

Thirty pieces of Silver is an adventure story about standing up to corruption, even if it takes a while to do so. The book highlights the idea of facade public personalities and the pitfalls of technology. I hope everyone finds this book enjoyable and as always can find something useful and positive from it. God bless you, our brave men and women of the armed services, and all our first responders.

I would also like to again thank my wife and children for their continued support and to those who assisted me with editing and quality. I greatly appreciate what you all have done for me and can't thank you enough.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my mother. Thank you mom for always being my safety net in life. I love you very much and see if you can read this book beginning first instead of your traditional ending first approach.

Tony

Chapter 1

“Rumor has it a Bloodhound has been deterring everyone from doing business in the Ashland area for some time now. That’s not good... That’s not good at all. So, we are going to have to do something about that. The word on the street is that the two of you had some sort of encounter with them at some point. I want you to tell me about that encounter. What you saw, what was said, who should we be looking for?” Kerry Cain, the well-known businessman who also had his hand in several illegal activities asked of the Florence brothers concerning the obscure vigilante group.

Hearing this, both Dale and Davis looked at each other, not quite sure what to say before the older of the two brothers spoke up, feeling he should probably say something.

“I... We never got a good look at him! All we really know is what he said and some of the things our old associates have mentioned to us,” Dale hastily replied.

“Him? So it is just one,” Kerry pointed out as he walked away, withdrawn in thought as his bodyguards kept a close eye on the worried brothers.

“But at least one of you did talk to him, is that not correct?”

“Yes!” Davis, the younger of the two brothers replied quickly.

“Good,” Kerry slowly responded without turning around.

“I need you to tell me exactly what he said. No paraphrasing. No summarizing. I don’t want your interpretation. I want to know exactly what he said.”

Both brothers again looked at each other afraid to talk. Knowing Kerry’s history, they knew this meant trouble for them and upsetting him past the simple step of asking once, wasn’t advisable. However, they also knew they had a similar issue from the hound if they worked with Kerry too much.

“Well Mr. Cain,” Dale said, speaking up with a little strain in his voice.

“We are moving on from our old life. We don’t want any issues. We both feel lucky we got out. We now have families and a somewhat successful business the two of us run together. With all due respect Mr. Cain, if we say anything more than what we have, we are going to be putting everything we own in jeopardy.”

“So I hear,” Kerry replied as he spun around and looked upon the two brothers as a snake might look upon a cornered mouse.

“Your little shoe store on the corner of Cohasset and Wyandotte seems to be on the upswing. Good for the two of you,” he remarked with an untrustworthy grin.

“But the problem is, I don’t care. I don’t care about your families. I don’t care about either of your particular dilemmas, and I don’t care about your little boutique. What I do care about, and what the two of you should also be putting a lot of thought into is what that hound said,” Kerry declared with a very controlled voice.

“Now...” He continued, tempering himself as to not look flustered with the Florence brothers delayed cooperation.

“Sometimes life puts you in certain spots and you have to make maybe an unpleasant decision. This particular one you both find yourselves in deals with the certain and immediate, or the distant and theoretical. You can tell me, without me asking again, what I need to know and then worry about what might happen later,” Kerry explained with a foreboding smile.

“Or... you can waste my time some more and the two of you will find yourselves specializing in selling a different type of shoe at the bottom of Lake Scone,” he vocalized seriously enough as to shutter the brothers hearts.

Both brothers got the message Kerry was trying to relay as they simultaneously glanced over to each other. Knowing they would have to talk, Dale took in a deep breath while looking around the room as he exhaled. Seeing the guards and their body language as he did so, he

instinctively knew they all had a bet between them as to whether they would talk or if they would be using force to get the answers they wanted. This idea plunged Dales eyes downward with a brief shake of his head before he eventually looked up and spoke.

“I guess if you mess with the bull long enough in life... the horns might eventually come back to git ya,” Dale muttered while negatively shaking his head as he focused his gaze towards Kerry.

Kerry acknowledged this idea with a slight nod, knowing he now was about to get the information he wanted.

“Like Davis said, we didn’t really see him... and we really never heard him until he was right on us either,” Dale lightly revealed as he continued with his story, now no longer looking at Kerry but rather the floor below his feet.

“He somehow got past our dogs, got into the building we were using, and quietly came up behind me with a knife while we were waiting on a shipment to arrive,” Dale explained before stopping for a moment to carefully think over the wording the hound used.

“He put the knife under my neck and told Davis to look away. He then tossed some photos of our families and homes onto our desk and said he took them himself. He then told us we were done dealing drugs in Ashland before taking his knife and throwing it onto our desk through some of the pictures. We got the message... what else could we say. That was it. He then shoved me towards the desk and told us not to turn around. That was the only time we dealt with or heard from him.”

“Wow, sounds pretty wimpy,” Kerry said disparagingly of the Florence brothers.

“But I already knew you guys turned yellow. What I want to know is what he said.”

Just as he didn’t challenge the hound, Dale blurted out what he could remember but in a confused manner, not understanding what Kerry was getting at.

“Ummm, he really didn’t say much. As soon as he put the knife under my throat, he told Davis to look away. He said he took the photos

himself after he tossed the photos down, then he told us we were done. That was pretty much it. He said like twenty words to us and left.”

Not getting what he wanted, Kerry looked over to one of his guards who brushed aside his jacket and pulled out a gun.

“I want to know what he said.”

Dales eyes widened as he cocked his head back trying to remember the wording the hound used.

“Ummm...” was all Dale could say as his mind searched for more specifics.

As Dale was doing this, Kerry looked over to Davis to see if he had anything to say. Getting the hint, Davis spoke up with what he could recall.

“It’s like what Dale said,” Davis squeamishly vocalized, feeling the pressure of the situation.

“I heard look away from a strange voice. I reacted to the voice and saw a man behind Dale holding a knife and then did what he said. I heard those photos fall onto the desk followed by him saying, “I took these yesterday.” I then heard what ended up being the knife hitting the table followed by him telling Dale, “You’re done old sport. You’re done dealing drugs in Ashland.” He pushed Dale and then said, “don’t turn around.” We both then stood still for probably ten minutes before we felt enough time had passed before we even looked at each other.”

Kerry stood quiet for a moment just looking at the two brothers to see if they might feel enough pressure to say more. After a solid minute of this quiet lull, Kerry seemed satisfied with what he heard and changed his questioning slightly.

“Davis, you said you saw him, and you obviously both heard him. What did you see and what did he sound like?” Kerry asked while looking mainly at Davis.

“I just got a glimpse. He had a hoodie pulled down over his face, so I only saw a beard. It was white so I assumed he was older. He was average size, probably five ten-ish, and average build, not fat but not

rail skinny either,” Davis explained as he thought back to this momentary glimpse of the hound.

“Speech I guess was normal. No accent, no lisping, or anything like that. He did sound like he probably smokes, but that was about it.”

Kerry then looked at Dale, indicating to him he wanted him to take his turn.

“I didn’t see him, but I’d say the same thing about his voice. It was a little hoarse, kind of raspy, but normal sounding for around here. Other than that I really can’t add or say anything different.”

Kerry shook his head to this, then looked over to his main guard who looked back at him. Both had a visual exchange in which the guard holstered his weapon. This was then followed by him directing another guard to the rear door.

“My associate here will take you both home,” Kerry said as he motioned for all but his main guard to leave.

“And we never had this conversation.” he then firmly stressed before both brothers reached the rear door which was now being held open for them.

Once everyone had cleared the room, Kerry looked to his main guard and asked him what he thought.

“I wouldn’t have let them go. I think you were too nice,” Theo Gaius, his main guard replied.

“You know one of them is going to talk. If they talk too much, we are going to have a hound after us.”

“I know,” Kerry replied.

“But I think with this hound that will be inevitable, and we might be able to use them as bait,” he said as he sat down in a chair and tilted his head back in thought.

“Do you know who we are dealing with?” Kerry asked after taking a deep breath.

“Well, I’ve never heard of just one by themselves before, so he has to be pretty good. I don’t know Mr. Cain.”

“He is,” Kerry said, now blankly staring at the floor shaking his head.

“It’s Mr. Silver.”

“Who’s that?” Theo replied, surprised to hear a hound’s name he didn’t somewhat know or even at least heard of at some point.

“He’s my dad’s old triggerman,” he said, now looking up at Theo with a vacant gaze.

“His only hitman actually, for about a decade.”

“So is this going to be a problem? If you can give me some information, I can get our guys on it,” Theo remarked, not knowing who they were dealing with.

“Let’s just put it this way, although A.M. Savings is doing a merger, and they are moving nine hundred million, just the thought of Mr. Silver is making me hesitate,” Kerry said with a straight and serious face.

“Kerry, tell me what you know, and I’ll have our guys take care of it.”

“No, you don’t understand. We are going to need something different.”

“Yeah, I guess I don’t understand. Whoever worked for your dad has to be like sixty years old by now. Anyone can pull a trigger, so I’m sure he can still shoot, but we will find him, surround him and wear him down. End of problem,” Theo tried optimistically saying in an encouraging way.

“That won’t happen,” Kerry said rather bluntly with a slight smirk.

“Then who is this guy? Tell me and we will hunt him down.”

Kerry then got up and walked over to one of the windows in the room and looked out. Standing there for a while, he eventually started to move slightly, indicating to Theo that he looked like he was trying to spot something.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he was out there right now doing his homework. I wonder if he recognizes me.”

Kerry then turned around to a confounded Theo and tried to explain Mr. Silver to him.

“Nobody knows his name. My dad didn’t even know his name. He called him Mr. Silver because he mainly only accepted physical silver as his payment. Always upfront. He was the only guy my dad was afraid of. He had no loyalty to my dad or anyone else. He always worked for the person willing to pay him the most. My dad had to constantly keep him under contract, and he had to constantly raise his rates just to make sure someone else wouldn’t step in and offer him more to turn on my dad. I bet you my dad’s happiest day was when Mr. Silver retired. He was costing us a small fortune. I heard my dad once say he was paying him something like thirty percent before he walked away.”

“Have you seen him?” Theo asked, thinking if Mr. Silver might recognize Kerry, then Kerry might also have seen Mr. Silver at some point.

“I saw about as much as the Florence brothers did. He came to our house once when I was a kid after a job didn’t go as planned. He never used phones, so he just showed up one day while my family was eating and met with my dad about the problem. It was brief, but I remember it distinctly to this day. My dad wasn’t someone who got unannounced visits, so the surprised look my parents had, combined with the chilling appearance of a hooded man in your doorway, was something I never forgot.”

“How do you know this is the same guy though?” Theo asked, not seeing a one hundred percent link between what the Florence brothers said and what Kerry was saying.

“Just one guy controlling the entire city was suspicious, but Davis

saying ‘old sport’ sealed it for me. When Mr. Silver left that unannounced visit, he looked over to me and said, ‘Eat up old sport’ as he was leaving. Do you know anyone else who uses that phrase? I’ve never heard that from anyone else until today.”

“So, what do you want me to do?” Theo voiced when Kerry had finished talking.

Kerry went still for a little while, thinking about how to go about handling Mr. Silver. As he had already mentioned to Theo, the guys they had would not work, so they would need a specialist. Thinking about how to even find Mr. Silver, Kerry had the thought of an FBI profiler he once used to hunt down an ex-client that refused to pay on an account.

“Do we still have that FBI profiler under our thumb?” he asked curiously, having rarely used him.

“I believe so, but I will have to look into it to be sure,” Theo answered, nodding his head to Kerry.

“Good. Talk to him and see if he will do the job. The terms are his, but we need it done by the end of the month.”

“Okay, I’ll give him a call right now if I still have his number,” Theo said, pulling his cell phone from his pocket and looking at his screen.

“NO!!!” Kerry exclaimed.

“No phones. You are going to have to meet him face to face. Don’t use your phone at all regarding this issue,” Kerry said very pointedly before explaining.

“One of the ways Mr. Silver kept his identity secret was by bugging phone lines. My dad never had a phone number for him. Instead, he would simply pick up his phone, explain the job and give a price and payoff location to a dial-tone. He never dialed. He just named the job and hung up. The job would then either eventually get done or if he didn’t offer enough, it wouldn’t, and my dad would have to pick up the phone and start the process all over again. There was rarely any back and forth between him and my dad.”

“Okay...” Theo said, rubbing his hand through his hair.

“So you just want me to wait outside an FBI agent’s house until I see him? That’s not going to look good!”

“Come up with something,” Kerry said shaking his head and dismissing how it would get done.

“You just can’t use your phone. Tell the FBI agent the same thing.”

“Okay,” Theo replied with slight hesitation in his voice.

“I want you on this tomorrow. Bump anything else we have. I’ll write down what I know of Mr. Silver and see what paperwork my dad might have had. See if that profiler will take up the job and have him work up a profile as fast as he can,” Kerry firmly made clear as he pulled open a drawer to grab a pencil.

Chapter 2

Although Theo was able to find and talk with his FBI contact rather quickly, the agent put quality over schedule and did not get back with him for several days. After thinking about looking elsewhere, the FBI agent appeared at Kerry's shop unannounced with several files in hand.

"This is the agent I was telling you about," Theo said as he shut the door behind them in order to give the three men some privacy.

"Good, have a seat Mr...?" Kerry inquired, not knowing his name.

"Drew Wooster." The agent replied, as he took up a seat across from Kerry and placed his files on his desk.

"Theo said the terms were mine," Drew said not wasting any time.

"Just the files will be fifty grand, plus I want my tab at the Woods erased."

"How much do you owe?" Kerry asked with intrigue.

"About forty grand."

Kerry laughed at this while reaching over to the files and giving Drew a smile.

"You have a problem," Kerry remarked of his gambling debt.

"But if these files have something good in them, I'll let the Woods know your account is clear."

Not saying much, Drew nodded his head to this agreement and watched as Kerry opened up the folder and started to sort through it.

"What am I looking at here?" he asked after a few quiet moments

of looking over the forms.

“The files stapled together at the back are his profile based off what was relayed to me and what I could find. The first few forms are some older documents I was able to find on Mr. Silver when the FBI was looking into him... probably when he was working for your father.”

Kerry shook his head to this, then carefully read through some of the forms seeing what the FBI thought and what Drew had come up with.

“No name?” was the first thing Kerry asked after only finding “Mr. Silver” or a series of numbers that seemed to indicate the FBI didn’t know who he was either.

“Nope, no name. But the FBI does have some prints on him. So if he ever does something that requires him to get printed, we will find out that way.”

Kerry again took his time looking over the forms to see if anything seemed to pop out at him. Not seeing much that he could discern, Kerry closed the folder and tossed it on his desk.

“Give me a summary of all this and what you think,” Kerry said as he gestured both his hands upwards in question.

“I think YOU have a problem,” Drew started off, emphasizing the “you” and mirroring Kerry’s gambling problem remark.

“Based on what Theo gave me and what I found, this guy is highly intelligent, patient, skilled, and has probably received some degree of specialized training to be able to do some of the things I’m seeing. First, he does not have a trademark killing style, or really any trademark for that matter. Everything from knives and guns to poison and bombs is on the table for him. That tells me he studies his target and comes up with what he feels is the best way to eliminate them while not being caught in the process. Additionally, the poison and bomb-making part are particularly noteworthy because both typically indicate a high IQ. Anyone can pick up a gun and use it. Being able to not only use a bomb successfully, but to also make one that works, tells you this guy is pretty smart.”

Kerry leaned back in his chair and continued to listen to Drew, not interrupting him.

“Theo mentioning he wiretaps also indicates an above-average intellect. This said, everyone, even the most thought-out individual, is going to leave clues as to who they are and where to start looking. Starting with the name you gave him, his desire to be paid in silver is unique, but also gives a sampling of his personality. I would put this desire to be paid in silver into the category of a survivalist. So he’s going to be adaptable, resourceful, and self-controlled. These traits are going to carry over to his buying habits. I would expect him to probably own a truck but nothing flashy. This same thing will be said about his home and clothing, and I would imagine he is a dog owner.”

Kerry shook his head in agreement to Drew’s assessment as he continued on.

“These traits, combined with the idea he patrols Ashland, tells me he probably lives near the city but somewhere low key and away from an abundance of people... probably in a trailer or farmhouse, but not an apartment building or someone that’s keeping up with the Jones’ house wise.”

“But Kerry said his dad paid him a fortune. I agree he probably doesn’t live in the city, but he had to have done something with all that money. Don’t you think he would at least have a large plot of land with maybe a nice little tucked-away estate? Maybe... Maybe a farmhouse but I just don’t see this guy in a trailer!” Theo said, speaking out loud.

“No. It’s going to be something like that. This guy is intelligent and knows people are looking for him. He’s not going to want to draw attention to himself, although his personality is still going to lean him towards the country and something modest. His wealth has nothing to do with it. It’s his personality that will leak through, not his wealth.... and that tells me trailer or farm,” Drew responded bluntly.

Kerry looked over to Theo, then back over to Drew still unjudging, wanting to hear Drew’s complete analysis and reasoning before questioning it.

“Also worrisome for you is the fact he is intelligent but doesn’t

wear gloves to hide his prints. He has to be supremely confident in his abilities to do that. Plus, as the FBI found out, he will not be a common law breaker other than his eliminations. He's going to be an upstanding citizen that doesn't have interactions with the police besides that he might donate to them or even befriend them in order to better throw off his scent," Drew added before standing up and opening the file to show a particular form he found on Mr. Silver.

"All of this is problematic for you, but I have zeroed in on an idea of what I'd be doing if I was looking for him," he remarked before pulling out a single form with a few paragraphs of information on it.

"Here is where I would start," he noted without handing it over to him.

Seeing he wanted paid for this information, Kerry didn't skip a beat.

"How much do you want to take up the job?" he asked directly.

Drew cracked a smile to this and sat back down in his chair for a moment.

"I thought you might ask me that. It's going to cost you a lot," he then said while losing his slight smirk and returning to a more serious face.

"It's really going to depend on a few things. Theo mentioned you wanted this done by the end of the month?"

Kerry nodded his head to this, which prompted an immediate reply from Drew.

"That's going to be impossible as things sit right now, it's just not enough time."

Understanding being frustrated and upset wasn't going to solve his issue, Kerry sat up in his chair and leaned forward towards his desk and Drew.

"Then what's going to speed up the process?" he asked with one eyebrow raised.

“Well first on my end, there’s a reason he can run this town by himself, even at his age. So to get it done in time for your bank heist, my services and ideas are going to cost you five percent of whatever you get,” Drew responded without a flinch or stutter.

With quick math telling him it was going to cost him at least forty-five million dollars, Kerry’s controlled demeanor finally cracked. This was manifested by a faint chuckle that slipped out due to swallowing this bitter pill.

“Okay, done…” he said while shaking his head side to side.

“What else?”

“You’re also going to need to pay off, blackmail, or intimidate the police since we don’t want anyone looking into what we are doing. That will have to be done immediately, but in a way that won’t catch his attention since he might be close to some of these officers.”

“Okay, anything else?” Kerry asked while fishing his tongue around his teeth in displeasure.

“Yes, there is simply no way we are going to be able to track him down in less than a month by statistics and processes of elimination… you’re simply going to have to speed up the process. Plus, you have to get this right the first time. If he’s tipped off, he might become impossible to find. So we’re going to have to do something that will be guaranteed to expose him. I don’t think that’s going to be something direct, but indirect.”

“You’re the profiler. What do you think will work the best and the fastest?”

“Since the patterns he’s shown us are specific to each job, we can’t rely on pulling a known lever of his to get a certain response. So we are going to have to dig a little deeper. At his most basic level, we can assume he is a hound because he sees injustice, has had some sort of prior experience which is triggering his actions, or he is guarding something. Each of these is essentially the same. He sees himself as a shield and is using his skills to achieve his goal,” Drew said, while pulling out a card and sliding it over to Kerry.

“Instead of us finding him, we will create a made-up scenario that will bring him to us.”

Kerry looked at the card and then looked back at Drew. Seeing he had Kerry’s attention, Drew continued on with his idea.

“We are going to need a Trojan horse, implanted by using his need to keep someone safe. Normally I would suggest an attractive young lady to rope someone in, but I think he will be wise to that. So, who would be the most defenseless and vulnerable that would force him to take action?”

Kerry looked at Theo who seemed to want to answer the question but didn’t seem to think it was realistic.

“A child?” Theo finally replied, filling in the question but with heavy doubt in his voice.

“Yes! I suggest creating a scenario where he will be forced to save or rescue a child. In doing this, he will come to us where we can then eliminate him.”

“That sounds great on the surface, but how are you going to do that? We would need a kid first off, and even if we had one, a ‘hostage’ or ‘abduction’ scenario, like I think you’re suggesting, is going to be too dangerous and scary for a kid... and... even if you convinced a kid and his parents to do this, he’s going to crack. That’s just too much for a kid,” Theo said, looking back and forth confounded between Kerry and Drew.

Kerry glanced over at Drew and then leaned forward and picked up the card he had given him. Looking back at Drew as if he wanted to hear out his idea, he handed the card over to Theo.

“Kids get the benefit of the doubt in stressful situations, even by the most skeptical. If we can get a professional child actor, I think the kid will be able to keep up the act long enough for us to be able to reel in Mr. Silver,” Drew said, as Theo looked at the card labeled “Mrs. Thornmeal’s Child Coaching. Child Actors of Tomorrow.”

“I don’t know,” Theo said of the idea while shaking his head.

“I get what you’re going for, but I just see too many moving parts. I always like things being simple. I think if what you are saying about Mr. Silver is true, then this needs to be simple for us but also foolproof so no mistakes are made,” Theo mentioned, politely disagreeing with Drew’s idea.

Instead of injecting what he was thinking, Kerry looked back over to Drew to see how he might respond to this. Leaning back in his chair, Drew gave the skeptical Theo more of his plan.

“I agree with you. Simple is best. I’d much rather track him down using what we know of him. But we simply don’t have that kind of time unless we happened to get lucky. So instead, we’re going to have to draw him out. I feel a child will give us our best chance,” he explained, lightly pointing at Theo to emphasize his proposal.

“We will put together a story and feed it to the media, letting it become the talk of the town. I doubt he listens to the media, but he is bound to hear it through gossip one way or another if we push it hard enough... so we’re going to have to use your media contacts. Once we let it simmer for a week or so, he will feel both pressure and obligation to do something, especially if we steadily ratchet up our made-up story. With all that, we will then have set up a ‘foolproof’ trap which will be designed to pin him down before he ever gets close to the kid,” Drew said, somewhat sarcastically of Theo’s “foolproof” remark.

“To be sure, we can also add in a buffer, say maybe a mom and child situation. We will make it so both are in the same area but separate. Maybe the mother will be in worse shape or in a more perilous spot, which will lure Mr. Silver towards her first. Our child actor will only have to yell ‘Help’, he will never have to actually have a full conversation with Mr. Silver. He will just need to keep the pressure up and be believable in that role. We will then catch Mr. Silver while he is trying to rescue the mother, the kid will only be bait.”

Hearing this, Theo continued to shake his head at the plan before finally hearing enough and speaking out.

“With all due respect, this isn’t what I meant by simple. This already has too many moving parts and too many people involved... especially people we’ve never dealt with before, like this child actor.

On top of that, you recognized he doesn't operate in a consistent pattern but it's sounding like you are making a plan off the type of person you categorized him as. I think that's going both ways. If you think he changes his M.O. for each case, then his personal style wouldn't be reliable towards this plan."

Kerry nonverbally showed agreement in Theo's concerns and shifted a more scrutinizing look towards Drew.

"You're right," Drew said without hesitation.

"But we have less than a month. We can't take the long road, so I had to break him down to his most basic self. As long as Mr. Cain is okay with my overall plan, we can adjust for what we feel might be his approach towards our plan once we have it set up. On top of that, he too will only have a limited amount of time to come up with how he wants to go about things. This will open him up in terms of not being able to craft himself towards the most advantageous outcome. We can control the shortcuts like water. In a sense, we can steer him along the path we want if we make some routes hard to solve while also making others easy. With the feeling he is running out of time, he will be forced to do things the way we guide him."

"I like it!" Kerry announced, vetoing Theo's concerns.

"Set it up and let us know what all you need from us. If it helps you Theo, in terms of not having too many moving parts, we can use someone we have in the past as the mother. That doesn't sound like it needs to be an actor and then it wouldn't be another loose end. Pick someone you know is loyal to us and fill her in," Kerry said confidently, as he stood up indicating this would be the plan.

"You two work together and get a more in-depth storyline going. Theo will pick the mom and feed whatever you guys come up with to the media while Drew picks out the kid. But, and I can't say this enough, DO NOT talk about any of this over the phone. This was Mr. Silver's main mechanism. Cut that from the plan completely unless what you are saying is fake. I want all these parts moving by tomorrow," he emphasized while putting his jacket on and leaving Theo and Drew alone in the room.

Chapter 3

“I got our kid!” Drew said as he walked into the room Theo was in.

“Did you pick out someone to be the mother yet?”

“Yes,” Theo replied, while only paying half attention to Drew as he wrote down several notes into his notepad.

“Well, who is she?” Drew asked as he took up a seat next to Theo, wanting to know more about her.

Theo partially ignored Drew as he wrote down more of his ideas concerning their plan. However, not hearing Drew say anything further and having the growing feeling he was waiting for a reply, Theo put down his pen and looked over to Drew.

“Her name is Gwen Skippski. We have used her several times and she is one of our more reliable partners,” Theo said, without much enthusiasm or detail.

Theo looked at Drew as if this was enough, and then without saying anything further, picked up his pen and returned to his notes.

“That’s it?” Drew asked, shaking his head a bit to Theo’s dull response.

Already bothered by the plan Kerry and Drew wanted, and not wanting to really talk at the present moment, Theo shrugged off the question and asked one of his own as a means of changing the conversation.

“She will be here in a little bit. When she gets here, we will fill her in on her role and you can ask her whatever you want. Tell me about the kid you got?”

Recognizing Theo seemed a little ruffled but not knowing why, Drew didn’t push the topic and instead answered his question.

“Her name is Heidi Greene. She’s six. Mrs. Thornmeal thought she was her best child prospect. I talked to Heidi’s parents and...” he said before being interrupted by Theo.

“Six?.. and I thought you said you were getting a boy?”

“Is there a problem with that?” Drew questioned, not seeing what Theo’s issue was.

Theo tightly pulled his hand down over his face with some stress. Not upset, just surprised with something new, he tried to explain himself.

“No, I just thought you were going to get a boy actor that was around ten or so.”

“Sorry if I misrepresented something, but I felt a young girl would pull at Mr. Silver’s strings a little more. Plus Mrs. Thornmeal said this little girl was her best actor anyways, so it all seemed to fit. Is that a problem?”

“No,” Theo replied.

“I just already don’t like all the moving parts and reacted to something else new. I am a little surprised about the age but if the instructor thinks it will work, then we will go with it.”

“Yes, the instructor had high praise for the girl and...” Drew tried to say, before being interrupted again, this time by a knock on the door.

“One moment,” Theo remarked, as he stood up and walked over to the same door Drew had entered. Looking at a monitor near the front door, Theo quickly recognized Gwen and opened it.

“Come in and have a seat,” he said while extending his arm inwards.

Gwen did just that, confidently walking past Theo, right up to a now standing Mr. Wooster.

“This is Drew Wooster, the FBI profiler I was telling you about,”

Theo continued, trying to introduce the two.

“Good to meet you,” Drew said, as he shook Gwen’s hand.

“Can I get either of you something to drink before we dive into this?” Theo asked, attempting to be hospitable.

“I’m okay,” Drew replied, as Gwen requested only a bottled water.

“Okay, give me a second and I’ll be right back,” Theo responded, as he walked into another room to grab Gwen’s water and a drink for himself.

Gwen then politely sat down in an open chair that was to the right of Drew before asking him what the plan was.

“Well Theo and I haven’t one hundred percent hammered out the details yet, but unless he thought up something more elaborate, all we really need is for you to pretend to be in trouble.”

As Drew finished his answer, Theo walked back into the room and handed over the cool bottle of water in which he had already politely loosened the cap.

“You were saying you might need me for up to a week?”

“Yes, that’s right. But it really depends upon how long it will take for us to get the guy we want,” Drew continued, as Theo also sat down and injected himself into the conversation.

“Regardless of how long it takes, we will still be paying you the thirty thousand we agreed upon. If it ends up being just one day, good for you... you get a big payday. If it ends up being a week, and I mean seven days not five business days, then it’s still a good chunk of money for a week’s work.”

“I agree.” Gwen acknowledged, a little excited.

“But if you need me for a little longer, what are we talking about then?”

Being a financial part of the plan, Drew remained quiet while Theo explained the terms.

“I really don’t think it’s going to take more than seven days. But if it does...” he said, trying to do some quick math in his head.

“How does five thousand a day for anything over seven days sound?”

Having already worked the math out before showing up, Gwen gave a firm reply with some reasoning as to why she needed more.

“Well I want to go over the details a little more, but if things start to go long that’s going to start being an issue with my regular job. So I want six thousand a day.”

Theo smiled at the impromptu negotiation, and then nodded his head in agreement. Gwen followed Theo’s reply with a little smirk of her own, which she had been trying to hide.

“Moving on,” Theo said, wanting to get into the details of what they needed from her.

“I was telling you, you and a kid Drew secured, are going to be a lure for a guy we want to eliminate. As of right now, all I need you to do is sit tight in a location we still need to pick out. And by still, I don’t mean you need to sit in a single chair the entire time. I just need you to stay in the building and be ready for whenever he comes.”

“So who is this guy?” Gwen asked, not knowing this part of the story.

“His name is Mr. Silver,” Drew replied, taking over this part of the conversation.

“He is a hound in Ashland that we feel will try to rescue you if we make up a story that sounds like you are in trouble.”

“Silver?” Gwen blurted out in surprise.

“I’ve heard his name before. Do I need to be worried?”

“No, no, we are taking precautions for that. You don’t need to worry about him or any legal stuff. We just need you to be more or less a physical target that he will be trying to get to.”

“So I’m going to be in a building and I’ll be notified when you need me to look like I’m in distress?”

“Yes, more less,” Drew responded, as Theo then injected a little more of the story into the fold.

“We need him to believe you are in trouble. So we are going to be putting out a story that a jealous ex-boyfriend kidnapped both you and your kid and is now holding you at an unknown location. Kerry wanted something to ratchet up the issue to ensure Mr. Silver would show up, so we are going to add to the story that you and your girl are diabetic. This with the idea you haven’t had your insulin either on time, or at all, should increase his desire to find you as fast as he can.”

“Girl? I thought you said boy?” Gwen said, catching the same thing Theo had.

“Yeah, no, I might have messed that up. It’s a girl, Congratulations!” Theo exclaimed, trying to make a joke that fell flat.

“Anyways, Drew secured a girl named Heidi who will be your daughter in this story. You two will meet when we pick the location and put out the story.”

“So you are going to have a plan in place to catch Silver before he ever gets close to me, correct?” Gwen asked, obviously going somewhere with her question.

“Yes, that’s already in the works. I can’t tell you exactly how that’s going to happen right now just because we haven’t figured out where this is even going to be taking place. However, he will be dealt with before getting anywhere near you or Heidi.”

“So, I know plans don’t always go the way you want. What if he manages to get near me? Should I have a cover story in place? Do I need to be worried about him trying to give me insulin?”

“No... again, we will have that end covered. I can fill you in

more about the ‘how’ if you want when we find our location. But no, we’re planning on having several layers between you and him. So you don’t need to be worried about him having a needle. You don’t need a cover story. All we will need you to do is to maybe call out for help or lay still if he even gets that close. But if you want to cook up some elaborate tale or maybe a fake name, sure go ahead. But I don’t think it will get that far,” Theo noted with an assured voice.

“Okay,” Gwen replied, still fishing around the idea things might not go as planned.

“Say he does get to me or at least really close. Do I need to be worried about him getting shot at or something like that near me? A. That might increase how much you owe me, and B. I’d rather have nothing to do with that or see any of that kind of stuff.”

Theo shook his head, understanding Gwen’s concerns. Before answering this line of questioning, Theo picked up the notepad he had been writing in and handed it over to her. Receiving the notes, Gwen looked upon the many pages of ideas and drawings Theo had written up in preparation for the undertaking.

“I have been writing all night. I know Kerry has a reputation as being a little harsher than most other gangs and mobs. But he has me heading this up. I want this as simple and safe as possible. There are less headaches that way. I’ve been working on this all night thinking up several different layers to put between him, you and Heidi. We don’t want it to get that far. All we want is for him to feel this scenario is real so we can put him into a position where we can get him. So everything I have drawn up on those notes are all thought out safeguards... and safeguards on top of safeguards, in order to have him under control probably before you even know he is in the area. We honestly might not even need you if what I’m thinking up works.”

“Okay,” Gwen replied again, buying into Theo’s spiel after seeing just how many detailed notations, plans and plotted out scenarios he had, all with favorable outcomes.

Chapter 4

“I don’t know what I was expecting, but I didn’t expect you to show up with a suitcase!” Theo said as he welcomed Gwen at the factory they had decided upon.

“I guess that’s just a guy thing though. My wife probably would have shown up with the same, if not more.” He went on to say with a smile.

Kerry, who was standing next to Theo, laughed at this and welcomed Gwen as well.

“How are you doing Gwen? I’m glad we could get you to fill in this role. How’s your father doing?”

“Oh no problem... He’s doing okay. He’s up and walking around right now with the assistance of a therapist which is a relief to my mother. He was getting a little demanding of her, laying around all day just watching TV. But the pain has largely gone away, and he seems to be okay with the fact he might need a cane from here on out,” she replied of her fathers recent car accident, in which his left leg was damaged quite severely.

“Good. Not ideal, but at least it’s better than the alternative. So, if we can have your keys, we’ll have someone get your car out of here, and then we’ll start showing you around.”

Still in her hand, Gwen handed over her keys to Theo, who then gestured for a younger man that was standing outside the factory to come over and get them.

“John, take Ms. Skippski’s car to our lot downtown and get Tyler or Paul to follow you so you have a ride back,” Theo explained, wanting her car away from the factory and out of sight.

“Good. Let’s go inside and we can start the tour!” Kerry said with some excitement that his plan was materializing.

“This is the old Brodel Ball Bearing Factory,” Kerry noted, as Theo pushed open a large sliding door that slowly screeched open from lack of use.

“This was probably one of the top factories in the county until, like a lot of other factory jobs, it was shipped overseas and shut down. So, let me give you the abbreviated tour and where we will be working out of.”

Once everyone was inside, Theo pulled the large door closed, struggling to get it to fully shut.

“We are going to set up near where they had their offices. After the factory closed, the office area was eventually turned into low-cost apartments, so you will have a semblance of hospitality with beds and so forth.”

All three of them proceeded through several different large workshops and abandoned storage areas. Each of these sections had obvious maintenance issues, especially from the roof that had been neglected since the Brodel Ball Bearings Company had left. However, some sections were not as bad, as Kerry went on to explain.

“Besides the apartments that got set up in the office spaces, some of these sections did get rented out to various companies over the years until the cost of maintenance exceeded what was best for each company. Most of these large buildings were simply used as storage areas for vehicles or excess equipment other companies didn’t have room for. But there is one section that got rented out by a countertop manufacturing company and another that I think was used for some sort of fish market or hatchery. I’m honestly not sure, I just know it reeks of fish and is probably the worst conditioned area in the building due to how many animals it attracts.”

Gwen quickly noticed which section Kerry was talking about as they walked by a room that smelled so strongly of rotten seafood that she had to pull her shirt over her mouth. Rapidly stepping as far away from the putrid room as possible, she eventually held her breath because the smell was so overpowering.

“Here we go, this is it,” Kerry then said, as they reached a much nicer section of the factory that had several metal staircases which lead up to the modified apartment buildings.

“We are going to stage everything in these two rooms down here, but you will have a room next to Heidi up there.”

Saying this brought up the question of when she might meet Heidi and get to talk to her.

“She’s already upstairs with one of our guards. Her parents dropped her off this morning. We will get you situated with your stuff and then the two of you can meet. After that we can go over a couple things and...” he said with a hint of a smile.

“I have a meal coming for all three of you. So I hope you are hungry.”

“Okay, yeah. That sounds good,” Gwen replied, surprised she was the last to show up and that she didn’t have a chance to meet Heidi’s parents.

Kerry and Theo lead Gwen up the stairs and into one of the first rooms on the second floor. Although Gwen knew not to expect a five-star retreat, she was quickly reminded this was an abandoned building that had not been used or maintained in a while.

“You do have power,” Kerry said, as he pushed open a flimsy door and pulled on a chain to give her light.

“But you don’t have water. We gave the better of the two rooms to Heidi, so you will have to share her bathroom.”

Gwen gave Kerry and Theo an amused smile, but humbly reminded herself just how much she was being paid and that it was probably going to be over sooner rather than later.

“Go ahead and get your stuff situated and we will be in the next room over,” Kerry said, as they both left the room and proceeded over to Heidi’s.

Not having a working bathroom, Gwen left the majority of her stuff in her suitcase with the exception of some of her clothes and a couple books she had packed. After this, curiosity got the better of her since the room didn't have the typical hotel or apartment layout. Being converted from an office, the main room was large and had a couple oddities a normal living room wouldn't. To the contrary, the refurbished bedroom was quite small, had a shabby, threadbare twin bed and no closet. This left Gwen to have to use a cabinet that was in the main room for her clothes and personal belongings.

After getting what she could situated, Gwen made her way over to Heidi's room which had a much sturdier door that was fully closed. Not wanting to just walk in, Gwen pushed a cheap plastic doorbell that gave off a muffled basketball buzzer-like ring. Waiting only a moment, the door was opened by the guard Kerry had mentioned.

"Hello. You must be Gwen. I'm Dalton Dogger, Heidi's guard for the week. Please come in," he said as he held the door open for her.

Gwen entered the room that was basically the same as hers but was much more well-kept and laid out in the opposite direction. Upon walking past some extra furniture, Gwen noticed Kerry and Theo seated next to a young girl with little pigtails.

"Hello Gwen." Kerry said, motioning for her to come over.

"Come over here and say hello to Heidi."

Assuming Heidi would be ten or eleven, maybe even an early teen, Gwen was surprised to see that Heidi was half that age, at about six.

"Hello Heidi." Gwen warmly voiced, as she knelt down next to her and slowly extended her hand out, not knowing if she might be shy.

"Hello to you too!" Heidi quickly and confidently replied to Gwen's surprise.

"I really like your shirt and you smell nice too," Heidi continued, showing she wasn't shy at all.

"Well thank you," a surprised Gwen replied with a smile.

“I just got this shirt the other day, so I’m glad to see someone likes it.”

“You’ll have to tell my mom where you got it. She lets me pick out my own clothes. I think I’d look as good in it as you... don’t you think?” Heidi asked with a big smile and an inquisitive look upon her face.

A little setback, Gwen stumbled a bit with her words before answering.

“Yes of course. I think it will look much better on you than me... Kerry, could I have a moment with you for a second?” she then asked, looking over at him.

Kerry shook his head and excused himself from the table they were at which had several coloring books and games spread across it. Walking into Heidi’s bedroom, Gwen immediately whispered her concerns.

“How old is she?” she asked with a troubled face.

“I believe Theo said six.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Don’t you think that’s too young for something like this?” Gwen said, forgetting she was second-guessing the most powerful mob boss in Saline County.

“Well, if you don’t want the job you need to tell me now. I already have the police calling out a fake report of a missing mother and daughter on the radio,” Kerry replied, skipping over her questioning of his judgment.

Gwen went silent for a second, surprised Kerry and Theo were using such a young girl for this type of job. However, after a minute or two of Gwen’s silence, Kerry voiced his thoughts on the matter.

