



Chapter Two

Zak stood at his desk, drained a cold cup of coffee, and mentally flipped through his five ongoing stories.

“Sloan, I needed that story ten minutes ago. Where is it?”

Two in editing. Vince’s dull recap—he refused to call it news—of the school board meeting and a roundup of twenty or so minor fender benders due to the storm. Save those for tomorrow’s print edition.

Two others nearly complete. The mayor’s press conference regarding the street clearing delays and a man-on-the-street full of storm quotes. People did love to talk about the weather, especially snow. Both would create great online traffic as those who made it home safely browsed to see what happened to those who didn’t.

That left only Sloan’s apparently epic account of the Calhoun County Dog Show—a piece only written because of Mick’s killer shot of a young girl, about five, walking a Great Dane. He should’ve made it a feature shot, with a few lines, but Sloan claimed he had an angle.

“Sloan!”

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“You can’t rush art, Zakary.” Sloan’s nose rose in the air.

“I’m trying to rush you, not art.”

Consistently pushing against his deadlines, Zak’s assistant editor and general assignment reporter would get no storm coverage.

As predicted, the ice storm had settled over the area, closing schools and creating havoc.

And Kay was out there in it. As a realtor, she could set her own schedule. He’d asked her to cancel that appointment, but she’d just laughed. Stubborn woman.

At least she’d made it to the coffee shop in Templeton. She’d be safe there.

Speaking of coffee ... Zak grabbed the nearby pot and poured a—fifth? —cup for himself. Without the cinnamon, thank you.

“Now or never, big guy. Send, Sloan, send.”

“Hitting send now, Zakary.”

That meant another five minutes.

“Don’t mess with the lead.” Sloan’s ego was as inflated as his word counts.

Hello? Pulitzer Committee?

Kay’s advice from when he’d accepted the editor position surfaced. *Make a conscious effort to appreciate Sloan’s abilities, if not the man himself. It’s hard to be passed over for a job.*

Well, it wasn’t hard to understand why.

“You should have my story.” Sloan stood and stretched like a prize fighter loosening tight muscles. “I gotta hit the can. I’ll be right back if there are any questions.”

Zak already had one. Why me?

He refreshed his screen and “dogshow21” appeared in the queue. At twenty inches. He’d asked for fifteen, max.

Appreciate, appreciate, appreciate.

Maybe the lead would redeem it.

“Baxter Maximillian VonKlepp, the prize miniature schnauzer and companion dog of Greta VonKlepp, Oak Hill, was succinct when asked about his win in the Calhoun County Dog Show.

“Woof. Woof, woof, woof.”

Zak closed his eyes and blew out a sigh. Okay, then. *Cancel the call to the Pulitzer Committee.*

With a flick of his mouse, Zak highlighted. Deleted. Paged down. And zip, another six inches of doggie doo from Greta about the breeding of “Baxie” disappeared into oblivion.

“Ah! Fourteen inches, even better.”

After a spellcheck, Zak added a headline and subhead, revised the cutesy lead, did a final spellcheck, and he hit *send*.

“Love this job.”

“Is that because you get to destroy others’ work?” Sloan’s voice cut through the air behind Zak’s right shoulder. “You cut my lead. I worked hard on that.”

He winced. How had he not heard Sloan return? “Tweaked it, Sloan. Just tweaked it.”

“You cut it, Zakary. You always do.” He sounded like a toddler deprived of his favorite toy.

“Sloan—”

“This is not your beloved *Sun-Times*. This is Oak Hill. Tiny little middle-of-the-cornfield, Oak Hill, Indiana.”

Sloan’s arms tensed at his sides, and his fists clenched. “Greta and all her friends, many of whom own businesses that advertise in this barely-afloat paper, will be loo—”

The phone on Sloan’s belt rang. He snatched it from the holster. “What is it?”

How could anyone get so overwrought about a dog show story—a badly written one at that?

What we have here is a failure to communicate. No, a failure to appreciate.

