

The Rising

Lynn Chandler-Willis

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The Rising

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Dedication

To my children and their spouses, Garey and Ellen Willis and Nina and Allen Jones, and to the wonderful nine grandkids they've given me: Jeana, Landon, Emma, Ava, Paisley, Aiden, Ivy, Casey, and Ireland. Thanks for letting me follow this dream. And to my sister, Rae, whom I love dearly.

1

"The kid's not dead."

Despite the middle-of-the-night grogginess, Ellie Saunders bolted awake at Sergeant Jack Walker's announcement resonating through the telephone. She adjusted the receiver cupped to her ear and shoved away the comforter. "How can he be *not dead*?" She swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"The hospital just called. They said we might want to come down there. Our homicide victim isn't a homicide victim after all."

Ellie brushed the tangled hair from her eyes. "What did he do, come back to life?"

"Apparently."

She had meant it as a joke, but by the tone of Jack's voice, her boss was dead serious.

Ellie's back straightened. A sudden chill wrapped itself around her, and it had nothing to do with her freezing cold bedroom. The dead kid had been found in an alley, no identification. From the looks of him, he had been beaten to death. Blood matted his blond hair into sharp clumps, and purple bruises the size of Ellie's fist covered his little body. About four or five years old, maybe thirty-five to forty pounds, he was wearing a blue t-shirt with a red Superman emblem and green nylon shorts, no socks, and untied sneakers that were too big for his tiny feet. The brutality of his beating was hard for Ellie to comprehend—or forget.

"Ellie? You there?" Jack asked.

"Uh...yeah, sorry." Her mind was reeling. That kid was dead. There was no way he could suddenly be *alive*.

"Meet me at the hospital in thirty."

She started to ask for forty-five, but he had already hung up. She sat for a minute, trying to make some sense of what Jack had just told her. There was no way. The kid was DOA. At least he had been thirty-six hours ago. She'd worked a thirty-hour shift gathering what little information and evidence she could before falling into bed sometime after midnight.

Ellie forced herself to stand and then padded to her closet. She took out a white linen blouse and a pair of dark colored jeans. She tucked her blouse into her jeans then pulled on her navy blazer. Jack would probably fuss about the jeans, but at four o'clock in the morning, this was the best she could do.

She returned to the bed and pulled her holstered Glock and badge from the nightstand drawer. She wrapped the holster around her waist then instinctively touched the butt of the Glock resting at her hip.

A few minutes later, she was speeding through town on her way to Burkesboro Regional Hospital. The town tucked into the foothills of the North Carolina mountains was dead at this time—much the same way the kid was hours ago.

How could this kid *not* be dead? There was no pulse, no heartbeat. Nothing. His little body had already gone cold and stiff. And now she was supposed to believe he *wasn't* dead? She'd believe it when she saw it. Maybe.

Perhaps there'd been some confusion. Maybe they

had her little blond-headed, blue-eyed kid mixed up with some other kid. It wasn't like blond-headed, blue-eyed kids were a rarity.

That was probably it. The kid was still dead and some other little kid who looked like him was alive and well.

She whipped her Ford Taurus into the hospital parking lot and parked beside Jack's Crown Vic outside the emergency room.

Jack stood at the admitting desk, dressed in coat and tie even at this awful time of morning, tapping his foot in a heavy rhythm, glancing first at his watch then at the clock on the wall then back to his watch. *Tap, tap, tap*. Glance. *Tap*. He was fifty years old with a slight paunch and high blood pressure, and Ellie wasn't looking forward to the day he dropped dead of a heart attack. She knew of no other supervisor that would put up with her.

"Sorry," she said as she hurried to the desk. "I was—"

"Save it." He motioned for the admitting nurse to buzz them through and then took Ellie by the elbow and guided her through the door to the treatment area.

She had to work to keep up as he marched ahead down the near-empty hall.

"I must have missed the memo that they changed the dress code." He cut his eyes toward her jeans then shook his head.

She let the remark slide. "How can the kid not be dead?"

"According to Cynthia Terry, he's alive and well."

"That's impossible. I know dead when I see it, and this kid was dead. Remember? I even called you and asked if I needed to follow them to the hospital. You

told me no. You told me—”

“Ellie—” Jack stopped and turned to her. “Calm down. You did your job. Whatever’s happened here isn’t your fault.”

Although she knew that in her heart, she wanted to hear Jack Walker say it. She’d been under his supervision in the Criminal Investigations Unit for over a year, but with the rest of the unit being seasoned veterans, she still felt the need to prove herself. The fact she was just twenty-nine and the only woman in the unit didn’t help matters.