“Heidi comes highly recommended and is in no danger. Plus, we don’t expect Mr. Silver to get anywhere near the factory. That’s why this place was picked. It’s in the middle of nowhere and has basically nothing leading up to it. He can’t make a move without us seeing him

coming. I have almost twenty sharpshooters waiting for him. As soon as he makes his move, it will be over, and you will have earned yourself thirty thousand dollars.”

Gwen continued to stay quiet, upset with the idea a six-year-old was involved in the ploy.

“Then why do you even need us?” Gwen eventually asked of Kerry’s remark.

“Because of the outside chance he does get close. This needs to be believable. He needs to see someone if he somehow does get past my men. If he doesn’t, he’s going to vanish. In the event he sneaks by my guys, I need you two to give him that visual confirmation our story is really happening. Then, if it does get this far, he’s not just going to rush in. He will plan out his entry which again will give us time to pin him down and take him out. Gwen, you’re overthinking this. Everything else we’ve hired you for has worked out. It’s easy money. Just sit tight for a couple of days. If we need you to act, we will signal you and Heidi. She will go to one room, you will sit out in the open so he can see you, and that will be the extent of it. Easy.”

Gwen thought about it for a second then nodded her head without saying yes.

“Good. Now, Theo and I are going to get out of here so he doesn’t see us or our cars. I have chicken tenders coming for Heidi along with some other hot stuff for you and Dalton. Dalton will go over the finer details in the event we need you two to act. But Gwen, it’s not going to come to that. Relax. Play some games with Heidi and think about what you want to spend that thirty grand on.”

Gwen gave a halfhearted smile trying to affirm this idea before Kerry asked one last question.

“Oh... What do you want your last name to be? We need to relay it to the police so they have a name to eventually put out.”

“Kennedy... I guess,” she said, not putting much thought into it.

“Okay. Tell Heidi you will be the Kennedy family.”

Chapter 5

Gwen rolled over in her bed feeling lethargic and with a slightly dazing headache. The sun hitting her closed eyes and the odor of fish did not help. This caused Gwen to grab at her covers until she grasped one convincingly enough to be able to pull the blanket over her head. This she did while rubbing her face and stretching her back a little. Still wanting sleep, Gwen tried to snuggle herself under the covers, moving this way and that in an attempt to try and find a more comfortable position.

With the exception of what she smelled and how she physically felt, her efforts were rewarded in finding an awkward but cozy position, sideways across the bed. Gwen remained in this corkscrew-like posture until the sound of Heidi giggling and thundering about in the next room over could be heard. This continued for a bit and was then followed by the sound of a dog playfully barking.

After a minute of waking up, this sound became out of place for her. Additionally, how loud Heidi was being seemed peculiar as well. Thinking about it, Gwen started to wonder if maybe the carefree noise and now apparent dog, were the result of Mr. Silver being caught. Maybe something promised to Heidi was a dog and the fact everyone was letting her continue to rest was because her services were no longer needed.

With this thought, Gwen brushed aside her covers only to have the light from the bright sun dim her sight. Holding her hands up, Gwen blocked out part of the sun and then stumbled about the room which seemed bigger than she recalled. Nevertheless, Gwen worked her way over to the bedroom door before stopping. Collecting herself, she opened the door and then immediately staggered backwards, astonished that what lay before her wasn't the converted office space she had seen before.

Shaking her head to the sight, Gwen rubbed her eyes and wondered for a moment if she was dreaming. Looking back into the room she had just woken up in, she again was surprised to see a farmhouse-like bedroom with two large windows and a queen-sized

bed. This combination of two new sceneries baffled and bewildered Gwen, who sat back down on the bed in an attempt to collect herself.

“Am I awake?” she thought to herself before glancing out one of the two windows.

Visible from this window was a large field. The field had been recently worked, but whoever had done so had left their tractor just outside the window along with several tools that were strewn about. Looking further out the window, all Gwen was able to see was more farmland, some fence posts, and a single country road that stretched up a small hill before fading away.

Turning her head and looking out the other window didn't reveal much more. This window gave her limited sight with pretty much more of the same, a single road and farmland. The only thing notably different that this window revealed was a short snippet of what Gwen felt was his driveway, a distant farmhouse, and a flag that was displayed distinctly in his yard.

None of this was what she last remembered. The factory and its surrounding area were in complete contrast to what now lay before her. First, most of the area around the factory was paved in concrete. Done so for parking, just this alone stretched a distance until you reached a fence or gate. The factory also only had one road, but its road was multi-laned with several turns or signs along its route. Beyond the Brodel factory, was more of the same from other factories that had mostly been torn down or long since abandoned.

Gwen was now stuck with a complete contrast in scenery, a completely different room, and with both these ideas in mind, an entirely new location.

“Am I dreaming?” she said aloud to make sure her ears at least worked.

Stumbling back towards the door, Gwen again heard the sound of a dog barking that seemed to be searching for her as the constant whimpering and increasing noise suggested. Thinking this was maybe her mind twisting the idea of the hounds or Mr. Silver tracking her down at the factory, Gwen went to the corner of the room and sank

down. Tightly closing her eyes, she waited for Dalton to wake her up so she could get ready to play her role.

Sitting still and quiet for a minute, the sound of mini feet could be heard rambling across her room. This was soon followed by a sudden tackle by a young dog that instantly started to give her kisses, cried with excitement, and wiggled about, happy it had located her.

“Good girl Ruby!” Heidi cheered as she rounded the bed’s corner and picked up the puppy that had located Gwen.

“She heard you get up before we did. I was playing fetch with her... but she knew you were up. She ran over here and straight to where you hid. You’re such a good girl Ruby!” Heidi said to the little floppy-eared Doberman, not thinking that Gwen was confused and hiding for a different reason.

“Let’s do it again! I’ll hold her and count to ten. Mr. Silver said you can hide in any room. But you have to change your clothes. I bet that’s why Ruby found you so fast. You smell like fish. That’s cheating. I’ll ask Mr. Silver for some clothes for you first.”

Just as fast as Ruby and Heidi had run in, they both ran out. However just as Heidi reached the bedroom door, she turned to Gwen and whispered one more thing.

“I told Mr. Silver you are my mom... like what Mr. Cain wanted, right?”

Gwen gasped, but still faintly nodded her head to this as Heidi smiled, feeling she did something good. Heidi then ran after the puppy and to fetch Mr. Silver, wanting to tell him Gwen was up.

Dream or not, the news she was so near Mr. Silver spun Gwen’s mind in what to do and in how to handle the situation. She quickly calmed herself and decided to mostly play dumb with the exception of her halfhearted backstory she had only thought up for fun, not expecting she’d have to use it.

As Gwen stood up to compose herself and to give off the impression she was grateful rather than fearful, she heard a male voice laugh, followed by barking and Heidi giggling. Gwen looked in a

mirror that was hanging in the room to test her smile as she now heard Mr. Silver, Heidi, and the dog making their way over. With her heart racing, Gwen noticed the puppy dog run into the room first, followed by a chasing Heidi and then Mr. Silver.

“Hello,” Gwen said, feeling it came out kind of awkwardly.

“My name is Gwen Kennedy... and I see that you met my daughter Heidi,” she continued on, hoping Heidi remembered this if Mr. Silver had asked.

“So I hear,” he replied, standing at the door frame as to give Gwen some space.

Other than his age, Mr. Silver wasn't what she expected. She had the idea that he would be somewhat shabby, possibly bald and maybe having a beard that was unkempt. To the contrary, Mr. Silver kind of resembled a fit farming Santa Claus. He had a full but trim beard, a generous amount of hair that was only lightly receding, a pearly smile that was complemented by his turquoise-colored eyes, and a nice tan from working long hours in his fields. In fact, the only thing that didn't look controlled on him was some slight coffee staining he had around his beard and mouth.

To match his almost business-like look, Mr. Silver's clothes looked almost new, with the exception of his boots which had been obviously used. He sported a very nice modern flannel shirt that was worn over a gray undershirt and had on a nice pair of dark blue jeans. This was all accented by a silver pocket watch chain that extended from his jeans to a loop on his belt.

Before anyone could say anything further, Ruby again ran up to Gwen and started to jump on her. Barking as she did so, Gwen knelt down and petted the happy dog which had a little docked tail that wagged constantly.

“You are going to have to change. You smell too much like fish. Ruby's going to be able to find you too easily,” Heidi said, as Ruby continued to jump at Gwen while also constantly sniffing her clothes.

“Sorry about that,” Mr. Silver mentioned of the spunky and playful nature of his younger dog.

“Dogs can be like kids sometimes, but with with much sharper teeth and claws. Here, give me a second and I’ll be right back,” Mr. Silver added as he turned from the door and walked into another room.

Only gone a minute or two, Mr. Silver returned with a handful of clothes, a towel, and some shampoo. Placing them on a stand next to the bed, he commented about the clothes he brought.

“I don’t have any girls’ clothes, but I’ll go to the store and get some for you. Until then, here are some neutral clothes, although they are still supposed to be for a guy. I have a belt for the jeans, some socks, and a towel since I assume you would like to take a shower.”

“Yes, please,” Gwen replied, as Mr. Silver seemed to be looking for an answer.

“Okay. The bathroom is just around the corner. Heidi and I will go play with Ruby. Just leave your clothes on the floor and I’ll come get them when I hear the shower start.”

Gwen smiled, drawing a blank on what all else to say at the moment. Hearing what Mr. Silver said, Heidi called for Ruby to follow her out the door and down the hallway. Likewise, Mr. Silver followed Heidi as she eventually was able to coax Ruby away from sniffing and kissing Gwen, into following her and doing something else.

Once they had all left the room, Gwen breathed a sigh of relief. Feeling the shower would buy her more time to think, she also dragged her feet getting to the shower in order to buy as much time as possible. This abnormal delay in the simple task of getting ready for a shower was noticed by Mr. Silver, who hollered to her from down the hall.

“Is everything okay? Do you know how to work the shower?”

“I’m fine thank you!” Gwen replied.

Now feeling pressure and starting to worry she was going to make it obvious something was wrong, Gwen organized herself and started the shower as soon as she closed the restroom door. This sound triggered Mr. Silver into retrieving Gwen’s clothes, in which she could hear him walking to and fro, as he passed by the restroom.

Gwen at first took a moment to herself and closed her eyes to settle down. Once she felt at least a little calmer, she tried thinking back to what all was said about the situation, Mr. Silver, and even some of the more remote topics, just in case something came up.

Doing this, her heart sunk at the thought that her and Heidi were both supposed to be diabetic. This would be one of her first problems she would have to solve if Mr. Silver were to bring it up.

Next was that she and Heidi had not discussed much of a backstory and she didn't know what might have already been said to him. A simple thing that might cause a big question like, what was her ex-boyfriend's name, now was problematic since that was never discussed.

Most importantly, out of all the issues that had started to surface, was simply how to get out of this situation. Gwen knew the longer she and Heidi were around Mr. Silver, the more and more likely it would be that one of the two of them would slip up. Then Mr. Silver, if not already, probably would start wanting answers.

After thinking about all these questions and feeling the water starting to cool down, Gwen decided to play off a lot of what may be "circulating" as overblown. If Mr. Silver were to ask her about any diabetic issues, her response would be something to the effect of "Oh my mom tells everyone that since I fainted once when I was young," swapping out her or Heidi interchangeably as needed. Gwen also felt she could probably buy some time by using the "embarrassment" card. She felt starting an answer off with "I'm embarrassed to admit this" might also help her shadow some of her past, just long enough for her to come up with an escape plan.

Chapter 6

Getting dressed, Gwen was confronted with the issue Mr. Silver advised. The temporary clothes he had given her were for men and were Mr. Silver's size. Mr. Silver was probably just under six foot tall. Gwen on the other hand was an average size female at about five feet five inches. So, both the shirt he provided and the pants were very large on her and made her feel like she was trying on her mother's clothes from when she was a child.

Tightening up the belt he provided her with, Gwen pulled it to almost its last notch then let the very loose-fitting shirt fall down. Feeling this was as good as she would get and that she had probably already used up more time than would be normal, Gwen left the bedroom and walked down the hall in the direction she had heard them earlier.

Upon reaching what she felt was the living room, she was quickly met by the smell of food cooking. Still feeling a little off, this smell came off stronger than normal for her. However, this slightly repelling feeling gave her the perfect excuse to maybe listen to what everyone else was saying rather than talking herself.

Leaving the living room, she entered the kitchen to find no one. Food was indeed cooking on the stove, and three plates were set out, but nobody was in the kitchen. This paused Gwen for a moment before she called out to see if anyone would reply.

“Hello?” she said with a little hesitation.

“I'm done with my shower. Is anyone there?”

These calls went unanswered by Mr. Silver, Heidi, and Ruby, who being a puppy, she felt would have instantly reacted to any new sound.

Gwen repeated her “Hello” call one more time before feeling this might give her an opportunity to snoop around. Looking back and forth one last time, she first walked over to a calendar that was hanging from

the wall. Looking at it, she saw little of use. One or two words were scribbled towards the bottom of the calendar, but nothing was listed on any of the days.

While by the calendar, she looked around for some notes or mail. A notepad was found on the nearby countertop which to her disappointment, was also blank. Feeling this area might be where he tossed his stuff, she thumbed through a small basket that had random stuff inside and found a still closed letter.

Glancing over the letter that appeared to be junk mail, the name “A.J. Hidell” was written on it but without a specific address. Instead of this, the letter stated “to the residence of” above the name which further gave her the opinion it was junk.

Gwen memorized this name and then started to thumb through his basket again until she heard the sound of a screen door opening, followed by what she had expected to hear earlier, Ruby barking and yelping. This caused Gwen to hastily rearrange everything she had fiddled with as quickly as she could. Doing this for only a second, she quickly turned around and tried to erase any semblance of guilt or wrongdoing that her face or body language might be giving off.

As before, the first one into the room was Ruby, although this time she was leashed and did not get the chance to run over and jump on her. Heidi joyfully followed Ruby into the kitchen, noticing Gwen but giving more attention to Ruby who was pulling hard on her leash. Mr. Silver was the last to come in and was holding two jars of spaghetti sauce and some parmesan cheese.

“Oh, hey! I hope the shower worked good enough for you. We didn’t know how long you might be, and I didn’t have a few things, so we went over to my neighbor’s to borrow a couple items. I got two types of spaghetti sauce. Traditional or Marinara. Are either of those okay with you?” Mr. Silver asked, looking at both the jars then looking towards her.

“To be honest, I’m not feeling the best. So, I think I’ll pass on food, but thank you,” Gwen responded, sticking to her idea that she hoped would allow her to remain somewhat quiet.

“But the shower worked fine. Thank you!”

“Okay good. The water pressure isn’t always good in these old farmhouses, so I’m glad the shower was at least tolerable,” Mr. Silver said with a smile and a nod.

“Well, if you don’t mind then, the spaghetti is ready as long as that’s okay with you?” he asked seeking permission from Gwen, Heidi’s mother in his eyes.

“Yes, of course!” Gwen replied, not wanting to elaborate to much just in case Heidi didn’t like spaghetti.

“Great! Would you like to join us? I know the smell of food can sometimes make people feel worse... but there are a lot of things I’d like to talk with you about,” he asked while lightly nodding his head, trying to get her to go along with what he wanted.

“Well... I ...” Gwen started to say, trying to wiggle her way out of talking until Heidi spoke up.

“Yes, it will be fun Mom. I’ll tell you all about Ruby!” she said, putting up a good act in referring to her as mom, but not catching the idea she didn’t really seem to want to talk.

“Alright,” Gwen replied, trying not to show she wasn’t very thrilled about it.

Mr. Silver then got the spaghetti while both Gwen and Heidi took up a seat. Heidi took Ruby’s leash and tied it around one of the legs of the table so Ruby couldn’t jump but was also near her. Gwen tried to act out her part a little by trying not to look unhappy while also looking slightly out of sorts. This was picked up by Mr. Silver as he came over and dished out some of the spaghetti onto both Heidi and his plates.

“It’s okay if you want to lay down or something. If this is going to make you worse, we can just talk tomorrow.”

Gwen thought about this offer and really wanted to take it up but decided to just sit it out and maybe hear what the two of them had to say.

“You know, I’ll just relax a little bit and let you guys do most of the talking. I think I’ll be fine if we do that.”

“Okay,” Mr. Silver said as he sat down himself.

“I hope this isn’t too much, but I like to say a prayer before my meal if that’s okay with you?”

“Oh no, by all means,” Gwen replied, encouraging him.

“I think that’s good that you do that.”

Everyone except Ruby then got quiet as Mr. Silver said a few nice words. Ruby, being young and smelling food, whimpered and lightly whined, hoping to soon get a table scrap or two.

“Heidi really wanted to tell you about Ruby, so I think that’s a good place to start. Especially since she’s already letting us know she’s here,” Mr. Silver mentioned as a starting point.

Not being bashful at all, Heidi took the attention and started off right away.

“Mr. Silver just called her Pup, so he let me name her. I really liked the name Elsa, but I decided to go with my middle name Ruby because I felt it fit her better,” she said with a little bit of a whoopsie face instantly thinking if Gwen was her mom, she would already know that Ruby was her middle name.

A silence went across the room for a moment as Mr. Silver looked at her seemingly waiting for a reply. With none, Gwen said the first thing she could think of to fill the space.

“Oooh... That was very nice of you. I think it fits her well. Speaking of names, did you want us to call you Mr. Silver or...?” she loosely voiced, just trying to get something out.

“That’s what everyone but my mom calls me. You can call me Silver if you want to drop the mister. But that does lead me to something I wanted to fill in just a little bit if that is okay with you Heidi?”

Still feeling like she made a slip, Heidi nodded her head rapidly, not wanting to make another omission.

“So just briefly before we get back to Heidi, I’m the Bloodhound of Ashland. I found out you and your daughter were in trouble, so I stepped in. I’m sorry for what I’m sure was a surprise, but I had to go about things a certain way in order to get you two out of the factory. Unfortunately, your ex-boyfriend was not in the factory when I found you. So, I would like to keep you two here until I can track him down. I feel...” Mr. Silver said, trying to pick his words carefully around Heidi.

“It would be best, physically, for everyone.”

“Well thank you for that,” Gwen replied, trying to break down what all he had just said so she didn’t contradict anything.

“How did you do all that?”

“Well, maybe I’ll get into all the particulars a little later,” he said, gesturing his head towards Heidi as if he didn’t want her to hear everything.

Gwen understood what he was getting at and switched the conversation away from how Mr. Silver went about everything, and back to Ruby, who was sneaking a piece of spaghetti from Heidi under the table.

“So how come you didn’t have a name for Ruby? Did you just get her recently? She still seems like a younger dog. What is she, about three or four months old?”

“She is about that but I forget exactly. I got her as soon as the breeder would allow it... so a couple months now, I just didn’t name her yet. I know that’s probably not common, but for me, I guess it’s normal. My last dog I had I didn’t name right away either. I eventually just named him after the place I brought him from... then gave him nicknames off of that.”

“What was his name and what kind of dog was he?” Heidi asked as she sneaked another piece of food to Ruby.

“He was a German Shepherd. I’ve always liked that breed... I’ve had a few over the years. His main name eventually settled on Lewey, but he started out as Luigi, since I brought him off a pizza shop owner. That name morphed a little from Luigi, to Loogie and then eventually to Lewey.” He replied with a smile.

“Ewww, your dog’s name was Loogie!?” Heidi said with a laugh.

“Yeah, he had a drooling problem. So at some point, I just started calling him that.”

“What happened to him?” Heidi asked, not thinking about what the obvious answer was.

“He passed away. I buried and marked his spot next to the first two shepherds I owned behind the shed,” he said with a pause in his thoughts.

“He was a good boy. But now I have Ruby, and now her name is settled!”

Wanting to ask more questions, Heidi continued on with things she didn’t know or things she wanted an answer to.

“Why are you called the ‘Bloodhound of Ashland,’ and is your name really Mr. Silver?”

“Bloodhounds are dogs that are known for their ability to track people down in older times and even sometimes now. Some of the towns around here have people that kind of help everyone with fairness. These people are called Bloodhounds,” he said, again choosing his words carefully.

“Sometimes the police and courts need help, so a town’s ‘Bloodhound’ or ‘Hound’ do some things maybe a police officer or the courts can not. Since I’m the only one in Ashland that is a hound, some call me that. Does that make sense?”

“Uh huh,” Heidi replied, missing the exact meaning he was getting at.

“What about your name? Is Silver really your last name? You don’t look like your name is Mr. Silver!”

Mr. Silver laughed at this and then asked about it.

“Then what do you think my name is based on what I look like?”

“Ummm, you look like a... Daniel. I have a friend named Daniel that sits next to me in school. He likes dogs too. He said he has three of them.”

Mr. Silver got a good laugh out of this, then asked her what she thought his last name would be then.

“Well, that’s a little harder. Last names are funny, but you look like you would have a long last name. My friend Tiffany says that her last name means baker in some other language. Since you’re old and like dogs, I’m going to say your last name is Grandbarker!” she answered with a smile.

Mr. Silver chuckled again to this as Gwen looked at Heidi as if she might have gone too far.

“So, my name is Daniel Grandbarker?” he was eventually able to get out between laughs.

“Yep, I think that’s it!”

Mr. Silver’s continued amusement gave Gwen a little relief that he had a sense of humor when it came to kids saying just about anything. However, she herself was more timid about Heidi’s name idea, and remained silent in the conversation.

“Am I right?” Heidi asked after Mr. Silver collected himself a bit.

“If that’s the name you want to go with, that’s fine with me. You named Ruby and she seems to be happy with it. So, if you want to call me that, then Daniel Grandbarker it will be.”

Heidi got excited about this but then changed her mind when she tried saying it.

“No, I think I’m going to stay with Mr. Silver. I’m getting used to that name too.”

“Okay, well either name is fine, as long as you don’t start calling me Great-Grandbarker!”

Heidi found this even funnier and kept going with it.

“Yeah, Great, great, great-Grandbarker!”

Heidi and Mr. Silver had a good time with this until she eventually changed her questioning a little bit about his name.

“Do you have a real name then?”

“I do. But if everyone knew what it was, then people who might not like me, would be able to find me. So, I just go by Mr. Silver since people know that name, but it doesn’t give away who I really am.”

“I like you! Can you tell me someday? I won’t tell anyone!”

Mr. Silver smiled to this and then gave her an open reply.

“I’ll tell you what. Finish eating. Brush your teeth and then maybe another day we can talk about it, okay?”

“Okay!” Heidi replied, switching her focus back to her plate.

Chapter 7

After Gwen put Heidi down for the night, she met up with Mr. Silver who wanted to talk with her more in the living room. Gwen dragged her feet again to this, but eventually did come out, half hoping Mr. Silver had fallen asleep.

“Have a seat,” he said as she walked into the room quietly.

Gwen did this while trying to think how someone who had really been rescued from a dangerous situation might act.

“I just wanted to explain a few things to you so we can be on the same page now and moving forward.”

Gwen nodded her head to this but didn’t say a word, hoping she could get through this while saying as little as possible.

“But first, I want to try and answer your questions so you’re not sitting here with things unanswered on your mind. I know a lot has gone on for you the past few days, but what would you like to know and what are you thinking?”

Gwen’s heart about hit the floor to this question. This was the last thing she wanted, having to come up with questions she hadn’t thought about or to give questions that differed from what he might know. Gwen did however have the presence of mind to think this question would probably be hard for a real victim to just come out with. So she allowed that thought to shine through instead of just spitting out anything.

“Umm...” her voice naturally started to leak out as her mind tried to come up with a viable question or two.

“It’s okay. Take your time,” Mr. Silver said with a much fainter, evenly toned voice.

Gwen did just this while putting her hands over her face, half wanting to personally hide and half as an act she felt someone might

show while under stress. After a minute of this and some purposefully done deep breaths, a question did pop into her head that she felt would be neutral to ask.

“How did you get us out of there?” she asked while sliding her hands slowly backwards across her forehead and then eventually to the sides of her head.

“Well that’s a tricky one. Let me think,” he said of how he wanted to reply.

“So, I can’t tell you all of it because someday I might have to use that trick again. But what I can say for part of it is that I might have poisoned your food. I mean, poisoned probably isn’t the right word. I boosted your meal, I guess,” Mr. Silver revealed with a sheepish grin and a shrug of his shoulders.

Gwen’s eyes got big to this, which prompted Mr. Silver to explain what he meant a little more.

“It was nothing that is going to hurt you. I’m sure the reason you weren’t feeling so good today was because your body was still dealing with some of the effects. But I assure you, you and Heidi are fine.”

“You poisoned Heidi too?” Gwen blurted out.

“Again, not poisoned. But yes, I spiced up what you all ordered. I then just waited about an hour for the effects to kick in and carried you and Heidi out.”

“So your plan to help us was to bring us here?” Gwen asked, forgetting there was someone else in the room with her and Heidi at the factory.

“No. My plan was for your ex to fall asleep. Especially now that I’m getting older, I don’t like to fight any more than I have to. So my plan was for him to fall asleep where I could then take him to a police department I trusted. You and Heidi weren’t going to be involved. You guys would have just woken up and might have thought it was all just a dream. But, in that hour wait, he went off somewhere. I’m sure if he ate any of the food, he nodded off as well. I just don’t know where he went.

I looked for him, I just couldn't find him," Mr. Silver said while holding up his hands like he made a mistake.

"Then, I was up against the clock. You and Heidi were going to eventually wake up. The point of all this was to get you two to safety. So instead of turning him in, I punted and brought the two of you here. I don't have any doubt I'll find him. It just didn't go one hundred percent the way I wanted so I had to alter the plan a bit. Nothing's foolproof, but I'll get the desired result eventually."

Realizing Mr. Silver thought Heidi's bodyguard Dalton was her ex, she quickly tried to talk away the entire ordeal so he wouldn't keep going after Dalton.

"You know, I forgive Dalton. He has had some issues in his life and has made some mistakes. This was a big one, I admit. But I think he was probably on something that made him act out of character. If he was sober, he wouldn't ever hurt me or Heidi," Gwen tried to explain, hoping this might convince him to stop looking for Dalton.

"Gwen, the things you are saying are normal for what you and Heidi went through. But what he did, regardless of his condition, is not acceptable. What you are going through now is similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. It's tough and I'm no psychologist, but Dalton needs to be held accountable. On top of that, okay maybe he doesn't do something to you or Heidi again, but what about someone else?" Mr. Silver explained, making it tough for her to argue.

"I understand that. But I know him pretty well. I was his first serious girlfriend. So I think this was a one-off thing. He..." Gwen started to say, before being interrupted by Mr. Silver.

"Gwen, he was going to kill you."

This statement staggered Gwen in what to say. Gwen eventually tried to justify even this before Mr. Silver explained even more.

"The methods I use to get my information are almost never wrong. That's why I use them. I found out that he planned to eventually kill you later this week. That in itself is bad enough, but if you play that forward, what does he now do with Heidi? She is a witness. I doubt he wants to go to jail. That's why I had to find you so fast."

Thrown for what to say or even how to figure out if that was true or not, Gwen stopped trying to argue with Mr. Silver and asked a simpler question.

“If that was his plan, then why didn’t you just kill him yourself?”

“I thought the poison approach would work. Now after the fact, sure, I can second guess myself on what the best avenue was,” Mr. Silver said more somberly.

“But I have tried to remove that part of me. That was my young impulsive way. There is always another way to deal with things. The plan I had, I thought was simple. Once you all fell asleep, I simply would have turned him over to the authorities. Problem solved and nobody gets hurt, even him. However, I didn’t plan on losing track of him. That factory is big, but I felt someone not trying to hide, wouldn’t be hard to find. Unfortunately, I got this one wrong. He went somewhere and I couldn’t look all day. He too would eventually wake up.”

“So you used to hurt people?” she asked, pretending not to know anything about his past.

“I am a mixed bag, that’s for sure. I was raised right. My parents took me to church every Sunday. But probably around my senior year of high school, I started hanging around people I probably shouldn’t have. That took me down a dark road for a long time. Yes, I used to hurt people,” Mr. Silver painfully expressed, which was evident in both his look and demeanor.

“I started off with small stuff and that small stuff led to big stuff. Somehow I was never caught which probably actually made it worse. I got a little sure of myself to the point where I thought I was better than my friends who did get caught. I left them and did my own thing for a while. I figured I should get one hundred percent of what I did while at the same time, now being solo, wouldn’t have to worry about one of my buddies who got caught, giving up my name.”

Mr. Silver adjusted himself in his chair and thought about what was the best way he could lead her to the present, without giving away too many of the tricks and methods he used.

“I eventually decided to go all in and approached a few bosses about doing some of their dirty work. However, figuring out early on that being known was a problem, I approached them in unique ways so I could keep my identity unknown, even by them. That’s how I ended up with the nickname ‘Mr. Silver.’ Nobody knew me and I insisted on being paid in means other than regular cash. Plus, I wanted something that could last without something like inflation hurting my wealth. So I generally made my clients pay in precious metals. Silver coins being the main one since they were so easy to either melt or trade away.”

“So how did you end up being a hound then?”

“A change of heart,” he replied without much detail.

“What was that?” Gwen asked, interested in his flip.

“Well, I had a few thoughts hit me. I guess as you get older you start to think a little differently, and maybe think a little deeper as well. Part of this was my religious upbringing which was always conflicting for me. I always believed, and still do, that everyone is responsible for what they have done and do. With that, I just figured when I was young, that I did so many bad things that it was too late for me to turn around. Then I had the guilty realization and feeling that not only was I responsible for my prior acts, but I was also responsible for all the things I could do but wasn’t... this more or less gave me the feeling I was turning my back on good people in need. Although I did steal and stuff like that, I purposely never physically hurt anyone I felt was a good person. However, the realization and knowledge good people were being hurt and I wasn’t helping them with the means and ability I had accumulated, made me feel like I was hurting them by not helping them. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah I never thought of it that way before, but it does,” Gwen replied, shaking her head.

“That’s when I changed. I wish that thought would have come to me sooner, but I guess that’s sometimes the pitfalls of youth and sin.”

“No offense,” Gwen said, trying to be polite but also wondering how he became a hound with his history.

“But with what you’ve done, why did the hounds accept you instead of turning you in?”

Mr. Silver’s more serious tone cracked a little as he smiled to this only enough that Gwen could tell he was somewhat amused by the question.

“Since I started the hounds, I would guess they would have to let me in, right?” he said, admitting he was the founder of the group.

“You started the hounds?” Gwen blurted out, shocked to hear this.

“I did,” he simply replied.

“So you control them?” Gwen continued on, still set back by the thought.

“I do not. Each town’s hounds can work together, but most work independently. I personally am the only one working Ashland, hence the nickname. I just prefer it that way, but I do fund a bunch of the other towns. I actually find that to be a funnier twist in what I was doing and what I do now. The mob bosses unknowingly were paying me to eventually take them down... it just wasn’t immediately. I had the idea when I was still working for them and just brought my time until I had enough to fund several towns. From there it just grew. Some I fund, some I have no connection to at all, although they still operate under the same principles I set up.”

“So you were thinking about this when you were working for the mob?” Gwen asked.

“Yes, when I was more crooked, I got an inside look into some things I might not have noticed. For example, who was doing what, how things were set up and where to look. Even then, I was surprised and bothered by how much corruption goes all the way up... even to the people that are supposed to be protecting us, or at least being a check over the government. These issues I used to my advantage when I was a criminal. However, this was more than a quagmire to work through from the law-abiding side. That was where I came up with someone working outside the law to fix the law.”

“So you still break laws?” she blurted out.

“Sort of. In a lot of ways, the game that’s being played isn’t fair to the average good guy. The deck is stacked. The good guys in the criminal justice system play by the rules. The bad guys don’t, which gives them an advantage. On top of that, they cheat and bend the rules so much, that it’s like playing a game of one-on-one but when you start your opponent already has eleven points in a first to ten game. Although we might sometimes break some laws ourselves, the overall goal is to bend the rules the other way. So when the police go up against a dishonorable Judge, a lawless prosecutor, or even have someone in their ranks that is undermining their own, we make it so the evidence is so overwhelming, that a conviction has to take place. Police need search warrants and probable cause. Hounds don’t.”

“Aren’t you worried about possibly getting the wrong person in trouble?”

“We don’t get fake evidence. Nothing’s made up. With the exception of some emergency situations, like yours, all we are doing is putting the light on topics which might have gotten buried or destroyed had we not stepped in. Besides that, we let the legal system play its way out as long as it’s being done fairly.”

“What if it’s not being done fairly?”

“That’s when we try to step in and show where the unfair part is. If a prosecutor is going after people with made-up charges, we show how and why that’s happening. If the news is misleading its viewers, we expose the reason they are doing it. However it does take time. We can’t do it all that very minute. But when people know a bloodhound is working their town, the odds everyone gets a fair shake goes up.”

“But what if it’s still not being done fairly?”

“You want to know if we hurt people I’m guessing? I don’t tell anyone what to do. But in some situations, things do break down and someone might find themselves in a bad spot. Then it’s up to them, but they are responsible for their own actions.”

“Have you since you switched over?”

“It’s unfortunate, but sometimes it comes to that. Yes, yes I have,” he replied, clearly bothered that he had.

“But I consider those my fault. I wasn’t clever enough or didn’t plan it out enough so that nobody got hurt. But let’s change this topic,” he said, wanting to get away from these parts of his life.

“What else might you have a question about?”

Gwen thought for a few minutes and didn’t come up with anything. This was half because she didn’t want to say anything and half because the majority of the details she could think of had already been touched on.

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“Okay, do you mind if I go on for a little bit?”

“Well I am getting a little tired,” she said as an excuse to hurry things up.

“But I could probably get through a little more.”

“Okay good, I’ll make it brief then,” he said, as he pulled out a couple pieces of paper he had in his pocket and then reached for a pair of reading glasses he had sitting nearby.

“First, I wrote down a bunch of questions for you. Some are simple things like, where does your ex go? Who does he talk to? Stuff like that. Others are general questions about you and Heidi. Medical, so I don’t buy things I shouldn’t or neglect things you need. Also, I’m sure you and Heidi don’t want to wear the same clothes every day. So if you could give me some roundabout sizes, I’ll get you some more comfortable outfits than what you presently have,” he advised, as he handed her his questionnaire which was very crumpled due to being in his pocket for most of the day.

“Next, although we mostly covered this, I just wanted to explain why I’m doing what I’m doing and why I need you to stay here until I get everything figured out.”

“Sure,” Gwen replied, feeling if she just let him talk for a bit, this would get her through at least the present without making a gaffe.

“Okay, I know this is a burden, and I apologize for that. But please trust me. My sources are generally spot on and it’s not safe for you and Heidi to leave here until I get more of this puzzle solved. With that, I also don’t want you to feel trapped here. Please feel free to walk about, do what you want although I admit there isn’t a bunch to do here. This area is mostly farmland, so I don’t really have close neighbors besides Beth, who lives about a quarter mile down the road. Entertainment-wise around here, I guess I compound the boorishness with little in terms of games or fun stuff. I don’t really have guests, so I never feel the need to have much,” he explained with a scant grimace upon his face.

“I don’t really watch TV unless I want to watch an old movie. So all I have is an older tube TV in my room I’ll bring out for the two of you. I also don’t have cable or internet, but I do have an old VCR with some tapes you guys can thumb through to break up the day a little. There are some cards and board games in the cabinet over there,” he advised, pointing to a large antique display case that had some nice dishes inside along with an ornament or two.

“But that’s about it. This is a remote boring place and I apologize for that. Good for me, good for corn and hay, but not ideal for kids or a family.”

Chapter 8

Mr. Silver, Heidi, and Ruby all woke up early the next day. Heidi probably would have slept in a little longer had it not been for Ruby, who constantly whimpered upon hearing Mr. Silver in the kitchen. Heidi however, didn't mind being up and around Mr. Silver like Gwen. She wasn't aware of everything that was behind her acting and felt this was just a fun extra part of her playing a role.

Heidi liked camping, sleepovers, and exploring. To her, this all just seemed like a blending of the two things she liked most... acting and adventures. This was a role she knew well. Like most kids, she liked to role play when at the park or playground, frequently turning a climbing dome into her own spider web, or using the spinning roundabout as a wild tornado in which she would have to hold on to in order to save her life.

For Heidi, this was just an extension of that. A prolonged role with fun. She got to play with Ruby anytime she wanted. Mr. Silver let her do whatever, so anything was on the table in terms of imagining a set of chairs were her castle, or letting Ruby play hide and go seek in any room.

Heidi did her games and explored in almost every area, as Mr. Silver sometimes joined in, and other times simply sat back and sipped on his morning coffee. This continued until she eventually worked her way into a room next to where Gwen was sleeping. This room was converted from a bedroom into a mild office, with some electronics she had never seen before, an old typewriter, and stacks upon stacks of books, each neatly organized on different shelves throughout the room.

Heidi first examined the different computer-looking devices which seemed bygone and were much bulkier than what she was used to. This inspection didn't last long as she then switched her attention to the books, looking at each title to see if she might find something intriguing or something she recognized. Only being six, most of the words were too big for her to read, and barely any of them had pictures or illustrations on them that caught her eye.

Going from shelf to shelf, she eventually came to a cabinet that had two large wooden doors with a small copper locking clasp holding them together. Being that Mr. Silver had given her permission to meander about the house at her own free will, she didn't think anything of unlocking the clasp to see what was inside. Needing attention, the doors to the cabinet came open, but squealed loudly enough to cause Ruby to whine and fuss.

"It's okay Ruby, it's just a door," Heidi said as Ruby first knocked over, then hid behind a nearby trashcan.

Heidi tried to comfort Ruby before glancing over to the cabinet to see several alluring objects inside. From top to bottom, almost every shelf had some sort of stuffed animal. Some were dogs, some were cats, others were very intricately dressed pets or varmints, made to look like the animal had some sort of job or was dressed for a special occasion. This sight was fascinating to both Heidi and Ruby, as Heidi went over to a few of the lower shelves to have a closer look, and Ruby sneakily stole one while she wasn't looking.

Ruby stealthily escorted her catch to the corner of the room as Heidi picked up a matching pair of teddy bears whom each held one end of a long saw and had on complementary flannel shirts. Enjoying her find, Heidi carefully put down the two bears and picked up another pair of animals, this time two dogs with the names "Jacks" and "Jessie" written on each of their collars.

Looking at these and others, Heidi didn't notice Ruby had one herself until Mr. Silver came into the room.

"Put that down Ruby!" Mr. Silver said, politely but sternly.

Ruby ignored him until he came over and grabbed the animal himself. Surprised, Heidi did put down the dogs she had in her hand before turning around.

"I said Ruby," Mr. Silver more calmly uttered, trying to verbally show he did not mean her.

Heidi kindly smiled but didn't immediately try to pick up any of the other animals he had in his shelf. Now having the stuffed animal from Ruby, Mr. Silver walked over to the cabinet and placed it on a

much higher shelf. Noticing the dogs were hastily put down, Mr. Silver commented about the two.

“Do you know who those are?”

Heidi didn't reply, unsure of the answer.

“Those were my first dogs from when I was a little boy. One is Jacks, and the other is Jessie. They are supposed to be German Shepherds,” he said of the stuffed animals which were all black.

“I kind of forgot I had these in here. You can play with them if you want, just try to keep them away from Ruby.”

Heidi picked the two dogs back up and patted their heads.

“Where did you get them all?”

“You remember Beth from down the street right? She likes making stuffed animals. She makes at least two a year for me, one for Christmas and one for my birthday. I bet if we go over there, she will make you one if you want. Do you have any pets she could make for you?”

“I do! I have a little cat named CS1!” Heidi said excitedly.

“Well I'll tell you what, if we see Beth again, just ask her and I'm sure she will make one for you. She likes doing that. But you will have to tell her what kind and color it is.”

