

DEAD in the
WATER

DENISE SWANSON



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*This book is for all the survivors of the Coal City
tornado. And for the wonderful volunteers who appeared
as if by magic and helped my mother so much.*

Mega thanks to:

Ronette and Mike Ksiazak

Bob and Joelle Elberts

Jim and Angie Hutton

Darla Hutton

Tiffany Votta

Traci and John Curl

Gene and Naomi Bianchetta

Gina, Vince, and Jacob Piatak

*Travis, Joe, JT: Orland Fire Protection District
firefighters who turned up with their trusty chainsaw
just in time to clear away all the downed trees.*

I apologize if I've forgotten anyone.

Dear Readers,

To those of you who have journeyed to Scumble River before, thank you for traveling with me down my rocky road to publication. To those of you who are first-time visitors, come on in and sit a spell. I hope you enjoy getting to know my sleuths, Skye Denison-Boyd and her husband, the chief of police Wally Boyd. I promise you that you will be able to pick up this book and feel right at home.

A lot has changed in Skye's and Wally's lives and in mine since I first met them back in 2000, which is why I felt it was time for a restart. In *Dead in the Water*, I'm so excited to launch a new incarnation of their hometown in the Welcome Back to Scumble River series.

Because the Scumble River series is being reborn as Welcome Back to Scumble River, I've decided to reboot the timeline of the books going forward. It is now present day. Although the characters haven't aged and only a few months have passed since Skye and Wally's adventures in *Murder of a Cranky Catnapper*, it is now 2017 in Scumble River.

I also hope you all will forgive me for this leap in time—figuring out how to handle the years passing is just one challenge that comes with writing such a long-running, well-received series, and I have to thank you, my wonderful readers, for supporting Skye, Wally, and all the rest for so long that I have to make these kinds of decisions! There are a lot of new

adventures waiting for Skye and Wally, and I promise you exciting things to come for them and the rest of the gang in Scumble River.

CHAPTER 1

"There's a cyclone coming, Em."

—Uncle Henry

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST SKYE DENISON-BOYD WOKE with a start. She jerked upright, nearly falling out of the brown leather recliner, and her black cat, Bingo, hissed his displeasure. With a glare in her direction, the fuming feline settled back on what little lap Skye still had at nearly thirty-four weeks pregnant.

Rain hammered against the glass of the sunroom windows and when lightning ripped open the darkness outside, the table lamp flickered. Skye had been reading the first book in a new mystery series set in a nearby college town, Bloomington-Normal, when she'd dozed off and awakened to a dark and stormy night. The cliché didn't escape her notice.

Skye shivered when the air conditioner suddenly kicked on and goose bumps popped up on her bare arms. Although it had been hot and muggy all day, the television meteorologists had promised that a

cold front was headed their way. However, Scumble River was seventy-five miles south of the city and the Chicago weather forecasts were rarely accurate for her tiny corner of Illinois, so Skye wasn't convinced that relief from the heat was on its way.

When her stomach growled, she wrapped her arms around her huge baby belly and whispered, "Patience, sweet pea. Daddy's not here yet."

Skye had been waiting for her husband, Wally, to get home so they could have supper together. Since their marriage eight months ago, she'd gotten used to eating later. But the more advanced her pregnancy, the harder it was to delay a meal. And now she was ravenous.

Wally had called around four to say he would be late because the officer scheduled for the afternoon shift had, at the last minute, called in sick. As the chief of police, Wally needed to find a replacement for the guy before he could leave the station. The town's population might be only a little over three thousand, but someone still had to be on duty at all times.

What time was it? Skye glanced at her wrist, frowning when she discovered her trusty Timex was missing.

Shoot! After her first day back at work after summer vacation, she'd been so warm and sticky that she'd stripped and showered as soon as she got home. The high school's AC had been on the fritz and Skye's office had felt like a sauna.

