slowly the door opened. King bolted through the door and ran to a bedroom in the back. He jumped up and crashed through the door and flew inside. Inside he knocked over an old lady, pushed aside a heavysset man and landed on top of Charlee who was tied down to the bed. The man tried to grab this flash of a dog but rather than defend himself King stretched out to his full length and covered Charlee.

Harry had followed King into the bedroom and when the heavysset man reached for his gun, Harry shot him in the arm. For good measure, he put a second shot in the man's leg.

In the meantime, Sandy had cornered three men in the living room. "If one of you makes a move, I'll shoot all three in the balls. Now lie face down on the floor while I check for guns. I'm warning you. One move I don't like and I'll blast all of you."

The group waiting in the hall heard the shots. Led by Ben, they came rushing into the apartment. Sandy stopped them. "Help me check these three for pistols or knives." Ben and Lex got right down to check. They found nothing: Lex could not resist; she kicked one of the three in the head and stomped on another's hand.

Lily and Charlee's parents, anxious to see where the shots came from, went straight for the bedroom. To their great relief they found Charlee lying on the bed covered by King. They ignored the old lady laying on the floor and the wounded man moaning in a corner. With Harry's knife, they cut Charlee free, but when they tried to hug her, she would not let go of King. She held him so tight it must have hurt the animal, but King didn't care. He kept Charlee covered with his body and enthusiastically licked her face.

Charlee kept saying "King, King," and did not seem to recognize the others.

Ben came into the bedroom. "Call an ambulance. She's in shock and needs medical attention."

The ambulance arrived at about the same time as the police. The three men held by Sandy in the living room, together with the old lady and the wounded man, were taken into custody and carted off in a heavily armed paddy wagon.

Charlee was examined by the medics. To bring her to the ambulance, they insisted on placing her on a gurney. She was in near catatonic state and spoke to no one, they didn't trust that she would be able to walk down the stairs. She didn't seem to recognize anyone but King. She refused to let go of him, and King rode on the gurney with her. The medics realized they had to take the dog along in the ambulance. They allowed Charlee's parents to also squeeze in and come along to the hospital.

At the hospital King was accepted as a companion dog and allowed to stay with Charlee in her room. She was examined by an intern who called in a psychiatrist. Charlee was suffering from serious psychological trauma and would not be discharged from the hospital until further tests. Her room was prepared so her mother and King could stay with her.

Chapter Ten

Date: June 18, 2017

Place: 1 Police Plaza Path

New York, NY. 10007

Before Charlee was rescued Simon and his crew had left the USA. Charlee remained behind guarded by the four transport and delivery experts and the old lady. After these five had been taken into custody the police found a trove of detailed records documenting hundreds of auctions, regardless of the country where it was held.

The names and addresses of all the buyers were shared with Interpol and local police in many countries. During the next week, it rained arrests all over the world. Almost two hundred young girls and women were rescued. Among those rescued were fifteen boys, all under the age of twelve.

A reporter from one of the Detroit newspapers broke the story, and soon King's picture appeared in newspapers all over the world. The story of Charlee's rescue and the ensuing return to freedom of hundreds of human trafficking survivors spoke to people's imagination. Magazines were filled with details, even a few of the names of the rescued women and girls.

All this did not escape Travis, and he called Lily. “Hi there, stranger. So we didn’t fetch that dog for nothing. You could have let me know you found your cousin. I had to read it in the paper.”

“Travis I’m truly sorry. Yes I should have called you and let you know. I was over my head and needed a few days for all the emotions to subside. It was so surreal. Besides, we’re not out of the woods yet. Charlee is still in the hospital. Luckily she’s starting to come around but I’m still worried about the long term effect from what she had to endure during those horrible ten days.”

“I would have been glad to assist in the search. I have considerable pull in this town. I could have gotten the mayor to help.”

“I know you would, Travis, and I appreciate it. But the FBI warned us not to spook the kidnapers. We had to keep a low profile during the search.”