“I'm not sure what kind she is but she is orange! We have an old house, so she catches all the mice that sneak in,” Heidi replied, excited to get her own stuffed animal.

“Yeah, cats are good for that. CS1, that's a different name, what's that mean?” Mr. Silver asked, never hearing of a name like that for a pet before.

“We got the cat free from my cousins, so the C and S are their initials. The number one was because she is my first cat. So I call her CS1... she likes it.”

“Will you name your next cat CS2 then?” he asked jokingly with an inquisitive look one sometimes gives when asking a child a question.

“No, it will be CS3, because you said your neighbor would make me a cat. That cat will be CS2 and then the next cat I get will be CS3,” she responded as if the answer should have been obvious.

“Oh, my mistake. I guess you are right,” Mr. Silver said, as he saw Ruby perk up and run out of the room.

Hearing a door close quickly, he imagined it was Gwen trying to get into the bathroom before Ruby could join her. Being her host and wanting to be hospitable, Mr. Silver told Heidi to be mindful of Ruby and the stuffed animals, then went into the kitchen to start another pot of coffee. Doing this he also got out a few plates, some silverware, and a couple glasses in case Gwen didn’t want coffee.

Before long he could tell that Gwen had left the restroom by Ruby’s yelping and excited spinning which also caused lots of noise. Mr. Silver waited patiently as Gwen came into the kitchen followed by both Heidi and Ruby.

“Good morning. Are you a coffee drinker?” he asked upon seeing her.

“Oh yes thank you,” she replied a little groggily, still waking up.

“I’ll always have a cup of coffee.”

Gwen sat down as Mr. Silver poured her a cup and asked if she wanted anything to go with it. Heidi played with Ruby, who had redirected her focus away from Gwen and back onto the stuffed animals Heidi picked to play with.

“Sorry Heidi, I’ll put her outside to give you some alone time. I’ve been training her and she’s catching on quickly, but she hasn’t learned her people manners quite yet.”

Mr. Silver put down his coffee pot and then grabbed Ruby, who continued to wiggle and squirm all the way to his back door. Clipping her to an outdoor leash, Mr. Silver tossed out a few random toys he had

laying nearby. Shutting the door, this allowed Heidi to play and for Gwen to have a calm and quiet breakfast.

“I have eggs, bread, some cheese, and maybe some cereal... I’ll check. Do any of those sound any good to you?” he mentioned as he walked over to his cabinets and started looking through them.

“I do like eggs, but you don’t have to make me anything. I’m fine with this coffee.”

“Don’t be silly. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Name a style of eggs and I’ll make it. Sunny side up, over easy, scrambled, an omelet, name it and I’ll get started... however I don’t have many things to add to it, so I’ll go shopping after you eat.”

“I’ll take over easy I guess. I haven’t had one of those in a while.”

“Coming up!” he said as he got started, cracking a few eggs and letting them fry up.

“Did you add anything to that list for me to pick up?”

Gwen could take an educated guess for Heidi when it came to clothes. So that wasn’t a problem, and her clothing sizes obviously weren’t a problem either. However, a problem she did run into was what Mr. Silver had asked about their medical issues when it came to food choices or possible medications.

Not knowing what he did or did not know, she decided during the night to play it somewhat safe. She would sacrifice some foods she liked and tell him she was prediabetic since the topic never came up. If Mr. Silver then knew or inquired into insulin, she would play it off as “it was just talk” or “people over-blow things” and that she was fine as long as she made healthier life and dietary choices.

Gwen could also use this “exaggerated” or “cautious” take when it came to Heidi. If questioned, she would admit her family has a tendency to become diabetic and that any talk Mr. Silver might have heard, was just that. Talk, so that she had a plan for her and her family to help keep this issue at bay. This Gwen felt, even if Mr. Silver had

information to the contrary, was understandable. People talk, people over-blow things, this was the case here if it became an issue.

“My family does have a history of diabetes,” Gwen started off with.

“So for precaution, I try to find foods that are good for our blood sugar. Whole grain bread, beans, corn, carrots, stuff like that. And as always, plenty of water. Not that we don’t splurge every now and again, but we try to stay in these categories since it has been a family issue. I hope that doesn’t make it hard on you or your family?” Gwen finished with, sneaking in a distractive family question to hopefully help slide her preemptive explanation by without him countering her narrative.

This mention of family stymied him for a moment before he replied.

“I had too many irons in the fire when I was young and missed that moment in life. I don’t have one,” he said with a reflective but weighted face, not sticking on the subject long while focusing on finding a pen and paper to brush past her question.

“So at any rate”, He continued after finding something to write with.

“If you did ‘splurge’, what would you and Heidi like?”

“Ummm, you know, if we aren’t going to be here long, we are fine with what I said,” Gwen replied, seeing the family topic was a tender missed road for him.

“Well obviously I’m going to try hard to resolve this issue and get you and Heidi back to your lives as soon as possible. But all of that is a big question mark. Maybe it’s a couple days, maybe it’s not. I put safety above everything else. I don’t want to make a mistake, miss him, and put you two into harm’s way. So to humor me, is there any small snack that I should look for?”

This comment again drove her back in the direction she didn’t want. She wanted easy back and forths with as little information given out as possible, so as to not have any obvious contradictions. But since

he did have a point, she rattled off some simple things to hopefully please him.

“I get what you’re saying. So how about maybe some ice-cream sandwiches for Heidi, and I don’t know, maybe some melons or berries for me.”

Missing the point of the conversation and only hearing “ice-cream sandwiches”, Heidi chimed in.

“Oh, I like those ice cream cones with the nuts and hard chocolate on top. Are you getting those?”

Quickly trying to be the “mother” and cover their tracks, Gwen replied with a look to Heidi as to tell her to go along with what she was saying.

“Maybe later honey. I know you like those but let’s just stick with these things for now, okay?”

Catching on this time, Heidi kindly smiled to maneuver over her slip, then went back to her animals.

“I think that will be it besides the clothes I have for you here,” Gwen added while pulling out the paper he had given her with some ideas on it.

“Okay. Well let me finish off these eggs for you, and maybe have another cup of coffee myself. Then I’ll head off into town.”

Chapter 9

Mr. Silver and Gwen sat and talked about random things for about an hour before he got up and advised the coffee was getting the better of him. Upon returning to the kitchen, he had in his hand a wallet, a set of keys, and the lists both he and Gwen had written.

“So town is about a fifteen-minute drive north of here,” he noted while pointing north.

“Forgive me for being a recluse and I hope you don’t feel I’m trapping you or anything, but I don’t have a phone. So if you have any issues, you will have to go to Beth’s house down the street.” He said pointing the other way.

“You are fine, and I’m sure we will be fine as well,” Gwen replied as briefly as possible, wanting him to leave.

“Okay, well give me about a half hour in driving time, and probably an hour or so on top of that for everything else. So let’s say about two hours, and I’ll be back.”

“Sounds good!” Gwen responded, being even shorter with her words.

Mr. Silver then went into his garage where Gwen and Heidi soon heard a loud vehicle start-up. Taken by surprise, both Gwen and Heidi looked out the window to see what kind of vehicle he had. Hearing something that sounded like his vehicle either needed a new muffler or Mr. Silver had some sort of sports car, the loud vehicle noise was explained as he slowly pulled out of his garage driving an older black and white pickup truck.

This truck looked to be mostly in good shape. It appeared taken care of and had nice shiny rims that went along with some extra-large tires. The truck also looked higher than it should be, had a short bed, and was only single cabbed. Following the truck as he pulled down the driveway, Gwen noticed the reason for its loudness was not because of a broken part, but rather the exact opposite. Mr. Silver’s truck had a pair

of custom exhaust tips coming out from just underneath each side of the truck's bumper, both plated in shiny chrome.

Gwen and Heidi watched as Mr. Silver drove down his long driveway until he pulled onto the street, heading north like he said he would. Seeing this, Gwen kept an eye on his truck until it crested in the distance and was no longer in sight.

“Okay Heidi,” Gwen said, as she turned from looking out the window and focused on her.

“We have about two hours. Let's see if we can find some information on Mr. Silver. Can you see if you can find any mail or anything with his name on it? I'll look for anything else I can find that might tell us his full name, address, or anything else that could help Kerry.”

Heidi agreed to this but felt bad about sneaking around Mr. Silver's house. In the little time she had spent with him, he seemed nice, funny, and grandfatherly. Although she knew she was supposed to be acting, looking through his stuff and turning whatever over to Kerry was starting to feel wrong.

“I'll start in his office. How about you start in the kitchen and if you find anything, let me know.”

“Okay,” Heidi replied, feeling conflicted.

Doing as she was asked, she first looked in the area Gwen had and quickly found the same A.J. Hidell letter. Setting this aside and not finding anything else in the basket, she switched her attention to the drawers. Pulling out each, most were filled with your standard kitchen items or towels. However one, just under the microwave, had lots of odds and ends things that she brushed through.

This was what her mom would call a junk drawer. It had loose money, batteries, tape, pens, and tools. All of these were meaningless in what Gwen had asked except possibly a few papers under these items. Moving this or that out of the way, she picked up the papers and turned them over.

The first paper was green and had two addresses written on it. One was crossed out while the other was circled. Trying to read both, she first looked at the crossed-out address and was able to read an address of 344 Clinton Street, followed by “3B.”

The circled address was a little more hastily written, and as such was harder to read. However, doing her best, she felt this address was 1938 Sullivan Place. This was followed by a town which she could not make out or read.

Not seeing anything of use on the other papers, Heidi did as Gwen asked, leaving the kitchen to report her findings. Expecting to locate Gwen in the office like she said, Heidi walked into the office only to find an empty room. This paused Heidi for a moment until she heard noises coming from another room over.

Heidi moved to this new room which was just down the hall. As she entered the room, she found Gwen, looking through drawers of clothes on the far side of a bed. The bed was positioned in the middle of the room and was rather humble looking. On the opposite side of the bed to which Gwen was, was another dresser which also appeared to have been looked through as was evident by some of the drawers not being fully closed.

“I found this,” Heidi said, not wanting to interrupt Gwen, but also seeing she didn’t notice her enter the room.

Gwen jumped upon hearing Heidi, knowing she was doing something sneaky and deceitful. Clutching her chest, she turned upon hearing Heidi’s voice.

“You scared me. I’m sorry Heidi. What did you find?”

“I found this letter and this piece of paper. It has a couple addresses and one name. Does this help?”

Gwen smiled, walked over to Heidi and graciously looked over what she had. Seeing that the letter with the name on it was the same one she had already found was disappointing, but not Heidi’s fault. The other paper was a little nicer find but was still discouraging in that it only had addresses, no names, and an indecipherable city. However, anything with this sort of information she felt would still be helpful for

Kerry. Additionally, Gwen also felt the more information she could provide him, the greater chance she had in earning herself favor and possibly even a bonus.

“Yes, anything like this is good. Remember where you find anything. We will write this or anything else down on another piece of paper and put his stuff back. So keep looking for things like this and set them aside but remember where you got them.”

“I found this one in his junk drawer and this one in a basket. I’ll put them back near where I found them so I will remember later.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Do that for anything else you find and try to place everything you move back in the way you found it. That way it doesn’t look like we were being snoopy, okay?”

Still feeling unsure, Heidi showed little happiness in her success but continued as she was told, going back to the kitchen area and eventually working her way into Mr. Silver’s living room. Gwen on the other hand finished looking through Mr. Silver’s bedroom and moved to the garage in which she hoped she might find some paperwork or insurance information.

Opening the door to the garage, Gwen was met with disappointment. Mr. Silver’s garage was small and was only big enough for one vehicle. The garage didn’t have much in it but did have a small workbench, some portable lights, and an old tool chest near the rear of the garage that looked as if he had pulled too far in a time or two.

Running out of things to search, Gwen decided looking into both the bench and chest might still give her the scant chance of finding maybe a subscription magazine or an old purchase receipt. Pulling the dented drawers of the tool chest open, Gwen only found Mr. Silver’s sockets, channel locks, and screwdrivers.

Her confidence deflating and running out of ideas, she moved over to the workbench and pushed around some of the tools before pausing due to mild frustration. Closing her eyes and leaning against the bench, Gwen took in a deep relaxing breath to calm herself. Trying to come up with other ways she might be able to identify Mr. Silver, she opened her eyes a bit and looked up. Doing this, she noticed that Mr.

Silver had decorated the crown of his garage with old license plates, which wrapped around the entire garage.

This sight gave Gwen the idea she wanted. She quickly returned to the kitchen and picked up a pen and pad of paper to write on. Feeling pressure to do everything quickly, she briskly hurried back into the garage and started to write down all the different plate numbers. With the idea maybe one or two of them might be one of his old plates, she noted every single plate and placed a star next to any plate she happened to see doubles of.

Doing this took a little time but also gave her the idea of memorizing his license plate number whenever he returned. In the least, she felt this should return to him. Then, when she met up with Kerry later, he could have his contacts in the law enforcement world figure out his name, address, and whatever other information he might want.

However thinking Mr. Silver might be clever in this regard, she continued pushing herself to think of any other avenue that might come to mind. Standing in the garage, Gwen did have the self-evident idea of simply checking his mailbox. This could actually turn into a two-for-one attempt. She could check to see if he had any mail and what was on it, and in the very least, she could simply see what number he had displayed on his box.

Seeing for herself that Mr. Silver's road was pretty desolate, Gwen calmly walked down his driveway and up to his mailbox. Trying to look inconspicuous, she faintly looked both ways before opening up his rather rickety mailbox for a look.

To her welcomed delight, a single letter was inside the mailbox. Taking a second to again subtly check for traffic, she reached in and grabbed the letter to see what it said.

“To the residence of 221 Baker Street...”

Slightly flustered to not get a name and address together. She checked both sides of the mailbox to only further along her frustration. Each side of the rusty mailbox was blank, and a wooden fence post, which was converted into a pole for the box was also bare.

Starting to see why people with far less access to his residence had a problem locating him, Gwen looked around some more to see if anything else came to mind or sight.

Looking at his big rocks to see if they might bear a number and then his front porch for the same, she eventually turned herself around enough to notice Mr. Silver's neighbor's house. Looking at it blankly, the thought soon popped into her head of being "neighborly" or simply "out of something" for visiting sake.

Since his neighbor had already met Heidi, Gwen felt this would be the perfect way to lighten Beth up. Once in, she could then twist and turn her words ever so much as to extract just enough from her to maybe confirm a number, name, or address she had. This too, if she formed her story out enough, would allow her to take her time as Mr. Silver had advised himself that Beth could be contacted.

Chapter 10

Before going over to Beth's house, Gwen wanted to clean up and make sure everything they had moved or manipulated was back in order as best as possible. So, Gwen went to all the rooms she had meddled in. Pushing all the drawers back in and moving doors to look as if they hadn't been touched, she placed everything in the way she felt looked most authentic.

Heidi on the other hand just wanted to play with Ruby. When Gwen went outside to look at Mr. Silver's mailbox, she had given up on her search and let Ruby back into the house. Horsing around with the spunky pup again, Ruby caused more chaos than if Gwen and Heidi hadn't cleaned up at all. Bumbling into whatever room she wanted, Ruby soon opened all the doors Gwen had tried to stage, jumped on a number of the beds, messing them up before moving along to somewhere else.

At first fixing the never-ending problem, Gwen caught herself with the idea she could blame the vast majority of objects and articles being out of place on her. Changing her stance, Gwen simply made sure only the items outside of Ruby's reach were tidy, opting to leave Ruby "alone" in the house while she and Heidi went to Beth's for a visit.

Checking the clock to make sure they were still under the estimated two-hour time limit, Gwen started to come up with an excuse for having to go over to Beth's. While thinking, Gwen had Heidi put on her shoes and made sure her list of addresses, plates, and names were hidden out of Ruby's reach and out of Mr. Silver's sight.

Finding a spot by opening a curtain rod and pushing the note inside the hollow tube, Gwen placed both back as they were and had Heidi follow her out. Backing out of the doorway due to Ruby's desire to follow, they walked out of Mr. Silver's garage and down his driveway.

"Why are we going to Beth's house?" Heidi asked, only knowing they were going there.

“Because if he knows her, she might be able to give us some information on him. Then we can try and get back to Kerry with what we found. But act normal around Beth. We are still the Kennedy’s and we don’t want her knowing we are trying to figure anything out. So don’t bring any of that up.”

“So what do you want me to talk about then?” Heidi asked, not having anything planned.

“Whatever you guys talked about yesterday when you visited her. Just keep going with that.”

Heidi thought for a minute as they walked down the roadway towards Beth’s house. Beth had a century home that had an unattached garage, a little garden, a shed, and two barns, one of which was half fallen over while the other had a large fence encompassing it.

“I know what I can say!” Heidi exclaimed excitedly as they got closer.

“Mr. Silver said Beth would make me a stuffed animal if I asked. I’ll ask her for one of them... maybe a puppy like Ruby!” she said with a smile.

“That’s a good idea,” Gwen replied, having not come up with an idea of her own.

“We will start off with that. Did you guys mention me when you came over here last?”

“Yeah we said you were still sleeping and that you would be hungry when you woke up.”

“Did you guys talk about him ‘saving’ us or anything like that? Maybe him being a hound?” she asked as she paused at the foot of the driveway, not thinking of that.

“No, we didn’t stay too long. Ruby didn’t like her dog, so we just pretty much said hi and asked if she had any sauce.”

“Okay,” Gwen responded, breathing a sigh of relief.

“We will just say we are friends and go from there... but don’t call him Mr. Silver because we don’t know if that’s his name or not. Try to stay away from saying his name, anything about the bloodhounds or how we know him,” Gwen said as they reached the door.

Not seeing a mailbox along her driveway, Gwen looked around the door area of the house to see if she could find a small mailbox or something of the sort. Not seeing anything, she knocked on Beth’s door and waited.

Upon her knocking, a small dog came to the door, as she could see it slightly through some of the door’s glass. This dog was clearly old, walked gingerly, had a wheeze, and was either blind or had severe problems with its vision. Having its barking years behind it, the older dog simply scratched at the door and eventually sat down. Not seeing any other movement, Gwen knocked again and then looked for a doorbell.

“Was this the door you guys used when you came over?”

“Yep, but we just went in. He didn’t knock.”

Not feeling that was right for her to do, she initially waited patiently until the idea came to her that it would be beneficial if Beth called the police. If done, this would give her an address and a chance to get back to Kerry. However, still not wanting to scare her to death, when they walked in they were more customary and polite about their entry.

“Hello? Is anyone home?” Gwen called out pretty loudly, but still sociably, as the older dog’s tail wagged, happy to have company.

“Hello... Beth? I’m Gwen Kennedy. You met my daughter Heidi last night. She was hoping you could make her a stuffed animal!” she voiced as they walked around the house slowly.

Still not hearing anything other than the dog warming up to Heidi, the thought that Beth might not be home came into her mind. If so, this presented her again with the same problem... searching Beth’s house before she got home. However before doing this, she called out

one more time just to be sure nobody heard her and she couldn't hear anyone moving about.

“Beth... Hello?”

This final call was eventually belatedly answered from an upstairs distant room. Seeing a nearby staircase, Gwen and Heidi walked over to the stairs and hollered up.

“I'm sorry. I don't mean to cause you any alarm... My name is Gwen Kennedy. You met my daughter Heidi last night. She was hoping you could make her a stuffed animal?” she said, half wanting her to simply call the police and get all this sneakiness behind them.

“Oh... Oh yes. Give me a moment and I'll be right down,” an older voice replied, faintly, but still strong enough so Gwen and Heidi could hear her.

After this answer, Gwen and Heidi could hear someone slowly moving around upstairs with the occasional inaudible word spoken here or there. This gibber jabber and walking went back and forth a few times before Beth said something that could be discerned.

“I can make you some potato soup! Does that sound alright?”

Wanting everything to go smoothly, Gwen replied in the affirmative and waited while now hearing the sound of someone slowly coming down the wooden stairs.

“Oh good. I make really good potato soup. What do you want to go with it? Bread, apples, apple slices, pudding pops, PB and J. Any of that sound good?” Beth carried on as she came into sight walking down the stairs.

“I can also cook. Have you ever had tater tots with cheese and bacon? My boy used to really like them. Or I could make cookies, everybody likes cookies!” Beth said excitedly as she rambled on, now at the bottom of the stairs.

Expecting to see someone in their sixties or seventies, Gwen was surprised to see that Beth was much older than that. Although healthy and full of life, Beth was at least eighty, hunched over due to the

ravages of life, wore thick-rimmed glasses, and stood at a mere five feet tall... obviously taller in her younger years.

“Umm... no, no I haven’t. I’m Gwen by the way. You met my daughter Heidi yesterday,” she said, holding her hand out for a shake.

“Oh I remember Heidi. Cute little thing. Do you want more sauce? I’ve got plenty of that,” Beth carried on, missing the handshake gesture while walking towards her kitchen.

“Did I say apple sauce? I have that too!”

Gwen politely smiled and followed Beth into the kitchen as Heidi looked around being able to see all of Beth’s decorations better in the daylight. Beth on the other hand, made it to her fridge and started to look inside.

“Someone’s taken my bacon!” she said, moving things around.

“Well I’m sorry, no taters and bacon. I do have some leftover spaghetti. The meatballs are a little spicy though. But I could heat that up for ya!”

“No that’s okay, we just had some last night,” Gwen replied, not wanting any spaghetti.

“You have to catch a flight?... Well then, nothing spicy for you. That could cause some problems on a plane. Let’s get you something with some fiber. That’ll clog you up!” Beth said, now taking some things out of her fridge and setting them on the floor.

“No,” Gwen responded, before clearing up what she said.

“We had some spaghetti last NIGHT, so I’m okay with spaghetti for a little while. Anything else will be fine. Smaller preferably.”

Hearing this, this time, Beth looked back at her a little disappointed, but carried on with her food and her random chatter.

“Okay, Okay... Well, Heidi is young and needs some growing food, so how about some chicken nuggets? Those are always good...”

and if you don't like them, I can still feed them to Alfie Pugsley, he will eat them up!"

Hearing his name, the blind dog sniffed its way over to where it heard Beth while shaking its tail, happy to be included.

"I hand make these. Alfie likes them that way. Here you go," Beth said, dropping one on the floor for her dog.

"Three fifty for about twenty-five minutes. Is that okay?"

"That will be fine... but could I give your neighbor a heads up so he knows how long we will be?" Gwen asked, leaving Mr. Silver's name out and thinking she would tell her he got a cell phone if it got mentioned he didn't have a phone.

"Phone?" Beth repeated as she sprayed her pan.

"It's on the wall over by the door. Go ahead, but it's not one of them cordless types."

Gwen asked Heidi to take a seat and to entertain Beth as she went over to the phone. The telephone was indeed nothing new. Flat black and probably from the fifties, Beth had an old rotary dial phone with a very long cord. Next to the phone was a chair, a stand, and a basket that had notepads, pens, a phone book, along with other scraps of paper and some miscellaneous items.

Not quite out of Beth's sight, Gwen turned her back to the kitchen area and tried to look as inconspicuous as possible as she glanced down at the table. Taking her time with the phone, she casually brushing some of the papers around and noticed a letter with a half-written address of "1640 Riverside Drive."

Feeling almost as if someone was playing a joke on her with all the different names and addresses, Gwen still memorized this although it differed from anything else she had seen.

"Do you like ketchup with your nuggets?" Beth hollered over to Gwen, startling her.

“Sure. I’ll be right there,” she responded, just trying to say something.

Now feeling pressed, Gwen looked at the phone with some reserve in how to use it, never having done so before. Picking it up, she concentrated on the windup numbers while trying to recall either Kerry’s or Theo’s phone number. Starting the dial, Gwen held the phone up to her ear and rotated a one. Doing this the phone wound back to its resting spot but Gwen heard nothing from the phone itself. Undaunted, Gwen finished out the rest of the numbers and waited to see if she got Theo’s number right.

This though was met with silence. Gwen heard no dial tone, no dialing, or even a click. The phone felt simply blank, as she looked at it and then inspected the cord to see if it was secured to the phone and receiver.

Not knowing much about phones or electrical maintenance, she returned her ear to the phone and still heard nothing. Waiting a bit feeling that maybe since it was old, it just took a while to warm up, Gwen stood still for a minute longer before shaking her head and placing the phone down. Quickly picking it back up to see if the phone now had a tone, she again heard nothing.

“I don’t think your phone is working,” Gwen voiced over to Beth, a little irritated.

“It’s what?” Beth responded, pulling more food from the fridge and sliding it over to Heidi.

“I don’t think your phone is working. I don’t hear anything coming out of it!” she said a little louder.

“Oh, Okay. Well I’ll call the phone company later to fix it. Sport will just have to wait then right?” Beth replied, not getting the idea she couldn’t call the phone company, but giving her a little information by referring to Mr. Silver as “Sport.”

As frustrating as her quest had been to find out some information, the idea that Beth had given her at least a nickname was comforting. This gave her the hope that with all Beth’s talking, she might slip up some more and give away a thing or two if she kept her going.

Returning to the table Heidi was at and taking a seat, Gwen waited to ask Beth anything further until she finished setting the table for the three of them.

“Alfie likes Ranch with his nuggets, do either of you want some Ranch?” Beth asked with the bottle of ketchup already in her hand.

“No thank you,” Gwen replied, wanting her to join them as they waited on the food to cook.

“Okay, well I’ll put it out just in case you change your mind. I do have some juice boxes though. My great-grandson loves these when he comes over. I’ll get you guys a few of them.”

Shaking her head to having to drink a juice box, Gwen sat patiently as Heidi seemed amused by Beth’s constant babble.

“Do you have cherry?” Heidi asked of her favorite flavor.

“Berry, I think they are all berry. I’ll just bring them all over and you can pick which one you want.”

Giggling at this, Heidi smiled as Beth grabbed a handful of drinks, the ranch, and ketchup, then plopped them down on the table in front of her.

“There you go, take as many as you want!” Beth said with a smile before having a seat herself.

“Probably another twenty minutes I’d say. I put some appetizers over here while you were trying to use the phone. But let’s say a prayer first,” Beth mentioned while holding out both her hands to hold theirs.

Understanding the gesture, Heidi reached out first followed by Gwen who also held Heidi’s hand. Beth immediately started into her prayer, adding a little flare as she went along before saying “let’s eat.”

Beth wasted no time in cutting up an apple then unscrewing a jar of peanut butter. While she was somewhat quiet and distracted, Gwen took up the chance to start asking her some questions.

“I don’t know if you quite heard what I said earlier. My name is Gwen Kennedy. I don’t recall catching your name though?” she asked in reference to her last name.

“Beth Doxie, or Grandma Doxie, whatever you want. As long as it’s nice I’ll respond to it,” she answered happily, still working on the apples.

“And you said your dog’s name was what?”

“Alfie Pugsley Wheezer. People get full names so I figured dogs should too. The Wheezer part you might have noticed was because of his breathing. He’s always had a little wheeze, so there you go. But you can call him whatever, he just likes being pet,” she said as she handed him an apple with some peanut butter on it.

“He has to eat healthy too right?”

“I suppose so,” Gwen replied, steering the conversation back in the direction she wanted.

“So tell me about yourself. How long have you lived here? Do you have any kids?”

Always eager to talk, Beth jumped into Gwen’s questions and started to elaborate.

“Well I’ve been here now for at least forty years... probably longer, I’d have to do the math on that. I got married when I was twenty to my late husband Henry, who passed about nine years ago now. His family owned all this land,” she said pointing all around her.

“And grew mainly corn. When his father retired, we took it up and did the same. We added a few things here and there, plus we purchased some more land, but it really didn’t change much, we just had more corn. This house used to be his parents’ house. When they passed away, we moved in and have been here ever since.”

“Do you guys have any kids?” Gwen asked, repeating the question as one step before asking the question she really wanted answered.

“We had problems having kids. I would have loved to have had a bushel of them, but that wasn’t God’s plan. I had one boy. He went off, got married, and had a kid himself. Thankfully my great-grandson likes my zedonks and will come over every now and again to feed them.”

“Zedonk? What’s a Zedonk?” Heidi spoke up, never hearing of such a thing before.

“They are half zebra and half donkey. They look like a donkey but have zebra legs. You can go out and see them if you want. They have always been friendly to me and my great-grandson.”

Heidi jumped up and scurried over to a nearby window hoping to see one.

“Where are they? Can I go see them?”

“They are free-range zedonks. Besides Alfie, they are the only pets I have, so they get my one good barn all to themselves. They come and go as they please,” Beth said standing up, more than willing to let Heidi see the animals.

“Umm, maybe later,” Gwen quickly interrupted, shooting down the idea of looking at them at the moment.

“I’ll think about it before we go. We only came over for a brief visit.”

Hearing this, Heidi became sad while still looking out the window, hoping to see one of them moving around. Noticing this, Beth went over to her refrigerator, grabbed a picture, and carried it over to her.

“Here you go. This is Zeus and Reff. They aren’t going anywhere. Come over whenever you and your mom get a chance and I’ll let you see them. They are very tame and gentle.”

Still looking a little sad that she couldn’t personally see the new animals, Beth had another idea and walked into her living room for a brief moment. Hearing the sound of a door open and close, Beth reemerged holding two zedonk stuffed animals.

“How about this. You said you wanted a stuffed animal and I just finished these up the other day. All they need now are a couple names,” she said, handing them over to Heidi.

Heidi snatched both of them up quickly and gave them each a seat at the table as she continued with her snack. Beth was pleased this seemed to make her happy and then checked on their chicken nuggets before sitting back down.

“Only about another five minutes, they’re cooking pretty quickly.”

With Heidi entertained and happy, Gwen tried to sneak a probing question in.

“So how long have you known Sport?” she said while air quoting the nickname Beth gave him.

“Oh boy, a long time now. He comes and goes. However I’ve really leaned on him the last few years now that Henry is gone. I don’t think I should be driving anymore, so he gets my groceries for me and takes care of stuff for me and Alfie.”

Not getting a lot to work with off of that, Gwen switched gears a bit and got a little more risky in her questioning.

“So how far down this street does your property go? We passed by a few roads on our way out. Does your land stretch out that far?” she asked, hoping Beth would name either the main street outside her house or a side street or two.

“Ha, ha, ha!” Beth laughed to the curiosity of Gwen.

“I could own half of Ashland and I wouldn’t know. I let Henry just do his thing. As long as we had food on the table, I didn’t really care. I only really know a few lots we purchased or sold. We own a couple lots in town that Ashland keeps asking to buy for the city to use, and I think Henry had a rental house in town. I’m honestly not sure. He also might have sold that... I should probably check into that. I might have a renter living rent-free.”

Not getting anywhere, Gwen upped her courage a little bit more.

“How long have you called him Sport? I’ve never heard anyone call him that before,” she said, hoping she would say his real name in relation to this nickname.

“My goodness! He always calls guys “Old Sport” instead of their names... even if he knows their names. I don’t know where he got that from, but I’ve heard him say it so often, I just started calling him Sport. Now that said, you probably wouldn’t know that unless you were around him and he was talking to another guy. He doesn’t call girls that. Just guys. So I call him Sport now, or something like that. Sporty, Spot sometimes.” She carried on talking as a truck pulled into her driveway.

“Oh that sounds like Sport now. He insists on driving that loud truck,” she said, as she got up and remembered she had food in the oven.

“Oh No! My Nuggets!”

With her time to talk about Mr. Silver clearly over, Gwen helped Beth with the chicken nuggets that were now burnt. Beth bemoaned the loss of her food and that she wouldn’t be able to share her prized nuggets with Heidi and Gwen. Trying to make her feel better, Gwen reminded her that her dog Alfie would probably still like them and that they could come back another time to see the zedonks. Hearing “another time” Heidi spoke up about seeing them now.

“Aww... I just want to see one! I’ll make it quick!”

Jostled between Heidi and Beth’s concerns, Gwen looked towards Mr. Silver as he walked in holding some grocery bags and asked him.

“Umm... I’m sorry Heidi. I still have groceries and your ice cream in the truck. How about another time, I promise,” he said to a disappointed but understanding Heidi as Beth also bombarded him about her food.

“Oh Sport! I burnt the chicken nuggets! You know how good those are!”

A little overwhelmed getting both issues at once as he walked through the door, Mr. Silver put down Beth's groceries and tried to console her.

"There's always another time. Here, there's some more chicken in here. We will make a date and you can make us all up a nice big plate of chicken nuggets. Maybe I'll cook up some hot dogs or something like that to go along with them. How's that?" he said as she almost looked as if she were about to cry.

Seeing this, Gwen gave her a hug as Mr. Silver looked at the nuggets and thought to himself that the dog probably wouldn't even want them. Wanting to help, Gwen chimed in trying to soothe her.

"Well thank you Beth for your hospitality. As he said, we will make a date another time for some nuggets and maybe see your zedonks. And thank you for the two stuffed animals. Heidi really seems to like them. You truly have a talent!" She said in a relieving and encouraging way.

"Oh wait, I'll give you one. Hold on a second," Beth said, snapping out of her sorrow and hurrying back over to the room she kept her animals and supplies in.

"I have a horse, a dog, two bears and I think a dolphin... Oh wait, no dolphin. I could make you a dolphin if you would like?" Beth voiced, excited to give away another one of her animals.

"The horse will be fine. She can play with Heidi's zedonks later on."

Chapter 11

The next morning Gwen woke up to the sound of Ruby barking outside. Annoyed by this, Gwen rolled over and pulled her pillow over her head in an attempt to block out the constant yelping. However, while trying to find a position that was also comfortable, Gwen was able to hear Heidi giggle from time to time followed by Mr. Silver saying this or that.

This sprung Gwen up with the idea she better take advantage of her moment alone to retrieve the note she had put into the curtain rod. Putting off changing into the new clothes he had gotten her, Gwen looked outside to make sure they were not on their way in. Seeing Mr. Silver throwing what looked to be a new toy, Gwen hurried over to the curtain rod and unscrewed the cap she had tightened on before.

Seeing the edge of her note visible, she pinched her fingers together to pull it out before recapping the rod. While doing this, the sound of a door opening in the adjacent room could be heard. Surprised by this, Gwen scrambled to get both the curtain and the rod back up as quickly as possible.

Before she was fully able to get the curtain up, Gwen heard footsteps coming her way. This signaled to her it was someone, although she had not heard anyone come inside. Getting the curtain straight and in order, she turned to see Beth standing at the room's entryway.

“Oh hi!” Gwen said, not expecting to see her.

“I didn't know you came over.”

As Gwen had now become accustomed to, Beth was her normal chatty self, instantly responding to her.

“I just brought the zedonks over. They needed the change of scenery and it was a little adventure for me. I haven't been over here in a while. Plus, I thought it would be a nice surprise for Heidi. What was wrong with the window?”

Gwen gave off all the typical signs of someone struggling to find something to say, while her body language also didn't do her any favors.

"I just, was, thought I heard someone outside," was what came out of her mouth when she tried.

"Well everyone's out back. Come and visit Zeus and Reff, I'm sure they'd love to see you!" Beth replied, not giving off the sense she was skeptical, although Gwen had a hard time thinking she wasn't.

"What's that?" Beth then said, looking at the ground.

Gwen looked down to see what she was talking about, only to see her note lying face up on the ground below her. Being able to see the various names and addresses she had written down, she quickly thought up an excuse to distance herself from it.

"You know, I made the mistake of leaving Ruby out last night when we came over to your house. She got into everything. That was my fault. I stayed up for an hour last night trying to clean up after her and must have missed some. If you see anything else, let me know. It was my fault."

"Oh dogs will be that way. Alfie used to get into the trash all the time until he got too old and lazy. That's part of having a puppy. They don't know the boundaries yet," she replied with a smile, remembering Alfie when he was young.

"Come on, I'll show you Zeus and Reff. I bet you've never seen a zedonk before. Plus, Zeus gets more and more grumpy as the day goes on. So if you want to catch him at his best, right now would be about that time. Come on," Beth added, turning from the room while signaling for Gwen to come outside.

Feeling as if she might have dodged a bullet, Gwen didn't say anything further and just let Beth continue on as they both went outside, tucking her note in her pant's pocket along the way. As they walked out Mr. Silver's back door, Gwen was surprised to see that neither of the zedonks were restrained and wandered about freely in Mr. Silver's back yard, chewing up any good piece of ground they could find.

“That one is Zeus, next to the air conditioning unit, and Reff is over there,” Beth noted as she carefully let herself down a couple of stairs onto Mr. Silver’s backyard.

Always spunky and attentive, Ruby was the first to notice the company. Dashing from Mr. Silver and Heidi to greet her friends, she ran across the yard bounding in happiness as a young pup does. Seeing this, Gwen stepped in front of Beth and slowed Ruby down when she got close enough, not wanting the pup to claw or knock her over.

“It’s okay!” Beth voiced of the polite action.

“I already have a fake hip. She can’t do too much more to me.”

Not expecting the joke, Gwen couldn’t help herself and laughed as Mr. Silver also caught wind of the joke and did the same. Now closer, he spoke out as Heidi tried to restrain Ruby.

“You know I got you those new clothes for a reason.”

Understanding this and knowing a normal person would have put them on before coming outside, Gwen tossed out a rebuttal she felt was convincing.

“Well I would have but I’m sure you know Beth. She didn’t give me much of a chance.”

Hearing her name, Beth looked up from the puppy and injected herself into the conversation.

“France, no I think Dobermans are from Germany. Same area but not the same country. They were actually made up by a tax collector. You know those tax guys and their money. They will get it from you one way or another.”

Feeling she had slipped her little secrets by Mr. Silver and Beth, Gwen refocused the conversation on the zedonks, which led Beth into more stories.

“My grandson, the father of my great-grandson that comes over, is an auctioneer in Ashland. These two goof balls came up for auction

when their owner passed away and nobody bid on them..." she said, going on and on about the two zedonks' life stories.

Letting her talk, Mr. Silver and Gwen walked with her as Ruby and Heidi went back to playing with the item Mr. Silver had purchased. Lightly talking as to not interrupt Beth, Gwen asked if there was anything new or anything she could help with concerning "her issue," as she put it, just in case Beth overheard.

Knowing Beth would just keep talking, Mr. Silver more plainly talked about what was on his mind.

"I have a good idea of where Dalton is at right now. I just need a few things to line up."

"You found him already?" Gwen questioned, surprised how fast he zeroed in on one particular person.

"Pretty close. He was in a house just off the main road in Jasper Valley. As of an hour ago, he had gone over to a bar. Do you know if he works at a bar, maybe as a bartender, cooler, bouncer, something like that? It's a little too early to be drinking."

Not knowing anything about Dalton or what he might do, Gwen deflected the question and tried to steer him away from what she did or did not know.

"He was honestly pretty secretive about his life with me. I don't know, but how did you find him so fast? I didn't even know you were looking for him yet."

"If a magician never gives away his tricks, he can continue to fool the audience time and time again," Mr. Silver simply responded with a wink.

Seeing he wasn't going to say how, Gwen decided to lean on the fictional fact this involved her and Heidi's lives.

"Please don't feel rushed or anything, but when might this be over? Heidi seems happy at the moment, but no offense, it can't be good for her to stay like this for a prolonged period of time."

“I should be able to catch him tonight,” he replied.

“So if all goes well, you and Heidi will be able to go home tomorrow afternoon-ish.”

Knowing that it would start to go downhill for her if he was able to catch up with Dalton tonight, Gwen knew this meant she would have to leave right after he left. Seeing this as her only current option, she fished to see if she might be able to find out some of his details.

“Well that’s good. Can I help in any way? I feel bad, kind of like I put you in this position. I would imagine this isn’t easy. So if you want, Heidi and I can go right to bed before you leave in order to give you a chance to get everything ready?”

“I should be fine. I’ve been a one-man show for a while now, but I appreciate the offer. Don’t worry about the sleep thing. I can’t guarantee the time I will be leaving... I’m waiting on him to leave the bar. Bars have lots of people, so I’ll wait until he is alone. Whenever that is, is when I’ll close in on him.”

