

THE
NOWHERE
GIRLS

BOOKS BY DANA PERRY

JESSIE TUCKER MYSTERY SERIES

The Silent Victim

The Golden Girl

DETECTIVE ABBY PEARCE SERIES

Her Ocean Grave

Silent Island

DETECTIVE NIKKI CASSIDY BOOK 1

THE
NOWHERE
GIRLS

DANA PERRY

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PROLOGUE

I still dream about her, even after all these years.

She is always frozen in time—her face perpetually that of a twelve-year-old—in the dreams.

Watching me as I board the ride at the carnival.

Smiling at me.

Looking so full of life.

My little sister.

In the dream, she is still there when I get off the ride a few minutes later. I run to her, and I hug her, and I tell her never to disappear on me like that again. She laughs, that infectious laugh I still remember so well, and promises me she'll always be there for me. I squeeze her tightly and think about how glad I am to have her back. I'll never lose her again. We'll be together forever.

But it never happens that way.

Not in the dream.

Or in real life.

And, when I wake up from the dream, she is still gone...

ONE

A cheer went up in the FBI office.

My face was on the TV screen hanging from a wall. Another interview on how I broke the Mattheu case. Below my face, a crawl moved across the screen identifying me as: “Nikki Cassidy, the star FBI agent who rescued Julie Mattheu and delivered a dramatic message to her kidnapper!”

I stood up from my desk and acknowledged the applause from everyone, holding up a bottle of seltzer water in a mock salute.

“Thank you, thank you,” I said. “It was nothing really. Any dogged, determined, brilliant FBI investigator cut from the same cloth as J. Edgar Hoover like I am could have done it.”

Alex Del Vecchio, the woman agent sitting at the next desk, leaned over to me as I sat down. Alex was dark-haired, Italian—about the same age as me in her thirties. Alex and I had worked a number of cases together, and we’d become friends as well as partners.

“J. Edgar Hoover?” she asked.

“Too much?”

“I can’t believe that you’re actually comparing yourself to J. Edgar Hoover, Nikki.”

“Why not?”

“History has shown us that J. Edgar Hoover was a pretty mean, petty and despicable person.”

“Yeah, but we both liked to wear dresses.”

I’m riding pretty high in my career at the FBI right now. I was doing well before the Mattheu case, but that one really pushed me over the top and put me on everyone’s radar. Of course, that’s not the reason why I did what I did. I did it because I was determined to find Julie Mattheu.

Julie is a thirteen-year-old girl who disappeared from her school in a suburb of Denver four months earlier. One minute she was walking down the hall to class, the next she was gone. After weeks of futile searching by police, my unit—the Crimes Against Children Squad of the FBI—was called in to assist the local authorities.

I spent long hours interviewing everyone who knew Julie Mattheu—her family, her friends, teachers and others at her school, even her minister where she went to Sunday school every week. It was all a dead end. Everyone just assumed the girl had been abducted and murdered, and that her remains would be found. Everyone except me.

I operated on the theory that Julie was still alive, and I had to save her. Finally, after days of interviews and record checking and knocking on doors, I discovered that a school employee—a janitor—had quit his job not long before Julie’s disappearance. That was why I’d never talked to him when I was interviewing school personnel. Then, when I went to his home, I learned he had moved away from there too.

I’m still not sure if that was the red flag that motivated me to find him. Or that I had no other potential leads, so I chased this one because there was no other choice. But I eventually tracked him down to a small town in Oregon where he had moved.

The minute he opened his door, I knew he was the one. Maybe it was the look of shock on his face when I showed him my FBI credentials, maybe it was his nervousness in talking to me, maybe it was the way he kept looking around the house like he had something to hide. I got a search warrant, and that's when I found Julie Mattheu. He'd kept her chained up in a small, locked room off the basement. She was scared, she was emaciated, but she was alive.

That by itself would have probably been enough to get me a lot of media attention.

But then something else happened.

Just before we found Julie Mattheu in the basement and arrested him, the guy made a break for it. He knew we'd find her downstairs, so he broke away from the officer that was guarding him. He ran out the front door, but I was right behind him. I chased him down, got him on the ground and pinned him there while I cuffed him and read him his rights.

But I did a bit more than that too. I launched into a tirade against him. Promising him he'd never have another day of freedom in his life.

Of course, someone watching the whole thing had a cell phone and got it all on video.

