CHAPTER ELEVEN

4/1/88

April Fools! I wish I could think of a good one to play. The only thing I could come up with was making a time capsule. Went up Summit-to-Summit road and walked down to the cement pad. At the fence facing the Valley, I buried it. I will come back here as an old lady, and I'll laugh at myself.

Gabriel stood on Summit-to-Summit Road with a shovel in his hand. The dirt pathway served as a fire road that connected the neighborhood of Calabasas to Old Topanga Road. It was a well-used hiking trail, not too steep and wide enough for a fire truck. A couple of huge houses had been built in the passing years along its route, but for the most part, the landscape looked much like it did in Nancy's day.

Gabriel walked the dirt road, and the sweeping suburban vista known as the San Fernando Valley opened up before him.

The cement pad Nancy referred to in her diary had been the foundation of an old house. The scarred and pitted driveway sprouted weeds. A fence, overgrown with Poison Oak, enclosed the entire property. Gabriel hated Poison Oak. He could merely walk by the innocuous-looking shrub, and angry itching welts would appear on his skin.

Might as well get to it.

Gabriel threw over the shovel, hopped the fence, and tried to steer clear of the branches of green and red leaves that reached out venomous fingers.

As he walked along the ruined driveway, an intense sun toasted him, and Gabriel removed his jacket. Some autumn we're having, he thought. The stubborn summer never loosened its hold on Southern California without a fight. This year seemed particularly brutal because of the drought. A crunchy dryness lay on the land, and if the rain didn't come soon, no wildflowers would bloom in the spring. Only the damned Poison Oak seemed impervious to the dry weather. It was just as lush as it could be.

Tucked between a coastal live oak tree and laurel sumac, Gabriel spied a crooked metal post that reminded him of Len Lewicki's bent posture. He scanned the area, and sure enough, about ten feet away, another post poked from the rocky soil. These had to be the remnants of the old fence.

Gabriel walked over to the first post and paused, shovel in

hand. Now, what? The time capsule, if one existed, could be anywhere.

He felt foolish. Gabriel wasn't mandated to walk down every avenue of Nancy's life. He should stick to interviewing friends and family members—any possible witnesses. But what if Nancy had left a trail of breadcrumbs? They could exist in any niche or cranny. Gabriel needed to place himself in Nancy's footsteps at the time of her disappearance, and if it meant standing on a fire road in the middle of the Santa Monica Mountains on a hot day, then that's what he would do.

You're the one getting the clues from Nancy.

No, Gabriel inwardly argued. I'm nosing through her diary, that's all. We'll see if that effort provides me with a lead.

A breeze came up then, cooling the sweat on his brow. Gabriel rolled up his shirtsleeves and laid his jacket on the first post. Nancy claimed to have buried her time capsule on April Fool's Day. For what Gabriel knew of the prankster in Nancy, he could imagine that she'd written that diary entry for the sole purpose of fooling her parents, if they dared to delve into her private journal. Instead, the joke was being played on a detective more than thirty years in the future.

Ah, what the hell... Gabriel took up the shovel and hit hard, resentful earth. He began perpendicular from the old foundation to the fence post, figuring if Nancy did plan to revisit sometime, she'd need a marker. She mentioned the Valley, so Gabriel shoveled dirt at a spot with the best view of suburbia. He didn't dig too deep. A young girl wouldn't have had the patience. Had the ground been so hard then? Nancy dug here in the springtime, and perhaps green grasses blanketed the area, the soil rich and soft from good winter rains. This sun was relentless. Gabriel grew thirsty and berated himself for not bringing along bottled water.

Just then, he hit pay dirt. About a yard away from the fence post, at about a foot in depth, he felt something crack under his spade. Using his hands to toss the earth aside, Gabriel uncovered a Rubbermaid container about the size of a shoebox. Something was inside. The brittle lid, already fractured from Gabriel's efforts, disintegrated into shards when he opened the box.

He lifted out the bundle, and his hands trembled in anticipation. The wrapper turned out to be a blue jean jacket. As he unfolded the jacket, he found the material stiff

and unyielding. Like a body in rigor mortis, he thought. Despite its protest, the jacket succumbed to reveal the secret inside: a Jack-in-the-Box.

Gabriel inspected the toy in the bright sunlight. It was well preserved, considering the three decades it lay underground. The square box displayed circus scenes, which were slightly rusted and faded. He turned it over in his hand to view each side and beheld a Merry-go-Round, a circus performer riding an elephant, a trapeze artist caught in mid-air, and a lion who snarled at its chair-holding, whip-wielding tamer. The closed lid beckoned to Gabriel.

Moving under the shade of the oak, Gabriel wiped sweaty fingers on his shirt and carefully turned the crank. He heard a tinny rendition of the familiar "Pop Goes the Weasel" tune. The lyrics surfaced to his mind.

All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel.
The monkey thought t'was all in fun...

The song was about to end when—Pop! Up sprang a painted-faced clown, and mice ran down Gabriel's spine.

The clown triggered a terrible memory. Victor Archwood had thrown a party at his home and insisted that Gabriel attend. Itching to access the killer, Gabriel neglected to consider the possibility of a trap and accepted Archwood's taunting invitation. Costumes were mandatory, or a guest could not enter. Gabriel recalled Archwood wearing the accouterment of the Grim Reaper, a black-robed skeleton—appropriate for a killer.