“Alright, well if you change your mind just let me know. As I said, I feel like I got you into this. The least I can do is help in some way.”

Hearing Gwen say a word that ended in “ay”, Beth switched from what she was talking about and answered her perceived question.

“Yes, they will eat hay. Think of them more or less as horses. Hay, grass, oats, that kind of stuff. They just don’t eat as much as a horse does.”

Chapter 12

Gwen tried to pretend nothing was bothering her as she went to bed. She read Heidi a book, had a snack, and brushed her teeth. She also didn't rush either her or Heidi's bedtime. Instead, she mimicked the time they went to bed after going to Beth's, adjusting slightly for the hour it took to pick up after Ruby.

When it was time, Gwen first told Heidi to say goodnight to Mr. Silver before leading her to the room he had set up for her. Closing the door behind her as they entered the room, Gwen turned off the lights and told Heidi what they had to do.

"We have to leave tonight," she said very faintly, while gesturing for Heidi to remain quiet.

"Mr. Silver is going to leave at some point to catch that guy that was supposed to guard us at the factory. He thinks he is a bad guy and that he has to catch him."

"But he's not. He played games with me and..." Heidi said not understanding how Mr. Silver perceived him and why he was doing what he felt he had to.

"I understand. You're right, but we have to go. If Mr. Silver does catch him tonight, he will probably find out we are acting. Our stories won't line up and we will probably be in trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?" Heidi asked nervously.

"Don't worry about it, you'll be fine either way. But I need you to quietly get your things ready when I leave the room. Pack them all up in a pillowcase. I'll come back when he leaves tonight. Once he does, we will grab our stuff and head towards town, okay?" she said, shaking her head.

Heidi, visibly anxious over everything Gwen had said, merely shook her head in agreement while starting to fight back tears.

“It’s okay Heidi, I promise. We will be fine. It will just be a walk into town. It’s a nice night so I’ll try to point out some constellations and maybe we will see a shooting star!”

Heidi again nodded to this but didn’t say a word.

“Okay, get your stuff ready and then try to get some sleep. He didn’t say when he was leaving, so it might still be a while. I’ll wake you when he leaves, okay? Here are your zedonks. Squeeze them, it will make you feel better.”

Heidi did this as Gwen composed herself before opening the door and walking into her room. Once in her room, Gwen did the same. In the dark, she quietly organized the few things that were hers or that she thought she might need. She then sat on the floor in the middle of the room so she didn’t fall asleep while waiting on Mr. Silver to leave.

Gwen’s room thankfully had a digital clock and a window that allowed her to see the road. With nothing else to pass the time, she looked out the window and counted however many vehicles she could just to entertain herself.

Starting at eight-thirty, she counted cars until almost eleven o’clock. This proved trying in itself since so few cars traveled along Mr. Silver’s road. Being that there was so much time to pass and so few cars to watch, Gwen multi-tasked and tried to identify constellations. Having been a while since she had done this, the only real one she was able to pick out was the dipper, although she was not sure if it was the big or small one.

Trying to remember which one had what star in what position, Gwen finally heard Mr. Silver start up his truck. Being as loud as it was, she didn’t need to snoop as the sound of the truck gave away its position all the way down his driveway and eventually down the street. However, feeling she had assumed too much when Beth had surprised her, Gwen decided to wait in her room a little while to see if Mr. Silver might have “forgotten something”. Deciding to wait twenty minutes, Gwen started her countdown just before midnight. Watching the clock tick away, Gwen searched her mind if she had forgotten something or if she was leaving anything out. One thing that did come to her mind was that she would need money. Her overall plan was to first make it into town and to then call either Kerry or Theo to pick them up. However,

she couldn't guarantee she would be able to find a phone to use, and even if she did, that whoever she called would answer it. Because of this, her backup option was to call a taxi.

Watching minutes seventeen through nineteen take forever, Gwen stuck to her plan and waited to go into Heidi's bedroom. Upon her chosen time, Gwen cautiously left her room and looked around a little just to make sure she somehow wasn't being fooled. Not detecting anyone, she swiftly went over to Heidi's room and woke her up.

Heidi gave no fuss, had packed as Gwen had asked, and even excused herself without prompting to use the restroom. Gwen now being a little behind, double-checked her items and then went into Mr. Silver's room to see if he had any loose money. Gwen's entry into Mr. Silver's room caught Ruby's attention which perked her up in her cage, causing her to stand up and stretch. Trying not to acknowledge Ruby as to not rile her up, Gwen ignored her while rooting through Mr. Silver's stuff. Not finding anything, Gwen was startled a bit when Heidi came out of the bathroom.

"I'm ready," she politely said, still looking a little tired.

Gwen smiled at this but still knew she needed at least a little money or else they would be in for a very long walk. Trying to think of where else to look for some sort of cash, Gwen asked Heidi if she had seen any when she had been looking around.

"Yeah, he had some money in the kitchen."

"He did? Do you remember where?" Gwen asked, hoping it wasn't just a couple pennies.

Without knowing Gwen was going to take it, Heidi promptly showed her which drawer she had found the money in while thinking nothing of it. Upon opening the drawer, Gwen was surprised to see a large fold of money along with some loose change and some grocery coupons. Taking it without counting, Heidi at first thought nothing of it until she noticed Gwen putting it into her pants pocket.

"That's Mr. Silver's!" Heidi gently mentioned with the idea Gwen was taking it for herself.

“I know Heidi. But we need it right now. It will be okay,” she admitted, wanting to keep moving along.

Not feeling right about taking his money, six-year-old Heidi put up a little stand against it.

“No! You shouldn’t do that. Would you like it if he took your stuff?”

Not having time to argue, Gwen gave her a lie to move her along.

“I’ll pay him back I promise! I’m just borrowing it without permission. You’re right, but I will pay him back with a little extra later on, okay?”

“Okay,” Heidi skeptically replied, shaking her head hoping what Gwen had told her was the truth.

Gwen was quick after this, not having anything else she might need come to mind. After going to the bathroom herself, she went to collect Heidi only to find her trying to pet Ruby through her cage.

“I’m sorry Heidi, it’s time to go,” Gwen said, seeing it would be hard for her to leave the puppy.

Being brave, Heidi puckered up her lips a little bit, stood up, and said goodbye to Ruby.

“Be good Ruby. I’ll remember you. I hope you will remember me,” she said while sticking her fingers through the top of her cage and patting her on the head.

Not knowing they were leaving, Ruby went along with the gesture. Being excited that she might get let out, Ruby wagged her little nubby tail until she saw Heidi and Gwen leaving the room. At the realization she was not being let out to play, Ruby started to whimper as Gwen and Heidi reached the front door to leave.

“She sounds scared. Should we give her a toy or a treat?”

“She will be fine. Mr. Silver puts her in there every night, so I’m sure she is used to it. Plus, we will lock the door. That should make it

safe for her,” Gwen said, trying to give her some reassurance as she closed the door behind them.

Chapter 13

Gwen and Heidi walked down Mr. Silver's driveway and turned left onto his unknown street. Checking his mailbox one more time just to be sure, Gwen second guessed their direction a bit before telling herself this had to be the way. Taking a sure step, she also felt it was best for them to stay a distance off the roadway although she really didn't want to. This she believed would give her and Heidi a better chance of not being seen if a car happened to drive by. No longer wanting the police involved, walking just off the road would keep unwanted do-gooders away while also making it harder for Mr. Silver to spot them if he passed by.

Because both sides of the road were farmland, very little cover was available for them to hide. The occasional tree, drainpipe, and ditch did every so often present itself, but laying down in the plowed field became their main option the few times a vehicle did pass by. Waiting each time for the vehicle to be out of sight, they both slowly got back up and continued on.

Being a much longer solitary road than she expected, Gwen wondered if all of this land belonged to Beth. The field consistency never changed, a dividing land plot marker never appeared, and to her disappointment, no new houses came into sight. The best she did get was one tractor and one shed about three miles away from Mr. Silver's house.

Heidi and Gwen's trek also carried on for much longer than Gwen thought. Beth did seemingly own a lot of land, however, the land did eventually turn into valleys which were not so good for farming. In these areas, trees were allowed to grow in which more life was seen, although it was not the human type. A deer family crossed the road ahead of them at one point, followed by a fox that seemed to be distantly accompanying them. Further down the road, an owl could be heard, along with a bunch of peeping frogs when they came across a little creek.

The creek was a welcome sight in that it displayed a sign just before the bridge that crossed it. The sign depicted a tight curve and a

cross street which had limited sight due to the shape of the woods and the creek in the area. This cross-street sign had no name under it but was rejuvenating to them in that it was something new and changing.

The cross street was as depicted, only a short walk from the bridge and indeed needing a warning sign due to how the intersecting streets crossed paths. The bonus to this intersection was the hope of a street sign which was observed to the right of a stop sign. Excited to see it, Gwen focused in on it until she got close enough to read it.

“Riverside Drive / Twin Pines Trail.”

Twin Pines was a new name for her to remember since she forgot to grab a pen, but Riverside Drive was not. This name was what she found written down at Beth’s house and gave her a clearer picture of what to tell Kerry.

This brief moral boost was short-lived. With Riverside Drive being just one continuous street, she only had to pick between going left or right upon leaving Mr. Silver’s house. However, now she was stuck at a four-way intersection. Each road looked similar and none of them had anything of use in sight. This paused Gwen for a moment in having to pick a way to go.

Trying to think of anything that might help her decision, Gwen was aided by the pavement below her. Riverside Drive was clearly a back road, having no center or edge lines. To further this, although in good shape probably due to little use, it wasn’t the nicest paved street she had ever seen. To the contrary, Twin Pines Trail at least had lines in the middle and sides of the roadway and seemed to be more maintained.

Purely an observatory guess on her part, Gwen felt turning onto Twin Pines Trail would give them a better chance of getting to town. However, this again left her with which direction to go. To her left was a hill that was the original source of the creek they had passed over. To her right was another hill although much more gradual and less precarious if they had to walk along it.

At a standstill, Gwen exhaled in thought, then asked Heidi what she thought.

“What do you think? I’m thinking this road is more likely to lead us into town, but which way is town?”

Heidi looked both ways then looked at the street as well, judging it from a different point of view.

“I think we should go that way,” she said, pointing to the more gradual hill.

“Okay. Why that way?” Gwen asked, just wondering how she came to that conclusion.

“It looks like someone has been turning from this road to that road,” Heidi noted, pointing down at the road.

“There are tire marks there and someone made a wide turn here.” This was evident by someone driving off the road and into the mud on both streets in order to make the turn.

Gwen shook her head in agreement to this as it was indeed true someone driving a tractor had made several passes from there right onto Riverside Drive. Then at this moment, the distant sound of a vehicle could be heard heading their direction from the way Heidi had picked.

“Let’s get off the road,” Gwen said as she led Heidi towards the creek and out of sight.

The car only took a moment to reach the intersection. Not coming to a complete stop, the car continued along Twin Pines Trail, up the hill and out of sight. Hearing it continuing on, Gwen peeked her head up to see if any other vehicles were coming.

“I think you’re right. I think cars are coming from that direction and heading one of these directions. Good call!” Gwen said complimenting Heidi.

Deciding to go this way, both Heidi and Gwen continued on, still walking a distance off the roadway where it allowed. Although a little trickier on this particular road, the choice was soon after rewarded with a few houses staggered along both sides of the roadway. Each of these houses Gwen categorized as being family farmhouses. All had either dirt or gravel driveways, were built in the style of Beth’s house, usually

had at least a large shed if not a barn, and most had either a crop or a long barbed wired fence.

“I wonder if they have zedonks?” Heidi said as they passed by one of these farms.

“I’m guessing cows. I think the zedonks were a treat. I’d be very surprised if anyone else around here has any.”

Heidi shrugged her shoulders to this and still tried to see if she might catch a glimpse of something other than a cow. This though, as with walking, got old. Although their journey had not been strenuous or demanding physically, it seemed to be taking forever even to Gwen.

“How much further do we have to go?” Heidi eventually asked, still being patient enough to carry her own pillowcase.

Not having an easy answer for her or even knowing if they were going in the right direction, Gwen gave her a reassuring answer, hoping it would be correct sooner rather than later.

“Soon Heidi. Soon.”

Heidi accepted this but still wanted something to keep her busy. Not normally up this late, she remembered Gwen had mentioned stars.

“You said you know what the stars mean?”

Knowing what she meant, Gwen started to point out a few stars here and there, making up a couple as they went along.

“If you want, you can pick out a few stars and call it ‘Zeus’. I don’t think there is one named that. It can be ‘Zeus’ the zedonk star cluster,” she said, hoping this would be a fun distraction for her.

Heidi liked this and immediately started searching the sky, trying to find a bright star to start off with. Finding a few potential winners, Heidi eventually looked to their left and noticed a solid red light that faded between the tree lines, in and out of her sight.

“Can I use the red one?” she asked, pointing at it.

Having not seen it, Gwen searched in the area Heidi had pointed. Eventually seeing it through the brush, Gwen got excited about what it might mean.

“You know what Heidi, that might be a water tower or something like that. Something tall that people put a light on top of so planes don’t accidentally hit them. If it is a water tower, that’s good news for us!”

Feeling as if she did something good, Heidi giggled with excitement as Gwen tried to see what exactly it was. Fortunately for them, the road they were on took a curve towards the light which faded away the tree line that had been obstructing her.

“It looks like a water tower Heidi!”

Strengthened by this sight, both girls picked up the pace, finding more and more signs of civilization as they went. More modern houses started to appear. A few more streets crossed or dead-ended into theirs, and eventually they passed by a store, although it was closed.

Once the sidewalks appeared and the houses got closer together, Gwen and Heidi started taking side streets and alleyways through different allotments until they reached a part of town that started to have businesses. Ashland, not being a metropolis, still only had gas stations and convenience stores on its outskirts. This though still didn’t work for them as most of these stores had already closed, and the only gas station they found open, stopped allowing people in hours before.

Not wanting to explain their situation, they continued on until they found a larger gas station that was half for public transportation and half for commercial trucks. This gas station was open to all twenty-four hours a day, had restrooms, a shower, a laundry room, arcade games, and a mini convenient store with even an ice cream station. Most of all for them, the station was bound to have a phone, either public or private.

Once inside the store, both clerks looked at them suspiciously, wondering why a six-year-old was out walking so late and why they were both carrying pillow sacks. This oddity caused the clerks to talk to each other but wasn’t enough alarm for them to call the police as neither of them acted in distress or appeared hurt.

Finding a few pay phones near the arcade games, Gwen gave Heidi five dollars to play whatever games she wanted as she attempted to make her calls. Leaning on her memory again, she dialed up the same number she had while at Beth's house but this time getting a ring. Waiting for someone to pick up, Gwen looked around to see if she was alone or if anyone else might be nearby.

Not getting an answer and with the number she used not having a voice mail, Gwen was forced to decipher either what Kerry's number was, or if she had dialed Theo's number incorrectly. Running her hand through her hair as she watched Heidi pull her winning tickets from a Skee-Ball machine, Gwen felt almost defeated until she remembered her friend Delilah was also sometimes used by Theo and Kerry.

Knowing her number by heart, Gwen dialed her up and hoped she'd pick up this late at night. Hearing it ring only two times, Delilah picked up sounding groggy and a little confused.

"Deli, it's me Gwen. I need you to do something for me. I need Theo's number."

"What phone number are you calling from?" she replied, still disorientated.

"Deli, please focus for me. Can you give me Theo's number? I need it."

Delilah grumbled a little bit before saying, "hold on". The phone then went silent with the exception of some rustling and a little back and forth banter between her and her husband. After taking longer than what Gwen felt was necessary, she finally got back to her.

"Okay, you ready?"

"Yep," Gwen said, trying to clear her mind while also blocking out all the chirps and chimes being made by the various nearby games.

Delilah slowly read off the number, stumbling through a bit of it but eventually getting it out. Hearing it aloud, Gwen quickly figured out she had switched a couple numbers and had been calling the wrong number.

“Okay thanks Deli! I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go. I’ll call you tomorrow okay!” she said before gently hanging up.

Wanting and expecting to be picked up right away, Gwen wasted no time in dialing up Theo. This too only rang a couple times before, an also tired, Theo answered.

“Gaius,” he picked up stating only his last name, not recognizing the number.

“Theo! It’s Gwen. Don’t hang up. Heidi and I got away from Mr. Silver and are at a gas station right now. I need someone to pick us up. I know about what his address is!” she said, delighted her ordeal was almost over and that she would probably be able to get extra compensation for what she had found out.

Surprised to hear from her and trying to comprehend what she was saying, Theo understood enough to not hang up.

“I’m sorry, you’re at a gas station? Where?”

“I’m at a twenty-four-seven truck stop gas station. I’m pretty sure in Ashland,” she replied, looking at everything on the walls to see if she might catch the station’s name.

“It’s called ‘Haulin Wagons’ and has a prospector hanging out the window of a semi, waving. Does that sound familiar?” she asked after seeing the logo above the register area.

“Okay yeah, I think I know where you’re at. Just sit tight and I can probably be there in about a half hour... is he looking for you or anything like that?” Theo asked, wondering what kind of situation they might be up against.

“No, he doesn’t know we are gone. But he did leave to catch Dalton, so you might want to give him a heads up if it’s not too late. He thinks Dalton was my ex that abducted me.”

“Alright, I’ll call him right now. Just sit tight, I’ll come pick you up myself.”

Chapter 14

Theo managed to make it to the Haulin Wagons truck stop in just under a half hour. He thought about picking up someone just in case he ran into an issue with Mr. Silver, but felt if he didn't know they were gone, picking them up and getting them somewhere hidden was the better choice.

As they drove from the truck stop to Theo's selected location, Gwen recited all the information she had, along with any ideas that came to her mind. Driving and not being able to take down anything she said, Theo listened but also explained to her they would go more in-depth when they reached the safe house that only he and Kerry knew about.

Driving for about another half hour, they reached the house very late. Heidi had long since fallen asleep in the back seat, and Gwen also started to drift off after saying everything she knew. However, Gwen got a little wake-up bump when Theo pulled into the house's driveway. Looking at the house with yawning eyes, she noticed it was a quaint little house tucked away on a wooded lot without a neighbor in sight.

Upon stopping, Theo let Gwen in before going back to get Heidi. Carrying her in and placing her on the couch, Theo asked Gwen if she wanted to talk now or if she would rather him come back in the morning. Having a second wind, Gwen decided to power through before anything started to slip her mind. This she felt would also give him and Kerry more time to work with.

"Okay, let me get something to write on and we will get started," Theo said as he looked around the seldom-used house.

Looking about the house, Theo wasn't able to find anything to write with. No pens, pencils, or even a crayon or marker. He did find a single pad of paper to use, but after about ten minutes of searching, he gave up and decided to go with his memory.

"Welp. I guess I'll remember what I can and we will come back to this writing part later. So do you know his address?"

“Do you have a phone? You could take notes on that?” Gwen asked as an alternative before reciting Mr. Silver’s details again.

“I do but I didn’t bring it with me. Kerry said to not use phones for this job. He said Mr. Silver uses them to his advantage, even without a password. So no phone. Just memory.”

“Okay,” Gwen simply replied to this before going back to his original question.

“Address-wise, yeah I’m close. I know his neighbor’s address. It’s a little bit of a story, but his neighbor’s address is 1640 Riverside Drive. I had a tough time figuring that out but confirmed it when Heidi and I ran away and got to the nearest intersection. That street sign said Riverside and Twin Pines. Until then I was stuck with a few different possible addresses,” she answered while holding up the notes she took.

Seeing she had several things written down, Theo asked to see the notes to see what else she had.

“So are these the other addresses you found?” he asked, thrilled he wouldn’t have to remember everything.

“Yeah. Heidi and I searched his house and found these in various places. I wasn’t sure if they were his or not, so I just wrote them down. I figured it was better to have it and not need it. I also did the same with a bunch of license plates he had in his garage. I figured your guys at the police station could check them to see what they came back to.”

“Okay, yeah that’s not a bad idea. Who is this A.J. Hidell? Is that Mr. Silver’s name?”

“I’m not sure. I found it while I was looking but couldn’t confirm anything. So just like the plates, I wrote it down and figured I’d just pass it along. It could be his name, or maybe it’s just someone he knows. I really wanted to figure out his name but I just kept coming up with blanks. Even his neighbor called him “sport” instead of Mr. Silver or another name.”

“Sport? That’s interesting,” he said, remembering what Kerry had mentioned.

“Do you think his neighbor knows his real name?”

“I don’t know. I would imagine she does, but she is an old lady that talks a lot. I couldn’t get much out of her before she went on about something else. However she is the person who I got an address for and she only lives about a quarter mile away from him. So her address is pretty much his address since they were the only houses I noticed on the street.”

“What’s her name?” he asked, not seeing a female name in her notes.

“Ummm. I know her first name was Beth. Give me a moment and her last name will come back to me.”

While she was thinking, Theo moved the conversation over to Dalton and Heidi.

“So before I forget, I got a hold of Dalton. He went off to a friend’s house for the night. Also, I called Heidi’s parents. I gave them this address, so they will be coming here at eight AM to pick her up. I know that doesn’t give you too much time to sleep, but they are obviously spooked about this entire ordeal.”

“Are they going to be a problem? Are they mad at me?” she asked, wondering if she needed to worry about anything.

“No, you’re definitely fine. I think business-wise we will be fine as well. We paid them well and their daughter is back in one piece. They will get over the rest. I’m not going to worry about them talking,” he mentioned, brushing off any concerns.

With the little change in questioning pace, an idea popped into Gwen’s head of how to remember Beth’s last name.

“You know what? Give me a second, I know what will give us Beth’s name.”

Gwen got up and quietly walked over to her pillowcase and fished around inside of it. Taking a few things out, she finally grabbed what she wanted and walked back over to Theo.

“Beth makes these stuffed animals,” she said, handing over her stuffed horse to Theo.

“She has a little tag on them. Her name is on there.”

Theo looked at the tag which as stated had “Beth Doxie” written on it along with what type of materials were used and how to wash it.

“Too bad she didn’t have a website or address on here as well. But this will be good enough. Can I take this for a bit since I have nothing to write with? I’ll give it back,” he asked while throwing his hands up about the writing issue.

“I don’t need it back. I was going to give it to Heidi, so if you do anything with it, give it to her.”

“Alright... If we still have a good working relationship with her family. I’ll do that. Is there anything else you can think of that we can use? Did he mention anyone else’s name? Did he say anything about another town? Did he say anything about family or have any family pictures in his house? The criminal profiler mentioned he might have picked Ashland because he wanted to protect someone specific to that area,” Theo questioned, trying to pull as much out of Gwen as possible.

“Nothing about towns or names,” she said, shaking her head.

“He didn’t have any pictures in his house, but he did say he doesn’t have a family. No kids or wife which did go along with his house and truck. The house didn’t have much in the way of toys or games for a kid or a grandkid. Plus his bedroom was a man’s bedroom. When I looked through his stuff I didn’t see anything a wife might have... or even a late wife. He just had guy stuff. I guess you could picture his house as an older guy’s bachelor pad in a way. I didn’t even get the feeling that he had a girlfriend,” she continued while trying to think.

“His truck was the same way. Definitely not a family vehicle, being old, raised, and loud. I guess the only other thing that maybe you could use to figure out who he is, is his dog. He has a Doberman puppy named Ruby. I don’t know if you might be able to go to a vet’s office to

look something like that up. But it was just him and the dog in the house.”

“Okay, the profiler also thought he would have a dog so that lines up. I’ll look into the vet thing, I’m not sure about that. We are short on time, so we will see. Thank you again Gwen for putting the extra effort into this. I know this didn’t go the way it was supposed to, but I’ll make sure Kerry makes this right with your time. Plus, if we end up with what we want in Ashland, I know money won’t be a problem. Between this work and all your past work you have done for us, I’m sure you will be well covered and taken care of.”

Chapter 15

“Gaius here?” Theo said, picking up the phone half asleep for the second time.

“Theo. Mr. Cain wants to meet you at the Cellar in ten minutes,” one of Kerry’s security guards advised with a disciplinarian tone to his voice.

“Ten minutes! It’s going to take me five just to get out of my driveway!”

“Then you better make up the time on the road. Mr. Cain said he wants to talk in ten minutes.” The guard repeated before hanging up.

Upset but unsure how to take this, Theo did as he was asked, rushing down to his garage and taking his motorcycle to the Cellar instead of driving his normal car. Theo then raced out of his driveway and down the street, still tired from only getting about five hours of sleep. Dodging through traffic, Theo managed to get to the Cellar in just under fifteen minutes from the time the guard had called.

“You’re late,” the same guard said as Theo got off his bike in front of the Cellar’s front door.

“Mr. Cain’s not going to be happy,” he added as Theo took off his helmet.

“I drove a motorcycle here and sped most the way. I don’t know what else anyone could ask,” Theo responded, frustrated with the feeling he was somehow in trouble.

“Why does he want to meet at the Cellar?” Theo then asked of the large coal bunker that used to feed one of the several chimneys at a now almost crumbled historical mansion.

“You can ask him, he’s in there right now,” the guard replied, standing still but gesturing with his head towards the door.

Theo tidied up his clothes before entering, then walked into the Cellar. Inside was a small office with some seldom used tables and chairs. Also in the room was another guard standing in the corner. Knowing who he was but not getting any sort of greeting from him, only added to Theo's wonder of what was going on.

Besides the front door, the room only had one other door. This door was open and lined up with the front door, revealing a tunnel. The tunnel's hall was lit and was clearly where he needed to go. Walking down the tunnel, which was mostly a straight declining hike, Theo eventually heard people talking in a sort of controlled argumentative fashion. Reaching the end of this particular section, he walked into a more open area that had a converted and somewhat modern office attached to it. This office also had an open door where he could see Kerry.

"Have a seat," Kerry politely said to Theo upon noticing him.

Theo did so without question, walking into the office and sitting opposed to Kerry at a desk in the center of the room. Flanked on both sides were more guards, the FBI profiler, and another gentleman in a suit he had never seen before. At the table itself were a couple of refreshments and something that looked like cotton, randomly sprawled out across his desk.

"Would you like something to drink Theo?" Kerry asked in a common tone.

"No, that's okay. I'm actually still kind of waking up... and just wondering what's going on?"

"Well, I don't have time to dilly too much thanks to you Theo. But do you know what this is?" he asked, calmly pointing to the pile of fluff in front of him.

"I... I don't. No."

"Well then, maybe this will help you out," he advised while picking up the head of Beth Doxie's stuffed horse.

"The horse, why is it mangled? Did your dog get it?"

“Nope. When you dropped off the note and the horse with my guards earlier, they brought it in and eventually did what you should have... checked it out,” Kerry said, holding back his anger.

“The horse had this in it.”

Kerry, holding a mangled electronic, handed it over to Theo.

“What’s this?” Theo asked while examining it.

“It was a makeshift GPS and mic. It seems that he set you up and was tracking you to my house before we found out and crushed it as you should have. Now he knows where my home is, which is why my family and I are no longer there.”

Flabbergasted, Theo shook his head, having nothing to say.

“I can accept mistakes Theo, especially from my number two man. But this is a big mistake Theo, and you need to make it right, right now!”

Aghast this had happened, Theo tried to refocus himself and turned to the addresses Gwen had found.

“Mr. Cain, I’m sorry, I’ll take care of this. I’ll take some of our men today to the addresses Gwen found and wait him out. This will just be a minor mistake by the end of the day,” Theo uttered, with some of his words getting garbled in shock as he did so.

“I would say that’s a good idea, but it appears he outwitted you twice. Looking at her list, I thought the 221 Baker Street address seemed familiar. I had a hunch, so I looked it up. And indeed, I was correct. Other than it needing a B at the end of the numerics, that address is a famous fictional detective Mr. Gaius,” Kerry stated, scaring Theo more by using his last name instead of his first.

“And as I suspected, all these other addresses are the same. So, you found me a detective, two addresses for a comic book hero... one before and one after he is married, and the topper. This Beth apparently lives with a famous time traveling doctor.”

Taken aback so far he really didn't know how to argue with anything Kerry was saying, he instead randomly uttered what was on his mind without filtering it out.

"Gwen said she saw a street sign that had that street on it."

"I'm sure she did. But I'm also sure he planted that street sign there. It sold his story to you and to Gwen."

Only being able to shake his head to all of this, he tried to figure out how to fix his colossal error.

"Well, he might have changed the street signs, but he can't change the streets themselves. I'll get Gwen and have her retrace her steps. We will find him then."

"Good idea. Now you better find Gwen before Mr. Silver safeguards that fact as well."

"Okay, yeah... I took her to our safe house. I'll go over there and fix this right now," Theo excitedly exclaimed as he stood up and started to turn around.

"Good, but Mr. Wells here is going to go with you," he said while tossing a pair of car keys to the man in the room Theo didn't know.

"He will take you there and make sure Gwen is willing to work with us," Kerry added without a flinch.

Getting what he was saying, Theo waited for Mr. Wells to lead the way to whatever car Kerry just gave him.

Now going with the flow as opposed to leading and making choices himself, Theo was even more unsettled as Mr. Wells didn't utter a word the entire trip to the safe house. Instead, he looked straightforward and only reacted when Theo advised him to turn or veer off a road. Reaching the house which had a light on inside, Theo finally got some relief as this told him Gwen was still there.

"I'll be right back," he told Mr. Wells as he got out of the car.

“I’ll explain the situation to her and even pay her myself if I have to.”

Going inside the small house, Theo stayed inside for about five minutes before reemerging by himself, slowly walking back to the car.

“She’s gone,” Theo uttered to Mr. Wells as he opened the door to get in.

With that, Mr. Wells voiced his only words to Theo.

“Too bad,” he said, as he pulled out a gun and shot Theo.

Falling to the ground, Theo wiggled in pain as Mr. Wells got out and finished him off. This sight startled Gwen as Mr. Silver held her back, both of them hiding in the woods nearby. Holding his finger up to his mouth, Mr. Silver gestured for her to remain quiet until Mr. Wells drove away.

Mr. Wells did not initially do this but instead went inside himself to look around before coming back out. Checking to make sure Theo was dead one more time, he got back into his car and drove away.

Mortified by what had just happened, Gwen spoke up when it was clear she could.

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

Mr. Silver, as cool and calm as Mr. Wells was, explained the world of hitmen to Gwen as they walked through the woods to where he had parked his truck.

“Two reasons Ms. Kennedy,” he said in a way she knew he didn’t believe that to be her last name.

“First, you don’t know how hitmen, contract killers, and how mobs operate. I do. Since Mr. Wells was hired by Kerry for a job that involved me, you, and Theo, he knew I might be here and thusly, would have had a sniper hidden just in case.”

“You know him?” Gwen asked, hearing Mr. Silver refer to him by name.

“Yep. I know most of the hitmen around here. Mr. Wells is pretty talented, but not quite talented enough to figure out we were in the bushes.”

“So, he had someone else hidden in the area too?”

“No. This must have been a very rushed job for him to have taken that kind of a chance. If someone else would have been in the area, we would still be in the brush.”

“Are you sure he was alone?” Gwen asked, now a little scared.

“Yep,” he replied, without going into detail.

“Then why didn’t you stop him?”

“I wasn’t sure myself until he was driving away. At that point it was too late to help Theo,” he added, leaving it at that, again without going into the finer details of body language and other clues he knew to look for.

Reaching Mr. Silver’s truck, which was parked behind a nearby church, Gwen got in trusting Mr. Silver was trying to help her.

“What was the other reason you didn’t help Theo?”

“I needed you to see what these criminals will do if they feel they are in danger,” he replied while starting up his truck.

“What does that mean? What do you mean?” Gwen sharply voiced, feeling that wasn’t a very good reason.

Mr. Silver pulled onto the nearby road and started down the street, not immediately answering her question, but rather thinking about how to answer it before doing so. Gwen, wanting an answer for why she had to witness such a morbid thing, stared at him the entire time.

“Sometime people won’t believe things until they actually see them. Nothing that I would have been able to say or show Theo would have made him believe he was not safe. He felt he was next to Kerry

and although not as ruthless, was still to some degree untouchable. Now before all this, would you have thought Kerry would have done anything like that to Theo?”

Gwen didn't answer the question. She knew at least this part of what he was saying was true. She wouldn't have expected Kerry to treat Theo in that manner. Mr. Silver on the other hand waited for a while until he felt her silence was only going to continue.

“This is the way of these criminals. If everything is going well, they won't rock the boat. However, when things go south, they will keep all the life vests for themselves. It's that simple. Kerry never cared about you or Theo. He only cared what the two of you could do for him. When something disrupts that or causes a problem, a cleanup is needed. I know because I was hired several times to be that person. There were no exceptions. He paid you for a job one day, and I was paid to put you in a body bag the next if anything had the hint of a problem,” he explained candidly.

“I also probably would have been a casualty of this circle if I hadn't kept my identity hidden. They never knew who I was and they could never find me, which is why you were hired. They needed me out of the way to be able to pull off a job in Ashland, correct?”

“Yes,” Gwen quietly responded, surprised he knew this.

Feeling shame and embarrassment with the knowledge he knew she had been assisting in a plot to kill him, Gwen closed her eyes in remorse, not wanting to look at him. These feelings were compounded by the fact he might have just saved her life after witnessing what Mr. Wells just did. Feeling she needed to show some sort of loyalty to Mr. Silver, she asked him a simple question.

“What can I do to help?”

“Well, I need some details from you. You've worked with and have been around Kerry and his family for a while. I need some stuff you might have seen or heard. I would have simply just asked before, but I know you wouldn't have talked. Plus, I still needed a few things to fall into place regardless.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, as he slowed down near a stop sign.

“Do you mean about the information or my plans?” he replied while looking at her, seemingly willing to talk about either.

“Both I guess.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. It’s only fair if you are helping me that I fill you in a little bit more. But right now, we need to fix a few things.”

“Fix what?” she asked while watching him get out of the truck.

“Remember I said magic. A lot of what you saw and heard was an illusion. Stuff I needed you to see and believe.” he voiced quite loudly as he walked away from the truck and over to a nearby street sign.

“This sign for example, needs to be taken down. I figured you would see it, and I needed you to be convinced of a street name. So, I changed the name of the street,” he continued on as he started to wiggle the sign loose.

Carrying the street sign she and Heidi had seen while walking around, he tossed it into the bed of his truck, still talking to her as he did so.

“Kind of hard to find a house if you don’t have the right address, right?”

Mr. Silver then jumped back into his truck and put it back into gear.

“Now, we can talk about all that other stuff later. Right now, I need to make sure all my little props are switched out. I know Kerry is going to be looking. I can’t have him finding whatever it is you told them.”

Chapter 16

Although Gwen wanted to ask more about what was going on and what his plan was, she tempered her questions for the night, only picking up on a few extra things here and there as they returned to his house. This reserved approach led her to several thoughts, some about her uncertain future, and others about what to do in the present. Not wanting to think about how her personal life was now seemingly stagnate, Gwen pressed herself on how to best aid Mr. Silver.

In order to do this, Gwen tried to remember exactly what she did or did not say to Theo that might be useful. What did she miss, what else could be used, and what could she give to Mr. Silver that would help in some way? Focusing her thoughts on this until she eventually fell asleep, she did come up with one thing that might do some good.

Despite Mr. Silver probably having it covered, she did feel his truck was rather unique. Being old, loud, and rare, it would seem easier to spot a vehicle like this as it went from place to place. Additionally, since there most likely would only be a handful of this type of truck in the county, it would be much easier for Kerry to narrow down his search especially if he had access to BMV records, which she was pretty sure he did.

Happy with at least this little start, Gwen's eyes finally closed in which she got her first good night's sleep in the past few days. Feeling safe and secure, Gwen slept much longer than she normally would have until Ruby started barking. This was quickly silenced by Mr. Silver whom she could hear trying to calm her down. This back-and-forth yipping and yapping followed by Mr. Silver coarsely reprimanding her to remain quiet went on until Gwen figured she might as well get up.

Making her way into the kitchen, Gwen again first smelled then saw he was making breakfast. She also noticed that Ruby was now loosely tied up to the kitchen table, where she clearly was not happy.

"Hey, Morning! Sorry if Ruby woke you up. She has gotten used to sausage and eggs being our treat, and she was upset I was holding out on her," he said, as Ruby seemed to agree with this.

“I hope eggs and sausage are okay?”

“Yeah I heard something going on. It’s okay, I understand. I know how pets can be. My cat Hercules also has his particulars in when and what he eats. I’m sure Ruby is no different. But yes, eggs and sausage sound great! I’m personally used to eating on the run, which is usually something simple like a banana. So I always welcome an actual cooked breakfast.”

“Good, then have a seat and it will be done in a second. Just maybe not next to Ruby, she’s a little upset.”

Gwen noticed this fact already and took up a seat opposite to Ruby, who huffed upon her choosing. Waiting only a short while, Mr. Silver first poured her a warm cup of coffee before bringing her meal over.

“Only a second and the toast will be ready. I have potato bread, I hope that’s alright?”

“Yes, I haven’t had that in a while now. That will be nice, thank you!”

Mr. Silver waited by the single toaster until it popped, quickly getting the toast to her without a plate ready.

“Hot! Careful! I have butter or jelly if you want?” he asked while shaking his hands.

“No, you know what? I’ll turn the eggs part of this into a sandwich. Thank you though.”

“Not a bad idea,” Mr. Silver responded as he scooped a portion, albeit smaller than what Ruby normally would have received, into a bowl for her.

After making Ruby happy, Mr. Silver had a seat as well, only having a couple sausages for himself. Wanting to show she was trying to help, Gwen brought up what she had thought of rather quickly.

“Mr. Silver, I would think your truck is pretty rare and distinctive.

Do you have a cover story for that? I might have mentioned it to Theo when we talked.”

“How much did you mention?” he asked, not seemingly bothered.

“You know, I don’t quite one hundred percent recall, but I did tell him it was old, raised, and loud. Descriptives I thought would help which probably won’t help you,” she explained with a little cringe.

Mr. Silver took this well and shook his head before answering.

“Well, one thing about killing Theo off so quickly was that he might not have relayed all that information to Kerry yet. I would imagine when you told him he didn’t write it down did he?”

Thinking he was right but not understanding why, she answered his question with a little bit of uncertainty.

“Yeah, no, there were no pens in the safe house, so I just gave him my notes.”

Mr. Silver had a little laugh about this to himself before responding.

“To help me out some with these sorts of things, I might have made sure the house was out of pens.”

“You knew where his safe house was?”

“I predate Theo. That is a good safe house, but Kerry and his family have been using that house for a while. A little fact Kerry seems to have overlooked. But don’t worry about the truck. I took care of that,” he replied with a smile.

“How?”

“If he did put two and two together either by you, Theo, or someone else, I just made it so my truck fell between the BMV cracks.”

“How?” she said again wanting a little more.

“You know, I don’t want to give away too many of my secrets.”

“I’m guessing then your truck is probably the same as your house. That you also have it set up in a way that ‘slips’ between the cracks,” she said, lightly taunting him.

“Yep, trade secret,” Mr. Silver promptly responded without batting an eye.

Gwen did not find this as entertaining as Mr. Silver. Visually showing her frustration with the large gaps he was leaving her, Gwen snapped at him a little bit to his surprise.

“You know, how am I supposed to help or feel like anything more than a tool waiting to be used if you aren’t willing to fill me in on some of these things?”

Mr. Silver and his amused face got caught by this sudden shift in energy which left him speechless for the first time. Seeing he was taken aback by this, she asked the simplest question she felt she could of him or anyone.

“What about your name? This can’t just be a one-way road. How about starting with that unless you want me to continually call you Mr. Silver or maybe Mr. Hidell?”