“He was dead, Jack,” she said again.

Jack sighed. “And now he’s not. Probably just a mix up.” He returned to his break-neck pace toward the treatment area.

The hub of the ER was a circular corral of desks, computers, and medical monitors. Treatment rooms were located around the corral, some with curtains pulled for privacy, others wide open for public viewing. The smell of vomit hung in the air like a toxic cloud. A man from housekeeping was mopping up what appeared to be the source of the odor as a cluster of nurses and doctors in green scrubs gathered around the main desk. They were so engrossed in conversation—Ellie heard words like *kid* and *dead* and *morgue*—they barely noticed Jack and Ellie.

“Hey! I need something for pain!” a scraggly looking man in treatment three yelled. He stared at Ellie through glazed eyes.

Ellie and Jack stopped at the corral and smiled at the doctors.

“Ah, the troops are here,” Peter Bryson said. He was a third year resident and it seemed every time Ellie had a case that involved a trip to the emergency

room, Bryson was on call. "Guess you're here about the Lazarus kid."

The doctors and nurses focused on Jack and Ellie, their eyes anxious and excited.

"The Lazarus kid." Jack half-smiled. "Could you keep that title in-house for a while? The media's going to be all over this as it is."

Bryson handed Jack a manila folder. "They're still running with the idea we had a DOA. Our services are no longer needed in their books. It's all you guys from here on out."

"We'll return the favor one day." Ellie smiled and peered over Jack's shoulder at the file.

There were several photos stapled to the inside cover. Ellie took in a deep breath and pulled her blazer tighter around herself, warding off the chill. The pictures were similar to ones she took in the alley. Same Superman t-shirt and green shorts. Same bruises, same matted blood-soaked hair. The only difference was in these snapshots, the kid was lying on a gurney with fluorescent lights beaming down on him; in Ellie's pictures, he was lying among discarded needles and broken beer bottles, with the flash from her camera and red and blue strobes punctuating the approaching darkness.

"Leon's got some current shots of him," Bryson added.

"Leon as in wild-man Leon?" Ellie asked. Leon's reputation preceded him.

"It *had* to happen on his watch." Bryson shook his head. The doctors and nurses gave a collective chuckle.

"Where's the kid now?" Jack asked.

"With Leon."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "The kid's still in the

morgue? Has he been examined?"

"Oh yeah. We brought him back up here and checked him out thoroughly."

"And?" Ellie asked. She glanced at the photos again. There was no way this kid could be alive.

Bryson slowly shrugged his shoulders. "The kid is... *fine*. There's not even a bruise on him."

Ellie stared at Bryson, wide-eyed. "I saw the bruises. That kid was beaten to death."

"Or so we thought," Jack said. He handed the folder back to Bryson.

"No. That kid was *dead*," Bryson said, matter-of-factly.

"Why'd you send him back to the morgue after you examined him?" Ellie asked. The morgue wasn't exactly the best place for a child to hang out, and Leon wasn't exactly someone you'd want babysitting.

"We had a pretty bad accident with a carload of teenagers come in. A lot of hysteria. Screaming kids, crying parents. Dr. Terry thought it would be best if we got him out of the middle of it."

"Why didn't you just take him upstairs to the pediatric unit?"

Bryson shrugged. "For some reason, he really bonded with Leon."

That was understandable, Ellie thought. Leon was fun, if nothing else. "Who examined him when he was first brought in?" Ellie asked.

"I did. There was no pulse and no respiration. We checked for brain activity and, well..." Bryson arched his brows and scrunched his face. "When there's no brain activity, there's not much use in attempting resuscitation."

"Who called it?" Jack asked.

"Dr. Terry."

"Was she assisting?" Ellie asked.

Bryson shook his head. "No, but she makes the call on all DOA's. Standard procedure."

Ellie jotted the information in her notepad then asked, "What time did he arrive and what time was he pronounced?"

Bryson referred to the folder. "Arrived at six-thirty and was pronounced at seven o'clock. I called Leon and it looks like he signed off on the transfer at seven twenty."

"There's a thirty-minute time lapse between the time he was brought in and the time he was pronounced." Ellie had her pen poised and ready to jot down the explanation. When no explanation came, she glanced up at Bryson who looked as though he didn't understand the statement was a question. "What happened during those thirty minutes?"