That video quickly went viral with millions of hits on YouTube and Instagram and all the rest of social media. Usually, that kind of viral video is bad for a law enforcement officer. But this time the opposite happened, and public sentiment was overwhelmingly on my side. I was a hero. And, even more importantly, I'd saved a young girl's life.

On the personal front, I'm in a relationship these days. A real relationship. The most serious relationship of my life. His name is Greg Ellroy, and he's an attorney with a prominent Washington, D.C. law firm.

I met Greg about six months ago. It was a totally chance encounter. I was standing in line at a Starbucks next to the FBI

offices to get my usual black coffee, which I needed to get started every morning.

Except when I took the lid off the cup I'd gotten, it wasn't black coffee. It had whipped cream and specks of green and other stuff I didn't recognize.

"Are you looking for a black coffee?" I heard a voice behind me say.

I turned around and saw a guy—good-looking, well dressed, smiling—next to me.

"I am."

"I'm looking for a peppermint mocha."

"I have no idea what a peppermint mocha even looks like."

"I do, and this is not it." He showed me a cup of black coffee. "I think we got each other's orders by mistake."

"So I guess we should exchange our drinks..."

"Not so fast. Not without some negotiations first."

"Negotiations?"

"I'm an attorney. I negotiate everything."

"Look, what do I have to do to get my black coffee?"

"Drink it with me." He smiled.

That's how it started. Everything moved very quickly after that. And—a few weeks ago—he popped the question over a candlelit dinner at Bourbon Steak, one of Washington D.C.'s most prestigious restaurants. He proposed, I said yes, he gave me a ring and our wedding is planned for a few months from now in the fall.

So that's me right now. A rising star in the FBI. A media celebrity. Engaged to a successful, charming, loving man.

I guess I should be happy. And I am happy. But sometimes—crazy as it sounds—I wish I could be... well, happier.

I still have the feeling that's there's something missing from my life.

Something I wish I could fix.

Even though I've never been able to.

But life can hit you with unexpected twists—shocking changes that turn your whole world upside down in a few seconds.

And that's what happened to me that day in the FBI offices in Washington as I basked in the glory of my newfound fame.

Suddenly, and without warning, everything changed for me.

"Someone called for you while you were taking your victory laps," Alex Del Vecchio said to me. "A lawyer. Said they represented a client in prison who had information about a murder case. Wants to meet with you in prison to discuss it. Wouldn't tell me anymore—said the prisoner insisted only on talking to you."

"Did the lawyer give you the prisoner's name?"

"Yes, his name was David Munroe."

Alex saw the look of shock on my face.

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"David Munroe is the man who murdered my sister."

TWO

My twelve-year-old sister Caitlin was abducted on July 19th, 2008 exactly fifteen years ago this summer. Her body was found days later in a wooded area of the small town of Huntsdale, Ohio where I had grown up. David Munroe was arrested for the murder and had been in prison ever since.

Every year, on the anniversary of Caitlin's disappearance, I had gone to the Ohio prison where he was being held and attempted to talk to him. I wanted to find out why. Why this person did something like that to horribly change my life—and my family—so completely.

But Munroe would never speak to me.

He just sat there silently.

Staring at me—and ignoring my questions—until the hour-long visit was over.

It was almost July 19th again. I'd already planned to fly to Huntsdale on my day off and try once again to confront Munroe in jail. Even though I was pretty convinced at this point that he was never going to reveal anything to me about what really happened to Caitlin that summer day.

Except now. On the fifteenth anniversary of the day he

abducted and murdered my sister he suddenly had indicated he was ready to do just that.

And all the memories came rushing back for me again...

* * *

I had what I thought was a pretty good life back then during that last summer I spent in Huntsdale.

My father Luke Cassidy was the Huntsdale police chief, which meant everyone looked up to him—and to our family too. I was eighteen years old, had just graduated from high school and was getting ready to head for college. The future looked very bright for me, and for my younger sister Caitlin too.

Until the carnival came to town.

The carnival was a highly anticipated annual summer event in the town of Huntsdale where I grew up. Especially for me and the other young people there. The carnival meant riding the Ferris wheel, the Tilt-A-Whirl and other cool stuff; it meant eating great food like chili dogs and cotton candy and winning prizes at the arcades; and—most of all, for me anyway—it meant meeting boys. There were always a lot of boys at the carnival, and I was an eighteen-year-old girl who loved meeting and hanging out with boys. Yes, boys were a very important thing for me back then.