Because her job included working with students at all three schools in the district, she could have moved over to one of the other buildings. But it was highly unlikely any of them would have been much better. Before she'd claimed the space, her offices at the elementary and junior high had both been storage closets. Even in the best of circumstances, those rooms were usually hot as heck or colder than Antarctica.

Instead of seeking a cooler place to work, Skye had ignored her discomfort and spent the majority of her time getting her calendar set up for the rest of the year. She'd had her testing and counseling schedule mostly in place before she'd left for summer break, but there were always transfer students to accommodate.

She had wasted a good half hour trying to figure out how to pronounce the name of one of the new girls. It was listed as Le-a, and initially, Skye had assumed it was pronounced Leah, but she hated to call the teen by the wrong name. It could be Lee-a, or Lay-a, or even Lei.

Finally, Skye had just telephoned the student's mom to ask, and she was really glad she'd made the call. The girl's mother had explained that her daughter's name was Leedasha. Evidently, the dash in Le-a wasn't silent.

Paying attention to details such as correctly pronouncing names was one of many tidbits Skye intended to pass on to her new intern, Piper Townsend. In fact, she'd hoped to use today, before the students started

school, to familiarize the woman with her duties, but Piper had had car trouble and wouldn't arrive until tomorrow.

The woman really should have been better prepared and moved to town over the weekend. Her lack of planning made Skye wonder if she'd hired the right applicant. Of course, there hadn't been that many candidates to choose from. A ridiculously low stipend and the promise of a heavy caseload hadn't exactly been enticing to the new grads.

Plus, there was the fact that Skye would have six weeks at the most to help Piper get settled before going out on maternity leave. In theory, during Skye's absence, a school psychologist from the Stanley County Special Education Cooperative would supervise the woman. In practice, Skye feared that even if it meant she had to guide the intern via telephone while cradling her newborn, she would end up with the brunt of the responsibility.

At that disquieting thought, Skye bit her lip. She really hoped there wouldn't be any crises until after she got used to being a mother. Coping with—

Oomph! Everything below Skye's waist tightened as if a giant fist had closed around her uterus. She dug her nails into the smooth leather armrest while she tried to breathe through the pain. The first time she'd felt the squeezing sensation, she'd panicked and called her ob-gyn, convinced she was going into labor.

Dr. Johnson had reassured Skye that the baby

wasn't about to make an early appearance. Instead, she was experiencing Braxton-Hicks contractions. And although uncomfortable, unless the contractions grew consistently longer, stronger, and closer together, everything was fine.

Now, as she panted through the contraction, Skye gripped the wooden lever on the side of the recliner and pushed until the footrest lowered. Then, risking the wrath of Bingo, she picked up the cat, put him on the floor, and struggled out of the chair.

She shoved her swollen feet into a pair of flip-flops and began to pace. Walking usually provided some relief from the Braxton-Hicks throbbing, but as Skye marched the length of the sunroom, the pain continued. Her doctor had warned her that dehydration could worsen the discomfort and she'd been sweating all day. Maybe water would help.

Heading into the kitchen, Skye snagged a bottle of Dasani from the refrigerator and chugged it. As she drank, she checked the microwave clock. It was five thirty. She'd been asleep for more than an hour. Where was Wally?

When the contractions eased, Skye glanced at the telephone hanging on the wall near the stove. The tiny light on the base glowed a steady red, indicating there was no voicemail. Pulling her cell out of her pocket, she saw she'd missed a text. Wally had sent a message at 4:55, saying he was having trouble finding someone to work.

While Skye contemplated calling him for an update, she hurried to the hall bathroom. Along with all the other joys of her pregnancy, it seemed that the baby was nearly constantly kung fu fighting on Skye's bladder and she always had to pee.

She had just lowered herself onto the toilet when she heard tires crunching over the gravel of the driveway. She assumed it was Wally, but a few seconds later, the sound of two car doors slamming instead of one convinced her she was wrong.