“Anyway, now that it’s over I sure would like to see you again. How about me taking you to Manhatta so you can finish the dinner that was interrupted by Charlee’s disappearance?”

“No way!”

“You won’t go to dinner with me?”

“It’s not that. I don’t want to go back to Manhatta. I still have nightmares about that evening.”

“I have an idea. Why don’t you come with me to the Cessna Aircraft Company in Wichita, Kansas? I loved that Citation CJ3 we flew to Marquette, so I’m planning to buy one.”

“Can we do something a little simpler? I’ve missed too much time at work, and more importantly, I don’t want to leave town while Charlee is still in the hospital.”

“Fair enough. For old times’ sake, I’ll take you to Le Bernardin.”

Lily shuddered as she thought back to the first time Travis took her to Le Bernardin, his favorite restaurant. It had been a great evening. The dinner was exceptional and she was in a joyous mood. She eagerly accepted when Travis suggested taking her to see his penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park.

On the balcony overlooking the park and much of the city’s skyline her mood slowly sank when Travis kept groping her. “Please stop Travis; it makes me uncomfortable.”

He persisted and Lily retreated to the living room. Travis followed and suggested she stay the night. Lily shook her head. “Too soon. We barely know each other.”

“Come on Lily. We’re not strangers. I took you to a party at my folks and introduced you as my new girlfriend.”

“We’ve had a lot of fun together, but I don’t know if I’m ready to sleep with you.”

“You’re not a little high school girl anymore. For God’s sake, you’re in your thirties. Don’t tell me you’re still a virgin.”

“I am...sort of.”

“What do you mean by that? Either you are or you aren’t!”

“In boarding school I dated a guy from a nearby all boys school. At his graduation party we got a little tipsy and we went a little too far. Actually, he had it all planned. He took me up to his room and had the condoms ready. I think it was the first time for him, too. He came the moment he entered me.”

“Forget that. We’re adults now, and I assure you I won’t bungle it.” He didn’t bungle it, but Lily didn’t think it was great.

Lily realized that while she was lost in her thoughts she had not responded to his invitation to take her to Le Bernardin. He had gladly flown her back-and-forth to Marquette, and she felt she owed him one. “Sure, I’d love to go with you to Le Bernardin.”

“How about this Friday?”

“Sounds great. Pick me up around seven.”

Unfortunately, that Friday night was more or less a repeat of their first date. After dinner, Travis wanted to show her the condo he had recently purchased on Park Avenue South. He kept on pushing, and Lily finally relented. The condo was unbelievable. The huge master suite was almost the same size as Lily’s entire

apartment. Travis pointed at the huge king bed. “Why don’t you stay? You’ll love the special mattress my interior decorator found.”

“You know I like you. You’re a nice guy, but we’re not lovers.”

“Then, just sleep with a nice guy. I’m not insisting you love me.”

Lily thought it over. She did owe him for getting King. He responded immediately when she needed him. “Okay, I’ll stay with you tonight. I owe you that much for what you did. However, this will be payback. After tonight, we’re even.”

Chapter Eleven

Date: June 24, 2017

Place: Charlee's room

Columbus Hospital

19th Street, New York, NY.

By the fourth day in the hospital, Charlee started to come out of shock. The first thing she recognized was her Mom. It took a little while, but she threw her arms around her mother's neck and cried profusely. "Mommy, I didn't want to go with that man, but he insisted he could show me a better view from a room in the back."

Her mother squeezed her tightly to her chest. "It's okay, darling, we understand. Nobody blames you! We understand; we love you so much."

Charlee spotted King lying close to her bed on a blanket the nurse had laid down for him. She sat up and King immediately jumped on the bed. He licked her face and pushed against her; he couldn't get enough of her. Charlee suddenly remembered King jumping on top of her and covering her while she was tied down. Her mother explained how he got there and that it was King who led the way to the apartment where she was being kept.

Charlee started crying again. Hugging and kissing King, between sobs, she said, “King my darling without you they would have taken me to Hell. Oh my darling, you saved me from what would have happened to me. They sold me!”

