

NINE

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dekker, Rachele, author.

Title: Nine / Rachele Dekker.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020008338 | ISBN 9780800735968 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800738693 (hardcover)

Classification: LCC PS3604.E378 N56 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020008338>

The author is represented by The Fedd Agency, Inc.

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20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PART ONE

There will come a time when you believe everything
is finished. That will be the beginning.

Louis L'Amour

ONE

OLIVIA'S LUNGS BURNED as short bursts of air escaped her mouth. Her pulse pounded violently inside her head and for a moment blocked out everything but the vibrations of her feet slamming against the forest floor. But as quickly as the world had gone, it came rushing back in, and she wasn't alone. Lucy was behind her, and the group of armed mercenaries was closing in.

A dozen, maybe more, had descended upon the small motel. They'd come from all sides, clothed in black and armed to the teeth. She and Lucy had narrowly escaped out the fire exit and into the thick of the forest. The trees were a godsend but difficult to navigate. And they were two against many. The odds weren't in their favor.

Olivia listened for the buzzing of radio static, the hustle of approaching boots, but it was hard to hear through her heavy breathing and panicked inner voice. They were supposed to have more time. She thought they'd be one step ahead. She had underestimated them, a mistake she couldn't afford.

She heard rustling a few yards to her left and changed course. Pockets of moving lights dotted the darkness as their pursuers' flashlights bobbed. They were closing in.

She looked back at Lucy. "Stay close," Olivia said. The girl did, following only a couple of steps behind. Lucy could easily outrun her, but she was faithful to do exactly as Olivia directed. Always so obedient. Always so consistent. Even as a child, Lucy had been Olivia's favorite.

She pushed any thought of the past from her mind. She couldn't get distracted. Saving Lucy needed her entire focus. The past was behind them, and only what lay ahead mattered.

Through the light of the piercing moon, Olivia could see the ground sloping down. She charged for it, picking up speed, Lucy right behind. They plunged down the side of the small ravine, ankle deep in fallen leaves, an icy chill nipping at Olivia's cheeks.

When the slope met flat ground, she lost her footing and stumbled, narrowly avoiding spilling onto her face. She paused only for a heartbeat, then ran west. She knew where the moon was and used its position to guide her. Their salvation was west.

Lucy was close enough that Olivia could hear her steady breathing. Not rapid and broken like Olivia's. The forty years that separated them played a part in why. But only part.

They hadn't put but a couple of yards between them and the steep slope when the flashing lights crested the edge. The trained hunters were too fast for them to outrun. Olivia needed a different strategy. Her mind tumbled across potential solutions, landing on only one that gave Lucy a chance for escape. They needed a moment of cover.

Olivia searched the darkness, looking for a space. Collections of thick pine bushes scattered throughout the forest would have to do. She raced toward a large grouping, ignoring the ache in her knees. She maneuvered around and slid to a stop behind the prickly thicket.

Lucy pulled up behind her. "We shouldn't stop," she said.

Olivia placed a finger over Lucy's lips and pulled her closer, dropping to a squat and guiding Lucy to do the same. They didn't have much time. Olivia listened through the life of the forest, through her own violent pulse. For this to work she'd have to move quickly.

"I need you to stay here," Olivia said.

Lucy's eyes flashed with concern and confusion. "No—"

"Listen to me," Olivia said, her tone hushed. "I'm slowing you down. They'll catch up. You have to wait here. Let me pull them away, then continue west, as fast as you can, until Texas, like we talked about."

"No, I want to stay with you," Lucy said, her voice small with fear.

Olivia's heart broke. She wanted nothing more than to hold Lucy close, save her from all that had happened and all that would come. Save her from the trouble she herself had created for the girl, a miserable mistake that would never be forgiven. Yet there, crouched in the darkness, Lucy's bright blue eyes pleading with her for sanctuary, Olivia thought maybe, if she could save Lucy, just maybe she could save her own soul.

She brushed back Lucy's fiery hair, placed her palms on either side of the girl's face, and forced soft words through her rising emotions. "This is the only way, my sweet girl."

"But I don't know anything but you! I can't remember," Lucy said. Tears gathered in her eyes and shimmered in the starlit night.

"I know. I took your memories for your own protection. I know that's hard to understand, but you have to trust me, Lucy. Do you trust me?"

"I do."

"Good girl. Then do what I say now. Run west, to Corpus Christi, yes?"

“Yes.”

“Find Summer Wallace—she’s a friend of mine. Tell her Ollie sent you to find the robin. It’s very important.”

Lucy nodded.

“You can trust her. She’ll help you. You must find her.”

“Please come with me,” Lucy said. A tear slipped down her cheek and Olivia wiped it away.

“Remember what I told you. You are the key, Lucy. I gave you a weapon that will keep you alive, but it also puts a target on your back. I wish there had been another way . . .” Olivia swallowed hard against the sorrow threatening to overtake her. “Everything I ever did was for you. Even if it was misguided.”