Darn! Why was it that the only time she ever got company was when she was in the bathroom? Of course, since she had been expecting, she had been spending a lot of time in there.

Skye hastily finished her business, straightened her clothes, washed her hands, and hurried into the foyer. She reached for the dead bolt but jerked her hand back. Granted, they lived in a rural area near a small town, but Wally had drummed into her head the need for caution enough times to make Skye peer out the side window rather than fling open the door.

She squinted through the pouring rain. Trudging toward the house were two people huddled under a neon-yellow umbrella. The halogen lamp attached to the garage didn't illuminate the sidewalk and it was too dark to make out their faces.

Flipping on the porch light, Skye frowned when she saw her visitors were Frannie Ryan and Justin

Boward. What in the world were those two doing slogging up her sidewalk?

Skye had become extremely close to the pair during their high school years, and after their graduation, that professional relationship had grown into a personal one. Normally, she would have been happy to see her friends, but the young couple should be at college, not on her front porch.

Frannie and Justin both attended the University of Illinois, and the fall term had started last Monday. Before they'd left to drive down to Champaign, Skye had had breakfast with them. And as far as she knew, there was no good reason they'd be back in Scumble River so quickly. Something bad must have happened.

Her pulse racing, Skye threw open the door and demanded, "Why are you here?"

She winced as the words left her mouth. She sounded like her mother. It was a good thing Frannie and Justin were no longer her students, because that wasn't a very empathetic greeting. But between the weather, her advanced pregnancy, and Wally's absence, Skye was spooked.

"Can we come in?" Justin asked, closing the umbrella and leaning it against the outside wall.

"Sure." Skye stepped aside. "Sorry. I'm just surprised to see you."

Justin allowed Frannie to enter first, then followed her into the foyer. At twenty years old, Justin seemed to have finally reached his full height of six

feet two. And although he'd probably always have a slender build, his weight was finally catching up with his last growth spurt.

Justin pushed his damp brown hair off his forehead and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe off his glasses. As he cleaned the lenses, his long-lashed brown eyes blinked, adjusting to the brightness inside the house.

Skye smiled. Justin hadn't been an attractive or socially comfortable teenager. But he was turning into a nice-looking young man who appeared finally to be comfortable in his own skin.

"Let's sit in the kitchen." Skye started down the hallway, forcing herself to be patient. Frannie and Justin would tell her what was up in their own good time. "How about a soda or some tea?"

"A Diet Coke would be great." Frannie caught up to Skye and gave her a one-armed hug.

Frannie was tall and solidly built. Skye had spent most of Frannie's high school years trying to raise the young woman's self-esteem. She'd attempted to help Frannie navigate a world dominated by media that insisted anything above a size four was huge. Unfortunately, much of that work had been undone during Frannie's first semester at a Chicago university.

After a couple of months of feeling like an outcast and missing home, Frannie had returned to Scumble River, completed her freshman and sophomore years at a local community college, and then transferred to

U of I. Unlike her previous university experience, U of I's journalism program was more concerned with a student's abilities than her appearance or clothes. It had been just what Frannie needed and she'd thrived.

Justin had also lived at home while getting his associate degree at the same local community college as his girlfriend. Being nine months younger than Frannie, this was his first year joining Frannie in Champaign.

"Any chance of some chips with the pop?" Justin asked, dropping into a chair as if exhausted. "We haven't had dinner yet."

"Sorry," Skye said. "Not much in the way of snack food around here since the doctor gave me heck for gaining fifteen pounds almost overnight. Her exact words were: 'Thou shalt not be bigger than thy refrigerator.'" She patted her gigantic belly and made a face. "I've got salsa chicken in the Crock-Pot for dinner and there's plenty if you'd like some."

"That would be awesome." Justin straightened and reached for the bowl of fruit in the middle of the table. "I'm starving."

