

## Chapter 1 excerpt from *Dangerous Secrets* by Susan Hunter

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The late-afternoon sun shone with a fierce light that set the autumn reds and yellows of the leaves on fire. I had passed the construction and congestion around Madison, and I was almost home on that almost perfect October day. I rolled down the car windows, turned up the music, and sang my heart out to Adele, Aretha, and yes, it's true, the Backstreet Boys. Don't judge.

I was eager to get back to my small-town home—Himmel, Wisconsin, after a pretty grueling two weeks in Michigan. I had been thrust into the role of primary caregiver for my Aunt Nancy, after she took a tumble from the stage during an energetic dance number in her local theater group's production of *Grease*. Normally, her husband, or my mother, or her daughter would have stepped in. But Uncle Jeff was on a fishing trip at some remote camp in Canada, and Aunt Nancy refused to ruin it for him. My mother was on a cruise, and my cousin Rowena was giving birth in Texas.

Enter me, Leah Nash, devoted niece, former reporter, current true crime writer, and unlikely home health care aide. I love my Aunt Nancy, but, sadly, I don't have a big reserve of tender-loving care to draw from. And Aunt Nancy, it turns out, doesn't have a big reserve of patience for forced immobility, cabin fever, and a steady diet of grilled cheese, Honey Nut Cheerios, and spaghetti. When I tried to vary the menu one night by making Cornish game hens, a favorite of Aunt Nancy's, it just underscored my domestic deficiencies. They were in the oven a little long—well, maybe, a lot long. After I served them, Aunt Nancy started calling me “Baby Jane,” and asking me where her parakeet was.

When Uncle Jeff finally got home, both she and I were relieved. I flew out the door on a flurry of hugs, kisses, thanks, and don't-mention-its almost before he set his suitcase down. My tour of duty in the wilds of Michigan's Upper Peninsula was over. Himmel may not be a metropolis, but at least we don't have wolves in our backyard. And bears. I don't even want to talk about the bears.

The thought of sleeping in my own bed, in my own apartment, made me giddy as I neared home. If I had known it was the last time I'd feel unfettered joy for quite some time, I would've reveled in it more.

### Read the entire excerpt

\* \* \*

“Leah! When you get back?”

“Hi, Mrs. Schimelman, just now. I'm starving, so you're my first stop. What's good today?”

Clara Schimelman owns the Elite Café and Bakery just a short distance from my apartment. She's a friendly, gray-haired woman in her late sixties. Her large, comfortable frame is testament to the delicate pastries and delicious sandwiches she serves. The Elite, with its rickety old tables, squeaky wooden floor, and uncomfortable small chairs, is a Himmel favorite.

“Is all good,” she said with justifiable complacency. “I make you döner kebab. Is a new menu item I bring back from Berlin. Pita bread, roasted turkey, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, cabbage, chili flakes, garlic-yogurt sauce. It's the bomb.” Mrs. Schimelman, a fixture in town for more than 30 years, still

retains a strong German accent, but she loves her American slang—though she generally runs a few years behind.

“Sounds perfect,” I said. “So, what’s been going on?” I asked, as she turned to assemble the sandwich.

Over her shoulder she answered, “You haven’t talked to no one?”

“No. Most of the time I couldn’t get a signal on my phone, and my aunt’s internet connection was so slow, I couldn’t stand it. I texted a couple of times with Coop and Miguel, but that’s about it. Why, did something happen?”

At that moment, the bell over the door tinkled and a frazzled looking mother with three rambunctious little boys came through the door. “Coffee, just a really dark, really big cup of coffee, please, Mrs. Schimelman. Boys, one cookie choice. And don’t forget please and thank you.”

“Hey, Lanette, how are you?”

Lanette Howard is my mother’s across-the-street neighbor.

“Leah, hi. Sorry, did we just barge in on your order? Dylan, don’t lick the display case. Marcus, stop pinching Arlo.” As she spoke, she deftly separated two of her children and swiped at the remains of Dylan’s tongue print on the front of the case. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Schimelman. If you have a cloth and some spray, I’ll wipe that off. And please, go ahead, get Leah’s order.”

“No, that’s OK, you go ahead. I’ll just take a look at the paper and catch up.” A copy of the Himmel Times Weekly sat on the counter, and I grabbed it and moved to a nearby table.

“Thank you. It’s probably better for everyone if we get out as quick as possible. How’s your aunt doing? And when’s your mother due back?” The boys, having made their selections, were vibrating with anticipation as Mrs. Schimelman reached into the display case with practiced hand and scooped up their choices in thin, white bakery tissue paper. There was a moment of buyer’s remorse while one changed his order, and the other wailed because his brother was “copying.” Lanette sighed and said, “I know, sugar is a bad idea, but I had to have a coffee and I couldn’t bring them into this divine bakery and not let them have a cookie.”

“Hey, you’ll get no argument from me. Aunt Nancy is doing pretty well. Mom will be back Tuesday or Wednesday. I can’t remember which. Anything going on in the old neighborhood?”