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But Sloan's face—intent on the caller's information—made Zak pause. Breaking news? Maybe “Baxie” gets bumped anyway?

Sloan spun to his desk and grabbed a pad of paper.

“Right. Templeton Road, between County Road 4 and County Road 6. Right. Yes, of course, I know the hill, Barry.”

So, it was the local Deputy Dan. Zak opened a file on his computer and motioned for Sloan to sit.

Sloan shook him off.

“Are you serious? How many?”

Zak peeked at Sloan's notes. *Tour bus of Miracle Mile shoppers hit by drunk college kid. Ten fatalities. Ten other serious injuries. Others minor injuries and walked away.*

He knew he shouldn't, but he smiled. He loved deadline news. He'd need to rebuild the front page—and Baxie was definitely gone.

Sloan grew quiet. Zak looked up to find Sloan staring at him.

“Of course, he's here. He's the editor. Yeah. No wait. Is the road closed?”

Zak stood.

A new storm-related lead story in the works. Who was available to cover? Vince Conover was at his desk browsing the Internet. Zak whistled and motioned him over.

“What'cha got, boss?” Vince didn't bother moving.

“No, Barry.” Tension filled Sloan's words. “No, that's your job.”

Sloan held out the phone, his face hard. “Barry needs to talk to you. Accident on Templeton.” He dropped his gaze as he handed over his phone.

Zak took the phone and glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes to deadline.



AFTER PARKING on the berm of the closed highway, Zak stomped on the Jeep's emergency brake and leaped out.

"Are you insane?" Sloan screamed, exiting the vehicle. His eyes darted from Zak to the fast-approaching officers and back to Zak. "How many cars did you force off the road?"

Ignoring him and the hollering investigators, Zak ran toward Kay's crumpled sedan in the median, barely registering the bus on its side. Why hadn't she stayed at the coffee shop?

"What do you think caution tape is for?" Sloan's voice pierced his concentration.

Zak forced it away. Why had he let Sloan come? After talking to Barry and discovering Kay had been involved in the accident, he agreed to anything to get on the road.

"You could have got us killed too."

Zak spun so fast Sloan couldn't keep his feet on the slippery road as he tried to avoid a collision. But it didn't matter. Zak's right hand connected with his assistant's jaw.

Sloan went down.

"She's not dead."

He turned back to the car and peered inside. Glass, snow, blood—lots of each. But no Kay.

"Zak!"

He whirled at the voice, arm cocked.

"Whoa. Zak, it's me. Sheriff Sanders." He held out his palms. "Barry."

"Where's my wife?" His voice sliced the night. He needed answers. Right now.

"Zak, let's get a hold of—"

Zak stepped in close enough to smell the sheriff's stale coffee breath. "My wife, Barry. Where is she?"

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Barry moved back a step. “As I tried to tell you before you hung up, she’s been airlifted to St. Joseph’s. But Zak—”

“In South Bend? That’s an hour from here. More in this weather.” Zak stomped toward his Jeep, throwing a “sorry” over his shoulder, as Sloan stood from the road slush.

Barry grabbed Zak’s arm. “Let me take you. Reg can finish up here.” His voice was quiet and calming.

“Absolutely not.” Zak shrugged away. He didn’t need anyone’s help. *He* would find her.

A hint of movement in the scrub beyond the mitigation fence along the road caught his attention. What was that? Was someone over there?

Still staring in the scrub, Zak said, “Where did you say Kay was?” He pivoted toward the sheriff again.

“St. Joseph’s. Airlifted there. But Zak—”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. That’s my job.”

Zak glanced back to the side of the road. Most likely a swirl of snow. “Then I need to get there.” He strode toward the Jeep.

“Zak, let me take you.” Barry caught up to him. “I have an emergency vehicle. Lights. Sirens.”

Zak considered only a few seconds before tossing his keys at Sloan’s feet. “Leave it in *The Gazette* lot.”