Skye took two cans of Diet Coke from the fridge and handed them to Frannie, then reached back into the refrigerator and grabbed the Tupperware container with the Mexican rice. After spooning half into a covered Pyrex bowl, she popped it into the microwave and pressed the reheat button.

Waiting for the side dish to get hot, Skye put plates, silverware, and napkins on the table. Although

Justin had already devoured a pear and was gnawing at the core of an apple, Frannie was only chewing on her thumbnail and staring into space.

When the microwave dinged, Frannie jumped, then shot a worried glance at Justin. Something was definitely up. Skye just hoped whatever the problem was, it was fixable.

Justin dug into the chicken as if he were a squirrel and his plate of food was the last acorn on earth. Frannie never lifted her fork to her lips.

Having decided she was too hungry to wait to eat with Wally, Skye helped herself to a serving of the casserole. After pouring herself a glass of milk, she took a seat across from Justin and Frannie.

She waited to see if either of them would start the conversation, but when they both remained silent, Skye said, "Now tell me why you're here and not at college."

"My parents weren't answering their phone and I got worried," Justin mumbled through a mouthful of chicken.

Justin's father was in constant pain due to degenerative arthritis of the spine and his mother suffered from a debilitating depression. Neither was able to hold down a job or handle the minutia of everyday life. Until Justin had left for school last week, he'd been the one to take care of those details.

"Are they all right?" Skye asked, then took a bite of rice.

"As good as they ever are." Justin pushed away

his empty dish. “They only have the one cell phone, no landline, and Mom forgot it was in her pocket and tossed it into the hamper.” He shrugged. “They don’t get many calls, so they didn’t miss it until we showed up.”

“Luckily it was on and the battery wasn’t dead.” Frannie rolled her eyes. “We found it by calling the number and zeroing in on the ringing.”

“That was clever,” Skye murmured. It didn’t explain why Justin and Frannie had come to her house, but at least it hadn’t been a true emergency. She tilted her head and asked, “So, Justin, your parents were otherwise fine?”

“Yeah.” He paused and drained the can of Diet Coke. “But the thing is, I’ve been wondering for a while if I can leave them on their own.”

“I see how that would be a concern.” Skye nodded. She hated that Justin might feel he needed to give up college to take care of his parents, but she understood his feelings.

“You can’t just stay here and take care of them,” Frannie snapped. “You’re too good a writer to drop out of school and take a job at a factory.”

“It would only be until Mom and Dad were able to get their act together.” Justin didn’t lift his eyes from the tabletop.

“Which will be never.” Frannie’s brown eyes flashed. “They need to step up to the plate and be the adults for once. Yes, they both have issues. But they

certainly should be able to handle their own lives and allow you to be able to follow your dreams.”

Justin scowled and said, “I know that’s what you think, Frannie.” His lips thinned. Clearly, this was an argument they’d had before. “And yeah. I wish had a father like yours. Someone who cared enough about me to deal with his problems. But my parents aren’t ever going to be like him.”

“Sorry, sweetie.” Frannie scooted her chair over, laid her cheek on her boyfriend’s shoulder, looked at Skye, and said, “Isn’t there some kind of assistance available to help people like Mr. and Mrs. Boward?”

“Your parents receive social security disability benefits, don’t they?” Skye asked.

Justin nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll call the co-op’s social worker and see if she can refer me to an agency that is able to provide a caregiver to check on them a few times a week.”

Skye got up and made a note on the pad by the phone, then walked into the foyer, grabbed her appointment book from the tote sitting on the coat-rack bench, and stuck the slip of paper inside it.

When she got back to the kitchen, the table had been cleared, and Justin was lining up the fruit bowl, napkin holder, and salt and pepper shakers as if there were going to be an inspection.

Frannie poked him and giggled. “You are so OCD.”

"I'm not obsessively compulsive." Justin grabbed her finger and kissed it. "I'm just super meticulous."

Justin turned to Skye and said, "It's nearly seven, so we'd better hit the road. We both have early classes tomorrow."