Still silent and with the smile on his face now gone, a more serious look appeared as if he felt he might have joked around a little too much.

“Needless to say, Gwen,” he eventually started with, picking his words carefully.

“I’d hope you’d tell nobody this. But you’re right. Trust starts with equal footing. My name is Dan Able. That’s a little proprietary secret I’ve kept to myself for some time now. I don’t even remember when the last time someone called me by that name.”

Surprised herself he came out with this so fast and had decided to trust her with it, Gwen felt instantly involved in which a subtle smile appeared in the corner of her cheek.

“You’re right. I’m not the only one that has cards on the table...

What else can I help you with?”

Feeling she had a temporary or maybe passing moment of control, Gwen reached for what she could in what was going on.

“Do or have you had something planned out for Kerry?” was the most all-encompassing question she could think to ask.

Lifting his eyebrows and sitting back, Dan thought for a moment before saying anything. During this, Gwen didn’t rock the boat and instead kept the heat on him by politely staring him down until he answered.

“I noticed when I was working for Kerry’s father, he was starting to do some things I didn’t like... and that’s saying something since I was his hitman. For me, it was one thing when Warren had me doing jobs that were either business-related or issues with a rival. But he eventually got stuck in a different racket which is when I got my idea of the bloodhounds, although I didn’t have enough money at that time to start it. Warren was a very power-hungry person and I’m guessing found he could gain more influence and power in corrupting people rather than just selling drugs or having this or that scheme going on.”

“So what did he do then?” Gwen asked when Dan went silent for a moment.

“Warren had his fair share of busts. He got caught for this or that, and every now and again got convicted. He didn’t like that. He didn’t like the jail part, the convicted part, or the arrested part. So, he decided to control those aspects by putting his guys in the right places so he could later bypass this. To do this he found targets. People he felt he could break down. Then he simply found that person’s weakness. Each person is different, but he was usually able to get what he wanted through either blackmail, which was real or made-up, intimidation, or plain old payoffs... that is why Kerry really needs all that money and why you came into this story.”

This part of Dan’s story rhymed with what Gwen already knew but from a different angle. Although she had not asked Kerry as to why he wanted the money, Dan’s perspective did at least link up with Kerry’s stated desire which made his story more believable.

“The few honest people that couldn’t be bought, wouldn’t be intimidated, and were clever enough to keep themselves clean fell into my lap. After Warren got all his pieces in place, he no longer needed to worry about the police, since they were paid off. The same went for prosecutors, who were on the take. If somehow something made its way to a Judge, they were no different. As with the rest, they had their hands or chambers open. Warren and his men were free, which you might have gotten a small glimpse of when you heard people say stuff like ‘how did that person get off’ or ‘there are two justice systems’.”

Thinking about it as he went along, Gwen thought he was right. When one of those thoughts came up, they were generally brushed off or fodder for friendly gossip at lunch. It was true that she could think of a few times when someone was clearly wrong, but a prosecutor decided not to charge, or someone got an extremely favorable sentence for no good reason.

“Those head scratch moments were because he had the right pieces in place to get whoever he wanted off. Those people either then owed him or were already working for him and were simply the beneficiary of Warren’s chess pieces. My bloodhounds were then necessary to come in because people could not count on the justice system for police work, prosecution, or a fair trial. So we fill in where these groups get tied up. We provide so much evidence, that even a corrupt judge or prosecutor can’t wiggle someone off the hook. Yes, we might not get our evidence in the way I would like, but when you’re not playing with the same number of cards, you need to find some way of even things out,” he said, as he stood up and looked out his front window as if he were expecting someone.

“Now if you play this out and Kerry’s father’s idea didn’t go checked, you could continue to expand in whatever direction you wanted, grabbing power or setting rules to your benefit. This is where Kerry is going. Why worry about paying off the police, the prosecutors, and a judge when you can just make a law legal via a politician. Kerry pivoted from the justice system to those who make the laws. He started sponsoring certain political candidates or even fixing certain key voting blocks that might help his pick win,” he continued on, as he moved from the window to the door and unlocked it.

“So, all the police are paid off?” Gwen asked, getting a second to inject.

“No, you don’t need everyone. Just key positions at key times. Think of it like a football game. If you get the quarterback and one or two other guys, the rest can be honest athletes, just as unaware as anyone else. So no, not every officer, judge, or politician. Just enough to win a vote or control an outcome.”

With that, Dan looked outside again, then held the door open. Doing so in a way as to allow someone to enter, eventually Beth moseyed on in, carrying another stuffed horse to replace her old one. Not thinking about this fact, Gwen cut short their conversation and pretended they were having a regular morning discussion after a nice hot breakfast.

“Oh, hi Beth! I wish I would have known you were coming. Here, have a seat. I’ll make you something.”

Gwen got up and was at Dan’s fridge before anyone had a chance to talk. Now looking for food, she started to move things around until she heard Dan speak up.

“Did you mention the zedonks to Theo?”

This question stopped Gwen. Dan’s mentioning of Theo in front of Beth threw her off in what to do. Freezing for a moment, Dan spoke up again.

“I kind of hope you did. I had a nice little rabbit’s hole for him to fall down if he tries to find the zedonks to find me.”

Leaving the fridge open while peaking her head around, Gwen simply looked at Beth and Dan not knowing what to say.

“I had a lot of things set up for you to feed Kerry or Theo. The zedonks were part of the ruse as well. You asked how much was planned out. Beth here helped me,” he said, as Beth smiled while holding the stuffed horse out to her.

“So pretty much everything was planned?”

“To a degree, yeah.”

“Then what do you need from me? I’d guess with how much thought you’ve put into this, you need me for something, right?”

Chapter 17

Dan explained that he had worked with Beth to set up some of his ploys. He advised Beth had the idea of putting a tracking device into the horse so they could locate Kerry's "Hound House." This house was built by Kerry as a means of escape from the eventuality of a hound investigation taking place. Now exposed, Kerry would be forced to move himself to the Cellar while having his family move to another unknown location in order to keep them safe.

Knowing Gwen more than likely knew where Kerry's family was hiding, Dan's plan was to first, wait out Kerry's attempts to find him. Second, while doing this, he planned on extracting Kerry's family's location from Gwen once she realized she had been used by Kerry. Then, once Dan knew their whereabouts, he would coerce the necessary information out of them in order to be able to put Kerry and his criminal organization away.

"It's funny, it seems so much simpler to have just asked me up front where his family might go. But as you said, without seeing, I wouldn't have told you. Boy, do I wish I could just go back and change a couple of my thoughts," Gwen mentioned after giving up what she new about Kerry and his family.

"That's just life in general. Everyone has little things in life they would like to change later. I wouldn't have done what I did for the Cain family had I been thinking either. That's just how things go sometimes and hopefully you figure out those mistakes at some point before it's too late," Dan said, standing up and letting Ruby outside.

"I think I'm going to excuse myself too!" Beth said, as she also went off to the restroom.

"I hope you have learned now with three girls, to leave the toilet seat down! Ruby is even a girl!" Beth voiced as she left.

Now with Beth out of the room, Gwen took up the chance to ask about her and if there was something she should not talk about around her.

“Nope, you can say whatever. She knows my name, she knows I’m a hound. She knows what I used to do. You’re good to say whatever.”

“Aren’t you afraid she might say something or turn against you?”

“My mom wouldn’t do that,” Dan answered, jolting her a little bit while also pestering her in that she didn’t figure out the relationship earlier.

“Your mom?”

“Yep. I was actually hoping you and Heidi wouldn’t figure it out. I slipped in a few things I said.”

“What did you say? I missed it if you said it around me.”

“It was a combination of things that started when Heidi found two stuffed animals my mom made that represented two dogs I used to own. My mom added their names onto their collars, so Heidi knew I used to own two dogs named Jacks and Jessie. Then when I mentioned my dog Lewey was buried behind a shed, I tied myself to my mom’s house. I don’t know if you noticed or not, but I don’t own a shed and my mom does. That little shed part by itself was a consistency error, but when Heidi wanted to see the zedonks, I had to say no. The zedonks roam in the same area as the shed I mentioned. I couldn’t have you or Heidi seeing a shed at my mom’s with the names of my three dogs on it. That would have put me in a pretty tight bind and I would have had to do some explaining.”

“You know what, the shed part I didn’t bat an eye on and just took you at your word. But thinking about it now, your right. I don’t remember you having a shed. Names-wise, yeah I see what you’re saying, but I didn’t catch any of that and Heidi never said anything. Say, speaking of stuffed animals and zedonks, were the stuffed zedonks your mom gave Heidi chipped as well?” Gwen asked, with the thought popping into her head.

“No, just yours. I figured they would try to get Heidi back to her parents pretty quickly. So, I doubted they would take her to any location I might want.”

“Okay. What about the zedonks? I know you said you had a plan for them, but aren’t you worried they will be easy to find?”

“No, they were never ours. Remember, illusions!” Dan said of a lot of what he had previously presented to her.

“They are long since gone. They were both plants to lead Kerry and Theo down a long dead-end road. We even had some fake documents made up for them to find if they looked up the animals. But if you didn’t say anything to Theo about it, then oh well. It would have been funny, but I’m sure I got them frustrated enough as it is,” Dan said, smiling about all the little annoying things he had set up to cover his tracks.

“So, what are you going to do going forward? It sounds like you have everything else planned out. What’s going forward?”

“Nothing,” he replied while hearing Ruby ask to come back in.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” he said again with a laugh, now letting Ruby in.

“You let me know about his family. So for now, we are just going to sit back and let Kerry burn up his options. Kerry is the one that needs to find us. Me, to be able to safely get what he wants. You, to either help find me or to keep you from spilling the beans.”

Gwen was visibly puzzled by this and obviously wanted more.

“Okay, so Kerry only has a couple options. He could give up his quest for the money, but he isn’t going to do that. So what is he left with? Heidi, you, paying me off, and Mr. Wells. He’s missing you, so the only leverage he has to pull is Heidi. So, he will pretend to have her abducted hoping we will show up to save her. Similar to the idea he just did with you. But she’s safe, so no worries there.”

“Similar?” Gwen asked of his abduction idea.

“Yes. He will have his contacts at the media make up a story that a little girl has been kidnapped, or something like that. It will be in the

papers, on the television, and so on. It will all be a ploy to make us think Heidi is in danger. I'm sure they will have some juicy headlines that sound bad, but it's all fake. They need us to take the bait. So, we just sit back and do nothing."

"But Heidi will be fine then, right?" Gwen double-checked.

"She will. Kerry does not gain anything from hurting her or having a real abduction. That would actually hurt him if anything. He would run the risk of a real police officer, or a good samaritan causing problems for him. So it will all be paper thin. The public will believe it. They will lay it on pretty thick. But Heidi will be fine. Again, think what he just did with you."

"So you are just planning on waiting for that?"

"I don't know if that will be his first step, but he only has so many options. So we will wait until he crosses some red lines. He will do X, then that will trigger us to respond accordingly. I expect him to start with the Heidi issue, then when that doesn't work, he will get desperate and probably hire lots of different assassins to help Mr. Wells. It seems logical to do it in that order. So Heidi and Mr. Wells are really his only options since you are with me and paying me off wouldn't happen."

"How are you going to know when he is doing all this? You don't have cable or the internet. Do you have a phone I don't know of?"

"No phone. If I had any of that stuff, they would be at this house tomorrow. The vast majority of technology has tracking or other capabilities someone can turn on with or without your knowledge. So for me, no phone, no internet, no credit cards, and no new vehicles. New cars are loaded with technology, GPS, cameras, you name it. Other than the fact I personally like driving older vehicles, new vehicles are a privacy nightmare," Dan said, shaking his head.

"Credit cards?" Gwen questioned as they both heard Beth having issues with the toilet in the bathroom.

"Yep. Think about it. If I used a card everywhere I went, you could build a general idea of where I lived, what I liked, and who I palled around with. You probably could even figure out minute things

like what you're allergic to or what type of movies you do or do not like. I'll pass," he replied, getting up to check on Beth.

"Okay, then how are you going to know what he's up to then? I see why, but you've cut off all your sources of information."

"I'll just do it the old fashion way. I'll buy a local newspaper from town. What we need will be in there. If it's not, we still get to enjoy the comics section."

With that, Dan knocked on the restroom door and asked if Beth was alright. Beth hollered something indistinct back, but soon came to the door a little flustered.

"Something wrong with your toilet. You're going to have to fix it. The thing acts like it's never been flushed before!" Beth lamented as she walked past Dan, jibber jabbering the entire time.

"The guy never fixes anything. Look at that tractor outside. It's been like that for almost two weeks. Are you married Gwen?"

Giggling at the faces Beth was making trying to cover up her embarrassment, as well as the faces Dan was making in needing a plunger, Gwen only half caught what Beth had mentioned and gave a muddled response.

"Umm, no not quite."

"So you're engaged or something?" Beth deduced as being the alternative to almost married.

"No. I'm sorry. I'm single," Gwen replied, clearing her answer up.

"Oh, well. Whatever man you pick out, make sure he can fix things. But not everything because then you get a guy who thinks he knows everything and that's annoying. Find yourself a non-annoying fixer. Sport here does the worst of both. He's annoying and doesn't fix things."

Chapter 18

Beth continued to give Dan a hard time about the tractor until he went outside and started to work on it. After this Gwen was left with Ruby and Beth, who talked about oddball things rather than topics that were relevant. Instead of pressing her, Gwen went along with it until she left, insisting on walking home by herself. Seeing her leave, Dan finally came back in just before sundown.

“It’s getting there,” he said of his progress on the tractor.

“You just missed your mom leave,” Gwen responded, not knowing if he had seen her do so or not.

“Oh I know,” he replied while taking a seat for a break.

“She said something to me before turning down the street. I don’t know what it was though. Probably something she wants me to pick up for her. What did you guys talk about? I’m sure she had lots of interesting stories for you.”

“She did,” Gwen said with a laugh.

“She is a talker, that’s for sure.”

“I’m definitely aware of that. I have sixty-some-odd years of experience with her and counting. But she means well and honestly would do anything for you if you asked. She just might talk your ear off in the process, that’s all.”

Walking over to the kitchen to wash his hands, Dan noticed she had a pot of coffee going and looked to have consumed quite a bit of it while he was outside. He also noticed while drying off his hands, that Gwen’s foot was bouncing, either nervously or because of the excessive amount of caffeine that was now in her body.

“You okay?” he asked, pitching away his paper towel.

“Yeah, I was thinking, when your mom gave me a chance, about what you said. Are you sure his henchmen aren’t going to find us?”

“Well, I guess anyone could get lucky. But no, I do think he will do the Heidi thing first before he just starts taking shots in the dark with where we are. If it makes you feel better, I’ll go first thing in the morning to get a paper so we can see what, if anything, is being said yet.”

“You think he will already be doing something like that?”

“Oh yes! He is running out of time before the bank transfer. He’s probably already coordinating something with the news agencies to get a story going. I’m going to guess we will see a headline that says, “Young girl goes missing,” with the article below it saying something about how she is in danger. Just my guess though. The newspaper people are better than me at making headlines sound fancy. So it will probably be jazzed up a bit. You want to take a stab? Predict the future? It’s kind of fun.”

Gwen shook her head to this, still worried and not as confident or composed as Dan. Still noticeably restless, Dan tried to distract her with something that always worked for him.

“Want some ice cream?” he asked with a playful smile.

The sudden shift did partly do its job as Gwen accepted the invitation and asked what kind he had.

“Nothing too spiffy or deluxe... just some of the cheap stuff I picked up. Regular chocolate and regular vanilla,” he said while pulling both pints from his freezer.

“However, we can add things! I do have peanut butter, and some cookies we can crush up if you want?”

Gwen smiled at his attempt to try and distract her. Agreeing to the treat, she was still obviously distracted by the idea that Kerry at some point would have people searching for them. People with pasts that included carnage, brutality, and butchery. These thoughts were hard to ignore on purpose, which caused her to try and divert her attention

instead, hoping it would be enough until her thoughts managed to slip her mind.

“How do you know so much?” Gwen asked as he gave her a bowl of ice cream. Half with vanilla and half with chocolate.

“I’m guessing you mean how do I figure out where everyone is at or what they are up to?”

“Yeah. There are a lot of rumors about how the hounds figure things out... especially you, since you work by yourself. How do you get all your information?”

“Well my mom helps sometimes, so I’m not entirely by myself,” he started off with.

“Each hound does have their own way, so nothing is exact... and I honestly don’t talk with any of the other hounds much, so I can only imagine what tricks or tactics they use. But for me, as I’ve been saying, I use what already exists. People just don’t seem to understand how much I can access in today’s high-tech world,” he explained, now scooping himself a bowl.

“I mentioned credit cards, phones, and cars, but that’s only the start of it. You might as well just give me your password to your computer, that’s how easy it is for me to remotely search whatever you have on there. Or... just let me make up your password,” he said with a light chuckle.

“But everything nowadays seems to have some sort of technology in it that includes tracking or personal information. Even kids’ toys, kids’ gaming systems, whatever. So I just pretty much search whatever I want, listen to whatever I want, or watch whatever I want. Like I said, people just don’t get that they are walking around with a microphone, camera, or unsecure information. They keep these things on them all the time while people who know how to exploit them, can simply open them up or turn them on at a whim. If I knew so and so bad guy had an interview with so and so, I would just turn on one of their phones and listen to what they had to say. It’s that simple. I could be listening to Kerry right now, but he learned. He knows my phone trick, so he won’t use one when he is doing business. But he hasn’t learned one hundred

percent... and on top of that, more and more technology is always coming out. Peanut butter?” he asked, holding up a jar.

“Don’t you need computers yourself to be able to do that?” Gwen asked while turning down the peanut butter.

“Yeah.”

“Well, you really don’t have anything around here. No phones, no technology. All I noticed that you have is that really old tube-type computer in your one room. I can’t see that being able to do everything you just said. The screen resolution on that probably looks like the video games from the early eighties.”

“I keep telling you some things aren’t what they seem,” Dan responded, with a bold but coy look on his face.

“So that computer can hack into phones and vehicles?”

“What’s in that computer can hack into phones and vehicles. You are judging it based on what it looks like on the outside. The inside is modern, it probably has a faster CPU than what most IT guys have.”

“A processor?” she asked, thinking this was what CPU probably meant.

“Yeah. Although my screen still isn’t the best. I wanted it to look old. So the screen can do what I need it to but it’s definitely not for gaming or anything with lots of pixels. That is a little annoying, but I only need it for the one purpose, so it’s okay. It doesn’t take floppy disks, I just have some of those things on there to make it look the part just in case someone snoops.”

“Like me,” Gwen said of her and Heidi poking around.

“Yep, but you overlooked it didn’t you?”

“Yeah, we did.”

“Then there you go. It worked. Now out of curiosity, what kind of rumors are floating around about me? Just out of curiosity.”

Gwen laughed and then smiled, thinking he would probably think they were dumb. Then after seeing Dan was waiting, she rattled off the first thing that came to her.

“Well like I said, since you work by yourself and you’re supposedly rich, some people get really nutty trying to figure you out. I personally don’t believe these, but some people say you were an ex-magician or you have some sort of chemical potion that aids you. Like maybe besides the ex-magician, maybe you’re an ex-chemist and you figured something out that nobody else knows. It honestly can get a little silly and borderline comic book-ish, but people like to speculate. Like how they feel you count your silver by candlelight at night. Oh, and of course people talk about you being special forces or having some sort of prior military training. Is that one right?”

“No, I was never in the military. But I guess that’s to my advantage because people like Kerry would probably look up people who were as possibly being me. But no, no military. I guess I should keep going with my magician jokes. That’s actually not too far off. Are there any others that seemed believable to you?”

“I bought into the military thing, but besides that, you make a lot of people paranoid because they think you have someone on the inside giving you information. So people are sometimes hesitant to talk, or they look over their shoulder a lot. I’d say that’s the most believable one besides being ex-special forces. It does make you think twice about trusting people. Besides that... there’s the talk about not using phones, or putting whatever in tin foil to block out signals, but I don’t do that. It’s just another thing out there that is, I guess a little more possible than the comic book superhero things people say.”

Finding this fascinating, Dan started wondering how he could use this to his advantage.

“Well I’m not going to start wearing my underwear over my pants, but maybe I should start wearing a cape whenever I know someone is going to see me,” he said with a rather large and entertained smile.

“Or maybe I can start leaving some bread crumbs about my past. Maybe I was raised by some secret scientist doctor or I lived near a

nuclear power plant, something like that. That would be entertaining for me at least.”

“You do already have an alias, so you’re halfway there! Just find a sidekick and drive around something fancy,” Gwen added, messing around with him.

“So my current truck wouldn’t work?” he asked suspiciously.

“No I’m sorry, you’re going to need a vehicle update and maybe even something that flies!”

Chapter 19

Gwen's conversation with Dan went on throughout the night and kept her up later than was normal for her. Still, her talk with him did have the successful effect of taking her mind away from Kerry and anything he was planning until she went to bed. Laying down trying to let herself fall asleep, those negative thoughts crept back into her mind which made her jumpy over the smallest sound and the room's windows.

Although it was a nice night, Gwen shuttered the windows and eventually took up a defensive sleeping position, finding a belt and keeping it as her weapon. This uncomfortable and worrisome night carried on for her until her body finally gave in at about four in the morning. Because she fell asleep so late, she naturally slept in much longer, only waking up at about noon because she heard Dan trying to start his tractor, again and again.

Sitting up, Gwen stretched herself awake and went over to the window that faced his tractor. Opening it up, she saw him jump down from the tractor's seat, pick up a few tools, and then wiggle his way under the tractor to tighten something. After he had repaired and fastened what looked to be some hoses, he got himself up and back into the tractor's seat where he again tried to start it.

"BBRRRRRRR... BBRRRRRRR... POP!" The tractor went, not starting and causing Dan to be visibly irritated. Dan took a second to himself, putting his head down on the tractor's wheel until he heard the sound of fluid leaking. Upon hearing this, his head popped back up and he scurried below the tractor, this time grabbing a small open-faced container to catch everything that was pouring out.

With this container in place, Dan rested his head on the ground and appeared to give himself a break, laying still until an old car drove down the street. This sound grabbed his attention as he watched it drive past his house, down the street, and into Beth's driveway. Seeing the car turn into her driveway, Dan sat up rather quickly and stayed focused on the car.

Seeing that the car had alerted Dan so much, Gwen's curiosity was also peaked, causing her to switch windows to the other side of her room. This window allowed her to see what had caught his attention so much, now also being able to see the car at Beth's house.

Sitting in the driveway, the older car sat idle, still running but without the driver getting out. Being a decent distance away, Gwen couldn't quite tell who or how many people were inside but did notice a notable amount of movement coming from within. This did not last long, as the vehicle's backup lights soon came on. Reversing, the vehicle turned around and headed back towards Dan's house.

While all this was going on, Dan had gotten up and had started walking towards Beth's house, holding a large wrench in his right hand. Upon seeing the vehicle turn around, Dan paused in his steps and remained still about halfway from the tractor to the road. Dan remained this way as the car slowly drove closer towards his house, slowing down and stopping in the roadway just past his mailbox.

With the thought of Kerry's hitmen coming back to her, Gwen ducked from the window and flattened herself against the floor and the wall. Hearing the car's exhaust rumble in place for a while, Gwen slithered out of her room and into the hallway. Once there and without a window giving her position away, Gwen took up a squatting stance and scurried her way into the kitchen so she could grab a knife.

Taking the first one she could from his butcher's block, Gwen stood still and quiet, holding her breath to see if she could still hear the car's exhaust. Not hearing anything of note, Gwen cautiously put herself into a spot that gave her a suitable view of the street and where the car had stopped.

Timidly glancing in this direction, Gwen was somewhat thrown when she noticed nothing. Gwen's eyes quickly searched both directions of the roadway as her feet slowly allowed her to inch closer to the window. Scanning the window, Gwen unconsciously started to hold her breath as she looked further and further down the road to see if the car was gone. Reaching the window and not seeing it in the driveway or in either direction, Gwen worried she might have blocked out the sound of it pulling alongside the house. Now not knowing what to do, where to go, or if she could even call out to Dan, Gwen retreated back to the kitchen out of familiarity.

Attempting to think of a better solution in both what to do and where to go, Ruby suddenly barked at her from outside the rear door. Earlier in the day, Dan had tied her outside before Gwen had woken. Now in sight of a cowering Gwen, this unintentional startling bark made Gwen reflexively jump, causing her to pull the knife she grabbed across her body. The action caused the knife to faintly glide across her left thumb, ever so much as to cause a cut.

“Ouch!” she blurted out as she looked down at her hand to see how bad it was.

Worried it was bad, Gwen dropped the knife and held her thumb for a second before looking at it. Slowly relaxing her grip, she was relieved to see she had gotten lucky, only getting herself just enough as to cause only a minor amount of bleeding.

Distracted by this, upon looking at her thumb, the man door to the garage opened up and Dan walked in. Seeing her on the floor next to a knife and holding her thumb, Dan didn’t quite know what to make of this situation other than to approach her with caution.

“Are you okay? What happened?” he asked with a look of concern on his face.

Having Dan in the house without any of her worried drama playing out, Gwen’s emotions reached an overload and she started to cry.

“I’m fine,” she said tearfully, feeling embarrassed her body was acting this way.

“What happened? Did you slip or something?” he asked, hoping she didn’t harm herself while simultaneously picking up the knife in order to remove it from her reach.

Having her feelings out of sorts and already losing control of herself, Gwen broke down even more and simply cried. Seeing this and not one hundred percent knowing what to do, Dan reacted with the feeling he should do something, deciding to let Ruby in after seeing her excitedly spin and paw at the door.

Just wanting to play, Ruby jumped on Dan, then thundered over to Gwen who had receded herself into the corner of the kitchen. Being caught off guard by Ruby, Gwen gave up little defense as Ruby licked and nuzzled her until Dan grabbed her up and took her into his bedroom.

“I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t thinking,” he said when he came back into the room.

“Are you okay? What can I do to help?” he then added, repeating his previous question.

With this little bit of time and Ruby’s offsetting jubilant behavior, Gwen reset herself enough to give him an answer.

“I, I think I was thinking too much,” she started with a pause.

“I saw a car driving around outside, I saw you approach it somewhat guarded, and my mind started thinking. I started to worry the car had Kerry’s hitmen in it and they found us. So I reacted and found the knife. Then Ruby scared me, and I accidentally cut myself,” she softly uttered, halting for a minute to wipe her running nose.

Dan pulled up a chair from the kitchen and took up a seat next to her. Grabbing some paper towels as his best tissue substitute, he handed them over before saying anything.

“Well, I’m sorry if I maybe said too much that started your thinking. I guess, like with anything, over time you get used to whatever it is you do, and get maybe a little lackadaisical compared to what someone else might think. I can see what you’re saying,” he said of the car outside.

“If it makes you feel better, they were just lost. I don’t get a ton of traffic on this road, so you probably saw me react to the strange car... which I can see now how that might look with your worries. But on a funny note,” he continued, trying to get her to smile.

“They were actually lost because of me. I obviously didn’t tell them, but we must have missed one of my fake signs. They saw it and took a wrong turn,” he said with a chuckle, hoping she would perk up.

“I told them that these country kids out here like to play games and stuff like that. But I’m going to have to fix that tonight before it happens again.”

Gwen received this news well, although she did not say or ask anything. Trying to cool the situation, Dan tried to joke around with her some more, hoping chuckles and laughter would be the recipe for calm.

“I will say though Gwen,” he started off with, leaning back in his chair and looking over at the knife she had grabbed.

“Knives are great. I carry them. But I’m going to have to give you a little bit of an upgrade. Professional hitmen tend to be pretty well-armed. Have you ever shot a gun before?”

This little conversation and the childish way he said it, did do its job in at least allowing her mind to slide from her panicked state and into a more problem-solving mode.

“I have. My dad had a twenty-two for small things around our property when I was young. He let me shoot that every now and again.”

“Well, for safety or peace of mind sake, I’ll show you my little stash if something ever does come up... Unless you found it by chance?” he said of her and Heidi’s search.

“No, I did expect to find a gun but was surprised when I didn’t.”

“Okay, good. Then my little secret compartment is still a secret. However to make it easy, I do have a shotgun under my bed. It’s loaded and attached to the right side of the bed since I tend to sleep on my right.”

“Yeah, I missed it. You said it’s under your bed?” she asked, wondering how she didn’t see it.

“It’s attached to the frame of the bed. Not on the floor in a case or anything. It’s tucked up. It doesn’t have one in the chamber, so you can still grab it without it going off. Just remember to rack it if you need to use it.”

“Okay, that does make me feel somewhat better although I don’t know how I feel about using it. Did I miss any other guns? Is that the only gun you have quick access to?” she asked, curious to what a real hitman might have and also wondering how poor her searching skills were.

“The shotgun and this thirty-eight are the only guns I have quick access to,” he replied, pulling up his jean pant leg and revealing the gun on an ankle holster.

“I always have the thirty-eight on me as well as this knife, although I made fun of your knife. This one is a little different,” he added, putting his pant leg down then grabbing what looked like a regular pocketknife any farmer might use.

“This is just your general pocketknife on one end. However it has another knife on it that’s a bit smaller. The average person would probably think it’s just another multi-tool, but this knife is actually a throwing knife. It can disconnect and gives me just another little option,” he said as he unfolded both knives and showed her how it detached.

“But a little secret. I’m honestly not that good at it. It’s just one more thing to have with the thinking of, if people haven’t planned for it, then they generally won’t have a defense for it.”

“So do you have some sort of hidden room in here?” Gwen asked, a little more interested in this idea than the little tricks and devices he had at the ready.

“Ahhh!” he replied, seemingly almost eager to give away his secret.

“Yes, come this way.”

Gwen got up and followed him down the hallway and into the room Heidi had slept in. Stopping at the cusp of the room, he let her pass in front of him.

“Here is your clue,” he said while gesturing for her to look into the room.

Gwen took up the challenge and started searching the room much differently than she had done before. This time she looked for candles that moved, objects that might pop out, or a picture frame that might have something behind it. Fiddling with things, moving his chairs, and pulling on a loose piece of trim, Gwen soon became disappointed then frustrated with her inability to find his trick room or safe.

“Okay, I give up. Where is it?”

Without saying a word, Dan walked over to a display picture on the wall. The picture itself wasn’t much, only a large maze with some trees and a bull grazing in the middle. Attached to the frame of the picture was a ball of twine which uncoiled from the base and twisted its way through the maze to its center.

Without saying what he was doing, Dan reached over to the picture and took off the ball of twine. Detaching the pegs that held the unraveled twine in place, he rolled up the string then rest the pegs. After balling the twine up, Dan explained its significance.

“This is the clue.”

“A ball of twine?” she asked, a little bit stumped.

“Yep. A ball of twine. I caught that you named your cat Hercules, so I was kind of curious if that was just coincidental or if you liked mythology and picked up on my artfully worded clue question.”

“Nope. I’m still in the woods. I just named my cat Hercules because a friend made a comment about him being the little Hercules of his litter. So Hercules he was from then on. I can’t say I know much about what you’re talking about.”

“Fair enough. Follow me,” he replied, gesturing for her to follow him into another room.

“So a little Greek mythology for you which was depicted in that picture. A ball of twine was used by the hero Theseus so he could find his way out of a giant maze. Inside the maze was the Minotaur, which Theseus eventually destroyed. Anyways, depending on what history you are looking up, the word clue translates to a ball of twine,” he

explained, turning into the living room and facing a large wall that connected to the garage.

“So this is my clue on how to get my safe open, although you can use anything that’s like twine. A cable, some rope, I’m sure you get the idea. But first you need to flip that switch,” he said, pointing to the wall nearest to her.

Gwen did as he asked and flipped the switch, turning a light off. Expecting more, she heard or saw nothing after this. Only the light in the corner of the room reacted to her action.

“Right switch?” she asked, just to be sure.

“Yep. The switch controls a magnet and that light. When the light is on, the magnet is connected. When the light is off, the magnet is also off. I have a large magnet holding this wall up and the first thing we need to do to get the wall to come down, is to turn off the magnet.”

“Okay, then the twine?” Gwen said, figuring it had to come into play soon.

“Yes. Although like I said, it really doesn’t need to be twine. A cable or whatnot will work as well. But you take your whatever and tie it to each end of the trim on the wall. Each side has a little wood groove in it that the twine will sit in. That little wood groove pulls out and unlocks the wall, but it has to be done at the same time or else only one side will unlock. Then you’ll have to wait a half hour for the internal delay to reset itself to try again. With the twine, you stand in the middle and pull, which pulls both pins at the same time, unlocking the wall,” he tried explaining, as if it were simple.

“The wall will then slightly pop out, giving you a little edge to pull down on like a large oven door. Make sense?”

“Hey if you say so. You got me on this one,” Gwen replied, standing back a little, excited to see the entire apparatus work.

“Alright, give me a second and I’ll pop it open.”

Dan then grabbed a nearby chair and used it to be able to reach each side of the wood trim. Tying the twine to each side, he held both

ends and walked to a mark that indicated he was in the center of the room. Looking both ways to make sure each end was connected, he gave both a quick tug which pulled each sides pin out. When both pins dislodged, a large thump and knock could be heard which sprung the wall downwards about eight inches from the top. Using his chair again, he grabbed a ledge and started to pull the entire wall down just enough so that he could step onto the floor. Once on the floor, he moved the chair and any nearby items out of the way so he could complete his task.

Gwen was surprised that indeed the entire wall and not just a small section did come down. This was easily done so with the help of two large hinges that allowed the wall to drop slowly under Dan's control.

Once the wall was down, Gwen noticed he had everything he wanted hidden, neatly arranged in sections. Starting from the left, he had what appeared to be various chemicals and powders Gwen assumed were used for explosives, poisons, or both. After this, he had his guns which started with his rifles and transitioned to his pistols and shotguns. Next were several boxes, some labeled as ammunition, others left plain but of the same size, shape, and density as anything that was marked.

Finally on the very right and what caught Gwen's eye the most were stacks upon stacks of gold and silver bars. Stored randomly with both gold and silver on top of one another, Dan had several rows that reached from floor to ceiling. Next to these bars were also other valuables, being a few stacks of normal paper currency, and even a little bit of jewelry that seemed meaningless next to so many treasures. Noticing Gwen's attention went to the gold and not the guns, Dan commented about his cache as he picked up a silver bar that had fallen to the floor.

"I guess this is why they call me Mr. Silver."

"How much are those worth?" Gwen instantly blurted out without thinking.

"The gold or the silver?" Dan replied, being kind to what might normally be considered a rude question to ask.

Catching her misstep in etiquette and one's financial state, Gwen tried to walk back her comment a little while also trying to downplay her enthralment.

"I mean, how did you get this wall built like this? Did you do it?"

Dan subtly grinned to her correction then answered both, skipping over if he cared or not about civility and decorum.

"Metal values are always changing, so it's hard to say for sure. But each of those bigger gold bars are probably around sixty-five thousand... ish, and the silver ones that are the same size are probably about seven hundred bucks. Ish. It just depends on what the value is right now. I honestly don't know."

Wanting to get past her potential slip-up, Gwen quickly re-asked her question about the wall.

"So being secretive, did you build this?"

"Yeah I had to. I probably would have been on a list if I would have called around asking about having something like this built. So I did a little library research on how to do or get this or that. It did take me a while, but I think the end result turned out pretty well."

"You went to the library to research a hidden vault?" Gwen promptly asked, catching he specifically stated so.

"Yes. I didn't want to look some of my questions up on the internet. So I thumbed through some of the books they had at the library. A little more time-consuming, but it doesn't raise flags either."

Answering her question and having a lull in the conversation, Dan switched to the gun topic.

"So let's get you a gun... if you want one that is?" he casually mentioned, not pushing her to do so.

"Yeah no, I surprised myself how I panicked so much over things that were just swirling around in my head. So I think I should probably have one and not need it, rather than the opposite. But I would say

maybe something that is safe and amateur? If you have something that fits that.”

Dan nodded his head and looked at what he had. His thoughts instantly went to one gun, but that gun did not have a safety switch and was large for a novice. Weighing the ideas she presented him with, he glanced over his selections and picked up two, giving her an option to pick from.

“Well unless you want to go to the gun store with me now, I would say with what I have, this four-ten revolver is what I would pick, but it’s not small and doesn’t have a safety switch. On the other end, I do have this three-eighty with a safety. It holds more bullets and is smaller, but accuracy will be needed a little more and I don’t know how familiar you are with handguns,” he cited while picking out and holding up the two.

Gwen looked at both as he held them. The gun that he indicated was the four-ten revolver, was intimidating for her to consider. In her eyes, it looked fat and bulky, and she couldn’t imagine herself using it. This made her want the three-eighty more, but she also worried that if she needed to be accurate, without practice, she would have problems with this gun.

“I don’t want to sound dumb, but could you put a safety on the bigger gun?” she asked, thinking it was best to go with what Dan favored.

“No I can’t do that. However, I can put it in a holster. That would block your finger or anything else from the trigger until you removed it.”

“And you don’t have to be as accurate with this gun?” she continued quizzing him, hoping even a beginner would be able to defend themselves with little training.

“So this gun can shoot a few different type of bullets. One of which is a smaller shotgun shell. If you use buckshot in it, what comes out of the barrel will spread. This will give whoever shoots it wider coverage instead of just a direct location. So as long as whoever is close, you can just point it at them and pull the trigger. I’d be surprised if you missed.”

Gwen didn't like the idea of having a gun or maybe having to use it. But she also knew she was going to worry that Kerry's men might find them. If they did find them, this would give her some peace of mind and at least a little something to fight back with.

"I'll take that one then. As long as you have a holster for it?"

"Good choice. I do. I'll fish around for it in the garage. You can wear it if you want, or you can leave it somewhere you know you can get to it. Now that Heidi's gone, we don't need to be one hundred percent worried about kids finding it."

Mentioning Heidi made Gwen think about the paper. Curious, Gwen mentioned this to Dan wondering if he might have gotten one while she slept.

"Were you able to get a newspaper today?"

"I did. And it was basically what I thought. I was only slightly off on my headline guess," he responded while walking into the kitchen to get the paper.

"They have it as 'Saline County child goes missing.' So I was pretty close. The article itself lays it on pretty thick too," he said, as he handed her the paper.

"Don't feel like you have to read it. It's actually probably better you don't. It's all just bologna trying to get us to react. But if you want to see just how fake they are, feel free to see how many things you can find that you personally know are not true."

Gwen did take the paper but didn't look at it. In the present, she heeded his warning but still felt a draw to maybe glance over it a little later.

"Now. Let's get some bullets and put this wall back into place. Then I'll get you your holster."

Chapter 20

Gwen was able to keep herself away from the newspaper for the entire night. However, when Dan went to bed, Gwen was left with little else to do around the house. It was tempting for her to try and open up his vault, but only to see if she could. This though was a fleeting proposal since she knew in the back of her head she wasn't going to do it.

Not really feeling tired, her mind left her with only one choice. Picking up the paper, she first told herself to read anything else but the front page. This left her with the comics, the entertainment section, the weather section, the classified ads, and the sports section although she didn't really care much for sports.

Enjoying the classified adds the most and actually finding a few things she might have looked into had everything with Dan and Kerry not come about, Gwen was eventually left with one section that mentally stared at her. She had made several personal reminders while flipping through the sections, not to look at the front page. But not even out of purposeful accident, once or twice a picture or title caught her eye and reeled her reluctantly in like a fish on a hook.

Innerly knowing better, Gwen let her curiosity win the day. Now flipping back to the front page, Gwen caught the headline Dan had mentioned. This headline was followed by a crime scene photo depicting a house with yellow police tape, closing it off to the public. Attention-getting, Gwen went on to read the article with the idea Dan had suggested, in seeing what she knew was true or false.