On her fifth day in the hospital Charlee was ready to see her father and Lily. Her older brother had driven in all the way from Marquette, and he came to see her on the next day.

By day six, the psychiatrist thought Charlee was ready to leave the hospital.

He took her parents aside and explained. “She has recovered enough to function normally. However, the long period of confinement has led to what we call PDSO which is a condition of Prolonged Duress Stress Disorder. I’m sure the symptoms will remain under control as long as you don’t separate her from that dog. She has developed a strong dependency on the animal and feels secure as long as the animal is close. I do advise you to contact local medical agencies and arrange regular counseling for her for at least a year.

Her older brother had driven up in his uncle’s Chevy Suburban. He suggested he drive his parents, Charlee, and King back to Marquette. His father agreed, but only if he agreed to make the trip in two days. Coming to New York, he had driven the thousand miles from Marquette nonstop by himself. Only stopping for food and gas. To Lily, he admitted he was so worried his baby sister was missing that he cried most of the way.

Chapter Twelve

Date: September 8, 2018

Place: Lily's Apartment

1524 Sheepshead Bay Road

Brooklyn, New, York

Ben left Horizon Financial in the summer to assume the COO position at a new investment fund. For quite a while, he considered calling Lily to ask her out. He finally got up enough nerve to do it.

“Hi, Lily, it’s Ben.”

“Well I’ll be! How in the world did you know I’ve been thinking about you this past week? How are you, how’s the new job?”

“I’m doing great. The job is really great. Finally I get to put some of my ideas into practice without having to go through three layers of management to get approval. And you? Did you get the promotion I put you in for just before I left?”

“Yes I did. If I had known it was you who recommended me, I would have called to thank you.”

“How’s the rest of my crew at Horizons?”

“They’re all doing fine, but we miss you. Not until you left did we realize how nice it was to work for you. We miss the freedom to do our

job without strict boundaries on our ability to follow our own judgment.”

“Lily, I called to ask you for a date. Now that I’m no longer supervising your department at Horizon, they can’t object.”

“I’d love to go out with you! I’m glad you called; that’s so exciting.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’ve missed seeing you. It’s been more than three months. Yes, I would love to go out with you.”

“Anyplace special you would like to go? I’m open to any suggestions.”

“Part of me would like to go back to Manhatta. But I’m scared it would bring back horrible memories. It took months for me to get over the scary nightmares that haunted me. I’m okay now, and I’m sure that if I’m with you those demons won’t come back. It may be a way for me to make sure I am in control again.”

“Then Manhatta it is. Okay if I pick you up this coming Friday at seven?”

“I’m looking forward to it. Ben, I’m so glad you called.”

During the drive back to Lily's apartment in Brooklyn neither Lily nor Ben said much. Silently they were trying to sort out their feelings about each other. When they arrived at the apartment building, Ben searched for a parking spot near the entrance. Rather than let Lily out in front of the building, he parked a few blocks away and offered to walk Lily to her door. Despite her vague protest, Lily gladly accepted.

When Lily put the key in her front door, she hesitated. She turned around and said to Ben, "The evening is still young. Why don't you come on in and have some coffee before the long ride to your place in Queens?" This took Ben by surprise, but he gladly accepted.

When Lily got Ben settled on her prized, brand new black leather reclining couch, she asked, "Coffee? Or would you rather have a cold drink?"

"Something cold would be fine."

"Got some sparkling grape juice cocktail, it's non-alcoholic."

"That'll be great."

"Got it especially for you. I know you don't drink alcohol."

"You did?"

"Yeah, after you asked me out and we agreed it would be nice to go to Manhattan, I was hoping if the meal went well you'd come up to the apartment so we could enjoy a quiet night cap."

Lily went into the kitchen to get a glass of sparkling juice for Ben and some red wine for herself. When she returned, she handed Ben the glass of juice and she plopped down on the couch close to Ben. Her knee slightly grazed Ben's left thigh. She held up her glass as if she was about

to make a toast and asked, “No alcohol, is that a religious sort of thing? Don’t Jews drink alcohol?”