Skye recoiled as a flash of lightning illuminated the kitchen window, immediately followed by an explosion of thunder. "The storm seems to be getting worse."

"I'm sure we'll be fine." Justin put his arm around Frannie.

"Let me call Wally and see how the roads are." Skye snatched the receiver from the base, then repeatedly poked the on button.

"Something wrong?" Frannie wrinkled her brow.

"There's no dial tone." Skye replaced the handset in the holder.

"Try your cell," Justin suggested.

Skye took it from her pocket and blew out a frustrated breath. "No bars."

Frannie and Justin checked their cell phones with no better luck.

"Shoot!" Now Skye really didn't want them to leave. If the phones were all out, the rural roads between Scumble River and Champaign might be flooded.

As she stared at her cell, there was another blinding bolt of lightning, then the distinctive smell of smoke and the crunch of metal being smashed.

Justin, Frannie, and Skye rushed to the front door and peered outside. One of the enormous oak trees

that lined the driveway was split down the middle, with the largest part lying across Frannie's car.

"Guess we're not leaving after all." Justin sighed, then shrugged and asked, "Do you have anything for dessert?"

CHAPTER 2

“That is because you have no brains.”

—Dorothy

SON OF A BITCH!” CHIEF OF POLICE WALLY BOYD slammed down the telephone. It looked like he was working a double.

Zelda Martinez had been his last hope, and his call had gone directly to her voicemail. Zelda, as Scumble River’s youngest and only female officer, was usually eager to work a double shift, not only for the money but also for the experience.

When Tolman had called in sick at the last minute, Wally had known it was going to be tough to find coverage for him, but he hadn’t counted on the storm’s interference. The Scumble River Police Department had only six full-time officers, including Wally, so it just took one case of the flu or someone on vacation to create a staffing problem.

With two guys stuck on the wrong side of a flooded underpass, two others not answering their

phones, and the part-timers, who were supposed to fill in the gaps, unavailable due to their other jobs, Wally was out of options. And as usual, to solve the problem of being short-staffed, he would have to sacrifice time with Skye. He had to figure out a way to employ additional officers before the baby came, because he wasn't going to be an absentee father.

Wally walked over to the dartboard on the back of his door and flipped it over, then returned to his desk, opened a drawer, and took out a handful of darts. Taking careful aim, he released the projectile and watched in satisfaction as it landed smack-dab in the middle of the mayor's forehead.

The police department needed more personnel, but the city council had frozen hiring for all local government services. Although Wally had been begging for an exemption for the PD, with Mayor Dante Leofanti behind the moratorium, he knew he didn't have a chance at getting the council to allow him to take on another couple of officers.

Hizzoner was throwing a tantrum because his plot to outsource the town's law-enforcement services to the county sheriff's department had been thwarted. He had wanted to use the money saved on police salaries to finance building a mega incinerator on the edge of town so he could charge other communities to burn their trash and funnel the money into his mayoral salary. But once his plans became public, Scumble Riverites had protested, and Dante had been forced to

give up his scheme. Which meant the police department would be the last city service the mayor would excuse from the freeze.

Although Dante was Skye's uncle, her mother's brother, their relationship hadn't ever been particularly cordial. It had deteriorated even further when Skye and Wally had exposed the mayor's incinerator plans. And because Hizzoner held on to his grudges like a tick stuck to a hound dog, there would be no more money for the PD until he was booted from office.

However, in order for that to happen, someone needed to run against him. Currently, he was running unopposed in the November election, leaving only a little over two months for a write-in candidate to appear.

Hell! Wally threw another dart. This one landed on the mayor's beaky nose. The police department hadn't even been allowed to replace the idiot who had been fired for dealing drugs. Hizzoner had brushed off Wally's reasoning that replacing an officer wasn't the same as a new hire, all the while insisting that the budget didn't have room for another salary.