Muffled voices drifted toward them on the breeze. Olivia peered through the small gaps in the pine bushes and saw the distant flashlights approaching. They were out of time. She reached for the pistol tucked in the back of her jeans and turned to Lucy.

A final look at the young girl’s soft face. A face she’d come to love more than any she’d ever known. Without children of her own, Lucy had occupied that place in her heart, been her reason and purpose. Goodbye was harder than she’d imagined. The thought of never seeing this face again would break her if she sat here any longer.

“Wait until I pull them away, no matter what you hear. Do you understand?” Olivia asked.

“Yes.”

“Then run. Don’t stop until you’re safe. Find Summer. Be careful who you trust.”

“When will I see you?” Lucy asked.

The truth was too hard, so Olivia forced a small smile. “I’ll find you. I promise.” She softly placed her hand around the back of Lucy’s neck and pulled her forward. She kissed the girl’s forehead,

unable to control the wells of tears that gathered in her eyes. So she hid her face, dropped her lips close to Lucy's ear, and whispered, "I love you, sweet girl."

With that Olivia took off east. She pumped her legs hard and fast. She ignored the aching of her joints and the overwhelming sadness that was yanking at her heart. The farther she rushed away from Lucy, the colder the world grew. Twenty, then thirty, nearly forty yards she estimated before she slowed to a stop. Without second-guessing her choice, Olivia aimed the pistol skyward and yanked the trigger.

The weapon felt like it exploded in her palm, the impact of the single shot cascading down her arm. The sound of the bullet cracked against the silent night, and within a couple seconds she saw the distant lights. She sent another shot and heard approaching radio commands. Olivia waited a final breath—she wanted to make sure she had drawn them—and then with as much confidence as she had, she ran.

The more noise she made, the better. She wanted them all to rush her, to leave a clean, open path for Lucy. She knew what drawing them would mean for her, but she pushed through the fear and ran.

Dodging trees, trying to keep her footing firm, she struggled to take painful breaths. They approached quickly, from all sides. Moving as if with one mind, they emerged from the trees two and three at a time, the moon giving enough light to trace their shapes. She was surrounded.

She came to a full stop and raised her firearm. It was illogical, yet still she turned in a circle. She couldn't possibly aim at all of them. But they weren't firing at her. They approached carefully, weapons pointed directly toward her, triggers untouched.

They wanted her alive. Otherwise she'd already be dead.

“Dr. Rivener, put down the weapon,” one of the masked soldiers commanded. A voice she recognized well.

Olivia ignored his request.

“Where’s the girl? It’ll be easier on everyone if you just tell us,” he said.

When Olivia’s silence continued, the speaker nodded to the agent to his right, and he signaled to several others.

“She couldn’t have gotten far,” one said, and the group before her trimmed from a dozen to half as groups split off to search for Lucy.

Olivia had never been much for belief, but in that moment, she prayed to God that Lucy had done exactly as she’d asked.

“Dr. Rivener, lower the gun,” the team leader spoke again. “We don’t want anyone to get hurt.” He was taking slow steps toward her.

“Then don’t do this,” Olivia replied. “Please, Seeley, you don’t have to do this.”

The masked man stopped and after a beat of silence lowered his weapon. His men inched forward, their guns still trained on her, and he raised a hand to reassure them. They froze, and he pulled back his dark mask.

Starlight softly lit his face. Olivia knew his square jaw, sharp nose, dark eyes. Strong and symmetrical features that Olivia had always found handsome. The helmet hid his thick black hair.

They’d been teammates. Colleagues. Now they stood as enemies on either side of a war that would change them forever.

Seeley held her eyes for a long moment before speaking. “You know I have to take you in.” His voice was kind though his words were deadly.

“This isn’t right,” Olivia said. “You’re a good man. You know this isn’t right.”

"We have orders."

"Forget orders. You know her. She's just a child."

"Don't be naïve, Olivia," Seeley said. "You forget what we were trying to do here."

"What we were trying to do was wrong. It cost us everything."

"It doesn't have to. Lower your weapon. Come in willingly. Hammon is reasonable, and you are an incredible asset."

"Now who's being naïve?"

Another moment of silence passed between them, then he glanced left to another soldier. "Take her."

Olivia took a step backward, gun still raised, as she tried to control the fear causing her fingers to tremble. "You can't kill her, Seeley. I've made sure of it. She's the only one who knows where the information's hidden."

The soldiers all paused. Seeley stared at her as his men waited for orders.

"We both know what's at risk if anyone gets hold of that information," Olivia said. "To the Grantham Project, to all those involved, to the country. Kill her and the whole world will know what we did."

She pictured Lucy one last time. Again she found herself praying redemption was real as she took a breath and resolved her end.

Seeley took a step forward, putting the pieces together a moment too late. He opened his mouth to instruct, maybe even to intervene, but Olivia had already pulled the trigger on her weapon. Once, twice, three times, as bullets exploded from the gun's barrel and into the soldiers.

They responded in kind. Two bullets sank deep in Olivia's gut, then a third and fourth in her chest and shoulder. Her final moment was encased in agony as she collapsed to the forest floor and her world went dark.