Bryson glanced around at the other doctors. He was at a loss for words. He finally turned his attention back to Ellie, still with a puzzled expression. "Well, about fifteen minutes of it was spent checking for a pulse, any respiration, brain activity. Once we knew there wasn't anything we could do, he was covered; we pulled the curtain and...went on to other patients."

"Did anyone check on him?" she asked.

Bryson pursed his lips and shrugged. "Not that I'm aware of."

"So he was left alone?"

Bryson glanced around at the other doctors and nurses again for confirmation. "Sure, he was left alone. I mean...there was nothing else we could do for him. We moved on to other patients."

And that was that, Ellie thought. Poor kid. Left

alone to die in a stinking, muck-filled alley then left alone in the ER. It didn't seem right for even an adult to die that way, let alone a child.

"Were there any other children in the ER during this time?" Ellie asked.

Bryson again turned to his colleagues. One of the nurses spoke up. "We had a Hispanic kid with a fever and cough and a little girl that needed sutures. There was one white male—I think he was around twelve. Snow skiing accident, broken collar bone."

Ellie scribbled the information in her notepad then looked at Bryson. "Can I get a list of everyone who was seen in the ER in the last forty-eight hours?"

He gnawed on his bottom lip with a look of regret.

Ellie sighed. "I know. Court order."

"Honestly, there hasn't been that many kids in here in the last few days. And when we get one in the condition little Lazarus was in, it kind of sticks out so we tend to remember them."

"What about general admitting?" Jack asked.

Bryson shook his head. "You'd have to check with them."

Jack nodded. "Thanks for all your help. Is Dr. Terry in her office?"

"Should be. If she's not, let me know and we'll page her."

Jack and Ellie turned away from the corral and headed down the hall to Dr. Cynthia Terry's office. "Go ahead and get a court order for the general admitting list for the last ten days. And get one for the ER while you're at it," Jack said.

"You don't trust Bryson?"

"Just covering our butts, dear."

The door to Dr. Terry's office was open so Jack

poked his head in. "Good morning."

Cynthia Terry was a bone-thin, take-no-prisoners woman who looked harder than a high school principal ready for retirement. "Jack. Detective Saunders. Come on in and have a seat." She motioned with a skinny hand toward two mismatched chairs in front of her desk. "Have you spoken with Peter Bryson?"

So much for small talk. "Yes. He was very helpful." Ellie smiled at the doctor who returned the gesture with a stoic glare. Maybe it *was* four o'clock in the good doctor's morning but it was four o'clock in Ellie's morning, too. Maybe the woman just needed a strong cup of coffee.

Jack cleared his throat. "Peter said you make the call on all DOA's. Do you personally examine each one?"

Dr. Terry shook her head. "Not usually. It depends on the doctor, but Peter's one of our best. When it comes to DOA, I trust his call."

"Is there any possibility—even a remote possibility—that Leon picked up the wrong body?" Ellie asked.

Again, Dr. Terry shook her head. "I reviewed the admitting list and the charts of every person that was seen in the ER in the last thirty-six hours, and he was the only DOA."

"Were there any other deaths during that period?"

Dr. Terry leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "You mean did we lose anyone? An eighty-three-year-old heart attack victim and a sixteen-year-old female in a car wreck."

"Was this the carload of teenagers?"

"Yes. As you can expect, things were a little chaotic, and I thought it would be best if the child

wasn't right in the middle of it."

"That's when you sent him back down to the morgue?"

She nodded. "Probably isn't the ideal place to send a child, but he was comfortable with Leon."

"Dr. Bryson said when he was examined, there were no... injuries, or—" Ellie began.

"There was nothing. No bruises, no scrapes. His heart rate was normal. His respiration was normal, no indications of internal injuries. We even took him down to X-ray, and there were no broken bones. There was *nothing* out of the ordinary." She sat up and leaned into her desk.

"What about signs of previous abuse," Ellie asked. "Any old fractures in the X-rays?"

Dr. Terry shook her head. "None."

At least that part of this whole ordeal was a blessing.

"There has to be some medical..." Ellie struggled to find the right word.

"Explanation?" Dr. Terry shook her head. "Trust me. I've been racking my brain since Leon called and... well, I've never seen anything like it. There is a rare... *phenomenon*... called the Lazarus Syndrome. But in the brief research I've been able to do so far, I haven't found a documented case of this nature."

Ellie wrote the words *Lazarus Syndrome* in her notes. She stared at the words wondering if there really was a clue in the name alone. She quickly dismissed the thought. It couldn't be. Things like that just didn't happen. Outside of the New Testament, anyway. And she had her doubts about those. "What do you mean of *this nature*?" she asked.

