

I wrote “A Change of Heart” as the lone love story I currently have. However, being a typical guy, the story does go back and forth between that of a love story and that of an action adventure. I hope if you are kind enough to give this book a try, that regardless of which you prefer, the story does well in balancing both.

As always, and because I can not say it enough, I want to thank all our brave men and women of the armed services and all our first responders. God bless you all for what you do.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this story to a very special person. Amber, I love you, thank you for being my wife and the mother of our wonderful children.

Tony

<https://TonyGrimmsTales.com>

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Chapter № 1



“Did you remember to put ice cream on the list?” Wynn Clifton asked his wife Layla, who was up much later than normal, finishing off their week’s grocery list on her phone.

“That was the first thing I put on the list,” she replied, giving him a light but riled look, knowing his affinity for any type of cold snack, but also knowing he was trying to bother her.

Going back to her list as he put on his police uniform, Wynn smiled, knowing he had somewhat annoyed her. Pulling his vest over his head and making sure both sides were snug, he continued on with his ice cream discussion as Layla turned from him and faced the other side of the bed.

“What kind of ice cream did you add? I kind of want something different. See if they have any new blends,” he asked, purposely prodding her with the idea, knowing she was “on a diet.”

“I got you two types of peanut butter. I forget what specific style, but that’s what I added into the cart,” she sharply and a bit impolitely replied, not wanting to talk about sweets.

Finding this enjoyable, Wynn continued as he put on his duty belt and reached for his car keys.

“You know, they need to have more new flavors. But not chocolate or vanilla-based because those are both kind of used up. If I were making a new ice cream, my base would be strawberry. Strawberry doesn’t have a lot of different varieties. However, strawberry and cookies, or strawberry and some other sort of candy doesn’t quite sound right. I’d go with creamy or whipped strawberry. I’ve never heard of that before. Have you?” he asked, while walking around to her side of the bed.

Layla continued to look at her phone, ignoring Wynn as he

inched his face closer and closer to hers. Undeterred, Layla carried on with her list until Wynn got so close, that their noses touched.

“Creamy strawberry,” he said annoyingly.

Wynn’s cuddlesome, but irritating persistence finally got the best of Layla as he pushed forward and gave her a short peck of a kiss.

“Wynn!” Layla voiced quite loudly as she half-heartedly pushed him away, while he persisted with his nose nudges.

“Enough you weirdo! Be a normal person!” she said, as she relented and allowed him to give her a good kiss.

Wynn eventually stood up and smiled, happy he had gotten a kiss while simultaneously annoying her. Straightening up and pulling his uniform tight, he looked at her lovingly and reminded her of his upcoming surprise.

“Just tonight and tomorrow night before our secret trip.”

“I know. I’m really excited. But you have to give me a couple of hints so I know how to pack. You don’t have to tell me where we are going but just give me some sort of roundabout idea so I don’t have to pack one of everything.”

Wynn’s agitating ways gave him a big smile as he decided to bend a little bit with only a vague hint.

“Okay. You have never been there before.”

Exasperated with his constant games, Layla simply gave him a conversation-ending stare without a response.

Amused, Wynn dove in and gave her another peck on the lips that was not reciprocated.

“I will carry all your luggage for you. I will be your bag man,” he said, while giving her a regal hand gesture.

“So pack all you want. I shall never surrender my secrets,” he

proudly proclaimed as he continued his royal bows and waves, while backing himself towards their bedroom door.

His trying but admiring smile finally cracked Layla's dismissive front, which caused her to let out a chuckled laugh.

"Get out of here. Go to work already," she said, while still laughing at him.

"Yes, of course. I shall... shall, shall," he voiced with a noble-sounding accent that faded as he got further away.

"I love you!" he then added when he reached the bottom of their stairs.

"I don't love you," Layla replied, spinning his game against him before feeling bad about it.

Now worried he might have taken this the wrong way, she opened her window and called out to him as he walked over to his car.

"I love you too... you dumpy oaf!"

This gave Wynn a full smile as he paused to give her a blown kiss. Not saying anything further, he again repeated his royal hand gestures as he lowered himself into his car. Eventually backing onto the street, he honked and waved once more before driving away.

Wynn worked for the Village of Riceland Police Department, which was a short five-mile drive from their house. Working for a village, the department was small, having only eight full-time officers with only one assigned to work the night shift. Starting at midnight, Wynn arrived for work at a quarter till.

"Hey. What's going on? Anything new today?" he asked the second shift officer, Mark Parker, who was taking his radio off his belt.

"Not too, too much. I waited my entire shift for the Abner family to show up to complain about the Coleman family again, but they never showed up. So I mostly stayed near the station waiting for them, with the exception of a barking dog complaint, and another drunk call at

Murphy's," he said of the village's only bar.

"That was it. Nothing too exciting, which is good."

"What did the Abner's want?" Wynn asked, just in case their issues rolled over into his shift.

"You know. Same old stuff. The Coleman's are making too much noise. They are mowing too early. They are doing it on purpose and upsetting their chickens. At least that's what I was told. I doubt that's it but they never showed up so it must not have been that big of a deal. I was told they were going to come in around six, but they never did and I wasn't about to call them about it if they didn't think enough of it to show up."

"Well thanks for leaving it for me, I still need to finish my report from yesterday," Wynn jokingly mentioned of the well-known family feud.

"They said they would be here six hours ago. They're probably sleeping by now. I don't see them coming in this late. I wouldn't worry about it. I'll probably get stuck with it tomorrow."

"I hope so. I need to get my report done before my days off. I'm taking Layla to the beach for some horseback riding. I don't need the Sarge calling me when we're out there. It kind of ruins the moment, you know. Speaking of my report, did either of my witnesses call in today?"

"Yes. Sorry, I forgot," Mark replied.

"One of them called in and wanted your email address. I forget what his name was. But I would imagine he probably emailed you by now. That was at like five. Or at least I assume he would have emailed you by now anyways."

"Okay. I guess I know what I'm starting off today with. Anything else to pass along?" Wynn asked of the rest of his shift.

"Nope. That's about that. I think you're all caught up. Can you call me out whenever you call in?" Mark asked of letting their dispatcher know he was done for the night.

“Oh sure. Get some sleep. I’ll see you again tomorrow,” Wynn answered, while taking a seat at his desk.

“Alright man. See you later,” Mark politely replied, as he gave Wynn a thumbs-up, then walked out of the station.

Upon the door closing, Wynn notified the dispatcher who was working and who was not before turning on his computer. Eager to see if his witness might have emailed him, Wynn clicked on his email tab which highlighted three new messages. With the first two both being from his sergeant, he quickly read over them before moving on to the third email, from an unknown account. Opening it up, he noticed it was indeed from his witness but was very short and to the point.

Officer Clifton:

On June 4th, I was driving southbound on State Route forty-five when I noticed a vehicle in the ditch at about 1 AM, just past Billet Street. I pulled over and checked on the car, but didn’t see anyone inside. I did notice some tracks in the mud which led from the car to the nearby woods, but I never saw or heard anyone. This is when I called 911, just in case someone needed help. The lady on the phone took my name and number and told me I could go. The only other thing I could note, and I told the dispatcher about this as well, was that another car seemed to be circling the area. I don’t know if it was related or not, but I noticed it a couple of times. It never stopped. I gave the dispatcher a description of the vehicle from what I could recall.

If you need anything else, please feel free to reply to this email.

Wayne Doyle

Printing out Mr. Doyle’s email to add to his report, he did respond to him, asking him if he might have seen a license plate number or if he could describe whoever was in the car. This mystery vehicle coincided with his other witness’s story, who had only given him a verbal statement. His second witness was a local truck driver who lived nearby. Seeing one car leave and another car pull up, he did not reach out to the authorities until he was later driving his normal work route and noticed, three hours later, that the police were still on scene with the vehicle.

Feeling at that point it might have been more than just an average accident, he called into dispatch and briefly spoke with Wynn over the phone until Wynn had to attend to another police matter.

Staying with his report, Wynn continued to work on it for about another hour before he began to get tired of looking at his computer screen. As the truck driver correctly suspected, this car was more than just another vehicle on the side of the road. Coming back as stolen, Wynn also found a loaded handgun underneath the driver's seat upon searching it. With the vehicle's keys still inside the car and the gas tank almost full, the question of why it was left, and who left it in favor of the woods, puzzled Wynn.

Pivoting from the computer screen to his phone, Wynn decided to reach out to the truck driver since he also worked third shift. As he started to dial his phone number, Wynn was interrupted by a knock at the station's front door. Walking over to the door, he first checked the station's camera system that was set up nearby. Having two different angles focused on the front door, he was able to see three older ladies who were donned in their nighttime garments and appeared highly agitated. Looking at a different camera screen, he then noticed a familiar van parked along the street. This van was old, brown, rusted, sometimes indistinguishably so between the two, with a ladder on the back and a broken side window which was repaired with duct tape and cardboard. Knowing exactly whose vehicle this was, Wynn rolled his eyes, knowing he was now stuck with having to deal with the Abner's. Shaking his head before opening the door, Wynn made sure to activate his chest camera before greeting them.

"Hello Ruth," he first said to the more vocal, but nicer of the three.

"How can I help you all today?"

"Floyd purposely dented my van yesterday. I saw it, Mary saw it, and Merle heard it. I want him arrested!" Ruth demanded, as she pointed towards her family's van.

"Well, hold on now. Let me get this straight before we jump into the arresting part," Wynn tried saying in a soothing voice, as Mary and Merle's wife, Evelyn, both advised their agreement with Ruth.

“How did this start and what exactly happened?”

Still agitated, Ruth mentioned how much she despised the Coleman family before answering his question.

“He started mowing yesterday, at seven in the morning, just to bother us. Mary and I both went outside to tell him to turn it off, but he just pushed it closer to our property. He then mowed our driveway and blew all of his clippings onto our yard, on purpose. I saw him smile,” she explained, while demonstrating his actions.

“He then kicked up some of the driveways rocks, which hit our van. He didn’t have to do that, but he did. He could have pointed the mower in a different direction, but he didn’t. Mary and I then went over to the van and noticed a dent. This has got to stop. They are always doing stupid stuff like this just because they can and you guys never charge them. I want charges this time or I’m going to go right to the prosecutor’s office myself and tell them you guys aren’t doing your job.”

Trying not to roll his eyes to the idea of arresting someone for a stray rock, he instead appeased them by excusing himself for a second.

“Alright, I’ll tell you what. Let me get you guys a couple of statement forms and then we can all go over to the van to see the dent. It was the van you have parked outside the station, right?”

“Yes, it was. I’ll show you exactly where it hit,” Ruth stated as she abruptly walked away, not stating if she would fill out a statement form or not.

Watching all three head towards the van without hesitation, Wynn instead took the other approach by taking his time inside. Retrieving a couple of statement forms, some pens, and double-checking his body camera to make sure it was still recording, he took in a deep breath before continuing to entertain their theatrics.

Hearing Ruth spouting off random gibberish as soon as he stepped outside, Wynn internally bemoaned his situation while also holding some slight irritation towards Mark for this falling onto him. As he got closer to the van, another vehicle pulled up behind it, this one being a blue

truck. Also familiar with this vehicle, he knew before the male driver stepped out, it was Ruth's husband Hank.

"Wynn, I told you last time this was going to keep happening if you didn't charge them," Hank yelled immediately.

"This is ridiculous. This is harassment and it has to stop!"

Hank continued on in this huffy manner as he walked towards Wynn, not in a threatening way, but clearly ruffled in how he perceived they were being treated.

"Hank, I told you last time. I can't charge someone for cooking hot dogs over a fire. I'm sorry the wind was blowing in your direction, but that's one of those things that is legal that you are just going to have to accept. They didn't break a law," he explained to Hank for the hundredth time, before quickly switching over to the issue at hand.

"However, I'll look into this incident. If it's clear he did it with the intent to damage your property, I'll charge him. But let's start at the beginning first. Ruth, let me see this dent."

Happy to oblige, Ruth pointed to the front driver-side fender while using her phone as a flashlight. Pulling out his real flashlight for a more detailed examination, Wynn bent over to scrutinize and inspect their claim. Only seeing rust spots and mud, Wynn flicked away some of the debris to see if anything was under the van's dirt and grime.

"I'm sorry Ruth, where exactly are you talking about?" he asked, while trying to find the dent by changing the angle of his flashlight.

"Right there. You're right above it. It's just above the wheel well."

Being patient with her, Wynn moved his light downward a smidge, only to see what looked like old damage. Yes, there was a slight dent, but the paint and rust around it indicated to him it probably was not fresh damage from the prior day.

"This right here?" he asked to be sure.

“Yep. And these fenders aren’t cheap. They don’t make them anymore and they are hard to find.”

“Well Mrs. Abner,” he said as he slowly stood up, buying himself some time as he tried to mold his words the best he could.

“I don’t doubt he flung some rocks at your van and that you heard something hit your van. But honestly, this particular dent looks like it was from a prior incident. The rust tells me it’s been here for a while and the paint looks like someone even tried to touch it up at some point,” he explained, while still trying to smooth over the issue.

“Now, I can still talk to him about mowing your lawn and kicking up the rocks but...”

“I want him charged. That wasn’t there before,” Ruth vehemently demanded, not hearing out Wynn’s alternatives.

“Floyd and his brother are always doing things like this and they never get charged. How many of these things do we have to keep putting up with? I used to love Halloween, but we can’t enjoy it now because of all the stuff they put out. It gets even worse during Christmas. It’s always something that is ‘legal,’ but is being done on purpose just to push our buttons.”

Ruth continued explaining her side of the story as Wynn patiently tried to get in a word. Being constantly interrupted by her and the rest of the family, Wynn’s plight only got worse as another truck pulled up. Exhaling in disbelief, this vehicle, unfortunately, did not belong to another Abner family member, but to Floyd Coleman.

Doing his best to tamp out a potential flare-up before things escalated any further, Wynn tried to stem the incoming tide just long enough so that both parties could stay away from one another.

“Listen, I believe you. But if you say anything to the Coleman’s, it’s only going to make things worse. Please, do me a favor and get in your vehicles and simply ignore them. Let me go over there and do all the talking,” he said as the truck parked and was immediately followed by two individuals stepping out.

“Just let me handle it. Don’t worry about anything they say. Saying anything back is only going to muddy up the water for you.”

To Wynn’s relief, the Abner’s did as he asked and went back to their vehicles without saying a word. However, this wasn’t completely done in the humble way he hoped, as each gave a somewhat reprehensible scowl towards the Coleman’s before closing their doors.

“Hello Floyd. Hello Gage. How can I help the two of you today?” he asked while quickly walking over to their truck, trying to intercept the two men before they could get any closer to the Abner’s.

“They better not be trying to say I damaged their junk van yesterday,” Floyd sharply and bluntly replied, all while holding a fixed gaze in the direction of the Abner’s.

Holding up his hands in a stopping motion, Wynn tried to deal with their grievances as best he could.

“Yes, but Mr. Coleman, I was just starting to weed my way through the facts and it doesn’t sound like this was on purpose. Frankly, I don’t think the damage they pointed out was anything new. However, I try to be open and hear out each person’s complaint. It’s only fair. So, is there any merit to what they are saying about the mowing and so forth?”

Unflinching in his steely stare, Floyd answered Wynn, with clear fury held within his voice.

“Officer Clifton, that family is crazy and at some point, this has to fall under harassment. They can’t just claim everything under the sun, waiting for one of their complaints to finally stick. I never thought I’d have to deal with things so nonsensical.”

“Well Mr. Coleman, I can’t tell people what to complain about and what not to. I know you have a long history with the Abner’s, and I’m not disregarding the past, but I do need to handle each incident on an individual basis. Now, is there any merit to this mowing issue?”

With Wynn almost able to hear Floyd’s teeth cracking under the pressure of his clenched jaw, Floyd paused and didn’t answer the question right away. Giving Floyd the time he needed, Wynn shrugged his

shoulders and visually displayed to the Coleman's some physical cues that he also felt the accusation was frivolous. Eventually easing his tenacious stair from the Abner's and over to Wynn, Floyd acknowledged there was a sliver of truth to their story, but from the opposite side of the coin.

"Yes. I mowed their lawn and kicked up some rocks if that is what they are saying. But I'm sure they didn't tell you why or how this all came about?"

"No sir, they did not. To be fair I was just starting to get their side of the story, but we had not gotten to that part yet. Please, fill me in."

"I want nothing to do with them. If I could uproot my house right now and move it, I would. However, I only feel that way towards them. I'm not the barbarian... or fearsome monster they try to portray me as. This tension we have doesn't extend to their two grandkids they have over every now and again. The other day I was splitting wood... during business hours, not at midnight, and the two boys couldn't play ball because none of the Abner's seem to know how to operate a lawn mower," he explained disparagingly of the entire adult family.

"So when I was mowing yesterday, I did mow a little section by their driveway because it's the only flat piece of land they have that isn't occupied by junk. I did it because I was trying to give their two grandsons a place they could kick the ball around without losing it in the grass or needing a tetanus shot. I tried to stay away from their known driveway but didn't see some gravel under their thick grass and did kick up some rocks. I couldn't tell you where exactly the rocks went, but I wasn't near the van at the time, so I don't know how they are connecting the two."

Floyd continued to describe his side of the story which veered off into some other issues the two families have. While doing this, another vehicle drove by and parked about a block away from where they were standing. This vehicle, a much nicer black car, was not familiar to Wynn. Still, being that both families had several relatives in the area, Wynn decided to excuse himself from the Coleman's to see if this vehicle was related to the issue at hand. Asking the same of the Coleman's as he did the Abner's, Wynn carefully approached the luxury car that had backed itself into a business's driveway, leaving only its amber parking lights on.

Upon approaching the vehicle, Wynn noticed at least two

male subjects were inside, both of whom were in the front seated positions. Behind them in the rear seats was unknown due to the vehicle's heavily tinted windows combined with the darkness of night. Being cautious due to his unfamiliarity with the vehicle, Wynn approached the car from a strategic angle. Circling around and coming up from behind it, Wynn momentarily shined his light on the vehicle's rear license plate before affixing it back upon the front seated occupants.

"Dispatch, I'm going to be out with license plate number Sam, Paul, Lincoln, 1,9,1, in the driveway of Morrel's general store. It looks to be occupied by at least two males. I'm not sure if it's related to the neighbor dispute I have going on at the station or not," Wynn advised over his radio, so his dispatcher knew where and what he was doing.

When Wynn got within a social enough distance, he called out to the occupants of the vehicle using a firm police officer's tone.

"Hey guys can I have you roll down all your windows, and then leave your hands on the dash or steering wheel for me?" he requested in an amicable, yet still authoritative fashion.

The two visible men in the vehicle did as he asked without hesitation, revealing to Wynn that they seemed to be cooperative while also showing him nobody else was inside the car.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Are you guys here for the issue I'm dealing with at the station?"

"No sir," the driver of the vehicle replied.

"We are with the Federal Bureau of Investigations. We can show you our credentials if you allow us to put our hands down."

"You boys work this late?" Wynn quickly countered, half as a joke, while half wondering why the FBI was in his jurisdiction.

Then at that moment, Wynn's dispatcher replied to his earlier call, returning to him the plate information he had advised.

"Dispatch to six, oh, eight. That plate returns negative. Could you re-advise the numbers?"

Hearing Wynn's radio traffic and knowing what the dispatcher meant, the driver of the vehicle spoke up before Wynn could respond.

"Our plates come back blank if you didn't know that. I'm sure you got the plate right, it's just not going to come back to anything," he explained, while still holding his steering wheel.

Shaking his head to this, Wynn advised his dispatcher to disregard the vehicle, and approached them a little more casually than he had before.

"You guys can put your hands down. What brings you out to Riceland at this hour?"

Hearing this, both agents relaxed and slowly put their arms down, while the driver also reached towards the center console for his identification. Seeing this, Wynn halted his comments for a moment as this action naturally paused him out of routine. Cautiously extending his hand towards his gun, he soon broke this off when he noticed the agent's badge.

"Here you go," the agent said, handing it over to Wynn along with an identification card.

"I'm Special Agent Hill and this is my partner, Special Agent Harmon. We work out of the Charrington field office."

Wynn a little sheepishly looked down at the agent's identification, which confirmed he was William Hill of the FBI. Not asking to also see Agent Harmon's credentials, Wynn returned the badge and ID before William got into their reason for being there.

"We don't want to interrupt whatever it is you have going on but we were told that an Officer Clifton worked third shift for Riceland PD. Is that you?"

A little surprised to hear his name coming from the mouth of an FBI agent, Wynn acknowledged that was him, then explained to the agents the current situation he had going on.

“That’s me. You guys are fine right now. These two families are our version of the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s. They are always at each other. Always feuding. Always something. The guys at the station have honestly thought about scrounging up some money to pay for one of the two families to leave. They have been that annoying.”

Agent Hill replied only by giving a half smirk to this, as Agent Harmon didn’t show any emotion at all. Instead, he remained businesslike as William started to explain why they were there.

“To get to the point, we were advised you handled a stolen vehicle yesterday. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Wynn acknowledged, surprised but intrigued that the FBI was asking about this.

“Do you guys know something about that? I wanted to get my end of that report done tonight, but was interrupted by what you see,” he said while pointing to the Coleman’s and Abner’s.

“Yes. As I’m sure you are aware, two weeks ago that vehicle was reported stolen out of Scone County. Our office covers Scone, Montgomery, Huron, and a few other townships and villages on this side of the state. When you were dealing with what you had, it showed up on our end through LEADS that you had run the plate. A little digging showed us you had the vehicle involved in some form. We just wanted to see what you had, and if the vehicle is available to look at?”

“Yeah, well, I definitely did deal with it yesterday. Unfortunately car-wise, we don’t have a big enough department to store a vehicle not suspected of something like murder, so it’s not here right now. It’s at Rittman’s Towing. They’re the towing company we use. We do have a hold on it, but it’s in their lot. So you’re probably going to have to wait until eight until you can look it over unless you get lucky and their night shift guy isn’t busy.”

“Okay. Is that a local towing company and where is that?”

“It’s the town over,” Wynn explained, pointing west.

“They have it locked up there on their lot, but do you need

something particular from it? If it's something urgent, I'll give them a call and tell them to at least put it in their garage until the morning. It still runs and everything."

"No, that won't be necessary. We will look it over later," William said, as he wrote down "Rittman's Towing" on a notepad he had at the ready.

"Do you have any leads or was anything found in the car?"

"Not too much leads-wise," Wynn replied, while looking over to the Coleman's and Abner's to make sure they were still being civil.

"I have a couple partial witnesses that I'm still talking to, but really not too much in those regards. Car-wise, yes, we have some stuff. Rittman's has the car keys. A gun was found under the seat, and a couple hundred dollars was found in the center console. Besides that, the car was pretty bare besides a briefcase that was found in the trunk under the mat. You know, that space where a spare tire is usually located. The briefcase was there instead of the tire."

"Did you guys look in the briefcase? What was in there?" William asked while looking up at him.

"No, it was locked. It has one of those rolling combination locks on it, so we have a locksmith coming in a couple of days to pick it for us. We thought about cutting it but we didn't want to potentially ruin anything that was inside. The prosecutor was okay with us getting it picked because it's considered abandoned property."

"Do you think somethings in it? Could we see it?"

"Yeah, it feels and sounds like something is moving around inside, plus it's decently heavy to be just an empty case. So we were thinking it probably has something in it. Case-wise, I'd love to show it to you, but it's locked up right now in our evidence room and I don't have a key for that. So if you guys want to wait until eight and maybe knock out two birds with one stone, hit here and then Rittman's, that would probably be your best bet," Wynn mentioned, while glancing back over to the Coleman's after hearing something rather loud.

“We will see. You said you have a report, could we have a copy?”

“Sure... I’m just not done with it yet. Unfortunately. But yeah, when it’s done I’d gladly give you a copy or send it wherever. Is there anything specific you might need in the meantime?”

“Yes. We have to do our own investigation. So any pictures, leads, witness statements, and evidence like we discussed, we would need to look into.”

“Okay. Well, I can give you some of that off the top of my head, but I’m really buying time right now and probably shouldn’t leave these two families alone to go inside the station. Again, we can get you the vast majority of that at eight, but I’m kind of flirting with fire right now with these two families,” Wynn regrettably explained, feeling like he was stuck between a rock and a hard place with his family feud issue and the FBI’s needs.

“No, that’s okay. Later will do. Besides the physical stuff, we mainly wanted to talk with you and get your report since you were the officer on scene. So we will come back another time when you’re not as busy,” William replied while flicking his headlights on and putting his car into gear.

“We’ll be in touch.”

“Okay... But one quick question for you if that is okay?” Wynn mentioned as their car started to move.

Without saying a word, William stopped the car and looked his way, indicating to Wynn he could go ahead with his question.

“I always thought the FBI looked into bigger, national crimes like terrorism, hate crimes, or mob and gang affairs... not stolen cars. Are you guys thinking this car has a bigger aspect to it?”

Shaking his head to each issue, William went into some of the things the FBI does, and why they were looking into this particular vehicle.

“Yes. We cover public corruption, white-collar crimes, cyber

crimes, the stuff you mentioned, and more. No, the normal day-to-day stolen car isn't something that would normally grab our attention. However, this car is looking to be related to organized crime, so that's why we are poking our noses around and wanted to talk with you about it."

"So who do you feel is involved then, if you feel it's related to organized crime? We don't have any names yet."

Looking around and pausing for a moment before answering, William gave a vague reply to Wynn's question.

"Well, we really can't talk about that at this point. Since it's mob-related, we try not to have too many loose lips... so to speak. No offense."

"No, I understand," Wynn responded politely.

"But if you are talking about potential mafia types, then that kind of becomes an officer safety issue for our guys. Plus for your end, if anything in the briefcase has whoever's name on it, we could link that up for you since it sounds like you might have someone in mind, right?" he added, trying to word things as tactfully as he could, without creating any awkwardness between them.

Still to what Wynn had asked, William looked over to Agent Harmon who in return, nodded his head. This simple action flipped Wynn's perspective in regards to which of the two agents was in charge. Cordially awaiting a reply, both agents seemed to take longer than what was necessary before William eventually spoke up.

"Barton Mitchell and John Bloss. I would imagine you don't know either of them, but they are runners for the 'Culebra' gang... or sometimes just called the smokers, who mostly operate out of Scone County."

Looking at Wynn as if this was all he was going to give him, Wynn followed this up with only a couple in-general questions as he jotted both suspects' names down on his notepad.

"Are either of them dangerous? Do you think we should move the car to a different location?"

“No, the car is kind of a moot point. We will give it a once over, but it sounds like it’s fine where it’s at. I also wouldn’t put any extra concerns into them. They are just runners, paid for the simple task of taking whatever from point A to point B. Like you said, I’m sure they had a gun, but that’s... they won’t be an issue. They weren’t higher-ups and are probably long gone by now,” William explained, before being interrupted by a loud truck that drove past them and parked across from the station.

“Oh boy,” Wynn grumbled upon noticing this.

“I’m sorry but that’s another Coleman. Stop by tomorrow-ish and I’ll get you a copy of my report... as long as these guy’s issues don’t boil over too, too much.”

◇
Chapter Nº 2



Being purposefully loud and raucous, Layla audibly banged and rattled around the house as she did her errands, trying to repay Wynn for his ice cream remarks the day before. Having to stay over almost two hours for the Coleman and Abner issue, Wynn got to bed much later than normal and was not very receptive to Layla's deliberate commotion.

"Layla!" he cried while pulling the covers over himself.

"I get what you're doing. But my antics don't keep you up!"

Not giving him a response, Layla stealthily went quiet for a while, as a ruse to make him think she was respecting his wishes. Then, as loud as she could set her vintage 1980s radio, she blared a deafening classic right next to their bedroom door and scurried away. The time-period-accurate song started off with an ear-splitting synthesized solo that jolted Wynn from their bed and onto his feet.

"Layla!" Wynn screeched, expecting this to be the end of her prank.

Hearing the song continue left Wynn with little choice but to turn it off himself. Quite animated over this, Wynn shook his head and opened the bedroom door, finding the radio just outside. Looking for Layla down their hallways, he disconnected the radio from the extension cord she had used and carried it into their room. Figuring this would end her buffoonery, he set the radio on the floor and then turned to close their door. Hearing him do so, Layla leapt out from the room over while simultaneously blaring an air horn she had found.

"AHHHH!" Wynn shouted, jumping back a little, while bracing himself from a potential attack.

Orientating himself rather quickly, Wynn noticed Layla hysterically laughing at him while rolling around on the floor. Not as amused as she was, Wynn spoke up as Layla continued to both laugh and

honk her air horn each time he tried to speak.

“Stop that,” he muttered, as he playfully tried to take the horn away from her.

After a little tug of war with Layla, she finally relented, still laughing at his expense.

“You hopped like a little frog!” she managed to say between her tearful giggles.

Dismissively rolling his eyes and shaking his head, he didn’t acknowledge this, but instead commented about the horn.

“Why would you even buy this? This is a waste of what, eight bucks?”

“You tell me,” Layla replied, still trying to calm herself.

“I found it in your drawer. You had to have had it for some reason. I just thought I’d beat you to its most logical use.”

Relishing the fact her little goof had worked, Layla savored the taste of victory as Wynn realized he had not only been caught but had been bested as well. Grimacing enough to reveal this fact had gone through his head, Wynn tried to salvage his pride with a slight counter punch.

“Yeah well, at least I got a deal on these. Two for ten,” he advised, revealing he still had one more hidden somewhere in the house.

This idea muffled Layla’s enjoyment a little, but not enough to overcome her itch to keep poking.

“I really wish I would have recorded that. That would be on the internet right now. Officer Clifton’s little leap. Maybe lope? Little lope? Or... Officer Clifton’s hop dance! I could edit that little clip back and forth to start a trend. That would catch.”

Not as entertained as she was, Wynn changed the topic to focus more on the day now that he was clearly awake

“Anyways, back to reality. Do you have any laundry going today? Last night the Abner’s and Coleman’s were at it again. After making me look over a preexisting dent, they pivoted from that allegation and handed over a dirty box of tools as their proof the Coleman’s have been leaving stuff on their property. So I need a new, clean uniform now. If you have a load going, I’ll just add to it. If not, I’ll scrounge up some stuff to make a load worthwhile.”

Still sidetracked in amusement over Wynn’s jump, Layla hesitated in her reply. Feeling she was ignoring him, Wynn didn’t ask twice. Turning from her, he grabbed his dirty uniform and then walked towards a clump of clothes he had previously tossed into the corner of the room. Seeing his actions, Layla snapped out of her glee and finally responded.

“I do. I actually have a line going. Just leave it there and I’ll add it into the mix later... you’ve already had a rough start to your day,” she said with a devilish grin.

Taking his lumps in stride, Wynn shook his head as he started to remove and detach the items that could come off his uniform.

“Nope, I’ll do that,” Layla smartly voiced while forcing him to put it down.

“Like I said. Rough day,” she sarcastically added as she patted him on the head as if he were a little boy.

Licking his chops and relenting to her playful mood, Wynn accepted her offer and put down his dirty clothes. Briefly reconsidering laying back down, Wynn figured it was probably best if he stayed up now and took an early nap later before heading back into work. Left scratching and stretching, he started to mentally kick around his options, when Layla broke his thoughts with a question.

“Were you able to get that stolen car report done or did the Abner’s take up all your time last night?”

Effectively forgetting about the stolen car issue after spending so much time with the feuding families, Wynn bemoaned the idea he still had this on his plate.

“No. The Coleman’s and Abner’s were at the station last night for a lot longer than they needed to be... if at all,” he said in reference to the trivialness of their affairs.

“Their feud kept me so busy, that the report ended up being the last thing on my mind. Other than a couple FBI guys passing along some information to me, I really didn’t do too much with it last night.”

“You called the FBI about it? I didn’t know it was that big of a deal?” she asked, surprised to the point her body stopped what it was doing.

“No, no,” Wynn replied, while shaking his hands back and forth.

“While I was dealing with the Abner’s, I noticed a car pull up nearby. I didn’t recognize it, so I checked on it to see if it was related. There happened to be two FBI guys inside wanting to know about the stolen car. They wanted to know where it was, if they could see a briefcase I took as evidence, and then they gave me the names of the two guys who were supposedly involved before we got cut off by another Coleman showing up,” he explained, as an epiphany struck him.

“But don’t worry... It wasn’t your old boyfriend, Special Agent Smelly.”

Getting great amusement from being able to bring him up and make fun of his last name, Wynn had a hard time holding back his pleasure as Layla quickly corrected him.

“Smedley,” she voiced in his defense.

“You know it’s not Smelly.”

Finding his rod which to poke her with, Wynn kept the ribbing going.

“Mrs. Clifton sounds a lot better than Mrs. Smelly. You got to admit, I have him there.”

Ruffled over his jesting, Layla simply corrected his name again as Wynn kept going.

“I will say though, Mrs. Smelly would have been much better than Mrs. Zipper-down. That science major kid you dated for a little while.”

“Zappadon. You don’t need to make fun of their last names unless you’re jealous.”

Getting his kicks in, Wynn dropped his badgering when he noticed he was starting to bother her a little too much.

“I’m just having fun. I actually liked Smelly... I mean Smedley, when I had training with him in Philadelphia. We got along fine. He was actually pretty funny. Serious, but funny. Plus I’ll give him bonus points for serving... even if it was for the Marines,” Wynn jestfully mentioned of his prior Army service and the rivalry between the two branches.

“He’s a nice guy,” Layla replied, defending him once more.

Deciding to turn the conversation into an advantageous direction, Wynn snuggled up to Layla and nuzzled his nose next to hers.

“But I got the catch. He might be a nice guy, but he made the boneheaded play of the century. He can have the FBI, I’m the one here with you.”

This adoring remark instantly erased Layla’s inflamed thoughts she had towards him, and instead refocused her mind on why she loved him so much. He liked to joke, he liked to be a goof, but she knew she was always his center. Having a pure and unsurpassed smile form upon her face, Wynn recognized this change and stopped pressing her buttons.

“I do have to hunker down though tonight in order to get that stolen vehicle report done. Then we can go on our trip!” he noted with a distinctive wink, non-verbally indicating to her he too was excited to be alone and together with her.

Melted by this cherishment of her, Layla snuggled into him,

speaking aloud her present thoughts.

“I like when you say nice things.”

Paused before answering, Wynn eventually pushed that idea towards their weekend together.

“Well, let’s have more of the same together this weekend. But first, I need to go and get a couple things from the store... for this weekend of course. Then maybe I’ll be nice and give you a few hints as to what we are doing... so you can pack maybe a little more accordingly... if you want?”

This made Layla smile again, but also made her reconsider how she felt. Now, she almost wanted the mystery combined with the warm feelings he was giving her. This momentarily stuttered her in thought. Did she want a hint or did she want the secret to continue?

“You know what Wynn, whatever you want to say is fine. I’m just happy we will be spending some time together. As long as it’s the two of us, wherever we go will be splendid.”

Although he likewise enjoyed the endearing moment, Wynn’s sillier mindset started to wander a bit until he eventually cracked.

“Yes, very elegant and most exquisite!” he lightly muttered, trying to use what he felt were some synonyms for splendid.

Still loving her moment with Wynn, Layla didn’t initially catch on to his covert teasing until his choice of words got longer and more absurd.

“Sweet and pulchritudinous. We shall bask in each others’ nectarous radiance!”

Realizing what he was up to upon hearing the word pulchritudinous, Layla lovingly slapped his chest with both hands as she pushed away from him.

“Ugghhh, Wynn! Go get your groceries. I just wanted thirty seconds. Thirty Seconds! Pulchur-e-saur doesn’t even sound like a word.

What is that, a dinosaur of some sort? Go get your groceries!” she voiced in playful frustration.

Wynn then grabbed her hand as she pulled away. Spinning her around, he landed a full and firm kiss upon her lips. Rooted in her spot, Layla enjoyed the kiss and forgave him without a word. Smiling upon his release, Wynn then gave her a gentle brushing of a kiss upon her forehead before walking over to their dresser and collecting his keys.

“I shouldn’t have gone with nectarous. Syrupy radiance... that would have been better. If I would have said that, I would have slipped it on by you.” he added, playfully ruining the moment again.

“Just go get your stuff already,” Layla replied with a content giggle.

“You were ahead in the ‘nectar’ talk. In the future you’re going to need to learn how to exit while you’re still up. Or... maybe next time I will have to rethink your baby planning.”

“Hey whoa! Don’t be talking crazy now! I was just having a little fun,” Wynn replied while putting on the brakes.

“But seriously, pulcher... pulchunious. Whatever I said, isn’t a dinosaur. It’s a legitimate word, as long as I pronounced it right, which I guess I’m kind of now questioning. I saw it on TV once where those young kids spell those ridiculously long words... so I know it’s real. After that, I just stashed it away in my back pocket for a rainy day... waiting for just that right moment to be released.”

“Okay, whatever...” Layla said dismissively.

“Pick up some ice cream if you’re wanting any for when we return from our trip... and get some air filters if the store you’re going to sells them. I know you didn’t change it this month because we’ve been out for a while.”

“Sure. But... if I’m doing that, I might as well pick up a little more paint for the baby room. Right? I mean, the faster the room is done...”

◇
Chapter № 3



Layla and Wynn slept soundly over the lightly cooling night. Burrowing herself under his arm to both stay warm and cuddle, Layla inadvertently pushed him onto the last ten percent of their bed, soaking up the remaining ninety percent for herself. Comfortable and quite amiable, Layla was completely relaxed until their alarm clock went off.

“I just disagree... I don’t understand it. Jim, help me out here. We already have a guy that’s winning games for us. Why did we trade for a guy...” The radio host said before Wynn could turn off the alarm clock.

Gradually getting himself up, Wynn stretched and cracked his back while Layla took over the rest of the bed. Hearing him open a drawer to fetch a clean t-shirt, Layla instantly popped up, remembering she hadn’t quite gotten to his uniform yet. Scrambling out of bed so Wynn didn’t get a free run of jokes at her, Layla bumped into the corner of their bed and then their dresser before Wynn had a chance to ask her what was going on.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” she said as she pulled out a fresh uniform for him.

Although it was dark and he was still a little heavy-eyed, Wynn quickly caught on to what had happened.

“Did you forget something?” He curiously asked as the wheels of mischief started to turn in his head.

“Yes, don’t worry about it.” Layla honestly replied, humbly rushing herself so Wynn wouldn’t be late.

“But I’ll have your backup ready here in a second.”

Building himself up for some ribbing, Wynn was able to lightly see her face in the still-dark room. Noticing a genuine look of sorrow, Wynn considerably cut himself off and instead reached into his

sock drawer. Saddened as he patiently watched her frantically find his extra badge, she devotedly latched it to his uniform before spinning around and handing it over to him. Not giving her any grief, Wynn merely thanked her as she transitioned from his shirt to a fresh pair of pants. Having a dedicated drawer for this, Layla quickly unfolded a new, clean pair and handed them over to Wynn. Embarrassed with herself, Layla quietly returned to her side of the bed and curled up before meekly asking him for a small favor.

“Would you say something nice to me before you go to work tonight?”

With Wynn, Layla was never quite sure what she would get. He had easily turned other scenarios like this into running gags, and she herself had just pulled a prank on him. Hoping he would let her off the hook, Layla was left guessing until he warmly settled his choice of words into her ear.

“My heart beats only for you,” he kindly whispered, not razzing her while sealing his pledged deed with a nimble kiss.

Pleasantly smiling without saying another word, Wynn picked up his duty belt and stepped out of their room. Eventually hearing him troop through the kitchen and out their front door, Layla’s admiring feelings for him caused her to look out their window. Brushing aside their curtains and peeking in the direction of his car, Layla was surprised to see Wynn standing there looking back... almost as if he knew her steps. Smiling upon seeing her peering face, Wynn blew her a kiss and gave her an endearing wink.

Quickly trying to do the same, Layla forgot about the window in front of her and bumped into it. Each having a laugh over this, they then exchanged a brief moment of a lover’s gaze before Wynn turned to his car and started his drive into work.

Now left awake with her spirited adoration for him combined with her bustling excitement over their mystery vacation, Layla had difficulty relaxing herself enough in order to catch up with her nap. Often tossing and turning from side to side and occasionally giggling to herself, gradually, the welcoming darkness of the night again greeted her as the night eventually calmed her eyes and silenced her thoughts.

Resting on Wynn's side of the bed, Layla slept pleasantly for several hours. This continued throughout the night until she had a vague dream of a distant man with glowing blue eyes. Although she didn't get the feeling he was a threat, the surprising appearance of this assured man stoutly gripping an impressive axe, was enough to awaken her.

Settled by the sight of their bedroom, Layla soon made sense of the dream as an allegory for her ex-boyfriend. Since Wynn had brought him up, the representation in her dream soon seemed to make sense. Smedley did have sharp blue eyes, and the idea of the axe soon seemed to be a symbol for the word ex. Satisfied with her still-dazed thought process, Layla glanced outside towards Wynn's customary parking space and then soon thereafter fell back asleep.

This time around Layla had a more pleasant and almost alluring dream of riding a horse towards a bright but unseen light. Unfortunately, the conclusion of this dream was never reached as she was awakened by the ringing of her phone. Not orientating herself fast enough to both find the phone and pick it up, the caller hung up but then rang her again. Seeing the numbers on her phone somewhat unclearly, she answered the phone with an undefined greeting.

"Yeah?" she mumbled hazily.

Hearing some words but not quite interpreting them, Layla at first missed the idea of the call and had to ask the caller twice to repeat himself.

"Layla. This is Chief Scholl. I am outside of your house right now," he voiced with urgency.

"Can you hear my horn?"

This question was followed by a series of honks, indeed coming from outside her bedroom window. Looking outside somewhat confused, Layla verified this as she noticed a police cruiser with both its regular and police traffic lights on. The bright flashing of red and blue lights stirred her enough to realize that this time she was not dreaming and that this was not just another allegory of something she had once experienced.

“I’m sorry. You said Chief Scholl, right?” Layla now asked with some concern.

“Yes. Layla, I need you to trust me, and as fast as you can, get ready and meet me outside,” he replied while stepping out of the cruiser so she could see him.

“Oh, okay Chief. I’ll be right out,” she responded, with her concern now turning more towards a deep worry.

Dashing around the house to grab her perceived essential, keys, socks, shoes, and cell phone, Layla’s mind started to question why the Chief was in her driveway. With any good reasoning seeming faint, her mind then naturally steered towards the idea something bad had occurred. This realization sickened her as she quickly collected her things and walked out of her front door.

Already having the cruiser turned around, the Chief motioned for her to jump in without fully elaborating.

“We can talk while I’m driving. Please get in.”

Having no reason not to trust him, Layla did so and sat down in the front right passenger seat. Taking off immediately, Chief Scholl left his police lights on and even turned on his sirens as they entered onto Layla and Wynn’s country-style road.

“Give me a second,” he then said, as they sped down the street at a rate far beyond the posted limit.

This “second” that the Chief had asked for was to notify someone over the radio that he was “en route” and that he would be there “in about fifteen minutes.” Now well past worried, Layla desperately wanted to ask him what was going on but at the same time could only come up with negatives, which she diffidently did not want to utter.

Upon the Chief putting down the car’s mic, the apparent look of distress was clear upon his face as he searched himself for the right words to say. This nervous pause was followed by a few “Umm’s” and a clearing of his throat before he opened up. With her entire attention gripped

upon him, her heightened sense triggered another observation of the overwhelming musk of intensely charred wood emitted from his uniform. Reasoning to herself why this would be, the Chief at last, voiced what was on his mind, while also not glossing over anything.

“So Layla. I’m taking you to Green-Smith General Hospital. Wynn had an accident at work and he’s... not in the best state.”

Striking her with the force that only someone in great dismay could feel, Layla missed a breath as she waited for whatever else he had to say.

“I got a call from our dispatch center probably less than an hour ago. She advised that I was immediately needed at our police station because it had caught fire and that Wynn had been found outside. When I got there, the rescue services had already put him into their ambulance and were just about to take off to Green-Smith,” Chief Scholl continued, as he sped past a few vehicles.

“I did see him for a second, but the squad guys said they had to go. After they left, I spoke with the Deputy who found him. He advised he was called to our station because Wynn had made some garbled transmission over the radio about the station. So he went to check on Wynn and found the entire police department on fire.”

The Chief briefly broke off their conversation to pass yet a few more cars and then to turn left, off the road they were on, and onto a more main route which led to the hospital.

“The Deputy said while he was calling out the fire department, he found Wynn, unconscious, just outside the side door at the station. He said he was breathing pretty rough, but that he was at least breathing, although he never came to. So that’s the positive news. He was breathing.”

“Positive? I... what’s the bad news?” Layla asked, figuring everything she had just heard was the bad news.

“From what I gather, he somehow received a very large blow to the head. I’m sure this is why he was unconscious. I don’t know how that happened, but from what I’ve been told, the blow was to the extent that

when I spoke with one of the ER nurses over the phone, she said that the hospital considers him to be in critical condition.”

“Okay, how bad is critical? Do they think he is going to die or something?” Layla lightly voiced as the shock of what was being explained to her started to sink in.

“Honestly Layla, I don’t know. I don’t know if there might be a ‘serious critical’ or something above the critical condition she mentioned. She just said what I told you, that his vital signs were unstable and that they would recommend reaching out to his closest family members.”

This explanation left Layla blank. Some form of the worst seemed inescapable but nothing was firm or concrete. Thusly, Layla’s mind played both sides and still found a glint of hope out of his ominous account. Wynn was breathing, he was alive, and nobody had said he had succumbed to anything or that he could not recover. These ideas left her body and mind in a state of suspense, not knowing how to react. Stuck in the questioning and analytical stage, the idea something had struck him in the head seemed intentional more than accidental.

“You said he had a head injury. Do you know how that happened? Did someone attack him?”

Not having all the information himself, the Chief gave her the best explanation he could.

“Layla, based on what I saw and am getting, I would say someone hit him. Probably with some sort of blunt object like a bat or crowbar. That’s all just speculation on my behalf, I’m sure the doctors might be able to fill in some of those questions a little more, but I would guess someone snuck up on him and hit him.”

“Your station has cameras doesn’t it?” Layla asked, not hearing the Chief say if they had any suspects.

“Yes. But I kind of skipped over how bad the station is. I would imagine whoever attacked Wynn was also behind the fire, but the fire wasn’t something simple. The station was pretty well destroyed, which unfortunately included our cameras. I’m sure one of our cameras captured whoever this was, but because of the fire, we are probably going to have to

send out whatever remains to a specialist for digital recovery.”

“Did Wynn get burnt?”

“Well, that is a shade of good news. No, not that anyone told me or I could tell. Now I’m sure he probably breathed in some smoke and he might have gotten some... toasting I guess you could say based on how close he was to the fire. But I didn’t get that he was in the fire at any point.”

As Layla was about to ask another question, the hospital came into sight. This subsequently focused both of their thoughts on where to park and how to enter. Fortunately for them, as they were entering the hospital’s grounds, the same ambulance that had transported Wynn was beginning to drive away. Seeing this, Chief Scholl flagged them down and asked for directions.

◇
Chapter Nº 4



Chief Scholl and Layla were not immediately allowed to see Wynn upon entering the hospital. Since he was currently in surgery and receiving medical attention, both were asked to wait in a separate, special room for these types of emergency situations. Despite all the hurried work and running around the medical staff were doing, one doctor still found a moment to speak with them about a half hour after their arrival.