She looked surprised for a second and said, “In the neighborhood? No, but—Marcus, that’s it. Hand over the cookie. You may be able to get it after dinner, if you can ride home without picking at your little brother. I’m sorry, Leah, I have to get these monsters out of here.” She managed to pay Mrs. Schimelman, grab her coffee, and wrangle her crew out the door without spilling, dropping, or losing anything—or anyone. I stand in awe of Lanette’s multitasking skills.

I half-expected Mrs. Schimelman to share her views on parenting with me after they left. She’s as generous with her opinions as she is with her portions, but she was busying herself slicing turkey and getting out condiments. I opened the paper and scanned the headlines. Trick or treat hours had been set by the city council; a car had fallen into a sinkhole on Maple Street; a potbellied pig was used to assault a man in a domestic dispute; and Mrs. Hanson’s first grade class had participated in a trip to the zoo in Madison. A busy week, indeed.

I turned to the inside pages and checked the obituaries. It's an old habit I can't seem to break. My first assignment at my first newspaper, which happened to be the Himmel Times Weekly, was to write the obituaries. I'd envisioned covering police news, or at least a lively city council meeting—not dull, dead people stuff. When I had balked, my boss brought me up short.

“Every obituary is the story of a person's life. It's their final story. It's something their families keep, and reread, and pass on. It's a marker for their memories. It's not a throwaway job. You need to do it right, and you need to have the attitude. Understand?”

I did. Ever since then, I've never been able to put aside a newspaper without at least scanning the obituaries as a small way of paying respect to all those life stories. As I looked through them, one notice surprised me. I put the paper aside and saw that my sandwich was ready.

“Mrs. Schimelman, what happened to Duane Stanton? It says he died suddenly. Heart attack?”

“Oh, ja. Terrible that was. No heart attack. He fell from that bird-watching place. Watching birds. It's crazy.” She shook her head.

“That's awful. He was a quirky guy, but I got a kick out of him. What do I owe you?”

“\$4.50. And I give you pumpkin walnut cookie for free. Welcome home.”

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I pulled into the parking lot behind my apartment and was just hauling my suitcase out, when a familiar voice called to me.

“Leah, what are you doing here?”

“I live here, Courtnee, remember?”

“I thought you were fishing in Canada with your grandma.”

It was typical of Courtnee Fensterman, a self-absorbed blonde who never really pays attention to anything that doesn't center on her, to mash half-heard information into her own particular version of fake news.

“I was in Michigan taking care of my aunt.” I yanked the suitcase out and shut the door. Then I pulled the handle up, ready to head inside the back door to my loft.

“Aren't you even going to ask me what I'm doing here on a Saturday?” Her pretty but vapid face had taken on a frown, and her blue eyes held reproach. I noticed then that she had a cardboard box in her arms.

“OK, I'll bite. What are you doing here?”

“Well.” She paused and shifted the box, then handed it to me. “Could you hold this for a minute? It's really heavy.”

Reflexively, I grabbed it, looked down and saw that it appeared to contain the vast make-up collection Courtnee kept in her desk drawer, along with some framed photos, at least half of the pens owned by the Himmel Times Weekly, and several boxes of Junior Mints.

“What are you doing, moving out?”

“Duh. Yes. Keep up, Leah.”

“Wait, what?” Courtnee leaving had long been my dream when I still worked at the Times. It seemed unfair that it should happen after I left.

“Rebecca is just so mean. I’m not, like, her personal slave. ‘Courtnee, you’re late! Courtnee, this message makes no sense. Courtnee, you can’t close the office to get your hair highlighted. Courtnee, the conference room isn’t your personal party place!’ Like anything is ever a party around here. My mom said I shouldn’t have to take that kind of thing. So, I finally quit.”

I wasn’t shocked that Mrs. Fensterman seemed to share Courtnee’s view that slavery on the job consisted of performing duties in a timely, accurate and professional manner. She had to develop her skewed vision somewhere. But it did surprise me that her mother had encouraged her to leave a paying position. It’s not like Courtnee’s job skills would open the door to many careers.

“Wait, wait, wait. You quit your job? What are you going to do?”

She tilted her head and rolled her eyes the way she does when she thinks I’ve said something especially lame.

“I’m already doing it. I’m a secretary or something in the Public Safety department at Himmel Tech. My Uncle Lou got me the job. Rebecca didn’t even give me a goodbye party or a gift or anything. And then she calls me today and says to come and get the rest of my stuff because the new girl needs the drawer space or something. Like, I’ve been busy, right? You’d think getting married might make her feel happy and be a little nice. But no. She’s still a biatch.”

I felt a fleeting frisson of sympathy for Himmel Technical College, but I was more interested in the last bit of information Courtnee had dropped in. I handed the box back to her, then leaned my face in close so she’d have to focus on me. I had to see if this was real news, or fake. “Courtnee, are you saying Rebecca is married? Who to?”

Rebecca Hartfield and I had clashed at our first meeting, and things had gone downhill from there. She was dispatched by A-H Media, the hedge fund that had bought the Himmel Times a year or so ago, to bring their latest purchase into line. Which, as far as I could see, meant squeezing every drop of profit out of the paper until A-H Media shut it down or sold its dried, dead husk. There’s a reason I refer to it as Ass-Hat Media.

“Well, Coop, of course. They got married last week.”

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