"The length of time between when the patient was

pronounced dead and when there were signs of life. It's usually just a brief period of time. Not two days."

"What time did Leon notify you he was... alive?"

"It was a little after midnight."

"And you're positive there wasn't some kind of mix-up? A patient misidentified, perhaps?" Jack asked.

"I'm certain, Jack. I can't really speak for Leon's department, but I did go over his procedures and reviewed the files on everyone that had been transferred to the morgue and there's still no explanation. Trust me—I'm a stickler for efficiency but I was *hoping* to find an error, a mix-up, something that would explain this." She leaned back again and rubbed her forehead like she was rubbing away a headache. She sighed then continued, "Although there appears to be nothing physically wrong at this point, we'd still like to admit him to the pediatric ward. Maybe *they* can come up with something."

"What about his emotional state?" Ellie asked. "Is he agitated or distraught?"

Again, Dr. Terry shook her head. "He's... fine. A little quiet, but considering he woke up in a morgue, I'd say he's your average kid."

"Can we see him now?" Jack asked.

"Sure. I'll walk you down."

2

The morgue of Burkesboro Regional Hospital was tucked into the far end of the basement, far enough away from anything else so anyone heading there was there for a reason. It would never be mistaken by wayward visitors for a restroom or the cafeteria. Except for the rhythmic *click-clack* of Dr. Terry's clunky heels, the hallway was eerily quiet. The smell of chemicals seeped from under the tightly sealed door.

Despite the silent voices that occupied it, Ellie had always found the morgue to be a rather lively place, especially when Leon was working. He usually kept the Beach Boys at full volume, classical on his moody days. As they approached, Ellie heard only silence.

"No music?" Ellie asked, surprised at the quiet filtering under the door.

"Even Leon was a little perplexed by this kid." Dr. Terry keyed in a code on the electronic door then waited for it to open. When it swung open, Jack and Ellie followed her toward the office on the far side of the room.

Through the glass walls, Ellie could see Leon sitting at a gray metal desk, and a child sitting on top of it, his back to the glass wall.

Dr. Terry stopped and motioned for Jack and Ellie to do the same. "Wait right here and I'll get Leon. I don't think it would be in the child's best interest at this point to hear all the details."

Ellie peered over Dr. Terry's shoulder, anxious to get a look at the child. He definitely had blond hair, and he was wearing a blue t-shirt but from the angle, she couldn't see the front of it, the Superman emblem. The child turned and gazed through the glass at the trio of visitors. When he did, Ellie's blood turned as cold as the temperature in the room.

That's him. That's the same kid that two days ago was dead. She gathered her blazer and wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the creepy chill. Her teeth chattered. "Are you cold?" She asked, turning toward Jack.

"It's always cold in a morgue, Ellie."

"No, I mean it's colder than *usual*. It's cold, cold. Weird cold."

Jack stared at Ellie then slightly grinned. "It's not that cold. I think you're a little spooked."

"You would be too if you'd seen him in that alley. And dead."

Leon came out of the office. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and cut-off khakis that hung below his knees. His red hair was a mass of loose curls that sprang in different directions when he walked. As usual, Leon had way too much energy. Especially at this time of morning.

"Jack, Ellie, it's been a while." Leon laughed and offered his hand to Jack then gave Ellie a grabby hug. "Looking fine, woman. When are you gonna leave this old man and come to work for me? We can dance all night." He grabbed her hand and twirled her around then dipped so low Ellie knew she was going to fall to the floor.

When he finished, he saluted Jack and pretended to stand at attention. Ellie straightened and smoothed

her jacket. "Good to see you again, Leon."

"Good to see you, too, gorgeous. You ought to get down here more often."

"Well if I was here more often that would mean we both had too much work." She ran a hand over her hair, hoping to settle it back into place.

"Good point. Doc says you wanted to talk to me about *Johnny Doe*. Weirdest thing I've ever seen in my life, and I've seen some doozies." He shook his head back and forth for emphasis, sending his red curls into a bouncing frenzy.

"From the beginning, Leon," Jack said.

"Sure." He stuffed his hands in his pants pockets and rocked back and forth on his feet. He smelled like rose-scented room freshener. "Tuesday night I got a call around seven that the ER had a transfer—"

"Who called you?" Ellie asked, her pen poised at her notepad.

"Peter Bryson. I got up there around seven fifteen, maybe, and brought him down here to the dungeon." He glanced around his work environment and smiled.