“Hello, I’m Doctor Benjamin Neely. I just wanted to give you guys a little information. Unfortunately, it’s not a lot, but we like to keep family members in the loop as much as we can so you are as up-to-date as possible. We know this is equally hard on you, so we’re going to give you what we can, when we can.”

After giving them his opening monologue the doctor was true to his word, laying out what he could but rather quickly.

“Wynn sustained several blows to the back of his head which has created substantial damage. This is primarily in the Occipital portion of his skull, but it also does extend upward into his Parietal Bone,” he explained while demonstrating what portion of the head he was talking about by touching the back of his.

“This has caused a lot of internal bleeding, which we are trying to stop. It’s been difficult, but we have had some success. That said, by no means is he out of the woods. There is just a lot of damage and a lot of unknowns at this time. However, I can tell you, we still have him, he is breathing with the help of a ventilator and we will do everything we can to pull him through this.”

Being more cursory than what either Layla or Chief Scholl expected, both fumbled for a question to ask to try and gauge the situation a little more.

“Is he going to be alright? Is he going to make it?” Was the

most basic but complete couple of questions Layla could get out that she felt blanketed the main concerns.

“Well, I wish I could give you more than I did, but it’s a battle. Wynn seems like a fighter, but it’s just too early to be able to tell. We are still working and a lot more needs to be done. But as I said, he is still with us and he is fighting through at this point,” the doctor explained with a level of uncomfortability that wasn’t missed by Layla or Chief Scholl.

Happy with any news but understandably wanting more, Layla repeated her question of Wynn’s chances. In response, the doctor tightened his mouth a bit before saying anything.

“If we felt positive one way or another we would tell you. We don’t want to keep anyone in suspense, but we are currently in that unknown phase. Certain things are looking good... or are at least where we would want them to be, while others are a cause for concern. As much as it’s no fun to hear, we really don’t want to get your emotions going one way just for the opposite to occur.”

“So he’s fifty-fifty right now then?” Chief Scholl said, to fill in the gap for Layla.

Looking at him with his mouth somewhat open, the doctor nodded to this and seemed to be done with the information he was able to divulge. This promoted Chief Scholl to take charge of the interaction by thanking him for his time.

“Thank you, Doctor Neely for the update and for what you and your staff are doing. We very much appreciate it all. Please keep us updated when you can.”

“Yes, of course. And if you need anything please flag down one of our staff members and we will do whatever we can.”

Doctor Neely again nodded and then exited the room, closing the door behind him gingerly. While doing so, the reminder they were in a hospital was evident. Being in a room probably designed to block out disturbances, the opening of the door allowed the sounds of everyday hospital life to enter. Beeping monitors, light chatter, and the rattling of

medical supplies being pushed about could all be heard clearly.

Up until this point, Layla had held herself emotionally together quite well. She had cried some and had exhibited common signs of stress, but nothing had pushed her over her emotional wall. Some of this was due to the fact she was information gathering or moving about. Driving with the Chief, rushing into the hospital, all of this only allowed for personal reaction in order to accomplish her mission. Now in standby, the sounds of beeping and hospital chatter finally caught up to her, and toppled her emotional control.

“I’m sorry,” she lightly voiced to the Chief as she looked around for some tissues.

Noticing she had become teary-eyed, the Chief helped her with her search and found a complimentary tissue box near his chair. Trying to lighten the mood, the Chief made a comment about this find.

“If you want, I can go and get you some better tissues. I’m sure the hospital bulk buys these and they probably aren’t much better than a paper towel. Definitely not aloe infused or that soft, three-layered type.”

Lightly and politely smiling as he handed over the box, Layla reflected his demeanor but still accepted the rough and scratchy tissues. Dabbing her tears, she forgetfully repeated herself.

“I’m sorry.”

“Layla, there’s nothing to be sorry about. You haven’t done anything wrong. This is just a tough spot. Take your time with everything and don’t feel bad about anything. If you want a moment alone or something, feel free to ask me to leave. You won’t be hurting my feelings.”

Layla acknowledged this while wiping her nose. Starting a little pile of used tissues next to her, Layla asked him what he thought.

“You mean what do I think of what the doctor said?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think he sounded very confident,” she replied faintly, while pulling out another tissue.

“Yeah, I caught that as well,” he said with a pause.

“I can tell you personally, I’ve seen things go both ways. As a police officer, I’ve been on accidents where the accident and the injuries to the driver didn’t seem bad, but later the person had some problems. That said, I’ve also seen the opposite where a car has rolled over or someone needs to be pulled out of a car with severe injuries, and they made it. So I can’t say I’m the best at assessing these sorts of things,” he answered with, before changing directions in his explanation.

“But yes, I did catch the awkwardness the doctor had with your question. However, the underlying idea of what he was saying, I think still holds true. Let’s just say he wasn’t so optimistic. Whatever was in his mind was still not bad enough to push him into telling us the worst. Which means he is still holding off on a worst-case scenario. As I was saying about the car accidents I’ve dealt with, sometimes things don’t look so good and they turn out fine. So I’d say, let’s just take what we know and not put ourselves through every possible scenario. Yes, he’s gonna have what sounds like a fractured skull... which isn’t something new for these medical professionals,” the Chief explained, trying to downplay the issue some.

“But the people that know what they are doing still feel strong enough to keep going.”

Even though what the Chief had to say wasn’t what she wanted to hear, or delivered as clearly as she might have wanted it to be, his message still got across to her and did its intended job. The doctor could have said “We can’t do anymore”, but he didn’t. He could have also made several other heart-wrenching statements, but he pumped the brakes on those as well. So although she still felt the worst was more probable than the latter, the idea of “wait and see” was now more soothing to her than when it was first brought up to her by the doctor.

◇
Chapter Nº 5



During this incident, the staff at the hospital were overly thoughtful and very considerate. Every fifteen minutes, almost to the second, someone from the hospital's staff visited their waiting room. All were quick to announce their intentions and before long, the Chief had to excuse himself from the room due to the amount of coffee offered to the two of them.

Besides these breaks, the Chief loyally stayed by Layla's side. To cut out any distractions from the moment, the Chief appointed his Lieutenant as the officer in charge while he was at the hospital. The Chief even went as far as to turn off his cell phone to avoid all the continual calls he was receiving.

Occasionally Chief Scholl asked Layla if there was anything else he could do, or anyone she might want him to reach out to. Layla deferred all his requests, knowing if she called her sister or parents, her emotions of talking to each would both drain and worry her even more, than if she had just remained quiet in the room. This same choice for Wynn's side of the family was much more easily made. Since Wynn was an only child, he had no siblings to call. Then sadly, Wynn had also lost both of his parents a few years earlier due to health.

Standing by, Chief Scholl and Layla eventually turned waiting into a night of clock staring. Layla routinely fiddled with her shirt, strummed her hair, and then looked at the clock, with each time seeming longer and more separate. The Chief also made up his own cycle, except he was more of a pacer. Chief Scholl would start out next to Layla until she lowered her head to groom or twist her hair. This prompted the Chief to start a rotation of sipping on his coffee, looking out the room's window, and then flipping around a magazine or two until Layla looked up at the clock.

These subconscious actions continued on almost an indistinguishable loop until at about five in the morning, when Doctor

Neely reentered the room with an update. Looking tired and overrun, the doctor this time picked a wooden chair and pulled it over close to Layla. Sitting down, the doctor cleared his throat and then spoke up.

“I’m sorry Layla, there is nothing more we can do,” the doctor stated clearly so that there were no misunderstandings.

“He put up a heroic fight, but he has succumbed to his injuries.”

At “I’m sorry” Layla already knew the rest of what the doctor had to say. Losing herself in her chair, Layla got light-headed and slipped from her seat at about the time the doctor was using the word “succumbed.”

Thankfully being caught by both the doctor and Chief Scholl, Layla was rested gently onto the floor, on her side. With the Chief using a couch cushion as a pillow, Layla lost concern over herself as she went entirely limp in both body and mind. As the Chief rushed to get her a glass of water, Doctor Neely was eventually able to communicate with her, albeit only on a limited basis, and with her responses only to basic questions.

Allowing Layla a few moments to recuperate, Doctor Neely voiced another pressing issue.

“Mrs. Clifton, I don’t want to rush anything, but there is one thing I need to go over with you,” he mentioned with a pause to gauge her reaction.

Faintly acknowledging this, the doctor then went over the issue.

“Okay. Layla, we do still have him on a ventilator. I advised he had succumbed to his wounds because he meets all the clinical and legal criteria for someone who has passed away.”

“He’s alive?!” Layla announced with great confusion, as she sprung up from the ground.

“No Layla,” the doctor replied, in as soft of a voice as he could.

“He has passed. Our medical equipment is the only thing that is keeping him going right now.”

“Could you call in another doctor or take him to another location?” Layla asked quite loudly, while her mind scrambled to come up with something that might work.

“Layla, I’m sorry. I’ve already spoken with several doctors in-house and also called Reynolds Central Hospital just to verify if there might be any other possibilities. We have exhausted every avenue we can think of and have gone over anything else any one of us thought might be possible. We have simply reached the point where it’s out of our hands.”

Extinguishing, with these words, her final trace of love’s duty, Layla released her hope and painfully took the next step.

“Can I still see him while he is alive... or I mean, with us?” she asked in a subdued voice.

“Yes. That is what I wanted to offer you, although we do not have a lot of time. The catch and the reason he is on the ventilator is because your husband is an organ donor. So unless his wishes have changed at some point, Wynn will be able to help out at least one more person.”

Forgetting they had both signed up for this, Layla felt a slight pressure in giving an okay. With this being only a cursory thought prompted by her love for him, Layla knew he wouldn’t have changed his mind and somberly agreed with any and all donations going forward.

“Okay. Let me get you a wheelchair. That will be the easiest way to get you over to his room,” Doctor Neely replied, as he turned to the waiting room’s door and called for a nurse to bring one over.

Not waiting long, one of the nurses that had been checking up on them and getting Chief Scholl his coffee, arrived with the wheelchair. Assisting Layla into the chair, both the nurse and Doctor Neely escorted her to the room Wynn was in. This was done without Chief Scholl who didn’t put up a fuss about who was allowed to go and who was not.

The journey to Wynn's room took a little longer than she expected. Assuming he would be only a few rooms over, she was surprised to find out that they needed to go up an entire level, and onto another floor which was much less busy. For Layla this was for the better as she was already embarrassed about her crying, and had been trying to hide her face in the busier areas of the hospital. Eventually being pushed next to the door of a smaller room, Doctor Neely knocked on this door before anyone went in.

"A nurse is monitoring him. She will let you in to see him," he said while waiting on the nurse to open the door.

Not sure what she might see, Layla faintly vocalized some of her thoughts.

"Is he in bad shape? What am I going to see?"

"He's going to look like Wynn," the doctor replied in a calm and cordial way.

"He's going to be in a gown. He will have a vent and some wires attached to him. But he won't look hurt or anything like that. His head is wrapped up from the bridge of his nose upward, but from there down, he will look like the Wynn you remember. He didn't sustain any other injuries besides a couple of cuts from an unbraced fall. Feel free to hold his hand and talk to him if you would like. He still needs to be taken to another room for prepping, so a hug and a kiss are very acceptable right now."

Nervous, Layla fidgeted with her shirt sleeve some more until the nurse inside the room opened the door. Upon the nurse doing this she first looked at the doctor and then over to Layla. Giving her a polite smile and nod, she soon went behind Layla's wheelchair and pushed her in. Upon entering the room Layla looked down, still unsure of the moment and how fast everything was transpiring. Wheeling her in, the nurse tenderly repeated some of the information the doctor just had. Stopping her about a foot from where his chest would be on the bed, the nurse politely told her to take her time before slipping out of the room quietly.

Shortly thereafter Layla heard the door to the room gently shut. This was followed by an unanticipated mortal silence, something she

was unaccustomed to with Wynn so close. This however wasn't for all of the medical equipment which she was able to ignore, but for her personal contrast of only a handful of hours. In such an insignificant amount of time which teased in memories undiminished touch, Wynn was jovial and spirited. The sense of life was clear in his smile while his eyes distinctly bore a love for her that was loud and unquestioned. Now before her, in an hour once held for rest, life's warm glimmer was doused by a cold and barren void.

When Layla was able to open her eyes, she slowly looked up and saw Wynn, the man she loved, whose presence was near but whose life was far. Gradually focusing herself, Layla first took notice of Wynn's left hand. It was lying closest to her, palm down and slightly recoiled. Unsure of what to do, Layla initially studied his hand which had so often held hers. Casting her mind back, his hands had always been unique to her. They were both tender and sincere to grasp, yet determined and hardy to see. Now desolate, Layla clearly understood with this sight, that every dream and desire they once had together was now dissolved.

Slowly touching his hand, Layla rolled it over into an open palm. Doing this tentatively, she noticed the remnants of the paint he had been using. Remembering this recent pleasure of them painting together towards their desired future, broke Layla's strength and caused her to call out for Wynn. Hearing her cry from outside of the room, both Doctor Neely and the nurse remained still, knowing there was nothing they could do.

Adrift in both mind and thought, Layla was only kept on task by the continual auditory signals given off by the room's medical apparatuses. Moved enough to bear a little more, in time Layla did look upon his face. Precisely wrapped as Doctor Neely had described, the light brown bandages covered everything from the bottom of his eyes up. Admiring his facial features for perhaps the last time, she noted a familiar "C" shaped scar he had on his chin that was lightly masked by a couple days worth of facial growth.

As she had been advised, Wynn did not look to be in pain. Rather, he appeared relaxed and tranquil which brought Layla her first ounce of peace. Still holding his hand, Layla released her grip and gently brushed his cheek, and then his lips with her fingertips. Rugged but soft at the same time, Layla delicately ran the back of her hand along his stubbled

face, while thinking about what she wanted to say. Her mind projecting forward towards the one thing they had both patiently desired, Layla spoke up about what she felt this part of life would have been like.

“You would have been a great father Wynn. You... you were always so fun to be around. Our kids would have adored you. I’m sorry we didn’t get to share that together. I hope you forgive me for wanting to wait. I don’t know if that was right or wrong now,” she said while swallowing back a rush of emotion.

“But our little boy or girl would have treasured you so much, just as I do.”

Stopping to draw strength, Layla rested her head alongside his until she settled upon the words she felt were the best to leave him with.

“Wynn. I will never forget us. I’m glad we got to share our lives together. I hope I was able to return a portion of the happiness you gave me.”

“Wynn. I love you. I always loved you. I could feel love’s touch from the very moment you first said hi to me. Wynn. You showed me that love is everything in me for you.”

“I love you, Wynn.”

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Chapter Nº 6



The next several days and weeks were very foggy for Layla. Unfocused and often faded in thought, Layla often relied on her family and friends to help navigate the difficult responsibilities and tasks that ensued. In particular, although everyone gave a generous hand, Layla leaned most on her sister, Dayna, and her pastor, Isaiah. Both seemed to either soothe or understand her the most. Often calling both, before long, the pair would show up randomly on their own after making plans with one another to help brighten Layla's day.

One responsibility which Layla shied away from was the ongoing investigation into Wynn's death and the station's fire. Due mostly to the fact she simply didn't want to think about the entire event, she still occasionally found herself needing to supply the investigators with bits of information and a few medical records.

This was life for Layla until she started to run low on both vacation and sick leave. Kindly being gifted additional donation days from her fellow employees, Layla still opted to return to work as an office assistant at a clothing manufacturing plant, feeling this might be a constructive outlet to let her mind go elsewhere.

Between her sister, her pastor and now work, Layla briefly found enough busyness in life to skip by from day to day until Chief Scholl tried calling her one morning.

"Hey Layla, it's Chief Scholl," he started off with in a voicemail.

"Don't rush, but when you get a free moment, can you call me? I need to talk to you about the investigation."

Noticing the message an hour after he called, Layla waited until she finished her day's work before calling him. Picking up immediately, as if he had been waiting on her, he quickly got into what he

wanted.

“If you are free, can I come over today to talk about a couple of things?”

“Sure, if you want. I’m going home right now. Is it something we have to talk about in person? You’re getting me a little nervous about wanting to meet me at my house. Last time that happened, it didn’t turn out so well,” she responded with, meaning the comment to be taken in light humor.

“No, you’re right. I should have thought of that. I’m sorry. It’s just something I’d like to talk to you about in person.”

“I’m guessing things are going bad with the investigation then?” she asked, figuring this would be the only real reason he would want to talk in person.

“Well, nothing is one hundred percent. Yes it seems to be going bad, but it’s also just preliminary stuff I’m hearing.”

“About the investigation right?”

“Yeah, about the investigation. A couple guys today spilled some of the details that they heard. But I’d much rather talk to you about it in person. Is that okay if I just come over right now and we can talk when you get home?... and I am really sorry about us meeting at the house thing again. It’s not intentional.”

“It’s okay,” Layla replied, holding back just how much even talking about Wynn’s incident upset her.

“I’ll be home in about fifteen minutes. I’ll see you then.”

Layla paused at her car before getting in. Resting against it and putting her head down, she told herself to have a calm drive home and that no amount of thinking would change anything the Chief might have to say. To help her relax, she took in a deep breath before getting in and starting her car. Telling herself to simply enjoy the ride, she decided against turning on the radio, and instead opened up both windows in an attempt to allow the sound and feel of the wind to settle her mind.

Occasionally catching the smell of a local restaurant or hearing a random car's horn, Layla's decision to drive this way worked so well, that she was almost surprised to see a blue car in her driveway when she pulled in.

Unfamiliar with this vehicle, she glanced over towards the driver's seat as she drove by. Slowing to allow her garage door to open, Layla caught enough of the driver to see that it was indeed the Chief. Politely waving to her, Layla assumed the Chief must have decided to come over off duty since he was not in his normal patrol car. Exiting her car without closing the garage, she noticed that by the time she had done so, the Chief was already out of his car, in her driveway, and very sloppily dressed. Surprised to see him so disheveled, almost looking the part of a drunk, Layla's first comment to him was about this.

"Yeah I was going to be in uniform until you mentioned what you did on the phone. I didn't want to pull out any more bad memories than I had to, so I jumped into my personal car instead of my cruiser and I took off my vest and uniform while I was waiting. I thought the less I looked like before, the better. I'm not drunk though."

Appreciative of the thought, Layla thanked him before inviting him in. Also wanting to change, she asked the Chief for a second while she got out of her work attire. Only needing a few minutes, the Chief waited in the kitchen and noticed some of the "sympathies" and "thinking of you" cards Layla had received, which were all neatly piled up next to her toaster and microwave.

"You can look through them if you want," Layla said, noticing the Chief eyeing them.

"They came from all over the country and even some from overseas. It was very nice of people I don't even know."

Not wanting to rock the boat any more than he had to, Chief Scholl simply smiled and moved on from the topic, asking her if she would have a seat with him at the table.

"Sure," she said, as she clasped her lips together while having a seat.

"So do you remember Deputy Dent?"

“Umm, was he the first officer on scene at the station that night?” Layla replied, already distressed over the issue.

“Yes. He came into the makeshift office the Sheriff’s Department built for me inside their station and said he heard the Fire Marshal’s assistant talking about their final report.”

“Okay. What did he hear?” Layla asked, understanding it was related to Wynn’s case but not really worried about the Fire Marshal’s perspective unless he discovered some evidence that led to a suspect.

“Well, according to Deputy Dent, their ‘finding’ is going to be that a space heater fell over and started the fire,” he advised while air-quoting the word finding.

“Really?” Layla questioned, a little perplexed.

“I thought you said it was arson? That whoever attacked Wynn started it?”

“I still think that Layla,” Chief Scholl stated seriously enough that Layla knew he felt something was wrong.

“I have no question it was arson. That’s the way the evidence looks to me and the way my officers and I have been treating it. If it didn’t look that way, I’d just call it for what it is and we would have to move on. But allegedly this is what the Fire Marshal’s report is going to say when it comes out.”

Baffled, Layla asked Chief Scholl if he knew anymore.

“Yes. So, apparently, they have a melted space heater they claim fell over. I guess it’s an older style that gets really hot and wasn’t equipped with a modern fall switch which would have turned it off in a scenario like they are claiming.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Layla disbelievingly uttered.

“If Wynn was in the station and something like that would have happened, he would have picked it up, unplugged it, or at worst, put

out a small carpet fire. Wynn would have had to of been away from the station for the entire building to have gone up. He just wouldn't have watched it."

"Yes, I agree, but that's just the beginning of the problem with their report."

This time Layla did not reply, and instead looked back at him in confusion.

"They are alleging Wynn fell asleep at the station and knocked the heater over which started the fire. Then, he didn't wake up in time to do something about it, but instead panicked and ran outside, tripping and hitting his head in the process."

"There what? There's no way. That makes zero sense. That just would not have happened."

"I one thousand percent agree Layla," Chief Scholl said, trying to calm her down.

"But I can't control what the Fire Marshal or the Medical Examiner conclude. I can refute it, but they can write up whatever they want."

"The Medical Examiner?"

"Yeah. The Medical Examiner's report is going to line up with the Fire Marshal's report... from what I'm hearing. The Medical Examiner is apparently going to say that Wynn died because of trauma incurred as a result of a fall outside of the station."

"That's just not true. The doctor at the hospital said that night that Wynn looked like he had been struck in the head... a couple of times! Not from a simple fall or something he fell on. He actually said the opposite, that the wounds from his 'unbraced fall' part weren't that big of a deal. So that's a couple of contradictions right there," Layla emphatically pointed out, highlighting the doctor's exact words.

"The fall was the result of being struck on the head!"

“Layla, I know. I think that’s what happened as well. I even double-checked that with Deputy Dent. He said he found Wynn lying on his stomach with his head away from the steps, not on his back with his head near the steps... which I’m guessing they are going to say caused his head injury. If so, then for the medical examiner to be correct, Wynn would have had to of rolled over and positioned his head away from the steps before the Deputy showed up, in order to match the way he found Wynn. It’s just not likely.”

Visibly upset with what the Chief was telling her, Layla took a break from the conversation and walked over to the fridge. Doing this as a reaction to her emotions, Layla opened the fridge and grabbed a water without thinking. Shaking her head, Layla stood still with the water in her hand for a moment before eventually opening it. Taking a sip, the cool water reset her enough to be able to ask another question.

“They had to of talked to the doctor from the hospital. Wouldn’t his opinion hold weight? The hospital obviously gave him enough authority to talk to us and make life-or-death decisions. His on-scene assessment has to count for something... and it was clearly different from what the examiner is saying.”

“Yes. I think what we are going to have to do is wait until we get our hands on the report so we can see precisely how they came to their conclusions. Then when we can show something that contradicts their office’s rulings, we can present whatever we have and ask them to explain the difference. That said, I would guess they would have to confront the fact that a medical doctor... and probably several medical doctors from that night, were thinking the same thing as what our main doctor said. So I do expect some kind of explanation as to why they came to this or that ruling. The only thing I can guess right now is that the medical examiner is going to say that the hospital doctors are not trained in forensic examinations. Thusly, their opinions were just ‘on-the-fly’ assessment, and not backed by whatever the medical examiner is going to say they found.”

Layla took this in and stayed standing by the fridge a little longer. Thinking of other contradictory facts, Layla brewed over the idea someone might actually have this in a report until the Chief spoke up.

“Layla, I just wanted to tell you all of this so you could be ready. Don’t be surprised if the news or someone reaches out to you for a

comment. We are just going to have to take this in stride. It's going to be a speed bump, but I'm still doing my investigation and I don't need to conclude the same things they are. Plus, once we confront their opinions, if they don't give us any satisfactory replies, we can start to show they erred in their findings. Annoyingly, I've never had this big of a difference in opinions before with other agencies, but we will just have to roll with it and let our facts speak for themselves."

"You think the news will ask me about this?"

"I'd like to think not, but they're vultures, so I don't know. I just wanted to make sure you weren't blindsided. I do expect them to call me and ask for my opinion as soon as this is released. If they do call you or even stop by, just don't comment. You don't have to say anything. Just shut the door or hang up. As long as what I was hearing is correct, it's all just going to be someone's opinion and we will just have to refute it later."

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Chapter № 7



Two days after the Chief came over to tell her about the reports, they were published. Both the Fire Marshal and Medical Examiner each put out a public version of their reports onto their respective websites. This was soon followed by a news article that included a brief comment from Chief Scholl.

New Reports Conclude Officer's Death Accidental

June 22nd, 2022 By Tom Fields, The City Column

On Tuesday, two widely expected reports were published which concluded Officer Wynn T. Clifton of the Village of Riceland's police department, died of accidental means. Both the Fire Marshal and Medical Examiner's reports were posted online just after midnight, Monday night into Tuesday morning, indicating both agencies had collaborated with one another.

Fire Marshal John Banks' report indicates that a suspected sleeping Officer Clifton knocked over a Vapors, model 6139 space heater that started the fire which consumed the Riceland Police Department. Noted in the report was that the Vapors space heater was an older model that did not have a fall safety switch. If this model would have had this added feature, the Fire Marshal advised it would have automatically turned off the unit in the event of an overturn. The report also dismissed any belief of the incident being arson related in which he advised "No traces of any accelerants were found in any of the derbies on the premises. The fire patterns found on scene directly parallel the space heater's location and known electrical fires."

Medical Examiner Daniel Garrett found that Officer Clifton died as a result of blunt force trauma sustained during a fall just outside of the Riceland Police Department. His report concluded that fractures and other injuries sustained by Officer Clifton correlated with measurements taken of the police department's concrete steps. No secondary or assisting

means of death were indicated other than smoke inhalation, which was deemed minor. Medical Examiner Garrett also concluded, "All signs indicate this was of accidental means and that foul play has been ruled out."

In light of the two agencies' findings, Chief Phillip Scholl of the Riceland Police Department also released a statement Tuesday morning stating "His agency disagrees with the findings of the two agencies" and that "They will continue to investigate this incident and let the facts and evidence guide them to their conclusion." Other than Chief Scholl's statement, his temporary office at the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department could not be reached for further comment.

The article by Tom Fields went on to detail other points made by Examiner Garrett and Fire Marshal Banks along with a summary of the prior reports leading up to the day's paper. Not commented on were any of the discrepancies Layla and Chief Scholl had talked about or even a side article that gave voice to what Chief Scholl's disagreement was concerning.

Warned but still frustrated, Layla tried to get her mind off the news by doing some busy work around her house. This worked for her in the earlier portion of the day but fell to the wayside as more and more people read the article. As the day wore on, various friends and family started to call her, not to dredge up the topic or bother her about the article, but to lend to her their support.

Although appreciative of this, the sheer volume of calls she received became hard to ignore. Eventually turning off her phone, this too was soon thwarted as her family and friends started showing up at her house, worried about their inability to get in contact with her. Distressed over this, Layla eventually called her sister and asked her if she would go out with her, just as a means of getting away and diverting her mind from the repeated comments.

"Sure. I can pick you up in about fifteen minutes if that is enough time for you?"

Eager to go as soon as possible, Layla threw fashion and appearance to the wayside and actively awaited her sister's arrival, even to the point of contemplating walking down the street to meet her sooner.

Arriving on time, Layla left her house and hurried over to her sister's car before she had a chance to park. Smiling upon seeing her, Layla tossed her purse inside and pushed her sister to get out of the driveway.

"Which direction do you want me to go?" Dayna asked during her rushed departure.

"South. Go south. South has the feeling of going away from things."

Dayna didn't question her choice and turned south when the traffic allowed her to do so. Driving without a clear destination, Dayna soon raised the obvious question.

"So do you have any particular place in mind?" she said a little sheepishly.

Thinking for a little bit about what was in their present direction, an older, mostly women's clothing store came to mind. Having not shopped there for a while, Layla felt this store was the winner. Being somewhat dated and not as stylish, the limited amount of customers this attracted seemed to be their best option for relaxed browsing while not being around many people.

"Ables?" she asked while looking at her sister.

"I haven't been there in a little while but they have a bit of everything, so just looking around will take up some time. Plus, last I heard, they let a coffee vendor set up a little kiosk inside. So we can try that out too if you want?"

Okay with whatever store she picked, Dayna agreed to this but needed Layla's help finding it. Having only shopped there a couple of times herself, Layla also couldn't one hundred percent recall which exact road she needed to be on. Subsequently, this in itself became a game of sorts until they ventured down to many unknown or dead-ended streets.

Eventually letting her phone do the finding, Layla was pleased to see that only about ten cars were in the parking lot of Ables. Walking into the store and receiving the personal diversion she had hoped for, both Layla and Dayna were instantly struck by the smell of a fresh but

distinctly unique brew of coffee coming from the new store vendor. Naturally causing both of them to peer in the vendor's direction, both were surprised to see a pint-sized and almost pitifully small coffee stand, shimmed between the store's return center and restrooms.

Not much larger than a child's lemonade stand, the quaint shop didn't lack for customers. With three Ables' employees and three store customers queued along the wall, the lone worker at the stand hastily moved about, preparing one drink while taking the order of another. Despite the very enticing aromas wafting from the diminutive shop, both Layla and Dayna passed at the present moment, choosing to be active instead of in line. Even so, the name of the little coffee shop did provide them with their first talking point within their shopping foray.

"The Count of Caffeine?" Dayna said to Layla with a laugh.

"I hope that's a temporary name."

Dayna continued to laugh so hard that they both ended up scurrying down one of the closer aisles in order to not be seen by "The Count", as they dubbed him. Randomly selecting the kid's clothing aisle, both girls quickly hurried through the kid's clothes, shoes, and baby bottles, before they found the adult sections.

"So what's first?" Dayna asked, as she blatantly looked over to the store's clearance corner.

"Okay," Layla replied to the insinuation.

"But I'm capping us both at fifty dollars. Neither one of us can let each other go over... no matter what kind of deals we find."

"Just in the clearance section right?" Dayna asked to be sure.

"Of course. The rest of the store is fair game."

Agreeing to the terms, both girls excitedly hurriedly over to the section and started to pick through the randomly assorted, hung, and stacked items. Finding a bit of everything, both girls quickly found a few shirts they liked for only a couple of dollars, while Layla even found a pair of boots that had been marked down ninety percent.

“These are almost free if you like them?” Layla mentioned to Dayna upon making the find.

Hurrying over to see if they had a pair in her size, both girls soon had more than they could hold. Excusing herself to get a cart, Layla also noticed another sale going on in the sheets and bedding department. With her interests piqued after finding all the deals in the clearance section, Layla and Dayna soon found their way over to the bedding area in hopes of some more deals.

Picking through the bins of discounted pillows, slips, beddings, and blankets, this score soon turned disappointing as most of the items ended up being leftover seasonal or holiday specials. A little defeated after finding so many good deals in the clearance corner, both girls then moved on to their regular shopping routine of shelf surfing and eyeball ogling. Picking and poking, thinking and staring, both girls added a couple of items here or there until their cart was clearly full.

“Done?” Dayna asked, although they had not looked over the entire store.

“Yeah, I think we can call it,” Layla acknowledged, feeling good about both their regular and clearance finds.

Already being near the front of the store, they were quickly flagged down by a store associate who had an empty checkout line. Insisting on ringing up everything together, Dayna let out her and her parent’s secret, that today’s shopping excursion was on her parents, hoping it might be an uplifting experience. Appreciative of the offer, Layla laid it on a little more after noticing the coffee line had died down.

“Does that extend to a free cup from The Count?”

“I guess,” Dayna said with a smile, as she pulled out a credit card for their ever-growing haul.

Paying, then giggling to themselves over the coffee shop’s name once more, this time they were not so discreet and were spotted by the worker who had a hunch as to why they were laughing. Once it became clear they were going to be getting in line, the worker played along with

the girls' tone.

"It's the hat, isn't it? These weren't my first choice but the printer was out of the color hats I liked. But I assure you, the coffee will stand for itself. Don't judge my coffee based on my hat," the worker remarked, revealing he was probably the owner and that he had a sense of humor.

"So what can I get the two of you today?" he continued, while taking off his hat and flicking it onto the only chair he had.

Both girls enjoyed his apparent welcomeness and instantly felt at ease talking to him.

"Well, what do you have and what do you recommend?" Layla politely replied, looking over his small display board which was labeled one through seven, with an eighth item being randomly numbered "thirty-four."

"So, bear with me a bit, but I like to make everything simple. I have eight different cups each labeled here," he said while pointing to the board Layla was already looking at.

"And I don't get fancy with the names. Dark, medium, large, small, and the different blends are on the board. I don't do 'shorts' or 'grandes'. Just meat and potatoes... nothing spruced up, although if you say you want something 'grande', I'll still know what you're saying."

Finding the attendant entertaining, both girls agreed they wanted to know about number thirty-four before they made their choice.

"Is thirty-four your mystery cup? It doesn't have a name."

Smiling and expecting this question, as everyone asks, the worker went into his normal spiel, extending it some since the girls were still the only two in line.

"It's a little inside joke with a touch of historical literature. I'm assuming earlier, the two of you were not laughing at my hat, but at my coffee shop's name. If you were, the name and cup thirty-four have a relationship of sorts. When I was trying to come up with a name for my

coffee shop, I found it hard to do so without encroaching on other coffee shop's names. Anything with 'Joe, Bean, Brew, Cup' is already taken. If I wanted one of those names I'd have to be like an e-mail address. 'Coffee Cup 1745' or something like that," he explained, seeing he wasn't boring the girls with his story.

"That left me with a coffee-naming conundrum. So I decided to make it simple... at least for me. Plus, offhandedly, the unusual name has the effect of causing a social stir of sorts. People will talk about my shop because of the odd name. This also leads to some speculation about its meaning... as you two noted... and free advertising. Anyways, I don't know if either of you have ever read the novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*?" he asked, seeing a little bit of a lightbulb go off in their eyes.

"Yes, I have."

"So have I," Dayna replied of the story.

"Well, I don't know how well you remember the story, but my mother liked the story so much that she named me after the lead character, Edmond," he explained, as he pointed to his name tag with one hand while simultaneously trying to cover over his last name of "Harker" with the other.

"I thought naming the coffee shop similar to the book would match me, and having an unnamed cup of coffee as number thirty-four might ring some bells with anyone familiar with the story."

Remembering what he was referring to, Dayna blurted out the meaning of the number.

"I get it. Edmond was the prisoner in jail cell thirty-four, right?"

"Yes! Good for you for knowing that. I'm impressed. Yes, Edmond was wrongly imprisoned and put into jail cell thirty-four. He was then later referred to simply as 'thirty-four' by the head guy on the island... The warden or governor of the island jail, whichever. Now I'm forgetting parts of it. Anyways, so the coffee is a little easter egg for anyone who might be a fan of the novel. The coffee blend is also only found on an island. It's Kona coffee from Hawaii. Have you ever had it?"

“No,” they both replied while looking at each other.

“Oh boy. Well, I don’t want to tell you what to do, but although it’s my expensive blend, it’s really good. It has a very unique taste. It’s grown only in one area that has volcanic-rich soil and gets lots of rain... which gives it, its distinctive taste. Up to you guys, but if you haven’t had it, I’d recommend it.”

“Plus,” he continued on, turning his story into a sales pitch.

“Since you two humored me about my story, and I’m sure if you try it, you’ll be back for more, I’ll do it for half off... or buy one get one free. Whichever you prefer,” he advised with a salesman’s smile.

“It’s good stuff. You might not even want to add cream to it if you’re someone who likes cream in your coffee.”

Both girls looked at each other and shook their heads in agreement. With this, Edmond wasted no time in getting their coffees ready, adding an upgraded size in addition to the sale he had already granted them. Giving off a heavenly scent as their orders were prepared, another nearby Ables’ customer caught a whiff of Edmond’s brew and ventured over to inquire about it.

Preparing both cups rather quickly, Edmond served up the coffee without anything in it, advising he thought they should first try it “as is” before treating it in whatever manner they deemed fit. Eagerly picking up their orders, both girls noticed his cheesy, but now understandable name printed upon their cups. Hoping he took a credit card, Layla butted her sister away from the register, and insisted on treating her to at least one thing.

“Yep. I’ll take whatever you got. Plus, you also get one of these nifty punch card things. If you buy ten, your eleventh will be free.”

◇
Chapter Nº 8



Layla navigated the next few days with more ease. After the first day's hounding, only a few people called and nobody else showed up. This allowed Layla to somewhat relax in her house as long as she didn't turn on the TV or look through her phone. Unfortunately, both these sources were still coated with coverage of Wynn's death and the growing divide between what the Police Department was doing and what the other two reports claimed.

Without anything solid to show the public, the Police Department's views were quickly deemed misguided and even as cover for a fallen officer's "mistakes". These ideas were vehemently denied by both the Riceland Police Department as well as the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department which stated they would back Riceland's investigation as long as they either had credible evidence or leads which would hold up in court.

The Sheriff's Department's will was tested on a daily basis as both social media and the news relentlessly attacked. Tested so often, the Sheriff's Department soon had to create a liaison for the media so that they would stop calling or bothering any deputy they saw. This, though, was not the case for the Riceland Police Department which kept both a closed lid and a closed-mouth approach to the investigation and the media.

Then the Riceland Police Department finally received one of the reports they had been waiting for. Having the department's melted camera system forensically examined, an official report from this lab presented their findings.

Case Number: 011109
Lab Technician: Brennan M. Craft

Re: Technician's findings and summary

On June 8th 2022, a Vortex model 204 multi-media recording

base was submitted to our department for inspection and recovery. Upon initial inspection of the recording base, several sections, ports, and external wires were visually beyond our recovery capabilities. Despite the heavy damage / melting the model had sustained, other sections of the unit were still salvageable for basic inspection.

Memory card ports one and two both contained memory cards which our laboratory was able to successfully extract. These memory cards (Both Echo model 37) contained salvageable audio and video which was exported onto a memory card enclosed with this summary. Memory card port three and four also contained memory cards (same brand and model as is listed above) but were found to be in far worse condition.

An extraction of memory card three was successful but not complete. Melting of the recording base, internal wires, and to the memory card itself shrunk and disfigured the card to a degree that sections of the card broke during extraction. Several attempts were made using different techniques and devices to salvage the data from this card. Approximately 76.4 MB (80,129,076 bytes) of visual and audio material was able to be saved. Any other recordings that might have been originally on this memory card were not salvageable.

An extraction of memory card four was not successful. Nevertheless, two of the memory card's eight electrical contacts were visible and accessible from within the unit. Several attempts were made to extract any salvageable data from the card, but all attempts failed.

Memory card port five contained no memory card.

All pieces, whether broken or fragmented during our evaluation, were kept and secured into a new evidence box in accordance with our policies and procedures. Since our analysis is now complete, these items are ready for return and can be picked up at our facility during regular business hours.

With the lab report was the saved data advised in the report and several pages of the technician's training and certifications for court purposes. The saved data was placed onto two memory cards. One was for the first two ports that had complete files while the second memory card was for port number three which contained the partial but incomplete files.

Once in hand, Chief Scholl quickly viewed the data on the memory cards to see if anything of value had been captured. The first and more full memory card contained approximately twelve days' worth of station video. Being that the camera system recorded for thirty days before recycling itself, these twelve days were unfortunately the more removed dates from Wynn's incident.

Patiently optimistic, the next memory card was much harder to assess and review. With the files being broken and random, each of these files needed to be sorted through individually instead of simply skipping through the linear dates considered unneeded. Being saved and viewed in random order, the date in the corner of the video was still observable and useful in saving some time. Still, since each file was unknown and basically aimless in length, audio, and visual content, some files still needed to be watched in full, regardless of if the recording was merely two seconds in duration or several hours.

Following hours of watching grainy video, nothing close to the dates needed was found. Calculating that each memory card stored approximately six days' worth of footage, it was estimated that the memory cards which contained the most important data would have been the ones in ports four and five. Both of which were either unreadable or reported empty.

Being that the Fire Marshall's report listed an assistant as the one who recovered and sent out the recording base, Chief Scholl's first call was to this assistant's office.

"Hi, this is Chief Phillip Scholl of the Riceland Police Department. I see that a Mr. Martin Sulk might have recovered some of the items located during our station's fire. Could I speak with him if he is available?"

"I'm sorry Chief Scholl, Mr. Sulk is out of the office right now. Can I take a message for him?" A secretary for his office advised.

"Okay. Yeah just let him know I called, and if he could give me a call back whenever he gets a moment, I would appreciate it."

"No problem Chief. I'll leave a note on his desk and I'm sure he will call you back as soon as he gets it," the secretary politely added

before both parties ended their conversation.

Hanging up the phone, Chief Scholl tried to recall if he had removed a memory card from the recording box at some point. It wasn't uncommon for him to pull a memory card from time to time if an issue occurred at the station. But to the best of his knowledge, he had always returned any memory card after he had downloaded whatever it was he needed.

Tapping his fingers on his desk, the Chief then tried to remember when was the last time he had needed to remove a card. This in itself had been a while. Riceland wasn't a large metropolis, and although they fielded several calls a day, not every call ended in charges, let alone needing to be reviewed by the Chief. While meticulously combing his mind and replaying any recent noteworthy event his department had, his assisting officer came into his room and asked if anything was on the videos, or if anything else new had come to light.

"Unfortunately, no. I'm just spinning my wheels right now. Hey, could you do me a favor?" Chief Scholl kindly asked.

"If Deputy Dent is working, could you snag him up? I just want to pick his brain a little bit."

"Sure. I'll go over to dispatch and see if he is working. Just give me a few minutes."

With this, the assisting officer wasted no time and headed straight over to the shared dispatch center for Riceland and the Sheriff's Department. Having a simple task, Chief Scholl soon heard over the radio one of the dispatchers calling for Deputy Dent to return to the station. This was followed by Deputy Dent's acknowledgment and an estimate of how long it would be.

Almost to the minute he had guessed, Deputy Dent called himself out at the station where as the dispatch center then proceeded to direct him to Chief Scholl's office.

"How you doing?" Chief Scholl asked as he walked in.

"Oh, you know. Dealing with a neighbor dispute here, or a

drunk and disorderly there. You know, life's normal stuff," he replied, as the Chief offered him a seat.

"Yeah, that's one part of being on the road I don't miss. Especially the drunks. I learned pretty early on that you can't argue with a drunk. As much as I still tried, you just need to decide to do whatever you need to for that particular call, and then go ahead with it."

Deputy Dent laughed to his assessment, then went quiet, figuring he wasn't there for drunk stories and small talk.

"I guess getting down to business," Chief Scholl then started off with, after reading the deputy's change in body language.

"Are you sure when you showed up that Wynn was on his stomach with his head facing away from the stairs?"

"Yes," the Deputy said with confidence.

"That's the way it was. I wouldn't forget, because that wasn't what I wanted to find."

"Okay. After you found him, what did you do?"

"I rolled him over, checked on him, and called for a squad."

"You didn't have your camera on you, correct?"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't expect what I ended up having, and didn't grab it from my cruiser's charging port. That's my fault and I'm sorry. I know that would have cleared up the difference between what the examiner is saying and what I saw."

"Yes, but it happens. Push past it. Now, when you rolled him over, are you sure he didn't have his body camera on him either?"

"I didn't see one. I'd say I'm ninety-nine percent sure of it, but I also wasn't really thinking about it at that moment. But no, I don't recall seeing one."

"Okay. Riddle me this then?" the Chief then asked while

kicking his feet up onto his desk.

“Why wouldn’t Wynn have his camera on?”

“I’ve thought of that as well,” the deputy advised, being a focal point that would have cleared up the differing narratives.

“The best I could come up with is that it would be similar to a scenario in which we receive a call to a residential break-in where no signs of forced entry are found. In those cases, it’s very likely that the victim knows the suspect. My guess. It was either a mistake like it was for me, or Wynn might have answered a knock at the door of the station and knew who it was. This in turn caused him to feel he didn’t need his camera. One of those two, to me, is either why he didn’t have it on, or why he felt he didn’t need it on.”

“That’s what I’m thinking as well,” the Chief uttered while closing his eyes in thought.

“Who, though, is the question. I talked with Officer Parker, the second shift officer that Wynn relieved, and he said Wynn only talked about his vacation and doing his report. He didn’t talk about doing follow-up or having someone meet him. He also said he didn’t see Wynn carry in any sort of space heater. So it’s not impossible that he didn’t have one, but highly unlikely. If he did, he would have had to of left it in his personal car and then went out and retrieved it after the second shift officer left. Which I doubt. It wasn’t even cold that night.”

“No, you’re right. I didn’t think it was cold either. I don’t see why he would have needed a space heater.”

“Yeah, and I noticed that the temperature for that night was left out of the Fire Marshal’s report. Did you by chance see if the Fire Marshal picked up a heater or the recording box as evidence? Or, I guess, did you see him or his assistant pick up anything?”

“I was relieved before the fire went out. The Fire Marshal had only just arrived when I was leaving. So no, I can’t help you there... but maybe you could ask some of the firefighters that?” he answered, visibly disappointed he could not connect the dots a little better for the Chief.

“I did. They weren’t really paying attention to what they took. All they advised was that they found the heater pretty quickly out of all that mess. Convenient.”

After this, there was a brief pause in the conversation as both men thought about what to say next. Deputy Dent was the one who broke the silence first by simply asking the Chief if there was anything else he could do.

“No not at the moment,” the Chief replied as he removed his feet from his desk.

“I’m just double-checking what I can and trying to sort through everything logically. If I end up having to accuse someone of something, I want to be able to do that knowing I have the facts backing what I’m saying. I don’t want to miss or assume something, and then point the finger of blame erroneously.”

“Are you thinking you’re going to?” Deputy Dent asked of him possibly spurning one or both of the existing reports.

“Yes, probably. But before I do that I have to have all my ducks in a row and they have to match. I’m okay with going with my gut, but it can’t just be an inkling. Any of my personal feelings and ideas need to be answered with me still feeling this is how whatever happened. If it means double and triple checking, then so be it,” he said with a brief lull in his dialog, before getting up and walking over to the door.

“There are a few things I want to check over, sew up, and maybe even test before I press the matter. But as of right now, I’m not getting anything that is telling me to stop. Things just keep stacking up,” the Chief finished with, as he opened the door for the deputy.

◇
Chapter № 9



It took Chief Scholl three days to interview and speak with the majority of the people he had on his list. This majority was everyone except for Martin Sulk, a couple of specialists, and of course Layla. Layla he intentionally aimed to contact last, so he could have as many of the answers as possible for her if she might ask. However, between the media's continual chatter and to make sure he had everything straight, Chief Scholl eventually relented to keep the wheels turning and to keep her up to date.

"Hello Layla, it's Chief Scholl, do you have a second?" he asked after she picked up surprisingly fast.

"Yes, but give me one moment," she replied, sounding chipper to his surprise.

Giving her all the time she needed, the Chief could hear some distant banter between her and someone else. This talk was soon followed by a laugh and a thank you. Shortly after that, the Chief heard the phone rustle around a bit before she said she was back.

"Hey Chief, you still there?" she asked merrily.

"Yes, I am. It sounds like you're doing well. Do you have maybe a moment or two to talk?"

"Yeah, sure. I was just paying for an order but you still caught me at a good time. I don't know if you have ever had Kona coffee before, but I just discovered it and it's the best stuff ever. I think I'm addicted," she said with a laugh.

"No, I've never heard of it. It's really that good then?" he asked, trying to keep her high spirits going.