Saline County child goes missing.

May 19th, 2022 By Mark Fields, The Morning Star

The Helena Heights community was shocked early Thursday morning to learn that a local child has gone missing. The Helena Heights Police Department has announced that an unidentified six-year-old was kidnapped sometime during the night of May 18th, leading into the early hours of May 19th. Police Lieutenant Albert Sandro stated

that their department was dispatched to the 4500 block of Pinewood and Valley Springs for a noise disturbance just after midnight. Upon the officer's arrival on scene, they noticed a local house appeared to have its front door damaged and was left ajar. Investigating the incident, it was discovered someone had broken into the residence during the night, although no one was found inside. Further police investigation has revealed that a vehicle has gone missing and as of five o'clock this morning, at least one unidentified juvenile. The Helena Heights Police Department is still on scene investigating the incident, along with state authorities who were called in to preserve the scene. Anyone with information is asked to contact the Helena Heights Police Department.

The article continued with further analysis by the author of the newspaper article, comments made by local residents, other issues that had occurred at the residence and in the immediate area, and what might be done going forward. The article did not specifically state it was Heidi who went missing or what, if any danger she was in other than the obvious concerns when someone goes missing.

Since the article was vague and gave so little direct information, this gave Gwen a modest amount of wiggle room and doubt concerning the connection to Heidi. Although this probably was more in the realm of meager to negligible since Dan had correctly predicted it, it still left her with slight doubt whether it was undeniably about Heidi or not.

This game of wondering played out in Gwen's head as she thought about it. She only knew Heidi lived in Saline County, not if she lived in Helena Heights or the area the article advised. The six-year-old part was not debatable as was made clear in the story. However, since the piece was so vague, it technically didn't even mention the child's gender. Only that it was a six-year-old juvenile. The rest of the columnist's opinions and local's comments gave no further details or insights for Gwen to confirm the article was for sure about Heidi or not.

Then the other side of her mind set in. Dan already advised her not to trust the news and that this was merely a ploy. Her gut also told her that since Dan had been correct on so many things, that she should trust him in this matter as well, although it was hard for her to go against a printed paper.

Both sides of her mind tugging each way confirmed to her she shouldn't have looked at the article. All the paper did was confuse her and gave her more worry and speculative rabbit holes. Since Dan had tricked her in the past. Was he doing it again to keep her from running to the authorities? Then the game continued with, was this column even about Heidi or just one big coincidence? Each year each county unfortunately has a few kidnappings reported. Was this just that? Was this just a chance occurrence whereby happenstance, this would have been in the paper with or without her meeting Heidi or Dan?

All these thoughts and avenues seesawed for Gwen the rest of the night, regrettably pushing her into wanting the next morning's paper. This circled her back into the squandered feeling she originally had. To ignore the front headline altogether, which she now wished she had.

Chapter 21

The next morning Gwen was the first to wake up. Letting Ruby out and getting the coffee going, her thoughts bothered her so much during the night, that she felt she had to see the day's paper. However if she asked, she knew what Dan would say. Not wanting to sway him from potentially picking one up, Gwen instead decided to act as normal as possible, only asking him to pick something up for her if he didn't mention going into town on his own. What that something was, she had not yet decided. But she did know she wouldn't bring up the paper unless he mentioned it. If he did, she would dismiss what it said like he had mentioned.

Waiting for him, Gwen had another temptation pop into her mind. Something that would be much easier and faster for her to figure out the information she wanted. His computer. This though presented her with several serious questions and hurdles. Gwen assumed simply asking him was off the table. Because of this, she thought about somehow secretly using it.

Gwen figured she would be able to get the computer running but didn't know if it had a password. Although it seemed more likely it did, she also ran into the probable problem of him having stuff on it he wouldn't want her to see. His secrets, his capabilities, and however he kept his location hidden were all original reasons she felt he wouldn't want her or anyone on it. All these ideas combined amounted to, too high of a risk when weighed against losing his trust.

Knowing he didn't have cable and without knowing if he owned a radio, Gwen was left with no other alternatives of reaching the outside world for news. For good or for bad, Dan would be her source of finding out about Heidi. Stuck with this, the lingering feelings she had before she looked at the paper still hovered over her like a righteous angel telling her no.

With the coffee done, Gwen half thought about making some "accidental" noises to wake Dan up. Loudly fiddling with the food in the refrigerator, riling up Ruby, or going in and out of the house were

all front runners. These ideas though were soon subdued when the smell of morning coffee ended up doing the trick for her.

“Good morning,” he said, as he walked into the kitchen, stretching and cracking his back.

“Sorry. I slept in a little longer than I normally do. Did you have breakfast yet? I’ll make you something if you want?”

“You’re fine. You don’t need to make me anything. I just got some coffee going and was just sitting here enjoying the early farm mornings you have around here. It’s very quiet. I’m not used to that. Someone is always doing something around my apartment complex that causes noise. The maintenance guys are mowing, someone is fixing something, someone has music going, it’s always something. The quietness around here is the total opposite and is so relaxing. It makes me want to move out here.”

“Yeah, I know things aren’t right at your fingertips when you live this far out. So the wants part of life takes a little longer. But the chaos, commotion, and distractions are very diluted out here. You know your neighbors, if you even have any. You don’t have too many unexpected things popping up, or other people’s plans infringing on your time. Like with anything in life, you do have give and take. But I’d much rather have to drive a little to get this or that and be left with what you see, than have everything handy but bumping elbows with everyone else’s issues,” he explained, demonstrating with his elbows while he got himself a cup of coffee.

In Dan’s spiel about his preferences, Gwen caught that he mentioned “drive a little to get this or that.” Since this was what was on her mind, it gave her an excuse to continue this line of thinking in hopes she might find out if he had any plans about going into town or not.

“No, I agree. The morning sun is much more enjoyable to wake up to than the morning commuters. But I also really do like being able to get something I need in less than ten minutes. How often do you make trips into town each week? I guess city life can afford someone the ability to be a little less planned when it comes to having what you need for a period of time. That kind of really makes me think about times before cars. People who lived on farms or in the hinterlands, really had to plan out how long everything would last between trips.”

“Hinterlands? I’ve never heard that word before. I’d guess that means the wild? Something like that?” he asked, inquisitive in a new word.

“Yep. At least that’s the way I always took it as well. My Grandma used to say that... so I kind of picked it up. Outskirts of civilization I’d define it as. At least that’s what always came to my mind whenever she said it,” Gwen replied, not wanting to linger too long on her word choices.

“So do you have a set routine?” Gwen then asked, trying to steer the conversation back to what she wanted.

“Yes and no. My mom is very particular, so she wants her stuff on the same day each week. Monday. So to save time, I generally get whatever I need at the same time. That’s the yes part. The no part is now more that I’m older. When I was younger and had to do more jobs, I had things planned out more. Now that I’m less busy, it is more up in the air. I do have lots to keep me busy, but I sometimes get bored too. So sometimes wandering into town for a snack or something is the driftless lifestyle I live now,” he ended with, half joking around and adding flair to his quaint life.

Being that it was presently Thursday, Gwen was now under the gun to come up with something in order to get him into town. Quick math told her he more than likely already used his “driftless” day yesterday, and waiting until Monday seemed too long. Stretching her imagination a bit, her on-the-spot thoughts came up with nothing. So Gwen went to plan B, being the obvious female needs that he wouldn’t be stocked up on.

“Well, I’m a little embarrassed to ask, but could you maybe have a driftless day today? I might need some feminine products unless you have some?” she asked, trying to look uncomfortable doing so.

With his coffee reaching his lips at the same time the thought of what she asked reached his mind, Dan about choked on his coffee with the delicacy of the matter. Turning red, Dan quickly got embarrassed thinking about having to go down the women’s aisle or having to talk about the topic.

“Ummm, no I don’t,” he managed to spit out, while trying to catch himself.

“I’d doubt your mother has anything like that still does she?” Gwen asked, trying to really stick it to him.

Stumbling by this as Gwen hoped, Dan became a stuttering mess before answering.

“Yeah no... I don’t think so, no.”

Knowing he probably wouldn’t agree to her taking his truck, Gwen asked anyways while she had him on the ropes.

“I don’t mind going to get what I need, but I’d need to borrow your truck... unless you have another vehicle?”

Totally blindsided by this, Dan for once had a hard time working himself through the situation, although he was able to make clear he would do it.

“I mean, I can go into town. Could you maybe write down what you need so I can just give it to someone at the store? I can do it, I just don’t know what I’m really looking for, or anything that goes with that. How fast do you need it... if I can ask that?” he said squeamishly.

“Today. It’s not an emergency, but today,” Gwen responded firmly, not giving him a chance to kick the can down the road.

“Okay,” Dan answered, while immediately standing up and looking for his wallet.

“Anything else? I like to have all my ducks in a row, but I admit sometimes things like this slip through the cracks. Am I missing anything else?” he inquired, as he continued to look for his wallet with some haste.

Now feeling she had him, Gwen went for the kill by asking for more while his mind was flustered.

“You know, as much as I like it out here, since you’re not very… internet accessible, I could use some reading material to eat up some of my time.”

“Okay yeah. How about I grab you some magazines, a book or two, and the day’s paper? Would that work?” he said, finally finding his wallet.

Excited he brought up the paper so she wouldn’t have to, Gwen played off what he said and added a little more to make it sound like a variety.

“I like crossword puzzles as well. Unless you already have some, all of that will hold me over pretty well,” she added, as she wrote down the list of feminine items she needed.

“No, I don’t, but I will see what I can find. The store I like to go to has pretty much everything, but it’s a mom-and-pop shop and I really never looked for crossword books there before. But I’d guess they’ll have something close.”

Chapter 22

With Dan gone, Gwen was stuck at the house by herself at just a little after ten in the morning. The thought of trying his secret compartment came into her mind again, but again was only something to tease herself. This thought did lead her to search for more secret rooms or hidden vaults, keeping her mind open that Dan was probably open to anything being more than it seemed.

Doing so just for fun and not for prying purposes, Gwen first gave special interest to his pictures and decorations. Being that his Minotaur in the Labyrinth picture held meaning, she echoed this idea in that maybe his other displays might hide another clue as his ball of twine did.

Looking around, the first thing Gwen noticed was that he didn't have any family pictures around the house at all. None from his childhood, none from other family, none of his parents, and not even a picture of Ruby on the fridge or atop a dresser. Other than his old computer monitor possibly having this, no matter where she looked, no personal photos were found.

To the contrary, Dan did have several pieces of art, professional drawings, and painting. These though were not overly so, with only a few in each room. Still, each did stand out in terms of being individualistic and different than what someone might normally have in a house. Although Gwen did give a little latitude to this being that her attention was now heightened for any hidden messages.

Skipping the bedroom they had already gone over with the clue, Gwen started in his computer room. Besides his bedroom, she felt that while he was alone, he probably would spend the majority of his time here. Thusly, it made sense to her that something might be in this room. Unfortunately though for her, this room had little on the walls due to his computer setup and the shelves he had.

Nevertheless, he still did have one picture hanging just to the right of the door. This picture seemed to fit the room as it was academic in nature although it seemed too bland to reveal anything. Being

straight forward, it was merely a framed periodic image of the element Chlorine. Nothing fancy was on the picture, like the ball of twine he had in his other room. Moreover, nothing stood out as different to which she could riddle or solve. The picture simply showed the symbol of chlorine, its electron configuration, atomic weight and number, plus a couple shapes. Although she knew he chose this picture for some reason, nothing came to her mind as to why he did so or if it held a hint to something secret elsewhere in the house.

Disappointing in the room she felt gave her her best chance, Gwen skipped the living room with the known vault and went into his kitchen and dining room area. These adjoining rooms had two pictures, a cross, and one painting for her to possibly decode. Choosing the painting first, she did so not just because it was fancier, but because it caught her eye both now and a few days prior. This was so because it was about a topic she liked.

Stars and astrology were fascinating to her. Although she had let her recollection of them slip over time, the joy of looking at the stars still survived in her mind. This picture was of that. A night's sky illuminating the ground enough to make out the tops of pine trees ever so slightly. Despite the predominately dark color scheme of the painting, the artwork itself was light in nature, giving off a sense of camping or a cool night's breeze on a porch.

The frame holding the art matched the painting. Looking to have been purposely burnt before staining, the wood frame was also dark but highlight the picture with just enough accent to its surrounding border.

Admiring the starry depiction, at first she didn't know if the stars were dotted along the sky at random, or were purposely positioned as to highlight a specific pattern. Trying to recall her younger years, after two to three minutes of interpreting the art, her eyes started to recognize a triangle with two arms hanging off.

This recollection was exciting for her. Not just because she might have figured something out, but that she actually remembered something she once so fondly enjoyed. Seeing it more and more clearly, she remembered the constellation's name was Libra. Knowing that this cluster of stars represented the scales of justice, gave her the insight she felt this picture represented, although the name and its meaning were all she was able to discern.

Based on what she had learned from Dan, she felt justice was what he wanted. Fairness from top to bottom. If you succeeded, it wasn't because of bribes, cheating, or knowing the right person. If you failed, it had to do with some amount of your own effort, and not the efforts of others holding you back. This picture and the idea of the scales of justice displayed this concept. A level playing field in which your own acts fulfilled your own goals in life.

Feeling she had worked out the meaning behind this painting, Gwen was eager to move on to his other decorations to see if she would be able to unravel something else. Making note of anything on the painting she felt she might be able to use in some way, she then went on to the next picture frame which was just before the rear sliding glass door.

This picture was interesting to look at but was a little disappointed and much easier on the surface to figure out. It was a print of a bunch of hound dogs, listing each breed's name underneath a specific dog, and what kind of hound it was. Obviously chosen due to his relation with the Bloodhounds, it unfortunately was only educational for her to look at.

Breaking down hound dogs into either sight hounds or scent hounds, each side had a brief description of what the group was good at and why. Although neat to see how and why they were divided up in this way, Gwen noticed nothing of use in this photo and chalked its selection up to purely personal appeal.

Next, Gwen turned her attention to the medium-sized cross he had near his kitchen, clearly positioned to overshadow his dining room table. This cross was flat, wooden, and had some words printed across it. Not indicating if they were scripture or not, Gwen read the short phrase to herself.

“As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart.”

This quote seemed to fit the meaning of the cross but also made her feel as if it might be a riddle. Thinking it through a few times, Gwen looked around for a mirror, using the “reflects” portion of the phrase. Not seeing one that might point to a further clue, Gwen was left with the meaning of the saying and how Dan might interpret it.

The final picture in the two rooms was bland to the eye and looked as if it might've been a small banner at one point. Now trimmed down in order to fit into a metal frame, this image gave off the vibe of an inspirational grammar school hallway poster. However, instead of the normal quotes of achieving, hard work, and reaching one's goals, it was a compilation of freedom cites instead.

Reading the short messages which had a few photos next to them, most were once's she had heard before or at least something similar. Yet, some were not. One that was a little more intriguing stated "Do domesticated animals ever know or feel they are not free? Would you know if you were not free?"

This quote above the others, got her to contemplate its meaning. On the surface, Gwen had thought of this before. Not directly, but in a similar fashion. She had owned several different cats, dogs, and other animals throughout her life. Gwen was also around various friends and family members who owned cattle or other livestock in which their daily actions were strictly controlled. This controlled part was something that had always stuck with her. From the angle of control, each were at the mercy or whim of their owners, up to and including their lives.

This same thought echoed, albeit to a lesser degree, with household pets. Although pampered, fed and members of the family, they too had to do what their owners said. With this quote in mind, did they ever feel stuck or even captive... especially if put into a cage just because their owner wanted to do something else.

The thought they might actually think about how they were unjustly restrained by their perceived friends gave light to her in the second half of the quote. "Would you know if you were not free?" Transferring the idea over, if those we trusted were skillfully doing something that was not in our best interests, when would we know or would we know at all?

Blending together the animal and human idea, Gwen's thoughts walked between covert and overt. Animals don't require subtlety to coerce but people, or a group of people do. Thus, it would probably

actually be harder to detect if something was going against the people's will than the direct overt approach with an animal.

Gwen then multiplied these thoughts against what Dan had mentioned. That Kerry was secretly paying off, bribing, and bullying people that were in key positions in order to control an outcome. This was regardless of what the people in that area wanted. Since this was done with willful obscurity behind a curtain and aided by people who amplified Kerry's desires, this unmasked for Gwen the perspective of how someone might not know if they were being controlled.

This light bulb moment caught her off guard and made her slightly off-color. Deciding to step outside to allow the mix of a day's breeze with the sight of the surrounding farmland to reset herself, Gwen walked out the back sliding glass door and had a seat on the steps. Closing her eyes and breathing in, Gwen relaxed herself a little by hearing the local bird's calls to one another until they were silenced by Ruby.

Hearing the door open instantly triggered Ruby to investigate. Seeing Gwen outside made her want outside as well. This resulted in her continual whimpering or barking until Gwen relented in letting her out. Ruining her calm, Ruby did at least distract her mind although it wasn't in the more tranquil and harmonious way she had with the birds.

Regardless, she watched Ruby bound and play, scaring off all the birds until she was left with no one else to boss or chase. Losing this entertainment, Ruby worked her way back over to Gwen to play. Gwen though, did not reciprocate Ruby's idea, and politely pushed her away until she got the point. This left Ruby to amuse herself.

Digging holes until Gwen scolded her, Ruby patrolled the yard for a while before looking out into the distance for something fun. Scanning the horizon for more birds, cats, groundhogs, or anything that moved, she eventually noticed something and decided to scare it off.

"Bark, Bark, Bark!" Ruby went, letting this strange creature know it was on her property and was too close to her.

Being that the land was pretty flat with little in terms of obstruction, the creature had difficulty finding cover to which Ruby continued to point out.

“Bark, Growl, Bark!” Ruby carried on, upping the stakes in her warnings.

Ruby’s hints to this animal of peculiar shape seemed to work as her hair raised and she pulled tight against her leash. Her aggressive behavior was obviously hard for Gwen to miss, in which she also searched the landscape to see what had Ruby’s eye.

This search did not take long as she soon spotted something large and crawling in Dan’s field. Probably about a quarter mile away, this object was hard to make out, but didn’t resemble any animal she knew. Thinking it might be something hurt due to its slow and unusual progression, Gwen kept watching it to see what it might do.

Very slowly, the animal continued to move from one spot to another, looking as if it were trying to hide but failing miserably in doing so. Ruby did not let up with her warnings to this trespasser, as her barking continued to the point it became clear to Ruby, Gwen, and this animal, that each had seen one another. This made the odd creature that Gwen now thought might be a deer stuck in a bag, hasten its movements. Partially standing up, this quickened pace revealed it had four limbs.

Still, this was not the four-legged type she had thought. By the way it now moved and crawled across Dan’s land, it became immediately apparent it was probably a person. This apparent truth was confirmed to her when the creature reached a fence. Having to stand up a little to get over it, the person stealthily scaled the fence but revealed his arms, legs, backpack, and what looked to be a rifle and scope.

Panic-stricken by this revelation even if she somehow saw or interpreted something incorrectly, Gwen instantly popped up and clamored inside, not thinking to bring Ruby in. With assorted thoughts racing through her mind of what to do, where to go, and how to react, her overriding urge to lock the doors and hide took over.

Running to the garage, Gwen first checked to see if it was down. Seeing Dan had left it open, she slapped the garage door button and only watched long enough to see that the door had started to drop. Running over to the front door, she swiftly both checked and tugged on the door, finding it locked already. This left her with only the judgment

of choosing a hiding place. Wishing she had found some sort of safe room, Gwen decided to squeeze herself behind the couch, figuring if a paid assassin was looking for her, the room Dan had given her would be his first and most likely place to check.

As her mind started to process information more, settling on this hiding spot did not last long. Now mentally slowing down, she remembered Dan had given her a gun. This gun, unfortunately, was in her bedroom. Feeling haste trumped safety with this person spotted so far away, Gwen made a dash for her bedroom and slid to the floor of her bed to save time. Carefully grabbing the gun, Gwen crawled back to the couch with the feeling she was almost out of time.

Compacting herself as much as she could behind the couch, Gwen went quiet to see if she could hear anything. Holding her breath at times, she did hear Ruby continue to bark but didn't hear anything around the house. Gwen stayed in this flattened-out state for what felt like an hour, only occasionally wiggling when a limb went numb, or something started to hurt.

Losing track of time, Gwen could only see part of a window from her vantage point. This window gave her little to look at other than the upward angle of clouds passing by. Eventually hearing Ruby measure her barks, Gwen's mind let her resume normal thoughts although she still didn't want to move from her couch refuge.

Despite her desire to stay put, her mind eventually came to the idea that Dan should be returning soon. With a suspicious sniper in the area, Gwen started to feel Dan was a sitting duck. That he would return home as normal, only to be shot upon exiting his truck. Yet without a phone, she had no way of warning him. This left Gwen to think over what might be her best option to warn him.

An overturned flag was the first thing that came to mind. She had heard once that this was a sign of distress. However, this meant she would have to do something outside that she was not familiar with. Just guessing, she would need to go to the middle of his yard, figure out how to lower his flag, hope it was easy to detach, then raise it again. With all these possible steps, she didn't see this as a wise choice.

Her next two ideas seemed either too small or too unrealistic to be seen or noticed with time to help. The first of these was to simply

pull off or distort his curtains, as to signal maybe something wrong had occurred inside. Taking that idea a step further, her second idea involved throwing something through his window in order to show actual damage with the same meaning behind it. Both these ideas fell flat with the continued thinking he either might not notice the signal, or he might notice it but too late.

Pushing herself to come up with something, Ruby again gave her an idea. Hearing her slowed but continued calls, Gwen thought maybe she could let Ruby off her leash to chase whoever off. Although still young, this could be an offensive tactic which could work in two ways. Possibly scaring the sniper off or being a visual clue for Dan from much further out than her flag or window ideas.

Still, this had one obvious setback. With a gun, if Ruby found whoever after the passage of time, regardless of if he had good intentions or not, he might shoot Ruby out of defense. Weighing what to do and feeling the pressure of having to do something soon, Gwen narrowed her choices down to her final option. Feeling that although releasing Ruby was not ideal, it did give Dan his best chance to notice something from afar, there was no guarantee Ruby would be shot at or find someone, and the best result if she did find someone, maybe she would simply chase whoever off.

Wiggling herself out from behind the couch again, Gwen kept herself as low as she could, moving her way over to the sliding glass door. Angling herself to give away the least amount of her position as possible, she eventually reached the door and slightly opened it. Reaching out with only her hand, she fiddled with the clasp that was connected to the house until she felt the slide to release it. Hearing the commotion, Ruby investigated the affair which gave Gwen just enough slack to slide the leash off the mounting hook.

Upon Ruby's release, Gwen shut the door and went back into the kitchen to see if she could hear something of note. With nothing happening right away, Gwen assumed Ruby's silence was the result of her own actions, temporarily taking Ruby's focus away from the field. The sound of silence went on for a short while before Ruby eventually figured out she was not being let in. Having energy, being headstrong, and wanting to do something, Ruby did eventually redirect her attention back to the field where she again started to bark. This led to the progression of her testing her leash in which she discovered her anchor

was missing. Happy to scamper away, Gwen recognized Ruby's discovery by her ever-fading barks.

Chapter 23

At about the same time Dan would normally see his house come into sight, he noticed Ruby chasing a rabbit on the opposite side of the street. Ruby was just about at the rabbit's tail when Dan honked his horn in order to grab her attention. Startled upon hearing this, Ruby stopped and looked confused in Dan's direction. The rabbit, however, did not and took advantage of this jolt by running off into the field until it was out of sight.

"Go Home!" Dan yelled, after slowing down.

"Go! Now!"

Having trained her some, Ruby understood what Dan wanted and apprehensively scampered home, dragging her leash behind her as she did so. Dan noticed this and as Gwen had hoped, wondered to himself why this was.

Driving slower than the speed limit and thinking about it, Dan didn't jump to conclusions but did start to lean towards something being wrong when he noticed his garage door was down. Never caring to close his garage door in his remote area, this told him someone purposely had to have done so. Being a cautious person anyways, Dan started to look around vigilantly as he hit his garage door opener. Pulling his gun and setting it on his lap, Dan pulled into his garage, hitting his button again to close the door before he fully pulled in.

Alone in the garage, he heard Ruby had returned home by her endless barking that came from the rear door. Ruby's barking continued uninterrupted as he sat patiently in his truck. This steady and repeated barking indicated to Dan that she had not been let in which made him ask himself why.

The garage door being shut told him Gwen wanted something kept out. The dog running loose had too many paths to immediately narrow although he felt confident he could eliminate the "by chance" idea since nobody was letting her in. Furthermore, not only was nobody letting her in, but nothing was being heard coming out. No scolding of

Ruby for running away. No excitement that she had returned, and no sounds of someone moving about inside.

All these signs pointed to some sort of problem although not something necessarily meaning he himself was in harm's way. It could have been Gwen and Ruby simply going for a walk and her closing the garage door out of courtesy. He could easily see this scenario playing out with Ruby somehow pulling herself loose. On the other end, something could have happened to Gwen which was preventing her from reaching the door.

Cycling each different angle through his mind quickly, he reverted to his conservative self and entered the house slowly with his gun at the ready.

"Gwen? Are you okay?" he started with, as he cracked open the door and then stood back.

"Gwen? Hello?"

Hearing it was him, Gwen shimmied herself out from behind the couch to which she had again eventually retreated to.

"Yes, I'm alright!" She yelled from the living room while getting up.

This "I'm alright" statement confirmed to Dan something either was or had been wrong which caused him to stay in his spot.

"What's going on? What happened?" he asked, being cautious that a setup could be at hand.

Gwen missed these questions as she kept herself out of window range while making her way over to the garage. Getting in sight of the man door, she noticed that Dan barely had it open which caused her to pause.

"Are you in the garage Dan?" she now cautiously vocalized, not wanting to get too close.

“Yes. Gwen I’m going to need you to slowly show me your hands through the door and walk in,” he politely commanded her, turning off the lights in the garage to better shield himself.

“Dan you’re confusing me a bit,” Gwen said of what he asked.

“I’m just making sure you’re alone. I’ve learned to live a little paranoid. Just trust me. I’m sorry it’s dark but come into the garage with your hands out and I’ll take it from there.”

Hesitant and off balance, the mutual worry he was setting her up crossed her mind. Now guarded, Gwen reacted slowly to Dan’s orders, which didn’t go unnoticed.

“Gwen, listen,” he voiced, growing impatient with her after she didn’t react in the way he wanted.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I saw the garage door was down and Ruby was running around. Both of those things are odd to me. Plus, the way you responded to me makes me think something is going on. I’m just being cautious. I’ve had times in the past where people say they are alone although they are not. Trust me, you have nothing to worry about, but I have to be on edge.”

Hoping he was telling the truth and the sniper she saw didn’t get to him. She decided to say what she saw and why the garage, Ruby, and her actions were off.

“Okay,” she started with, while taking some steps towards the door.

“I saw a man with a gun trying to hide in your field. That’s why I’m acting strange. I couldn’t think of a way to warn you, so I let Ruby go hopping she might scare the guy off and maybe give you the idea something was off. That’s why the garage door was closed, I didn’t want anyone getting in. I wasn’t sure where that guy went.”

Hearing her reasoning connected a lot of the dots for Dan. In spite of this, he still felt he had to go about handling the present situation in the way he felt was best.

“Okay. I believe you. Just show me your hands and we can talk about that in a minute. You’re just going to have to trust me Gwen. Remember, if I wanted to do anything, I would have already done so when you were actively trying to get me caught.”

This point pushed her enough to show her hands through the door to which Dan noticed. Gently grabbing them as to not scare her and to show he was not a threat, he then quietly whispered to her.

“You showed me trust so I’m going to do the same for you. I’m not going to pat you down, but I need you to go to the corner of the garage. Sorry it’s dark but go slowly and feel your way over.”

With this, Dan released her hands and stepped back, allowing her room to walk through the door while also not giving himself away just in case someone else was on the other side. Once Gwen was behind him, Dan slowly backed up, opened his truck door, grabbed something, then closed it quietly. Next, he tactfully opened the man door just a pinch and tossed an object inside. After this toss, he closed the door and backed away.

With both the man and garage doors closed, the garage got very dark. Dan’s charging power tool batteries helped some, but not enough for Gwen to make out what was going on. It wasn’t until Dan reached her did she find out what he was doing.

“Did you open up any windows or leave the back door open?” he asked softly.

“No. I closed it after I let Ruby run away. What was that, that you tossed into the house?”

“A custom smoke grenade. The house is going to fill up with smoke pretty quickly. No offense, but I just need to be sure nobody else is inside but you. The smoke will force anyone out. Give me ten minutes of silence and we can get back to your sniper issue. Oh... stay low too.”

Although she knew nobody else was inside, she went along with what he asked, staying quiet as he went back over to the wall nearest the living room and listened to hear if anyone was moving or coughing. Seeing a little better over time, she noticed some smoke had leaked into

the garage, but not enough for them to worry about. She also noticed Dan being very attentive to all sounds. Scrutinizing anything he heard, even the faintest squeak or creak.

Following what Dan deemed to be ten minutes, he spoke up in a normal voice while also turning on the garage lights.

“So, tell me what you saw?”

Before doing so, Gwen commented about the smoke grenade first.

“Are we going to be able to go back in there?”

“Umm, maybe. I guess that depends on a couple of things. I’ll obviously have to start up some fans and open up all the windows, that’s for sure. Unfortunately, my air filter is going to take a beating. So I’ll probably have to replace that a couple of times too. But before all that, a lot depends on what you saw?” he said, answering her questions but quickly coming back to his.

Gwen this time fully explained what she had seen and what she did. She disclosed to him she was worried Kerry had sent someone and that the person she saw might be him. Gwen also advised she was sorry she let Ruby go, but that she felt this was her best option with what she knew and had access to.

“No apologies needed. I get it and Ruby is fine, she was just out back before my smoke grenade. So no worries. This guy though, he never stood up, only crawled?”

“No, he never stood up. He looked like he was trying to hide. If he would have stood up, I would have recognized him as a person right away. But until he went over the fence, I was wondering if he was an injured animal or something.”

“Okay, well that is strange. I do give permission to a few people in this area to hunt. But they will wear vests and have no reason to crawl like you said. He didn’t have on a vest by chance did he?”

“No, no vest. He was pretty far away, but I would say no.”

“Alright, well it could be something explainable or it could be a problem. So let’s play it safe. We’re kind of stuck here right now, so let’s take up a defensive position in front of the truck until it gets dark. If someone is trying to shoot us, then they currently have the advantage. So let’s either let them come to us or at least let the dark increase our chances a bit. Do you have your gun by chance?”

“No, I’m sorry. I left it by the couch when I heard you come in,” she said, cringeing a bit.

“Okay well, I guess it’s my little revolver, my throwing knife, and some smoke bombs until the house airs out a little more. I’ll hold my breath and open a few windows to hopefully speed up that process some. Then we will get situated a little more.”

Chapter 24

Dan moved several things around in the garage to fortify their spot as much as he could. This mainly consisted of moving his benches, creating more of a barrier, and gathering what tools he thought might be best as weapons if needed. He also did as he said and went into the main part of the house to open some windows. He did this a couple times, taking in a big gulp of air before going into the house for however long he could hold it.

Still hazy during these trips, he never tried to find Gwen's gun on the ground. Rather, the only things he ever returned with was his shotgun and a couple small items from the fridge. Letting her have his gun, Dan wrapped his shotguns strap around his shoulder so he had it close to him at all times. When Dan finally finished his preparations, he felt bad upon noticing Gwen sitting alone with nothing to do other than to stare at the corners of his garage.

"I'm sorry Gwen. I wasn't thinking. Here, let me get you the things you asked for," he said, in regards to the reading materials.

Reaching into his truck, Dan pulled out a couple books, a few magazines, and the day's newspaper. Handing them over, he commented about his time at the store while hunkering down in what he felt was a good spot.

"Your products are still in the truck. I can look away or whatever if you need privacy. Books-wise, they only had two, so I just got both for you. One looks to be a love story, so I hope you like that, and the other looks like a fantasy story. I don't know if that's something you like, but that was all they had."

Admittedly a love story fan, Gwen was excited to see if this was something she had read before or not. Titled "A Change of Heart" she was thrilled the book was new to her and was actually anxious to get started on it. On the other hand, the fantasy book was titled "The Royal Torch" and looked interesting, but would clearly come second to the love story.

“As far as the magazines go, I just grabbed. I hope you like them. They didn’t have any crossword puzzles, so I got you about five magazines instead.”

Gwen gave him a contrived smile to the magazines with the thought of the paper resting on her mind. Although surprisingly excited for the love story he found, her excitement was dwarfed by a drawing desire to read the paper. Trying to play off her want, Gwen looked at the paper last, shuffling through the magazines and pretending to be interested in a few of them before looking at what she really wanted.

The day’s newspaper didn’t disappoint. Holding it up, the front title stated in bold lettering “Amber alert issued for abducted girl. Authorities say in grave danger.” This headline was followed by a few photos and a second, smaller article about the same incident just below the main one. Seeing she was reading it, Dan spoke up about it.

“Told you. They are going to keep ratcheting it up. Don’t believe it. There’s more truth in one of those sensationalized tabloids than there is in that paper.”

Faintly laughing it off just to go along with what he said, Gwen retreated to the corner she had been in with all the items he had purchased her. Flipping through all of them until she noticed he was doing something else, Gwen grabbed up the paper and started to read Heidi’s article.

Amber alert issued for abducted girl. Authorities say “in grave danger.”

May 20th, 2022 By Mark Fields, The Morning Star

The Helena Heights Police Department released the name and issued an Amber Alert for the six-year-old who went missing in the wee hours of May 18th, leading into the early morning of May 19th. The juvenile has been identified as six-year-old Heidi Greene of Helena Heights. She is described as being approximately four feet tall and was last seen wearing green and yellow pajamas with horseshoe imprints on both the front and back of her clothing.

Officials were vague as to the exact reasons they consider Ms. Greene “in grave danger,” but did advise property inside the residence

in question was damaged and that it appears someone had been injured at some point due to blood stains being found outside of the house. Police Lieutenant Albert Sandro cautioned anyone to call 911 immediately if they believe they might have located Ms. Greene considering what was found on scene. Lieutenant Sandro also clarified a previous report of a missing vehicle. That vehicle has since been located and is no longer considered related to this incident.

The article then went on to repeat prior information given in the previous day's paper along with snippets of the press release the police department had given to the media. The smaller article written by another Morning Star reporter highlighted an exclusive interview with two local residents who had called the police department about the loud noises they heard. One local resident advised she heard "screams coming from the rear of the residence" while another stated they "heard a male voice tell someone to be quiet."

Both these articles combined unsettled Gwen. She still held what Dan had mentioned about the media and Kerry's long arm with respect, but still couldn't help but let her mind question and ponder both sides' information. Besides Dan's understandable deceptions, he had been kind, protective, and very hospitable to her. On the other end, she again couldn't help playing devil's advocate with herself about those very deceptions. These thoughts put pressure on her to continually bounce back and forth with which to believe more.

Adding to this, several people were mentioned in both days' articles including at least two law enforcement agencies, a couple neighbors, and now two reporters. If Dan was correct, most if not all of both law enforcement agencies would have to be in on it, both residents would have to be lying, and both journalists would have to be writing fiction. The cumulative amount of people involved seemed powerful to her to believe.

Yet, Gwen still continued her circle back to Dan. She could see that at least up front, since no names were given by either reporter concerning what a witness heard, that these statements could be simple catchy fabrications. Additionally, it was hard for her to see so many officers being willing to go along with something that didn't happen. Being an inquisitive job by nature, Gwen felt at least one person within both of these agencies would be bound to start questioning the narrative if they were to notice any discrepancies.

Confusing her all while trying not to give away this internal feeling to Dan, Gwen decided to try and take her thoughts away from the topic by switching back to the present moment. Still hearing Ruby occasionally bark outside, she asked Dan what his plan was concerning her.

“She will be alright,” Dan replied, as he finalized his impromptu barriers.

“She obviously is still hanging around the house, so I’m not going to worry too, too much about her running off too far. On top of that, she has her doghouse next to the door and her barking might actually be a benefit to us. If she is barking and doing so in a continued random manner, we know nothing has happened to her and can calculate she feels nothing is going on. I would think if she noticed something of further note, she would either run off and go silent, or increase her barking rate, tipping us off something has changed.”

“Okay,” Gwen simply replied, getting tired of analyzing each idea in different directions.

Catching this emotional drain, Dan also switched the topic to something more normal.

“Would you like something to eat or drink? I don’t have a lot of options out here in the garage, but I did grab some sports drinks from the fridge, and I picked up a couple bags of chips that were on sale. I got sweet barbecue and a new type called smoked peachwood. Does any of that sound good to you?”

Chapter 25

Two hours after it got dark, Dan changed his demeanor as he started to prep to go outside. With the house decently flushed of smoke, Dan more freely went in and out of the house, getting items he needed. Although he moved freely, Dan still used care and vigilance, crouching down, pulling his blinds closed, and not using a flashlight or turning on any of his lights.

Staying in the garage because of the preparations he made along with the much better air quality, Gwen could tell she must have missed at least one more secret door, as strange sounds came from areas within the house to which she knew had nothing of note. Thinking about what she could have missed in these areas, Dan came back into the garage carrying more weapons and a box of other objects.

“I found your revolver next to the couch,” he said as he pulled it out of his box and handed it over to her.

“I’m going to let Ruby in and go out there in a little bit. I think this revolver will suit you well in here. Plus you now have two just in case. Just point and shoot if you have to.”

“What are you going to do?” Gwen then asked, seeing him pull a few magazines from his box and check this or that on a larger rifle he seemed to be preparing.

“Well, we need to figure out what’s what. So I’m going to go out there for a little walk,” he responded with a mischievous smile.

“Do you have a plan?”

Dan laughed in reaction to this question before giving away why he did so.

“Yep, don’t get shot.”

Gwen didn’t find this as funny as Dan did and questioned him further.

“No seriously. What are you going to do and what do you want me doing?”

Still finding his comment funny, Dan took a minute before taking the issue seriously and replying.

“Alright. I just want you to stay here. Your end will be simple. As long as I come back, I’ll announce myself before entering the garage. If someone comes in without saying anything, you know it’s not me. On my end, I’m just going to go out there and do a little hunting. I’ll see what I can find. If I come across someone, great. If not, I’ll try to see if there are any markings showing if it was a person and which way whoever went.”

“How long do you think it will take?”

“I think we will both find one another pretty quickly if someone is waiting out there. So I don’t think it will be long. Like I was telling you, the night helps me out a bit, but if he is truly coming after us, he will have picked a spot he likes by now. It’s pretty mathematical from there.”

“Do you have any tricks you can use or anything hidden outside?” she asked, seeing if he might have something bigger outside or some other kind of fancy gizmo to use as a distraction.

“I always kind of like the advantage being on my side when it comes to my life. So I do have some toys that might help me out. But don’t worry about any of that. I’m going to go out one of the side windows since he will probably be watching one of my doors. That should give me at least a little correction time on his behalf so I can get to a spot I like. Then we will see what happens. However, like I said, I want you to stay here. I’ll turn out the lights so the darkness will help you as well. I hope you are okay with that. It’s in your favor.”

Not really knowing how to respond to any of that, Gwen went along with it, tucking herself into a corner where she could see the door but had plenty of cover. Looking to Gwen as if this was a matter of routine for Dan, he slung a rifle over each shoulder, picked up his box of toys, smiled, and left the room.

Upon him closing the door, the room got instantly dark minus Dan's charging tools. This allowed her to see the outlines of objects in the room but not much else. Readjusting herself to the new conditions of the room, she corrected Dan's layout only slightly as to adapt to his shield of darkness.