Wally had hoped the city council members would override the mayor, but they were all either in his back pocket or afraid of his wrath. Even Zeke Lyons, the newest council member and the only one who wasn't one of Dante's old cronies, was too much of a milque-toast to speak up.

When Zeke had been appointed to fill in the

vacancy created after Ratty Milind had a stroke while he was screwing his little side dish in the Dollar or Three store's parking lot, Wally had hoped Zeke would change the way the council did business. From what everyone had said about Zeke, he had seemed like a stand-up guy who would put the town's interest before his own. But so far, Zeke hadn't even opened his mouth at any of the council meetings.

Which just proved what Wally's father, Carson, always said—politicians and babies have one thing in common: they both need to be changed regularly and for the same reason. Of course, Carson Boyd was *sar-chotic*—so sarcastic that his targets weren't sure if he was joking or a whack job.

Blowing out an exasperated breath, Wally threw the remaining darts, then removed them from the board and flipped it back over. It wouldn't do for the mayor to come visit and see his own face, impaled by the sharp projectiles, staring back at him.

Checking that he had his portable radio and flashlight, Wally turned off the lights in his office, stepped into the hallway, and locked the door behind him. If he couldn't find anyone to cover the afternoon shift, he'd better get his ass out on patrol.

As he ran down the stairs, Wally grabbed his cell from his shirt pocket and dialed Skye to tell her he wouldn't be home until midnight. His wife wouldn't be happy, but he knew she wouldn't complain. She was employed by the department as a part-time

psych consultant and understood the demands of the job.

When his call didn't go through and there were only clicks and pops, then a strange buzzing on the landline, he stopped his descent and tried Skye's cell. That number went to voicemail after the first ring.

Since Skye had gotten pregnant, she'd faithfully kept her phone turned on and charged up. Maybe she was in a dead zone. Their house was full of mysterious spots where their cells didn't work.

Frowning, Wally left a message and headed toward the attached garage. A few steps from the exit, he turned and hurried to the front of the station instead. His mother-in-law, May Denison, was the afternoon dispatcher. She could keep trying to reach Skye while he was out on patrol.

When Wally walked into the dispatch area, he stopped to stare out of the rain-streaked window. His office was windowless and he was momentarily stunned by the intensity of the howling wind and flashing lightning. He'd been following the weather alerts for the past couple of hours, but clearly the storm was growing worse than had been predicted.

May pointed outside and said, "It's getting really bad." Her forehead wrinkled. "A lot of phones are out and cells aren't working too well either."

At sixty-three, his mother-in-law had the energy of a twenty-five-year-old. She kept her house immaculate, exercised at a nearby community's fitness center

three times a week, and worked the afternoon shift at the PD as a police, fire, and emergency dispatcher. As far as Wally could see, May's only flaw was her over-involvement in her children's lives.

Skye was thirty-six and her brother, Vince, was forty. Neither needed nor wanted the intense nurturing their mother was determined to provide, which made Wally asking May to check up on Skye a little awkward. His wife wouldn't be happy that he was siccing her mom on her. But for the past several days, Wally had had an uneasy sensation about Skye's pregnancy, and he didn't like the idea of her being alone for the next eight hours.

"The alerts didn't make it seem as serious as it looks."

"Did you find someone to cover for Paul?" May asked. "I hope he's okay."

"A hot appendix is nothing to mess around with and I'm glad he went to the ER, but I sure wish he would've called me when he first felt sick, rather than waiting until the last minute." Wally scowled. "And no, I wasn't able to get anyone to work for him."

"So you're staying until Zelda comes on at midnight?" May asked.

"No choice." Wally shoved his hands in his back pockets. "But I don't like the idea of Skye being by herself. Do you think her dad or Charlie would run over and stay with her until I get home?"

Charlie Patukas was Skye's godfather. He'd never

married or had any children of his own, and he had been like a father to May, whose real dad had died when she was young. He owned the Up A Lazy River Motor Court, but was knee-deep in most of what went on in Scumble River.