"What did you do after you got him down here?"

He pointed to a row of three gurneys, two with army green drapes covering noticeable lumps, and one with the drape puddled beside it on the floor. "I parked him right there. There were instructions to hold for autopsy, so I didn't prep him or anything. I took all the information from his toe tag and went back to the office to catalog it."

"You didn't touch him or move him again after that?"

Leon shook his head. "Not for a while. I had four to catalog so I was in the office for about an hour and when I finished, I moved him to a drawer. I pulled the

rest of my shift, and then went home."

"Who came in after you?"

"Vanessa. She works day shift. Dr. Jenkins had three autopsies scheduled yesterday, including your little Johnny Doe, but he called in sick – the flu, I think. I mean, like it really matters down here, ya know?" He smiled.

Maybe it was a good thing Jenkins was out sick. The Medical Examiner was known to be a little stressed and jumpy. Ellie could only imagine how jumpy he would have been if he had started an autopsy on a child that wasn't dead.

"Did Vanessa...*check* on him or anything?"

Leon stared at her a moment then chuckled. "Check on him how? Usually when we put 'em in a drawer, they stay put."

Ellie sighed. Leon was right. It was a stupid question, but considering the circumstances, she wasn't taking anything for granted. "OK, fair enough. When did you discover he was... alive?"

"Sometime around midnight. I went up to the coffee shop and got a cup of coffee and a couple of doughnuts. When I came back, I moved him out of the drawer and put him over there. Then went to the office to finish up some paperwork."

"Why'd you remove him from the drawer?"

"Dr. Jenkins is supposed to be in around six, and I was supposed to have all the prep work finished before he gets here."

"What happened next?"

Leon's eyes widened, and he spread his hands open. "Oh man, talk about weird. I was working in the office and he just...*walked up*. Asked where the bathroom was. Imagine that. The kid had to pee." He

laughed.

"What did you do then?"

"I took him to the bathroom."

Ellie glared at him. "You didn't question who he was or where he came from?"

"The kid had to go bad. Real bad. He was doing that little pee-pee dance kids do. You know how they—" He began to illustrate but Jack interrupted him.

"Um—Leon, when did you get around to asking him how he got down here?"

"After we got back from the bathroom. I asked him who he was and how he got here, and he said he 'woke up' on that table over there. He pointed to that empty gurney." Leon did the same. "I'm telling you, I flipped out. He was still wearing the toe tag so I took him in the office and checked it against the paperwork and man-oh-man, the thing matched. Then I *really* flipped out."

Ellie glanced at the gurney and saw the same sneakers she had seen in the alley now lying underneath, partially covered by the drape. She looked at Leon and nodded understandingly. She would have flipped out, too. She shivered again. "Did he say his name, or what happened to him?"

Leon shook his head. "I asked him, and he said he didn't know."

"What happened to him or—"

"No, his name. He doesn't know his name."

Ellie furrowed her brows. Even a two-year-old usually knows their name. "Was there anyone in here while you were gone?"

Leon shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. The security camera at the door would know for sure."

"We'll need to get a copy of that tape," Jack said.

Ellie looked around the room, paying close attention to the upper corners. She wondered if she could get so lucky. "Are there any other cameras?"

"Just the one at the door. I guess they're not as concerned about what goes on in here as they are who comes and goes."

"Did anyone else come down while you were in the office?"

Leon shook his head. "Nope. Just me. We don't get a lot of traffic down here. There's an electronic log of each time the door's opened, time, date—stuff like that. I know 'cause they nailed me a few weeks ago. Came in late." He smiled. He was missing a tooth.

Ellie looked past Leon at Dr. Terry and the little boy. She wondered if he remembered anything. "Can you introduce us?"

"Sure. I've been calling him Johnny. You know, John Doe?" He bobbed his head again.

Ellie smiled. "Better than Lazarus."

Leon laughed hard enough his hair bounced again. Jack and Ellie followed him to the glass office. The kid turned and looked at them as they entered. Ellie forced herself to breathe.

It was the same kid; there was no doubt. The same blue t-shirt with the red Superman emblem, the same green knit shorts. The same blond hair—except now there were no bloody clumps. The same delicate features, except now there were no bruises. His fair skin was flawless. There were no scuff marks at his knees, no scratches on his little skinny arms. His blue eyes were bright and sparkled with life. New life.

"Hey, Johnny, this is Ellie and Jack. They're going to talk to you for a minute. OK?" Leon gently clapped