
THE LANDLORD



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PROLOGUE

CENTRAL DISPATCH: “All units! Missing child in the area of Sixth and Fir. All units respond!”

The scream of sirens pierced the frigid night air of the small Utah town. Of the seven police officers on the force, five were on duty. The second missing child in town, fifth in the county this year. Last time, Lieutenant Barker had vowed to be prepared when it happened again.

Officer Rick Stacey wheeled his patrol car around. Sig, his three-year-old German shepherd, lurched to attention and began to bark as the tires spun on the gravel at the side of the road. “Are you ready?” he yelled to Sig as he keyed up the mike. “One-thirty-nine responding.”

“You got Sig?” The dog’s ears snapped to attention, as he released a deep, throaty growl.

“Ten-four.”

“She’s been missing only ten minutes,” crackled the voice on the other end.

“We’re three minutes away.” Stacey, dark brow drawn down around black eyes squinting to penetrate the moist night air beyond the glow of headlights, maneuvered down the center line.

Sig was one of just two K-9s in the county. The rookie team of man and dog was as ready as could be expected. Together they’d trained hundreds of hours just for this kind of crisis.

Eleven-year-old Ashley Gardner swung her arms and legs frantically, hopelessly trying to fight off the masked attacker who had pulled her from her bicycle only minutes earlier. He had dragged her into

the thick undergrowth, taped her mouth shut, and now struggled to secure her arms.

She struggled for breath, precious air becoming harder to draw in. She knew of the other attacks. Who didn't? That's why her mother had been on her way to meet her. The entire town lived in fear— and now she was experiencing it. Fight! she thought. Mama said to fight.

Ashley could hear sirens above the pounding of her heart throbbing in her ears. Her lungs burned, starved for air. She reached to her face to tear away the tape, but her attacker caught her arm in a powerful grip, practically pulling it from its socket. The pain instinctively sent the girl's other hand on a desperate mission to pry open her attacker's fingers. With both arms now in reach, the child-killer acted quickly, taping her wrists together, leaving only her flailing feet as defense.

Stacey jammed the gas pedal; his right leg started to shake like half-chilled gelatin. Thick, meaty hands, white at the knuckles, gripped the wheel as if in a stranglehold on the elusive perpetrator. Sig stalked anxiously, pivoting side to side across the tattered rear seat, sensing the buried fear, smelling it, registering his owner's change in demeanor.

Stacey's squad car skidded to a stop on Fir's dead-end gravel road. His headlights, in concert with those of the three other patrol cars, shone on a bicycle laying on its side in the gravel. He scrambled from the car and opened the door for Sig.

"Stacey, this is the girl's jacket, and the mother, Mrs. Gardner." Lieutenant Barker, keeping control of his voice, stood near the woman, dust billowing around them. A single thin vein jutted from his forehead like a faintly smeared tattoo. "She was walking to meet her daughter, on her way home from a friend's house. This is where she found the bike and coat."

The woman was dressed in a three-piece suit that bulged at the buttons. Sag-chested, wide-hipped, her knees protruded recklessly from a high-cut skirt. Her dark curly hair was wrapped around her

painted face, mascara smeared by tears.

Several neighbors milled about nearby, talking with the gathered policemen. Stacey reached down and picked up the coat. He dropped to one knee in front of Sig, shoved the jacket under the dog's muzzle, and held him by the ears. "This is important, Sig. We have to find her."

Determined to live, Ashley continued to kick violently at her attacker. A contemptuous grunt came from behind the mask as two strong hands slapped her legs to the side. Within seconds, her shoes were flung from her feet and her pants yanked from her slender legs as she continued to kick in her own defense. The distant sound of voices could be heard over the rush of the swollen river nearby. Grabbing Ashley's bound arms, the perpetrator hauled her to her feet and pressed his covered face close to hers.

The girl stared into eyes as black and hollow as the senseless acts they had witnessed over the past year. His breath billowed from his lips, rotten, suffocating. Ashley ceased her struggle as powerful hands encircled her youthful neck.

Sig struggled to break free from his master, then raised up to lick Stacey on the mouth with his rough tongue. "Seek!" Stacey commanded. The dog leapt forward and began to sniff the ground. Suddenly he bolted sideways, scattering bits of dirt and rock behind him.