At about the time she went quiet, she heard Dan slide the rear door open, letting Ruby into the house. This he did slowly although Ruby didn't seem to understand the circumstances of the matter, immediately whimpering out of excitement. Pulling her in without closing the door, he promptly swooped her up and locked her in his room as was evident by the sound of a door shutting in that direction.

Now free from the problem of Ruby pointing him out, Dan did as he advised Gwen, opening a side window ever so slowly as to not be noticed or seen. Not immediately jumping out just in case he had been observed, Dan waited for fifteen minutes before readying himself for his exit.

When he felt ready, Dan released one of his distractions in the form of a couple fireworks. Tossing them out the rear door, Dan then wasted no time, flinging himself out his open window with little concern for his own well-being. Gathering himself and his things at an all-out rate, Dan then ran to a spot on his property he felt secured himself the most.

Gwen was able to hear the majority of this play out although she was unaware of the fireworks. Hearing them go off, Gwen took them as gunshots and hunkered down in her spot, securing her grasp on her revolver and pointing it towards the door. Waiting to hear anything else, the sound of silence came over Dan's property as he stayed still in his spot waiting for something to happen.

Dan's patience concerned Gwen as nothing seemed to happen from her point of view while inside the garage. For what she deemed to be a good half hour, she didn't hear even a single whimper from Ruby, who usually liked letting herself be known. This silence seemed to fill the room with tension as she waited for either the door to fling open or for Dan to announce his presence.

Getting neither, Gwen grew impatient and decided to go over to the garage door in an attempt to maybe hear or even see more. Using a

screwdriver to pry one of the door panels away from the frame, a faint opening appeared allowing her to see a whispering amount of Dan's property. Almost not even enough to feel a breeze through, she still could make out part of his driveway and some of his grass.

This view left her to only use the opening for hearing rather than seeing. Putting her head down and her ear against the slender gap, Gwen did hear a little more all be it, just the night's creatures crooning and creaking.

Holding firm to this position, Gwen was rewarded but in a very surprising way. Startling her at first, another loud bang went off from somewhere on the opposite side of the house. This bang was soon followed by a fizzing sound and a bright light that illuminated the surrounding area. Seemingly man-made, this light appeared to move downward outside of her direct view and lasted only a few seconds before going out.

Feeling this must have come from Dan, this aided in relaxing Gwen with the sense he was still alive and still on the hunt. Not getting anything else from Dan, Gwen retreated back to her spot and waited another half hour before she heard anything else.

This something else was the sound of his rear sliding glass door being pushed further open. Followed by the sound of it closing, another sound of objects being put down on a table could be heard before a brief pause. This pause was broken by the sound of footsteps raising in intensity towards the door she was pointing her gun at.

"Knock, knock," Gwen heard on the door, without a voice behind it.

Not what she expected, this accelerated her heart rate as she waited for something else.

"Knock, Knock," occurred again, this time followed by a voice.

"Sorry, forgot. Gwen it's me, Dan."

The sound of his voice soothed over her anxiety as she got up and made her way past Dan's barricades and over to the man door.

“Okay, I’m unlocking it,” she replied, turning on the lights at the same time.

Just after she unlocked the door, Dan walked in, a little disheveled, favoring his right shoulder and smelling of smoke.

“I found your tracks, but I didn’t find anyone,” he said as he walked in.

“So I did see a person then?” Gwen asked, hoping he would have some answers.

“Yep. I found some scattered footprints coming from the west and heading across my field towards the road. So someone was out there, that’s for sure.”

“Who?”

“Oh I’m not sure who,” he replied, as she noticed him being ginger with his shoulder.

“It could have been anyone. It could have been one of my neighbors hunting. Although I admit that the tracks show an unusual walking pattern for someone just hunting. It could have been someone randomly carrying something that looked like a gun. I’m not discounting that, no offense. Or it could have been a sniper scouting out the layout,” he noted with a pause.

“But if it was a sniper, I do think he was only scouting, looking for the best place to shoot... I guess unless Ruby scared him off. I think if he were still in the area I would have found him, or he would have found me. It’s pretty open, so the two of us wouldn’t really have had many spots to hide. Plus, my little devices didn’t indicate anyone was around.”

“What do your things do?” Gwen swiftly injected into the conversation, captivated in this secret part of his life.

Dan first sat down before responding, taking up a seat on a stool he had near his small workbench.

“I’m sure you already know my answer,” he responded with a half laugh, half wince because of his shoulder.

“Nevertheless, some of it was stuff I already told you about and some of it was stuff I’m sure you heard. Like my fireworks. Those aren’t really top secret and probably should be expected by anyone looking for me.”

“Well, I didn’t. I thought someone was shooting. I assumed you were in a mini shoot-out with him before it went quiet. Then I didn’t know what was going on or even if you were alive or not. That was until something I assume you shot off lit up the sky.”

“Yep, that was me. That was a flare. Basically what you see in the movies when someone is alone and trying to get someone’s attention. But I was checking an area I wasn’t sure of. I needed it lit without giving myself away too much. So I shot off a flare.”

“Oh, well that all adds up then. So you said you only found tracks?”

“Yeah, and like you said, they were odd. Besides heading west to east, I couldn’t make out where they came from, but they went towards the street. Straight line, so it wasn’t like whoever was circling my house. But definitely something I think we should keep in mind. Unfortunately though, since I give people hunting permission, what you and I saw wasn’t enough to say for sure whether we should be concerned or not. I’m going to err on the side of caution, but this could be benign as well.”

“What are you going to do? Are you going to set something up for him?”

“Kind of,” Dan said, rotating his shoulder in a way Gwen felt he was trying to work out some soreness.

“But if it’s someone that I allowed to be out there, then I don’t want someone like that getting hurt. So I’ll have to think up something in-between and also go to the houses I think I gave permission to hunt.”

“Did you get hurt?” Gwen then inquired, feeling bad if he did.

“Life just gets you sometimes Gwen,” he answered her with a saucy grin.

“After a while, your body just doesn’t keep up with what you used to be able to do. After I tossed those firecrackers out the back door, I jumped out the window and landed a little funny. Maybe I should have thought that one out a little more. I was thinking about what I used to be able to do, not what my body will allow me to do now. If I ever do that again, maybe I’ll wise up a bit and jump out with a cane or something, right?”

“You mean a walker!” Gwen countered, seeing that he was going to be alright.

Chapter 26

As usual for Dan whenever he did something this late, he picked letting his body rest over his general preference of getting up with the sun. Personally liking this way of starting a day off because it gave him the feeling of maximization, Dan still did make exceptions and this was one of them.

Gwen however did the opposite, only sleeping a few hours before a slew of nightmares bothered her enough to wake up. Having dreams of hunters, Heidi, and being trapped, Gwen tried to shrug them off until the morning daylight finally finished her off. Half startled and half perturbed, Gwen decided to help Dan clean his house as a way of distracting her mind.

Still having the scent of smoke, Gwen searched Dan's cupboards for anything she felt might help remove the smell. Having grown up with a grandfather who smoked heavily, she had a little knowledge in this field by what her grandmother used to do. First on her checklist was the obvious masking agents. Candles, aerosols, and other smell goods were always at her grandparents' house to help disguise the cigar and cigarette odors.

Second was simply washing, cleaning, and washing some more. This required various cleaning materials she hoped he might have. Finally, last but not least, was what Dan had already started, ventilation. Simply opening up the house and letting a breeze do some of the work for them was a free way of airing out the house.

Looking through what he had, Gwen did find some air fresheners and other cleaning products, some of which were meant for pets. She also found baking soda which her grandmother used to sprinkle in the areas her grandfather frequented. However, other than soaps and laundry detergent, this ended up being the limit of what she could find.

After tying up Ruby and opening up all the windows and doors she could, Gwen added to this air flushing a little bit by retrieving a box fan she had noticed in his garage. Being away from where all the smoke

was, it didn't add to the smell and circulated the more stagnant parts of his house.

Gwen then gathered up all his blankets, pillows, or anything else she could run through a washer. Starting a laundry line, whatever she could put into the machine, she did. Everything else waited its turn until a new cycle began. The sound of this machine, thumping away load after load eventually caught Dan's attention in the wonder of why it was going on for so long.

"What is that?" he asked as he sluggishly walked into the living room, still waking up.

"That's the laundry. You have a lot of it. Do you have a shampooer by chance?" Gwen replied, getting into cleaning mode.

"No. I've never needed one."

"Well you're going to now. I think I can get the smoke smell out of a lot of your things, but vacuuming will only go so far. You're either going to have to buy one or rent one. You're also going to have to call someone to clean out your vents. I changed the filter, but the vents are something I can't do."

"Oh, okay," Dan acknowledged, still waking up and not one hundred percent knowing how to digest all of what she said.

"I washed all your dishes, cleaned the inside and outside of your cupboards, and did your dining room area. I think the place is starting to smell better. But I'm going to need you to get a few things from the store. I'm running out of towels, and I could use more fabric sprays, gloves, and laundry detergent... not to mention the shampooer."

"Alright, well thank you. You didn't have to do any of that, but I appreciate it. What time is it? How long have you been up?" he asked, still shaking off his drowsiness.

"I've been up for a while, I couldn't sleep. It's almost noon though. I was about to take a lunch break."

"Well, I guess the least I can do is make you something. What would you like?" he asked as he walked over to the fridge.

“Let’s see, I have eggs, some lunch meats...ummm, cheese. I know I have some stuff in the freezer,” he continued as he shut the refrigerator door.

“Yeah. I have some burgers and a few french bread pizzas. Any of that sound good? I think I have both pepperoni and plain cheese.”

“You know, just a water and a sandwich will do. Thank you!” Gwen replied, cutting past him and washing off her hands.

“You really didn’t have to do all of that you know. I would have gotten it. It’s not the first time,” he said, waking up and trying to make a joke.

Gwen smiled as she took up a seat at his table, now a little tired between cleaning and not sleeping. Then to both of their surprise, they both heard a third voice come from the front door area.

“Hello?” A male voice called out, before knocking on the open door.

Not used to visitors, Dan became defensive in posture, grabbing up a kitchen knife and disguising its meaning as him just making a meal. Carrying it with him along with a half-made sandwich, he motioned for Gwen to stay where she was before slowly peeked around his kitchen area towards the door.

“Hello? Is anyone home?” the voice called out again, before Dan replied.

“Yes, hello?” he announced, slowly revealing himself while trying to seem like he was doing so in a normal way.

“Sorry if I scared you but the door was open. Is everything okay? Did you have a fire or something?” the younger man asked noticing all the doors and windows were open, a fan was blowing outward and several different cleaning supplies were scattered about.

Dan feigningly laughed and quickly gave up the easiest answer he could think of.

“No, but close. I left my door open yesterday and my dog chased a skunk inside. I’m sure you can imagine how that went. So we are just trying to air out. It’s a process.”

“Oh boy. Yeah that would be a process. Well, if I may steal a moment of your time. My name is Peter Pancake, I’m volunteering for the Ace Institute. We are working in the area for that little girl that went missing the other day. Have you heard or maybe your phone alerted you of it?” he asked in a very welcoming and genteel way, while wearing an identification lanyard and holding an envelope.

“Yes, I did get an alert message. How can I help?” Dan responded, instantly suspicious of him.

“The Ace Institute put together a large proactive group of volunteers to go around and inform everyone of the missing girl and to see if anyone might have any useful information. You said you did get an alert? Did you get today’s updates, it’s urgent!” he asked, in a perceived annoying way to Dan, since he was already suspicious.

“No, I did not. I just got up and was making myself a sandwich and hadn’t gotten to my phone yet. Last I heard was the Amber alert like you said. What else is going on? I’m obviously just getting thrown into the mix here.”

“This morning the Helena Heights Police Department released an urgent statement about the unfolding situation. They advised they had received a ransom note demanding an undisclosed amount of money by midnight tonight or else Heidi would be killed. So our volunteer group is trying to knock on every door to see if anyone knows anything or could donate to the ransom, which is said to be extraordinarily high.”

“I’m sorry I don’t know anything but sure, I can give you some money. What’s a good amount? I’m not sure what’s appropriate,” Dan said with concern, while personally irritated he had to donate money to a false cause just to look normal.

“Well, the amount I have received has varied, but I would say the average has been twenty dollars. Honestly though, anything will help.”

“Sure, no, absolutely. Let me go get my wallet.”

Dan smiled before turning and hurried over to his room, trying to maintain a display of distress. Reaching his room, Dan pulled out a fifty, grumbling to himself as he did so. Playing out several scenarios in his head before turning over the money, Dan didn't feel anything Peter might have observed could identify him and put little weight into Kerry fingerprinting every dollar just to get lucky with a match the police might have. Confident in both, Dan begrudgingly went back into a bothered state and rushed back over to his door.

"Here you go," he tensely vocalized, handing over the money long before he reached the door.

"Is there anything else I can do?"

"Yes," Mr. Pancake replied to Dan's irritation.

"Please spread the word on social media and to anyone you talk to. If anyone knows anything, we are asking they call the Helena Heights Police Department as soon as possible. If anyone wants to donate money, they can contact either the police department or the hotline we set up," he answered as he put Dan's money into his envelope and then pulled out a xeroxed card.

"Sorry this looks sloppy. We had to rush everything this morning. It has both our number and the number to the PD if you don't feel comfortable calling us."

"Okay, thanks old sport for what you're doing. I'll tell everyone I know. Be safe okay!"

Peter Pancake didn't bother Dan anymore and respectfully left his house walking in the direction of Beth's house. Watching him do so, Dan looked both ways to see if he could see a parked car to which he might have driven. Not see one was concerning but didn't necessarily mean anything since he could have been dropped off with a return ride coming later.

Once he was about halfway to Beth's, Dan went back inside and stewed over what Peter said. Picking apart what words he used, any facial expression he thought were noteworthy and even the clothing he wore, Dan jotted down these notes on a piece of paper all while Gwen questioned him.

“Did he say Heidi was going to die tonight?” Gwen asked, very upset in hearing this.

Dan didn’t answer her, but rather kept to his notes, pausing every now and again to think.

“Dan! Is that what he said? That’s what it sounded like!” Gwen added, picking up her volume and irritation towards him.

This, however, had no effect on Dan. Instead, he remained focused on his notes, writing then scribbling this or that out if he felt he wrote down a word Peter hadn’t used.

“Dan! I know that’s what he said! I shouldn’t have to even ask! You need to tell me what all else he said!” she insisted, grabbing him this time by his arm.

This contact finally triggered a response from Dan, but in a way that upset her more.

“His name was Peter Pancake... Doesn’t that sound fake? Hold on, okay!”

Now pushed to the level of irateness, Gwen stormed out of the room, towards the rear door and marched herself down his few steps. Going down these steps, Gwen noticed even Ruby was nice enough to acknowledge her concerns by not jumping on her and staying away.

“See! Ruby gets it!” she voiced, in a controlled but denouncing and demeaning way.

Dan this time just ignored her and continued doing what was on his mind. Being ahead of the game was half of what made him so successful. Planning, being cautious, being patient, and thinking out everything he could were the pillars that got him there. Although he knew ignoring Gwen was impolite and even maddeningly so for her, he still knew he had to place figuring out Peter and any motives he might have, over making Gwen happy. Especially since he knew Peter’s story about Heidi was fake.

Gwen walked about twenty feet from the house and fumed over Dan's stubborn introversion. Feeling they had to talk about Heidi's situation now, Gwen simmered for about ten more minutes until she heard Dan say something to her.

"I'm sorry for ignoring you. Let me work in my office for a little bit and I'll see what I can find out. Come inside and try to relax. Heidi will be fine. Try reading one of the books I got you. I know that can have the ability of calming some people down."

Being the one to apologize first did soothe her some, although this time she ignored him by not saying anything or turning around. Instead, she stared out into the field and waited until she felt Dan had left to do his work.

Chapter 27

Two hours passed before Gwen heard or saw from Dan. In that time, Gwen calmed herself down enough to go back inside. Still agitated, she decided against cleaning anything else, but did eventually pick up the love story Dan had purchased.

Enjoying at least the beginning of the book, Gwen read about seven chapters before she heard the door from the room Dan was in open. Mellowing out, Gwen this time had a hard time ignoring him and looked his way when he started to speak.

“I was wrong. Peter Jenson Pancake was his real name,” Dan opened with.

“He’s twenty-nine, married, and lives just outside of Helena Heights. There’s actually a whole family of Pancakes in the area. I wouldn’t have guessed,” he added with a little amusement while looking down at his notes in an attempt to try and show Gwen he was doing work and wasn’t just blowing off the topic.

Gwen didn’t initially respond to this until it was clear he was waiting for her to say something back.

“What about Heidi? It’s almost three. I heard that guy say if the abductor didn’t get the money he wants tonight, she’s dead.”

“Don’t buy into Kerry’s lies. That’s a cooked-up story just as much as the one in your hands. Heidi will be fine.”

“But you said Peter gave us his real name. So he did that but then gave you a false story?” Gwen countered with.

“You know, I got fooled a little. When I started talking to him, I thought between his name and him asking about my phone, that he was a bad guy. But I thought about it some more and looked him up. I think he is just being used. I think he personally has good intents, he’s just unfortunately inattentive to the bigger picture and is being misled. But Kerry is getting desperate.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear him say anything about Kerry or anything that sounded desperate besides for Heidi. Where is that coming from? Did I miss something?”

“It was in the stuff I read. One of Kerry’s minions instructed the group Peter was working with to mention the cell phone alerts. Then when Peter and anyone else walking around are done, they will have a wrap-up meeting. In that meeting, if Peter or anyone else says someone missed the alert, they will ask why. Kerry knows I don’t have a cell phone, so if I would have told Peter I didn’t get the alert or I don’t have a phone, my house would have gotten flagged as a potential lead. Pretty clever outside the box thinking on their part,” Dan replied, talking more about the phone idea than what Gwen wanted to hear about.

“I guess I’m missing the desperate part there. Did Peter give something away?”

“Yes and no. Looking him up led me from one person to another. Some of this is speculation, but figuring out who Peter’s handler was, I looked over his recent text messages and got a whiff of what is probably Kerry’s plan B, if he can’t get us.”

Hearing him out, Gwen didn’t interrupt Dan, letting him explain what he had although she was curious how he figured out and then read whoever’s text messages.

“Since Kerry is running out of time and knows if I’m still around his heist will be muddled at best, he is trying to pull off a fast one. He is leaking information about his pretend intentions on the day of the bank’s transfer, so he can secretly swoop in a few days prior without me being there. Pretty smart, but he has too many talkers and moving parts to keep track of.”

“Did he give an exact day and did this handler say anything about Heidi?” Gwen asked, sticking with Kerry’s Heidi narrative.

“Offhandedly yes, two days before the bank’s move. His texts advised they bribed the head of security to not go with actual police security in a ‘cost-cutting’ measure. Instead, they are going to pay a private security detail to watch over the facility prior to the transfer. Kerry’s men will then come in two days before the transfer date while

the private security team is watching over the vault. The valuables will then be pulled out of the vault during this time and watched over by any of the security guards that agree to go along with Kerry.”

“Okay but both are still security, I don’t see the difference?”

“The difference is the private security guards don’t have guns. That bank’s head of security is leaving these guards out to dry. It’s a lot easier for Kerry’s men to impose their will over the private security detail because of this disarmed fact. So unfortunately for these guards, they will either have to accept a payoff or be shot. Honestly probably shot, because that costs less and Kerry doesn’t need to worry about loose lips later on.”

“You sure?”

“Oh I’m sure. They would much rather get rid of me and thwart the transfer the day of without me present. That would cost Kerry less, be a lot cleaner and cause less death which equals less attention. But he is now hedging his bets if he can’t get me to bite on Heidi.”

“Did you find anything on Heidi?” Gwen asked again since Dan brought it up.

Grimacing in frustration over how Gwen wasn’t listening to what he told her, Dan again said his piece about the matter.

“The Heidi thing is nothing more than a treat for us to grab a hold of. He’s giving us something we want hoping for a reaction. Gwen. Heidi is fine.”

Gwen herself now disagreed with him from a cautionary standpoint. She felt that if Kerry was this bad, he might very well hurt Heidi just to send a message to her and everyone else. However, she also didn’t want to argue with Dan about it, seeing that he had already made up his mind. Instead, she switched the topic to something else.

“Any chance you might be willing to tell me how you figured out the different ways of separation between Peter, you, and Kerry based off just knowing Peter’s name?”

“Nope, sorry. I told you enough of it already.”

“Okay then, how is your shoulder doing today? I thought I saw a walker at your mom’s house. I can get that for you if you want?” she said, confused inside while trying to display an indifferent air of herself.

“Stiff but better. I’m just going to have to remember, no more windows.”

Chapter 28

Gwen tried to be polite the rest of the day as Dan frequently went in and out of his computer room, closing it behind him each time. Feeling a clock ticking away just above her, Gwen paced the house for a while before picking up her book. This was only a slight distraction that lasted until she noticed Peter walking down the street. Talking on his cell phone and heading back in the direction he originally came, she couldn't help but think he was probably calling someone to pick him up.

Contemplating talking to Peter herself about Heidi, Dan interrupted this idea by coming out of his room and asking her a question.

“Do you know a William Stone?”

“No. I can't say I do. Why?”

“He's just someone I'm hearing a lot about and when I searched for him, I'm hitting a lot of dead ends. More than normal. So I was hoping maybe you might know him or might have heard of him,” he asked calmly, not giving off any indication he was concerned of this Mr. Stone.

“No, definitely not in my personal life. As far as when I did work for Kerry, not that I'm aware of, but I also didn't ask for everyone's name either.”

“Okay. I just thought I'd ask. I'll figure it out, I just thought if you knew who he was it might save me some time. Sorry I'm not being the best host. Are you okay out here?”

“Yeah, I mean, I can't say I'm overwhelmed with activities to do, but I'll just read some more. Hey by the way, I just saw Peter walk by. He was at your mom's house for a while. You don't think she said anything to him do you?”

Hearing this Dan instantly started to laugh, before calming

himself down and explaining.

“For him that might have been the problem. She probably talked too much. I’m sure she cornered him like she does everyone and slowly beat him into submission with her endless banter. Yeah she said stuff to him alright, much more than he ever expected.”

Flipping her thoughts towards how Dan explained it, Gwen also chuckled remembering how she carried on and on about any topic.

“No, my mom is pretty crafty. She talked about everything but me, you, or Heidi. What kind of candy she likes. If Pluto should be a planet or not. Do animals have accents or lisps? I’m sure he learned quite a bit from her.”

“I’m guessing she has asked you some of those questions at some point?”

“Oh yes. Them and many more. And the weird thing is, she somehow always has a new question or topic. She hardly ever asks any of her oddball questions more than once. So I at least have to give her that,” he said, as he smiled thinking about her.

“But anyways, I’m sorry to say this but since Kerry is panicking, lots and lots of information is coming in. Almost more than I can handle. So I’ll be in my room. If you need me just knock. Again, I’m sorry, but they’re talking more than a group of teenage girls.”

With that, Dan turned from her and went back into his room. This left her with the smokey house, her books, and Ruby, who was digging a hole next to the door. Although she liked the book, her mind slipped back to Heidi as she looked at a clock. Now being almost five, both the clock and the waning sun, visible from the rear of the house, flushed her mind with frenzied thoughts of Heidi and an ever-shortening rope.

These thoughts compounded by also having barely any new information coming in, pulled at the “what if” part of her mind until she remembered Peter had a phone. This epiphany cleared her mind and told her instantly what she needed to do.

Trying to be quiet, Gwen edged her way over to the front door while looking back to make sure Ruby was still occupied with her

digging. Seeing Ruby walk across the yard to fetch a ball, Gwen stopped in her tracks so as not to catch her attention. After Ruby retrieved the ball, she watched as she carried it to the hole she had been digging, and then started to bury it. With her attention engrossed in hiding the ball, Gwen took up this moment and skipped out the door and away from Ruby's sight.

Now free and clear of the house, Gwen jogged in the direction Peter went in an attempt to catch up with him. Not seeing him from the roadway, she continued on for a distance hoping if he did call for a ride, it had not picked him up yet.

Gwen continued her pace down the road for about a mile. Still not seeing him, her hope of being able to use his phone faded the further and further out she got. Seeing only a big hill ahead of her, Gwen decided to get to the top of this spot. If when she reached this higher vantage point, she still could not see him, she would turn back and hope Dan did not notice her absence.

This ever-slowng run up the hill pushed her endurance back to her high school years. Feeling the fact she hadn't run like this in years, she just about reached a walk by the time she made it to the point she wanted. Bending over for a breath, Gwen looked down the roadway and only saw empty road. This was disappointing for her, until she noticed a man leaning against a solitary tree just off the roadway. From the distance she was at, this man appeared to be Peter who looked to be either resting or maybe even waiting on his ride.

Energized enough to keep going, Gwen collected herself and continued on at what probably appeared to be something between a slow jog and a fast walk. Laboring her way down the road, her exerted stammer caught the eye of this man, who suspiciously perked up upon seeing her. Seeing she had his attention, she waved to him so he knew she wanted to talk.

Gwen could tell by his reaction, her distressed look startled him into confusion, although he didn't put up a defense or tell her to stay back. Reaching him and noticing it was officially Peter, she quickly realized she didn't know what she was going to say. Deciding to just ad-lib it, she simply let her mouth start to talk.

"I'm sorry but my phone is out of power, and I have an

emergency that I need to call my friend about,” she came up with on the spot.

Taking some time for a couple of breaths, she then continued.

“I saw you walk by on a phone and was hoping I could borrow it. I can pay you if you want?”

“Sure, I guess. But are you okay? Where did you come from?” he asked, looking at her strangely.

Still tired, she held up her hand for a moment before answering his questions.

“I was at the house with the skunk. I’m fine, it’s just very rural out here and I saw you walk by with a phone. Could I borrow it? It’s important!”

“Yeah sure,” he skeptically responded, pulling his phone out and handing it over.

“You don’t need to pay me anything. If you need a phone and it’s an emergency, I’m just happy to help.”

Gwen smiled and shook her head to this. Taking in a few more breaths, she finally stood up and asked if it would be alright if she had some privacy.

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll just walk a little that way. If it’s an emergency, take your time,” Peter politely replied.

“Are you sure everything is okay miss?” he then asked one more time before giving her privacy.

“Yep. I just really needed a phone. Everything is fine, thank you!”

“Okay then. Just tell me when you’re done,” Peter said while slowly giving her some space.

Gwen waited a little while for Peter to get out of hearing range before she dialed up her friend Delilah. Hoping she would pick up, the

phone rang twice before she heard her friend's voice.

"Hello?" Delilah said, not knowing the number that appeared on her phone.

"Deli, it's me, Gwen. I need to talk to you!"

"Sure. Whose phone are you on?" Delilah asked, not knowing what Gwen wanted was urgent.

"A friend's. Hey what do you know about this missing Heidi girl... and I'm not talking about what's in the papers. Have you heard anything going on behind the scenes or from someone that knows Kerry?" Gwen said trying to muffle her voice, so Peter didn't hear her say Heidi's name.

"Yeah, I did hear some stuff about that. Someone was saying you worked with her recently. Is that true, because I'm hearing there is a lot of stuff going on around that and none of it sounds good."

"Yes, I did. Do you know if she is okay or if there is some semblance of truth in what is being said?"

"I think it's a ruse but I'm not sure, it's a pretty hot topic right now. I only heard a few things and didn't ask any questions. I do know Kerry is calling in some major help for something he is planning. It's said to be big."

"You think it's a ruse? How are you coming to that conclusion?" Gwen asked, not liking the word think.

"It's just stuff I've heard. I'm getting the impression Heidi is okay, but that's not what's on the news or in the papers. It's just a little jumbled up right now. I could text Kerry if you wanted me to?"

"No!" Gwen said, loud enough to catch Peter's attention.

"I mean, no don't. He's... he's not a good person Deli. I think I might be in over my head. Please don't say anything about me or this phone call. I just wanted to find out if Heidi was in danger or not." Gwen said as she heard a car coming down the street.

Looking in that direction, she noticed a nice black luxury car approaching. Upon seeing this car, Peter reacted and started waving to get the car's attention. Feeling off about this, Gwen asked Delilah to hold on as she hid Peter's phone and stood still.

When the vehicle got close enough to Peter, he leaned down and spoke to the driver. Having a short conversation, Peter eventually got into the back seat of the car. Not knowing what to do, Gwen slowly started to make her way over to the tree Peter had been using since it was the only thing around.

Reaching the tree at the same time the car made it over to her, the car first slowed down then stopped. Having its windows up, the driver of the vehicle rolled his window down to reveal it was John, the young man who drove off and parked her car for her while she was at the Brodel Ball-Bearing factory.

"I didn't expect to see you here Ms. Skippski," he painfully uttered to her with a smile.

"Jump on in. Kerry will be happy to see you," he then added, causing Gwen to panic.

Frozen in what to do, Gwen didn't respond to John and also didn't walk towards his car. Seeing she was not listening, he put the car into park and stepped out himself.

"Ms. Skippski, I think it's best you come with me. We can sort everything out while we drive back to town."

Being so unnerved by the transpiring events, Gwen was only able to shake her head "no" before taking a few steps backwards.

"Come on now Gwen. Let's just..." he said, before Gwen found her feet and started to run towards Dan's house.

The sight of Gwen running caused John to chase her although this mini foot race didn't last long. Gwen was still tired from her jog down the street and had bad footing running from the tree, through a ditch, and onto the road.

John tackled her at about the time she made it to the roadway in

which they both fell to the ground. Wrestling a little bit, John kept trying to tell her to stop, while Gwen started to call out for help. Seeing this all transpire, Peter got out of the car and ran over to the skirmish.

“Get off her, what are you doing?” Peter said, grabbing at John.

Now almost fighting two people, John released his grip on Gwen and stood up. Then without a word, John reached into his waistband and pulled out a gun. Pointing it at Peter, he gave him no warning and shot him. Seeing him fall, Gwen screamed out as John walked over to Peter to make sure he was dead.

“Now Ms. Skippski, I need you to get into the car.”

Chapter 29

“Peter told me you came from a house not too far from where we met,” John said while driving, hoping he could get as much out of her as possible in order to win over some favor with Kerry.

“He said there were only two houses down there and that you were at the one on the west side... with a guy. I’m guessing that was Mr. Silver. Is that all correct?”

Sitting in the passenger seat of the car with her hands bound together with zip ties, Gwen did not answer. Instead she barely moved, looking half downwards and towards the door panel with only the bumpiness of the road changing her stance. This non-action wasn’t what John wanted, feeling he had a golden opportunity fall in his lap. However he knew he had to be nice to her to get her to talk

“Gwen, the more you show you are cooperating with us, the more likely Mr. Cain will forgive anything you said or did against him. I won’t even tell him you tried to run. You can just tell him Mr. Silver was holding you against your will and you broke free when Peter showed up. He’ll forgive you if you play the victim here.”

This too was met with silence as she remained still, mute to his offer and words.

“Alright. You have about twenty minutes before we get to the cellar. Think about it. The more I can tell him and the less time he needs to spend questioning you, the better your chances are. Gwen, you can still walk away from this and probably profit as well.”

Half of the twenty minutes went by without a word from either John or Gwen. John drove, occasionally looking over at Gwen without turning his head. Gwen continued to keep her head down, blank to the world. This eventually got old for John. Frustrated with Gwen, he felt this was his most opportune time at furthering himself with Kerry, but he needed her to talk. So, John tried a different approach with reward and inevitability in mind.

“Gwen,” he said in a lower voice.

“Heidi doesn’t know what’s going on and she already talked. This missing girl stuff Peter was peddling and the news is talking about was only a ruse to flush Mr. Silver out. Heidi gave us a lot of details about Mr. Silver, but she couldn’t remember stuff like where he lived. Because she talked, Mr. Cain set her and her family up. They live on the beach now. They have the good life. I could call her mom right now and she could confirm all of this for you. That can be you. Mr. Silver is done and has nowhere to run. You can’t help him. Help yourself, Gwen. Tell me what kind of weapons he has, what kind of security he has, and Mr. Cain will treat you the same way he treated Heidi and her family. It’s a good deal Gwen.”

Hearing this, Gwen finally changed her fixed posture a bit. Instead of letting the roads contour randomly jostle her head around, this time she gave a definitive nod to what John said followed by a brief reply.

“I don’t need thirty pieces of silver,” she stated before returning to her prior stoic position.

This assertion confirmed to John that she understood, but that she wasn’t going to talk. Almost heartbroken realizing he wasn’t going to be able to provide Kerry with some of the key information he knew he wanted, John soured and verbally lashed out at Gwen.

“Fine. Throw all that away. Enjoy bussing tables and mopping floors for the next forty years, if you’re even that lucky.”

Unbothered by his scolding, Gwen remained voiceless for the remainder of the ride. Not uttering another word nor asking any questions. Leaving John to stew over his failure in extracting any information, he likewise went quiet, allowing his erratic driving to show his displeasure.

The remainder of the drive passed by quickly. John freely used as much of the road as he wanted with little regard for anyone else. Gwen thought to herself how she might be able to get out of this mess and also warn Dan. With her mind now calming from the sight of a murder, then being abducted herself, Gwen remembered she should still have Peter’s phone.

Renewed with this sliver of hope, Gwen pretended to adjust herself in her seat in an attempt to make sure the phone didn't fall out of her pocket when John tackled her. Wiggling just enough, she heard a muffled beep that gave her the impression the phone had just turned off. Clearing her throat as a mask for this tone, Gwen remained statuesque the rest of the drive, trying not to nudge any more numbers and hoping nobody decided to call Peter.

Not knowing where the cellar was or even what it looked like, Gwen waited patiently as John pulled off the main road and started to work his way around a residential area. Driving by a few houses and apartment complexes, they abruptly left the residential area and pulled off into an old "Arthur's Crude" gas station parking lot. Examining it while they proceeded, the gas station looked to no longer serve gas as its pumps were mostly hollow and no longer had hoses. Regardless of this, it did still look half operational as the convenience store portion of the station appeared open as was apparent by some lights on and a person who could be seen walking down an aisle.

When John put his vehicle in park, he honked his horn. Hearing this honk, the man inside walked over to the cash register area and pushed a button. This button triggered a garage door to open on the near side of where John had parked. Once the door was open, a light came on and three men could be seen near the rear of the garage waiving him in. Putting the vehicle back in drive, John pulled in slowly as Gwen finally asked a question.

"Is this the Cellar?"

"Nope," he coolly replied, watching the two men tell him to stop when he got towards the rear of the garage.

Alarmed he was obviously stopping somewhere before he took her to Kerry, Gwen tightened up and looked around for something to protect herself with.

"Get out," John said, not moving from his driver's seat, obviously still upset.

Unsure why, Gwen didn't move and gave John a worried look instead. Seeing this look of distress, John explained what was going to

happen.

“These men are going to make sure you don’t have any bugs or tracking devices on you. Mr. Cain recently had this problem, so he wants everyone to stop here first before going to the Cellar.”

With one of the men now opening and holding the door for her, Gwen noticed the more senior man had walked over to John’s window while the third man moved along her side of the vehicle after retrieving a large wand.

“No worries ma’am, he’s just going to scan you to make sure you have nothing on you. Don’t worry about anything. Do you have anything we should know about?” the man holding the door inquired as John could be heard advising the senior employee of Peter’s body in the trunk.

Not wanting to tell him about the cell phone, Gwen felt trapped to do so since she figured the wand would find it anyways.

“I have a phone,” she uttered with some uneasiness evident in her voice.

“Okay, we will take that. Anything else?”

“No, but the phone’s not mine,” she stated, trying to pull the phone out of her back pocket while her hands were still zip tied.

“That doesn’t matter too much ma’am. It can still be used for tracking and other things. That’s it then?”

“Yeah that’s it.”

“Okay, step over to this gentleman here and he will cut off those ties and give you a once over just to be sure.”

Noticing John did not introduce them and none of the men stated their names, spooked Gwen in the idea they did not want to be known.

“Right there’s fine. Just raise your arms and stand still. You don’t have any medical devices do you? Like an implanted defibrillator?” he asked before proceeding.

“No. I don’t have anything like that,” she responded, now having a little relief he was asking these types of questions, indicating to her he more than likely didn’t want to harm anyone.

Upon her answering this, the man ran the wand over her with it only hitting on her belt buckle. Confident she had nothing, he nodded to John and told Gwen she could get back into the car. Wanting to delay her meeting with Kerry as long as possible, hoping maybe Dan was on his way, Gwen asked the guy who inspected and approved her if others who had been checked, were set free or seen again.

“It’s not my business ma’am,” he replied, knowing he would be in trouble if he did anything more than what he was paid to do.

This wasn’t the answer she wanted and ended any idea of furthering their conversation with more small talk. Still holding the door for her, the other man chimed in, but only to tell her it was time to go. Stuck with this inevitability, Gwen did so while hearing one of them advise they would call ahead his clearance.

John thanked the men as the garage door opened. After exiting the station, John turned around and went back the way he came for about a mile before turning down a couple smaller streets. These streets lead to a road that had several older mansions, each of which sat on very large lots. Expecting “The Cellar” to be on or one of these estates, Gwen was surprised when John pulled into the driveway of the most dilapidated home she had ever seen.

Wondering if John might in some way be joking, he pulled up to what she felt was a shed that had one man standing outside of it. This man opened the car door for her upon stopping, then gestured for her to enter the shed. Not feeling she had a choice, Gwen did so soon followed by John.

Upon entering the rickety building, she noticed two more men inside, each of which looked the part of a security guard. Both looked upon her with blank stares, neither of which saying a word. Pausing without knowing what to do or where to go, John opened a door in the center of the room that led down a long hallway.

“This way,” he said, leading this time.

Following his lead, John led her down the declining hallway. Having the damp but cool feeling of a cave, they eventually reached a larger section which looked to have been given some attention. Part of this section was walled off and had a door. John led her to this door and stepped in. The inside of this room gave off the air of a luxury suite for what its conditions allowed. Having a couch, a television on the wall, some nicely carved wooden shelves, and a business-like desk in the center of the room. This all was monitored by a formidable-looking man who stood in the corner.

“Have a seat. Mr. Cain will be with you shortly,” the man said without any expression or emotion.

Not waiting to be told twice, both John and Gwen sat down at the desk in the two chairs that were obviously for visitors.

“I already advised his men of what is going on, so don’t try to pull a fast one,” John lightly noted to Gwen before hearing Kerry step in.

“I don’t like it down here,” Kerry started off with, after shutting his door.

“It’s dark, damp, wet, and has a musty smell. It doesn’t matter how much I fix the place up, what I use to make the place smell nice, or how many dehumidifiers I have, it’s still a cave,” he added, taking his time to walk to his seat.

“But that seems to be at an end. Mostly. Right now I have a dozen of my men surrounding Mr. Silver’s house. I’m going to be sending more soon. Just to be sure. But what I need to know from you is any of his little secrets or tricks he might try to pull on my guys. You were around him for several days, what did you see? What did you find out?” he finished with, walking around his desk and taking his seat.

With the question being meant for Gwen, Kerry looked at her but instead received a reply from John.

“I asked her that, Mr. Cain. She won’t talk. I asked her about guns and traps. I even told her about the deal you gave Heidi, but she’s being stubborn. She’s not thinking.”

Turning his attention to John, Kerry gave him a contemptuous look, devaluing him in front of Gwen in that moment. Getting the obvious message, John sank down in his chair and gave off the sense of a scorn dog tucking its tail. Refocusing on Gwen, he added to his question.

“You can’t help him, Gwen. You can only help yourself. So, give me something and life will be easier for you.”