"Oh yes. If you're a coffee drinker, you have to try it. I'd never had any until the other day when I by chance tried a cup. You

actually just caught me laughing with the owner of the shop about it because he warned me that I'd be back," Layla commented quite happily.

"I'm just an average coffee guy but I'll have to look it up," The Chief replied, before blanking on what other small talk he could bring up.

"So... Layla I would just like to go over a few things with you if you have a moment you could spare?" he asked, with his nervousness unknowingly forcing him to again ask something he had already brought up.

"Over the phone is fine with me, but I can come over in person if you want. It's up to you," he said while cringing to himself, knowing her chipper moment was probably going to be taken away.

"No, no you're fine Chief. I expect your calls now and I know what you more than likely want to talk about. I've unfortunately looked at my phone a couple of times and seen some people saying some pretty nasty stuff on social media and even the news, which is disappointing. I give the average Joe on the street some leeway in not understanding, or maybe not liking cops. But you would think the media would stay neutral, knowing the P.D. has openly debated the topic."

"You would think," Chief Scholl replied.

"You would think that they would actually do us some favors by asking both sides some questions and not seemingly picking a side. 'Do they have something that shows your report is wrong?' 'Why isn't the P.D. agreeing with you Mr. Fire Marshal?' would both be some basic starter questions they could ask," the Chief said, temporarily forgetting the Fire Marshal's name.

"But yeah, that kind of stuff is why I called. Are you okay with us talking now, or how do you want to go about it?"

"Now is fine. Just let me get to my car. I'm almost there."

The Chief muted his words for a moment, hearing what sounded like a door open and close, followed by some random jingling and clatter before hearing her voice again.

“Did I lose you Chief?”

“Nope, I’m still here.”

“All right, go ahead, ask away.”

“So, getting away from the news stuff. I’ve been double and triple-checking all my information to make sure I don’t have any leaks. With that, I do have a few for you. The first one is about this pesky heater. Did you guys have a heater like the one they described in the report?”

“No, not one like they described in the report. We do have one, but it is one of those fake wood-burning heaters. It has fake flames and looks like the real thing. That’s it. The heater wasn’t the station’s heater?” she said, assuming it was.

“No. We don’t need one. Our furnace at the station worked fine. All of the guys said they didn’t bring one in and Officer Parker said he didn’t see Wynn bring one in either. But, I wanted to double check with you since there is a chance that Wynn might have had it in his car and Officer Parker simply didn’t see it.”

“No. Unless he brought one and never told me. But the way the report explained it, it was an old one. So even if he would have brought one without saying something, I don’t think he would purchased an old one.”

“Well, this right here is why I wanted to re-check everything. This little bit got mixed up in the fold. As of right now, none of my guys at the station have ever owned the one described or have ever brought a heater into the station... let alone the one the Fire Marshal advised. So it’s good to hear you also never owned one and actually assumed it was ours,” he voiced somewhat excitedly, as he wrote down a couple of notes.

“Yeah, no, nothing like that is ringing any bells. I just thought it was the station’s.”

“Okay,” the Chief advised after a moment of note-taking.

“Next, did he by chance say to you that he was planning on

meeting anyone at the station that night? Our second shift officer said nothing like that was brought up, but again, that doesn't mean everyone always talks about everything."

"No. He grumbled about dealing with the two feuding families Riceland has, and also said he was going to simply bury his head into getting his car report done before our vacation," she said with a falter in her voice, having the thought of their vacation pulled back into her mind.

"Okay. Well, here is where I'm at right now," the Chief started with, not catching Layla's vocal clue that her mind had strayed.

"I spoke with the prosecutor's office about how I feel. They didn't one hundred percent give me what I wanted, but they did say they will back what I feel was foul play if we can come up with an air-tight case. Not a lot of backbone, unfortunately, but they pretty much said they don't want to rock the boat. Their counter was that since any defendant would already have both the Fire Marshal and Medical Examiner's reports to use as their defense, they would need overwhelming evidence to combat this."

Chief Scholl went on for some time about Wynn and the case before realizing Layla hadn't said anything in a while. Layla hadn't commented, she had not agreed or disagreed with anything, nor had she even asked for the smallest of clarifications. All was simply silent on her end no matter what part of the case Chief Scholl talked about.

"Layla? You there?" he finally asked, slowly sensing something was off.

This question was met with more still air until he heard a vague gasp.

"Layla, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Layla replied softly.

In an obvious distortion of the truth, Layla tried to cover up the fact her mind had gone to another place by asking a question that had already been discussed.

“Have you talked to the prosecutors yet? What are they thinking?”

This time the Chief went silent, understanding he had lost her at some point. Not wanting to backtrack and possibly bring up the same trigger that had set her aside in the first place, Chief Scholl backed away from the Wynn topic.

“Layla, I’m always willing to listen. I might not have the right answers or the best solutions, but I’m always willing to at least listen. Do you want to talk?” he asked, while trying to also think of any other way he could help.

Thankful for the offer, but not wanting to talk about what was on her mind, Layla skipped over his offer while refocusing herself.

“I’m fine Chief, seriously. Just... continue on and I’ll focus a little more.”

Unable to argue with her, the Chief obliged and tried to remember where he had left off.

“Sure. So I think our next step is going to be reviewing and rechecking what the other reports are claiming,” he began with, while noticing Layla had already returned to her quiet self.

“Eventually, once we develop a suspect, we will have to counter and disprove what they are saying. So I was going to start with some easy stuff by simply getting some second opinions. I contacted another fire investigator who said he would be willing to have his guys retest the samples our Fire Marshal collected,” he explained, while deciding to leave out the idea he might have to exhume Wynn if he later still needed to refute the Medical Examiner’s claims as well.

“It might be fruitless, but if they come back with a hit, it then adds a feather to our cap. I was also thinking about having someone else look over our recording box to make sure that was analyzed completely. I tried calling the office that collected it twice now, just to ask a couple of questions, but the Fire Marshal’s assistant is always out of the office... which is annoying and makes me suspicious. Especially without a callback.”

Feeling the weight of her emotions drawing upon her, Layla sharply focused herself on the recording idea and asked about that.

“Did you check for any other cameras in the area? Maybe another business or house in the area might have caught something?”

“That’s a good idea, I did look into that, but unfortunately no, I didn’t find anything else. I’ve tried to think of every angle I could come up with where a camera might have caught a car, a guy in the area running, or something like that. But no, every place I checked either didn’t have a camera or didn’t have one that was recording. Lamentably, we are just coming up blank at every turn in that regard. The deputy that showed up that night didn’t grab his body-worn camera from his cruiser, and he parked his cruiser facing the wrong direction. So, the only extra video we did receive was from the Sheriff’s Department cruiser which was pointing away from the fire,” he explained, while trying to come up with a way to ease in a question about Wynn’s body-worn camera.

“Then... when Wynn was found, the deputy didn’t recall seeing one on him. I have ten of those cameras that each download and charge on a port at the station. That actually didn’t get damaged very much, but I am missing one camera. It wasn’t found during the search after the fact, and none of my officers have it. So, I have to surmise that either it was missed while everyone was combing through the debris, and it got accidentally pitched. Or the Fire Marshal found it, and for whatever reason is hiding it. Or Wynn had it on him and someone took it off,” he advised as clearly as he could while hoping he also didn’t touch on too many emotionally sensitive areas.

Cringing as he recoiled from the phone, to his surprise, Layla didn’t shy away from this and actually asked a couple of questions herself.

“Did it maybe fall off outside, not inside? Did maybe a nurse or squad guy accidentally take it off?”

Quickly taking advantage of her questions, the Chief promptly answered both in order.

“If it did fall off while he was near or around the station, nobody found it. I personally looked and didn’t find anything. The fire and

squad guys didn't see or touch anything and the hospital has been disappointingly mum about the incident."

"What do you mean mum? I thought they were more than helpful and accommodating when everything was going on. That's changed?"

"Well, I don't know if they are afraid of getting sued by contradicting the Medical Examiner, or something like that. But unfortunately, they have become very closed-mouthed about the issue. I have only received one seventeen-word-long statement from them. Besides that, nobody at the hospital has given me a statement. Not one. The doctors that treated him, the nurses, nobody. I've been forwarded up the supervisor hierarchy when I've asked, and they said they can not discuss the incident at this time. So I'm really at a loss. I even spoke with the prosecutor's office, and we worked out a way that doesn't infringe on anyone's privacy rights, but they are still refusing to give me a statement."

"Do you need me to sign off on something? I should be the one that has that say, I would think."

"When I was looking into this, yes that did come up, but I didn't want to bother you about it. I wanted to keep you away from all of this as much as possible. Like I said, I worked it out legally, through the courts, but right now the hospital is simply refusing to cooperate. So I guess it might come to you signing off on something. I don't know, we will see. That's still something I'm working on and thankfully, the one thing the prosecutors have not shied away from."

"What kind of statement did they give you?" Layla asked, catching that they had provided him with at least a little something.

"Ummm... let me read it to you," he said as he picked up the folder he was using for the case.

"After all the titles and dates their letter reads, 'All of Mr. Clifton's belongings (other than his weapons) were turned over to the Medical Examiner's office.' That was it. They didn't even sign it. However, I will say, if he was wearing a camera, I don't think it ever made it to the hospital. Deputy Dent seemed fairly confident he was not wearing one when he got there. We even speculated about the psychological reasons

Wynn might not have had one on at the time.”

“Where did his gun go?”

“I do have those here at the Sheriff’s Department. They were turned over to a deputy that night. Since we no longer have an evidence room after the fire, the S.O. is temporarily letting us use theirs. So I do have that stuff, but from a case perspective, there really isn’t any evidentiary value to his belt, gun, taser, and so on.”

Layla remained quiet, waiting for him to add a little more which never occurred. Speaking up to break the silence, Layla asked if he needed anything else or if there was anything she could do.

“No. I just wanted to double-check the facts and keep you up to date. I’m sorry Layla, if I bothered you or upset you. If I’m doing or saying anything wrong, just stop me and let me know.”

“Chief, it’s okay. I know what you’re doing and there just isn’t a good way around it. If I can think of something, I’ll say so. Just unfortunately, if we want this solved, it’s just going to be something you are going to have to bring up from time to time. I get it. Do keep me in the loop. I do want to help and I do want to know.”

◇
Chapter N° 10



The next morning when Layla arose, her first thoughts were centered around driving to Ables to get herself another “thirty-four.” Being that she had awoken rather early, her desire for coffee was much higher than normal, but her options fell rather short. Ables, sadly, didn’t open until nine o’clock, and driving to a gas station didn’t quite seem to hit the spot. Unenthusiastically deciding to brew her own, Layla brushed through her cupboards to see what her choices were.

Testy with each cup, as if it were their fault they were not from Hawaii, Layla eventually settled on a classic roast simply because it was the last one in that particular pack. Adding some water to the back of her machine and settling her coffee pod into its receptacle, Layla lowered its lid and awaited her Kona-less, consolation coffee.

Hearing her machine steadily warm, Layla took up a seat next to her kitchen window. During her brief lull in activity, Layla’s eyes listlessly browsed her local view for her area’s normal routine. With her house seated along a soft bend and surrounded by several large fields, Layla got little regular traffic other than from her two neighbors, both of whom lived more than a quarter mile away.

This, however, didn’t mean her road was always silent. On the contrary, it often felt at times that her street was used more for tractors or farming equipment rather than for the everyday commuter. Living in a rural and agricultural area, Layla would quite often hear one of several large row tractors passing by her house at all hours of the day. This was common, and after years of it, became seductively pacifying to watch and hear in the morning.

That said, Layla could always count on one hiccup to spoil her tranquility. A polite but distant family she secretly dubbed as her “Filth Friendly” neighbors, commonly drove their General Cullings Mark two diesel tractor, constantly and seemingly without cause. Un-roadworthy at best, the tractor’s engine gave off an irritatingly loud whine, it incorporated

used car parts as replacements, and billowed black smoke as if it were a coal-fired locomotive. Hearing what she mentally called “The Clutter Clunker” approach, Layla soon lost her brief moment of peace as the tractor’s noxious smoke overtook her early morning reprieve.

Annoyed, Layla watched as “Uncle Corwin” caught up to his own smoke screen, waved affably in her direction, and then kept chugging along to who knows where. Having some time on her hands, the idea of following him briefly crossed her mind until her coffee started to pour.

Getting up and watching her cup fill, she waited as her machine seemed to purposely take its time up until its final drop. Bluffing her with a hiss and a wheeze, the machine clicked off and yielded her prize. Adding in some “Cinnamon Glaze” creamer to boost its taste, Layla sat back down, enjoyed the warmth of her cup as she took her first sip, and renewed her watch of her country road.

With little traffic, Layla drifted from the roadway and started to watch her squatting squirrels, who often liked to use her gutters as personal storage troughs. Watching them as they jumped from tree to tree or scurried across her power lines, Layla thought to text her sister about her acrobatic friends.

“Does John still have that buddy that works on gutters? I’m watching some squirrels run back and forth, from my trees to my house. I know they’re filling up my gutters again.”

Sending the message, Layla caught sight of all her missed and unread messages she had ignored. Not feeling like reading at the present moment, Layla tried to brush them aside but still noticed one headline.

“Mayor of Riceland considering termination of defiant Chief” the article’s title read.

Purposely staying away from the news, this title struck close to her and mentally required her to read on. Reluctantly clicking on the link, Layla opened the article to see what all it had to say.

Mayor of Riceland considering termination of defiant Chief

June 29th, 2022 By Andy Wallace, Scoops-Beats Web Media

In the little town of Riceland a large problem has been brewing. On June 6th, 2022, in the wee hours of the morning, the Village of Riceland was struck with tragedy. Seven-year veteran Officer Wynn T. Clifton passed away after accidentally burning down his own police department. Several reports were soon published finding that Officer Clifton had fallen asleep while on duty and had unintentionally knocked over an out-of-date space heater that ultimately claimed his life.

These events were tragic for the small Village which had never lost a single civil service member since its inception. However, this is not where the tragedy ends. Immediately after two highly regarded reports were published, the Chief of Riceland Police Department, Phillip Scholl, without evidence, contradicted both reports claiming he felt foul play was at hand.

Since the release of Chief Scholl's statement, increasing evidence has come to light supporting the notion that the fire and Officer Clifton's death were no more than a tragic accident. These revelations and ever-increasing calls from multiple legal specialists have fallen on the deaf ears of Chief Scholl, but not the Village's Mayor.

The Mayor of Riceland, Al Benton, announced yesterday that he has consulted with the village's attorney concerning Chief Phillip Scholl's employment status. Mayor Benton could not be reached for any further comment about this report, but a source close to the matter advised that the Mayor himself does not believe the incident has any criminal involvement.

The source, who spoke under conditions of anonymity, also stated that the Mayor has increasingly grown frustrated with Chief Scholl's reluctance to face facts, which has resulted in a "Circus like environment" within the Village of Riceland. Because of this, the Mayor feels the Chief is not holding the best interests of the Village in mind and should thusly be removed from his position.

The article went on to describe other alleged incidents involving the Chief, and other infractions the Mayor was looking into. A couple of these infractions were the Chief's failure to keep track of the department's finances, records, and belongings. Alleged in the article was that the Chief had failed to keep track of vehicle maintenance records,

training logs, updating and recycling officers' uniforms, and a lack in attempting to find competitive value and pricing.

Having stayed away from the news, radio, internet, and small talk around people, these revelations were new and unknown to her. Taken aback, Layla reread the article a second time just to make sure she saw and understood everything correctly. Shaking her head to most of the accusations, Layla still gave the article some credibility for fairness' sake.

Now sidetracked in thought over both Chief's predicament and what ramifications this news might put onto Wynn's case, Layla missed her sister's reply text message. Completely backing the Chief in his interpretation of the department's fire, Layla thought through the rest of the accusations and if she could prove or disprove any herself.

Taking one at a time, the first one that stuck out to her was the idea the Chief didn't try to get the station or village its best value. Having many conversations with Wynn about police and station matters, this on the surface was quickly rebuffed as Wynn often complained about the cheap hotels he or the other officers had to stay at while on training.

Training logs were something she knew she would not be able to answer along with what the department did with its vehicles. Despite this, Layla did feel she might be able to help out some with what Wynn kept at home. Wynn had always kept all of his training certificates for whatever classes he attended. Although probably minor assistance, still, being able to provide those to Chief Scholl if needed, would just be a simple matter of scrounging them up.

Uniform wise was much simpler but also much sadder. She couldn't vouch for anyone else but Wynn had always kept his uniform up to date. Nonetheless, she could not argue with the fact that the Chief had never asked her to return any of his equipment or uniforms. Although with this, she felt, the Chief did deserve a little latitude, considering the circumstances.

Seeing as the Mayor and the media were currently on the Chief's heels, Layla decided to try and help him sooner rather than later. Putting down her coffee, Layla went into their multipurpose office, workout, and scrap room. Pulling out the drawer in which Wynn stored his certificates, Layla found a large stack of old jumbled-up documents.

Criticizing him over his sloppy filing habits, she soon found not only the documents she wanted, but possibly every grammar school grading card Wynn had ever received, from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Getting a subtle smile out of seeing his third-grade spelling tests, Layla put the entire stack of records on her kitchen table for a later, coffee-drinking chore. Moving on to the more emotional effort of rounding up Wynn's police belongings, Layla's brief smile over Wynn's C plus scores, faded as she looked over the attire she had seen him don so often before.

Collecting his shirts from their closet first, she gently placed each sorrowfully on their bed before pausing in thought over the many times she had seen him with them on. Sparking a flood of emotional disorder, Layla unwittingly stared at the finer details of his uniforms. Frozen, her mind strayed of better times. The kisses he would give her before leaving for work. The smile that would appear on his face whenever he noticed her. The simple laugh which sprung from him after one of his endless attempts of playful whimsy. Each of these recollections struck her separately but simultaneously, vividly yet faded in mental definition.

Winded for a moment, Layla took a seat on the bed next to the uniforms. Being unexplainably careful not to ruffle or disturb his shirts, Layla soon became faint and airy. This led her to slowly lie down onto their bed. Closing her eyes, Layla didn't physically dissolve into tears but did have an internal rupture which ceased everything of present significance.

Barren for an unknown time, Layla's feelings from the night of Wynn's death felt near-at-hand... until a memory of him just prior to his accident slowly crept in. Wynn's blown kiss from their driveway called her towards their window. Pushing the curtains aside, a shimmer of light emanated from his car which was parked in its standard spot. Happy for this reminiscent glint, regardless of if it were by chance or by another means, Layla exhaled her pains in one long and steady breath.

Resolved for the moment, Layla told herself to get up and make herself useful to Wynn and Chief Scholl's cause. Even if it was in the mere task of gathering up his belongings, the more effort the Chief did not have to spend on the Mayor's beliefs, the more he could spend towards advancing and solving theirs.

Refreshed enough to persist, Layla quietly opened the drawer he used to store his pants. Finding four pairs, she serenely placed each on top of his shirts and then looked around for anything else. Remembering he put his “extras”, like his searching gloves and his winter caps, on the right side of his sock drawer, Layla sorted out anything that was clearly not police-related and carried the rest to the kitchen.

Grabbing up one of her cache of stored grocery bags, Layla placed his gloves and his other miscellaneous items inside and then spotted her coffee mug. Having a taste for coffee return to her, she picked up her now cold coffee and took a sip. Somewhat flat and not as invigorating as her dubbed “34”, Layla still finished off her zestless treat before remembering she had swapped out and put aside one of his uniforms the night of the incident.

Having placed the entire outfit next to Wynn’s laundry basket, Layla went back to their bedroom and picked up his dirty uniform. Soiled but in officer-ready shape, Layla quickly noticed it still bore Wynn’s body-worn camera. Excited, even if by happenstance, that her efforts had turned up what was probably the station’s lost item, Layla swiftly located her phone to call the Chief.

Finding his number in her recent contacts, she dialed him up while looking at the camera. Thinking about giving him the good news as the phone rang, she realized that not only did this help the Chief from a recovered item perspective, but that it might also contain a recording that could help in Wynn’s investigation. Delighted, a smile formed upon her face as the phone continued to ring. Not paying attention to how many rings had passed, Layla soon heard Chief’s voice, apologizing for not answering and asking for a short message.

“Hey Chief, it’s me. I know you’re probably busy but give me a call whenever you get a chance. Day or night. Thanks,” she said without giving the reason for her call.



Chapter N° 11



Layla waited the rest of the day but never heard back from Chief Scholl. Figuring he was probably overloaded with Wynn's case and now the Mayor's mess, Layla laid down with the intent of falling asleep and calling him the next day. This however soon proved to be difficult, as the overwhelming desire to see if she could view what was on Wynn's camera brewed within her.

Initially not a desire at all, when Chief Scholl failed to return her call, the wonder of what might be on it slowly materialized. Becoming ever so enticing the more night started to fall, Layla finally relented and scratched her increasing itch.

Standing up, Layla looked at Wynn's uniform as if she were about to break some sort of unwritten rule. Hesitantly picking up his attire, internally she felt both intrusive and slightly shameful for her nosiness. These sentiments initially stymied and paused her. Having this momentary tug of war within herself, eventually she did decide that she could solely examine the camera to see if it were even possible for her to view its content.

Resolved, she initially struggled to figure out how to detach the camera from a clasp that was affixed to his uniform. Playing around with it, she soon found a double-ended button that was most likely designed for officer safety purposes. Successfully disconnecting it, Layla examined the unit to see how one might export the videos from the camera.

Only having a few buttons, she didn't find a connecting port but did find a thumb slide on the bottom end of the camera, right next to the contact ports. Giving it a little push, the slide came open and the top of a memory card could be then seen within. Gently pushing on the card, it first clicked then sprung towards her so as to be extracted. Being careful while pulling it out, she noticed that the memory card was yellow, that it was labeled "for police use only" in small fine print, and that it was not of any shape or size she had seen before. This odd size solved her personal

dilemma, which was strangely relaxing to her.

Gingerly placing the card back in, it eventually clicked, which told her it was back in place. After pushing the thumb slide back, she fastened the camera onto Wynn's uniform and placed it, the grocery bag, and the rest of his items into a large box. Resting the box in the corner of her room, Layla laid back down and this time was able to fall asleep quickly, without any other questions wrestling within her mind.

With the idea her efforts would help the Chief and his investigation, Layla slept more soundly than she had in some time. Not having any more mysterious or confusing dreams, her sleep went uninterrupted until the loud wheeze of Uncle Corwin's tractor passed by her house. Soon smelling its smog, Layla exhaled heavily, then wandered over to her phone to see if she had missed anything.

Picking it up with a stretch, she noticed a red dot in the corner of the screen which indicated to her she had a message. Interested in if it was from the Chief, she scanned through her phone to find out it was just a missed text message from her sister. Disappointed he still had not reached out to her, she decided to try him again, this time telling herself to leave a more detailed message that might pique his interests. Dialing him up and hearing it ring, this time Layla didn't need to wait or leave a message, as he picked up almost right away.

"Hey Layla. Sorry I didn't call you back yesterday. I got your message but between our Mayor and the assistant to the Fire Marshal, I was a little busy," he mentioned, confirming her suspicions.

"It's okay, I understand. Did you get anywhere with the assistant then?" she asked since he mentioned it.

"I did. Their office finally called back. I have a sit-down meeting with Mr. Sulk later today. He said he was 'more than willing' to sit down and talk with me, although he didn't really give me a sound reason for his office's delayed response. He even agreed to meet with me here, so I guess that gives me a little more time to deal with our Mayor," he voiced humorously.

"Well that's good about him then... but, I saw the article and was kind of calling about that."

“You did? There wasn’t another one, was there? Accusing me of not paying the station’s water bills or some other nonsense like that?”

“No,” she replied with a laugh.

“It’s actually good news. I saw the article and wanted to help, so I gathered up Wynn’s stuff and found your missing camera!” she said, hoping it would excite him.

Surprised, Chief Scholl didn’t initially respond, causing Layla to fill in some of the gaps.

“He had it on his uniform from the night before the accident. He got his uniform dirty and we had a last-minute uniform change that night. I got his backup uniform ready for him, and didn’t think about what was all on his uniform. So that solves your camera mystery for you.”

“Good. Okay. Umm... alright,” he sputtered while trying to figure out how he could fit this into his busy schedule.

“I can’t thank you enough for finding that. Unfortunately, I’m a little tied up right now. My meeting with Mr. Sulk is in about a half hour and I don’t know how long that will last. That said, I want the camera and I want to watch it immediately. Are you going to be home? Could I send over an officer to pick it up?”

“I can bring it in if you want. With what’s going on right now, I decided to use up the remainder of my off time. I thought work was a nice, brief escape, but I just need more time to pass before I can correctly dedicate myself. So once again I have time on my hands. Then if that’s okay with you... you could watch it whenever is convenient for you, and it wouldn’t tie up one of your officers.”

“Well I appreciate that, but you don’t have to do that. I don’t want to put anything on you. I’m sure my first shift guy will have some time today to do it,” the Chief countered with, now a little frustrated today was the day the assistant agreed to meet him.

“It’s okay Chief. Driving around is relaxing, and maybe I’ll stop somewhere afterwards. I’m not sure where, but maybe something will

catch my eye. Also, this would let me feel like I helped out in some way.”

“Alright,” the Chief replied with a sigh.

“But if you change your mind or something comes up, just give me another call and I’ll send my guy out. Plus, I’ll pick up this time. I promise.”

“Well thank you, but I’ll just get ready and do it right now. I’ll change and bring everything over. If you happen to be talking with that guy, who do you want me to leave the stuff with?”

“I have Officer Eaton working right now if I’m tied up. But if you’re coming right now, I’ll just tell the fire assistant to give me a minute whenever you show up. I’d rather have it in hand for chain-of-custody purposes... so nobody, later, can say it was getting passed all over the place if anything good ends up being on it.”

“Okay. It’s all going to be in one big box though... sorry about that. The camera, his shirts, a file of his training certificates, just a lot of things I thought might help with the Mayor. That said, if you need any of his training forms, I didn’t thoroughly sort through them all. So mixed in with his police training stuff, he also has some old grammar school paperwork. Second-grade spelling tests and things like that. Everything was all jumbled together, so I’m sorry for any of the little extras you probably won’t need.”

“Well with the way things are going right now, I actually might need them,” the Chief promptly replied with a chuckle.

“I’ll just use them to one-up the Mayor. If he tries to say I don’t keep good enough officer records, I’ll be able to say that I’m so thorough that I even have my officer’s preschool finger paintings.”

◇
Chapter № 12



At about ten thirty at night, Layla had already been asleep for an hour when she was awoken by the sound of her phone beeping. Being able to tell it was just a text message by its sound, Layla ignored it and went back to bed. About twenty minutes later she was again awoken by her phone, but this time by it actually ringing. A little agitated that she had now been disturbed twice, Layla went over to the phone with the idea of silencing it.

Shuffling her feet while she lumbered in the dark over to her glowing phone, Layla picked it up when she got close enough and squinted at its screen.

“Dayna Butler” the display read.

Although she would answer her sister’s call anyways, the fact she was calling so late at night further roused Layla from her lightheadedness. Taking a moment, she greeted her sister while still a bit slothful in both voice and action.

“Hey Dayna, is everything alright?”

“Yes and no,” she responded with, in a strong and pressing voice.

“Chief Scholl is dead!”

Although Layla clearly heard what Dayna had said, her drowsiness still delayed her thought process, which caused her to sparsely grasp the idea.

“He’s dead? Chief Scholl?”

“Yes. John and I heard it on the radio. I looked it up online after we heard it, and it’s all over the news.”

“How? Chief Phillip Scholl? Does it say what happened?” Layla asked, still trying to put together what her sister was saying.

“Yes, Chief Scholl. It’s all over. ‘Riceland Police Chief Shoots Himself’ one article says, and another just popped up saying the FBI was on scene with the Sheriff’s Department.”

“Is he dead? ‘Shoots himself’ doesn’t mean dead,” Layla asked forcefully, as her mind became sharper.

“Yes. At least that’s what’s being reported,” Dayna replied as Layla received another call.

Feeling the vibration of her phone, Layla asked Dayna for a moment to see who else was calling her. Putting her sister on hold, Layla browsed over her incoming call to see a number she did not recognize. Not having a name attached to it, she still noticed it was local and decided to let it go to her voicemail in light of what her sister was talking about.

“Sorry, I’m back. Did ummm... does it say what happened?”

“It doesn’t say. It’s all preliminary. It just says that he shot himself and that both the Sheriff and the FBI are looking into it.”

Taken aback, Layla didn’t initially reply as she thought about what she had just learned. In doing so, her phone beeped, indicating to her that someone had left her a message. Gathering herself, Layla voiced what her initial thoughts were.

“I don’t think he would do that. I mean, I don’t know him like I know us, but I just don’t see him doing that. He seemed very motivated to figure out what was going on with Wynn, even to the point of not caring about what everyone else thought. That just doesn’t strike me as the lead-up to someone who would turn around and do that to themselves. To be fair, I suppose nothing is impossible, but you would think he would’ve had to of reached a low point, stumped and feeling like he was lost before that would be part of his... viewed options. Right? I actually just talked to him earlier today and he seemed optimistic, not without... choices I guess.”

“You know him better than I do Layla, but you’re right, it

doesn't add up. John thought the same thing. After the radio blurb, I read the article to John and we both thought that. I don't know Layla. I'm sorry to call you this late to tell you, but I figured you would want to hear it from someone you know."

"No, thank you. I do want to know. You said it's online? What site?"

"It's popping up on my main news feed now, so it'll probably be doing the same thing on your phone. The article I read to John was from The City Column's website. That was the one I found when I searched for it," Dayna replied as she also looked through her phone for more information.

"Yep. The City Column just updated their page. It says they will be having a news conference at eleven."

"Eleven, that's in a couple of minutes! Dayna I'll call you back, okay?" Layla immediately advised after taking a glance at her digital clock.

"No that's fine. We're going to try and catch it too."

Bumbling into her living room, Layla used her phone as a flashlight in order to find her remote. Searching the TV stand, recliner, and couch, she eventually found the remote lying on the floor. Promptly hitting the power button, she rapidly flipped passed the late-night shows and movie channels until she reached a couple of local news stations. Selecting the first one that looked to be prepping for a press conference, Layla took up a seat on her couch and waited for their announcement.

"We have been told that Sheriff Gary Thompson will be out shortly to address the media regarding the developing tragedy that occurred within its department today. To recap what we have already learned, at about ten thirty the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department requested its emergency services to respond to their office for a gunshot victim. That victim, as confirmed by the Sheriff's Department, was Chief Phillip Scholl of the Riceland Police Department.

Chief Scholl had made waves lately with his ongoing investigation into Officer Wynn T. Clifton's death. Chief Scholl had openly

contradicted several reports by other outside agencies and was recently put under scrutiny by the Village of Riceland's Mayor for several employment infractions."

The reporter went on about this until she was notified by someone off-camera that the Sheriff was about to take the podium. Having her cameraman focus in on the stand, Sheriff Thompson appeared flanked by his other senior deputies and a couple members of the FBI. Adjusting the microphones at the podium, the Sheriff wasted little time before starting.

"Good evening everyone. I'm gonna make this brief and won't be answering any questions at this time," Sheriff Thompson said, while gesturing with his right hand for silence.

"As has been reported, Chief Phillip Scholl has passed away. His family has been notified. Please give them the privacy they deserve. Concerning this occurrence and to stamp out the speculation that has already begun, Chief Phillip Scholl died as a result of a single gunshot wound to the head. As many of you know, since the fire at Riceland's Police Department, Chief Scholl had been temporarily using a couple of our office rooms for their police functions. At about ten-thirty, an employee of our Sheriff's Department heard a single gunshot come from this section of the building, whereas she then notified our dispatch center.

Deputies both on station and on patrol, responded to the call and found Chief Scholl in his office, unresponsive. He was transported to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead upon arrival. The Montgomery County Coroner along with the Medical Examiner have already ruled this to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Lieutenant Joseph Steed will now be the new acting Chief of Police for Riceland. Again, this is an emotional time for many and we ask that you give the friends and family of Chief Scholl the time they deserve to grieve properly."

After the Sheriff asked for the public to respect the privacy of Chief Scholl's family, he stepped off the stage and walked back into the Sheriff's Department. Although he already advised there wouldn't be a question-and-answer period, this did not stop the reporters from shouting out several random questions. Staying mum, all of the officials involved remained silent, followed the Sheriff into the station, and closed the door behind them. This action quieted the reports who each went back to their

cameras and tried to analyze what was just said.

For Layla, the Sheriff's brief statement was confirmation of what her sister had advised, but it didn't relieve her of her own questions. Chief Scholl had just received the camera which was a possible new lead. He had an important upcoming interview, something he had been waiting on for a while. Both of these thoughts were up-front questions, instant red flags for her the moment the Sheriff walked off the stage.

All this information and all these questions caused Layla to dubiously shake her head until her phone rang. Glancing towards it, she again saw her sister's name appear on her screen. Picking it up, Layla received a mouth full from her.

"I don't buy it. He didn't even look like he cared. Plus, it's only a little past eleven now. If this supposedly happened at about ten-thirty, how did they get all those top-level guys and the FBI to the station so quickly? Something is off."

"Yeah... I agree," Layla slowly voiced after a moment of thought.

"Hey, can I call you back? Before you called, my phone was a little busy. I want to check and see who all wants what, okay?"

"Sure," her sister replied, reversing her more forward tone.

"Thank you Dayna. I'll call you tomorrow at the latest."

After hanging up, Layla didn't immediately do what she had advised her sister. Instead, she took a moment and thought to herself. Her sister had made several good points. How were all those top-tier officers all together at one location so fast? How did they already have a press release and several news crews set up so quickly? Guessing at about how much time everyone had, she came up with a charitable forty-minute window between when the gunshot was heard and the press conference she just witnessed.

Even being kind, everything still felt excessively fast-paced, especially for the time of day. Having been around Wynn for so many years, she had heard through various stories, how long some issues took to

process and how long the average response time was. Being generous, Layla figured it would have taken at least thirty to forty minutes just to both find him and get him to the hospital. That would include if everything fell just right, and not much care was put into both the crime scene and the Chief's medical needs.

Trying to be fair, she could see that if everything somehow did conveniently fall one way, and all the administrative officers had gone straight to the Sheriff's Department, that with one phone call, they all could have learned of the Chief's passing. This though, still would have probably been right at the forty-minute mark, right at about the time the Sheriff was giving, or about to give his press conference, which again didn't seem very realistic.

All of this was without counting the Medical Examiner, the Coroner, and the news being able to show up, set up, and complete their jobs. Collectively, this all seemed absurd to Layla. Unreasonable response and reaction times, an iffy and quick ruling of the Chief's actions, not to mention how the FBI somehow worked their way into the equation, and her own preexisting suspicions before any of this occurred.

Being a little reflective in thought in order to maybe work through something she might have missed, the addition of the FBI continually threw her a curve ball. Twice now the FBI had been brought up in recent memory. Once for this event and once by Wynn for his stolen car. In the course of doing his job, Wynn had worked with several other agencies before, including the FBI, but this was rare. When these infrequent events occurred, they were always spaced out and generally led to the FBI taking over.

Neither was the case for these two matters. Wynn mentioned they were only seeking information and the Sheriff didn't note if or why they were requested. Instead, they were simply there for an unknown and unstated reason. Furthering this idea along, why was the FBI even needed for an alleged suicide?

Now questioning the FBI's involvement, she naturally also questioned their involvement in Wynn's case. Admittedly not knowing the complete story, she still felt it was odd that, per Wynn, two FBI guys were needed in person to inquire about a stolen car. To Layla, logic told her they purposely chose to be there over making a much simpler phone call. Why?

What did they feel they needed to do physically over a much easier and time-saving phone call? Moreover, if it were just a question from one law enforcement officer to another, why were two needed?

Slowly, Layla's mind started twisting nefariously towards the FBI when it also dawned upon her that Wynn's encounter with the two FBI agents was the day before he died. Although she couldn't say that the two FBI agents that were on television were the same two guys Wynn had met, it now seemed likely that at least one of them probably was.

Being overly trusting, the idea of another law enforcement agency being possibly involved in a negative form, littered Layla's mind. "Am I overthinking this" and "Anyone can connect a few dots if they try hard enough," started to push back against her budding conspiracy theory. Not wanting to assume or confuse herself, Layla tried to break from these competing ideas and out of habit, took a peek at her phone. Seeing she had a text and voicemail message, she tried deterring her thoughts by instead bothering herself with these.

"Hello, Layla this is Sheriff Thompson," the voicemail started off with, instantly thwarting her diversionary tactic.

"We had an incident here at the station and we would like to speak with you. Would it be possible to meet up with you or have you come to our department so we can discuss this a little further?" he added, before thanking her and rattling off his personal cell phone number.

This single message bothered her more than her earlier FBI thoughts. First, why did he so quickly feel the need to call her about the Chief's death? Second, his emotionless presser was echoed in this cold and seemingly distant message. Finally, she personally had an unsettling feeling about his use of the word "we" throughout his call.

Although a few ifs, ands, or buts did come to mind, his call left her highly distressed. Yes, one of those "ifs" revolved around her husband's case. Maybe the Sheriff was just calling to be proactive and reassuring in this regard. Unfortunately, his message simply didn't come across this way. For her, it came across as rather crass, somewhat self-motivated, and ultimately off. Imperceptive and off-matching, at least to her, and to the situation of just finding Chief Scholl dead.

Hesitant now even in thought, Layla's gaze eventually swept over her phone once more. Still showing she had a missed text message, Layla cautiously touched her screen which promptly displayed Chief Scholl's name. Taken aback, Layla opened up the screen to see what he had composed.

“Run.”

◇
Chapter № 13



Heeding the Chief's warning without thought, Layla hastily raced around her house, gathering up whatever random items she felt she might need. Being a spur-of-the-moment act, her choices were sometimes fruitless and even counterproductive, as at one point she stuffed several coats into her luggage but not a single fresh shirt. Petrified every time a set of headlights could be seen driving down her road, Layla darted under her table or beside her couch until the perceived threat had passed by.

Unexplainably holding her breath while waiting out an older truck, Layla took the moment to try and collect herself. Scared, Layla still had enough presence of mind to tell herself she needed to calm down. Starting with controlling her breaths, Layla closed her eyes and simply listened as the truck gradually passed by her house without a stutter. Staying anchored between her recliner and the wall, Layla expanded the moment to think further down the road.

Not feeling comfortable calling 911, Layla asked herself who else could she call. First on her list was her sister. Having just talked to her and knowing both her and her husband were thinking along the same lines, they were her clear first choice. Second on her list was her lifelong safety blanket, her parents. Her mom was the listener of the family and her dad, although gruff, always seemed to be able to fix a problem. The final person she thought of was her pastor. He had already been so supportive during her moment of need that it seemed inconceivable to her, he wouldn't help her now.

Creeping around her house looking for her phone, Layla paused herself before finding it. Wondering how Chief Scholl and Sheriff Thompson both thought to call her so closely, the question of why and what might have caused this in such close succession materialized. Chief's text message came in just before ten-thirty, minutes before the Sheriff's Department had allegedly heard a gunshot. What was so important that could cause his death, but was also tied enough to her, that would trigger both parties to reach out to her?

The Chief's beliefs had been made very clear. He did not believe Wynn had died by accidental means and disagreed with anyone who said so. This was widely known, yet the Chief had never mentioned any problems with his beliefs other than a minor amount of friction and some hard feelings. Both of these were so negligible to him, that he made zero attempts to safeguard himself. Nonetheless, something had to of occurred which sparked a reversal in his thought process, to have asked her to run. This implied to her, that it had to of been recent and linked to her.

Having seen him that very day, only two things came to mind. First, he had mentioned he had an appointment scheduled with the Fire Marshal's assistant, and that this assistant had already been acting suspiciously by avoiding him. The idea the assistant was somehow involved seemed possible, but was countered by the problem of his steps being easily traced back to the Chief. The assistant had a secretary, the Chief had voiced his desire for the two to talk, and in the least, a phone call history would be present. Now seeming a bit of a stretch the more she picked at the idea, the assistant quickly became an afterthought once she started to scrutinize her alternative choice. Only she and the Chief knew about the body camera found on Wynn's uniform. This was a new detail to that day, a direct link between them both, and something that the agency investigating the Chief's death, the Sheriff's Department, should be able to couple together.

Having this epiphany moment, Layla instantly deduced something must have been recorded by Wynn which the Sheriff's Department did not want seen. Having access to the downloaded video, the Chief must have watched the film, noticed whatever problem, and confronted or questioned whomever was involved. The link of her knowledge to the camera could have been either mentioned by the Chief, or seen via surveillance footage as she entered the Sheriff's Department to drop it off. Having not watched what was on Wynn's camera, the idea of the camera's existence must have been enough to cause the Chief's warning and the Sheriff's follow-up.

Feeling she had solved the why, Layla still hadn't solved what to do or where to go. Not wanting to involve anyone else, Layla now shied away from her sister, and could only think of her parents as a source of refuge. Similarly not wanting to involve them, Layla felt all her other paths were shut and that her parents were her lone road.

Just as she decided upon this, her phone rang. Locating it in her living room, Layla picked it up and noticed the call was coming from the same number the Sheriff had already used. Shaken that the person she felt had killed the Chief was fixated on her, Layla now wanted nothing to do with her phone and dropped it in the same spot she had found it. Paranoid, Layla suspiciously peered out her windows to make sure she had not missed someone pulling into her driveway. While doing this, she again heard her phone beep, indicating to her the Sheriff had again left her a message.

Tentative to even look at her phone in fear of another incoming call, Layla did manage to convince herself that merely listening to his message wouldn't hurt. Furthering her along was the idea and hope that the call might reverse her concerns, and if not, maybe it would at least give her some sort of clue. Trembling while picking it up, she soon put her phone on speaker and played his message.

“Hey Layla, it's Sheriff Thompson again. Hey I'm sorry it's late, and I don't know if you've heard about what's going on, but I felt we should probably talk... so I'm on my way over. It shouldn't take too long. I just want to go over a couple of things with you. So don't worry if you see a car in your driveway. Alright, see you in a bit.”

Scared more now than she had ever been in her entire life, Layla physically felt her heart flutter as soon as she heard him say “I'm on my way over.” Now thrust back into panic mode, Layla stopped thinking and grabbed up her bag of overloaded coats. With a sense that time was now against her, Layla quickly located her keys, purse, phone, and her favorite picture of Wynn and her together.

Shoving everything but her phone and keys into the front compartment of her luggage, Layla slowly opened her side door and peered out. Seeing only moonlit fields, the driveway, and her garage, Layla darted over to the unlocked man door and then into her car. Wasting no time, she opened her garage and swiftly reversed her car down their gravel driveway and onto the street. Purposely going the wrong way, Layla drove away from the Sheriff's Department, not wanting to cross their path.

Unfortunately for Layla, driving away from the Sheriff's Department also meant driving away from her parent's house. Living in the

country and on a country road, Layla was left with very few useful options to correct her course. This ultimately led her to drive several miles in the wrong direction, frustrating her along the way. Eventually stopping at an all-night fast food restaurant, Layla purposely parked next to the restaurant's other customers as opposed to the empty but secluded rear lot, feeling that "witnesses" would grant her more temporary security.

Parked, Layla reluctantly turned to her phone which had unofficially become her target of blame due to all the bad news it had given her. Finding a map to figure out the easiest path to her parents, she stopped herself just before she entered their address. Remembering a law enforcement tactic Wynn had advised in the past, Layla knew the Sheriff's Department could use a phone's GPS against itself to locate a desired person.

This realization brought her thoughts back to a couple of things the Sheriff had said in his message. "I'm on my way over," he had stated, without asking her if she was home. So confident the Sheriff seemed to be, that he even followed that up with "So don't worry if you see a car in your driveway." This idea delayed her hand, and caused her to wonder if the Sheriff's Department might be tracking her.

With parts of her still playing a mental game of tug-of-war over what was right and wrong, the opposing side soon emerged. At close to midnight, it was likely for anyone to assume she would be at home sleeping. She herself would have guessed this, so consequentially anyone else coming to this same conclusion would seem logical.

Trying to decipher which train of thought was right, an idea came to her that she felt might point her in the right direction. If someone was monitoring her phone, they would theoretically show up wherever her phone's GPS said it was. As a result, if she placed it somewhere, and the Sheriff's Department then showed up, that would tell her they weren't merely passing along information, but tracking her.

Unsure exactly how GPS and tracking worked, she first detached the cell phone's battery from her phone. Assuming the loss of power would eliminate its signal, she then quickly drove away from the parking lot just in case her location had already been identified. Randomly cruising around the area, Layla now felt stuck with what to do with her phone. She didn't want to merely discard it because of the evidentiary

value it might hold. However, she also didn't want it on her just in case it was still somehow traceable. This dilemma caused a quandary of where she might be able to store it for later safe recovery.

Mentally scrutinizing a few ideas as she drove around, a familiar location soon came into sight. This known area was a mundane intersection she used while traveling to work every day. Realizing where she was, her desk at work became an idea. At her desk, she had a little cabinet that locked. Generally used for her lunch or personal belongings, she was the only one who had a key for it. Already having her work keys attached to her cars key ring, the idea of placing her phone in her desk drawer seemed to be a simple and logical test she could try.

Driving only a couple more miles, she soon pulled into her employer's parking lot and stopped near the office's front doors. Being that the office employees only worked first shift, Layla was able to freely walk around the office without the loaders and drivers who worked the later shifts, asking her why she was there.

Hastily opening the door and letting herself in, Layla quickly made her way over to her desk. Stopping herself from reflexively looking through any new mail that had accumulated on her desk, she shrugged off this desire and instead unlocked her personal cabinet. Having some leftover lunch money inside, she pocketed these few dollars and then pulled out her phone. Feeling a bit of a doomsayer, she brushed aside her feelings, connected the battery and turned the phone on. Locking it in her cabinet, she briskly left the office, locked the front doors, and jumped back into her car.

Instantly checking her surroundings, she promptly pulled out of her employer's parking lot and onto the road. Scanning the area for any unsuspecting location she could use to monitor her workplace, she soon spotted a house that had been for sale for some time. Being abandoned, she didn't need to worry about alarming a homeowner, plus, it had the added bonus of two junky vehicles being left in its driveway. Tucking her car behind these two scrap heaps, Layla was still left with a decent surveillance point. Unfortunately, as she quickly found out, this spot was not perfect and did come with one hitch. At a marked distance from her office, she would not be able to see who exactly entered or exited a car. A slight setback, Layla accepted distance for safety, knowing this did not change the idea of her plan. She would still be able to tell if a vehicle entering her

workplace was a normal delivery van or the Sheriff's Department. Content with this, she turned off her car and waited.

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Not knowing how long she should watch and with nothing better to do, Layla tried calculating what she felt would be a reasonable response time. First Layla added her drive from her house to work and also if they by chance went to the restaurant. She then tried to factor in the idea they might not have been tracking her the entire time, assuming on their part that Layla was unaware of this capability. Adding in time for some waiting outside of her house and the relocation of her via her GPS signal, Layla came up with a rough estimate of no more than two hours... one and a half being the more likely limit.

Turning her car key just enough to see what time it was, she saw that it was now just past one in the morning. Juggling around the calculated time frames she had come up with while subtracting some time for the period she had been parked, Layla came up with a little past two as her goal.