Gabriel, who had refused to dress up, was handed the costume of a clown upon his arrival at the party. Having no other choice, he'd worn the costume to gain entrance.

Gabriel could remember very little of the party. He only remembered waking up from a drugged sleep, bound and gagged, and hanging by his arms from a meat hook.

Gazing now at the jovial clown with its outstretched arms, Gabriel thought of Nancy's words, I'll laugh at myself. A tiny pink paper was pinned to the clown's baggy pants. Swallowing his dread, Gabriel unpinned the doll-sized note and unfolded it. In neat handwriting were the words, *"Are you still afraid of me?"*

He brought the toy with him to Commerce and placed it on his desk. Keeping one eye on the closed lid, lest the clown jump out bearing more bad memories, Gabriel picked up the phone and called Jenna Goldman Klein.

A message machine answered, so he tried her cell phone. No answer there either. Gabriel hung up and dialed the

Lewicki household. As he listened to the ring tones, his thoughts went back to the blonde teenager who buried an object of her fear and dared herself to return to it. What a personality Nancy possessed. How could she know, at her young age, that time might be an ally in conquering her fear?
And the fact that she left bits and pieces of herself around... Keeping class notes, burying the Jack-in-the-Box.

It's as if she knew, Gabriel mused. It's as if Nancy needed to leave a mark of permanence before she vanished.
Pauline answered the call. "Hello?"
"I found a Jack-in-the-Box," Gabriel blurted and then wished he had more tact. "I think it belonged to Nancy. She buried it and wrote in her diary where to find it. I hope I didn't cross a line or anything."
"What?" Nancy's mother asked in confusion. "She buried something? I don't understand."
"A Jack-in-the-Box," Gabriel repeated and worried he'd violated some sacred code by digging up a time capsule. "A pop-up thing with circus scenes on it."
"Oh, that." Pauline seemed relieved to quit the subject of something buried. "I remember now. Nancy hated that thing. She'd gotten it as a birthday present when she was little and swore it played on its own. I used to tell her that it was only a cheap toy with a defective mechanism. If it bothers you so much, I said, throw it out. I guess she did."
Gabriel laid his palm on the toy's lid and imagined the clown crouching inside, coiled and ready to strike.
"Is there something else, Gabriel? Did you find anything more?"
"A jacket," he mumbled. "I'll return it to you."
"Please do." Pauline paused. "Gabriel, I have a special favor to ask."
He hoped the favor had nothing to do with a séance.
"Carmen is holding a séance at our house, and I want you to come."
Before Gabriel could protest, Pauline continued. "Carmen says you must participate. She says you hold the key to Nancy's whereabouts, but she must be the translator."
The caustic words that threatened to burn through Gabriel's mouth, he would reserve for the Psychic to the Stars. Nancy's harrowed mother, however, required a gentler approach.
"Pauline," he began, "if I had any idea as to where Nancy was at this moment, I would already be there. This woman,

this medium, is nothing more than a TV personality. Please consider that when speaking with her."
"I want you to participate," Pauline begged. "If Carmen is some sort of fake, then isn't it better for you to be there, playing advocate for us? You would do that for Len and me, wouldn't you?"
Gabriel's hand went to his forehead. Nancy's mother certainly knew how to push his buttons. "Okay," he consented. "I'll be there."
"I'm so glad. Carmen wanted to know if she could bring in a camera crew."
"Mrs. Lewicki."
"I'll tell her 'no.' It's not a problem. I'll see you tomorrow at six-thirty."

When the call ended, Gabriel's eyes fell on the Jack-in-the-Box and its four circus scenes. Now, he was going to attend a performance worthy of a Big Top. He picked up the toy and turned the crank.
All around the mulberry bush—
there existed horrors far more frightening than a bullshit session with a Ouija board.
The monkey chased the weasel.
Gabriel recalled how the area rug in the living room of a child molester felt against his face.
The monkey thought 'twas all in fun.
He considered how a serial killer named Victor Archwood went, in the course of one evening, from being Gabriel's prey to Gabriel's predator.

The clown suddenly popped up with a small bang. *Are you still afraid of me?*
Gabriel's throat felt dry. He set the toy down and walked over to get himself coffee. Rick met him at the machine.

"Okay, Gabe," the younger detective started in immediately. "I think the Lucky Strike downtown will work. It's a bowling alley, but I can get private lanes, and I'm pretty sure they sell booze. Or we can keep it close to you in Santa Monica at the Fairmont Hotel's Bungalow. That's a little more chic if you prefer something classy."

It took Gabriel a moment to figure out what Rick was talking about, and then he remembered—the bachelor party.
"I don't have a preference," Gabriel told the younger detective.
"I do," countered Ramirez, who had magically appeared behind the two men. "What kind of bachelor party doesn't

have women?"
"Well..." Rick began, surprised to see his superior standing there. Had Ramirez been watching and waiting for a bachelor party conference?
"Bowling?" Ramirez barked. "Are you for real? And why would we want to go to some stuck-up bar? 'Oh, let's drink a cognac overlooking the ocean.' Fuck that. Let's see some titties. What are you, Frasier? Some kind of maricón?" He turned to Gabriel. "I'm taking over your party."
With that, Ramirez splashed some coffee into a mug, threw both Rick and Gabriel an exasperated look, and strode back toward his office. The two detectives stared after him.
"You're in deep shit," Rick said.
Gabriel sighed. "I was okay with bowling."