Which is why I was so upset when my mother told me I couldn't go to the carnival on the first day it opened. My mother said she had places to go that day, and she needed me to stay home to be with my twelve-year-old sister Caitlin until she got back home later that evening.

But all my friends were going to the opening of the carnival, and I so desperately wanted to be there with them.

And so, without telling my mother what I was doing, I took my sister to the carnival with me and all my friends.

It was fine at first.

Caitlin seemed to enjoy being there with me and all the older kids.

Except she was afraid of the rides.

We managed to get her to go on the Ferris wheel with us. That seemed safe enough to her, I guess. But when we got to the Tilt-A-Whirl, she was terrified of it. The Tilt-A-Whirl was actually my favorite ride at the carnival. Scary, exciting, but all in a good way. I tried to convince Caitlin it would be fun, but she adamantly refused.

And so, when me and my friends got on the Tilt-A-Whirl, we left Caitlin standing by the ticket counter to watch us.

Even now, all these years later, I still remember what she looked like that day. Wearing tan slacks, a brown-and-white striped top and a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap. Her long blonde hair hanging down her back. Waving at us for luck. She looked a lot like me—well, a younger version of myself when I was 12—and I still thought about that sometimes when I remembered that day at the carnival. It was the last time I would ever see Caitlin alive. When we got off the ride a few minutes later, she was gone.

There was a frantic search for her that went on for days.

Until it finally ended tragically.

Caitlin's body—she had been shot to death—was found by a dog walker in a wooded area called Grant Woods several miles away.

And, in a horrifyingly macabre touch, the killer had placed a wreath of roses on her head in death.

No one ever understood about the wreath of roses.

Since my father was the police chief in Huntsdale at the time, this meant he had to investigate the murder of his own daughter. It was a terrible ordeal for him. I remember that so well. But he did his job as professionally as he could. That was my father: he was always the consummate professional police chief.

The search for the person who did it focused at first on the people working at the carnival. Many of them were temporary workers and drifters and some had criminal records. So it seemed likely one of them killed my sister. But, despite intense interrogation of anyone and everyone associated with the carnival, none of them were ever linked to her death or even named as a potential suspect.

Instead, the murderer turned out to be a person from the area. David Munroe. He worked as a postal clerk in a town near to Huntsdale. People there said Munroe was known as a loner, a bit strange, but no one ever suspected he'd be capable of murder.

Until Caitlin's death.

The key to catching Munroe turned out to be a parking ticket. Later, his DNA and fingerprints were also found at the crime scene. Even more damning evidence came when strands of Caitlin's hair and pieces of her clothing were found inside Munroe's home, which he'd apparently kept as a sick "souvenir" of her murder.

Munroe was quickly convicted and is now serving a life sentence at a high-security prison called Dagmore outside of Columbus, about seventy-five miles away from Huntsdale. He later admitted to Caitlin's murder in a deal with the prosecution to avoid a death sentence. But despite that admission, Munroe had never talked about why he had killed her or divulged any more details about the murder.

For me, my entire world collapsed the very day Caitlin went missing.

And it was a nightmare that has haunted me ever since.

Especially after my father suddenly died that summer, too. It was just a few weeks after my sister Caitlin's murder that my father suffered a fatal heart attack. Many people—including me, I guess—believed the heart attack came because of the stress of losing a daughter in such a horrifying way.

My mother—without a husband and having lost a daughter—didn't turn to me, her only surviving family member, for support.

Instead, she blamed me for everything, saying it was all because I had taken Caitlin with me to the carnival that day.

She constantly laid the guilt over Caitlin's murder—and my father's subsequent death—on me.

What made it even worse was that I was already struggling to deal with my own guilt over what I did. I so badly wanted my mother's love and emotional support to get me through those terrible times. But instead she just made everything worse for me—and still does even after all this time.

My relationship with my mother had always been a bit complicated. I loved my father, and he loved me back unconditionally. On the other hand, my mother and me... well, we had some problems. Especially as I got older and began going through all the teenage trauma that a girl goes through. My mother wasn't much help to me there. So our relationship was never great, even before Caitlin died.

But after Caitlin was gone and my mother was forced to deal with that reality, well, that's when things truly fell apart between us.

We haven't talked in a long time.

I knew back then that I had to get away as quickly as possible. In a small town like Huntsdale, everyone knew everyone else's business. Everyone knew me as the girl who took her sister to the carnival where she got abducted and killed. I desperately wanted to go someplace where people didn't look at me like that and judge me.