“About an hour,” she said to herself, while reclining her seat and putting her head back.

Conveniently having some mints in her center console, Layla ate a couple as she intently watched each car pass by. Frequently saying “nope” to every non-police vehicle, Layla’s gaze eventually strayed from the street and over to some distant construction workers she noticed outside another business. Wishing she had a pair of binoculars to be able to see what they were exactly doing, she still could see some distant sparks, which she assumed were from a welder, and a couple of large pieces of equipment being unloaded from the back of a trailer.

Distracted by the late-night workers, Layla’s attention was startled back to the road as a large semi drove by, blaring its horn at a car that had cut it off. Thankful an accident had not occurred, not just for them but also for the unwanted police attention that would garner, Layla again turned her key to check on the time.

“1:45,” she lightly voiced, now starting to feel she might have let her mind drift a little too far.

Unwrapping her last mint, Layla checked her back seat for any other goodies she might have left in the car. Finding a grocery bag and hungrily searching its contents, Layla did find a couple bottles of water but did not find any food. Turning around while cracking open one of the waters, Layla nonchalantly glanced over to her work’s parking lot and noticed some activity.

Straightening herself up, Layla surprised herself by not being able to tell if the vehicles in the parking lot were law enforcement related or not. Only seeing two, Layla squinted in an attempt to see if they had any decals. Watching them slowly pace the lot, a light soon came on inside her office area. Focusing intently to see what might happen next, two more cars rapidly passed by her hiding spot and quickly pulled in behind the first two. Both of these cars were clearly not labeled as law enforcement, nor did they have any flashing lights, but the occupants of the cars did hastily rush to the front doors of her office. Seeing someone inside the building let them in, Layla was only able to see random but feverish movement after that. Observing what was clearly odd behavior for both the time of day and her standard of work, tipped Layla’s scale of suspicion back towards the Sheriff.

Trying to think of how she could get a positive look at one of these cars, she soon heard distant yelling coming from one of the men exiting her office building. This was followed by two more men also coming outside. One of these men walked over to the agitated man and seemed to be trying to calm him down as the other returned to his car. Still not able to firmly say they were law enforcement, the third man who had gone to his car, emerged again, this time with a bright flashlight. Shining it around the parking lot and near the office’s front door, eventually his beam illuminated both of the first two cars she had missed.

Seeing the first car as simply plain, the second car was unmistakably dressed in traditional Sheriff’s Department regalia, painted in all black with yellow lettering. Positive that they had to have been tracking her, this was now her personal proof that the Chief had been murdered, he had tried to warn her, and that a cover-up concerning Wynn’s case was occurring.

Staggered and sickened, Layla now felt that she was too close. Certain her life was in danger, she contemplated driving away but feared another “one of them” might pass by. Now trapped, Layla hunkered down even further into her seat and mentally played out her options. Seeing that three out of the four cars they had used were unmarked, she now felt she couldn’t trust any vehicle. She also assumed they knew what type of car she had, so staying in or with her present car only added to her problems. Finally, if they now perceived her as being “on the lam”, they would likely question her friends and family in an attempt to ascertain her location. Accordingly, this meant going to her parent’s house now seemed less advisable.

Pressing herself to come up with some sort of a solution, the thought of a hotel came to mind. This would give her a place to temporarily rest, but wouldn’t hide her car and would likely be a highly searched location. The notion of staying at the abandoned house she was at briefly seemed plausible, but she was sure it didn’t have any food and her presence was bound to eventually attract attention. Feeling stranded, she decided to sit tight and to simply watch what they did and where they might go.

Knowing patience was her immediate friend, Layla tried to calm herself as she centered her sights on her place of work. Still seeing all four cars in the lot, Layla took the half-full approach in that at least nobody else had showed up. Watching them for a while, each seemingly took turns wandering around her works premises before they all eventually huddled up and went back to their cars. Scared but somewhat spirited at the same time, Layla watched as each car pulled out of her works lot and drove off in the same direction.

Surprised they all went the same way, Layla sat tight just in case one of them returned for whatever reason. Having more time on her hands, Layla again thought about what to do. Being given a little bit of an answer in which way not to go, her first obvious thought was to ask herself, what was in the opposite direction. Familiar with the area, the only thing relevant in that general direction was her parent’s house. Unfortunately, this now seemed off-limits and unsafe.

While lamenting the fact she couldn’t use her phone one more time, a car pulled into the driveway of the abandoned home. Surprised, Layla froze as the car’s high beams shined brightly into her car. Fortunate to already be reclined, Layla held her breath as the car sat in the driveway

for what seemed like an uncomfortable length of time.

Wondering if it was the police or maybe the owner of the property, the car eventually backed up and drove off in the opposite direction. Cautiously looking up when she felt it was safe, the car was thankfully now gone. Still stuck with what to do and where to go, Layla now worried that whoever had pulled into the driveway, might have reported her. Anxious over the idea the cops could be on their way, her anxiety lamentably forced a directional choice out of her.

Having no other good ideas, Layla reluctantly chose her parents' house. Slowly pulling out onto the main road, Layla once again held her breath as she passed by her place of work, hoping a random co-worker wouldn't notice her or her car. Besides the obstacle of her co-workers, she also had the additional worry that the Sheriff's Department might be eyeing her parents' house. Trying to put herself in the most advantageous spot, Layla decided that when she got close enough, she would make several passes, up and down their street, in an attempt to see if a car, person, or object seemed out of place.

Critiquing every car she passed, Layla began to stare a little too much, which caused her to occasionally swerve outside of her lane. Catching herself before anything bad happened, Layla made a mental note to slow down and focus before she ended up on the side of the road. Taking her anxiety out on her steering wheel, Layla's hands gradually became sore as she reached her parents' street.

Turning right onto their road, Layla was somewhat aided by the fact that her parents also lived on a country road. Only having a few more houses per mile than that of her own, and being familiar with the majority of her parents' neighbors, Layla made her first pass, focusing her gaze on the more distant houses. Trying to do so while driving at an unsuspecting speed, Layla did her best to recall what was normal and what was not.

Only noticing one out of place truck with an attached pontoon boat, Layla doubted the Sheriff's Department had the time or ability to pull this off as some sort of surveillance vehicle. Satisfied with what she was able to see along the unlit road, Layla used the service driveway of an oil pumpjack to turn herself around.

With no other traffic, Layla righted herself and started her second pass, this time focusing in on her parents' closer neighbors. Again trying to drive the speed limit, Layla carefully scanned each neighbor's driveway to the best of her ability. Only seeing familiar horse trailers and pickup trucks, this pass was more pleasing and less stressful than her first.

Reaching her original starting point, Layla was left with only her parents' house. For this, she cheated and actually got a little bit of a head start during her two first passes. With her parents' house naturally drawing her attention, she couldn't help but scan their property regardless of whatever earlier objective she had assigned herself.

Driving much faster down her parents' street for this last pass, she quickly spotted her father's military-style mailbox and slowed down. Being mindful that someone might be pulling the same trick that she had just used, Layla paid extra attention to what was positioned or parked behind anything as she slowly passed by. Only seeing what she considered to be normal, Layla put her car into reverse, backed up, and then drove down their long gravel driveway.

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On guard and at the ready to put her car into reverse, Layla almost sluggishly proceeded down her parents' driveway, attentive to the slightest change or variation to their land. Fixated more on their vehicles and house, Layla's focus caused her to forget about her father's dogs. Loose and left outside year-round, both bolted straight for her, barking only when they got about twenty feet away. Startling her, Layla screamed, quickly hit her brakes, and soon had her car going backwards.

With her heart racing, she soon saw both dogs playfully chasing her. Friends with anyone, both dogs wagged their tails as they turned Layla's scared reversing action, into a game. Barking and jumping, both dogs turned their "car in the driveway" barks into playful howls. Now pawing and jogging alongside her car and she course-corrected, Layla gave up her sleuth-like approach, and put her car into park. Figuring the Sheriff or a Deputy would have shown themselves by now if they were anywhere near, Layla opened her car door to both dogs' delight.

"Good boys," she said as they affectionately pushed each other out of the way for her attention.

"You guys scared me. You know that?" she added, giving them plenty of pets.

"Now, has anyone been here? Is anyone here that shouldn't be?"

Both dogs playfully grunted and groaned, feeling this was part of a game rather than a serious question. Jumping over one another and almost getting into her car, Layla backed them away before shutting her door. Rolling down her window, Layla tried to focus the dogs while telling them she would meet them at her parents' house. Hearing the word "house", both dogs took off, running as fast as they could along their driveway and onto her parents' porch. Spinning in circles and howling to the idea they might go inside, the noises they made were easily enough to

cause her parents' bedroom light to turn on.

With her surprise visit now over, Layla drove more plainly and parked in front of her parents' porch. As she did this, her dad opened the front door. Being bombarded by his two dogs right away, her father first thanked them for their vigilance, and briefly let them inside as a reward. Tossing each a snack which he kept in a jar near his front door, he turned back to Layla, who had now also reached the porch.

"Is everything okay? It's like three-thirty in the morning. What are you doing out this late?" he asked, still in the confused stage of waking up.

Layla at first didn't reply or say anything was wrong. Being besieged by his dogs once more, he politely corralled them up and had both go back into his house, closing the door behind them. Turning back to her, he asked her again what was wrong, this time after stabilizing his thoughts a little more.

"I don't know if I can say, Dad. I was nervous just to come here. On top of that, I don't know if I can even explain it."

Taken aback by his own child stating she was nervous to come over, his parental wariness skyrocketed, which piqued his interest to ask once more.

"Layla, you should never be worried about coming over here. Why would you be worried? I'm a little confused. I'd love to help, Layla, you know that. But if you want help, which it seems like you do, I have to know what the problem is."

"I don't know Dad. I'm confused too. Can I come in and sit down for a little bit?"

Frustrated, but knowing if he showed his frustration it wouldn't help, her dad did the fatherly thing and let her in, to both of his dogs' delight. Romping around, both dogs nuzzled and tried to play with her as she took up a seat on the couch. Catching that Layla wasn't being very receptive to this, her dad started towards the door to have the dogs leave.

“No, that’s okay Dad. They’re just trying to be nice to me,” she said, seeing what her dad was about to do.

“Okay. Do you want something to drink? This is kind of feeling like a coffee moment,” he said, trying to inject a little humor.

Smiling, Layla nodded her head and played along.

“Sure. Do you have any Kona by chance?”

“Kona? What’s that? Is it something illegal?” he replied, never hearing of it before, while still being a fatherly goof.

“No,” she giggled.

“I’ll tell you about it some other time. But I’d love to have whatever you make.”

“Alright. Give me a couple of seconds. Then I’ll come back and you will tell your favorite parent, and your loving father what’s going on. Okay?” he advised with a smirk, making it clear he was not going to give up.

“Remember... when you were in third grade, you gave me that ‘Best Ever’ award!” he added from the kitchen, trying to win her over.

“I think I meant to give that to Mom!” Layla instantly replied, countering his attempt to butter her up.

Since her dad, like Wynn, was always a jokester, it was hard for her not to give in to him. Seemingly able to dilute even the most serious of issues, he always had a gag or wisecrack at the ready. Soon smelling and hearing the coffee going in the kitchen, she also heard her mother start to move about upstairs. Noticing the same thing, her dad pardoned himself and went upstairs to talk with her. Having been under the weather, Layla’s dad insisted she stay in bed, advising her “Everything’s okay” and “Layla just wanted someone to talk to.”

When her dad returned downstairs, he simply smiled and walked back into the kitchen. Hearing a few cups clatter and some items move about, he reappeared after a couple of minutes, holding two cups of

coffee. Setting them both down on a table in front of her, he asked her if she wanted anything added.

“No, that’s okay. I think I’m just going to take it as is today.”

Himself liking it this way, he pulled up a chair and sat down, sipping on his coffee without uttering a word. Obviously doing so to let her start the conversation, Layla countered his smooth tactic.

“My memory tells me you turned that award into ten years of torment at my expense.”

Laughing, he agreed with her.

“Yes, that is true. But that was partly your fault. If it would have been just a ‘Best Father Ever’ award, you would’ve only had to deal with that acknowledgment. But it wasn’t. You made it even better for me by purchasing the wrong award. ‘Best Grandfather Ever’ supplied me with many more years of jokes... yes, mostly at your expense. So I thank you once again. That turned out to be a very fruitful award... for me.”

Giving her a very cheeky grin, he again went silent, reapplying his muted pressure upon her. After she resisted this for a few more awkward moments, he slightly altered his unique interrogation method.

“I was actually planning on polishing that award today. Let me go get it,” he said while merrily popping up.

Knowing he was just going to continuing on with this until he got what he wanted, Layla relented before he started posting pictures online.

“Okay Dad, calm down.”

Pleased he had squeezed enough to get it out of her, he quickly dropped his buffoonery and became more serious. Turning into a sounding board, he again sat quietly, but became acutely more attentive to anything she had to say.

“So...” Layla started off with, while trying to come up with a

way to not sound kooky or paranoid.

“I guess to make this short, if you didn’t already know, the Mayor of Riceland just recently came out and accused Chief Scholl of this or that chintzy infraction. To me, it seemed like bologna, so I tried to come up with a way to help. One of the things the Mayor was griping about was something about officer’s uniforms. So I figured I could help by turning over Wynn’s stuff,” she explained, while taking a few sips of her coffee.

Layla continued her story, advising her dad that she found Wynn’s body camera, turned it in, the Chief was then found dead, and her belief that it was all somehow related. She also described how she “confirmed” the Sheriff was behind this and subsequently, why she felt her life was in danger. Taken aback, Layla’s dad thought about what he had just heard before saying anything.

“I’m not judging, I’m just asking. Are you sure the Sheriff’s Department didn’t just have some sort of alarm call at your office? The timing does raise eyebrows, I agree. But might it of been something as simple as that?” he asked, playing devil’s advocate, not wanting to assume anything.

“I tried to think of a lot of different reasons for everything. I guess it’s possible, but the chances of it all happening at the same time seems low. Plus, one of the guys that went in, came out angry. That doesn’t seem like something a cop would do for an alarm. I couldn’t see Wynn doing that. Why was he so upset?”

Still trying not to be judgmental, Layla’s dad went back to his analytical approach.

“Okay. Did you see what was on Wynn’s camera? Was it something you could view?”

“No. I looked at it and found a memory card, but the card wasn’t a normal size. I didn’t have anything that I thought I could put it in to read. So I just placed it back in the camera and turned it over to Chief Scholl.”

“Alright. Well...” he said while lowering his head and rubbing his face in thought.

“I’d say things do seem suspicious. But on the other end, I don’t like how essentially all of these people would need to be in on this, at least a little bit. That I’d say, is maybe an asterisks. And, I would have to agree that the Sheriff going to your house would more than likely be a normal choice, especially at night. If I felt I needed to say something important to someone and it was late, I’d also think the person would be at home. So I can’t fault him there.”

Layla shook her head in agreement. She had played the back-and-forth game with herself as well and really didn’t want to think the worst of people. However, out of both preservation and caution, she still had a hard time not being wary. How many red flags are just coincidences or turn into justifiable facts?

“Okay,” she said, while taking a peak outside.

“What do you think then? What do you think I should do?”

Her dad once again took a moment to reevaluate the situation. Trying to be based in his thoughts, he saw her dilemma, why she was scared but also didn’t want to overreact. Kicking these ideas around, he eventually asked her a question.

“Do you want to stay here for a few days? Maybe take your mind off some things for a while?”

“Honestly Dad, I wasn’t going to come over here because I was afraid this would be one of the first places someone might check. That’s nothing against you or Mom, I just figured if I was looking for me, I’d first look into my friends and family before moving onto other places like hotels and whatever else.”

“Mmmm,” her dad simply mumbled, not upset, but taking away his easy options.

“Did you go back to work or are you still off?”

“Both. I did try to return, but everything else got mixed in. So I’m off again.”

“Okay. How much more time do you have remaining?”

“I only have a couple of vacation days left, but just about everyone in the office donated a day or two to me. So being paid, I don’t have to go back to work until the 13th... although I bet my boss would let me take as many unpaid days off as I want.”

“Okay then, I’ll tell you what. If you don’t feel right at home, at a hotel, or at a friend’s place, how about a hunting cabin?”

“A hunting cabin?”

“Yeah. The Mullins gave me free rein to use their cabin whenever I wanted. Their boy Scottie is being deployed right now, so he won’t be there, and Sean said he’s just too old anymore to be up there by himself. So with Scottie gone, nobody is going to be there. If you have time off, maybe just relax there and see how things play out. I know for me, whenever something happens in my life, I always tell myself to step back and wait at least twenty-four hours before I react. Whenever I react in the moment, I tend to regret it. If after a period of time, I still feel whichever way about something, I can then say or do something with a clear head behind it. Not anger. I’d say, do the same thing here. It’s no five-star retreat, but it’s secluded in the woods, has food, water, and a wood stove. As long as you’re okay with no television and a.... rustic bathroom, then I think this is your best option to not under or overreact. Relax, and maybe more clear answers will appear.”

“What does a ‘rustic bathroom’ look like?” she asked, catching her dad stutter over this point.

“Well, I guess outhouse is more the right word. But it’s a bathroom... and you will have power at the cabin. Just maybe not in the bathroom,” he said with a little bit of a wince.

“Sean has a generator up there and I think he might have also installed a small solar panel as well,” he then added, trying to gloss over the outhouse issue.

Not amused by the “rustic bathroom” idea, she did feel her dad was right, and that this was a non-embarrassing way she could lay low without making it obvious she was running. Unenthusiastically agreeing, her

thoughts then turned to her car.

“Will anyone see my car? That was my big problem with a hotel.”

“Nobody should. It’s by itself in the woods. However, if you want some peace of mind, you can borrow my old truck. The four-wheel drive will probably be better for you out there and it fits in more with a cabin as opposed to a smaller car.”

“Are you sure he has food up there?”

“Yes. He always has beans, soup, and some other guy-style foods stocked up. If you want, take some of our stuff for snacks. You can cook, but it will have to be on the stove. So keep that in mind if you want to take something hot.”

“Do they have water?”

“To drink, generally. But you can take a pack of ours. If you’re talking about running water, they have rain barrels. But I’ve never been up there with that being a problem, and I’ve stayed there a couple of days before.”

“What about if the Sheriff comes here looking for me?” she asked, worried for both her parents and for her location being given away.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a grown girl. Right now, everyone you know understands your struggles, and either knows or will understand why you are not at work. So if someone questions where you’re at, it would be easy to say ‘She’s getting away from everything’ with your remaining time off. You’re an adult, so you can go wherever you want without telling anyone. The Sheriff doesn’t need to be notified every time someone wants to go on a vacation.”

Going quiet for a moment, her dad continued on. Trying to ease the idea as much as he could.

“Take some of your mother’s books and let your mind fall into those. You have the time off, that cabin is on private property, so it would be extremely unlikely someone will notice. Let yourself relax. I

think that is what you need right now. Relax and maybe something that seems out of wack now, will be explainable in a few days.”

◇
Chapter № 16



Only about a twenty-minute drive from her parents' house, Layla arrived at the cabin just before six in the morning. Still somewhat dark, Layla struggled with the unorthodox padlock the front door had. Holding her father's flashlight in one hand, she patiently tried almost every key he had on his ring until she located the right one. Excited to get out of sight, Layla hurried in and closed the wooden door behind her.

Securing the door like a medieval castle gate, she lowered a large wooden block across the frame which rested snugly upon some roughly made supports. At ease when the large block barred the door, Layla paused for a moment before inspecting the cabin.

"I forgot the food," she voiced to herself, realizing she would have to again wrestle with the large block, then go back outside to gather up her things.

Deciding to kick this task down the road, Layla instead looked around to see what sort of mess her father had gotten her into. As advertised, the cabin was a stereotypical guy's place. Its items were not put away, cabinets were left open, and a few dishes were even still in the sink. To further the sloppiness along, the food her dad had mentioned was indeed stocked up, but not where you would normally think. Instead of being properly kept and maintained, the cans were stacked on the ground, right next to an empty cupboard. To top this off as almost a final touch, the cupboard itself wasn't affixed to the wall but was likewise resting on the floor.

Quickly second-guessing her adventure, the rest of the cabin was minimalistic but wasn't as bad. The structure itself was a genuine log cabin. The pleasant scent of pine was immediately distinct and accompanied by a tempered trace of smoke, which wasn't annoyingly overpowering. Small, each corner was dedicated to a clear objective. The corner to the right of the door was the kitchen area. The corner to the left of the door was the messy storage area. Directly to the rear of this was the

cabin's bed, which was a small twin-sized arrangement combined with a military cot folded up underneath. Finally, the remaining corner was the apparent living space. This had a small table, a couple of cheap chairs, a radio, and to her surprise, a television.

Scrutinizing the items that were stored in this corner, which included a deck of cards, some candles, and a few hunting magazines, Layla discovered a protruding ladder. Obscure and out of the way, this ladder was collapsible and pointed to a makeshift attic. Intrigued, Layla carefully pulled down the ladder and climbed up. Only about ten steps, the ladder itself appeared to be handmade, but not by anyone with woodworking talent. Somewhat rickety in certain sections, Layla slowed her climb the higher she got.

When Layla reached the top of the ladder, she found a crudely made shelf that was little more than an elongated ledge with lots of nails. Stacked on this ledge were a couple of dusty boxes, some random pairs of clothes, a couple of blankets, and the remains of a mouse nest. Being that this was the only location the cabin had obvious signs of animal life, Layla was disgusted but encouraged that with no other toiletry traces anywhere else, having a mouse as a camping companion was not going to be a problem.

Going back downstairs, Layla lit some candles and started to sort through the items the cabin had. In the kitchen area, the sink and faucet worked once she figured out that she needed to turn on the rain barrel. The kitchen had an adequate supply of dishes, cups, and silverware for a temporary stay, although these too were rather homely. Under the sink, Layla found a healthy supply of toilet paper, a couple rolls of paper towels, along with a collection of soap bars. Finally, to her surprise, she also found a decent cache of cleaning supplies, all of which were found to be unused, which gave her a hearty laugh.

Food wise was basically what her dad had advised. Pork and beans, beans with bacon, and meat lover's soup. Besides these cholesterol bombs, Layla also found plenty of marshmallows and a couple random cans of broccoli and cheese. On the healthy side, the only drinks she found in the cabin was a twenty-four pack of bottled waters. Sadly for her, this turned disappointing as she was only able to find some lemonade mix for the water, but no coffee.

Not finding any tea either, Layla beat herself up for forgetting to grab these items. Bemoaning this, she did notice that the small bed was actually quite comfortable. Complete with thick wilderness-like blankets, the small bed soon became the pleasant surprise of the house. Cushy, she considered taking a much-needed nap until her desire to get things organized kicked in.

Almost peeling herself away from the cozy bed, Layla went outside and slowly fetched the supplies she and her father had packed. Mainly food, her dad did insist on her taking some survival gear. Refusing to take one of his guns, she reluctantly took a hatchet after her dad demanded that she take some sort of protection. Leaving alone the generous supply of wood her dad had dumped into the bed of the truck, Layla finished her unpacking by gathering up an armful of books that she had selected from her mother's shelf.

Lightly tidying up for her own sanity, the morning sun casually made its daily appearance after weeding its way through the surrounding woods. Hearing the birds talking about this, Layla relaxed her cleaning desires and turned on the radio to catch some of the morning's news. Being battery-operated, she placed the radio on a small stand that was next to the bed. Catching the news during its commercial segment, Layla snuggled herself under the bed's heavy blankets. Almost falling asleep the moment her head touched the pillow, the day's news then started which focused her attention a little longer.

“Good morning Northern Buchtel, Huron, Montgomery, and Scone counties, today is the first day of July, 2022, and here are your morning talking points,” the radio host joyfully exclaimed as he went into the local news.

Starting off with a robbery conviction that occurred in Huron County, the host babbled on about several other topics that didn't pertain to her. Hearing his endlessly talk about catchy gossip and filler topics, Layla peacefully drifted asleep by the time he had reached the weather and daily traffic report.

◇
Chapter № 17



Two days passed with little news to note. On one of the two days the morning news host did mention Chief Scholl, but it was all rehashed information for the average listener. Other, meaningless topics which did not pertain to her situation were also discussed. How the cost of gas was rising, the reasoning for a tax levy that had been proposed in Buchtel County, and a storm that caused a four-hour blackout in the small town of Denners Creek. The same or very similar things followed on all of the other news stations she could find. All random and all frivolous bits of filler information that mattered little to her.

Because she had already committed to being at the cabin for a while, and with little information coming in, boredom became her immediate problem. Most of the books she had grabbed from her mother were done so with haste, and were not her style. Playing solitaire soon became old and although one of the hunting magazines was somewhat interesting, the rest of them seemed either dull or lacking in variety. Despite her doldrums, not all her time was gainless. Layla did find some comfort in reading her mother's scripture book which had some personal notes written between the margins. However, being more of a motivational reference book, and only having one, she quickly swept over this before lunch on the second day.

To occupy the rest of her time, Layla made it her task to clean up and make the cabin as nice as possible. Feeling this would be a nice "Thank You" to the Mullins family, she cracked open all the unused cleaning supplies and made do with what she could. Not having a mop made getting a complete shine in certain areas a little more tricky. Nevertheless, she countered this with plenty of towels and some shuffled dancing once she found some music she liked.

Eventually making her way onto the porch, Layla became bold enough to try the cabin's generator. Originally not wanting to use it out of noise concerns, time encouraged her enough to branch out after two days of almost complete silence. Having to read the directions to be sure

she was operating it correctly, the engine started off rough, puffed and smoked until an evenly toned rev settled in. Excited she had got it working, she immediately went inside to try out the cabin's television.

Having already found the television's remote while cleaning, Layla took a seat on the comfy bed and almost strangely overjoyed, turned it on. Needing to turn up the volume thanks to the generator, a local station came on, playing an older black and white movie. Knowing the cabin only had an antenna, she curiously flipped through all the channels to see how many and what all, she got.

Due to the remote location and abundance of trees, she sadly only received five channels that were clear enough to watch. Two were local news stations, one was a Spanish channel, another was dedicated to reruns and the old movie she had on, and the final channel only broadcasted infomercials twenty-four hours a day. Knowing only minimal Spanish, dismissing the infomercial channel altogether, and deciding to maybe watch reruns later, Layla dully picked the clearer of the two news stations and watched what they had to say.

"Tonight at six, a Lake Fork area farmer was arrested late last night for his part in a multi-county methamphetamine production ring. A burst water main in downtown Burton City caused several local businesses to have to close their doors for the day. And, local authorities are saying that the widow of the late Officer Clifton is missing, after they received a call about her house being vandalized earlier this morning. Stay tuned for these headlines and much more, only here tonight at six," the news anchor intently stated with flare, trying to sell viewers into watching his channel's program.

Awed over the headline, Layla left the channel on, feeling once again her intuition had been right. After the end of the station's five o'clock program, the news began, leading first with the arrested farmer. Patiently waiting through his arrest details, the next story was about her and her house. Starting with a reporter standing outside her residence, he advised that the Sheriff's Department had received a call at about seven in the morning concerning a spray-painted garage door. Showing the door on camera, the black spray paint spelled out "We'r No More" and was underlined in red.

Following this, the reporter detailed the Sheriff's

Department's response, their attempts to contact Layla, as well as their alleged concerns. He then went on to give the back story of her husband as well as both the Fire Marshal and Medical Examiner's findings. Finishing off his segment, the newscaster advised that the Sheriff's Department currently only considers Layla to be "absent" and that an official missing persons report had not yet been declared.

Left without words, Layla turned off the TV and thought. Immediately hearing the generator still running, she wasted no time in shutting it off. Promptly returning to her more paranoid and fearful state, she again secured the log cabin's door behind her. Sitting back down, Layla tried to make sense of what she had just learned.

Her first thoughts went towards the knowledge that the Sheriff's Office had again been at her house. This made her question how genuine the vandalism actually was. Her house wasn't desolate but it also wasn't rubbing elbows with her neighbors' homes either. Because of this, Layla surmised someone would have had to intentionally pick her house, gone down her medium-lengthened driveway with two cans of spray paint, and done this. That, to her, did not seem random but purposefully carried out. The idea of it being deliberate, made her then ask herself who and why. This generally resulted in her accusing the Sheriff's Department.

Second, Layla naturally also wondered about her friends and family. As she had thought before, both seemed to be the likely starting point for any investigation. When did you last see her? When was the last time you talked to her? Has she mentioned anything strange going on? These questions would almost certainly be asked of not just her friends and co-workers, but of her parents as well. Also concerning was the fact that her car was still parked in her parent's garage. If by chance a nosey officer happened to look in, he would need to be blind not to notice it.

The third thing that crossed her mind about the news broadcast was the reporting itself. This temporarily put her in a bad mood as she fumed over the "reports" they kept touting, as well as what were more than likely lies. Hearing that they "attempted to contact" her, and that they had "concerns", didn't hold much weight with her. Both seemed like smoke for the common viewer especially since she knew they had almost certainly located her phone in her locked drawer just a few days prior.

Finally, when all her other thoughts had run their course,

Layla was left with what was written on her garage. Regardless of if it was truly random, was targeted, or done by the Sheriff's Department themselves, "We'r No More" seemed like an odd thing to write. First, she assumed it was supposed to say "We're" no more instead of "We'r". This misspelling meant to her that someone either didn't know how to spell, was rushed while doing so, intended to spray some other less than obvious word, or actually did write what they wanted and she was just misinterpreting it.

Already feeling her house was targeted for a reason, Layla deduced that the message on her garage was more than likely meant for her. Writing it down so she wouldn't forget, she stared at the words and twisted them around in any way she could think of in an attempt to pick them apart. Running the words backwards, flipping them around, using only the capital letters, Layla spent a good part of the night trying to decode what the phrase possibly meant.

The more time she spent trying to translate what was on her garage without any progress, the more her mind started to drift back towards the rest of her concerns. Chief of those concerns was if the Sheriff's Department had spoken with her parents, would one of them talk or accidentally slip up? Layla had heard several of Wynn's police stories about the subtle yet efficient tactics law enforcement commonly used to figure out information. The simplest of these tactics was to merely separate individuals before questioning. If one of her parents were to give a different account than the other, the discrepancy would be picked apart until they zeroed in on who or what they should be talking about.

Besides this, they would both still have to navigate the other obstacles of talking or even not talking. Seemingly harmless details one might say or forget to say could also tip the hand of someone being questioned. Facts not being straight, facts going against already verified certainties, and even too much or too little knowledge could turn problematic.

Then the ultimate red flag of law enforcement being over the target would be if one or both of her parents decided not to talk. Even the average layperson understood that not talking to or cooperating with an officer of the law would be a bright neon sign pointing directly upon them. In the least, you are essentially telling the official something is off. The general public clearly understands innocent people want to show they are

not a suspect, and or, they like to help law enforcement settle a matter. With this in mind, when someone deploys the right to remain silent, although not always direct evidence, it is generally assumed they have knowledge concerning the subject at hand.

Knowing her father was a straight shooter when it came to serious matters also didn't help. Not that she wanted him or anyone else to lie, but if he did have to do so, it wouldn't be a finely tuned skill he possessed. Stuck with the reality that one of these scenarios would probably play out, Layla nervously wondered if the cabin was still a safe location for her to be at.

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Chapter № 18



A storm blew in overnight, often waking her up. Already antsy, the constant sounds the cabin, wind, rain, and thunder made, almost brought her emotions to a breaking point. Thinking about leaving, Layla clutched the hatchet her dad had insisted she bring, playing out the worst-case scenarios in her head. Her natural surroundings also added to her dreary night, as she heard several weak or rotten limbs crack and break, causing abrupt thuds and knocks on and around the cabin.

Pulling her covers over her like she had when she was young and afraid of the closet monster, one large crash caused her to jump off the bed. Striking somewhere above her on the roof and rumbling the walls, Layla darted over to the cabin's table and tucked herself underneath. Wide-eyed and fully alert, Layla glanced up at the ceiling almost positive she would see a hole.

Spending the next couple of hours under the table, the storm finally passed just before sunrise. Relieved the storm was over, another relief crossed over her. After almost twenty-four hours since the reported vandalism of her garage, nobody had shown up at the cabin. Although she did give law enforcement a little wiggle room considering the storm's violence, the idea she was probably a top priority and still hadn't been contacted, gave her some solace.

Staying inside and thinking over the flaws of her theory, two more large sounds occurred. Paused out of surprise, she realized rather quickly that these crashes didn't quite sound the same as the ones she had heard overnight. Very close in occurrence, the first noise sounded like a large continuous pop, almost as if there were a giant outside cracking his knuckles. Once this was over, it was promptly followed by a heavy and even louder crash that sounded metallic with some glass added in.

After having her mind so concentrated and focused on other matters, this occurrence blanked her mind over what could have made such a noise. Listening to see if anything else occurred, Layla could only hear a

moderate amount of persistent crunching coupled with what sounded like glass falling. Not having any front windows, Layla tried to angle herself enough to see if she could identify what was going on from one of the cabin's side windows.

Hearing the sounds eventually slow, then stop, Layla's curiosity gradually swelled her courage enough to open the door. Telling herself she would only crack it open, Layla carefully positioned herself with enough room to be able to re-board the door if needed. Counting to three, she opened the door, cringing as the door's hinges revealed her intent.

Still defensive in posture, Layla peered through the tiny opening she had granted herself and at first only noticed some branches and leaves. Scattered about from the storm, Layla opened the door a little more so she could brush aside the branches that had reached the porch. Doing this somewhat guardedly, this slightly new angle gave her a clearer view of her dad's truck. Spotting it, she instantly put together what had made the glass and crunching sounds.

"Oh no," she instinctively uttered as she noticed a large branch on the truck's hood.

Not thinking about safety, Layla instinctively went outside and over to her dad's truck to inspect the damage. Going to the front, she looked at the large limb that had fallen from a nearby tree. Mostly still on the truck, the large branch fell on the driver's side front fender and hood area. This left a large dent in both body parts, shattered the driver-side headlight, and disfigured part of the bumper. To add to her bad luck, lots of other smaller branches had also peppered the truck throughout the night. This unfortunately left further knuckle-size indentations or sliding grooves along other various portions of the truck.

Standing there in disbelief, Layla lost the physical tension her body was holding, which caused her shoulders to drop. Staring in silence, another crack sounded which made her jump back. Looking up, the portion of the limb that didn't break off, teased over top of her. Seeing the unhealthy state of the branch, Layla quickly ran inside to fetch the truck's keys. Darting in and out of the cabin, fortunately, nothing else occurred although she still felt pressure to move it out of the way. Pushing what amounted to a log off of her father's hood, Layla then got into the truck and

drove it behind the cabin, parking it where an entire tree would have to fall in order to strike it.

Dejected over her luck, Layla sat in the truck for a moment trying to temper her gloomy view. Taking in several deep and controlled breaths, as her spirits started to return, her focus shifted from disheartenment to that of a more pared outlook. Consequently, the sounds that depression and sorrow had interrupted, gradually returned.

With this, Layla caught a deep and professional-sounding voice coming from within the truck. This voice gently became louder as her heart pivoted from its distress, allowing the words that were being pronounced to become clear.

“That will definitely be a topic of conversation during the next council meeting,” the firm voice stated.

“In local news, Hunington Elementary School has announced that they will be closed on Monday and Tuesday due to a series of electrical issues generated by the storm overnight. These issues are expected to be resolved within those two days. However, in the event repairs take longer than anticipated, parents will be notified Tuesday morning as to Wednesday’s school status.”

“Cedar Path’s Chief financial officer has stepped down over the weekend amidst rumors of a possible undisclosed federal indictment. Reports of this announcement were made public late last night via the company’s website. Cedar Path has expressed full cooperation with authorities concerning the matter and is expected to fill the vacated position in the near future.”

“Finally, the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Department has upgraded the status of Layla Clifton from absent to officially missing. This report was made public by Sheriff Thompson after a second report of vandalism occurred at the Clifton residence. Anyone with knowledge of Mrs. Clifton’s whereabouts is asked to call the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office or your local authorities.”

Hearing the radio broadcaster move on to the next topic, Layla turned off the truck. Thinking for a moment, Layla got out, ran over to the porch, and started up the generator. Going back inside the cabin, she

turned on the television to see if she could catch any additional information about her house or what the Sheriff's Department was saying.

Only having the two news stations, Layla for once didn't exercise patience and fiddled with the antenna for the television. Knowing almost nothing about antennas, Layla contorted, angled, and manipulated the antenna's rabbit ears, trying her best to increase the news channel's poor reception. Failing to get the results she wanted, Layla briefly considered adding length to the ears via some aluminum foil. Not knowing if this would actually work or not, she then opted to stretch the antenna and its base as far as it would go towards the cabin's window.

Coming up just inches short of the window sill, she moved over the kitchen's small table as a support. Checking the television, she noticed a slightly better picture. Looking around the room for something else she might be able to use to raise it up to window level, Layla spotted the cabin's abundance of soup cans. Grabbing an armful, she stacked the cans high enough so that the antenna's base was even with the window.

Messing with the ears a little more, the news channel she wanted became visible enough for her to recognize the images on the screen. Talking about sports and the weather, the news broadcast eventually looped around to the day's leading stories. When the commentator reached her story, they displayed an image of the eastern side of her house. Again vandalized with black and red spray paint, this time her home's siding was attacked. Spelled much larger than on her garage, the vandal again wrote the phrase "We'r No More".

The information the reporter advised concerning her updated missing status was nothing new. He simply underscored the new distinction and displayed a photo of her in the upper corner of the screen. Wincing over their choice of photo, Layla turned off the television once her segment was over. Sliding the table with the antenna back towards its original spot, Layla grabbed the piece of paper she originally used to write down the phrase.

Staring at it again, she ended up with the same problem as she had before. "We'r" was spelled wrong, face value gave her nothing, and moving around the letters resulted in more new words that didn't make any sense. Even so, with this happening a second time on her property, it seemed almost certainly meant for her. Not dismissing the idea it could be

some dumb kids, the more she thought about it, the more she felt putting her time and effort into untangling it, wouldn't be just a wild goose chase.

Feeling the message was probably a code meant for her, she tried a renewed hand in translating it. Assuming the message writer would know this was not her forte, Layla felt it had to be something simple but relatable only to her. Having this in mind, no spontaneous insight came to her upfront. Not wanting to let go of this principle, Layla side-pocketed it just in case a word or phrase dawned upon her.

Having already tried the simpler avenues she could think of, Layla reminded herself not to overthink it, and to stay with something straightforward. Holding this, she first turned each letter into its corresponding alphabetical number. Hoping this might turn into a phone number or an address, the converted numbers became too long for either to apply. Assigning this same idea towards a social security number, the numbers, sadly, didn't line up for this either.

Sticking with simple, Layla tried removing all the vowels, and then removing all the consonants. Seeing a possible pattern emerge with the removal of the vowels, she then rearranged the MR to be upfront and asked herself if she knew a MR WR N? Thinking of anyone that might have some combination of these three letters, the best she could come up with was her late grandfather on her mother's side, William Nelson Roper. This idea did somewhat feel like a possible break, however, every path she applied his name to quickly fell apart in how, where, or why he could be connected.

Playing around with the letters as initials did still give her an idea. WRN definitely wouldn't mean much to the average Joe, but did mean something to her. Although she now felt her grandfather's initials were just a coincidence, the idea of someone's hidden initials did seem to fit her simple but relatable theory. This gave Layla a new look upon the phrase, especially the misspelled part since it seemed purposely reduced to three.

Tinkering around with just the WE'R portion, she couldn't quite come up with another name she knew, with the E becoming her biggest problem. Nobody she knew had a last name that started with an E and she could only think of one person whose first name started with it. Middle initials also became problematic since she either didn't know or

couldn't recall that portion of most people's names. Nevertheless, Layla did feel she was on to something and that maybe if she gave herself a little break, the time away might help clear up her overly stretched mind.

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Chapter № 19



Lying down while watching a lunchtime western classic, drowsiness quickly slipped in, and rested her eyes. Plunged into a dream just as fast, she first dreamt of horses and prairies before finding herself in a large and more modern cabin. Looking to be more the part of a bed and breakfast, the cabin had a sizable stove and cooking area, its own restroom, as well as many modern amenities such as cell phone service and the internet. Taking advantage of this, Layla wasted no time in using a computer to figure out the words written on her house. Unfortunately, this service soon grew frustrating as she was unable to find any of the right keys on the keyboard.

Trying other illogical ways to make her search work, she was abruptly awakened by the sounds of gunfire coming from her TV program. Collecting herself while turning the TV off, Layla once more sat back down at the table with her notepad. Thinking about how much easier a computer would have made this task, she again stared at the first three letters of the riddle feeling they were the key. Despite this feeling, she soon found herself going nowhere. Stymied, she sat back in her chair and asked herself how this annoying phrase might be an out-of-the-box representation of someone's name.

Following some hair twisting and table tapping, the realization that maybe the presumed left-out letter was actually meant to express something, entered her mind. Reinvigorating her, Layla first tried her letter to number association for E, which was five. Using five, she both added and subtracted that value from and to WER to see what new letters appeared.

Subtracting five created Layla's first problem. Since WER already had a letter representing five, the subtracted number for that, zero, was not represented on the alphabetical chart. To cover this idea, she tried both one letter up and one letter down, giving her two sets of new initials. Eliminating RZM on sight because her ex-boyfriend was the only person she knew that used the letter Z, she tried RAM instead. This series of letters

gave her two possible names. One, a distant relative along the Roper family tree named Mary, and an almost forgotten elementary school friend named Adam Marshall. Unfortunately for both, she ran into the unknown middle name problem and secondly, she couldn't see why either of them would have this sort of involvement with her now.

Shifting to the added result of BJW, she came up with one more possibility. This person was a girl she once worked with by the name of June Williams. Remembering that her middle name was Bernice via what was on her time card, Layla wrote down June's name and then tried to think to herself why or how she might apply to this situation. Only knowing her socially at work and not coming up with some sort of legitimate tie, Layla shrugged off June's name as purely coincidental.

Although she felt her assumption was sound, her results said otherwise. Checked at the present moment, frustration started to build as no instant revelation came her way. Putting her head down and thinking of any other angle she might have missed, Layla reminded herself of the word "simple". Spinning the letter E around in her head, in time, a simple idea did come to her. Since WE'R only needed one letter to complete its correct spelling, maybe the trick was merely adding one to WE'R.

Re-calculating what each letter would represent if she added one, she jotted down the letters XFS. As she did so, Layla recognized the initials as plain as day. Specifically the X, this letter decidedly steered her memory towards her ex-boyfriend, Xandros Flint Smedley. His distinctive yet awkward-sounding name set off a firestorm of ideas in her mind. "We're no more" was correct, since she had broken off their relationship. He coincidentally worked for the FBI, and since he went by the name Flint, anyone who did figure out his trick might not know what his real first name was.

This thrilling moment of discovery was quickly countered with a moment of hesitation. Was he trying to help her or was he working with the FBI and Sheriff's Department to lure her in? Stuck, Layla began to reason between the two competing ideas.

Always having a high opinion of Flint, she decided to give his side the benefit of the doubt first and argue out all of the positives. To start, she knew she couldn't stay at the cabin forever for multiple reasons. If he was indeed trying to reach out to her, he would probably also give her a

safer place to stay. Next, after figuring out his message, Layla felt she was right in that it was simple and specific only to her. However, “simple” was relative to the idea that it would be within her reach to figure out, not that it wasn’t without effort. Therefore, she felt if he was trying to negatively lure her out, why would he bother to code in the time-wasting fashion he did? To her, this pointed more in the direction of friend than foe. Finally, she was still left with her personal view of him. Flint was always kind and good-natured to her. The only reason she had brought an end to their relationship was because he had dedicated so much of his time to his FBI pursuits. Leaving her second in their relationship gradually formed distances and hardship between them until she officially called it off. Besides this failing, he had always been good to her. They never fought, rarely argued, they both liked the same things, and he was at all times loyal. The idea of him hurting or cheating on her had never crossed her mind. Adding all these ideas together greatly moved the needle of trust in his direction.

Nonetheless, Layla felt it was still prudent of her to consider the opposing side. This though, was countered by her own personal struggle of seeing him able to turn into something he was not. Flint hurting or doing something that might hurt her was a huge mental hurdle for her to overcome. Forcing this train of thought through, the only counter she could come up with was that he was tapped to work with the Sheriff’s Department to find her. Why he would be tapped then became the question. Wynn himself knew little about him, last she knew he worked out of a field office somewhere in New York, and to her knowledge, he didn’t have any social media accounts as a means of connection. With this, it just didn’t seem logical that he would be asked to work an out-of-state case or that he would volunteer to go against her. Especially if it had to do with corruption or setting her up.

Feeling she had eased her doubts, her next step presented her with another problem. How to go about contacting him? He clearly knew where she lived but she wasn’t willing to go back there. This same problem circled back to every other familiar location Flint might be aware of. Her house, her parents’ house, work, and some neutral friends they had, each seemed to be likely spots the Sheriff’s Department would be keeping an eye on.

Frustrated over how close relief conceivably was, while at the same time not knowing how to achieve it, Layla turned back to his phrase.

Having already used the “We’r” portion, she reasonably deduced the “No More” section also held some sort of secret. Figuring she had already used up her initial trick in every way she could think of, Layla again went back to the drawing board, doodling out different ideas onto her piece of paper.

Finding a slight pattern alphabetically with the letters “MNO”, and even a location by reshaping “More” into “Rome”, Layla quickly drew blanks as to their application. After an hour of solid speculation and theory, fatigue loosened her hopes that she was onto something. Taking a mental break, she stretched, ate some marshmallows, went outside to inspect her father’s truck, and in time found herself lying down on the comfy bed. Briefly staring at her notes once more, she gradually set them aside as no new ideas came to her. Turning on the radio for a possible update, her eyelids slowly submitted to her mental taxing, causing her to inadvertently fall asleep.

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Chapter № 20



Sleeping until the generator ran out of gas, Layla was awakened by the sudden loss of sound. Slowly getting up, Layla stammered her way through the dark and over to where she had placed a flashlight. Finding it as well as some matches, she started a few candles as her stomach notified her it was time to eat. Figuring she better tend to the generator first, she staggered outside, made sure everything seemed to be in order, and topped off its fuel. Deciding to let it rest for as long as it took her to make up a meal, Layla walked back inside the cabin and mulled over her food options.

With beans sounding like a tummy tickler, she instead helped herself to some noodles she had found at her dad's. Getting a fire started to heat up a pot of water, Layla enjoyed the relaxing process of rustic food preparation. Feeling the bit of a turn-of-the-century pioneer, Layla sat on the cabin's wooden floors near the stove instead of on a chair. Warming herself as she watched the water slowly boil, she often checked the noodles to see how soft they were getting. Liking them a smidge al dente, Layla drained the noodles before they were fully cooked. Only needing to add in the prepackaged spices, she enjoyed the steamy and surprisingly comforting meal.

Blowing on her next bite, Layla's eyes couldn't help but notice the notepad she had been writing on. Seemingly inviting her to try again, Layla decided to temporarily ignore the affair at least until she finished her meal. Turning on the radio, she scanned through the stations until she found some music she liked. Purposely stayed away from any station which aired the slightest amount of dialogue, Layla listened to several songs as she tried to allow herself to have a peaceful and somewhat normal meal.