“No, nothing to do with religion. As a freshman at MIT upperclassmen got me stone drunk during pledge week. I must have acted like a real fool because for weeks after that I was the butt of most jokes.”

“That is so cruel. It almost makes me cry thinking about you being picked on like that.”

“I think I deserved it. Because I was valedictorian of my high school class, I acted too much like a know-it-all. I forgot that most of the freshman class at MIT was either at the top or near the top of their own class in high schools much larger than mine.”

“Stop putting yourself down. I think you’re pretty damn smart. You have to be to be such a big shot at the hedge fund which recruited you. If I recall, they came to you; you weren’t even looking for another job.”

“Well, anyway, I have steered clear of alcohol ever since. I don’t ever again want to lose control like that.”

“Not to change the subject, but I have to tell you how much I enjoyed our dinner.”

“Manhatta is not known for fine cuisine, but the food was good and the waiter was very pleasant.”

“Yup the food was great, but I meant I love being with you. Just the two of us having great conversation and enjoying each other’s company. It was really very nice.”

“Boy, that makes my ears glow! Coming from a girl like you, who has a boat load of real cool admirers, that’s a very nice compliment. You’re very nice to say that, and I appreciate it. I had a great time, too.”

“Ben, I’m not just saying it to be nice. I mean it. You’re real, you know who you are, and you have both feet firmly planted on the ground. You’re not all puff and totally in love with yourself like most other guys. Those guys bore me to death.”

“If I’d known you felt like that, I certainly would have come to visit after you gave me your address. Or at least I would have gotten my nerve up much earlier to ask you for a date.”

Lily looked at Ben and a naughty little smile crossed her face. “Do you still live in Hunters Point in Queens?”

“Yes, it’s been six years since I moved there.”

“It’s a long drive to Queens from here. Would you like to stay here tonight?”

“You only have one bedroom.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of that, and I’m not asking you to sleep on the couch.”

This turn of events caught Ben completely by surprise. He wasn’t sure how he should respond. He stalled so he could think before giving a direct response. “Are you sure about this?”

“Ben I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t! I’m thirty-four, no longer a virgin and I am fully protected. This is not some wild, ill-considered impulse. I know what I’m doing, and I want you to stay. I know what I’m asking! Yes, I’m sure.”

Ben was still shaky. He adored Lily, but this was beyond his fondest dreams. He waffled, “I think the street I’m parked on has alternate side parking.”

Lily took Ben’s glass and together with hers put it on the coffee table in front of the couch. She took his hand and led him to her bedroom. “We’ll worry about your car tomorrow.”

Epilog

Date: Sept 6, 2019

Location: Charlee's home

Marquette, Michigan

After more than a year of psychological treatment, Hailey was finally well enough to travel by herself. She booked a flight from her parents' home in London, England, to Detroit, Michigan. In Detroit she rented a car and drove to Marquette.

Once in Marquette, she had no trouble finding the address given to her by the head of the regional Interpol office.

Her heart was beating rapidly as she approached the front door. She would finally get to meet him and hug him and tell him how much she loved him. She rang the door bell and a tall blond girl opened the door. "You must be Charlee. I'm Hailey and I've come to see King."

Charlee asked if she was a journalist working on a story. "Far from it. I'm a survivor, one of the many women saved by King."

Charlee invited Hailey to come in. When Hailey saw King in the hallway she raced over. She hugged and kissed him while whispering, "Thank you. Thank you," in his ear. King gracefully allowed all of Hailey's hugging and kissing. During the past year, he had gotten quite used to being adored and physically thanked.

When Hailey finally let go of King she turned to Charlee. “Where did you get this wonderful dog?”

“I found him on an old porch, nearly starving.”

Hailey told Charlee she had been held for over a year. “Well, he saved me from hell. Before they found me, I tried desperately to commit suicide. Life was so bad I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Charlee’s mom had come into the front hall and overheard what Hailey just said. She went over and petted King. “He knows what you mean. He went through hell, too, before Charlee rescued him.”