"He's onto her!" Stacey sprinted to keep up with the dog, heading directly north.

"Mitch, you go northeast," Barker shouted, pointing to the right. "When you get to the river, turn toward the old Bunnell farm. Deek, you head east. Keep in touch on channel one." The second man jogged off, following the beam of his flashlight.

Barker unfolded a map on the hood of the car and addressed the small crowd. "If you men want to help, form a line 20 feet apart and head through the trees toward the Bunnell farm." He motioned toward the trees. "I don't want anyone hurt. Don't do anything stupid;

just try to find the girl."

"Sig's movin' real fast. I think we're getting close," the radio reported. Stacey had been moving at full speed; their quarry couldn't be far off. "We're now headed east," he added, "almost straight for the river."

Lieutenant Barker gently took the arm of the mother. "Come on, Mrs. Gardner, let's find your daughter. Officer Stacey's on his trail. Been less than half an hour. I think he'll drop her and run."

Again the radio, it was Mitch. "I see him on the other side of the river!" he yelled between ragged breaths. "Don't know how, but he got across."

Captain Bingham snatched the device, his voice booming. "Has he got the girl?"

"It's dark...can't be sure. He's movin' real fast. Don't think so."

"Take him out if you can," the captain roared. "Just take him out."

A shot rang out—then a second.

"Don't shoot! I repeat, don't shoot." The radios fell silent. Everyone knew Chief Anderson's voice.

Stacey stopped to listen through the trees. The shots were close; he heard them clearly over the rush of the river. Sig began to bark. "He found her—I can tell by his bark."

"Is she alive?" sobbed the mother.

Barker patted her arm. "He'll let us know as soon as he gets to her."

Judging by the sound of his barks, Stacey figured he'd meet up with Sig just around the bend. He'd never seen a homicide up close—and didn't want to see one now, especially a girl the same age as his sister.

Officer Stacey's flashlight beam swung up from the ground. There was Sig, pacing wildly back and forth in front of the girl. "Off Sig!" Stacey commanded, wading through the thick brush toward the girl. Sig, obeying his master, backed up and crouched down. Stacey's beam shone on the girl's face. "She's alive!" he called over the radio.

The distressed mother collapsed to the ground. Deep sobs of re-

lief shook her body. Lieutenant Barker stooped to comfort her. "Come on, Mrs. Gardner. She needs you now." He helped her to her feet and led her toward the river.

Officer Stacey knelt by the frightened girl and pulled her close. Tears coursed down her cheeks, broken only where tape covered her face. Her hands were also taped. "Don't be afraid. I'm Rick and this is Sig. That's short for Siegfried. Do you like dogs?" The girl nodded warily. "This is going to hurt a bit," he warned, gently peeling the tape off her mouth. "What's your name?"

"Ash—Ashley," the girl stuttered between whimpers.

"Ashley, you hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Let's undo your hands." Ashley bravely stretched her arms in front of her to allow the officer to remove the tape.

Just then she gazed upward. "The moon's out," she said. "I knew it would come from behind the clouds."

Stacey realized the girl was in shock. "Do you want to meet my dog?" She nodded. "Sig, come." The dog trotted over and began to lick the tear-stained face. Hands now free, Ashley hugged its neck. The clouds once more slid like a curtain over the moon. Officer Stacey lifted the girl and strode toward the vehicles, Ashley holding tightly to his neck.

About halfway through the undergrowth to the road, the bushes rustled and out stepped Mrs. Gardner and Lieutenant Barker. The woman flinched slightly as the lieutenant's light beam fell on the young girl wrapped in the arms of the approaching officer. She rushed to take the girl in her embrace. "Oh, Ashley," she cried, "thank goodness you're alive."

The girl, with long, dark hair cascading across a face streaked from dirt, burst into tears at the sight of her mother. Her pants were gone, but she still wore her shirt and underwear.

Sig, clearly proud of himself, pranced about nearby. Bathed in the light reflected from his owner, his ashen coat gave him a ghost-like glow.

Barker slapped Stacey on the back. "Good job, Stace. Good job."

Stacey, in turn, knelt to pat the head of the "real hero." "We did it, Sig. This time we did it!" Emotionally spent, he settled himself on the ground. He blinked in a vain attempt to hold back tears. Sig stepped up to lick the droplets away.

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