At about the time she was finishing up her noodles, the radio station went into its hourly break. Announcing that it was now five O'clock in the morning, the station then rotated through its normal break routine of ads, weather, and short briefings. Astonished she had slept for so long,

Layla rested her full stomach as she listened to a local car dealership's "Super Sale" pitch for the upcoming weekend. Hearing that more rain was forecast for the next couple of days, the radio station then transitioned to the news which led with another broadcast about her.

"The Montgomery County Sheriff's Department has updated their search for Layla Clifton. Late last night, Sheriff Gary Thompson made two new announcements during an impromptu press release held outside their station. The Montgomery County Sheriff's Office now considers Henry Huber, Layla Clifton's father, a person of interest after receiving a third vandalism call and subsequently locating Mrs. Clifton's car inside his garage. The Sheriff advised that at approximately nine forty-five in the afternoon, their office received a call concerning several service vehicles being vandalized at C.V. Structures, Mrs. Layla Clifton's employer since 2015.

The deputies who responded to the call noted that the same known "We'r No More" message was spray painted onto three of the company's vans in addition to the number thirty-four. Surveillance video shows what is believed to be a lone male individual appearing on screen just after nine o'clock at night. After writing on the sides of each van, the male suspect can be seen leaving on foot, northbound on Skylar Road before disappearing.

According to several sources, the Sheriff's Department was later seen at the Huber residence in which a car, which is believed to belong to Mrs. Clifton, was observed being towed away. Sheriff Gary Thompson was mum about the car and what else they may have found but did indicate Mrs. Clifton's father was now a person of interest."

Turning off the radio, Layla became queasy over the idea that her father, in any way, shape, or form, might be shouldering the blame for her disappearance. Exacerbating the issue was the idea that in all likelihood, her father simply took whatever accusations and pressures that were applied by the Sheriff's Department. Not having any form of law enforcement show up at the cabin, told her they still didn't know where she was and that her father must have remained quiet over what he knew.

Alternating between sadness and nausea, Layla broke down after imagining what her father's face must have looked like while he was being accused of something he didn't do. Crying over the thought, she

considered turning herself in to stop the speculation and to alleviate the pressures her father was receiving. Despite this desire to help, she also knew her father chose to defend her, and that if there was any chance she might get hurt, he would want her to stay away until a solution was found.

This confusing state of emotions and what to do stymied her for some time. Curling up near the now smoldering fire, the warmth dried her tears but didn't calm her soul. Unsure of what was the best thing for her to do, she suddenly heard the faint sound of gravel crunching underneath a vehicle's tires. Knowing this sound meant someone was driving towards the cabin, Layla quickly splashed water over the fire and searched for her hatchet.

Frantically scouring the room, the sound of the vehicle approaching grew louder and louder until the distinct screech of applied breaks could be heard. Not having a front window, Layla tried to garner a glimpse from one of the side windows to see who or how many people she was dealing with. With this not working, she quickly moved to her escape stage. Fiddling with the window's stubborn clasp, she applied as much pressure onto it as she could until she heard what sounded like the voice of a younger child.

Paused, Layla next heard a door slam and what sounded like a father giving his son directions. Gambling in the moment that this was someone who had received permission to be at the cabin, Layla hastily came up with the best backstory she could think of for being there. What's more, Layla realized whoever this was, that they may have seen her photo on the news or over the internet. This subsequently caused her to rapidly look around the house for anything she could use to disguise herself.

Spotting a fisherman's hat that had some flies and lures attached to its brim, she swiftly put it on and added its idea into her fictitious story. Composing herself, she apprehensively opened the door and began acting to the best of her ability.

"Sorry, I was trying to get out of here by five. My husband already left and forgot his hat. I'll be out of here shortly. I already got almost everything cleaned up for you guys."

Not expecting an encounter and not able to see the truck that was parked on the other side of the cabin, both the young father and his son

jumped upon hearing her chipper voice.

“Oh. I’m sorry I wasn’t expecting anyone. Sean said we could use the cabin this week. I’m sorry if I misunderstood something and made a mistake of some kind. We aren’t kicking you out or anything are we?”

“No no,” Layla replied while trying to play up the situation as much as she could.

“My husband said we needed to be out of here today by five because someone else was supposed to be coming in. He though, kind of left me high and dry to do all the packing. This was an impromptu little getaway for us but his work called and needed him to come in, so he got out of doing the cleanup. You guys are fine. It’s our fault. We should have been long gone.”

“Oh, okay. No worries,” the young father said, as he took some supplies out of his car.

“Take whatever time you need. We’re just going to unpack and whatnot as well.”

Paused out of surprise and shyness, the five to six-year-old little boy waited for his father to walk towards the cabin first. Following in right behind him, the little boy carried with him some snacks, a pillow, and a green adolescent’s bow. Barely looking up at her as they walked onto the porch, the little boy gave her a polite but modest smile as they entered the cabin.

“I’m not trying to kick you out or anything, but if you need a hand, just let us know. We can help you carry whatever. Where did you park by the way?” he asked, realizing he didn’t see another vehicle.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. You might want to park out back. My husband and I parked our vehicles about where you’re at right now and we had a huge tree limb fall onto our truck. It’s out back now away from all the other trees, but the truck unfortunately got dented. My husband wasn’t very happy.”

“You know what, I better do that. I heard we’re supposed to get some rain today. I don’t want to have to tell my wife something like

that happened. Wait here Zane, I'm just going to pull around the car and I'll be right back. I'm Kyle by the way. This is my boy, Zane."

Layla smiled and shook both of their hands. Wanting to be as inconspicuous as possible, she kept the conversation going with the first thing that came to mind.

"You know what, that's kind of funny. I was just thinking about how I only knew one person whose name started with a Z. Now I know two... although the others was his last name," she remarked, not reciprocating the common social standard of advising her own name.

Having a slight hitch in their conversation while waiting for this custom, Kyle noticed it wasn't going to happen, so he moved on to his car.

"Okay. Welp ma'am, thank you for the heads up. I'll be right back."

Watching his father leave, the boy uncomfortably stood in the corner. Clearly not used to making up chit-chat or being around adults he didn't know, Zane looked down and froze in his place. Catching his awkwardness, Layla tried to break the tension by commenting about his bow.

"That's a neat bow you got there. Are you and your dad going to use it this week?"

Zane got even shyer when Layla asked him this, and took as much of a step backwards as he could while shoving his hands deep into his pockets. Not wanting to scare or pressure him, Layla instead gently turned around and started to place some of her things into a bag.

"When I was a little girl," she voiced softly with her back to him, in an attempt to give him a perceived cushion.

"My dad tried to show me how to use a bow like that. I wasn't ever very good. He had me shoot hay stacks and targets, but mine always missed or hit the ground."

Seeing out of the corner of his eye that this topic perked him

up, Layla kept going with it.

“The bow my dad had me use didn’t look as strong as yours. I bet you can shoot an arrow with that thing like twenty yards.”

“I hit a bull’s eye at thirty yards. My dad said he had never seen anyone do that before.” Zane voiced meekly but excitedly, proud of his accomplishment.

Honestly impressed, but also trying to play the part, Layla gave him a wide-eyed look as Zane continued on.

“Yeah and look at this,” he said while changing his demeanor and walking over to her.

“I tied feathers to it to make it look like an actual Native American’s bow. And I made this arrow holder,” he added, as he pulled out a roughly made quiver built from flannel shirts and a sock.

“Wow. How many arrows does it hold?” Layla asked, playing along.

“Ten. And I have a pouch on the side for a knife. See?” he said as he pointed it out.

“Dangerous... be careful. You have a talent for building things. I couldn’t have done that when I was your age.”

Now wanting to show her more of the things he made, Zane reached into his suitcase and pulled out what appeared to be a pair of shoes. Made with green vegetation, duct tape, and flip-flops, he excitedly displayed them as if they were authentically made Native American attire.

“These are my moccasins. I made them as well,” he proudly stated.

About to explain to her how to do so, his father came back into the cabin. Seeing Zane showing off his custom belongings caused Tyler to grin.

“Zane you little flirt. I’m gone a minute. Just one minute and

you're already chin-wagging about your handiwork. Has he shown you his cowboy belt and holster yet?"

With Layla giving him a deep look of curiosity, Zane instantly put down his moccasins and ran straight over to his backpack. Pulling out a long interlacing mix of twine and yarn, he momentarily rested this assemblage on the ground as he searched his bag for his holster. Retrieving an actual kids' toy holster made out of black plastic, he strung his makeshift belt through its loop and wrapped it around his waist.

"No gun?" Tyler asked, seeing he had forgotten it.

Caught off guard, he quickly pulled out a handful of rubber bands and a wooden gun, then smiled.

"Oh boy. You're ready. You got all the bases covered, don't you. A bow, moccasins, a cowboy belt. You're probably a hoot come Halloween aren't you?"

Laughing a little bit, Tyler applauded his son and then intervened in the conversation.

"Alright old sport, that's enough for today," he said to Zane before turning to Layla.

"We better let you go while you have a chance. He has more of these things in the car. Swords, tomahawks, spears... he seriously will have you here all day."



Chapter N° 21



Turning out of the cabin's gravel driveway and onto the road, Layla thought to herself how she'd much rather be at the cabin talking with Zane than out driving around. Although she knew it wouldn't solve her problems, being there over being within so many watchful eyes seemed much more preferable. Zane's toy distraction had been fun, they were both nice and enjoyable to talk with, and most of all they made her smile, which had become something of a rarity for her of late. Even thinking about them as she drove away drew up a pleasurable smirk upon her face.

The jovial mood which Zane's endearing creativeness had provided her soon dissolved as she entered into a more populous, and thusly, more trafficked area. Pulling her stolen fisherman's hat down further over her face, the feeling of being on a wanted poster in the wild west flashed in her mind. Now with inspecting eyes seemingly everywhere, Layla looked for the first and most neutral location she could think of to stop.

Picking a grocery store with a large parking lot, she drove her dad's truck into a distant corner and backed in. Turning it off while slouching down, Layla tried to soothe her thoughts so she could come up with a best course of action. Not wanting a garbled and hastily constructed idea aimlessly leading her, she instead patiently waited out her addled and overflowing mind.

Unfortunately for her, this was easier said than done. Every vehicle that passed by distracted her, store clerks merely doing their jobs alarmed her and the normally welcoming smell of a restaurant's grill implored her to either move along or pick up a menu.

Considering a quick pass through one of the many nearby drive thru's, Layla started up her dad's truck and drove in the opposite direction. Putting some distance between her and the numerous lunchtime temptations, she soon was struck with the alternative idea of parking at a cemetery. Normally something she wouldn't consider as an option, this

idea now seemed justifiable to her as she drove past a local funeral home. Having listened to many of Wynn's police stories, she knew out of respect that cemeteries were left alone during daylight hours. Feeling the departed would forgive her, Layla drove until she noticed an unassuming, and better yet, withdrawn burial ground with a long and indirect driveway.

Far from the roadway, Layla idled along one of the cemetery's paths, passing by a few efficiently arranged sections and only one other visitor. Nearing the rear of the grounds, she found a somewhat favorable section that had been completed but was out of the way. Stopping just behind one of the cemetery's larger headstones, Layla put the truck into park and again let herself think.

Oddly finding this location more relaxing than the grocery store, Layla eased up on herself and soon had a clearer mind to work with. Taking a breath, she looked around and noticed she was in section thirty-three. Looking at the ornate placard number reminded her of what the radio host had said. That a number thirty-four had been painted on the side of her works vans. This specific number struck a chord with her because it had been highlighted lately in her life. With that number now representing her favorite coffee, a slight mouthwatering taste of Kona swept over her. Pairing this sensation with the coffee shop at Ables gave her a momentary smile until a realization dawned upon her. What if the purpose of the number on the vans was a disguised way of saying "met me here"? This number and location association certainly would only mean something to her and a select few others. However, pulling herself the other way, as always, this was just an assumption and it could just as easily mean something else.

Weighing her present options, she understood that her biggest hurdle was time, and that this alone greatly limited her choices. Boxed into a tight corner, Layla reasoned that if Flint was indeed trying to reach out to her in code, then the spray-painted thirty-four representing Ables did seem like the most likely interpretation. Still, one logical problem came to mind. How would Flint know this association? This more than valid hitch bothered Layla to the point of not just second, but third-guessing herself.

Trying to think it through, the pressure of time gradually started to push back. This building tension forced her to set aside the "how", for present action. Settling with her number theory holding her best chance, Layla warily turned the truck back on and coasted out of the

cemetery... giving herself the assurance that she could return if something didn't materialize.

While driving to Ables, Layla caught her first break with the store being only two towns over. Knowing how to get there, she decided to take her time by staying on the lesser traveled, and thusly less crowded, back country roads. Still being able to reach the store in less than thirty minutes, she pulled into the store's rear parking lot and slowly paced its rows. Unsure if she should go in, if she should somehow leave a code of her own, or if this was even Flint's desired day, she again opted to park in a distant corner, and to take up the cautionary approach of people-staring.

Watching somewhat jealously as people blissfully went about their lives, enjoying the day, chatting on their phones, and returning their carts, Layla didn't notice anyone who resembled Flint. Figuring he had long ago sold the car he had when they were dating, she focused her eyes on single males who were in their thirties. Being known as more of a women's clothing store, this search became easy as the vast majority of those who walked in were female. Unfortunately, this patience-testing task was soon muddled by the day's forecasted rain.

Leaving her in the pickle of either going inside, and possibly being recognized, or waiting out the storm, Layla again opted for the safer approach and disappointingly stayed in the truck. Only having the occasional lull which allowed her to see a scant person or two, the rains continued hampering eventually caused her to consider parking a little closer.

Weighing out the good and bad, Layla's exhausted mind wandered from the store's customers and over to an unwitting distraction. Calming in both sound and sight, her attention shifted to the rain running down the truck's windshield. Hypnotic to a mind that had been dealing with so much stress, the relaxing sound of a pattering shower combined with the soothing flow of cascading water pacified her enough to miss a figure appear at her door. Cordially knocking on the glass, Layla's body in turn, reacted to this unexpected occurrence. Letting out a jolted scream, she vaulted herself from the driver's seat and over to the passenger's side. Unaware of what she had physically done, when her wits realized her body's actions, Layla found herself with a racing heart and a persistent by-standard.

Discovering her new location, Layla's body hesitated to acknowledge the knock and instead pushed itself against the passenger door. Jittered out of an excess of stress, the ability to utter any words escaped her until she heard a familiar voice.

"I'm sorry for scaring you. I just wanted to ask if I could borrow your phone. I locked myself out of my car and need my spare key."

Paying attention more to the voice than the words used, the calm and evenly toned male spoke in such a familiar fashion that it relieved her of her tension. Freeing her enough to open the door, Layla reached across the truck's cabin, pulled on the door's handle, and peered upwards with a hopeful gaze.

"I thought so," Flint said, soaked to the bone.

"But we need to leave right now."

◇
Chapter N° 22



Having her remain on the passenger side, Flint calmly drove her dad's truck out of the parking lot and down the main road. Not explaining himself, he turned here and there, and eventually into the parking lot of a small public playground. Not wasting any time, he unbuckled himself and told her to sit tight. Exiting the truck, he walked over to the only other vehicle in the lot, started it up, and parked it next to her dad's truck. Letting his car idle, he got out holding a pen and pad of paper.

"Who's truck is this?" he asked in a way she felt he only wanted direct answers.

"It's my Dad's."

"Okay. I need you to follow me. However, don't break any laws. We need to fly under the radar. If we separate, go to this location here," he explained while drawing up a little map.

"I'll be there. Stay in your dad's truck and don't get out until I say so. Okay?"

Trusting him, Layla shook her head without saying a word. Getting a nod from him in return, he went back to his car and pulled out of the parking lot. Obeying his instruction, she followed him from a normal distance and luckily wasn't separated by any lights or traffic. Watching him turn off the main road and onto the grounds of a construction company, he parked near a large dumpster and then pointed for her to do the same.

"Right here," he yelled as she got close.

Looking at him kind of funny, she still did as he said, pulling her dad's truck forward and parking it almost right next to the dumpster. Before turning the truck off, she rolled down her window to see if he had anything else to say.

“Leave the keys on the dash and don’t lock it. Then grab whatever you need out of the truck and jump in with me... also, make sure you bring that map I drew up with you.”

Figuring he knew what he was doing, she again did as he said. Placing the keys on the dash and collecting the few things she had, she closed the truck’s door behind her and scurried over to Flint’s car. Shaking herself off like a wet dog, Layla handed over the map and then pointed out a sign that was near their vehicles.

“You know theirs a tow-away sign right over there, right?”

“Yep. That’s what I want,” he replied, giving her a sheepish smile.

“Wait. You want my dad’s truck towed?” Layla asked, as she contemplated getting back out to move it.

Noticing this, he quickly replied while driving off, advising her of his rationale while also not allowing her to jump out.

“We could return your dad’s truck, but I’m sure the Sheriff’s Department is keeping a close eye on your parents’ house. So that won’t work. We could have just left it at the park, but it would have eventually been noticed by the park rangers or the local police, who would have eventually towed it. That wouldn’t have helped us either because it would have given away part of our location to the authorities. So, I had you park it in a private tow-away zone. Hopefully, the construction company sees it and just calls for a tow truck to take it away. They have that right since it’s a posted zone. If all goes as it should, the tow truck company doesn’t need to necessarily call the police. Instead, they should just leave a card with the construction company, detailing where the truck can be found. It will eventually cost your dad a tow bill, but the truck will be moved and the police shouldn’t be involved. It’s not foolproof, but it was the best option I felt we had.”

“Okay,” Layla simply replied, accepting his train of thought while transitioning to another.

“So I’m guessing by the way everything is going, that I’m

somewhat right, but can you maybe confirm a few things for me?”

“Sure, but one quick thing first, just so you know. I’m taking you to my house. It’s going to take us about two hours to get there, but I guess that will give you plenty of time to ask whatever you want. Plus I actually had a few things I wanted to go over with you anyways,” Flint advised, figuring she would have a lot to say.

“Alright, that sounds fine,” she said in reference to where he wanted to take her.

“But about the Sheriff’s Office and whatnot. I don’t want to sound crazy or anything, but I feel like I’m in danger. Do you know if I’m onto something or am I way overthinking things?” Layla asked a little awkwardly, believing she was right, but wanting his confirmation.

“Yes, you’re right, but it’s not the Sheriff’s Department that’s the main problem. It’s the FBI.”

The FBI somehow being involved wasn’t a one hundred percent shock to her, but them being the main antagonist was. She had felt they were probably somehow involved, but they had not been the ones reaching out to her or mentioning her. They were only briefly shown during the Sheriff’s news conference and only possibly connected to Wynn’s body camera via his stolen car. Feeling she should divulge her suspicions and the little bit of information she had, Layla briefly mentioned to Flint the FBI’s interest in both Wynn’s stolen car and the briefcase found within. Now talking somewhat negatively about the FBI, a different realization came to her.

“Wait, don’t you still work for the FBI in New York?” she loudly blurted, catching herself as soon it came out.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that as something negative towards you,” she quickly replied, in an attempt to cover over her foot-in-mouth comment.

“Don’t worry about it. I understand. The entire bushel of apples isn’t bad just because one or two on the top are. Yes, I still work for the FBI, but not in New York anymore. I work in East Redwell now. New York is a different beast and it kind of wore me down. So when a spot

opened up a little closer to home, I took it. East Redwell is a smaller satellite office, it's not a full field office, but we still have a lot of the bells and whistles." He said getting a little sidetracked.

"But anyways, the majority of the agents I've worked with are good guys that have nothing to do with these sorts of things. They do the job you would expect. That said, the ones that do notice something is going on are just as upset and frustrated as anyone else."

"Why doesn't someone at the Bureau just get rid of the bad apples, or at least put them on leave until they can figure out if they are doing something wrong or not?"

"That's an easy question with a not-so-easy answer. We do, just like any other business or agency, but most of these, miscreants, or whatever, are dug in and covered for. Just like spilled milk... or I mean something that takes over something slowly if it's not attended to," Flint advised, trying to amend his analogy.

"Over time one bad egg turns into two bad eggs. After a while, it can get out of hand and becomes difficult to clean up... especially if one of those eggs gets into an upper management role and can cover for the others."

"Most?" Layla asked, hearing him use the word.

"Yeah, most. Some 'sleepers' I'm sure are there but are kind of a wild card. They might be whoever and you just don't know until something comes up."

"I guess I'm not understanding. If you think someone is corrupt, why don't you just investigate them and arrest them if they are doing something?" she questioned, simplifying the issue.

"Yeah..." Flint replied, wishing things were that direct.

"Like I said, we do, but if someone is covered for or completely unknown, it makes things very hard. I guess the easiest way to explain it, is to say that it's a big game of cat and mouse... but the stakes can be unbelievably high. You might have that one-off person that is doing stuff purely for their own benefit. That's something we don't want, but

solvable once we are onto it. Or, someone might have outside powers behind them that have an agenda. Powerful people have lots of weight, and if they can infiltrate enough, they can help shield their assets from both a financial and legal front. It's unfortunate, but over time we have had some infiltration that has some protected pieces. Positions in places like the FBI, a prosecutor's office, a judge, or the media can be very important to obtain for nefarious types. So there are a lot of steps in the process in order to resolve these sorts of things whenever they come up. Starting with simply being able to identify and see them."

"You saw what's going on in my case. Mine must be pretty clear for everyone in the FBI to see."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence in my detecting skills," he jestfully replied, figuring she didn't mean it negatively.

"But not exactly. I think you're dealing with some big fish, the deeper-pocketed variety. Something bigger seems to be going on in your case. To me, yes there were some obvious red flags, but I had to be careful just to get the little bit of information I dug up. Lots of doors are either being watched or are locked. Lots of mouths are shut... or are being shut."

"What do you mean 'to you' it was obvious? If you're seeing something, wouldn't the other guys?"

"Yes and no. Most things if you look at them enough can have, or can appear to have something that is off. So just because one thing is starting to catch your eye, doesn't necessarily mean the entire thing is rotten. Your case caught my eye in particular because it involved you, an officer that I kind of knew, and an entire police department burning down... which doesn't happen all that often. Three things were pulling me in and had my attention. Then the more things dragged on and the more things didn't add up, the more I scratched my head and asked why. So even for me, someone whose attention was on it right from the start, I still needed some time. Plus think of it this way, you had to ask me if you were in trouble. If you were doubting things, then whoever in the law enforcement world would really need to be invested into your situation in order to keep questioning the narrative."

"What was it that tipped the scales for you then, or what did

you find that told you I was in danger?" she asked, half not wanting to know the answer.

"The news. The other stuff was fishy, but the first major thing that told me something was wrong was the fact that the news was only covering your story one way. This, although it was an openly debated topic. Why? A fair and unbiased person would call it both ways as long as both arguments were reasonable... which your Chief's was. That is one thing the news should have been doing. They should have been digging into both stories to see which side was right. Normally that would make for good news, good journalism, and for good ratings. Maybe they can break a story about how the Fire Marshal is wrong or corrupt. Right?" Flint explained with some spirit.

"That would be a great story in the media world. But in your case, they were only interested in giving one side which is suspicious... and actually is a hallmark sign of corruption. The news should not be picking sides. When they do, when they seemingly become lap dogs, tossing softball questions and just accepting narratives, you know something is going on behind the scenes. For a large cover-up to occur, it is essential to control the narrative. This has traditionally been via the news. You need control over these outlets so that first, the news broadcasters don't expose and pick you apart, and second, so that they can reinforce a desired narrative as factual. When the media's words are short, your suspicions should be long."

Layla had noticed this as well and quietly shook her head in agreement.

"Besides that, the social media activity, or lack thereof, was also a red flag. The Chief wasn't the only one pointing out that something seemed off. But I bet you, you didn't hear that from anyone else. Am I correct?"

"No, you're right. The only people that I heard saying something like that was the Chief and my family. But I admit I did kind of close myself off, so I wasn't really following social media all that much."

"Okay. Then think of it this way. In a world where nobody agrees about anything, why was nobody disagreeing with this?" he questioned, with a thought-provoking pause.

“The answer is that they were but their voices were being suppressed. One example I can give you, and I admit, I’m definitely not a fire expert, was from a retired firefighter. Since I was watching your case, I was also fishing around for things I wasn’t educated in. One of those things I was curious about was arson detection, since the Chief felt arson was the cause of the fire over an accident. I wanted to see if the two could be definitively distinguished. So I looked and found a retired firefighter raising some decent questions online. Now I’m not saying the guy was right, but coincidentally his video was removed from the internet and his social media was blocked, within hours I’d say. Why? He should be able to give his opinion if he wants. If he’s wrong, then that’s on him. But he should still be able to say it. Things like that were what told me something bigger was going on.”

“So was he saying the Fire Marshal was wrong or what did he say?” Layla asked, hoping maybe he had some information that might help.

“You know, I honestly don’t recall. He was very technical talking about things like burn patterns. Plus, that was just as my suspicions were being raised. So at that time, I wasn’t really dialed in enough, to where I had the presence of mind of preserving something like that.”

“Well, could it be somewhere else on the web? Did you try searching for it? If one person is voicing a concern, maybe others are too?”

“Nope, I didn’t want to touch it digitally once I thought something was amiss. I didn’t want a digital footprint. The first couple of things I noticed were during the natural course of things. But once stuff started disappearing, when things were gone, I wasn’t searching anything. That would spotlight me as a person of interest if push came to shove later. However, yes, if one person pointed out something that had some weight behind it, then I’m going to guess he wasn’t the only one.”

Disappointed with all the closed or closing doors, Layla switched the conversation back to one of his earlier remarks.

“You said you have, or found some sort of information. What did you get and can we use that to help us out in some way?”

“Yes,” Flint responded slowly, getting a little turned around

in his driving while trying to explain everything to Layla.

“When this one-sided narrative was developing, I started to ask myself what might be a counter or hole to the storyline. What was a source that would have taken place right away that wouldn’t have been under control? The responding police and firefighters were the obvious first choice but since your Chief seemed to be investigating that wrinkle, I tried to go to the next step. So by the process of that night, who then came into contact with Wynn that might hold key details.”

“The doctors?” Layla inadvertently voiced to herself, while working it out.

“Yes, the doctors at the hospital. They have medical expertise and saw what happened to Wynn up close. They could confirm or refute the narrative put out... but they didn’t. Not one way or the other. None of what they saw or did was in the report put out by the Medical Examiner. Not even a supplemental report or a reference to the hospital’s findings was mentioned.”

“Chief Scholl mentioned this as well,” Layla replied, wondering if Flint might have gotten something from one of the doctors.

“But just as you noted, he said they weren’t talking. I think he gave them a little bit of wiggle room because of medical privacy laws, but I was willing to sign off on whatever he needed me to for his investigation.”

“Correct. That should have been enough, but was it?”

“No, he couldn’t get the hospital or doctors to talk.”

“And that there shouldn’t happen. If the Chief had all the legal requirements met, they should have been more than willing to explain what they saw and what they did. Nobody was saying they did anything wrong. I’m sure they did everything they could’ve to save Wynn. So they should have been more than willing to help out if asked.”

Lightly nodding her head, Flint abruptly went silent, which dragged along her anxiety for an explanation. Focused on him and what he was not saying, his sudden silence confused and quickly heightened her overloaded nerves. Not liking the sudden suspense, Layla prodded Flint to

continue.

“And...?” she asked, with a modest amount of agitation.

Unfazed by her annoyance, Flint used his turn signal and casually pulled into a hardware store’s parking lot. Slowing down while driving towards a food truck, he seemed to randomly ask an unusual question.

“Feel like tacos?”

This abrupt shift in narrative irritated Layla, which provoked her to respond somewhat bitterly.

“What are you talking about?”

Holding his hand still and below the window line, Flint gave her a hushing motion before answering.

“There was a Sheriff’s deputy behind us. We needed to get off the road. He didn’t follow us but we can’t just swing around and go back onto the street. If for whatever reason he was eyeing us, even innocently, him seeing us do a circle would be a tip to him we were trying to lose him. So this taco stand seemed like a natural course a vehicle might take. Plus as a bonus, since it’s a mobile food truck, it more than likely won’t have any surveillance cameras. That fact doesn’t so much matter now, but it could later,” he explained, as he slowed down and parked adjacent to the taco stand.

“So, have you ever had... B & D’s Taco’s?” he asked with an inquisitive smile.

“No,” Layla slowly replied, now realizing why he had shifted the conversation.

“Good. Neither have I. Let’s try it. Is spicy stuff still off the menu for you? If I recall correctly, you didn’t like the snappier stuff, right?”

“Yes, you’re right. Good memory. Any food I have to chase with water just isn’t my thing. But you don’t have to get me anything. I’m

not very hungry.”

“Awww... come on. It’s obviously on me,” he said while holding up his wallet.

“Besides that, we still have over an hour before we get to my house and I really don’t want to have to stop any more than what is necessary. So how about this. I’ll get you something and if you want to nibble on it, great. If not, I’ll eat it later. What’s something that might catch your fancy?”

Seeing his point, Layla started to get out of his car so she could see what was on the restaurant’s menu. As she did this, Flint quickly stopped her and reminded her she was on the run.

“Wait, hold up!” he said while reaching across his front seat.

“Come back in. I’ll get you whatever you want. But you can’t be seen right now,” he added while lowering his voice.

Looking around to make sure she wasn’t noticed, Layla calmly sat back down and gave him some ideas. Memorizing a list of items that was mostly not his style, Flint removed some cash from his wallet, then left her with the remainder and his keys.

“That deputy didn’t spin around, so I don’t think this is going to be an issue. But if something does happen, just go. Okay?”



Chapter № 23



Unexpectedly dozing off after eating a shredded chicken taco, Layla didn't wake up until Flint pulled into his driveway. Striking the little lip of pavement that separated his driveway from the street, the car's slight jostle roused Layla enough to open her eyes and look around.

"I'm sorry, I must have fallen asleep," she faintly mumbled, as her eyes remained quite heavy.

"I didn't realize I was that tired."

"It's okay. You didn't exactly miss anything anyways. Feel free to rest if you want. If you want to stay in the car, that's fine. But I also have a guest room or a couch if either of those sounds a little more comfortable?"

"Umm..." she groggily replied.

"You know, I'm awake. Just give me a minute and I'll be up and about."

Flint smirked as Layla stretched, rubbed her eyes, and then sat up straight in her seat. Already in his garage, Flint turned off his car and lowered his garage door. Taking his time to allow Layla a moment to catch up, he dragged his feet until he reached the man door for the house. Seeing she had just now gotten out of the car, Flint patiently waited next to the door as he could hear one of his two cats calling for him. As Layla gradually made her way over, she too heard the cat's cries.

"That isn't Moses is it?" she asked of the cat he had when they were dating.

"No, that sounds like Nile. But Moses is still alive and kicking. He's in there somewhere, he's just not as spunky as he used to be."

“Really! You still have Moses?” Layla excitedly asked.

“Yeah, I still have him. He’s an old man now, but I’m sure you’ll see him soon.”

Upon opening his door, a playfully animated all gray cat met Flint at the door, purring and pawing his legs as soon as he could. Flint likewise reciprocated the cats’ cheer, by picking him up and giving him a warm embrace before introducing him to Layla.

“This is Nile. He’s almost two years old now. As you probably guessed, I stuck with the biblical theme for Moses,” he stated as he petted the happy and content cat.

“Hi Nile!” Layla exclaimed, joyfully greeting the pleased feline.

“This guy came to me by accident. Literally. I thought I wasn’t going to have any more animals since I’m away so often. But, this little troublemaker had a different plan,” Flint explained, while giving Nile a riled stare.

“When he walks, you’ll see he has a little bit of a limp. I’m guessing he got hit by a car, but one day after work I found him next to my garbage can with a broken leg. He was just a small little kitten and none of my neighbors knew of anyone who had a litter. So I ended up keeping him. Moses actually helped in that decision. He seemed to like the company and befriended the little guy almost immediately... although he couldn’t really walk at the time.”

Layla petted the friendly gray cat who continued to purr, enjoying the attention. However, with the memories of Moses being brought up, Layla gradually shifted the conversation back over to him.

“I feel bad but I honestly forgot about Moses. How old is he now?”

“Fourteen I believe. I don’t know where he’s hiding at right now, but other than getting older, he’s still the same cat. Whenever he comes out, you’ll see he now has a few white hairs on his face, but he still

acts and goofs the same as he used to, just a little slower.”

Wanting to see him and remembering Moses used to enjoy watching and drinking running water from the sink, Layla spotted a restroom near Flint’s door and asked to use it.

“Yeah, go ahead,” he replied, not knowing she just wanted to use its sink.

“You don’t... feel free to use the bathroom whenever. You don’t need to ask.”

Giggling to herself over his confusion, Layla promptly corrected him.

“No, it’s not that. I remember Moses used to like running water. He would hear it and come running. Doesn’t he still do that?”

Forgetting this used to be something Layla did with him, he shook his head as the memory returned.

“You know, I never really did that with him. I remember you doing it now that you mentioned it, but no I don’t do that.”

Turning on the water and splashing it around a little to create some extra noise, Layla went quiet hoping Moses might come out to investigate. This being a thing of the past, Flint somewhat doubted the idea Moses would care until he walked around the corner of the hall. Intent and interested, Moses had a burst of youth when he noticed Layla by the sink. Overjoyed to see him again, Layla gleefully crouched down and called out to him as he approached.

“Hey buddy! How are you!”

Clearly recognizing Layla, the all-black cat galloped over to her, purring and becoming more lively than Flint had seen in quite some time. Nuzzling up to her, Layla asked Flint if she could pick him up before doing so.

“Sure. He’s old, but a young old if that makes sense.”

Elated, Layla scooped him up and hugged the suddenly perky cat who seemed to reciprocate her hug in return. Wishing she had her cell phone on her to take some pictures, this thought leaked out of her mouth as she petted him.

“Oh, it’s too bad I don’t have my phone on me. You’re just as cute as I remember. Dayna would love to see a photo of you now.”

Smiling to this, Flint half accommodated her.

“Temporarily, I have a digital camera you can use if you want to take some photos. But the sending part we might need to put a hold on until we get some things figured out.”

With Nile and Moses pleasantly distracting her, the mentioning of ‘some things’, put a halt to her temporary delight and shifted her thoughts back to the present. Lowered by her reality, Layla continued to pet the cats but with a sunken look upon her face. Catching her emotional shift, Flint tried his best to smooth it over.

“Well, I’m personally hungry,” he started off with, pretending he didn’t notice the change.

“I know you said you weren’t hungry last time I asked, but you sure ate up that taco. I have a pretty full fridge, but to be honest, it’s more of a bachelor’s blend of foods. That said, I can get pretty creative in making whatever... as long as it doesn’t include salad. I don’t have any salads. I’m sorry,” he said as a joke, in an attempt to get a smile out of her.

Somewhat working, Layla recognized what he was trying to do and decided to go along with it. Hoping a meal and a talk might help simmer her feelings.

“I remember your salad thing. ‘Greens are for rabbits’ right? But I bet some of those tacos you ate had some salad in them, didn’t they?” she replied with a faint smirk.

Seeing that he had at least made a crack in her concerns, Flint laughed and continued on with this.

“I guess you got me there. But at least my tacos were

smothered in the good stuff. Cheese, meat, and sour cream. Actually extra sour cream. So that helped take away some of that herbivore-esk taste.”

◇
Chapter № 24



With his creativity not going as far as he had hoped, Flint eventually gave in and drove to a nearby restaurant and grocery store for some of Layla's preferred snacks. Picking up healthier alternatives to his microwave dinners, pizzas, and canned goods, he also purchased her some neutral and temporary clothes. Not knowing much about girls' clothing, this task quickly turned into him tossing whatever into his cart, as long as it looked halfway decent and was about her size. Racking up a rather large bill, Flint grumbled to himself as he paid in cash rather than with his card.

Not knowing he was also planning on picking up some clothes, Layla started to pace the longer he took. Working her way through all the negatives first, Layla eventually took a step back feeling a more reasonable explanation like traffic or an automotive issue, was the likely hold-up. Shelving her wondering mind, Layla instead directed her focus towards something she could control.

Looking around to fill her time, Layla's first distractive idea was Moses. Having run off while Flint was rummaging through his cupboards, Layla went back to her water tactic for summoning him. Turning on the sink, she patiently waited in the kitchen for Moses to appear. Expecting this to occur rather rapidly, Moses soon disappointed her when all she continued to hear was her own noises. Splashing the water around to no avail, she somewhat frustratingly turned off the faucet and looked for something else to do.

Faintly considering bribing the cats with food, Layla instead decided to simply roam around Flint's house. Poking around his kitchen and living room area first, Layla got a smile upon seeing a few nostalgic photos of Flint's mom and dad. Inside a nice red mahogany cabinet, the photos were flanked by a few more family pictures and a silly group shot of him and his two cats. Chuckling to herself, Layla's eyes were then drawn to three antique display cases, two of which were open. All three were old, wooden, and worn to some degree, with the smallest of the bunch having a light amount of burning upon one of its corners, as if it had been too close

to a fire at some point. As interesting as each of these hand-crafted cases were, all but one of them were on display not for their ornate craftsmanship, but for the valuable items they held within.

Housed in the two open cases were complete sets of fine silverware, adorned with elegant engravings and even seated with fine gems. Each piece of cutlery rested in its own fitted slot and was grouped by serving sections. Attended with a folded white glove for protective handling, Layla bit into the hook of temptation to see if she could tell where they were from and who was the maker.

Fitting the glove to her hand, Layla picked up a fork that was arranged at the far right side of the case. Glimmering even without much light, Layla admired the intricate work that went into both the front and back side of the utensil. Expecting to see a simple label for identification, Layla was instead confronted with several small stamped markings. Not seeing any simple words or countries that might hint to where they were from, she again lamented not having her phone to identify the small brands. Having the same issue with the second open set, Layla moved on to the closed set.

Carefully opening it just in case Flint had it closed for preservation purposes, this time Layla was greeted not with brilliant dining room art but with battered, shabby, and even bent forks and knives. Still being courteous enough to handle the silverware with the glove on, she also examined these not-so-intricate keepsakes, out of continued curiosity. Finding even fewer markings, they still did have some amateur lines and carvings that looked to be done so by almost primitive means. Assuming he had this set because it was probably a family heirloom, Layla gently closed the box and continued on with her time-filling snoopiness.

Skipping over his restrooms, pantry, and spare bedroom, she then found herself confronted with Flint's room. Taking a couple of steps in, then out, Layla juggled the morals of going through his personal belongings without his permission. Ethically paused in his doorway, a decision was soon made for her with the sound of the front door opening. At first assuming it was Flint, Layla relaxed her body and turned towards the kitchen. However, this assumption was quickly thwarted by the voice of a female calling for his cats.

“Moses. Nile. Here boys!” The voice called out loudly

enough to be heard throughout the house.

Stunned and instantly frightened that whoever it was might find her and call the cops, Layla quietly crouched down and judged what her best options might be. Unable to go back the way she came, and not knowing what was further down the hall, the only quick alternative she had left was Flint's bedroom itself. Not wanting to open the closet door out of the fear of an alerting squeal, Layla was forced to choose between sliding underneath his bed or tucking herself behind the far side of his dresser. Suspecting that even if she could make it under his bed, that her resulting push would probably cause too much racket, she instead cubbied herself into the corner of his room beside his dresser.

Squeezing in her legs and slowly moving a nearby box in front of her feet, Layla looked around the immediate area for any other objects she could use as camouflage. Noticing a blanket inside the box, she carefully removed it, then draped it over her head. Certain her disguise was curious at best, she still did what she could and remained statuesque just in case whoever came in.

Holding this cramped posture for a while, her hearing seemed to intensify as she was gradually able to make out the majority of the things this mystery person was doing. Judging by these sounds that she was a cleaning lady, did give Layla some solace but not enough to move from her spot. Hoping Flint's room wasn't on the day's menu, Layla mainly heard her in the kitchen or vacuuming in rooms with carpet. Thankful to be in a room with wooden floors, Layla eventually relaxed as the sounds this person made, never went past the bedroom's hall.

Still waiting her out, Layla eventually got bored and started to survey her immediate area. Maintaining her quiet approach, she slowly sifted through the items contained in the box in front of her. Finding old clothes, worn jackets, and some other odds and ends, Layla deduced this box was kept as a "secondhand" box for later donation. Now hearing what sounded like someone either loading or unloading the dishwasher, Layla rolled her eyes and shifted her attention elsewhere.

With nothing else within her minimal reach, she slowly lowered her head to see if he had anything under his dresser. Scooting some to see better underneath, she disappointingly noticed he was pretty tidy, only having a single shoe box for her to rummage through. Reaching

for it to waste some time, she was barely able to touch the top of the box with her outstretched hand. Scratching and clawing it, she finally managed to manipulate the box enough to be able to firmly grab it. Cautiously sliding it over, she paused her actions to double-check on the maid before opening it.

Hearing what sounded like Flint's front door open and close a couple of times, Layla switched her attention back to the box and removed its lid. Anticipating shoes but understanding that lots of people commonly use these boxes for storage purposes, she was tickled to discover a diverse assortment of objects held within. Seemingly random, some items were brand new in unopened packages, some looked to be smaller childhood toy favorites, while others were stray pictures or drawings from his youth.

Holding in a laugh upon finding a picture of him crying as his father took a fish off a hook, Layla soon noticed his pictures were not so random as they gradually raised in order of age. Ascending from youth to high school and beyond, she eventually found a few that were of the two of them. One of these was of them taking a barefoot walk on the beach, while another was of them passing out candy during Halloween. Finally, the last one she was able to find was of her kissing him at his FBI graduation ceremony. Remembering each occasion well, she inadvertently flipped them over and noticed a note she had written to him on the back of the Halloween shot.

"You are the cutest ninja I have ever seen. Maybe that's because nobody can see a ninja's face, but the outfit still fits you quite snugly," she wrote, while drawing a winking smiley face beside it.

"Thank you for the fun night. I can't wait for Thanksgiving and Christmas."

Seeing her flirtatious message again reminded her of the joy they once had until his work for the FBI consumed his life. Calling it off about six months after the Halloween photo, Layla recalled the heartache it gave her, feeling cast aside until their relationship faded away. Knowing it had hurt him as well, Layla was a bit surprised that not only did he keep these photos, but that he had stored them away as well.

Sad, Layla ended her nosy but unintentional search. Slowly placing the photos back into the box, she was abruptly frozen by the sound

of the maid walking along the nearby hall. Staring straight, unwilling to move even an eye, Layla heard footsteps walk in and out of the restroom, then into the spare bedroom, before heading towards her. Panicked, she tried her best to control herself knowing that her spot probably wasn't much better than a dog hiding behind a curtain.

With the maid's errands now bringing her inside Flint's room, Layla could almost feel her presence scrutinizing her makeshift hideout. Directing her thoughts towards the maid leaving, whatever task she had must have been satisfactory, as Layla soon heard her footsteps turn from the room and continue down his hall. Relieved, her hands and body reacted to this stressful moment. Slightly shaking, Layla took in one deep breath, held it firm, and then coolly let it out. In doing so, her head naturally dropped which aligned her view with the shoe box once more.

Now inadvertently staring at it, she noticed something brilliant which she hadn't seen before. Within the box but under some of his other items was a bright and dazzling chain. By no means anything ordinary, instead these striking links of jewelry were the couplings of a tennis necklace. Fashioned from white gold and strung with small continuous diamonds, the item was a clear one-of-a-kind piece of art. Sadly recognizing its beauty, Layla gently removed the necklace from the shoe box to marvel at its sight once more. Just as breathtaking as she remembered, the chain still magnificently glistened even under her dimly lit hideout. Culminating with five larger stones cut to represent a blooming flower, Layla remembered the time Flint had given it to her and the time she had given it back.

Feeling it was too expensive for her to keep, Layla had given it back to him on the night they had broken up. Having misplaced the original necklace case, when she returned it, she had placed it inside an envelope with a letter. Painfully curious if this letter might also be present, Layla lightly combed through the box and found the envelope near the bottom. Heartbroken her handwritten letter was still inside, Layla condemned her prying eye and almost wished she had negotiated with the maid instead of concealing herself.

After respectfully putting the items back into his shoe box, she slowly pushed the box back underneath his dresser and lamented her curiosity. Feeling guilty, Layla soon received some relief as she heard the garage door open, which was followed by the sound of Flint coming inside.

Hearing him engage with his maid immediately, Layla could tell he was verbally playing coy with her. Not hearing him reveal or ask anything about her, she remained quiet and in place until she heard a “Thank you” and a “Goodbye”.

Swiftly returning the blanket and donation box back to their original spots, Layla straightened up and emerged from the hall that led into the kitchen. Seeing that Flint was looking out his front window to make sure his maid wasn’t doubling back, Layla spoke up to guarantee everything was alright.

“Is she gone?”

Flint didn’t initially answer and instead started to wave. Doing this for a couple of seconds, his head turned in unison with her car as he watched his maid drive down the street. When he felt she was an adequate distance away, Flint replied.

“Yes. She didn’t see you, did she? I didn’t get that she did, but I just want to be sure,” he asked quite seriously.

“No. I hid,” Layla responded, stopping herself before she said where.

“Okay. I just wanted to be sure I didn’t need to do some cleaning up.”

Saying this and having her personal issues in mind, Layla gingerly asked about what he meant.

“Ahhh. You weren’t going to hurt her if I would have said yes, were you?”

Being polite about her concern, Flint laughed and started to unpack the handful of groceries he had brought in.

“No, that’s not what I meant. Maybe I shouldn’t have used that wording, but I trust Trisha. I wouldn’t allow her to be in my house if I didn’t. No, I just would’ve had a talk with her is all.”

Relieved and a little embarrassed her mind had steered her in

that direction, Layla apologized while giving off some physical signs of dejection.

“Layla don’t worry about it,” he replied with an uplifting and non-judgmental look upon his face.

“I probably used the wrong wording and I know you’re on edge. On top of that, her being here was my fault. So if anything, I should be apologizing to you for putting you in that spot. I forgot to call her off. She comes a couple of times a week to clean and check on the cats if I’m away. I never have to tell her where I’m going since she assumes it’s for FBI stuff. I told her I was going to be gone this week, not knowing how long it might take to find you. So she was just doing what I asked her to do. I completely forgot to call her off after finding you. That’s my fault.”

This stroke of kindness combined with her continued anxiety and the awful feeling she had from snooping around, cracked her emotions and caused her to cry. Seeing this, Flint likewise felt bad assuming he had brought this on. Giving her a hug and having her take a seat at the kitchen table, Flint offered her some food to lighten her up.

“Those tears won’t go very well with the hot meal I got for you,” he said as he pulled out a plastic take-out bowl.

“I picked the most unappetizing thing I could find,” he added with a lighthearted laugh.

“I might be joking a little.... but I admit, I wouldn’t have picked this. Anyways, if I remember correctly, it’s Roasted Butternut Squash. I asked the lady at the ‘Eco-Style’ what was a popular and fancy dish. She said this so I went with it. It looks horrible if you ask me, but I do admit, it smells good. I would imagine it’s the cinnamon and syrup she said was mixed in. So I’m guessing it’s going to be kind of sweet. It actually gave me a craving for some cinnamon rolls,” he playfully voiced while holding up a pack of frozen rolls.