HIS MIND PLAGUED by worst-case scenarios and his body tired from the somnolent effect of the warm car, Zak hesitated when Barry pulled up to the ER entrance. During the drive, he’d called Mick, Kay’s brother and his best friend, and their pastor, Dave. Both were on their way. But he’d find her first.

“Car 2, what’s your 20?” The dispatcher’s voice came over

the radio as he opened the patrol car door. During the drive, Barry had listened to the reports as they filtered in.

Zak opened the car door.

“Hang on. I’ll be right there,” Barry called after him. “Dispatch, this is Car 2. I’m at St. Joseph’s in South Bend. What’cha got?”

He waved Barry off. While grateful for the ride, he refused any more delays. At least an hour, maybe ninety minutes, had already passed since Kay’s airlift.

“Car 2, Reg is finished at the FATAC. Uh, Sloan White wants to press charges against Mr. Cooper.”

Zak gestured obscenely to the radio, slammed the door, and marched to the emergency room.



ZAK’S CELL phone pinged as the door into the emergency room slid open. He snatched it from his pocket, stepped into a puddle of water, and slipped. “What the ...?”

As he scrambled to catch his balance, his phone crashed into the puddle with an unmistakable *crack*. Not bothering to waste time to check the screen, he snatched it up, shoved it into his pant leg, and strode to the registration desk.

“Sorry about that.” A harried woman behind the desk waved a hand at the wet spot. “Things are a little wild here tonight. Jamie, find a mop and clean that up.” She turned to Zak. “What’s your injury?”

Zak wiped his feet on the carpet. “Um. Sorry, what?”

“Are you injured?”

The ER was packed. People filled every available chair and most wall space. Doctors poked and prodded. Nurses scurried from patient to patient, arms full of clipboards. It was like a

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scene from the old *Chicago Hope* emergency room. “No, I’m not injured, but—”

“Jamie, where is that mop?” She glared over his shoulder.

“Look, I just want to check on the status of—”

“Miranda, this guy’s throwing up.”

He turned toward the voice.

A panic-stricken young woman, a girl really, stood in the waiting room, wide-eyed.

The woman at the triage desk, apparently Miranda, sighed. “Volunteers. God love ‘em,” she muttered, then plastered a fake smile on her face. “Hang on, Betsy. Be right there.”

Zak leaned forward “My wi—”

“Sir, this is Emergency. If you’re not injured or here to check on a patient, you’ll need to go to the hospitality desk near the main entrance. Take the elevator up one floor and follow the signs. We’re swamped.” She stood and hurried toward the terrified volunteer. “I’m sorry.”

Still feeling the effects of the drive, Zak hurried to the bank of elevators and pushed the call button. The doors of the elevator behind him opened, and he stepped in before pressing the button for Lobby and Admitting. The doors closed but instead of rising as he’d expected, the cab began to descend.

Great. This car must have been heading down already. Hang on, Kay.

He poked the Lobby button two or three more times and waited for the car to complete its downward slide before going back up. Kay would be okay. Hurt some maybe, probably, from the looks of the car, but okay.

When the elevator opened in the basement, Zak exited before remembering he was headed up. In front of him hung a sign. *Morgue Holding Area*. The pungent odor of death told him where he was just as well.

As a cub reporter on the police beat in Chicago, Zak had

often encountered death and its recognizable smell—an unforgettable mixture of sulfur and rotting flesh.

As he stepped back into the car, the pneumatic doors to the room *pfffd* open, and a kid pushing a gurney came through.

“Hold the elevator, please!” he called.

Zak almost let the door close so he could be on his way, but a woman’s wrist hanging over the side of the gurney stopped him. A charm bracelet circled the wrist. With half of a mizpah heart. And a little airplane from Kitty Hawk, just like—

Zak reached for the chain around his neck. The one with the other half of the mizpah heart. Kay’s gift to him on their tenth anniversary.

The heat rising in him and a lack of oxygen fuzzed his brain, and the floor rose to meet his face.