Picking up his pen and waiting for an answer, Gwen calmly closed her eyes for a minute, sending Kerry the message she wasn’t talking. Seeing this, Kerry leaned back in his chair and looked over to his guard. Being given this cue, the guard nodded in return and grabbed a thick-foot-long stick that resembled a small billy club. Walking over to and stopping behind Gwen, Kerry spoke again.

“I know he has guns, I’m just looking for what kind. I know he has one or more secrets at or around his house, I just want to know where and what. I even know he has a family Gwen. A secret of his I’m sure, but that leverage alone could end this. Gwen, the more I know the cleaner this will be and the less attention this will get. So tell me what you know or saw?”

Kerry then went quiet, waiting for her reply as she could almost feel his guard standing over her. Seeing firsthand what Kerry was willing to do, the idea of a bluff fell short of her feeling of impending harm. With these thoughts teetering in her mind, Kerry upped the ante with a quite disconcerting remark.

“Let’s try jogging your memory,” he said, feeling she was taking too long.

Gwen immediately closed her eye and braced herself, pulling her shoulders up while trying to raise her hands over her head. As she did this, she heard a loud “whap,” followed by a battered grunt and thud. Opening her eye to see what had happened, she noticed John slumped over, half off his chair and unresponsive. With the only sign he was still alive being a haunting gurgle, Kerry’s guard took a step back and looked over at her.

“Mr. Ortiz, if you would, put him in the trunk with his friend and

we will dispose of the two of them later,” Kerry said, looking at Gwen to see what her reaction would be.

Aghast and almost breathless by this new world of violence she had found herself in, Gwen didn’t want to say anything, but accidentally blurted out what went through her mind.

“He’s still alive!”

“The compactor will take care of that,” Kerry replied, as he motioned for his guard to carry on.

The guard pulled John out of the room and closed the door. Now alone, Kerry continued his line of questioning about Mr. Silver, feeling his show of force reinforced his seriousness.

“Information Gwen. Guns, family, secrets?”

Under pressure, her mind raced in what to say or do. One thought that ultimately dawned on her was that she might actually have a slight upper hand. Kerry had already shown how fast he was willing to get rid of someone, but he hadn’t done so with her. He could have had his guard strike her, but he struck John instead. It was clear he was trying to intimidate her, which meant he didn’t have full control. Feeling she had nothing to lose, Gwen gambled a bit by being bold and asking him a question.

“Why would I say anything like that to you? You’ve already shown how little you care about others. If I gave you what you wanted, what would stop you from putting me into a compactor?”

Staggered by this, but also liking her nerve, Kerry smiled to her bold grit and explained his stance while also giving her an offer.

“I said I want this to be clean. I said that because I care about public opinion. People see me as a successful businessman, not a criminal. I need it to remain that way. If in this case I have things blowing up, gunshots going off for days, or whatever else you can think of, that draws attention. The more attention Mr. Silver gets holding up in his house, the more people will ask questions and wonder what’s going on. I can explain away or do away with one or two people, but an entire city or county is much harder. The more low-key I can keep this

and my other activities, the less people ask questions, and the less people want answers. Make sense?”

“Yes,” Gwen replied, not giving Kerry much.

“Good. As far as my men, you’re half right. I would rather not kill people for the attention reason I just mentioned. However I don’t have a shortage of gullible, vulnerable, or desperate people wanting easy cash. So if I have someone who is an issue, someone gives away my Heidi leverage like John, or makes a big mistake like Theo, I can easily replace them. In fact, some people like the person John killed have bought into what I have the media pushing so much, that I don’t even need to pay them. He bit into that hook so hard, I don’t think anyone would’ve been able to tell him any different despite the fact the narrative he was peddling was a lie the entire time. You see Gwen, people are expendable, and there’s no reason for me to keep someone around when they are causing me an issue... regardless of how much they have done for me in the past,” he explained with a pause, letting this idea sink in about her or anyone else’s prior work for him.

“But you Gwen, you find yourself in an advantageous spot because I need something only you have. I know you at least have some of his weapon information based on the way you respond to my earlier questioning. People innately don’t like to lie. You didn’t say no when I first asked you about the guns, which tells me you know something about his weapons. What is it, or should I go after his family instead?”

“He doesn’t have a family,” Gwen confidently replied.

“Maybe if you didn’t kill Theo, he would have told you that. He is by himself.”

“Did he say that? He’s lying to you Gwen. He has a family. We could make this very simple if you could give me just that little nugget of information,” he responded with after laughing at her response.

“He doesn’t, Kerry. Use your own logic the other way. Yes I saw some guns, but I didn’t see or hear anything that would make me think he has a family.”

“So be it Ms. Skippski. Be fooled. Buy into his illusions. Then tell me about his guns and traps... and keep in mind two things as you

think this over. I get rid of things I don't need. You know this. I also could have already killed you, but I didn't. So with the knowledge I could have already done so but didn't as my promise I won't, tell me what you know?"

Chapter 30

“Mr. Wells, where do you want us to go?” a guard asked as Kerry’s men loosely surrounded Mr. Silver’s house.

“Just keep his house surrounded for now. If you see a gap, plug it in. I was told to wait for a William Stone before we do anything. He is the expert Kerry brought in,” Mr. Wells said in response.

The younger guard acknowledged this order and went around the line, directing the men here and there as to have Mr. Silver’s house encircled as evenly as possible. Having little cover anywhere, some of the men started to dig trenches the best they could using what they had. A few men used nearby rocks or sticks, while others took more drastic measures to safeguard themselves and used the butt of their rifle as a crude shovel.

With only some of them having body armor, the number one request from the majority of the guards was along these protective lines. A shovel, a barrier, a helmet, even a car that could be pulled into the field as a means of shielding themselves from Mr. Silver. Each had been warned prior to being dispatched to his house of his history and talents, and none of the men felt comfortable just laying prone in his field with nothing in front of them.

Receiving these requests, Mr. Wells radioed in what he needed. Seeing this, a guard close to Mr. Wells tried stopping him, remembering they were advised Mr. Silver could listen in and track the location of any phone.

“Mr. Wells, don’t do that!” this guard said, trying to keep both his head and voice down, while still catching his attention.

“He’s going to know where you’re at and what you’re saying!”

“We are going to need shovels, any kind of armor you can find, a couple thermal imagers now that it’s getting dark, and have everyone that is coming with Mr. Stone drive separate. We will use each of their cars as protection,” Mr. Wells said, finishing his conversation on his

overly large phone before responding to the guard.

“Kerry special ordered these secure phones. They scramble our location and can’t be hacked. So as long as the two people talking are both using them, we will be fine. Is there anything else the men need?”

Relieved to hear this, the guard thought for a second before responding.

“How long do you think we are going to be waiting?”

“I don’t know. I was just told to wait. I can’t imagine it being too long. We will just have to be patient,” Mr. Wells replied, watching Mr. Silver’s house to see if he could see any movement.

“Okay well, tell them to also bring some water the next time you talk to them.”

“All right,” he replied, trying to concentrate on Mr. Silver’s house.

In this delayed wait, almost all the guards did the same. Each had their orders. First was to make the perimeter around the house which was already accomplished. Second was to hold that perimeter, making sure nobody got in or out. Finally, third was to shoot Mr. Silver on sight, but only if it was a clean shot. A simple pass by the window wasn’t enough unless they were already in the thick of the fight.

Watching his house as dusk started to turn to night, a few of Mr. Silver’s lights slowly popped on. This was not done all at once which would have strongly indicated a light timer. Rather it was done independently, with one room going on and off and without two lights going on in different rooms simultaneously, which would have also indicated a light timer.

The dark also introduced their first sight of Mr. Silver. This, though, was only vaguely, which did not allow the attempted shot Mr. Wells advised. Each guard in turn also eventually noticed this as he seemed to spend most of his time in the kitchen and dining room. However this was not absolute, as he occasionally used the restroom and even opened a couple windows while being careful not to give himself away.

Unfortunately for the guards, the wait to either see Mr. Silver or for Mr. Stone to arrive at their location went on for much longer than what was assumed. Not being set up for a cold standoff eventually spurred complaints amongst the men.

“Let’s just burn him out. That will end this pretty quick,” one guard said.

“We better be getting extra for all this waiting,” another guard remarked who was within hearing range of Mr. Wells.

Feeling that Mr. Silver was only fortifying his position more and more, Mr. Wells also started to get impatient until he heard a voice.

“Yer man’s still in there now is he?”

Not recognizing the Irish-sounding voice, Mr. Wells turned around and noticed two men walking his way. One was an older man using a knotty black cane to help him walk. Dressed nicely but casually, he was clean-shaven but had bushy eyebrows and a very serious face. Next to him was a much younger man. He was probably in his early twenties, was also dressed nicely, and carrying two large cases, seemingly so for the older man.

“Don’t stall the ball now, is he in there or not?” the older man said, with little concern he was walking up to a group of men holding rifles.

Not expecting William Stone to be an older man, Mr. Wells made sure it was him before going forward.

“I’m sorry, are you William Stone?”

The older man looked at him with great question on his face. Giving off the feeling he was already doubting the way Mr. Wells was handling the situation, he spoke up briefly.

“Aye. I’m William. But the last names O’Dwyer not Stone. Stone was just code to pass it by Silver. You are Mr. Wells I suppose?” he said without reaching out his hand for an official welcome.

“I am. Kerry said you were coming and to wait for you. So we have just been holding the perimeter like he asked,” Mr. Wells explained, feeling William didn’t like that they were just watching the house.

William didn’t respond to this. Instead, he looked around to survey the land, the positions of the men, and Mr. Silver’s house. Seeing in the fading light a couple of windows open, William signaled to his young assistant to open up one of his cases.

“Here. Your lads are going to need these.”

Opening the case, the younger man pulled out two gas masks and handed them over to Mr. Wells and the guard who was closest to him. Grabbing a couple more out of the case, the younger man started handing them out to all the nearby guards as William got one for himself.

“Are you blocking the road so that no peelers show up?”

Holding the mask not knowing if he should put it on or not, Mr. Wells looked at him funny, not understanding the word peeler.

“Peelers? Coppers? Police?” William said, going down the list of what he meant.

“We don’t want any Peelers!”

“Oh yes. Yes, both ends of the road are blocked off. Plus Kerry paid off the captain at the sheriff’s department. So if we end up making noise, the police won’t be responding.”

William nodded to this then looked into his other case as his younger assistant grabbed more face masks. Pulling out what appeared to be a thermal imager, he looked over to his younger assistant and voiced his disapproval of his pace.

“C’mon now! Leg it out a bit or I’ll show you what this shillelagh usta be for!” he said quite loudly, while referring to his cane which he vigorously shook in the air.

The young man quickened his stride to almost a run, racing

around to each guard with a mask. This was done so with the help of some of Mr. Wells' guards, who took heed to William's order by passing out masks around the other side of the house.

As this was going on, William retrieved a rather large rifle from the same case that had his thermal imager. Resting it on the ground with its tripod down, William also pulled out a couple poles that were inside the case before flipping the entire case upside-down. This turned it into a makeshift table, where he then screwed each leg on so it could stand.

William then went to the other case and pulled out a folded-up chair which he opened up. Putting the chair next to his makeshift table, he then retrieved his rifle. Sitting down, William took the lens caps off his scope and looked through it, seeing if he was satisfied with his position and distance.

Upon his assistant returning, he also searched through his case and pulled out a single scope. Putting this scope near William, he also adjusted what he was looking at in accordance with William's instructions. Once both were set up and ready, William explained to Mr. Wells that Gwen had seen Mr. Silver use a gas canister inside his house. Since this was so, William suspected he would use these same canisters on them upon an initial assault.

William advised Mr. Silver would more than likely continue using these canisters until he noticed they were not working. He then felt when this failed, he would try to blind Kerry's guards with the use of several lights Gwen had noticed around his house. This would help conceal him and any tricks he might have until Kerry's guards thwarted this idea with their rifles.

Once both these tactics had run their course, he advised they would take advantage of the fact he was the only person inside. By this, they would create a diversion to get Mr. Silver's attention on one side of the house, while covertly trying to enter the other side of the house. However, Kerry wanted to avoid using fire and explosives due to the possibility of outside attention. So these measures were only to be used as a last resort.

"Did you want to try and negotiate with him?" Mr. Wells asked, feeling this was passed over by William.

“Mr. Silver’s not an eejit. He knows Kerry won’t be worrying about a capture unless it gets out of hand. So us faffin around will only give him more time to take it up to ninety on us. No negotiations.”

“Okay,” Mr. Wells said, having his guards spread the word of the plans while leaving the timing up to him.

William waited for a while, sitting at his suitcase desk and looking through his scope often. Telling his young assistant a few things here and there, he finally broke his silence with Mr. Wells when the bathroom light came on.

“We’re going to give it a lash. He just went into the jacks. That will give us a lead with his britches down,” he said while grabbing his mask but not yet putting it on.

Following his lead, Mr. Wells signaled to a group of men he had on the western side of the house. These men got up slowly from their improvised foxholes and grabbed some shovels in order to make some noise. Clanging them together, they slowly approached his house until three to four gas canisters were propelled out of the open windows, emitting a thick cloud of smoke over the field.

“Ha ha!” William laughed loudly.

“How ya getting on now boyo!” he then exclaimed, excited to see his prediction coming to light.

Now putting on his mask with the smoke starting to spread, William held up his arms, signaling to all of the guards he wanted them to stay in their spots. Mr. Silver, on the other hand, continued to fire off canister after canister for about another fifteen minutes. This, however, eventually ended when it was clear his smoke canisters were not causing the guards to run away.

“Wait!” A muffled William could be heard saying through his mask.

Then like clockwork, several bright lights turned on from the windows. Intense beyond what most the guards expected they would be, William then gave the anticipated order to shoot.

“Bang on boys!” he yelled, lifting his mask off just enough so that everyone could hear him.

Taking aimed shots in order to keep the noise to a minimum, all the lights were blown out and smothered in less than a minute. Going dark quickly again, William held up his thermal imager to see if he could spot Mr. Silver. Scanning the house with a tempered and now tense group awaiting the next inevitable order, a single shot rang out which caused all but William and his assistant to duck.

Not hearing another shot, all the men cautiously regained their composure and looked around to see what had happened. This review of the men didn't take long as one man on the east side of the house yelled out that his partner was dead. All eyes looked over to this spot only to see a slumped-over guard still holding his gun. Then another shot rang out which quickly produced the same result, but from the west side of the house this time. Now with two guards dead in only two shots, Mr. Wells turned to William to see what he wanted them to do.

“Should we go in or should we just...” he said, until another shot rang out which killed Mr. Wells.

Seeing this happen right in front of him, William noticed that Mr. Wells slumped forward instead of backwards when shot. Looking back to make sure one of his men didn't accidentally shoot him, he saw a flash from the distance, followed by another and another.

“He's got us flanked!” William yelled, as he knocked over and dove behind his makeshift table.

Hearing more and more shots go off in the distance, they were soon followed by return fire from the guards, who fired in all directions not knowing who or what to shoot at. During this, William looked around himself to see if he could spot Mr. Silver. Looking in the direction he last saw the flare of a rifle, he soon noticed other flashes in different locations. This quickly told him they were the ones surrounded and he was not fighting just Mr. Silver, but apparently several others, each of whom were well trained in shooting.

Making sure his assistant was okay, William told him to stay down as he reached for his rifle. This was for not, as one of the shooters must have been paying attention to William and shot the rifle from his

hand. Left with no other weapon, William and his assistant were forced to watch as they saw guard after guard fall until none were left.

When the shooting stopped, someone out in the distance could be heard shouting “hold” before anything else was said.

“Check them!” one man could be heard yelling as several men tactically approached Mr. O’Dwyer who had stood up, ready to take his shot in good form.

“William O’Dwyer?” one of these men said as he walked up to him and lowered his gun.

“Aye,” William replied, knowing he had been bested.

“Mr. Silver would like to have a word with you.”

William shook his head to this and looked around but didn’t see the older man Mr. Silver was. Instead, he only saw younger men wearing tactical gear and checking each foxhole for survivors. Puzzled he didn’t see Mr. Silver in this group, he was soon greeted by Mr. Silver’s recognizable voice.

“Hello William, or Mr. Stone, or whatever you are calling yourself nowadays,” Mr. Silver said as he walked from his house over.

“It’s been a long time for both of us. I’m glad you didn’t shoot that Barrett. When did you switch over to that?”

William laughed in seeing his name change didn’t fool Mr. Silver before responding.

“Just this once. I figured for the job I’d better have something grand,” he replied with a smile.

“Well that’s for sure. Is this your son?” Mr. Silver then asked, looking at William’s assistant.

“Aye, he is. William, this is Mr. Silver.”

“So you’re a junior then?” Mr. Silver added, unsure of how many William O’Dwyers they had in the family tree.

“He is. And how about your wee little one?” William senior inquired after looking around to make sure nobody else was nearby, having kept that little secret to himself.

“He grew up. I’m a grandfather now. My grandson is eight and just got done with second grade. I’ve been helping him with baseball. The kid’s a good little hitter. I had to buy one of those L-shaped net protectors so I wasn’t getting pegged. But kids grow up fast don’t they?”

“Ah yes. When did ye stop working alone?” William then asked, surprised by the help that caught him from behind.

“Today more less. It feels a little different, but I figured if you need help, then you need help. To be honest, I called some of the hounds from the neighboring communities in just the other day. However Gwen, the girl who was talking with Kerry, was here and almost spoiled my plan. Her and Ruby noticed one of the men scouting out the landscape a couple days ago. She even let Ruby go after him. He got a nice little run out of it. But I just played it off as if it was a local kid or a local hunter. Close though. If Kerry would have found out I was planning on surrounding you guys, our conversation now might be going a little differently, right?”

“Ah well, you know how contracts go,” William replied, admitting he would have kept his agreement with Kerry.

“Well then, how about a new contract? I’d be willing to do one with you if you are okay with being paid in silver?”

Chapter 31

Kerry sat up, awake in his underground office the entire night waiting for a call. Whenever his issue with Mr. Silver was resolved, Mr. Wells was to call him to let him know it was over. Not getting a call at all didn't so much worry him, but did annoy him. Since he had reluctantly given William the green light to take it as far as explosives if necessary, he felt the inevitable conclusion at some point would be a confirmation call that Mr. Silver was dead.

Getting a somewhat withdrawn shoulder from Gwen, Kerry instead joked with his guards and went over his plans on how to rob the A.M. Savings bank. Working out the finer details in who needed what took his mind off the current waiting game and allowed him to settle his displeasure in having to be patient. This was so until his phone finally rang. Upon hearing this, Kerry calmed himself and picked up the phone.

"How'd it go?" he said, confident in what the verdict would be.

"Mr. Cain," Kerry heard from an Irish voice.

"That bleedin' melter is dug in and he killed yer man. Wells I believe his name was."

Getting the opposite news he was expecting, Kerry went blank for a bit and missed part of what William said to him. Upset things weren't going his way, he eventually reset himself and started to ask some questions.

"How bad is it?"

"Oh, it's not a grand day that's for sure."

Kerry winced upon hearing this. Shaking his head in dissatisfaction, he ran his hand through his hair while thinking of what to do. Needing Mr. Silver out of the way but also not wanting to rock

the boat any more than he had to, Kerry asked William for ideas, hoping to stay away from explosives if at all possible.

“He’s gotta be knackered by now. No power and he’s been shot at least once. Do you have any sound bucks that can do a bargain so ya both can break off?”

“What do you mean sound bucks? He’s not going to care about money.” Kerry questioned William, thinking his use of the word bucks meant a payoff.

“Any relations. Not cash. Do ya know anyone in the Seanad or any Judges he can work a deal with? Relations you might have on the take?”

“I’m guessing you mean senators. Yeah, is that what he’s thinking? Did he say something like that?” Kerry asked, willing to work a deal if it meant a die-down to the situation and no extreme measures being used to flush him out.

“Naw. But if you could get some high figures to convince him this won’t go further, he might head on.”

“Okay. I’ll make some calls and see if I can get someone of the sort who is willing to work up an understanding that he keeps his life and we don’t need to turn this into an attention magnet.”

“Aye. Also, ya might want to send some more of your lads as a reminder of his choices.”

After this tentative agreement, Kerry called a Judge he knew would do it and a couple well-placed official contacts, to see if either would be willing to take up the task. Both of these figures were unfortunately out of their office in which he had to agree to a later callback. Pivoting to the hired help while waiting on these two individuals, Kerry struggled to find additional men willing to cover the house. To the majority of the men called, “more men” meant something either went wrong or was going to get worse. However this was resolved as the amount per head climbed higher and higher.

Grumbling over these new expenditures, Kerry reminded himself of just how much wealth this bank heist would yield. This, with the

addition of not having Mr. Silver in his way, would open up doors and would allow for further expansions into whatever his longings might be.

Almost giddy that he had won, Kerry stood up and told his guards it was time to pack up. This order being more for his guards than it was for him, Kerry started to direct his men to do this or that until his phone rang. Picking it up, he heard back from one of the two politicians he had contacted.

“I’m going to be brief but very direct, and I ask that you talk about business,” Representative Von Masker said to disguise what the conversation was about.

“I hear who we are working with. First, are you a fan of the first amendment?” Von asked, meaning was it safe to talk over the phone.

Understanding his wariness, Kerry tried to show him the opposite by talking openly about the topic.

“Yes. My guy advised he has no power and is surrounded. He is crippled right now, so speak freely,” Kerry replied confidently.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about but with our other business, we will need double the time to accommodate your request,” he said, still leery of who they were dealing with.

“Double!” Kerry blurted out, obviously upset to hear this.

“Yes, I’m sorry Mr. Cain, but these conference requests take time. So if you would like the conference to continue as planned, in light of these new complexities, I will need double the time.”

Fuming over this and feeling he had the upper hand, Kerry rejected this out of anger that bordered along the lines of hostility.

“Fine! You’re not the only office seeker in town! Don’t ask me again for any more voting services this next election cycle!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Mr. Cain. I’m sorry we....” he started to say before being hung up on by Kerry.

Visibly upset, as was noticed by Gwen who witnessed the entire

call, Kerry made a snap decision on what to do and how to handle Von, when one of his guards returned from moving his items.

“Von wanted double! When O’Dwyer comes back, pay him that double so Von can find out just how many people in the cemetery voted for him. Typical politician. They have no problem taking but won’t return the favor when it’s their turn to pay up. You know what, get me that other guy who wanted our help. Dornier I think his last name was. Tell that pencil pusher there’s going to be an opening on the ticket soon. If he wants our electoral services, he better meet up with William in the next twenty minutes,” Kerry said, fast-tracking and skipping over the other politician he was still waiting on.

Chapter 32

Waiting outside Mr. Silver's house, William greeted Jake Dornier who arrived last. The other political figure Kerry had recruited, Judge Roland Reels, arrived first and was clearly agitated about having to wait on Mr. Dornier.

"This isn't by the hour," he remarked upon Jake exiting his car, even though the two had never met before.

Jake stayed silent not wanting to stir anything up being the new guy. This, though, wasn't echoed by all, as a new guard named Han spoke out, not caring what Roland or anyone else thought.

"I have found that intelligence can be recognized more by one's reticence and listening ability rather than how much they speak," he said while looking at Roland with a brash smile.

Understanding the rarely used word meant shyness or reserved, Roland put two and two together and instantly became insulted, physically going after Han before being stopped by some of the other guards and William.

"Hey now, ya each got your slaggings in. It's fair between the two of ya. Now, let's stop tooling around so we can all go back to our gaffs."

Not feeling the same way, the judge tried to get the last word in.

"No Gaffs for you. We all know you're going to a pub after this," he uttered a bit under his breath as a stereotypical jest towards William.

"Will I, yea?" William responded, shaking his head and brushing it off.

"C'mon. Enough theater. Let's get along or I'll see to it ya go home with nothing in your purses."

This parental down talking worked as each person was muzzled

long enough for William to be able to explain what he wanted. He first explained he didn't want any accidents or misconceptions between the guards that showed up and Mr. Silver. So he had all of them put down their weapons as to prevent any further hostilities.

Next, he asked both Jake and Roland to come up with an offer and to facilitate it the best they could via any sources they might be able to draw upon. This request took time having to write it up and then having to figure out how to implement it. Finally, the last step was to pressure test their idea by bouncing it off one another to see if it had any leaks.

When both Jake and Roland had expended their thoughts and had come up with the best proposal they could muster, they presented it to William before trying to negotiate it with Mr. Silver.

"This is the best solution we could come up with," Jake said handing over a script with names and figures that would facilitate a safe exit for Mr. Silver while also safeguarding Kerry from his return.

"Aw, good!" William replied, starting to doze off a bit before Jake spoke up.

"Did ya check with all your lads that this was sound?" he then asked, wanting to make sure everyone was on the same page.

"Yep. He will be set up with a nice beach house and some other favorable amenities and services with the promise he will always keep a tracking device on him that is checked weekly," he replied, looking at Roland for his approval.

"What about his wounds?" William asked in regards to securing someone that could take care of him.

"We have that in there as well," Jake said, pointing to the packet.

"We have people that will cover him with that and other things as long as he signs on the dotted line and wears the bracelet."

"Trusted people?"

"Yes. People we know we can count on," Roland spoke up,

wanting to get on with it.

“Very well. Who’s going to dooter over there and give it a lash with Mr. Silver?”

Roland looked at Jake and didn’t move a muscle. This told William and Jake he felt his job was already done. Not the confrontational or argumentative type, Jake rather meekly shook his head indicating he would.

“Good then. Do ya know what he looks like?”

“I do not,” Jake replied as Roland found a place to sit down and leaned his head back.

“Oh, he’s an older fella just under two meters tall. Bearded, with a blend of blue and green eyes. But he’s a farmer, so he probably will be dressed the part as well. Here, Han has seen him. Is that about on the spot?”

Hearing his name, Han walked over to William and Jake, passing by a dismissive Roland who was pretending to be aloof. As he did so, Jake couldn’t help but notice Han fit the part of a farmer with a tanned wrinkled face, had light blue eyes himself, and a thicker beard that was white with the exception of coffee staining around his mustache and whiskers.

“I’d say that’s about right old sport,” Han commented without batting an eye.

“Probably not too dissimilar from me.”

Jake chuckled to this before asking a question.

“I’m not too familiar with what meters converts over into feet and inches. What does ‘just under two meters’ mean?”

“I’d say exactly right here,” Han answered, holding his hand level with the top of his head.

“Wouldn’t you agree Mr. O’Dwyer?”

William nodded his head in agreement and smiled signaling to Jake, Han more than likely was Mr. Silver. Flabbergasted, Jake was only able to spit out random partial sentences while realizing he had been duped. To the contrary upon hearing this, Roland did say something coherent and discernible.

“Guess your reticent quote was right,” he mentioned regarding Jake’s jumbled blather.

Seeing his long game now starting to yield results, Dan smiled before making a remark to William.

“Cheers!!!... If I’m using that wording correctly William? Now...” Dan said, turning back to Jake and Roland.

“Who else do you know of that is being used or paid off by Kerry that is not on this list?”

Chapter 33

Gwen watched as Kerry took a phone call in what was left of his makeshift office. Clearly excited, he hung up the phone having a hard time not smiling. Beaming with delight, he took a few congratulatory breaths before looking over towards Gwen.

“That’s that. Time to go home,” was all he said, while grabbing a quite opulent-looking suitcase he had next to his desk.

Opening it up, looking through it, and adding a thing or two from his desk, he said nothing further until one of his guards returned.

“Let’s get out of here. I’m tired of this place. We’ll get the rest of this stuff later,” he said, deterring the guard from moving a smaller filing cabinet.

Agreeing to this without question, the guard changed his course and walked over to Gwen.

“Time to go miss,” he stated, while opening up his hand towards the door.

Gwen likewise didn’t question this, stood up, and walked with him through the cellar’s tunnel and out onto the lawn. Once outside, the guard made a quick phone call before advising the other guard of what was going on. Similarly ending his moving chores, this guard instead started to lock up certain things until Kerry came out. Having a brief conversation with him, he then locked up the main door to the cellar and handed over all the keys to Kerry. Putting these keys in his briefcase, Kerry walked over to where Gwen and the first guard were standing.

“I have a car coming to pick us up. We’re going to need to make a brief pit stop at Arthur’s station to pay those guys off. Then I’ll get you home. Will a check work for you? The guys at the gas station usually take a check. I could write you one while I’m at it?”

Gwen didn't care too much about the money anymore. It now felt dirty to her with the meaning behind it much clearer. However, Kerry persisted with her about this until she replied.

"Sure. That will be fine," she said, feeling the bit of a cog in everyone else's scheme.

Kerry's car eventually arrived, taking all four of them to the checkpoint Kerry advised. Along the way, Kerry cut her the check and tried generating small talk with her which seemed flat and hollow.

"Down the road Gwen, I can envision needing work done in Curtin County. Would that be something you might be interested in?" he asked, before turning his conversation to his guards, not getting a reply from Gwen.

The only thing Kerry and the guards talked about which was even remotely interesting was a passing remark Kerry made about Heidi and her family on the beach. This comment being more about the beach than it was about Heidi, still gave her mind a little reminder that she was okay... but for how long? Playing out what Kerry was doing, if more people like him were able to pay off, beat and batter their way to the top, eventually all pure representation would be a mere sunset waning until darkness bore only perceived representation. No one would then be representing or doing what was best for the public... only what was best for their own self-interests.

These sad ideas played out through the dips and curves of the streets they were on until she felt the vehicle jostle a little bit indicating to her they had turned off the roadway. At this moment, Kerry turned from his guards and looked out the window, noticing they were pulling into the checkpoint gas station. Quieting the conversation he and the guards were having, he looked for his checkbook and waited to park.

The checkpoint men did the same as they had done for Gwen. They opened the garage, had Kerry's vehicle pull in, and then closed the garage door behind them so they could have a secure meeting. The same men had Kerry, Gwen, and his guards exit the vehicle in a more relaxed manner which was followed by a few light-hearted conversations and a couple jests. This went on until what Gwen felt was the head of the gas station's men broke off the exchange and asked to speak with Kerry alone about his cut. Kerry agreed to this, where they

both walked over to the business section of the station, leaving the two guards, the driver, and Gwen with his remaining crew.

Kerry's dealing with the gas station head went on for a while before Kerry eventually peeked his head out of the door he went in and called for his top guard to bring in his suitcase. The guard didn't hesitate with this order and retrieved his suitcase from the vehicle and walked over with it into the room Kerry was in.

Now only having the driver and one of Kerry's guards left with Gwen and the clerks, the back-and-forth banter started to fall flat as each ran out of simple things to say. Gwen, however, remained quiet throughout, solace in her contrasting opinion of the situation.

Each clerk eventually thought of another off-the-wall topic to talk about until Kerry's main guard did what Kerry had and asked for his remaining guard to come over so they could "finish the deal." The guard happily obliged, thanking the gas station attendants for their time before meandering his way out of the garage.

With only her, the driver, and the clerks who had been polite to her the previous time remaining, they watched until the remaining guard had closed the door behind him before saying something.

"You must have done something right at some point," the main clerk said, after instructing the driver to get back into the car and leave.

Figuring he knew Kerry had worked a deal with her and that she was still alive, Gwen shrugged it off and stayed quiet.

"What do you think they are going to do to Kerry?"

Not comprehending what he was saying, Gwen paused for a moment, a little disorientated as to what he was saying.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"What are they going to do to Kerry? You mess with a hitman like Silver, you better make sure you're coming up all Ace's. I haven't heard any gunshots or noises so they must be working something out."

"Wait!" Gwen repeated.

“Why would someone be shot? What do you mean what’s going to happen to Kerry?” she asked, thrown off.

“Silver and about ten hounds are in there and they are not happy,” He replied, pointing to the room Kerry and his guards went into.

“They showed up about fifteen minutes before you guys did. Didn’t you know?”

“No. I.... no I thought Kerry reached a deal with him and he was gone.”

“Well, I don’t know about all that, Mr. Silver said Kerry was done and to keep him and his guards distracted until he had them go into that room. That sounded fine to me. He said he would pay us what Kerry promised plus a bonus for another half hour’s worth of work. Isn’t he giving you something?” The clerk asked, assuming she knew and was working with Mr. Silver.

Trying to understand what he was saying, Gwen looked over to the door for a moment then back over to the clerk.

“Mr. Silver is in there?” she uttered.

“Yeah. He said to have the driver leave and for you to sit tight while those guys were to go in there one at a time. He didn’t want a shootout.”

“He had an order for me? Was he upset?”

“No. At least he didn’t seem that way,” the clerk responded, seeing that she truly didn’t know what was going on.

“I just took it as he wanted you away from whatever he wanted to do in there. I would take that as a good thing.”

“Okay,” was all she could say, seeing that Dan had tricked Kerry.

Having just assumed Mr. Silver wasn’t upset with her, the clerk himself took a step back and decided to watch Gwen a little more carefully just in case his assumption was wrong. Curbing his

talkativeness and pivoting to a neutral role over Gwen, his silence allowed Gwen to hear a few awkward sounds come from the room over. Her mind filling in the meaning of these sounds as something harmful or malicious, Gwen covered her ears in an attempt to block it out.

Thinking Dan would be upset with her for giving away some of his details, the idea started to brew that whatever was happening in that room might soon be in store for her. With the feeling of despair starting to leak past her conscious wall of refuge, a tap on her shoulder startled her to look up.

“Come with me Gwen,” Dan said with an empty look graven upon his face.

Feeling shame, Gwen got up and followed Dan who walked outside with her. Doing this as the day now started to fade away allowing the stars and fireflies to twinkle and stir, Gwen’s disgracefulness kept her head down until Dan started to talk.

“Need a ride home?”

Not what she was expecting, Gwen looked at him but didn’t say anything. Dan smiled when she did this, and then apologized.

“I’m sorry if I scared you or anything like that, but it had to be this way. I’m sure you’re a little mixed up... a little emotionally exhausted, but I assure you, the best is yet to come,” he tried explaining, but in doing so, noticed she needed more.

“I’m sorry too, Dan. I told Kerry about your lights and about your gas things and...” Gwen muttered on before Dan cut her off.

“Don’t worry about it Gwen. I wanted you to. It was part of my plan.”

“You wanted me to?” she asked with extended question.

“Yep. I told you all along a lot of what I was doing was show. I needed you and several other people to believe this, this, and this in order to get this or that response. I had a huge Rube Goldberg machine going if you know what that is,” he said, trying to explain it in the best way he could.

“You mean where a toaster trips a wire that hits a ball in order to turn on a TV?”

“Yep. So, I apologize for using you.”

Shaking her head to this, she asked Dan to explain it out a little more thoroughly.

“Kerry and his dad caused a lot of people a lot of harm. Some directly some indirectly. As I got older, I soured to this but knew I couldn’t simply stop it by just stopping Kerry or his dad... or I simply would have. There were just too many people in Ashland and the surrounding areas that were so fixed, taking out just one wouldn’t have worked. Too many unfaithful politicians, two-faced media outlets, fake videos, and even fake votes to overcome. One or two people arrested would simply just get replaced or swept under the rug. So, I had to play the long game and come up with an idea to expose as many as I could all at the same time. That was this,” he said, holding his hands out.

Seeing her wheels turning but still not quite there, Dan continued.

“One big hustle. One major sting.”

“So, you waited until he went after a bank in Ashland so you could catch as many as possible?”

“Close. Yes and no. I dangled a prize so big, I knew someone, probably Kerry, would have to take it. Once I knew I had him, the wheels of my trap started to spring and trip.”

“How did you get the bank to go along with that? Did you pay them off?” Gwen asked.

“Nope. There was no bank.”

“What? How? He would have noticed a bank was not there.”

“Oh, the building was there with a really nice big sign. But that was basically it. I purchased the building a decade ago and paid a few buddies to pretend to work there. They gave out a few loans to family and friends as cover and stayed picky over who could bank there and

who could not. One of them was even the head of security that Kerry paid off, if you remember that. So, the bank had the look and feel of the real thing. Then I slowly started to float the idea the bank had a huge vault and eventually that it was going to be moved because of a merger. It all looked and sounded good, so nobody questioned it,” he explained giving her a cheeky smile.

“So how did you know he would pick me then?”

“That I didn’t, for both you and Heidi. I had a lot of this planned out, but I couldn’t perfectly predict everything. But like I told you, I listened in or read his stuff and he eventually gave me the pieces I needed. As much as he knew I listened in, he continually failed to realize how many windows technology opens up for someone who knows how to use them.”

Breathing a sigh of relief in that she was safe and that he was not mad at her, she asked what else was fake.

“Well I was never interested in Kerry’s wife and kids... I just needed that to feel real. I also needed my house to feel real, although it’s not really my house.”

“Really! Is it your mom’s?... That was your mom right?” she said, starting to question even the little things.

“Yes, she is my mom and yes that is my mother’s house. My dad and mom had that house there for a while and just rented it out. When I started my bank idea, we had that become Mr. Silver’s house as cover. Just in case someone found out where he lived.”

“So do you have a family then? Kerry insisted you did.”

“Yes I do.” He voiced with one of the few vocal flutters she had heard from him.

“I’m married, we had one boy who is also married. He has a boy as well. So I’m a grandfather... or grandbarker as Heidi would say,” he mentioned of Heidi’s earlier reference with a wink.

“A little secret tidbit for you, if you remember when I said that it came to me once that I was responsible for both the things I do and

don't do... My wife was actually the one who told me that. However, my wife, son, and family are the most top-secret things I have. If that would've gotten out, my Achilles heel would have been exposed. O'Dwyer, the hitman Kerry just paid to kill me was the only person I can think of that knew. Thankfully he kept that a secret which I just repaid. Actually, as much as I tried to hide it, I caught myself slip a couple of times around you and Heidi. Did you catch it?"

Other than Kerry's insistence that Dan did have a family, Gwen couldn't think of anything he said or missed that gave that fact away.

"No, I mean, if you did, it went by me."

Amused, Dan filled her in.

"Well one was my fault, and one was my mom's fault... kind of. Once I mentioned to you that dogs are like kids but with more teeth or sharper teeth, something like that. I beat myself up for saying that because why would I say that if I didn't have a reference point? So, I felt I slipped there. Then my mom also told me she mentioned to you and Heidi about my grandson, her great-grandson, coming over to feed the zedonks. True story the short while she had the zedonks, he wanted to see them just as much as Heidi did. However, I told you Beth was my mom which would amount to her great-grandson being my grandson... and so on with a family. I probably could have played that one off a bit by saying I had a brother, but I'm just glad it never came up again."

Remembering both those conversations, another aspect of everything dawned upon her.

"Was any of the killing planned?" she hesitantly asked, having this idea pull on her.

"I didn't want anyone to die. That's something I want to be over with. But that kid who came to our house trying to spread the word about Heidi, wasn't planned. I knew Kerry would push the in-danger idea, but I didn't know someone would show up. Like I said, I didn't have everything planned out. Some stuff I had to adjust to as I found out or as things went along."

"What about Kerry? What did you do to him?"

“He didn’t want to give up names for his family’s sake. I think he has some family involved, so he took the easy way out.”

“He’s dead? I tried muffling the sounds I was hearing but I didn’t hear a gunshot or anything.” Gwen asked.

“He took a jump off the aisle four step stool. I’ve never been into maiming or torturing people, and I wasn’t about to set him free or give him a gun. So his options were that or jail. He took the stool.”

Gwen tried to void this thought out of her mind but was reminded that with Kerry now gone and Dan not seemingly needing her either, she asked what was next.

“Go home. Leave Gwen Kennedy and that part of you here. I’ll pay you for your time. I have what I think I need now, a long list of names and I’m sure those names will squawk when I turn up the volume. So rest. Try to let your mind go and turn over a new leaf. You have a good heart, start letting your life reflect it.”

Agreeing with what he said but knowing what she saw and went through might not be that easy to let go, the thought of her fake name brought up another question for her before taking him up on his ride offer.

“Is your name really Dan?”