Which is what I did. Going away to college first, then joining the FBI in Washington and eventually specializing with the bureau in rescuing missing children.

I couldn't save my own sister.

It was too late for that.

But I could save other children like her from the same fate.

Even now, after all this time, I hardly ever go back. Whenever I do, I feel trapped and uncomfortable and out of place. I never stay for very long. I always rush back to Washington as quickly as I can to escape the nightmares from my past that still haunt me back when I'm in my hometown.

Except I still could never put the memories of my sister behind me. That's why every year, on the anniversary of her abduction from the carnival, I've returned to Ohio and attempted to talk to David Munroe in the prison there. Looking for some answers from this man. Looking for some kind of closure for Caitlin.

But that has never happened.

Every year that I went there to visit him, Munroe just sat there silently and refused to reveal anything.

Until now.

Now Munroe suddenly wanted to talk to me about Caitlin's murder.

And I had to find out why.

THREE

“I want to go to Ohio,” I said to Les Polk, the head of the Crimes Against Children Squad and my boss at the FBI.

“What’s in Ohio?”

I told him about my sister and David Munroe and the call I’d received from Munroe’s lawyer.

Polk didn’t look happy about my request. I didn’t expect him to be happy.

“It’s not appropriate for me to assign you to a case that you have such a personal involvement in, Nikki,” Polk said, shaking his head after he heard all this from me. “It’s not ethical. It could be a conflict of interest for a law enforcement officer to do something like this.”

“If you won’t let me do it, I’ll take vacation time—I have a lot of it, you know—and do it on my own. But I’d rather do this officially. As an agent for the FBI. That could help me open up a lot of doors with local law enforcement when I get there.”

“I don’t know—”

“Look, you owe me for all the positive publicity I just got for the FBI with the Mattheu case arrest.”

“That arrest could have gone either way,” he said, referring

to the viral video. “You could have been the next example of police brutality instead of a hero. You got lucky with all the media adoration that followed. You know that as well as I do.”

“But it worked out great for us.”

“C’mon, Nikki, you’re a hell of an agent, but you’re also a loose cannon out there sometimes. Especially on a case like this where you have so much personal emotion involved in it. I just worry about you getting out of control again on something like this. Like you have in the past. And that can cause me a lot of problems.”

“When have I gone out of control?”

“Uh, Norm Byers.”

“Oh. Yeah, that.”

“You kicked a U.S congressman in the balls, Nikki.”

“Well, he tried to rape me.”

“He said he tried to kiss you. He admits he had too much drink, but he said it never went any further than the kiss.”

“I was there.”

“Still...”

“Okay, maybe kicking Congressman Byers in the balls was a bit of an overreaction on my part.”

“And then there was the time you ignored orders and charged a hostage situation on your own—”

“Listen, I promise not to charge any hostage situations on my own in Ohio, and I won’t kick anyone there in the balls. Now can I go to Huntsdale?”

I knew this was going to be a tricky decision for Polk. I waited to hear what he said.

“How long would you have to be there?” Polk asked.

“Just time enough to check in with the local authorities, then go to the jail and meet Munroe.”

“So we’re talking about a day or so, right?”

“I guess.”

“Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. You go there for a day. You

visit this jail in Ohio and talk to the guy, find out what he wants now after all this time. Then you come back and do the job you're supposed to be doing. One day, that's all, okay? In and out. That's all."

"In and out," I agreed.

Greg Ellroy, my fiancé, wasn't happy with me going there either.

"Why do you have to do this?" he said as we were lying in bed at his Washington, D.C. apartment and I'd told him about my upcoming trip to Ohio. "We've got that big party coming up at my senior partner's house. I really want you to be there. And we still have so much to talk about for our marriage plans and everything else that's going to happen for us in the next few months."

"It's my job," I told him.

"Not really. This isn't your job. From what you tell me, it's a personal thing."

I'd told him about my sister Caitlin and the man in jail for murdering her that I was going to see after I got back to Greg's place. And how I had been going back to try talk with him on every anniversary of Caitlin's disappearance. I hadn't really told him much about my sister or her murder before that. I hadn't talked about it much with anyone. The memories were too powerful.

I felt bad about burdening Greg with all this now though. He was never wild about me being an FBI agent in the first place. "Chasing murderers and kidnappers and child molesters and all sorts of disgusting people all over the country. Is this really what you want to do with your whole life, Nikki?" he said, when we were working on our wedding plans.