◇
Chapter N° 25



Again dozing off after a nice hot meal, Layla got her first solid night's rest. Sleeping until the sunlight sprinkled the morning air, she awoke in Flint's spare bedroom still wearing the same clothes she had been wearing. Feeling they were now a bit grimy, Layla was both surprised and overjoyed to find a couple of bags filled with clothes next to her bed. Picking through them, she was again surprised to see that some of the clothes were name-brand and that most were also her size. Still having the tags on them and knowing Flint must have picked them up while shopping, once more Layla was confronted with her snoop behavior. Juggling what she should do as she tried on some of the clothes, Layla decided she would admit she had found the photos and necklace, and then apologize.

Noticing that he even purchased her hair ties and some other female products, Layla pulled her hair back and hoped she wasn't very pungent. Walking into the kitchen and seeing Flint reading a magazine, the thought of needing a shower came out of her mouth first. Hearing this, Flint quickly popped up and greeted her.

"Oh, good morning. I hope that old bed wasn't too stiff for you. It doesn't get much use. Even the cats tend to stay away from it. But I personally think it's better than the couch," he said as he gestured towards it.

"Yes, forgive me. I see you found the clothes and I did put a towel in the bathroom if you wanted to take a shower... although I do have breakfast ready. If you want. It should still be hot. Or if you want to take a shower first, that's fine as well. It's up to you."

Seeing a large breakfast made up, with two plates and some coffee brewing, Layla felt bad turning him down and agreed to eat first. Pardoning herself if she happened to smell, Flint got a good laugh out of this as he pushed her plate over towards her.

"I just made or scooped up a little bit of everything. Don't

feel obligated to eat any of it. If you would rather have some cereal, I have some of that as well. Look at it as a continental-like breakfast you might find at a hotel but with some eggs and bacon. It was hard to not add those two in,” Flint mentioned, as he pointed to everything on his countertop.

Rapidly finding her hunger as she looked over everything he had, Layla somewhat shyly helped herself to a bit of each, filling her plate quickly. Seeing she was heading over to his table, he asked her if she would like some coffee.

“You know what, sure. Coffee has been my thing as of late, so I guess I’ll take a cup.”

Having waited for her to get up, Flint also filled his plate, although mostly with eggs and bacon. Bringing this over as well as their cups of coffee, he sat down across from her with a somewhat dorky smile. Noticing that she seemed to be waiting, Flint caught this clue and opened up with a short prayer before trying his eggs.

“I didn’t know what time you were going to get up so I just made them scrambled. If you would like another style I can do sunny side up, but that’s about as fancy as I get.”

“No, this is more than fine. More than more fine. You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Well, I was already up early and my parents always said ‘Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.’ So I just started putting thing after thing out. Before long I had all this and hadn’t even started on the eggs yet. So again, don’t feel like you have to eat one of everything. I just kind of got carried away.”

“Yeah, my Mom and Dad said the same thing,” she replied, while thinking about the picture she found of his parents the day before.

This simple reflection triggered her desire to admit to finding the necklace, however Flint verbally beat her to the punch by bringing up another topic.

“So now that I’m back home, I need to go into the office today. At least for a little. I want my face to be seen to hopefully distance

myself from any possible connection,” he advised, missing that she was about to say something of her own.

Shelving her necklace disclosure, Layla went along with his topic and quickly found something to ask.

“Do you think someone is going to be suspicious of you?”

“No. But I’d rather be seen and not absent while someone goes missing. Guys will quickly turn stuff like that into ‘Hey Flint, weren’t you gone that week? Maybe we should be looking into you’ type of jokes. I’d rather just fly under the radar and not give anything away. Remember, some of these guys are pretty much walking lie detectors. I don’t want some little joke at the office turning into an internal inquiry or an elaborate analysis of my body language. Most of these guys are skeptical about everything anyways.”

“Okay. Well, do you have a plan to get this all worked out?”

Before answering, Flint let out a questionable laugh. Done so out of the unknown, Flint dubiously shook his head not knowing how far things might go. Letting the frail moment pass, he cleared his throat and then replied to her question.

“No, I don’t have a plan. To be upfront and honest with you, I’m just winging it,” he remarked with a rather subdued and stony look.

“Nevertheless, I’ll come up with something,” he added as he broke the awkward moment with a bite of bacon.

Lost in what to say, Layla likewise turned to her food. Eating some of the fruits she had put onto her plate and taking a small sip of coffee, the smell of coffee reminded her of Ables and the little coffee shop it had. Reflecting upon this and the last time she was there, sparked another question.

“How did you find me?”

“I guessed,” he quickly replied, giving her his now familiar crafty smile.

“You guessed?”

“Yes kind of. Some of it was a guess. An educated one.”

“How so?”

“The part where I located you in that parking lot was an educated guess. But you being there in the first place all depended upon whether you translated my messages or not.”

“Yeah, start with the messages first. They felt like they were for me, but how did you know I would translate them or even what to write?”

“That did take a little bit of thought. When you went ‘missing’ and when I started to get the idea something was off, I had the same problem everyone else had. Where were you? They tried tracking your phone but you either wisely left it at your workplace or got lucky and forgot it,” he said as she butted in.

“Yeah, I put it there to see if I was being looked into. The Sheriff’s Department showed up not long after I left the office. That told me they were tracking me.”

“That was a smart move. They tipped their hand. So the same as with the S.O., the FBI, and anyone else interested found out, you were pretty hard to find. Nobody knew where you were, which included me. So to be able to find you, and find you first, I needed something to flush you out. The only thing I could come up with was to have some sensationalized event, something that was bound to make it onto the news, with a message I hoped you might see and decode. Basically, it was my best way of attempting to communicate with you and I leaned on our advantage of maybe shared knowledge. Something that might stand out to you and me, but would probably be gobbly gook to anyone else.”

“So you spray painted both my house and work.”

“Yes. But I used a rubberized spray so I didn’t ruin anything. Everything should peel or rub off. So no, I didn’t ruin your house. Hopefully. Sorry if I’m wrong, I didn’t test it. But people use it on their cars all the time and it doesn’t seem to ruin anything.”

“No, it’s okay. I mean I’m happy it’s not. But I understand now what you were trying to do,” Layla replied, amused he took damaging things into consideration.

“But how did you know I would correlate the number thirty-four with Ables? The first part of your message makes sense once you know what you’re looking at... both from a letter standpoint and the message of us being together at one point. So I get that, but how did you know I would translate that number to that store?”

“This is where I was being somewhat sneaky. I would have never guessed that either, but the S.O. reached out to the FBI for some help in finding you. It wasn’t originally assigned to our office or even me, but it did trickle down to us and a couple of other field offices in the state over time. Since it wasn’t in our area or one of our cases, it was left as an open task in which any of us could look at what the S.O. currently had. So I casually took a look over the printouts when I got a chance and noticed they were looking into your credit card bills to see where you frequented. On there, I saw that you ordered whatever a number thirty-four is, a couple of times, at a certain spot. So I pinned my hopes on that particular number standing out to you as a location without saying a location. It was a bit of a gamble, but it worked.”

“Wow. I never thought ordering a coffee would turn into a link that law enforcement would use to find me.”

“Yeah, there are lots of little tricks like that. However, it was also risky on my end to do. The guys who are looking for you also have that information. If they put two and two together with that store and the number, they might start working it out as well.”

“Do you feel they will figure it out?” Layla asked, a little anxious over the thought they might not be one hundred percent safe at his house.

“I do think the S.O. or someone within the FBI will connect something eventually. That said, since you had more insight into my name, I think linking me to it will be much harder for them.”

“Impossible?”

“No, not impossible. I’m sure they will find an expert in decryption that will break down my phrase into a hundred different meanings. Eventually, after sifting through all that, they will make the same connection you made. But don’t overthink it. I actually think they will have more luck, and quicker luck, looking into the surveillance footage at that store where we met at... once they figure that thirty-four part out. As careful as I was, there is no way I can account for everything.”

“Since your code came after they declared me missing, might they overlook it as meaningless or unrelated?” Layla asked, hoping they might not even see that as a clue.

“Not likely. I wish I had time to come up with something better that would have been more discreet. But I’m sure they see what I did as being related somehow. Thankfully not as clearly as it was for you. But I’m sure it is on their radar.”

“You said it would be easier for them to find us by using the cameras at Ables over the code you made. Why do you think that?”

“I think the weak link that they will be able to break first is the thirty-four idea. I actually imagine they will figure that out rather quickly because they already have the papers, they were just a step behind. Once they are on to that, they will pull the surveillance footage from all the businesses in the area. I did my best to disguise myself and to stay a distance away from any store I thought might have cameras, but it’s hard to account for the location of every camera, not to mention any other chance thing that might go in their favor.”

“Is that why you walked over to my dad’s truck?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want my license plate or vehicle on camera.”

“How did you know what vehicle I was going to be in?”
Layla asked, coming back to this earlier idea.

“Aw yes. This was the educated guess part I was telling you about. I did a little deductive reasoning based on human behavior. I figured you would not want to be seen, so you probably would be parked further away. However, you still needed to see who was going in and out of the

store, so I concluded you would still be within viewing distance and angled towards the store. Your dad's truck was the only vehicle that fit those ideas while also having someone inside. So I took a chance hoping it was you. If it wasn't you, I planned on playing dumb and saying something obscure. That however, is one other reason I think the video surveillance will be their best bet. Random witnesses and people may have seen something they didn't realize was important at the time."

"Well at least in our case, the only time we stopped was at the food truck. So I would think we would have a minimal amount of people that might have noticed anything."

"Yes, you're right. That and the rain helped us out as well. But I'm sure what will happen, at least for the one store you stopped at, is that they will identify as many people as they can who shopped there during a certain time period. Then they will ask them if they saw anything. Maybe one or two in the group will remember a dented truck parked in the distance. That will lead to them looking into where this dented truck turned up next. And so on. It's a lot of leg work, but pieces tend to come together either by witnesses, video, cell phone records, or credit card bills, which is why I only paid in cash at the taco stand."

"Good thing then that I remembered Wynn had said the police could use cell phone records to find someone, or else I might have been caught rather quickly."

"One hundred percent. Cell phones really cast a wide footprint for the legal world since so many people use or at least have them on their person almost all the time anymore."

Having Wynn cross over her mind caused Layla to go silent. Grieved over the loss of him and why this was happening, Layla calmly but sorrowfully asked Flint if he knew the answer to this question.

"I do not," he respectfully replied, while not advising her of his own suspicions, wanting to keep her mind from straying into darker waters.

"Despite that, I'm still going to put my ear to the ground, to try and figure out as much as possible. I have a few ideas that I think will give us some information. Then, we can start coming up with a plan,

okay?”

Layla shook her head to this but didn't reply. Still a hint sad, she instead stirred her fruits around her plate as a way of letting out some of her unease. Figuring this was the case, Flint didn't try to joke away the situation. Instead, he also went quiet and let both time and the sounds of the early birds songs drift the solemn moment away.

◇
Chapter № 26



Flint decided he would go into work about an hour after they finished breakfast, allowing a little leeway for Layla to refresh herself. Wanting to make an appearance earlier in the day rather than later, this he felt would not only give off the appearance of normality but would also give him his best chance at catching any ideal chitchat about Layla. Reminding her not to use the internet or call anyone, he did give her a task to help keep her busy. Since all modern forms of contact were off limits, Flint proposed writing a letter to her parents or any other loved ones.

This idea would allow her to inform those she cared about, that she was safe and sound. Plus, he also reasoned that if she sent out several letters, some of her information might expand outwards via mouth or social media. With even a slight amount of the opposing narrative rattling the cage, maybe more cracks and leaks would materialize through the scope of scrutiny.

However, this was not without drawbacks. Flint warned her they would probably only get one opportunity at sending out letters, as the powers that be would probably divert, and filter, all other forms of mail from there henceforth. So he advised her to write anything she could think of, to anyone they could manually find an address for, knowing they would only get this one chance.

Letting her know he would pick up a phone book somewhere along his travels, he also advised her to carefully craft every word she used. Inevitably, law enforcement or the FBI were bound to intercept or bully one of these notes away from a recipient. In this event, it was certain they would analyze the letter, its markings, and even the envelope, in every way imaginable in order to draw out her present location.

After putting on a jacket, he walked over to a little cabinet he had next to his door. Pulling open what sounded like a utility drawer, he sifted through its contents until he located a couple of usable pens. Placing them on top of the cabinet, he then opened a lower drawer which contained

his notebooks and writing paper.

“Here,” he said as he handed them over.

“Write as many as you would like. If you want to write several to one person, that’s fine with me. And…” he added as his mind expanded.

“If you’re feeling frisky, add one in for a newspaper or maybe a reporter you feel might be trustworthy or sympathetic. Maybe we will get lucky, it’s worth a shot… they can’t all be bad right? Plus a neutral letter isn’t going to hurt anything, anyways.”

“Sure. Okay,” Layla replied in general, showing a little distress.

Noticing this, Flint paused before leaving.

“Everything is going to be fine Layla. It might be a dark and bumpy road, but we will figure something out and things will get better,” he said trying to reassure her.

Layla shook her head to this but didn’t reply. Being patient with her, Flint waited by the door and even removed his jacket as a way of conveying to her nothing was urgent. Seeing that he wasn’t going to leave, Layla spoke up about what was bothering her.

“This is probably dumb,” she started with.

“I shouldn’t let this bother me. I know nobody has shown up… but I’m getting a little bit of a claustrophobic-like feeling with the idea that I don’t have a direct or immediate way to contact anyone. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does.” Flint replied while trying to come up with a quick solution.

“I’ll tell you what,” he then eventually added after a short lull in their conversation.

“Not the best idea… and not that I don’t trust him or

anything, but there is a house a couple of doors down with a firefighter's flag on its porch. The gentleman who lives there is named Lewis. He's a spunky eighty-eight-year-old widower who used to be a fire lieutenant. Now it is a couple of houses away, but if something happens, I'd go to his house. Except for Mondays and Tuesdays, which he uses for shopping or doctor's appointments, he's always home. I have a good rapport with him. I help him with little things here and there so he likes me. Plus, as a bonus in this situation, he keeps to himself and is more or less a hermit. So if for whatever reason you do go over there, tell him you know me and I'm sure he will help you out... but you still can't use any phones." He added just to emphasize how much he wanted her to stay away from them.

"I'm sure they have all your friends and family pegged, and we don't know which officers or police departments we can trust. So right now, we are flying solo."

Acknowledging this, Layla shook her head and then realized she had lost track of the days.

"Okay. What day is it today?"

"Thursday. Lewis will be home today if need be. But I still wouldn't go over there, even just to talk, unless you have to. I trust he will be fine, but someone else might see you. So I would just stay here, out of sight, until we have a plan."

"Okay. What if someone shows up here? Or might you be planning on someone stopping by?" She asked, making sure he didn't have another worker, like his maid, scheduled to come over.

"Nope. Nobody else will be here. But if someone does knock, just ignore it and don't make any noise until whoever leaves."

"Do you think I should have a weapon or something?" Layla asked squeamishly, personally not liking that idea.

Seeing her nerves return, Flint this time did try to inject some humor into the mix as a way of showing he didn't feel this would be an issue at the present time.

"I'm pretty confident in my security system," he started with,

puzzling Layla but also causing her to listen more intently for something she wasn't aware of.

"Yep. Not one mouse has gotten past my fiercely driven cats," he intensely stated as Nile could be seen sleeping on the couch.

Quickly changing her look of interest into one of mild scorn, Flint carried on as Layla thought of a rebuttal.

"Fearsome creatures they are. Wait until you get a chance to see them after a belated meal! Sometimes at night, I purposely don't feed them."

"Ha ha. I liked the old down to earth Flint better. You know, the one that took things seriously and didn't tell middle school-style jokes."

Successfully shifting her nervousness away, Flint pivoted from his admittedly dim joke and commented about the matter at hand.

"Hey, I'm still that guy, I just have a few more life lessons in me now. I was just teasing you because I didn't want you to worry, and I was trying to break through your wall of nerves. I honestly don't see someone coming here being a problem up front. Down the road, if we don't come up with some solution, yes it will turn into a race of who figures what out first. But right now I think we have some time. So, if you want to get going on those letters, I think that will help your family and it might also chip away at the FBI's armor. If you would rather wait until later, then just kick back and watch a movie. I have some DVDs under the television, or maybe you'll get lucky and something good will be on one of the regular channels. Either way, feel free to pop some popcorn and relax a little bit."



Chapter N° 27



After watching the only non-action, non-thriller movie Flint had in his selection, Layla switched over to his regular television only to discover he too did not have cable. With his antenna receiving at least a few more channels than the cabins did, she still was not able to find anything of interest and soon had the television off. Petting Moses who had become her shadow upon Flint's departure, the thought of writing some letters gradually became her best choice.

Taking up a seat in the kitchen with Flint's supplies, Layla first jotted down every name she could think of. With her parents and sister being the most obvious recipients, she also added her pastor, her employer, and a couple of other friends she and Wynn used to go on double dates with. Being mindful of what Flint had mentioned, she also decided to write a letter to the county's most popular newspaper, hoping they would want to publish her side of the story.

Starting with her parents' letter first, Layla was vague but also reassured them that she was alright. Leaving out the exact details pertaining to her dad's truck, she did still apologize for this and promised him she would pay for any and all of the charges he incurred. Stressing for them to be safe, she finished the letter by asking them to post her message on social media and by underlining the idea that the narrative being pushed around by the local officials was fake.

Unsure of just how muted Flint wanted her to remain, Layla decided to leave out specifics like their suspicions of the FBI, the body camera footage, and why she could not call. This however was loosened up some for the newspaper. In this letter, she began the drip of suspicion towards a cover-up, but still left out anything she felt might connect the authorities to her location.

With her hand beginning to cramp upon writing her eighth letter, Layla moved over to the fridge to see what types of foods Flint had purchased. Finding an exorbitant amount of clearly random and sometimes

expensive healthy foods, Layla felt it would be nice of her to cook him up a nice hot meal. Trying to come up with something he might like other than pizza and burritos, Layla stretched her mind and remembered a warm but now bygone memory of them on a date.

On only their second date, Flint had gone all out by securing them a pair of reservations at a lofty high-rise restaurant that overlooked the nearby river and downtown commercial district. An expensive ticket for him to acquire, Flint secretly dipped into his college savings in order to afford the restaurant's two best seats. Using the ruse of picking up a "friend" from work to go on a double date, Layla quickly became suspicious when his "friend" worked on the top floor of a well-known investment firm building. Noticing that he was trying to divert her attention at certain points, Layla was still surprised when the elevator they were on, opened its doors.

Escorted from the elevator doors by name, the tone and atmosphere of the restaurant alone, told her she was at the finest establishment she had ever attended. Playfully advertised as above five stars, the maitre d, gracefully led them past several opulent booths which were all frequented by exquisitely dressed patrons. Only casually dressed herself, this fact was the only conscious hiccup she had from this breathtaking spectacle.

Seated at an exceedingly grandiose table that featured candles, choice silverware, and a violinist, Layla was further astonished when they were handed off to their own private waiter.

"For you madame." The waiter announced with a distinct yet refined foreign accent, as he pulled out her chair.

Giving her a stately bow as she took her seat, the waiter then proceeded over to Flint for the same gallantry. Gracefully handing over a pair of highly decorative menus, the violinist quietly started his private serenade which allowed them an opportunity to look over the menus without being disturbed. As Flint smiled and attempted to play off his special deed, they were both cordially served a plate of freshly baked bread, dusted with an unknown but fine cheese, and encircled by a pyramid of rare signature butters.

"Tonight our chef highly recommends the poached tuna with

kumquat and minced jalapenos,” the private waiter politely mentioned before awaiting their reply.

Looking a bit overwhelmed, Layla managed to stumble through a shy response.

“I... you know I’m not the biggest fan of jalapenos,” she said, while feeling bad for indirectly rejecting the chef’s choice.

“Not to worry madame, might I then recommend the Gambas al Ajillo for you tonight?”

Confused and feeling pressure, Flint noticed her hidden anxiety and injected himself into the conversation.

“You know, I think if you give us just a couple more minutes, we will have everything in order. Thank you.”

The well-dressed waiter acknowledged this with a bow and then retreated to a distant podium to await their signal.

“I don’t know what Gamb-is is?” She quietly uttered, hoping nobody else could hear her.

“I don’t either, but everything is paid for, so pick anything you want. If you just want to sample something, we just have to ask the waiter and he will get us a small portion,” Flint replied with an amused and chipper grin.

“Oh. Okay,” Layla spontaneously uttered, having already noticed the lofty prices for most of the plates.

“Well... what are you having then?” She then squeamishly asked before continuing.

“I honestly don’t know what most of these foods are and am a little embarrassed to have to ask about everything on their menu. Like this one. What’s Pacific-wrapped blue blanquillo?”

“Oh, it’s the same as Atlantic-wrapped blue blanquillo,” Flint jokingly stated while giving her a clever smirk.

“But don’t be embarrassed. The waiter that seated us is our waiter and I’m sure he will be more than happy to answer any question you have. That said, I obviously called ahead for our reservations and asked basically that same question. I’m sure grilled milkfish is good, but unless they have chocolate milkfish, I’m not interested. I’ve always liked simple foods. I’ll pick a cheeseburger over a steak. Not that I don’t like steak, I just tend to go the other way. So I did ask if they had anything in the regular, peasant realm, and they do. They have some more normal-sounding dishes if you want.”

“They do? Like what? Do you know what you’re getting?”

“Yeah, I asked specifically about burgers and they said they have a large bison burger. That sounded good to me, so that’s what I was planning on getting. But If you want, we both can get something you think sounds good and we can either share or swap it if you don’t like one or the other.”

Romanced over his thoughtful charm, Layla politely turned down his offer, wanting him to get whatever he wanted. However, since the topic was mentioned, she did asked about some of the simpler plates they had. Chatting and lightly laughing over what the chef might say if they both ordered childish meals, their flirty conversation was suddenly interrupted by the loss of power throughout the entire restaurant.

“Oh boy,” Layla surprisingly voiced while looking around the room.

“Is this normal? Did they skip the dimming the lights part to go right to the candles?”

Unsure himself, Flint looked towards their personal waiter who could be seen via some sparse window light. Also seemingly confused, he hastily gestured to another attendant near the restaurant’s front door. This worker immediately stopped what he was doing and exited into the foyer. Not seeing any light from the elevators or nearby corridor, Flint faintly noticed the worker questionably raise his arms but couldn’t discern anything that was said.

Glancing back over to their waiter, who now had a lit candle,

Flint noticed as he seemed to hail another attendant to take his spot before coming over. Walking briskly as his left hand cupped the candles flame, the waiter didn't slow down until he reached Layla's side.

"Pardon my interruption," he said with haste in his voice.

"I must attend to a... issue. I will send over one of our finest waiters in my stay. Hopefully, this will only be a modest inconvenience and you both may resume your engagement here at the Aliments De Choix soon."

With this, the waiter clapped loudly and called for a trim gray-haired man to come over. Wasting no time, the new waiter came over and introduced himself as their original waiter rushed to the front doors and out into the hall.

"Greetings," the new waiter announced, as if nothing was wrong.

"My name is Elliot. I see that you have not been served a drink yet. May I offer you a bottle of wine? Compliments of the house... for any inconveniences."

Snickering to themselves knowing they both were not old enough to drink, Flint honestly corrected the man, not wanting to take advantage of him.

"Well thank you, but we both aren't quite twenty-one yet. But we are thirsty. So Layla, what are you thinking?"

Still faintly smiling to this mistake, Layla quickly put aside her smile and asked him for something simple.

"If I could have a glass of water with some ice, that would be fine."

Apologizing for his miscalculation, Elliot also noted what Flint desired and swiftly made for the kitchen. Enjoying the snafus being thrown their way, both Flint and Layla broke into a controlled laugh once Elliot was out of sight.

“Well. This evening is surely full of surprises now isn’t it?” Flint stated after calming himself.

Amused with how their date was going, both Layla and Flint soon noticed they were probably the only ones who found enjoyment out of the restaurant’s complications. Starting with some light chatter once the power outage wasn’t swiftly resolved, this eventually swelled with some patrons becoming coarse towards their waiters due to their frustrations. Culminating in a good majority of the dinners leaving, Flint and Layla were soon forced to do the same when the kitchen announced they would have to close until the power was restored. Being given a written voucher for their abbreviated date, Layla and Flint later found themselves simply going through a fast food eatery for some burgers and fries.

Smiling to herself over this memory, Layla looked through his freezer and found a stack of hamburger patties. Defrosting them in his microwave, Layla rushed herself some not knowing what time he might return. With the smell of meat fluttering throughout the house, Moses and Nile soon wandered into the kitchen, each becoming Layla’s new best friend. Taking turns rubbing up against her legs, both cats persisted until Layla relented and gave them both a small portion of meat.

“Careful you guys. It’s hot,” she cautiously stressed, trying to warn both.

With each cat impatiently devouring their share, Layla lightly chuckled as both cats ignored the hot meat’s sizzle, electing to eat their portion before it cooled. Watching Nile swiftly correct his mistake by turning to his water bowl, Layla’s amusement over the cat’s eagerness distracted her enough to miss the sound of Flint’s opening garage. Watching as Moses similarly lamented his decision, Layla let out a jolted scream upon hearing the door that led into the house, open.

Not expecting this sort of welcome upon his return, Flint himself recoiled, stepped back, and instinctively drew his gun. Unintentionally escalating the situation, Layla subsequently screamed even louder upon the sight of an unknown person brandishing a gun. Scaring both cats away, Flint was the first to recognize the error and tried to let the familiarity of his voice calm her down.

“Layla it’s me, Flint,” he voiced gently while holstering his

gun.

Noticing her body's continued alarm, Flint tried something unorthodox in hopes of bypassing her primal response.

"Hey, I give up," he announced, while slowly raising his hands and turning around.

"I surrender."

This childish submission accomplished Flint's aim. Shifting her frightened state to that of a stunned silence, Flint seized his opportunity and tried his voice again.

"Layla, I'm sorry. It's just me... Flint. I'm done working for the day."

◇
Chapter № 28



Once Layla was able to settle herself, she laughed off her jumpiness and even made a couple of jokes at her own expense. Apologizing for her jitters, Flint was quick to dismiss her actions.

“I understand. I was actually a little scared myself.”

“Well, I appreciate you not shooting me. That’s always a good thing,” Layla replied while pulling up a chair to relax on as the burgers cooked.

“Boy. I’m sweating a little. My body must have really turned on its fight or flight mode. That’s a little embarrassing. I bet I made some pretty awkward faces. I’m glad you didn’t record that.”

Sitting next to her, Flint also relaxed and admitted she did make a little bit of a scene, although an understandable one.

“Thankfully I was closing the garage door when I came in. You screamed quite loudly. I don’t need my neighbors questioning me about a girl randomly screaming. Yes, you did make some pretty interesting faces... although I was actually feeling bad for you. I could tell you were genuinely scared which is never fun. But let’s forget about all of that. What are you cooking?”

Happy to turn the page, Layla brought up her memory of their old date and that she wanted to thank him in some way. Replaying the events of that night, Flint laughed and added a little more to the story that she was not aware of.

“You know I got in big trouble for that,” he started off with, grabbing her attention.

“My parents had joint access to that college account since they were putting money into it. When they saw how much I pulled out for

a date, I was in some deep water. If you recall, I was still living with them at the time and they threatened to charge me rent to make up for the money I took out. It eventually blew over, combined with a couple years of suspiciously small Christmas presents.”

“No. I didn’t know that. They were always so nice to me. I hope they didn’t hate me.”

“No, they were just angry at me. They really liked you. They just worked so hard to build up that money for my future... I justified it by saying I felt you were my future,” Flint said, being honest but also second-guessing if he should have mentioned that.

Caught off guard, Layla went quiet for a moment as her mind tried to work through her feelings. Embarrassed he had divulged as much, Flint’s discomfort was plain to see as he lowered his head which was now a flushed color of red. As he recoiled his lips, Layla noticed these open clues and then herself became the one taking up an unorthodox approach by turning the table onto herself.

“Flint, don’t feel bad. If anyone should feel bad, it’s me. I might have found your shoe box under your dresser the other day when I was hiding from your maid. I shouldn’t have opened it but I did. I found the necklace you gave me inside. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been looking around, but I was.”

This admission did catch Flint’s attention but didn’t deliver the same relieving effect that Flint’s unorthodox approach had. Although it did move his mind off of his remark, instead of reversing his unease, it merely heightened it... causing him to worry she might view him as a stalker for still having it. Seeing his face turn an even deeper shade of red, Layla stumbled her way out of the conversation by announcing that it was time to eat.

Immediately becoming communicative and gossipy in order to bury the topic, Layla chatted about her grandfather’s beef cattle, how his cats probably had burnt tongues, and anything else she could think of that didn’t relate to the present topic. Soon finding herself talking about which type of pan spray she liked best, Flint eventually broke the ice by bringing up the elephant in the room.

“Layla, forgive me for injecting anything about the past into our present situation. The past is the past and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable around me. The necklace, I... I’m not really sure why I kept it all these years. I don’t know if that was right of me or not. If you would like me to get rid of it, I will. I don’t want you to feel weird around me or anything. Yes, I admit I regret taking the left road instead of turning right with you, but that was a younger and different time. You found the love of your life with Wynn, and I was so happy for you,” he said while holding back the rest of his feelings for her.

Flint went on a little more, talking over other issues he felt might help put a positive spin onto a gloomy issue. During his efforts, Layla never got past Wynn’s name which brought her mind back to the present. Putting aside the emotions in the room, Layla asked if anything happened at work or if he had thought of a plan.

“I tried to stay as incognito as possible today. So I mainly just went over my e-mails and some of the reports that were related to my other cases. I was basically at my desk most of the day. So no, nothing was blatantly new or buzzing around the office,” he noted, to her disappointment.

“However, the lack of information being brought up did give me an idea. Did you write any of those letters today?”

“Yes. I wrote a few before my hand started to cramp up.”

“Okay. Well, I don’t know how many you had in mind, but I’d like for you to write maybe about a dozen more,” he noted with a pause.

“A dozen? Twelve? What for? That’s going to be more than I already have.”

“Yes, about twelve. We can probably get away with less, but the more you write, I think the better the outcome will be.”

Flexing her hand as she could almost feel the cramps setting in, Layla agreed, then asked who they were for.

“The FBI.”

“The FBI? All of them? Why? You haven’t forgotten that they are looking for us right?” She questionably mentioned with a confused look on her face.

“Yes the FBI. Because we need people at my office and around the FBI talking. If you write a letter to them accusing them of foul play, it’s bound to get around. That will be especially so if you write to several offices but only accuse a couple of them. The other offices you write to will take notice and start to wonder. That is what we want. More people thinking and scratching for the truth. Plus for anyone who was already an ally or sympathetic to you within the walls of the FBI, it will only bolster those suspicions.”

“Okay. I see what you’re getting at but isn’t that also like playing with fire? Poking the bear? I agree it needs attention, but we don’t want too much of the wrong attention.”

“If nobody is talking about anything at the office, then we are wasting time. I need some buzz, some loose lips. Something, so I can gather some information and maybe even get a little help along the way. Yes, it will be handing them a free avenue to look into... but they inevitably would be looking into your letters once they found out you wrote this or that to your family and friends. So all we are doing is sacrificing a day or two for some chatter around the office. I think it’s worth it.”

Taking in a deep breath, Layla agreed with Flint, and then asked him what he wanted her to say.

“Just the truth. Pared-down of course because we don’t want to show all our cards, but just be honest. Lay down the facts as you see them. If we give them misleading or far-fetched ideas just to create buzz, then any skeptical eyes that might have been in our favor will start to lose interest. If something is truthful, it won’t be disproven which will only add to anyone already on our side. Slowly, it will start to turn the finger of guilt from you, over to its rightful place.”

“Alright. So I’m basically going to write the same thing to a dozen offices then. Might I be able to just write one or two and then xerox the rest to save my hand a little bit of trouble?” Layla asked hoping he had a multi-purpose printer.

“Unfortunately, no. I’m sorry. We are already handing them evidence, we don’t want to hand them any more than we have to. Since I don’t have a copier, we would need to go somewhere to do that. Then everything associated with this other location would turn into another lead for them. The paper and ink used would eventually create a list of purchasing clients. Then they would simply put two and two together. This place buys this ink and this place also buys this paper. That link would lead them to whatever location we used which might have cameras... or at least witnesses. Say we picked a library. Unless I went in there with a ridiculous disguise, they would eventually see me on video scanning copies.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Although, we could have had some fun with the disguise part,” she said, trying to alleviate any remaining awkwardness.

“Not a chance,” Flint replied politely, yet somewhat seriously.

“Fine. Although I think it would have been pretty funny. Can you imagine using that old ninja outfit you had for Halloween? Everyone might let things go if they saw that,” she humorously stated before noticing he was still focused on the issue at hand.

“So, when do you need them by?”

“As soon as you can write them. The sooner we stir the pot, the better. And no that outfit is long gone. It found its way to the thrift store years ago. If Halloween was around the corner, then maybe... and I mean a very big maybe, could we consider something like that. Mercifully for me, it’s not.”

◇
Chapter № 29



Layla worked on the letters for the rest of the night, taking periodic breaks every now and again to rest her hand. When she was done, Flint had her make up a few random return addresses and stuff her own letters, in an attempt to minimize other forensic evidence like touch DNA and his fingerprints. Once she was finished with this, Flint put some gloves on and placed each letter into a larger manila envelope. Knowing of a distant blue collection receptacle he could use that was away from any known cameras, Flint planned on dropping the letters off there before proceeding into work the next day.

To complete this task, Flint woke up much earlier than normal. Trying to create as little noise as possible, his attempt to slip out unnoticed was thwarted by the fact that Layla had also woken up early in order to see him off. Quickly rustling up a cheese-filled bagel sandwich for him, Flint thanked her for this surprise, while mindfully isolating the greasy treat away from the manila envelope. Bidding her adieu as he went into his garage, Layla was once again confronted with the stagnant adventures of an empty house. Compounding the issue for her was the fact that she wasn't able to fall back asleep. Painfully staring at a miniature grandfather clock that sat atop a rustic cabinet, the thoughts of the most basic and remedial activities openly crossed her mind.

Because Flint's maid had done an exceptional job, passing the time by cleaning was off the table. Gardening, something Layla enjoyed, was also off the table due to her present hermit-like state. This left very little of anything else for her to do. Sympathizing with Nile and Moses as they idly walked from window to window, the dullness of a shut-in life soon had both cats taking a nap.

Lamentably not on the menu for her, Layla thought of anything and everything she could do that didn't include the television or something nosy. Only coming up with straightening an out of place book, or frequently checking on the cats to see if one of them might have awakened, Layla soon found herself on the couch with his remote in her

hand. Reluctantly turning on the television, his limited channel selection cornered her into watching thirty to forty-year-old reruns. Finding only one show she had even heard of, Layla halfheartedly watched this and a couple of other outdated programs before unexpectedly dozing off.

Dreaming of Wynn and one of the last conversations they had, this fond memory was indirectly interrupted by the television. Having a show on which depicted a fire, fire trucks and yelling actors switched her pleasant dream into a nightmare. Transitioning her dream from an affectionate conversation over to her at the hospital, Layla quickly became sad and frustrated, as she ran down the hospital's halls, opening every door but not finding Wynn. Layla's torment only increased as her dream often changed, forcing her to run up and down several flights of stairs and even needing to collect parts of his operating room, in order to find him.

Fighting her dream, Layla was found by Flint tossing and turning on the couch upon his return home. Confused and teary-eyed, Flint tried to slowly wake her up, not wanting to startle her anymore.

"Layla. It's okay. You're only dreaming. You're okay," he gently voiced as he knelt down next to her.

Layla at first struggled through this but eventually recognized Flint and accepted she was having a bad dream. Allowing her some time to gather herself, Flint remained quiet and attentive until she spoke up.

"I had a nightmare," she said quite plainly.

"It was about Wynn and the night he died. It was one of those confusing dreams where nothing works and everything you do fails. Do you ever have those?"

"Yes. I think everyone does."

"I couldn't find him. I couldn't help him," she mentioned softly.

"Did I do the right things? Should I have told the doctors to try something else?"

Flint took a moment to respond to her. To him, the answer

was clear, but it clearly was not for her. Recognizing the difficulties stress and afterthought can place upon oneself, Flint understood that giving her his answer wouldn't matter if she held herself in some way responsible.

“Layla. I fully believe everything was done that could have been done... and that if some other possibility existed which had even a morsel of a chance, you would have gone for it. With that, I know you did what you could have done. It wasn't in your control for you to come up with some extraordinary superhuman fix that would have made everything better. If it was, everyone knows you would have given him that magic touch. Nobody doubts that. But Layla, it was never anything for you to steer. I feel, and I believe Wynn would agree that you shouldn't put something on yourself that you had no control over. I can't tell you how to feel Layla, but knowing that you would have done anything and everything if you could have, tells me you don't need to answer or fault yourself for something that was never within your grasp.”

Layla thought through Flint's reasoning. Within her, she knew she had no hold over what had happened. Still, her dream had confused her which drew out even the smallest amount of pessimism. Amplified through the early haze of consciousness, her reasoning failed to completely balance until her wits were measured.

“I'm sorry. My dream took me a little. I just needed to wake up. What time is it? Are you done with work?” Layla asked, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“It's about five. I stayed over a little today but I'm done now,” he replied while standing up.

“Wow. Okay. I didn't realize I was that tired. I guess I must have been. Okay well, tell me some good news then. Did the letters work? Did they cause any buzz around the office?”

“You know, I'm not one hundred percent sure the letters arrived yet. But there was still talk around the office about you.”

Plainly curious, Layla asked about what was mentioned and how whatever that was, was not connected to the letters she wrote. To answer this, Flint started off with a question of his own.

“Do you know or have you ever heard of a guy named Jack Mantin?”

“No. I can’t say I know anyone by that name. Why?”

“Whoever this Mantin guy is, our office is looking for him.”

“What do you mean?” She asked, while still trying to think if she had an ex-co-worker or an old schoolmate who might have gone by this name.

“I’m not so sure myself because I wasn’t in on all of the conversations. The assignment was given to two other guys. But our office is actively looking for him. We were asked by the FBI office in your area if we had any files on him and if we could locate him. He supposedly lives in the area our office covers, but his last known address was vacant.”

“How is he connected to me?” Layla asked with confusion.

“Again, I’m a little handicapped in not knowing all the details since I wasn’t tasked to find him. That said, from what I gather, apparently this guy is or was trying to find you.”

“Trying to find me?”

“Yeah. Obviously, the police and Sheriff’s Department are keeping tabs on where they think you might be. Apparently either his name keeps popping up or he personally does. Near or around your known hangouts. Work, your friends’ places, things like that.”

“Have they seen him?”

“The police or sheriffs, no. At least it doesn’t seem that way other than his BMV photo from his driver’s license printout. I’ll try to nonchalantly get my foot in the door to find out a little more, but I can’t push it. I don’t even want to run his information to take a peek at his photo. I don’t want anyone asking me why.”

“But he’s showing up in person somewhere?”

“Evidently yes. He approached some of your co-workers at

some point asking questions. I didn't hear what kind of questions or where these encounters occurred, other than it was not at your work. So I'd be guessing, if he is showing up at places related to you, he's probably staking out a couple of your known locations and then approaching people with questions once they leave. That would be my guess based on what I'm hearing."

"Are they okay? What did he want? Are they sure it's this one guy?" She asked, becoming quite animated.

Trying his best to answer her questions with the limited knowledge he had, Flint stayed patient, regardless of whether a question was already answered.

"I didn't hear what kind of questions were being asked. I wasn't part of that conversation. However, it did seem like they were fairly confident this Mantin guy was the one going around doing this. Physically, I would say whoever is fine. If he assaulted someone or was trying to kidnap someone, I'm sure the discussions around the office would have been much different. I just got the feeling based on what I did hear, that he was basically information gathering. Probably... I'm assuming, about where you might be."

"Well, what do you think that means?" Layla then asked, now showing alarm more than inquisitiveness.

"I'm not sure." Flint eventually replied while taking a seat in an old recliner.

"It definitely seems like he is trying to find you... but that's really all that can be said. I don't think we should jump to any conclusions based on that. Remember, if true, he isn't the only one trying to find you... so someone doing so isn't anything really new."

"But if the FBI, deputies, and police are looking for him, then that can't be good."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I think it's good to keep it in mind. But this guy might just be a good samaritan trying to help. Or..." he said, having a thought pop into his head.

“Maybe your parents hired a private investigator to find you or to help out in some way. It could be something as simple as that.”

“You don’t think he is trying to find me to hurt me do you?” She asked, hoping to see that he was leaning away from this.

“I would be cautious until we know more. We just don’t have enough. It could be one way just as much as the other.” Flint replied, trying to keep her mind away from the negative.

“What would be the other?”

Wanting to stay away from this, Flint didn’t initially reply. This led to a short muted standoff with Layla intently staring him down as Flint tried to figure a way out. Not coming up with anything, Flint noticed that his silence was doing more harm than good. So, he gave her an honest, albeit intentionally brief, response.

“He could be a professional... finder,” he uncomfortably muttered, trying his best to glaze over the word hitman.

“Like a contract killer?” Layla swiftly but timidly voiced, not letting him get away with a simple reply.

“Yes. It’s possible.”

“But not the most possible right? I mean, why would the FBI ask the FBI and whatever other agencies to look for their own hired gun? Right? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Well...” Flint said with his mind stuck on the word before completing his sentence.

“You’re right, but. It could be a simple ruse where their FBI office is trying to look like they are doing everything they can while hiring this guy to do their d... their work for them.”

“Dirty work?” Layla correctly guessed, filling in the gap for him.

“Yes.”

◇
Chapter N° 30



For the rest of the day, Layla suppressed any of the concerns she had over the idea some kind of assassin might be looking for her. Making up other small talk and watching a movie with him, she externally displayed her usual self while internally collapsing. Purposely giving Flint a couple of visual clues showing she was tired, by stretching and yawning, Layla excused herself after the movie by advising him she was going to catch up on some sleep.

Once alone in her guest room, Layla released her emotions by collapsing onto her small bed. On the verge of tears, Layla balled herself under the covers and tried to hide from her thoughts. Now stuck in her mind, the feeling of prey was hard to shake as even Flint's house now seemed vulnerable. With her body tensely reacting to the smallest rasp of wind, her efforts to mask her concerns with averted thoughts were eventually betrayed by the reminder that Flint himself was non-committal on how he interpreted Jack.

These tense reactions and disquieting thoughts caused Layla to roll around in her bed. Involuntarily doing this for over an hour, the continual sound of rumpus movement gradually clued Flint that something was wrong. Having a good idea of what this something was, Flint at first hoped the night's draw for sleep might settle her mind. However, after hearing her roll around for another twenty minutes, Flint ultimately came up with a distractive plan that would hopefully sidetrack her long enough so she could doze off. Lightly rapping on her door, Flint announced himself and asked if he could come in.

“Sure,” she replied while trying to disguise her unease.

“Come in.”

Walking in slowly, Flint asked her to close her eyes before he turned on the bedroom's light. Allowing some time for her eyes to adjust, Layla eventually squinted enough to be able to see him standing at the

doorway holding a box. Upon her recognition of him, Flint spoke up.

“This bed isn’t the most comfortable is it?” He remarked, not mentioning her rolling around part.

“No, it’s fine. Yes, it’s not one of those foamy-type beds, but it does the job.”

“Yeah, those are nice beds,” Flint replied with a reserved smile.

“But anyways, since you’re my guest, I thought I should probably offer you my bed. It’s larger and more comfortable. I can sleep in here. This bed’s firmness is actually better for my back.” He added, hurrying along his offer to be clear he wasn’t asking for them to be in the same bed.

Understanding he was probably doing this to be nice as a result of her restlessness, Layla at first tried to turn down his offer.

“I appreciate that but it’s okay Flint. I’m as cozy as one could be.”

Not relenting, Flint continued his push.

“I see. Well, you would actually be helping me out plus the bed thing wasn’t the only reason I knocked.”

“No?” Layla slowly replied while trying to figure out what other angle he was working.

“No. I thought about this earlier but held off on it. I want you to have this,” he lightly voiced while walking over to her bed holding a small wooden box.

A little sheepish and less confident than he had been, Flint gave her an awkward smile and then retreated back to the door. Silent, recognizing the box as that of the one which once held her tennis necklace, Layla found herself momentarily flabbergasted until Flint spoke up.

“Forgive the little saying that is in the box. That was

obviously from a long time ago,” he mentioned of the personalized engraving that was inside.

“But as you already noticed, I’ve had it just sitting around in a shoe box for all these years. I wasn’t thinking this way when I first purchased it, but I wanted it to be yours regardless of what happened between us. It was never mine to me, which is what made it hard to sell or give away. It was always meant to be for you. I do understand why you gave it back. However, if you would humor me, and as long as it doesn’t cause anything concerning Wynn, I would like for you to have it back. It’s not a boyfriend-girlfriend present... although I know that’s what it was for once upon a time. Now it’s just from one old friend to another... present.”

With an awkward silence that seemed to last forever, Flint tried to inject some light humor when she didn’t respond right away.

“And it looks way better on you than it does on me. Not that I tried it on or anything. You know what I mean.”

“Okay.” Layla singularly replied after thinking for a while.

“If it makes you feel uncomfortable or anything like that Layla, I don’t want you to feel forced... or anything odd. I...” He stated until Layla interrupted him.

“It’s okay Flint. I know you don’t mean it as an awkward gesture... and no I don’t see it as a slight towards Wynn. Thank you, Flint. It’s a very nice gift, for the second time. But how did you find the box? I thought that was lost?”

“The original one was, yes. However, at some point in there, you brought it up to me and apologized for misplacing it. Naturally, that gave me the idea of getting you another one. I don’t recall how long it took me to go back to the jewelers, but I eventually did and put in an order for a second one. I had it done up in the same way as the original, with the engraving included... although again, forgive that part. I simply told the jeweler to make an exact replica.” Flint over-explained a bit bashfully.

“When they finished it, I was just going to give it to you as a surprise present, but that didn’t quite one hundred percent turn out the way I had planned,” he said with a wince.

“So, when you gave the necklace back to me, I eventually put it and the new case into that shoe box. I’m actually surprised you didn’t find it in there with the necklace. It was still wrapped up from the jewelers, but it was in there.”

“No, I never saw it.” Layla shyly replied, flushed with guilt once more.

“Anyhow, well...” He then quickly started off with, briskly moving on from the necklace topic and back over to the bedroom situation.

“I do, as your host, have to respectfully insist on us swapping bedrooms. Mine is more comfortable. I think you will find it easier to get a good night’s rest in.”

Seeing that this was a topic he wasn’t going to budge on, Layla gave in and accepted his offer. Giving him a hug as they met in the doorway, neither said anything else as both retreated into their new rooms for the remainder of the night. Successfully deviated from her fearful thoughts, Layla took a peak at the engraving inside the box, forgetting what message was originally inscribed.

◇
Chapter № 31



Since Layla was in a much more comfortable bed, Flint was able to wake up, get ready, and head off to work without her notice. In fact, Flint's bed was so comfortable, that she continued to sleep in until Moses and Nile eventually grew hungry. At about noon, both cats had enough and decided to rudely serenade her until their demands for proper rations were met.