Wally pursed his lips. Maybe Charlie could be talked into running for mayor. It sure wouldn't hurt to ask. If anyone could win as a write-in candidate, Charlie was that person.

"Why are you worried?" May's frantic voice yanked Wally from his musing. "Is something wrong with her or the baby?" She clutched her chest. "What is she hiding from me?"

"Nothing," Wally assured his mother-in-law. "It's just she's only a few weeks from delivery, and she's gotten so big it's hard for her to move."

"She can barely fit behind the wheel of her car." May's mouth flattened. "That old Bel Air isn't going to work when she has a baby to haul around. I wish she would have let you buy her that SUV."

Wally fully intended for Skye to have a safer vehicle, whether she wanted one or not. In fact, he'd ordered her a Mercedes G-class. It was being delivered to their house this Friday and he couldn't wait to see her face. The SUV was an extravagant car, but his wife and child deserved the best.

Unwilling to ruin the surprise, Wally mumbled something noncommittal to May and repeated, "So, do you think either her dad or Charlie would be free?"

“Jed won’t answer the phone, so let me try Charlie.” May dialed, then said, “It’s busy. Hopefully that means he’s home and the telephone is working. I’ll keep trying. And I’m sure when I reach him, he’ll be happy to go visit his goddaughter.”

“Great.” Wally glanced out the window. “I need to hit the streets. Let me know if you aren’t able to reach Charlie within the next half hour.”

“Will do.” May frowned. “I have a bad feeling. Maybe I’ll call someone in to cover for me and go over to your place myself.”

“Don’t!” Wally realized he’d shouted and modulated his tone. “Skye’s going to be mad enough that I sent Charlie to babysit her. If you take off work to do it, she’ll be upset with both of us.”

“Well...” May narrowed her eyes, their emerald green the same brilliant color she’d passed on to both her children. “Okay.” She shook her finger at Wally. “But nothing better happen to my daughter or grandchild while I’m stuck here.”

“If Charlie can’t go over, I’ll stop by and check on her.” Wally’s jaw clenched. “Worse comes to worse, I’ll ask County to cover for me.”

Wally started to leave but halted when the phone rang. May answered it, then held up a finger, indicating he should wait. She listened for a few more seconds, then frowned and tried to speak.

Finally, May put her hand over the receiver, looked at Wally, and said, “Myra Gulch called a few minutes

ago. Seems her neighbors were playing their music too loud and she wanted the police to make them stop. She's just called back and is threatening to shoot them."

"What's her address?"

"1900 Kansas Street," May read from the computer monitor.

"Call County for backup!" Wally shouted as he ran toward the police station garage.

Once he was in his squad car, he raced toward the crazy woman's address, thankful that the rain had momentarily stopped. Arriving a few minutes later, he leaped out of the cruiser, unsnapped his holster, and hurried up the sidewalk.

When he knocked on the screen door, it crashed open, clipping him on the side of the head. A woman stood just inside with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

Without apologizing, she snapped, "I thought the idiot dispatcher said that nobody was available."

"Myra Gulch?"

"Of course." Myra was a plain woman in her late seventies. She wore her gray hair scraped back into a bun and her dark eyebrows formed a disapproving line across her forehead. "I knew threatening to shoot my horrible neighbors would get your attention."

"I'll need you to hand over your gun, ma'am." Wally kept his fingers on the butt of his weapon.

"I don't have a gun, you moron," she sneered. "I just said that to get your attention."

“Threatening to shoot someone is a serious offense.” Wally kept his voice even.

“And driving me crazy isn’t?” Myra huffed. “If it’s not that stupid dog barking, it’s that awful classical crap. Just listen.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Wally said.

“Are you deaf?” Myra pulled her white cardigan closed. “The thumping is awful.”

