

PETER
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FROM THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
OF SHELTER FROM THE STORM

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**MERCY
STREET**

INTRODUCING DETECTIVE ANGELA POOLE

CHAPTER

1

Detective Angela Poole saw fear in the young woman's eyes. Fear, anxiety, dread. The girl couldn't have been more than nineteen years old. Pretty, fragile, innocent. Her long black hair flowed over the back of the wooden chair like a shimmering waterfall.

Black zip ties bound the girl's ankles to the legs of the chair, wrists to the backrest. A gag of white cloth made it impossible for her to scream . . . impossible to communicate in any way at all.

Poole knew the young woman's name: Julia Dawson.

Student at the local community college. Singer in an old-school funk band. Single. No siblings.

For an instant, as Poole noticed the girl attempt to keep the fear and anxiety from her face, she saw a young version of herself. Had she ever been this fragile? This innocent? Perhaps. But that had been another lifetime.

Poole checked her watch: 9:47 P.M. Time was running out. They had to do this now.

"Lights out!" Poole yelled.

Two deafening explosions. An instant of blinding light.

Then the room plunged into utter darkness.

A male voice: "Go, go, go!"

A loud chorus of heavy footsteps. The chaotic symphony of metal tools and equipment rustling from quick, precise movements.

Five seconds.

A high-pitched screech of wood sliding on wood.

More rustling, more heavy footsteps.

Pitch darkness.

Ten seconds.

Poole had been counting the seconds in her head.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, it ended.

The room became a chamber of utter silence. The stench of adrenaline hung heavy in the air.

Fifteen Seconds.

The lights came back on.

Julia Dawson was gone.

The chair she had been bound to . . . *gone*.

“Oh, holy shit!” A young man sitting at the far corner of the large table.

“Where’d she go?” This from a middle-aged woman two seats away from the young man.

Poole moved to the front of the room. All eyes focused on her. Confused and frightened looks from the faces before her. Poole motioned toward the only door to the room, and called out, “Bring her in.”

Julia Dawson, now free of her gag and restraints, no longer bound to the chair, walked into the room. A huge, relieved smile now covered her young face. The members of the Oak Hill PD SWAT Team filed in behind her. The team, fully armed and armored, a well-oiled, highly trained crisis unit, had just demonstrated their response tactic to a high-alert abduction scenario.

Day four of the Oak Hill PD’s Community Academy, where local citizens learn about and experience every facet of the department, every aspect of the job.

“Had Julia been an actual abductee,” Poole said, “the SWAT Team would have been deployed as it was here, and the recovery would have taken place *exactly* as it did tonight. The flash-grenades immediately disorient the abductor or abductors, and plunging the scene into total darkness gives the team—all equipped with night-vision goggles—a tactical advantage. And since getting the abductee to safety is the primary goal, simply taking her *and* the chair with them was the most efficient and effective move.”

All in attendance clapped and applauded.

“HOW’D THEY LIKE TONIGHT’S CLASS?” Jeffrey Poole asked his wife.

“Are you kidding?” Angela said, as she strolled to her black, unmarked, department-issue Ford Taurus Interceptor. “They *loved* it! The SWAT demonstration is always one of the most popular nights of the academy. It’s fun to see the reactions on their faces when the lights come back on and the abductee is gone.”

“I bet.”

Angela let herself into her car, put the call on speaker, and started the engine.

“I should be home in about fifteen minutes,” she said.

“Sounds good. I’ll warm up some dinner for you.”

Angela put the car into gear and pulled out of the restricted parking lot behind the Oak Hill Police Department. “You’re too good to me, you know that?”

“Not possible.”

Angela smiled to herself as she drove. *He is too good to me*, she thought. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I’m the lucky one,” he said.

“Oh, *whatever!*” she said. And they both laughed.

“I mean it,” he told her after a moment. Soft, sincere.

A long silence followed.

She knew he meant it. And it made her love him that much more.

As Poole approached Colton Street on Kimball Road, she observed a vehicle pull out from a service alley behind a nearby shopping center, turn the wrong way onto Kimball, then immediately continue left onto Colton. The vehicle had no headlights on. Poole turned in behind the car and followed for a bit. Still no headlights. She flashed her brights, hopefully alerting the driver ahead of his oversight. She knew it happened sometimes when people were leaving a well-lit shopping center at night.

The driver didn't respond.

Knowing how dangerous this could be for a pedestrian out walking a dog, or a teenager riding a bike home from a friend's house following a night of studying, Poole decided to initiate a traffic stop, alert the driver and give him a friendly warning.

She activated her emergency beacons and sounded a quick yelp of the siren. No need waking the entire neighborhood. The car ahead of her slowed and pulled to a stop at the curb. Poole stopped her Taurus Interceptor directly behind the four-door sedan.

Being in plainclothes, Poole displayed her badge through the driver's window. The driver lowered the window all the way.

"Is something wrong, officer?" he asked.

"You know you were driving with no headlights?"

The driver looked down toward the dashboard. "Was I? I didn't even notice. I'm sorry about that."

No hesitation, no slurring of voice, no nervousness, no tell-tale stench of alcohol on his breath. Poole doubted the man was intoxicated. It was just a simple mistake.

"It happens," she said. "But no lights at this hour can be really dangerous, especially in a residential neighborhood like this."

"Yes, of course, officer. I don't know where my brain was at. It won't happen again."

Poole was clipping her badge back onto the beltline of her slacks when she heard an infant's soft cry come from the backseat.

"What was that?" she asked.

"What was what?"

She took a step back, glanced through the rear driver-side window. There was no baby seat.

No baby seat, no baby. The cry must have come from a nearby house . . . or her tired brain had simply manufactured the sound out of thin air.

"Nothing, sir." Poole pointed toward the front of the car. "Wanna get those headlights on before I leave?"

Another cry, louder this time. Definitely from within the vehicle.

"What the hell?" Poole said. She moved closer to the back door, looking inside for the baby she knew had to be there. But still she saw nothing.

She said, "I need you to step out of the vehicle and—"

But before she could finish her sentence, the driver fired three shots into her chest then sped away.