Stretching as she slowly made her way over to the door, Layla could hear the cats' intensity increase as it became apparent someone was approaching. As she opened the door, both cats eagerly greeted her before seemingly guiding her towards the laundry room. Upon entry, both cats inspected their bowls as if they were surprised to find them empty. Then, to show their humble desires, Moses and Nile, circled, then laid down next to their trays. Intensely looking up, both did their best job to guilt Layla by acting feeble and famished as they saddened their gaze.

Providing each a healthy portion, both cats thanked Layla before happily emptying their bowls. Thoroughly consumed before she was able to leave the room, both cats abruptly shot past her as if something had called to them. Unaware of any changes, Layla curiously watched as both cats ran to the interior door for the garage and sat down. No more than five seconds later, Layla heard the garage door activate, followed closely by the sounds of a vehicle pulling in. Surprised Flint would be home so soon, Layla thought better of opening the door, fearing it might be another worker Flint had forgotten to call off. Retreating out of caution, Layla made it to the bedrooms hallway when the door opened up.

“Hey guys, where's Layla?” Flint asked as soon as he came in.

Blissfully walking into his house without a concern, he soon spotted Layla who did not mirror his jovial temper. Plainly breathing a sigh of relief, Flint quickly realized she had been trying to hide before he entered.

“Oh sorry.” He said with an awkward laugh.

“I wasn’t thinking. If I come home early again, I’ll make sure to announce myself before entering. Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s okay. Maybe I need to lighten up some and be a little more trusting. Why are you home so early?”

“Because I, unfortunately, need to go back to work later, so I’m splitting my shift,” he replied as he set down his keys.

“Oh. What for?”

“Well, I’ve been purposefully dragging my feet so I can hear what’s being said around the office. Unfortunately, a witness for one of my other cases stepped forward today and said she could come in around six to give me a statement. Normally someone wanting to talk is a good thing, but I didn’t want to push it with the time she mentioned, so I had to accept. If I would have postponed a cooperative witness, my supervisors would have wondered why. It would have been out of character.”

“Does that happen often?.. You needing to split shifts?”

“Ummm... every now and again. Some cases I have a lot of names up front, so I don’t have to look for as many leads. Then you have your other cases where you have next to nothing and you will accept information from a squeaky mouse if you can get it. So it all just depends. It’s annoying for sure, but it’s part of the job.”

“Do you have a preference in case style if you get to pick?” Layla asked letting herself relax on his couch.

“Yep, the kind where they admit to everything up front,” Flint smartly replied.

Getting a merry chuckle out of his own joke, Flint let the somewhat dry quip pass before taking a seat himself and changing the topic.

“So, I did get some information for you today,” he casually

mentioned, knowing this would grab her attention.

“Really? What?” Layla eagerly replied.

“Did the letter idea work?”

“Yes. I believe it did. I’m pretty sure we received it today based on what I was seeing.”

“Seeing? Don’t you mean saying?”

“Sometimes what people don’t say is just as important as what they do say. Today was one of those days where I saw. I didn’t so much hear,” he responded.

“Explain?” Layla exasperatedly asked, wanting the facts, not his psychological analogy.

“We generally get the mail around ten. So at about ten, I wandered around the office to see if your letter was getting any sort of attention. At first, I didn’t notice anything until our RAC... or more less our boss, our supervisory agent, called to his office, the guys he assigned to look into Jack Mantin. When they got to his office, he closed the door and had a little talk with them before letting them leave. During their brief conversation, he looked to be continually referring to a piece of paper, which he picked up and slid over to them. No, I couldn’t positively say it was your letter, but I’m assuming it was. Then the interesting part happened,” Flint advised, letting her know that everything, so far, was somewhat within normal.

“After they left, George... my boss, shut his door behind them and displayed some visual indicators that suggested he was in distress. He fidgeted about, tapped his fingers on his desk, then appeared to take a photo of, whatever paper he had, using his cell phone. He then put that ‘whatever’ into an evidence bag and called for our forensic tech to collect it.... Plus...” Flint stated, highlighting the start of his next thought.

“He also added in a new personal behavior or habit, whatever someone might call it. He now locks his office door behind him every time he leaves. He might have done that occasionally before, but never always.”

Layla shook her head and briefly interpreted Flint's details before responding.

"Well his behaviors do sound... wary, but his, steps, all sound like normal police work to me. How was any of that suspicious?"

"Yes some were normal, but some were not. However, all of it needs to be taken together." Flint replied with a dubious smile.

"Assuming our letter is what he was reacting to, ask yourself how you would have handled it. Nothing in the letter was accusing him or anyone at our office. Everything you put into those letters was pointing the finger towards offices, departments, and other agencies in your area, not ours here. Correct?"

"Yes, correct."

"Okay. How then would you suppose someone with nothing involved and no insight into something, should have reacted to and approached that?"

"Honestly I'm not sure. Wynn sometimes talked about his investigations, but he didn't talk too much about the steps he took... if that's what you're asking. He would talk about this or that traffic stop, an arrest he made, or what kind of colorful words that person decided to call him. But he didn't usually go into the steps involved." Layla replied while shrugging her shoulders.

"Yeah, that sounds like what most people in the law enforcement world would say. They stick to the highlights, that's what people want to hear. Nobody wants to hear about the boring stuff. Paperwork, calling people who are purposely not answering, waiting on lab reports. That's not interesting. People want to hear the TV stuff, not how you worked on a search warrant at your desk for three hours. But anyhow, first, if I had something in front of me that was accusing someone else of something, why would I be nervous?"

"Ummm." Layla said in thought.

"I don't know. I'm not coming up with anything."

“Right. Because there really is no good reason. That said I will give everyone a little wiggle room, but why would I get nervous if some random person accused me of, say, robbing a store when I clearly did not? I wouldn’t. I might laugh it off, I might get angry, but I wouldn’t be worried. So his anxiety manifesting itself through his fidgeting and finger tapping is odd behavior. Maybe explainable. Like I said, I give everyone a little bit of leeway. But if he was my suspect, he should be able to give me some reasonable explanations as to why he was reacting the way he did. Next, he skipped a step in an investigation that he doesn’t need to do.” Flint explained while pacing around the room still internally scrutinizing his supervisor.

“First, we need to keep in mind, that he doesn’t need to look into this because it doesn’t have anything to do with him or our office. All he needed to do was to forward along your letter to the Sheriff’s Department handling your issue or the appropriate FBI field office. That’s basically all he needed to do with the exception of advising the two guys keeping an eye out for Jack Mantin. That part does make sense. But why did he call in our forensic tech? Our tech only has two jobs. He deposits our evidence into the evidence room, and he sends out our stuff for testing. At most, all we needed to do was to place the letter into a temporary evidence locker, for later pick up or delivery. We don’t need to keep it in our evidence room because it has nothing to do with us. We should just be passing it along. Furthermore, why did he not call up our statement analysis guy first? We get hoaxes and attention seekers all the time. That’s especially so for the big headlining cases like yours. So, my first step if I felt it was something I needed to be looking into, would have been to see if the letter was genuine or not,” Flint noted with some punctuation.

“He skipped that step which tells me he believes what you wrote to be true. How could he possibly know that? That indicates that he has some amount of foreknowledge which is telling him what he saw held weight. So calling up our statement analysis guy was subconsciously irrelevant to him. He then naturally progressed to the next step, which was calling for our forensics tech, so he could process it and, I would assume, have it sent out for the types of testing we talked about. Fingerprints, touch DNA, ink analysis, and so on. Those steps would also be fine if he had confirmed the letter’s authenticity and our office actually had a reason to be looking into it.”

“You did say he took a picture of the letter. Maybe he sent

that picture to your statement guy.”

“Good. Good observation. Yes we do, do that. However, the statement guy was never injected into the conversation. If he was, he would have shown up at George’s office, wanting to see the letter in person. Photos are nice, but you can’t tell everything from a photo. Something like writing pressure and pressure consistency would have been something he could have used to verify the letter. Since he had it in hand, and it was a handwritten note, he would have been bound to want to do that. Then in the very least, he would have needed some time to look over the letter to come to some sort of conclusion. But none of that ever happened,” he said with a pronounced pause.

“Instead, George went straight from the Mantin guys to bagging and tagging the letter. He didn’t do any verification. If he did text it to someone, and that in itself is a flip of the coin, he didn’t wait for even a cursory analysis. On top of all that, to seal any outliers I also had, I kind of ‘bumped’ into our statement guy. He wasn’t working on your letter, he didn’t have a printout of it, and he didn’t seem rushed or fast-tracking something his boss had asked him to do. But very good observational assessment. That might have been a reasonable explanation if it wasn’t for the other issues,” he advised, giving Layla some credit.

“Finally, if this is something we are looking into, why didn’t he start up a report and assign it to someone? The two guys he called into his office would have been the likely candidates. But their task hasn’t changed. They are still only looking for Mantin, they didn’t pivot from that into a full investigation. If they had, they would have created a new case in our system. But they didn’t. That is something I can check without causing any suspicion since I do it every day. There are no new reports by them or George,” he mentioned while shaking his head.

“Why would we be looking into something without a new report? Where are his findings going? Take for instance the photo he took. I would have uploaded that into my report to save it as a record. Where our his going? So again, his action of taking a photo is not supported by an action which would have made it explainable.”

“So do you think your supervisor is our guy?”

“I would say that the steps and movements he has taken are

on the outside of ordinary, which does make him suspicious. Maybe tomorrow all my suspicions will be answered and this will be just a simple case of a bad day. We all have family drama or personal issues that can cause scatterbrained moments. It happens. But as of right now, without an explanation, something is off. Now that still doesn't mean he did this or that. Just that something seems to be making him jumpy. I think that's a safe deduction. However, that's all we are able to say at this point."

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Chapter № 32



Flint and Layla talked a little longer about his boss, the implications this may hold, and ultimately his upcoming interview. Having a late lunch and taking a quick nap before going back into work, Layla's anxiety grew as his time to leave approached. Showing visible signs of nervousness and mental wear, Flint asked her if there was anything he could do for her before he left.

"I don't think so. I'm just a little nervous, I guess, to be alone late at night," she said while unknowingly twisting her collar around her finger.

Taking notice of her angst, Flint reminded her of his elderly neighbor if it might comfort her some. Weighing this option, Layla asked a few questions before deciding.

"How well do you know him? Are you sure he isn't buying into what the media is saying? Not that I want anyone to catch me, but it would kind of be embarrassing to have been so careful only to be caught by a ninety-year-old man," she said, exaggerating his age a little bit to make her point.

"Well, he's actually eighty-eight, not ninety," Flint said semi-seriously, not catching her dramatic enhancement.

"And second, I might have already mentioned you and some of your story to him just in case you went over there. Nobody has kicked down our door yet. So I'd say you are pretty safe."

"When did you say something to him? Today?"

"No, yesterday. He was out, so I told him. He's a sharp old timer, so he will remember to keep everything quiet."

"Okay. You said his house was the one with the firefighter

flag outside?” Layla asked to be sure.

“Yes. And to be honest, he’s probably been waiting for you to stop by. He doesn’t get a ton of visitors, so I bet you he has been keeping an eye on the house ever since I mentioned it. But don’t let that sway you. He’s still a big boy. You don’t need to go over there unless you want to.”

Layla thought about it a little more then peeked out the window.

“That house?” she said pointing to the house with the flag.

“Yep.”

“Okay. I think I probably will. It kind of seems like it would be mutually beneficial for both of us. What’s his name?”

“Lewis Dodgson.”

“Okay. Does he go by Lew?”

“Not since I’ve known him. I’ve always called him Lewis and when his family is around, they call him Lewis, or Grandpa... which he probably wouldn’t even care if you did as long as you have a coffee with him. Actually, if you’re going over there, bring over some of my coffee. He’ll like it,” Flint mentioned as he went into the kitchen and grabbed an open bag of coffee.

“Neither of us use those K-cups, so you’re going to need these grounds. He’ll have some filters. Have you ever done coffee this way before?” He asked, knowing the traditional filtered method was beginning to fade.

“Yes, but not for a little while. I’m sure it will come back to me. My mom and I used to always have a cup in the mornings before I moved out. Sometimes I’d make it, sometimes she’d make it. It’s been a while, but I’m sure I’ll remember.”

“Alright. Well, I better get to going before this witness changes her mind. Oh. Also, he’s hard of hearing. So if he doesn’t see you coming, be patient with him while answering the door. He’ll get there, but

if for whatever reason you think something is wrong, there is a key on his porch under the largest flower pot.”

Flint then grabbed some of the things he needed before departing, advising Layla on his way out to leave the house unlocked if she did go over to Lewis’s. Watching him as he drove down the street, Layla was abruptly struck with anxiety. Preferring to be lost from view, her nerves now forbid her from even stepping onto Flint’s porch. Mentally preparing herself, Layla’s angst cost her over an hour before she was able to summon up enough strength to make a mad, but hopefully inconspicuous, dash over to Lewis’s house.

At a brisk pace, Layla reached Lewis’s front door, hoping along the way he would notice her and simply let her in. Not receiving this response, she causally rang his doorbell while double-checking for his firefighter flag. Growing impatient after only a couple of seconds, Layla rang the doorbell again while peering through his door’s decorative glass. Soon feeling he was taking too long, Layla thought about using his hidden key until she heard the unlocking of his door. Quickly turning around, Layla noticed a pair of withered eyes staring back at her, amplified through the lenses of his double-thick eyeglass frames.

“Mr. Dodgson?” Layla politely asked, fairly certain of his answer.

“No. He lives down the street. Who are you?” He sharply replied with a foreboding scowl.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was told a Lewis Dodgson lived here. I’m sorry to bother you Sir. Please have a good day,” she said, flushed with embarrassment as she turned from the door.

Seeing her distress, Lewis instantly felt bad and corrected his trick by advising her why he had done so.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Clifton. Flint said I should joke around with you to keep you happy. I wasn’t trying to scare you or anything. Please come in. I’ll fix you up some coffee if you like coffee?”

Hearing her name and detecting the genuine sound of guilt held within his voice, Layla turned around and noticed that the old grumpy

man had suddenly changed. Now nearly tearful over the thought he might lose some company, his open show of remorse easily won her over. Stepping outside to stop her, Lewis slowly reached out a wobbly hand while clutching his cane with the other. Fearing he might fall, Layla stopped him before he got too far.

“I guess I’ll have to get Flint back then huh?” She voiced loudly to be sure he heard her.

“I guess so,” he replied with a smile, happy she had turned around.

“Come in. I’ll get the coffee going. You like coffee right?” he asked again.

“Yes. I actually brought some over. Would you like some...” she said while checking the coffee bag for its name.

“Six o’clock coffee.”

“Never heard of it. Is that from Flint’s house?”

“Yeah. That’s where I got it.”

“That explains it. He always buys that cheap stuff. You would think the FBI would pay him better and he could get some quality stuff. Here. Pick one of mine,” he offered as he led Layla to his kitchen.

“See if there is a kind you like.”

Layla looked over his extensive collection and wondered why Flint had recommended bringing anything over. Having almost every flavor or brand she could think of, Layla curiously searched for a Kona blend but regrettably found that this was the one style he lacked. Noticing that she seemed to be looking for something specific, Lewis spoke up and asked.

“Is there a certain kind you like?”

“Umm... Yeah. I know it’s kind of unique, but do you have any Kona? It’s a blend from Hawaii. I’ve kind of developed a sweet tooth

for it.”

“A coffee tooth,” Lewis countered with as a joke.

“Yes, I know what you’re talking about. That’s the good stuff. How in the world do you know Flint? That’s the opposite of his generic junk,” he said as he searched through his stash, indicating to Layla he might have some.

Lewis first looked through the coffees he had out in the open, then diverted his search to a couple of nearby drawers, all while talking about the FBI and how much they get paid. Grumbling about nonsense from time to time, he eventually gave up after one last check in his closet. Somewhat defeated, Lewis embarrassingly walked over to her and admitted he was out.

“I had some. But I must have used it all up. Sorry about that. Is there another style you like?” He asked with a noticeably dejected look upon his face.

Not wanting to pick another blend he might not have, Layla instead asked him for a recommendation.

“You know what? I’m your guest. So I’ll have whatever you’re willing to make me.”

Paused for a moment, Lewis quickly came up with one he thought she might like.

“Do you like vanilla?”

“Yes, of course.” She replied, already liking the direction he was headed.

“Okay good,” he said as he pushed a few bags of coffee out of the way.

“This is another something you won’t find here on the mainland. I came across it when I was in the Navy. Have you ever had White Hair Coffee? It’s a peg lower than Kona, but it’s still pretty good,” he volunteered as he displayed the bag.

“No, I haven’t, but I’d love to try some.”

Happy to make her a pot, Lewis had his filtered coffee machine up and running almost as fast as Layla could make a K-cup. Smiling as it started to brew, Lewis insisted that she have a seat while he went through all the preparations. Finding two matching cups and retrieving some cream and sugar, he placed both on the table, giving her the least worn and thusly, nicer cup. Moving uncomfortably fast for someone his age, Layla found herself bracing to catch him as he roamed and shifted about without his cane.

“It’s almost ready,” he loudly voiced over the brewing of his machine.

Then just as fast as he started, he finished. This time being carefully slow with a hot pot, Lewis gently poured her cup three-quarters of the way full, leaving her room for cream. Placing the pot back, Layla noticed he didn’t pour himself any.

“Aren’t you going to have some?” She asked while pointing to his empty cup.

“Oh yes. I just like mine resting on the burner for a little while. It’s an old Navy thing for me. I find it tastes better if I let it sit a while.”

Never hearing of that before, Layla shrugged her shoulders and tested her own.

“Any good?” He asked mid-sip.

“Yes. Yes, it is.” She graciously replied, while trying not to laugh about his over-inquisitiveness.

“Good. I hate to talk something up, just for whoever not to like it. Good, that makes me happy. So, tell me about yourself? Flint told me some stuff, but he didn’t tell me what you do and so forth.” Lewis excitedly questioned, not wasting a moment of his social encounter.

Slightly enamored by his grandfatherly charm, Layla instantly

felt at ease conversing with him, almost as if he himself were her grandfather. Still, since he mentioned Flint, she inquired into what he said first.

“So what all did Flint tell you?” She inquired somewhat loudly.

Briefly staggered, not wanting to mention Wynn, Lewis chewed on his words before Layla butted in.

“It’s okay if he brought up what happened to my husband. He said he trusted you and I can see why. You have a very open, ease to yourself. So it’s okay. You don’t need to dance around it. Honestly, it might be good for me to talk about it with someone other than myself.”

“Alright,” Lewis agreed with some relief.

“Flint did mention that you were the girl missing out of Montgomery County... and that your husband was the officer who died suspiciously in that fire. I’m obviously sorry about that. He also mentioned he believed some underhandedness was going on and that’s why he wasn’t turning you in. Forgive me for saying this if I’m hitting too close, but I too felt something was off. I was a firefighter for almost forty years, what was being reported on the television and in the Marshal’s report seemed... questionable. Very plain for something so complex. That train of thought crossed my mind even before Flint said anything to me.”

Interested in his skilled perspective, Layla asked him why or what made him suspicious of the official reports.

“Well, even if a space heater started the fire, and even if your husband had fallen asleep, it still wouldn’t be that simple. Yes, it could happen. But the heater would have had to of been heating the ground for some time. Plus, they never mentioned what it was heating. Most of the PDs and Fire Departments I was used to being around had tile or something like tile flooring. I got the impression, based on what was being said, that the heater simply fell over and started a fire. But if they had simple flooring like tile, that would have made it hard. In that regard, I would have liked to have heard more in the marshal’s report. Plus, that’s not to mention if a fire actually did start that way, it wouldn’t have instantly turned into a raging inferno. Without an accelerant, it just doesn’t work that way. Your husband

should have had plenty of time to react, even if he was asleep. That's why, right up front, I had serious doubts. He should have had plenty of time to get out, and or, put it out. It honestly seemed curiuser than the Warren Report... if that reference isn't too old for you."

Correctly guessing his dated comparison was before her time, Layla didn't question his analogy and instead politely skipped over it, more eager to prod his professional knowledge.

"Umm, would... I honestly don't know much about fires. Would that be something you or I could show to help prove the report was wrong? That this or that in the report wasn't very realistic?"

"Yeah. The marshal should have already done that. I would need more information. But it should be easy to demonstrate. If I recall correctly. They did mention the type of heater that fell over?"

"Yes. I forget what model they said it was, but regardless, Wynn and I never purchased one. Unless he did so without my knowledge, which I doubt."

"Okay. Then if we knew where it fell and what type of surface it fell on or near, we could make up a model of sorts, of how long it would have taken, and how much time your husband would have had to react. And... that's not counting if he knocked it over from an elevated position. That would have made it even less likely to have resulted in such a disaster, due to the sound it would have made from falling. But with the posted report being so basic, I'd need more info," he reluctantly replied while holding up his hands.

"The Marshal did allegedly post his report online, but I stayed away from it. The chief of Riceland filtered it for me. But what you're saying does give me some hope. It sounds like another way to disprove or at least put a dent into the narrative being put forward."

"Do you know by chance what type of flooring the station had or what it might have fallen near?" Lewis asked inquisitively, wanting to help.

"I don't know where exactly they are alleging it fell," she said while speaking up for him again.

“But I can say that most of the station did have tile floors. They were white and gray, that’s how I remember. That said, I do think the chief’s office had carpet... and maybe the secretary’s area, but I’m honestly not one hundred percent sure.”

“Did the chief say your husband was sleeping in his office and the fire started there?” Lewis asked, knowing this was absurd.

“No!” She responded sharply.

“That just wouldn’t have happened. Wynn wasn’t disrespectful like that, and I’m sure the chief or media would have mentioned that if it did happen. Plus, I think the chief usually locked his office when he was out, so it happening in his room would be a hard sell.”

“Let’s just say the secretaries area was carpeted, would he have slept there?” He asked, trying to shorten up the list of possibilities.

“I don’t think he was sleeping,” Layla advised, stating her opinion.

“I agree. I don’t either. But that’s not what the public’s been sold. We need the public to see the absurdity of the official ruling. Then scrutiny can move in without insider obstruction. It seems so silly and simple, but if there is corruption involved in whatever this is leading to, then the first thing that needs to die from their end, is the truth, since the truth is not in their favor.”

“I see what you’re saying. Then no, if the secretary’s area did have carpet, then I’d highly doubt he would’ve picked that spot as a resting place. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah. I’d really like to know at what precise location they are claiming the fire started... or if the report says it fell next to or on something flammable. Even then, you still have several obstacles to overcome in order to burn down an entire structure. Did Flint ever give you his or the FBI’s opinion as to why this occurred?”

“No for both. He said he would keep his ears open at the FBI, but he didn’t have a why when we talked about it.” Layla said while

continuing to speak loudly for Lewis.

Wondering why she was talking in this fashion, Lewis finally spoke up about it.

“Speaking of why, why are you speaking so loudly? I’m old but I can still hear. Nobody needs to put me down just yet.”

Surprised to hear this, Layla shook her head and answered his question truthfully.

“I’m sorry. Flint told me you’re hard of hearing and that I should speak up. Forgive me, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Hard of hearing!” He blustered.

“You know, that wheezy ankle-biter pulls the wool over everyone’s eyes with his serious attitude. It makes whatever he says believable. No, I am not hard of hearing. I don’t even use hearing aids. Just old man glasses and false teeth. I have all original hips and all original hearing.”

Finding out more and more that Flint had shed his once-staid personality, Layla apologized for any disrespect and moved the conversation over to his life.

“At any rate, tell me about you. I heard the words Navy and Fire Department in there. You sound like you probably have had quite the life.”

“Oh, not really,” Lewis replied somewhat coyly.

“No, no. You gotta tell me something about yourself. Give me at least the dimes tour.”

Secretly willing to talk for the rest of the night, he instead spared her of this and solely touched on his personal highlights. His family, becoming a Lieutenant at the Hatters Grove Fire Department, being too young to serve during World War two, but instead serving during the Korean War. Straying only a little while reflecting, Lewis eventually brought up a fun nuance of his military career.

“I was a cook, which made me very popular amongst all the men. Do you know why?” He excitedly asked, happy to reminisce.

“No, I do not. Why?” Layla replied, pleased to see him muse over his memories.

“Because the cook has control over all the sweets while at sea. When you’re a couple hundred miles away from land, that makes a difference. If someone wanted a snack or an extra portion, they had to butter up to one of us cooks. Ice cream, cake, three or four choices of cobbler, plus my favorite, our breakfast cinnamon rolls. All went through us. In today’s Navy, we couldn’t have gotten away with all that. Now I hear they’re basically cruise ships with superstores in their bellies. Even a lowly recruit can buy a caramel or soda pop whenever they want. That kind of takes away some of a cook’s luster. But I’d still pick that over a BM or a boiler tech if they even have those anymore,” he merrily stated, as he got up to check on his coffee.

Not knowing too much about the Navy’s abbreviations, Layla chuckled a little bit before asking about a BM.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what a BM is. At least I hope I don’t,” she said while trying to keep a straight face.

Touching the side of his coffee pot to manually check its temperature, Lewis let out a big laugh before answering.

“Oh, oh thank you. That was funny. No, a BM in the Navy doesn’t stand for a number two. Although I wish I would have been snappy enough to of come up with that about sixty years ago. No, it stands for Boatswain’s mate,” he pleasantly explained, as Flint knocked on his front door.



Chapter № 33



Now back to his normal work cycle, once Flint had completed his interview with his witness, his standard two days off kicked in. This, as always, was minus the complexities each agent's cases might hand them. Purposely not pushing the envelope in an effort to limit these complexities, Flint aligned all his work duties to afford him the maximum amount of time off without neglecting a single investigation. Intentionally procrastinating on a few not-so-important assignments, Flint made sure after his witness's departure, that he would not be called back in.

Picking up Layla much later than he thought he would, Flint kept all the conversations short for the night, preferring to talk in the morning after a good night's rest. This same sentiment was held by Layla as Lewis had thoroughly stretched her ear. Listening to him orate a good portion of his life, Layla's patience pleaded with her for some sleep after his interesting, but nonetheless, constant babble.

With both resting soundly, Flint only woke up once during the night. This was due to a text message assignment from work which was deemed "departmental assistance" only. Tired and not wanting any chance of getting entrapped in something else, Flint ignored the overtime offer in favor of his guestroom's bed, which was much more comfortable after an uneven day's work.

Waking up four hours later, Flint stretched his legs and slowly worked his way into the kitchen, scolded by his cats for their belated breakfast. Staggering into his laundry room to refill their bowls, Flint noticed an exorbitant amount of vehicles parked alongside his street. Only noticing this in passing while tending to his cats, it wasn't until he made himself a cup of coffee did he see just how many vehicles there were.

Taken aback by the sight of six vehicles parked outside Lewis's house, Flint quickly deduced the reason for this. Clamoring to re-read his text message, Flint now noticed the specifics of the assignment were to question a "Mr. Lewis Dodgson concerning his possible

involvement with Mrs. Layla Clifton.”

Scrambling to jump ahead of his fellow FBI agents, Flint realized given the time frame, that Lewis probably searched several keywords online after they left. This innocent action then triggered one of the FBI offices. His subsequent five o'clock text message was the result of this flagging, in the attempt to locate a missing person as fast as possible.

Running into his main bedroom and waking up a still-slumbering Layla, Flint hastily filled her in and encouraged her to remember exactly what they had talked about. Taking a moment to set herself, Layla soon realized this was not another joke and advised him of everything she could recall.

“Umm... he went into some detail about the fire. He didn't believe what was being said and questioned me about some of the specifics. I didn't have all the answers for him but did tell him what I knew.”

“Do you remember what any of those specifics were?” Flint asked, trying to see what the FBI was honing in on.

“Boy, he said a lot. Umm... he talked about tile floors. Wanting to know where the report claimed the heater fell over. Things like that. He didn't feel the fire was likely and said we could make up a model of the fire to disprove the Marshal's report if we had more details. Do you think we need to leave or do something?” She asked, worried about the FBI being so close.

“No. I do think this probably won't help, but as of right now I don't think we need to overreact,” he coolly replied.

“How so? They're right outside!”

“Well, if they suspected you were here, I'd say they would already have my house surrounded. It doesn't look like they are doing that.” He responded as he looked out his bedroom window.

“So I'd be guessing if Lewis told them anything, he didn't mention you being here or over there. Also, they wouldn't have text-messaged me if they suspected I was involved in some way. So I'd say as

of right now, we are not in the fold. However... and an interesting dilemma for me, if they are doing a thorough job, they should go door to door to try and talk with everyone in the area. That means all of my neighbors' houses and here," he said while pointing down.

"So the question is, should I go over to them and be nosy since I work for them and this is my neighborhood? Or, do I stay away and wait for a knock?"

"Stay," Layla quickly replied.

"You said yourself 'should,' which means maybe, which means not one hundred percent, which means it's conceivable they won't. They might not come over. So don't give them anything."

Taking in a deep breath while trying to play out all the different scenarios, Flint came to the opposite conclusion, feeling his approximate location to Lewis would ultimately be too much to overcome.

"I want to do that Layla. I truly do. But I think it's best if I casually mosey on over there."

"No, don't do that. We don't know what they know or what Lewis might have said. For all we know, Lewis talked and they already have all the goods."

"Lewis talking never crossed my mind. I highly doubt he'd do that. That said, I think we need to stay normal. If this was any other issue and I saw the guys I worked with buzzing around my neighbor's house, I think my normal response would be to go over there and see what's going on. Not doing what is expected could cause suspicion. We can't avoid the fact my house is this close... and one of those guys over there might have already noticed Lewis's house is near mine. That by itself makes me a much more likely candidate to talk to. Plus think of it this way. If they do suspect something and I don't return, then you know you need to run," he replied with a wink and a mischievous smile.

Agreeing with him but not saying so, Layla lightly nodded her head while descending her gaze. Feeling her anxiety build, she tucked herself into the corner of the room, away from the windows and out of sight. Calmly putting on his FBI jacket and fitting himself with a gun, Flint

tried to ease her fears, but also gave her some defensive advice.

“Layla, they aren’t over here right now. That tells me we’re more than likely, not on their radar. Just don’t turn anything on or make any noise while I’m gone, okay? Now, despite that, if for whatever reason something does go south, here is my shotgun,” he said while revealing a hidden cavity on the far side of his television stand.

“I don’t know how proficient you are with a gun, but it’s something. Its safety is on right now, so it’s safe to handle if you need it.”

“How long do you think you are going to be then?” She asked, skipping over the gun talk.

“I can’t look like I’m in a rush although I can lean on the fact that it’s my day off. So let’s just say about fifteen to twenty minutes. I’ll go over there, probably answer a few questions about Lewis, and chit-chat for a minute or two. I’ll try not to prolong anything although I can’t promise they won’t ‘need’ something from me, or that one of them might start to gab. But most guys prize their days off, and will likewise respect others when they are off. So I’ll be sure to mention that upfront, in order to hopefully shorten our interaction.”

“Alright. Be quick.” She faintly voiced while trying to make herself comfortable.

Straightening out his jacket, Flint coolly walked over to Lewis’s house, as if he were on any other FBI assignment. Passing by the unmarked vehicles dotted along the road, Flint approached the first agent he saw. Personally not knowing this man, Flint identified himself and explained why he was there.

“Hey, how’s it going? I’m Special Agent Flint Smedley. I work out of the East Redwell office. We’re in Redwell... but our office is on the east end,” he nervously over-explained.

“I live just over there. Is everything okay? There’s an old man that lives here. Is he okay?”

The young fresh-faced agent initially looked at him somewhat skeptically during Flint’s greeting. Easing up only a little bit after finding

out he was a fellow agent, he likewise introduced himself and explained their reason for being there.

“Hello, I’m Agent Ian Peline. I’m out of the Charrington office. You don’t know why we’re here?”

Stricken with concern this was meant towards him, Flint had to consciously restrain himself from grasping his chest. Halted in distress, soon the worry of needing to respond swept in. Feeling overwhelming pressure to say anything, Flint managed to squeeze out the most simple and basic word he could muster up.

“Huh?”

Sensing this was inadequate, Flint tried to follow this up with a little more.

“What do you mean?”

Not catching his nervousness, Agent Peline explained.

“You have some nosy neighbors. We have had a couple of them getting a little too close while live-streaming us. I’ve already got a couple of text messages from my family saying they’re watching me online.”

Relieved, Flint let out a nervous laugh and again said the first thing he could.

“Yeah. I live here.”

With his reply not one hundred percent matching the agent’s statement, Flint pushed past this and changed the dialogue back in the direction he wanted.

“Nosy neighbors, yeah, that’s what you get around here. Anyways, I’m sorry I just woke up. I didn’t check anything online. I didn’t see that... although I’m sure I will. I just fed my cats and noticed all the vehicles outside. I did get a text last night, but I skipped over it because it’s my weekend off.”

“Okay. So the guy that lives here was searching online for some information that made our office think he might know something about a girl that went missing out of our area. The text message you received last night was us asking for some help. One of your guys is over there.” He advised while pointing to a distant agent standing near an SUV.

“Since this is so far-reaching, we’re assisting the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Department in trying to find her quickly. That said, this guy’s house was a bit outside of both of our jurisdictions, so we wanted some help with knowledge of the area and outside cover just in case someone showed up. Just basic assistance. We’ll handle all the case stuff, so minus your neighbors poking around, it’s easy overtime on your end. That’s why we asked your office and why you got that text. Your fellow agent over there has been the main one shooing away all of the streamers.”

Playing along with this, Flint made a comment as the agent turned towards one of the vehicles.

“Well then, I guess maybe it’s good I didn’t help out. I still need to live next to these people.”

Getting a rise out of Agent Peline, he chuckled some to himself without responding. Busy in his work, the agent grabbed a couple of big bags out of the vehicles trunk he was next to, then excused himself. Watching him walk towards and enter Lewis’s house, Flint slowly drifted backwards then meandered his way over to his fellow agent who was doing the security. With his back turned Flint didn’t recognize the agent until he got close enough to greet him.

“Hey, Donnie!” Flint excitedly voiced, happy to see the agent was someone he had a good relationship with.

Turning towards him, Donnie also loosened up his guarded posture and reciprocated Flint’s greeting.

“Hey Flint... I was thinking about you. I thought you lived in one of these houses.” He said while giving him a handshake.

“I do. I live right over there. Who else from our office showed up?”

“Just me, Rob, and Geno... and both of them are only here because they are handling that Mantin thing. Everyone else is from the Charrington office. How come you didn’t sign up? You could’ve just walked over.”

Now rehearsed and planned for this question, Flint easily rattled off the same explanation he had given Agent Peline.

“I didn’t read the entire text message last night because it’s my day off. As soon as I saw that it wasn’t a major issue, I went back to bed. Plus, like I was just saying to that other guy, if I would have known, I probably would have still shied away from it anyway. You don’t eat in your restroom or however that saying goes.”

“No, I get it. Well, you’re not missing much anyways. This is pretty boring. Besides your neighbors acting like this is front-line news, I’m just standing here.”

“Well welcome to my neighborhood. Or at least what I thought. What’s going on here? This guy is almost ninety. Why is he getting the treatment?”

“I guess he’s D.B. Cooper, right?” Donnie jokingly replied.

“Ha! Now that would be something.”

Laughing together, Donnie eventually composed himself and advised what he knew.

“No. Apparently, this guy searched some things their office was keeping an eye on. I guess they were so specific in nature that they think he might have some connection with that missing girl. I personally think this is a wild goose chase. Like you said, the guy is pushing ninety. Let him search away. He probably doesn’t have anything else to do. But their office is doing whatever. So whatever. I’ll take the overtime. You know what. If you know anything about the guy, you might be able to go in there and hurry things up a bit.”

“I do know him. He’s a nice old man. I help him out with mowing and stuff like that. I can’t imagine he has any involvement outside

of curiosity. The guy can't even mow. Maybe I should go in there and talk with him and the agent in charge." Flint deceptively mentioned, while not wanting any part of actually going inside Lewis's house.

"Feel free to talk to the agents, but the older guy is already gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone? He's not dead is he?" Flint asked with genuine concern.

"No, not that kind of gone. They took him all the way back to the Charrington office for an interview. They must be pretty serious about the guy. That's not a short trip."

"What? The old guy? Lewis?" Flint spontaneously voiced out of both surprise and bother.

"Yeah. They took him away pretty quickly. No cuffs, so I'd be guessing they talked him into 'willingly' going. But he's been gone for a while now."

"Wow." Flint muttered.

"Yeah, like you said. I wouldn't have thought this was that big of a deal or that a man his age would be of such interest, but apparently, he is. Maybe he is D.B. Cooper." Donnie remarked, assuming Flint's "wow" lined up with his own opinions.

Just as Donnie and Flint were having this discussion, Agent Peline came back outside, holding two full evidence bags. One plainly containing a laptop, Flint was left having to internally speculate as to what was in the other bag. Feeling pressure now building within him, Flint politely ended his small talk with Donnie in an attempt to get a sneak peek at what was in the other bag.

"Alright, well. I'll ask this agent if they need any more help. I'm already up and out here if they do."

Walking over to the agent who had opened a trunk to put the evidence in, Flint tried to not look too hurried, while wanting to catch a glimpse of whatever was in his second bag. Thinking of a way to delay the

agent, Flint called out to him, hoping to distract him.

“Hey,” he started off with.

“Hey, since I’m here, do you guys need any more help? I’m sure all my neighbors have seen me out here by now, so I might as well put in for some overtime, right.”

“No that’s okay, we’re done. We just need to lock up and take this back to our office for processing,” he paused to say, with his hand on the lid of his trunk.

“We appreciate it though. If we need anything else we will let you know.”

With this, Agent Peline closed the lid while Flint was still about ten feet away. Not close enough to discern anything, Flint basically stopped in his tracks while still trying to be cordial.

“Oh. Okay then. Well, I’m right over there for future reference. You guys call us if you need anything.”

◇
Chapter № 34



Giving Agent Peline a half-hearted wave, Flint immediately changed his direction and proceeded home. Doing so with a cool and composed demeanor, secretly every step lingered as he wanted to get home as soon as possible to reevaluate the situation. Stopping to pick up his newspaper as a touch of displayed normalcy, Flint walked back into his house as any Saturday morning early bird might do. Having peaked a couple of times out the front window, Layla also picked up on his relaxed temper which had the effect of soothing her own.

“What did you find out?” She asked optimistically.

Not answering her back, his confident presentation evaporated with the shutting of his door. Statuesque, with a sunken expression cast upon his face, Layla noticed the sudden change which caused her to likewise pause. Confused by this, Layla asked him a direct, but now dispirited question.

“What’s wrong?”

Looking past her in thought, Flint took a couple more steps without responding. Trying to get anything out of him, Layla continued to press.

“Flint tell me something. You’re scaring me.”

Catching the word “scare” out of her, Flint recovered from his thoughts and apologized, but only briefly explained himself.

“Sorry, I’m trying to think. Just give me a moment to get my thoughts straight.”

At least getting this something out of him, Layla now took the patient approach, with heightened apprehension. Working out the idea that the agents had taken Lewis back to their office, combined with the fact

nobody questioned or came over to his house, told him Lewis had remained silent. However, knowing the tactics and questions that would be used, Flint was faced with the likely outcome that Lewis would indirectly give away something, even if he didn't mean to. Exhaling to this conclusion, Flint finally gave Layla some answers.

“So, do you want the good or the bad?”

“Bad.” She promptly replied, feeling with his reaction, the good news was negligible.

“I think our plan to stay hidden while figuring out a solution is going to get sped up.”

“By how much?”

“I don't know yet.” He said with an unintentional pause.

“But they took Lewis to question him. I honestly don't think Lewis will consciously give us up. However, he might give away enough by accident, that a piece will point to us. It probably also doesn't help they know I live so close. Them figuring that part out was inevitable, but I'm sure my name floating around in the back of their minds will eventually trigger something.”

“Should we leave now? Maybe we could go back to the cabin I was at.”

“The time is definitely ticking. That's for sure. Still, that doesn't mean we need to run just yet. Now, if I don't show up for work, that would easily give my involvement away. Plus, although this will turn into a very touchy feeling-out game, I can probably still gather what is or is not known by simply showing up to work as expected. So when should we speed up our timetable is still a little unknown although we do know we are working with less time.”

“Alright. Well, have you come up with a plan that might shine some light in our direction?” Layla asked after letting out a deep breath.

“Yeah, a little bit.” He replied while rubbing his head.

“But I’d be assuming some things which might fall flat.”

“Assuming what?”

“I’d be assuming who is involved and why. Right now I’m guessing my supervisor is involved, but that is just out of deductive reasoning. Even worse, I’d be guessing the overall reason why. If I were to question or point out something wrong, it would give away that I don’t know much, while at the same time giving up my involvement with you.

“What is your guess as to why this is happening?”

Moving into the living room and taking a seat, Flint thought this out a little more before answering.

“So I did hear something that was interesting. Before my interview yesterday, I heard that the agents looking into the Mantin guy were going to a building owned by Roth-Dixon Ventures. Supposedly, he was seen there. I’m not going to look online to research exactly what Roth-Dixon does unless I want to end up like Lewis. But I did look through the phone book and noticed that they do printing, specifically for governmental projects.”

“Did it say what kind of projects?” Layla asked, wanting to see where his reasoning was going and if it had any flaws.

“No. The ad in the phone book was just that. An advertisement for printing. That said, since the company does printing for the government and we have legal forms, I checked our rolodex of businesses we order from. They were on the list along with the owner’s name. So I looked in our office’s original hard files to see if I might be able to connect someone somehow, and I did. Admittedly very loosely, he was several people removed from the owner, but Roth-Dixon once had an employee who was caught printing extra voting ballots.”

“Okay, but how would that guy still be working there after an FBI investigation? Didn’t the guy get charged?” Layla asked, picking his story apart.

“Yes, he got charged, convicted, and fired. So, no he no

longer works there. However, the idea of this one guy still working there or not isn't the point. I'm not saying this was or was not the case, but we see that corrupt companies have 'fall guys' while the boss or CEO 'knows nothing about' what's going on within their company... or so they generally claim when something goes wrong. We have this same issue when we look into the mob. They have guys willingly or otherwise, who will take the fall while a mob boss can claim some sort of plausible deniability, neglect, or just plain sloppiness. The report I found was old and it didn't have a great amount of detail. That said, because the Mantin agents are checking into this specific company, combined with the knowledge this has happened there before, could be the link between Wynn, that briefcase you said the FBI was interested in, and the burning of the station."

"How so?"

"Okay, if you look at what happened at the station from a criminal's point of view, if the briefcase was the desired objective, why was a fire sufficient instead of breaking open the doors of the evidence room? Yes, time is a factor, but this idea gives me the feeling that whatever was in the briefcase was something that a fire would be able to destroy. Documents or photos then jump into my mind... and documents or photos of the high-value variety. Not Grandma's secret pumpkin pie recipe. No. Blackmail photos, maybe someone's shady records, or maybe I'm completely wrong. But I personally think whatever was in that briefcase was something burnable. Easily burnable at that. Which makes me think paper. Yes, memory cards or laptops do melt, but if you are going to go as far as they did, I'd think you would want to be sure. You would want to physically crush those types of items to be sure nothing could be recovered later. So in my opinion, something of high value and something flammable was in the briefcase... if the briefcase was indeed the objective. Again, I admit I am assuming as much based on what we have." He explained while pivoting to his next train of thought.

"Expanding on that, maybe then the connection of ballots and fraud comes in. The fire, Mantin, now the printing company? I could see someone willing to take things that far to cover for some powerful officials who have a lot to lose."

"Couldn't it have been something as simple as drugs or money? Those would burn up in a fire."

“Yes, but drugs generally are more of a normal, individual crime and that amount of cash wouldn’t be worth the extreme risk. Yes, you could get a decent amount of either inside a briefcase, but I don’t see so many people taking things that far for one person’s loss, or that amount of drugs. We see entire truckloads of drugs that get seized that don’t get that type of response. Plus, from a legal standpoint, someone could have a briefcase stuffed full of cocaine, with their driver’s license on top and you’d still not get a conviction solely based on that. If he wasn’t caught holding it, whoever would simply deny it and say his license was stolen. No, I think this was something that pointed to someone or something bigger. Since we had the possible connection of voting fraud come up, something along those lines, for me, rises to the top. Ballot harvesting, voter rolls, a list of people on the take... NAMES!!! All offshoots of election fraud or interference. Those types of issues are the kinds that get people to do dumb and desperate things. Plus, as of right now, money and drugs haven’t been linked or injected in any way. These other strings have, I’m just tying the knot.”

“Who was the guy you found that was connected to that Dixon place? Was it Mantin by chance?” She asked, hoping he was a former employee who was up to his old tricks rather than a hitman on the hunt.

“No. That guy is still in prison. Barry Venona, ever heard of him before?”

“No.” She responded somewhat downtrodden, hoping the hitman idea was off the table.

“Yeah, sorry. I also looked to see if we had a file on him in our hard copies, but either we don’t or the guys assigned to look into Jack have it. I’d like to dismiss Jack’s name continually coming up as just a fluke, but we’re going to have to put him into our back pocket. Some of the dots I’m finding are very... abstract, with the who’s and the why’s, but his name keeps popping up, so we’re going to have to keep him in the loop.”

“Okay,” she muttered regrettably.

“Then what kind of time frame do you think we are now working with?”

“That’s a good question.” He advised with a huffy speculative breath.

“I honestly don’t have a good answer. Best case scenario, Lewis lawyered up and gave them nothing. That’s minus the idea he somehow concocted an amazing story that they brought... but I doubt it. If he lawyered up, it would give us some time. But then the FBI would know they were fishing in the right pond. They would then simply poke around and wait him out which would result in them being at our doorstep sooner or later. Worst case scenario, he already spilled the beans and they are just working out what type of approach they want to take.”

“Should we leave now?”

“Ummm. I don’t think he did that. So leaving now, now, would just look bad on us. That said, the screws are getting tighter. I don’t want to rush a plan, but our hand might get forced,” he noted, giving away that he had been working on something.

“Well, what are you thinking then? What’s your plan?” Layla naturally asked.

About to answer, Flint was interrupted by a knock on his door. Startled by this, Flint covertly signaled for Layla to hide. Choosing to go behind a couch, Flint dragged his feet until she was out of sight. Seeing her toes disappear, Flint settled himself and looked out his peephole. At first not seeing anyone, a single person soon appeared from the side.

Wearing bold yellow lettering over a blue FBI-style vest, Flint’s heart sunk as he knew he would have to open the door. Unsure if this was a friendly visit, or if a pair of handcuffs awaited his opening arms, Flint studied the man hoping he might be someone he knew. Not being able to tell through the arched loop, his eye continued to look around until a second agent came into sight. With his hopes of a cordial visit waning, Flint opened the door and put on his best face, feeling his expected response time was up.

“Greetings,” he overstated, feeling his tone sounded a bit robotic.

“Do you guys need a hand after... Hey, how you doing Rob. What’s going on?” Flint happily voiced, recognizing both agents through the clearing of the door.

Returning a much relieving smile of his own, the addition of this and a welcoming stance collectively confirmed an innocuous address.