“You can hear it right now?” Wally asked. The only sound he could make out was the howling of the wind and the water dripping from the house’s eaves. “You know sometimes, if you’re having a panic attack, your heartbeat can thud like a bass line pounding.”

“I’m not mentally ill.” Myra’s large nose twitched in disapproval. “Go make that noise stop.”

“Ma’am.” Wally’s patience was wearing thin. “There is no music.”

“You lazy, good-for-nothing—”

“Your crazy is starting to show,” Wally said, keeping his voice calm. “You might want to tuck it back in.”

“I’ll have your job!” Myra ranted. “The mayor is a personal friend of mine.”

“Glad to hear it.” Wally shrugged. Sometimes you had to burn a few bridges to keep the lunatics away from you, and he was fine with that. “He can post your bail if you do shoot someone.”

He turned to leave, and when something hit

his shoulder, he looked back and saw the witch had thrown a book at him. He picked it up and gently tossed it inside the open door.

Shaking his head, Wally stared at Myra and said, "Just be aware that falsely reporting a crime wastes the police's time, and you could be prosecuted."

"You'll be sorry you treated me this way," she screamed. "I'm going to talk to the mayor about your cavalier attitude."

"Join the crowd," Wally muttered, getting into his squad. "Join the crowd."

After canceling the county call for backup, Wally began his patrol of the town's streets. When the rain started up again, the windshield wipers nearly hypnotized him. His eyelids drooped and he powered down the window, hoping the air and droplets blowing in his face would keep him awake.

He was tired and hungry. Maybe after the next loop around downtown, he'd go through the McDonald's drive-through and get something to eat. Or, better yet, he could stop at his own house for dinner.

The roads were quiet. Folks must have decided to stay home because of the weather. Even the bars along the main drag were empty. Everyone must have been hunkered down waiting for the storm to pass.

Having made the decision to take his meal break at home, Wally steered the cruiser out of the business district. He crossed over the river and made a left. Now that he was on the edge of town, there were no

streetlights, and he could see only a few feet ahead on the narrow asphalt.

A right turn on Brooks Road and Wally was less than a mile from his house. He had just reached for the radio, intending to tell May he would be out of service for the next thirty minutes, when he spotted a Chevy Silverado parked on the shoulder.

The pickup didn't have on its emergency lights, and the rear end was sticking out onto the blacktop. If the driver couldn't be located, Wally would have to call and have the truck towed.

Sighing, Wally pulled the cruiser behind the Chevy and studied the scene. There didn't appear to be anyone in the Silverado, but he couldn't see fully into the cab from where he sat.

Keying the radio, Wally said, "I've got a vehicle stopped alongside Brooks Road near Rood. The plate is muddy and I can't see it from here. I'm getting out to take a closer look."

After May acknowledged his transmission, Wally exited the squad car, easing the door shut without a sound. He unsnapped his holster and rested his hand on his weapon.

Wind rustled the cornstalks in the fields on either side of the road. The rain held the scent of fresh earth and a trace of smoke. Where was that coming from? It was too hot for anyone to have their fireplace going, and the weather was too bad for a bonfire.

The moon was hidden by a huge bank of low-lying

clouds and the night sky was completely dark. The cruiser's headlights illuminated the area immediately behind the pickup and Wally moved forward until he was a few steps from the Chevy's rear bumper.

He trained his flashlight's beam on the license plate, but it was still too obscured to read. As he reached out to wipe off the mud, his radio crackled to life and Wally straightened.

"10-75!" May screamed. "A twister just made an unexpected turn and is heading this way. It's less than five minutes out. I'm going into the basement. You need to find shelter."

"Is Charlie with Skye?" Wally asked. His heart thudded and fear formed a sour ball in his stomach.

The radio was silent and Wally heard the tornado siren blaring. His pulse pounded in his ears. What if Skye was asleep and didn't hear the alarm? Could he make it home?

He had to. There was no way he was leaving the welfare of his wife and child to anyone else.