Greg belonged to a prestigious D.C. law firm that did mostly corporate work for rich and power people in the Capitol.

I think he was sometimes embarrassed by what I did for a living. Probably got a lot of kidding and disapproval and questions from the people at the law firm when they saw me splashed all over the news handcuffing and arresting a suspect.

Now I was focused on this new David Munroe business.

And going back to my hometown in Ohio—where Caitlin’s murder happened—to confront him about it.

After all my repeated trips in the past, that had never yielded any answers for me from David Munroe.

“Why?” he asked. “Why would you keep going back like that over and over to this man all these years, even though he never spoke to you during that entire time?”

It was a reasonable question. I’m not sure how the whole thing started. All I know is that as the first anniversary of Cailin’s death approached, I became more and more consumed by the need to get some sort of closure about her. To find answers about what happened to her, and why. The only person who could give me those answers was David Munroe.

“He confessed to killing my sister,” I told Greg now. “But he never revealed any details about why he did it or how or anything else. He was never called to testify by the public defender assigned to represent him. He just sat there staring stonily as he listened to the prosecutor’s case against him, until the jury came back with the guilty verdict. And that’s the exact same thing Munroe did when I went to meet him in prison afterward. Just sat there and stared at me. Never said a word during the entire time I was there, no matter how many times I asked him the questions I desperately wanted answers for.”

“But you kept going back? Visiting a man who refused to speak with you at all? That’s the part I don’t understand, Nikki.”

“It became a sort of game. I would show up every year, sit there watching him as he stared back at me while saying nothing at all. At first, I kept asking him questions that got no

answers. But at some point I stopped even doing that. And the two of us just sat in silence for the duration of the prison visit.

“For some strange reason, it always reminded me of the early scene between Matt Damon as Will and the psychiatrist played by Robin Williams in the movie *Good Will Hunting*. They simply sit there for an hour session, staring at each other without speaking. It was a test of wills to see who would crack and speak first.

“Munroe didn’t have to meet with me all those previous times, of course. He could have simply refused my requests to see him there. I was never sure why he didn’t do this. And honestly, Greg, I was never really sure why I did what I did: making the trek to see him in prison every year on the anniversary of my sister’s death.

“But I didn’t know what else to do. So I kept making these bizarre visits in the hopes that one day this monster would finally talk to me. Now his lawyer says he finally wants to do that. And he’ll only talk to me. I have to go. I have to find out what secrets he’s been holding onto about Caitlin’s death for all this time. Don’t you understand that?”

“I’m trying. I’m really trying.”

Greg massaged his fingers across the back of my neck as we lay in bed together.

“Feel good?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Want me to keep going?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Are you getting as turned on as I am?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let me see if I can make you forget about David Munroe for a little while,” he said, his fingers exploring my body as he talked.

I moaned softly.

“I believe I can do it,” he said.

"I'll betcha you can, too," I murmured.

And, when the lovemaking started, it really did feel good.

As good as it had ever been for me and Greg.

So good that I almost did forget about David Munroe and all the questions I was going to ask him.

Almost.

When it was over, Greg leaned over and kissed me.

"I love you, Nikki," he said.

That's the bottom line about Greg and me and our relationship: he *does* love me. And I love him. Which is why we're going to get married. At least I think I love him. I know I like him. I like him a lot. But do I really love him? Of course, I do. What am I talking about? Just the usual pre-wedding jitters everyone gets, I'm sure.

"Right back at you, big guy," I said.

Later, after Greg had fallen asleep, I lay there awake for a long time. Finally, I got out of bed and went into the living room. I turned on the TV, making sure I kept the sound low enough so it wouldn't wake up Greg in the bedroom. I watched awhile, but my mind wasn't on what I saw on the screen.

I stood up, walked over to the window in Greg's apartment and looked out at the lights and buildings and historic spots of Washington D.C. out there.

"What exactly do you want out of life, Nikki?" Greg had asked me not long ago during a discussion about our future together.

Sitting there alone during the early hours of the morning, looking out the window of Greg's apartment at all the streets and the buildings and the immenseness of the Capitol, I realized I had no answer for that question yet

And now I was going back to Ohio.

Back to my hometown of Huntsdale and all the memories I had back there.

I'd run a long way and for a long time since then to get away from those memories.

But not far enough to escape them.