“Oh, not too much. Hey, sorry to ask, especially on your day off, but do you have any cameras or anything like that on your property? Donnie said he already talked to you about your neighbor, but Geno and I are just putting in the leg work searching for a break. We were hoping you might have a security system and might have caught something.”

Already well aware they were the two agents assigned to look into Jack Mantin, Flint mostly played dumb, only giving away well-known facts or what Donnie had already mentioned.

“No I’m sorry, I don’t have any cameras. I had thought about getting one of those doorbell cameras, but nobody ever visits me, so I saved my money. Yeah, Donnie mentioned you guys were helping out across the street. Do you think that girl was there or something?”

“That I don’t know. The Charrington guys are handling that end. However, Donnie was shooing people away and noticed a guy lingering about in the distance. He thought he was strange and wrote down his plate. The plate ended up coming back to our guy. Because of this, we were hoping you might have some cameras on your house so we could see what he was doing and so forth.”

“Yeah, no, I’m sorry.” He replied.

Caught off guard by this news, Flint initially found little else to say. However, as Rob started to talk about random other cases, Flint noticed a curious distant neighbor. Staring at him in clear question, his look of clouded concern sparked an idea.

“Should I or my neighbors be worried? I’m sure they’ll be over here asking me questions once you leave. I know I can’t say everything, but I don’t recall the exacts of what you have. Is he just an obsessed ex-co-worker or something? A stalker? Or is this something that maybe dives a little deeper where if he shows up again, I should be telling

people to call the police?”

“We haven’t been able to get much on him. He has been pretty slippery which makes us wonder why.”

“You mean like mob tactics slippery?” Flint asked, feeling this was a good opening for him to pry.

“We aren’t sure yet, but kind of. So yeah, if a guy wearing an army-colored sweatshirt and blue jeans is poking around in the area asking questions and you don’t recognize him, I’d arm myself and call the cops. That said, we have been stuck with this one. He keeps showing up in connection with this missing police officer’s wife, but nobody knows who he is. I’m not saying he is mob or criminally-related, but we haven’t been able to rule that theory out. I will say the lack of info on him makes me feel like something’s up.”

“We don’t have any files on him?” Flint asked, knowing if they did, they weren’t at the office.

“Nope. Nothing. We even tried a few other ways of checking on him and we are coming up with blanks. I honestly don’t even know if Jack Mantin is his real name. The higher-ups just told us to look into it and that this was our guy. Geno and I are getting a little iffy about it because you would think we would’ve found at least a little something by now. Besides these sightings, that’s basically it.”

“Interesting. Have you floated his name out to any of our contacts or do you know why he would be interested in that girl?”

“A few of them, yes. Nobody’s heard of him. I guess you could say it’s a good thing the drug dealers don’t know who he is, but nobody else does either. It’s starting to feel like a wild goose chase except the goose knows more about us than we know about the goose. No, the why mystery is the same as him. Don’t know him, don’t know what his motives might be.”

“Well then.” Flint said jokingly with the agents.

“Good luck with that. I’m glad they didn’t hand that one off to me.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Anyways, do you know if any of your neighbors have cameras? We were hoping you would but if you don’t, then to your neighbors, we go.”

Paused for a moment, Flint’s heart fluttered as it dawned upon him that they may have been inadvertently captured on film by his neighbors. This nauseous feeling was compounded with the knowledge he had helped one of his neighbors install a camera the year prior. Feeling as if he was tightening his own noose, Flint felt forced to advise the agents of as much out of concern his neighbor would mention his help. Hoping they might only review the last few hours instead of the previous twenty-four, Flint reluctantly mentioned the camera while casually trying to talk his way out.

“Oh boy. Ummm... Well, I know my neighbor Patrick across the street has one. I don’t know if he’s home or not, but he has a small camera that points off his front porch and towards his driveway. That might help. Besides that, I don’t know. Most of my neighbors in this area are elderly, some of whom might not even have a television, let alone a surveillance system. So I’d guess not, but I do know those doorbell cameras are getting pretty popular, so maybe someone around here might have one of those. Maybe?”

“Okay. Are you talking about the tan house with the two pine trees in the front yard?” Rob asked to be sure.

“Yep. Hey, I know him. Do you want me to go over there and ask while you guys check on the other houses?” Flint now excitedly asked, thinking he might be able to intervene.

“No, don’t worry about it. You’re off. We’ll just go over there now and see if he’s home. But thanks, and if you do see or hear anything, give us a call okay.”

“Sure will. You guys stay safe.”

◇
Chapter N° 35



Stepping away from his front door, Flint thought about calling Patrick during the brief thirty-second window he had as they walked across the street. This idea quickly faded as he frustratingly searched for his phone. Not finding it fast enough, the math behind him dialing, it ringing, and Patrick answering, didn't realistically equate. Looking out the window with these thoughts in mind, both agents had already reached his front door and were about to knock. Openly imploring for Patrick to be somewhere else, for the agents to get a sudden call, or even for a fluke door jam, Flint's pleads for a favorable outcome shifted as a drowsy Patrick opened his door. Watching them talk for a moment before entering his house, indicated to him that Patrick was probably going to show them whatever video footage he had.

As he stepped away from his window, Flint had been so immersed in both Patrick and the agents, that he altogether missed Layla's attempts to find out what was going on. Catching himself wanting to go back to the window, Flint finally heard Layla's growing concerns.

"Flint. Hello! We're going to have to do something. We can't stay here anymore."

Hearing her out, Flint lightly shook his head while thinking. Trying to mentally play out the different scenarios, Flint didn't initially respond which caused more prodding by Layla.

"We can't stay here!" She said, stretching out her words.

"Either that Mantin guy is going to find us, those FBI agents are going to see us, or Lewis is going to give something away. And I'm not trying to bash Lewis. I'm just saying something is going to give. Somebody is going to figure something out."

Still in thought. Flint again nodded his head while peering out his window a time or two. Exasperated, Layla finally grabbed Flint in order

to get a more detailed response.

“Flint! Say something!”

Not purposely ignoring her, the shake by Layla was a surprise to him. Now giving her the attention she wanted, Layla didn’t hold back her thoughts.

“Flint, one way or another, I think our time is up. You said you had a plan. I think we need to do whatever it is you were thinking or come up with something else, fast. If that means we need to tip our hand a little in order to get a head start, I think it’s worth it. It feels like the walls are starting to close in and as much as I agree with you that us taking off would be a pretty hefty hint, I think we are simply out of time.”

Initially wanting to debate her, he now also saw the writing on the wall, even if he disagreed with her on how much longer his house would be safe. Taking in a deep breath, Flint exhaled and started to spell out the plan he had been mulling over.

“I... this was the best I could come up with without the full facts, and it’s going to involve us separating.” He started off with in order to gauge her reaction.

Only looking away for a moment, Layla didn’t disagree or inject a concern which is what Flint wanted to see.

“If we are going to do this, then we are both going to have to stick fully with it. Okay?”

Layla now reversed rolls and simply nodded her head, staying quiet in order to hear him out. Getting this agreement, Flint started to unravel his plan with a question first.

“Do you play chess?”

“No, not really. Maybe a little when I was a kid, but nothing serious. I could tell you what some of the pieces do, but I honestly forget how to even set up a board. Minus the pawns.”

“Okay. So in chess obviously the goal is to take the other

person's king. You'd ideally like to keep as many of your pieces as possible while doing this. But since the only goal is to take the king, at the end of the day, you are willing to lose a few pieces for the overall win. With that thinking, some chess strategies purposely place pieces into vulnerable positions in order to entice an opponent into making a move that is beneficial to you. This sometimes includes sacrificing a valuable piece or two with the overall aim of being in the end position you want. That in essence is my plan. I will confront my boss about what's going on. I feel he is the most likely to have a hand in what's going on. By doing this, I will be giving myself up, but I will also be potentially moving the board in our favor."

"How so?" Layla asked, not doubting him, but rather trying to see his logic.

"Right now we are just guessing. Deducing his involvement based on our suspicion. That's all we have right now. We need to somehow move the suspicion forward with actual evidence of some sort. Facts we can hold up to anyone and point to. If I can get him to admit to some level of involvement, whether directly or indirectly, we can use that as either a starting block to build up a case or at least proof something is amiss."

"But if he is involved, he either isn't going to say so or he isn't going to let you go."

"Correct. I'm kind of counting on parts of that. But just like in chess, we are going to give him some tempting bait so that he hopefully opens up and gives us what we want. If it all goes to plan, he will think he has the advantage and will thusly drop his guard. Stuff like that works in the movies all the time, right?" Flint said with a laugh, adding in the last part for fun.

Not as amused, Layla remained the serious one and kept at him.

"This isn't the movies, Flint. Plus, regardless of whatever he might say, it won't matter too much if you're arrested. At best you will be discredited as an arrestee making up a story in order to get out of whatever they charge you with. Probably kidnapping me or accessory to something."

"Yes, you're right. And I'm actually hoping he thinks the

same way you do,” Flint replied with a smile.

“I’m going to record him. So just like I mentioned before, if he is involved, whether he directly spells out his involvement with Wynn or not, won’t matter. I will have him on tape not making strong denials or even avoiding answers altogether. That’s not the way an innocent person reacts and it will come through. On the other hand, if he comes out and admits something, then we will gladly take that on record too.”

“One problem,” Layla abruptly stated.

“He’s not going to fall for a recording trick. Wherever you are planning this, if he is involved, he’s going to make sure there’s not a single recording device within a quarter mile. You’re just not going to get that.”

“Yes, you make a good point. However, that idea also helps us. Why would he be shaking me down for a recording device? That sounds guilty by itself. So I actually hope he pats me down and brings that up. That will tell me right away that he is hiding something and that we’re on the right trail. Nevertheless, just like in chess, I’m going to give him an air of safety. I’m going to have a meeting with him in his office. He will feel safe there.”

“Okay. I agree with you. But how are you going to plant a camera in his office? Did you already do it or something? On top of that, you said yourself he is now locking his door behind him whenever he leaves. Are you going to pick his door or something? Then...” She intensely stated as another problem came to her.

“Are you live streaming this? How are you going to get the video after the fact? He’s not going to simply hand over something like that. You better have a pretty crafty magic trick up your sleeve. I just don’t see him not noticing a new camera or even a hidden camera in his office... which he locks... and I’m sure he doesn’t have a shared key.”

“Good. These are all good points which like I said, hopefully gets him to drop his guard. No, I don’t have anything installed in his office. The locked room part does prevent that. Plus, finding time to do that would be hard given the random amount of people in and out of there. However, key-wise is a weak link. You are right that, as far as I know, he is the only one that has a key to his room... except for one person.” Flint explained

with some dramatic flair.

“These big offices have vetted janitors. They have to be able to get into just about any room in order to clean. His office is no exception. He needs the trash taken out and so forth. If he would just do this himself, he would have an exclusive hold over his room’s key. But he doesn’t. He lets our vetted janitor do his thing. So this is my opening. I will have the janitor place a camera in his room beforehand, and have him pick it up afterwards while he is in the midst of his routine cleaning duties. In and out. Not on me, so he can pat me down all day and will not find anything.”

Following his train of thought, Layla quickly concluded Flint must have already talked with the janitor.

“I’m assuming you already spoke with this person then?”

“Yes. It pays to be friendly with everyone. I never look past him and help him out every now and again. We have a pretty big office. So I approached him and asked him if it came to it, if he would do this for me. He said he would. So I will set up a meeting with my supervisor and then signal him to plant the camera in his office before the meeting. If George is involved and I get arrested for something, then he will pick it up later while he is doing his normal cleaning rounds. If George has any sort of association with what’s going on, his denial, non-denial by silence or even better, a self-assured confession, will be a starting point for Wynn’s unraveling.”

“Can we trust him?”

“Well, he hasn’t given us up yet. So that’s a good sign.” Flint replied without adding much else.

“Yes, I think so. Then if this does go that way, he will deliver the recording to you. Now honestly, I didn’t really hammer out the delivery part much with him. We primarily stuck with the front end of the plan. But the idea will be for him to slip in and out if I’m arrested. Then bring the camera to you.”

“Truthfully Flint, I was hoping you would have something more discrete and individually set like the spray paint idea you had. This sounds like it has a lot of variables... that on a dime things could shift in

several different directions. I trust you Flint, but I'm stuck with the idea that the more forks there are in the plan, the harder it will be to predict the outcome. Let alone the outcome we want. For instance, let's just say this does go our way. We manage to record him, get what we need and I then meet up with this guy somewhere. At this point, everything is going in our direction. Where do I go then? I can't come back here. I can probably drive your car for a little while but that will eventually get flagged and become dangerous to have out. I can't go to my parents or sister's place. I'm going to be stuck with nowhere to go, let alone figuring out who or where I can take the recording..." She said with a brief pause.

"And all of that comes after and assuming the front half of your plan worked. I know we need something, but with all the planning up front, the later stages are very scratchy... and we need two halves. It feels like a sports team having a detailed plan for the first half, then coming out and winging it in the second. That doesn't usually end well. I'm not meaning any offense by that, I just think I need to point out the flaws." Layla finished with, realizing halfway through that she was sounding rather bleak and discourteous.

To his credit, Flint took the criticism well, hearing her out fully while not countering with an interruption or a frustrated comment. Instead, Flint faintly nodded his head to her concerns and gave them the weight they deserved. With these words, Flint's eyes drifted around the room in thought. Feeling remorseful about what she said and how she had delivered it, Layla was the first to break the room's silence.

"I'm sorry Flint. I didn't mean for that to come off as negatively as it probably did. I was just hoping for an easy solution. A 'goof-proof quick fix' as my dad used to say." She mentioned while giving off a slight titter, manifested through her current awkwardness.

"I guess I wanted to see hope right there in front of me. Visible and easy to reach. Here's the answer and it's that simple. Instead I hear a plan with nothing promised. Nothing simple. And... I'm sorry. I know how much you have already done for me, let alone now talking about confronting your boss. I'm sorry Flint."

"I get it. I'd like to have an easy answer as well." Flint replied as he gave her a hug, indicating to her that all was forgiven.

Warmed and now somewhat yielding, Layla returned his hug as she used to hug Wynn. Doing so initially without thought, her hug remained firm far past the walls of friendship. Both gradually aware of this, neither said anything as they both held fast. Suspended for the moment, Flint eventually noticed both agents leaving his neighbor's house. Noticing that one of the two agents was now holding something, jogged Flint's thoughts back to the present moment.

"Umm... I agree with you," he started off with, while reluctantly loosening his grip.

"I'd like for this to be smooth and easy without any hiccups. No risks or loose ends... and I think we could work towards that if the present situation wasn't unfolding as is. This is the best I could come up with, with what we got," he said while another thought came to him.

"It's funny how things your parents said, even if you weren't completely paying attention, still manages to sink in. Your 'goof-proof' with your dad. My dad also had a couple sayings. One of them was 'hope that's seen is not hope' or 'hope can't be seen'... something like that. Anyway, I might not be hitting on his complete meaning, but I can still hear him saying that in the back of my head. With us, if everyone could see what's going on, we wouldn't be in the position we're in right now. Good people would understand the issue, and the bad wouldn't be able to hide it. Problem solved. Sadly, this is not where we're at. Instead, we are under the veil of corruption... which occurs when things are done with deceit and in the shadows of the night. So by its very nature, it's not going to be a simple task to unwind. Long ago barriers were put into place. Since those barriers are blocking or distorting the light, there's bound to be a struggle that ensues if someone pushes back. A tug of war of sorts for either secrecy or accountability. Unfortunately, right now we're in the magician's palm where not enough is evident to the average person. So we need to remove the smoke and mirrors and show the audience that the rabbit was never in the hat. Once people know it was under the table, they won't be able to unsee that fact. That's what we want. With the wool removed, people won't listen to the bogus reports or the sleight of hand media. Does that somewhat help?"

"Yes. A little long, wizarded. Maybe. But I see what you're getting at." Layla replied, poking fun at his lengthy analysis.

Taking her joust, Flint countered by asking her for a superior rebuttal.

“Okay then. How would you have explained it?”

Spirited, Layla broke down his imagery into a much more manageable piece.

“If you have a solution, you don’t have a problem.”

Outfoxed, Flint didn’t say if her explanation was better or not. Rather, he stuck to his prior temperament, and only made an impartial comment.

“Hey, I got your thinking there.”



Chapter N° 36



Flint called the janitor not too long after his fellow FBI agents left Patrick's house. Thankful they didn't immediately walk back over to his house, Flint disregarded the dangers of openly contacting the janitor due to their present time constraints. Making sure he was working, he asked him to have the camera in place and recording by four o'clock. Coming up with a rendezvous point, some contingency plans, and confirming the janitor knew what Layla looked like, Flint indebtedly thanked him for the risks he was taking.

Following this call, Flint then went over the details with Layla. This took some time as his plans involved her walking along roads she was not familiar with, locating a rental house and remembering a combination. With her nervousness thoroughly brushing aside her composure, Layla double and triple-checked every direction Flint gave her.

"At five o'clock, walk east along your street until I get to Cohasset Avenue. Turn right and stay on Cohasset until I come to the first traffic light on that street. Turn left onto.... Rob...erts Road." She questionably voiced while trying to recall the name of the street.

"Yes, Roberts. Good. Go on." Flint replied, encouraging her along.

"Once I'm on Roberts, stay on that road until I go over a bridge. After that bridge, there will be a one-way road called Clare."

"Ware." Flint injected, correcting the street's name.

"Yeah. Ware. Turn right onto that road and then count out five houses on the right-hand side."

"Left side, fourth house." Flint patiently uttered.

"Right. Four houses. Wait, right or left?"

Exhaling out of frustration, Flint calmly went over the directions again with Layla while occupationally glancing over at his clock.

“Down your street until I reach Bassett Avenue. Turn right and...”

“No.” Flint this time voiced with a little less poise.

“It’s Cohasset Avenue. I believe it’s a Native American word. So maybe think up an analogy to remember it that way. Or, its spelling ends with a T. The street with a T means turn.”

“Bassett still works then if I’m just going by the T... but maybe I should just write all of this down.” Layla replied, trying to lighten the mood while equally dejected.

“Okay. But I want you to have this memorized just in case something happens.” Flint responded while grabbing his wallet and pulling open a kitchen drawer for some scratch paper.

Setting aside all the loose cash he had for her, Flint then hastily scribbled out the direction, being sometimes too meticulous in an attempt to be sure there were no mistakes or misunderstandings. As he scrupulously described even the most insignificant detail, Flint started to feel the pressures of time rising within him. Rushing himself, Flint did so a little too much and inadvertently wrote down the wrong order and numbers for the lock.

“Ugh!” He aggravatingly exclaimed, tossing the paper into the trash.

“Three, Nineteen, Seven, Seventeen is the combination for the lock at the rental house. The teens come after the smaller numbers,” he stated out loud as he started on a new draft.

“The house is going to be an empty rental owned by the janitor’s family. When you get there don’t turn on the lights and try to stay out of sight. If we end up going the route where Ethan has to pick up the camera, he will also get you some supplies so you can hold up at the rental for a little while.”

“The janitor’s name is Ethan?”

“Yes, sorry. I double-checked with him about you, so we probably should talk about what he looks like as well. His name is Ethan Riverbanks. He’s tall and thin... I’d say a little taller than me. He has blue eyes, is probably about thirty-five years old with a blond receding hairline. He does have a nineteen twenty’s style mustache, so I’d say if you see a guy with one of those, you have the right guy if you know what style I’m talking about. He doesn’t quite have it to the point where it loops at the ends, but it’s pretty thick and predominate. It stands out.”

“Yeah I know the type.” Layla replied, actually glad he had this for ease of recognition.

“He is very easy to talk to. I’ve obviously struck up a few conversations with him since he started working with us. I’d say he has worked at our office for probably about three years now. He’s married and has a little girl. He’s a nice guy, you’ll like him.”

Thinking ahead while Flint was talking, a safety question popped into her mind.

“Should we have some sort of password or something? Just in case it gets dark and I can’t see him.”

“Ummm, you know that’s not a bad idea, but it’s probably a little too late for that now. I don’t want to call him and have his phone go off while he is planting the camera,” he said with a laugh.

“That wouldn’t be good. But, use what I just said. He has a daughter. So if you are unsure of someone, ask him if he is married, how many kids he has, and what genders they are.” Flint explained while getting a little confused over his own wording.

“Those are all things he’s going to be able to rattle off pretty quickly, and I’m sure he will understand why. If whoever can’t spit out ‘I’m married with one little girl’ rather quickly, then you know you’ve got the wrong person.”

“Can you write all that down as well? I don’t want my stress

to overcome my memory.”

“Sure. But try to memorize this stuff. You don’t want to somehow lose the paper and be stuck. Have the paper but don’t rely on it. Plus you don’t want to look lost or unfamiliar with the area. You want to blend in. Just another person out for a walk. If I had a dog I’d say take the dog for a walk. But you’re stuck with my cats and I don’t think walking one of them around would be very discreet.”

Seeing a smile appear on her face with the imagery of Moses walking around on a leash, Flint then visually noticed Layla retreat into herself as he finished writing the instructions. Taking a peek at the clock, Flint tried to show care while working within the waning time.

“I’m gonna have to go here in a couple of minutes. Let’s go over this one more time, without the notes,” he said in a reassuring way.

Layla closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind. Despite Flint’s gentle encouragements, Layla couldn’t stop her frantic thoughts, which were filled with questions and doubts. Starting to feel ill, Layla didn’t recite Flint’s directions, but instead crumbled onto the floor. Becoming a little flushed, Flint quickly retrieved a moistened towel and draped it over her forehead. Then, still wanting to help, Flint knelt down and gently put his arms around her.

“Forget about the directions, use the notes if you have to. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Layla meekly squeezed out.

“Layla, everything’s going to be fine. I can feel it. The truth is on our side. All we need is a little break, a little light, and I think things will start to build in our favor. It’s going to happen. Trust me.”

“What about you? I don’t want to lose you too.”

With this statement, Layla’s composure broke, causing her to cry without constraint. Flushed with his untold feelings towards her, Flint agonizingly held them back as he tried to console her. Resisting his arid thirst to say “I still love you”, Flint instead grasped her close and muzzled his swelling desire to do so, not wanting to compound the situation. Still

feeling these words bursting out from within, Flint threw back his head in order to physically restrain himself. Doing so with great distress, he coolly eased out some improvised words.

“That’s not going to happen. There’s going to be other agents around the office. I know the majority of them are good and honorable men. What’s going on here is an exception, if it even is at all. I could find out he has no involvement whatsoever. If on the other hand, I’m right, maybe we have a stalemate. An awkward understanding that each of us knows, and we are on opposing sides... especially if he doesn’t verbally admit to anything. He’s not going to deny his involvement just to turn around and do something to me. That would go against his denial.”

Flint paused on that thought to allow the idea that his ambush-style tactic would not permit time for a return surprise onto him. Although a race against time would inevitably ensure, both parties would be forced to cordially part ways. Flint, with presumably an indirect admission, but not enough to arrest, and his supervisor without a plan in place to keep his dealings hidden.

“It just wouldn’t be tactically smart for him to do. He is just going to have to sit there and take it... unless he truly isn’t involved. Then I’ll just get suspended... or fired.” Flint lightheartedly noted with a slight squeeze to try and cheer her up.

“What if it doesn’t happen that way?”

“You mean if he arrests me or maybe somehow takes me out? Yes, anything could happen. It’s going to be a risk. I’m giving myself up for a bigger piece of the puzzle. Our cards will be on the table at that point and we won’t be able to walk it back. Nevertheless, it still would not be logical for him to take the step of somehow getting rid of me right then and there. He’s going to be in the proverbial, rock in a hard spot, position. Then, if it does work out that he is involved, he can chase me around while you have the footage of whatever is said.”

“What do I do with the video? Do you have someone that can get it on the news?”

“I do not. That ball is going to be more in your court. I would recommend figuring out a way to copy the data as soon as you can. Maybe

Ethan will have a laptop or something for that. But you're going to have to work on that end. I wouldn't trust the media to do the right thing, so once you figure out a way to access the internet, I'd upload it to as many social media or video-sharing accounts as possible. Sign up for them all. The more eyes you can get on whatever we capture, the safer you will be and the harder it will become for him to deny."

Still scared of the vast unknown, Layla took in a few alleviating breaths in order to mitigate her angst. With her thoughts resting, her unintended inward focus was soon broken by her present self. Mislaying Flint's initial embrace, her renewed self-awareness caught his tender clasp. Settling within his arms, Layla quietly asked about his impending plight.

"What about you Flint? When am I going to see you again?"

Giving her a subtle, yet crafty smile in an attempt to dilute his own uncertainty, Flint responded with an open yet positive reply.

"Be strong."



Chapter № 37



At about a quarter after three, Flint advised Layla it was time. After a slow retreat from a telling embrace, he stood up and calmly walked over to the front door. Stopping to put his shoes on, both remained silent as he grabbed his FBI jacket. Patting his pants pocket to make sure he had his keys, Layla slowly stood up and walked over to him. Taking up his hands, both looked at each other with more than warm regard. Quiet and still, Layla used her lips as words, softly applying them to his long desiring mouth. Only a delicatory nuzzle, her savory embrace quenched his wanting heart as much as he had longed for.

Light with the opening of his eyes, this momentary embrace was worth more than all the words one's mouth could spell. Now silent, Flint's eyes responded for him as human language fell short. With a faint breath, Flint dutifully turned from Layla while his hands protested, pursuing her perpetual touch. As necessity rose, Flint ceded his heart's desire for his committed course.

Watching as his car pulled out of his driveway and onto the road, Layla took advantage of her rare stance next to the window and surveyed the rest of the street. Seeing a docile neighborhood, with only a few neighbors out waking or lightly gossiping over the day's events, Layla was comforted with at least for now, no further pressures were upon her.

This however made the almost two-hour wait linger as anticipation seemed to rest the clock. Left with a hollow to fill, Layla first tended to the cats, endowing them each with hefty portions of dry cat food. Filling up two more bowls for their upcoming unknown absence, this little chore did not press the day forward.

With television, radio, and about any other form of distraction seemingly irrelevant, Layla found herself in the kitchen, picking over Flint's pantry. Knowing she would be provided with food later, Layla stuck with topping off her hunger instead of packing a bag of supplies. Nibbling away on a couple chocolaty treats she soon found herself in the same

quandary as she had before, but now with the unhealthy feelings of overindulgence as well.

Now stuck with only the simple doldrums of finger-tapping and clock-watching, Layla sat back down and tried to avoid the latter. Patiently waiting, Layla's eyes wandered around his room in search of something to mentally scrutinize. Finding some humor out of Flint's mismatching picture frames, her gaze eventually crossed over the instructions Flint had written for her. Unknowingly unhanding them during her earlier collapse, Layla picked them up and gave credence to Flint's memorization advice.

Hunkering herself down in the same spot she had earlier embraced Flint, Layla unfolded the directions and started to look them over. Remembering the lefts and rights more than the street names, Layla took her time with each line, not proceeding forward until she had reached a comfortable familiarity. This memorization technique gradually worked her along the sheet until she reached the rental homes combination code. Expecting this to be his final line, Layla was surprised to see an additional note underneath.

John 15:13

Initially feeling this was added as a blessing or for good luck, the fact that she couldn't recall this particular verse, barred her mind from assuming as much. Curious to its specific meaning, Layla wandered over to Flint's bookshelf, not one hundred percent sure if she had noticed a Bible there before or not. Briskly scanning over his assemblage of books, the standout nature and design of most Bibles was not readily apparent. Being somewhat scrupulous as time was not in her favor, Layla's interest in solving Flint's verse, or possibly another riddle, led Layla to think of his bedroom.

Figuring this was the next most customary location a Bible would be found, Layla turned from the bookshelf towards his room. In doing so a glance of Flint's front window caught her sight. With the curtain slightly ajar after watching Flint leave, she noticed a white male carrying a duffle bag, walking along Lewis's driveway. Focusing in on him, this man didn't attempt to go to Lewis's front door but rather took a direct path to Lewis's side door. Drawn closer to Flint's front window, Layla was gravely troubled to see that this man was wearing a pair of heavily worn

construction boots, blue jeans, and an army-colored sweatshirt.

With these features matching the most recent sighting of Jack Mantin, Layla eyed the man intently, watching as he covertly surveyed the surrounding area, giving off the distinct impression he was about to do something. Furtively shading himself away from the street, the man suddenly changed from his wary but casual demeanor to that of an assailing intruder. Bashing in the door's window with a large tire iron he had concealed underneath his sleeve, the man then swiftly reached through the broken window and opened Lewis's door.

Shocked, Layla was left with only the ability to watch as her normal reaction to call the police was off the table. Recoiling from the window, Layla ducked for a moment before returning a secretive stare. Hoping someone else had heard or seen the commotion, Layla scanned the neighbor's houses but didn't see any sort of action or response. Stuck with having the person she believed to be Jack Mantin so close, internally caused her pressure to build. Fearing as a professional hitman he might find some link to Flint that the FBI had missed, her worrying mind skyrocketed with the idea of him soon crossing the street.

Now only a half hour away from Flint's five o'clock time, Layla leaned on the idea his choice of time was probably arbitrarily chosen. Not coming up with a logical reason to wait any longer, Layla made the executive decision to take off now. Grabbing the necklace Flint had regifted her, a couple waters, the money he had set aside for her, his directions, and an apple, Layla ducked out Flint's back door. Stealthily cutting through his neighbor's yard, she anxiously worked her way around a fence, then bee-lined to a nearby road that paralleled his. Initially walking briskly along the sidewalk, Layla caught her suspicious haste and corrected her gait to more of a Sunday stroll.

Reminding herself to look as casual as possible, Layla's physical over-analysis was still echoed in how she walked, regardless of how hard she tried to mask it. To make this normal routine worse, Layla was occasionally forced to cross paths with other walkers. Feeling not saying or acknowledging someone would be odd, Layla tried to make a brief, but generally socially awkward comment. Overthinking this action as well, Layla complimented one man's hair while later getting tangled up in an unwanted conversation over an elderly woman's handbag. Making the decision to only smile after this, Layla gratefully noticed the first road on

Flint's list.

Turning right as directed, Layla was happy to see that this road led her out of the housing allotment and along a more rural path. Although an acceptable change, this new route meant she now had to contend with missing or less than attended to sidewalks. Recalling as the road stretched along, that Flint had advised she could turn at the street's first traffic light, Layla assumed this meant a shorter road. Unfortunately, this first traffic light, or even first street, was quite a distance from his neighborhood.

Checking his notes to make sure she was correct, while simultaneously worrying he might have goofed on the directions, Layla finally noticed a flashing light just around a sharp bend in the road. Crossing her fingers that she would find a sign labeled "Roberts Road", Layla's heart soon sank when at the intersection, no sign could be found. Now a little concerned, Layla trusted Flint's directions and turned left onto this no-named street regardless of this fact.

Being even more rural, this street didn't have any sidewalks and not a single house for the first several hundred yards. Starting to doubt herself, Layla got her first relief with the eventual sighting of a small bridge. Specifically mentioned in his notes, she also noticed a street and some houses opposed to it. Rereading his instructions, if she was indeed on the correct path, then the road following the bridge should only have a single flow of traffic. Somewhat holding her breath as most of the sparse traffic seemed to ignore the small street, it did in time, become apparent that any car which drove upon it, traveled in only one direction.

Rejuvenated, Layla was also pleased to see a bent street sign as she got closer. Focusing on it, Layla's trust was rewarded when she reached a comfortable reading distance. Stating "Ware Road" in white letters within a green field, Layla's eyes then cheated Flint's directions by counting out the fourth house on the street's left-hand side. A shabby two-story house with a large rental sign planted in the front yard, Layla encouragingly made her way over to it while surveying the area for any potential observers.

Only seeing one young kid riding his bike and an elderly man checking his mail, Layla tied her shoes and dragged her feet until the older man was out of sight. Seizing her chance, she discreetly made her way

around the back of the house and quickly spotted the door with the combination lock. Spinning the rotors until each number was set, Layla unlatched the lock and casually let herself inside.

◇
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Initially reaching for the rooms lights, she instantly remembered she wasn't supposed to turn them on. Recoiling her hand just as her fingers grazed the switch, Layla decided to first let her body settle in, before exploring her temporary refuge. During this moment of adjustment, Layla slowly found her way out of the mud room and into the connecting kitchen. Spotting the houses refrigerator, she elected to make a slight exception to her sensories acclimation by giving in for a prying gaze.

Being sure not to trigger the refrigerators light, Layla cautiously peered in. Stretching out her neck and squinting, she was surprised but pleased to see it contained some random goods. Inside the faded yellow fridge was a couple bottles of water, a case of generic soda, and even a misplaced frozen dinner which had clearly gone bad. Gently shutting the door, Layla paused to see if her slight action caused any sort of stir. Listening for the smallest squeak, creak, or groan, both the lack of noise and the lack of homely supplies eased her mind of any unexpected or unwelcomed guests.

With confidence in her temporary shelter, Layla more freely walked around the house, peering into each room for her own familiarity. Finding it had a couch and a bed with some blankets and pillows, was a nice bonus, after not knowing what the house's furnishing status would be. On the other hand, these few items were largely it, as the house was mostly barren, not even having a single roll of toilet paper in either of its restrooms. Happy to find a leftover bar of soap on the utility sink, Layla moved this over to the kitchen along with a roll of shop towels she had located in the garage.

Now with nothing to do, Layla found herself pacing the house out of boredom. Feeling she should stay vigilant over taking a nap, her continual roaming about the house was sometimes interrupted by the outside glimpse of a person. Generally one of the neighboring kids kicking a ball or running up and down the relatively lifeless street, Layla still took the cautious approach, by not touching the blinds and only looking through

what was already open.

This arid and tediously slow wait for Ethan went on well past the time she had expected. Not having a watch or a clock, Layla was forced to guess her wait by the most basic of means. With the day's sun tickling the tops of some distant trees, she calculated a time of about seven thirty based on her recollection from a prior day. Deliberating the meaning of this delay, Layla's first thought was one of a glass half full. Maybe Ethan didn't need to meet up with her due to a long but productive meeting between Flint and his supervisor. Layla split this thought and conceived a theory that maybe his supervisor was also looking into the fire and had simply kept it quiet. This segued into a rabbit hole of ideas where now even Mantin was under arrest.

Regardless of however any positive angles her mind could concoct, the more she waited, the more her thoughts turned bleak. How would Flint have signaled to Ethan to wait? Why wouldn't at least one of them have shown up? What if Flint, Ethan, or both had somehow been apprehended? These thoughts and many others steadily increased in severity as the sun went down and the moon came up. Growing restless as the stars began to shine, her earlier acts of discrete peers now became overt and prolonged stairs, even to the point of moving the drapes and cracking a window in order to better hear the sounds of any approaching cars.

Now getting worked up, Layla gradually started to feel a dull pain which started at her head and spread to both sides of her neck. Slowly feeling her tensions grow, Layla eventually took up a seat on the living rooms couch. Tilting her head back for comfort, she occasionally sipped on a cool bottle of water to help soothe her strain. Purposefully losing track of time, she kept her head back and her eyes closed until she heard the sounds of a man grumbling and tools clashing.

Slowly getting up, Layla reverted back to her more guarded state and only faintly peered out the front window. In doing so, she was able to see a single man on the roadway tending to a truck. As he was a distance away, and it was now fairly dark, all she could discern from him was that he was on the younger side, skinny and very distraught. Banging away on his truck which appeared to have a flat tire, in time he seemed to abandon his frustrated attempts to remove it. Taking a few alleviating paces away from his work, he eventually returned to the bed of his truck and retrieved a spare tire. Rolling it next to the one he was working on, he

again knelt on the ground and started to work on the rims lug nuts, this time using a hammer and pipe for added leverage.

Figuring this was not Ethan, Layla still concentrated on the man's face to see if she could make out his facial features. Watching him as he exhaustively tossed up his hands after failing to break loose the remaining nuts, Layla confirmed with this gesture that he did not have a mustache or any facial hair at all. Sympathetic to the man's plight, Layla inwardly thought about helping the struggled young man but held back her normal supportive instinct because of her own difficult situation.

Gradually fading herself from the windows view, Layla turned for the room's couch but was abruptly frozen in place by the outline of a figure standing in the kitchen. Taken by surprise, Layla gasped as she tried to move her non-responsive legs, causing her to stumble. Unsure of who this was, she continued to tensely backpedal until she ran out of room, bumping into the wall next to the window. Caught in what to say or do, Layla tried her best to stay calm, not wanting to assume this person's intents.

Pressed against the wall and staring upwards at the taller male figure, her mind raced in question, contemplating both an apologetic greeting or a hasty dash for the door. Judging him by his body language and his other nonverbal clues, Layla's choice was made harder when he spoke up.

"Layla Clifton, I trust? I've put in a lot of time and effort into finding you."

Clearly not something she felt Ethan would say, Layla instantly deduced it wasn't him, but was still caught in how to react. Speaking in a calm and non-combative tone, the man didn't lunge or even step towards her upon seeing her reflexive retreat. Confounded, Layla did not reply as she tried to make sense of it all. Seeing she was not going to respond, the man spoke out again.

"Well, if you are not Layla Clifton, then you sure look a lot like her. Her face has been all over the news. Plus, I was under the impression she was the only one with permission to be here. So maybe I should call the police if you are not her?"

“No. That’s alright. I’m her. I mean, I am Layla Clifton.” She quickly voiced, not wanting the police involved.

“And who are you?” She then retorted, hoping he was somehow sent by Flint or Ethan.

“I am the head of the East Redwell resident office. George Dyson, of the FBI. I’m sure you have heard of me? Supervisory special agent for East Redwell?” He sharply replied, still shielded in shadow.

Shattered to hear this, Layla instantly knew something had gone wrong. Now in a desperate spot, Layla stalled in thought. Accidentally glancing at the door, George caught this evasive intrigue and commented upon it.

“You won’t get far if you try that. The man outside fixing the tire is one of my men. You’re sewed in right now. So have a seat and let’s talk. Okay?”

Accepting temporary defeat, Layla conceded his point while realizing the disabled vehicle had been a distraction. Taking a seat on the far side of the couch, she inadvertently held her breath as she awaited his next move.

“You, Flint... and I guess Ethan, have been quite the annoyance.” He started off with, as he stepped out of the obscurity of the kitchen, and into the living room.

“But, that is over. I can call off the dogs now, right?”

Looking up at the older well-dressed man, Layla acknowledged what he said, but not what he meant.

“Good, very good. As is this has been too messy... too cluttered. I already had to call in a few favors from the other FBI offices, I had to twist some arms, I even had to turn some less-than-willing minds just to be able to tamp out this... difficulty. I don’t like doing that... getting that many hands involved. All I ever wanted was that briefcase. Your husband was an accident. I didn’t mean for any of that to happen, Layla,” he unconvincingly overstated.

“Now, all I want is whatever memory card or computer you used to download the footage from your husband’s body camera,” he voiced while holding up his hand, as if he had more to add.

“And please, spare us both the time and hassle. We fingerprinted the camera’s memory card and found your fingerprints on it. So I know you took it out and stored its contents somewhere. I just need to know where and if anyone else has it?”

Recalling what he meant, she was confronted with the problem of having touched the memory card, but having not seen or recorded anything from it. The revelation of what he was seeking was also doubled in complexity with what he might do when he discovered she didn’t have anything to give. Mentally playing out a couple of quick scenarios, the eventuality of each storyline ending in the same manner, persuaded her to play the honest card.

“Ummm. Well, your fingerprint experts are right. I did touch the memory card, but I never viewed or downloaded whatever was on it. I did think about it. But the card was an odd size, so I didn’t try to do anything with it. I just put it back into the camera and let it be. I figured the size was a safeguard so that people like me wouldn’t be able to mess with it. Plus I didn’t want to potentially ruin anything on it. So I don’t have anything. I never had anything.”

Hearing her out, George’s judgmental mannerisms clearly indicated he didn’t believe her explanation. Staring her down for a while, he reset himself and tried again.

“Layla. I know that’s not true. The card’s shape or size doesn’t matter. We were able to view its contents just using a regular laptop. So I know you’re lying. However, Layla, I’ll forgive you this one time since maybe you’re not understanding the seriousness of the situation. Now, forget all this and just tell me where the downloads are.”

Stuck with the fact she honestly didn’t have anything, Layla coughed out a frustrated laugh and then tried to explain herself again.

“I don’t know what to say. Yes, I took the memory card out. But when I saw it, I thought I couldn’t do anything with it. I, I don’t know what else to tell you. That’s the truth.”

Unconvinced, George hammered his fist against the wall and instantly changed his tone.

“No!” He yelled, with fire in his eyes.

“I’m not playing games with you. This isn’t the time!”

Checking his loud outburst, George paused for a moment to calm himself. Then, standing up straight while clearing his throat, he continued in his original, more peaceful tone.

“So. This can all be over right here. Things will go back to normal and we can put all of this behind us.”

Catching that his “right here” and “go back to normal” comments were both vague and didn’t include her future, Layla inverted the question and called him out.

“What about me? How would I go back to my life without questions? And what about Flint and Ethan? Are their lives’ going to go back to normal? What even happened to them? If you could let me talk to Flint, it would go a long way in making me feel more comfortable.”

Giving her an ominous smirk, his lack of details concerning either in his reply wasn’t missed by Layla.

“You don’t need to worry about them. Their affairs are separate from ours. You need to concentrate on yourself.”

“Well, you leaving them out isn’t inspiring much confidence. It undeniably comes off as you did something to them and you’re just leaving that part out so you don’t scare me off.”

“Flint made a mistake. I guess it is what it is, but I didn’t expect that out of him. Ethan wasn’t...” He tried to explain before being interrupted by Layla.

“How’d he make a mistake? By trying to help me? You just got done talking about not playing any games, but you’re the one doing so. Cut it straight. Regardless of what was in the briefcase or what was

recorded on that camera... you killed Wynn and are just making sure it's covered up. How is Flint helping me hide from something or someone like that a mistake?"

Impressed with her bold offensive, George nodded and did as she asked.

"I don't blame him for helping a former girlfriend. Especially one he considers to be the 'one that got away'. I can understand and can appreciate that. No, his mistake was trying to record me," he grimly advised, confirming he did somehow find out about Flint's plan.

"That's a no, no. Maybe if he would've approached me, we could have worked something out. I don't know. But trying to get me in trouble... jail me... is a problem. Unfortunately for him, and fortunately for me, Ethan isn't a polished criminal, someone used to lying in order to cover over a mistake. I caught him coming out of my room, which is fine by itself, he does have a job to do. But his reaction to seeing me, particularly in his eyes, told me something was off. He gave me that kind of look a kid gives their parents when they've been caught doing something they shouldn't. He didn't say it, but I knew something was amiss." George explained before pausing in thought.

"Wait. Stand up." He then directed her as he stepped forward.

Following his orders, Layla did so, unsure of what had triggered his abrupt change. Not wasting any time, George brushed by her and checked the couch for any listening or recording devices. Going as far as to check underneath the couch, he then had Layla raise her arms so that he could pat her down. Satisfied with the couch and Layla, he also did a quick cursory check of the surrounding area, turning on the kitchen lights and opening every drawer. Eventually eased of any subterfuge, he turned off the lights and chuckled.

"That should have been your plan. You might have gotten me had you also been recording. But I'm guessing Flint wasn't willing to take it that far. He wanted you away from the danger. He gave himself up, but he wasn't willing to give you up. That was his key mistake. He wasn't willing to take it all the way."

"Did you kill them then?" She asked with a disdainful look.

“I gave them a choice. Tell me where you are, and I will show them pity. From there, it was up to them. Ethan spoke up first. To their credit, maybe from your perspective, neither of them did it right away. So I had to, persuade them a little,” he said with an intentional halt in his speech.

“Eventually I sent some of my guys out to toss Flint’s house, then threatened to do the same to Ethan’s, before I made some headway. But don’t blame him, he has a family to think about. The point is, as I tried to spell out to them, I need X... and I’m going to eventually get it. All roads lead to the same destination. So like them, you’re only making things harder on yourself by refusing to accept the inevitable.”

“Okay,” Layla solely replied to his strong-armed tactic.

Seeing that her “Okay” wasn’t meant as a concession, George then pivoted from his verbal maneuverings to one of threats.

“Fine. You have until Craig puts that tire on and knocks on the front door. Then your time’s up... and you better hurry. I told him not to mess around with the tire for long after his little acting job,” he said, coldly staring her down.

Knowing she had nothing to give, Layla was forced to quickly come up with another way out. Rapidly thinking over every other option that haste would allow, panic over an impending knock soon forced her to choose guilt. This, she hoped, might trigger some amount of sympathy or even an unknown solution that might go in her favor.

“George, you don’t have to do anything rash. Whatever reasoning there was behind the briefcase is over. It’s gone. Nothing’s going to come up about it. Even if there was a recording out there with Wynn, nobody would be able to trace back the briefcases contents to whatever was going on with it. Nobody at the PD opened it or could tell you anything about it. So you were successful in keeping it under wraps.” She rambled urgently, hoping her random thoughts might strike a cord.

“The more you keep going with this, the more loose ends you’re going to keep having. If it’s not me, then it will be some other witness or passerby. On top of that, the more strange occurrences that keep

happening, the more likely it is people will start asking questions. If I'm safe, visible, merry, and content, all future questioning won't have anywhere to go."

"My benefactors don't like the idea of possibilities. Jobs are not done halfway and all tracks are covered. You aren't appreciating how high this goes. What is at stake and what was in that briefcase. The people don't need to know, so the table needs to be clean."

Callously denying her any pity, he stared at her with a cutting eye, not remotely concerned about her or her position. Left bare, Layla's problems worsened when a spine-chilling knock came from the front door. Giving her a careless gaze, George showed his lack of mind, by immediately walking over to the door. Stopping only to fiddle with the lock, he made one more ominous remark.

"It would behoove you to have a change of heart now. I'm actually the more charitable one."

Closing her eyes in exceptional distress, a coldness went over her body as the door unlocked and the hinges cried out, almost as if they were apologizing for giving way. Anxiously awaiting the voice of doom, a surprising question leaped from George's mouth.

"Who are you?"

Just as puzzled, Layla cautiously opened her eyes to see what had caused the sudden shift. Peering towards the door, she noticed that George had taken a cautious step back as he likewise, tried to comprehend what was taking place.

"Put your hands up!" An excited but amateur-sounding voice rang out, demanding George do so.

Initially complying, George seemed to judge the moment and made a split-second choice to lunge at the unknown guest. Vaulting himself out the door, an obvious struggle ensued, in which Layla could hear the unmistakable sounds of a physical encounter. Growing in intensity, a desperate cry called out before the sound of a muffled gunshot echoed throughout the immediate vicinity. Followed by a brief calm, a painful moan then emerged accompanied by the sounds of tape being strung.

Unsure of how to interpret this, the thought of fleeing crossed her mind until she lost her chance.

“Are you okay?” She heard from an unknown man who staggered into the living room and fell onto the floor.

Both surprised and bewildered by what had just occurred, Layla initially shuddered at his appearance before digesting his helpful message. Now tentatively trying to render aid, she did so while also looking outside to see what had happened. Not seeing anything, she carefully checked him over and asked him what was going on.

“Are you okay? Did you get shot?”

Noticing he had an empty holster on his side, the man quickly shook her off and instructed her to find his gun.

“Ughh... hurry. I dropped my gun. Look for it.”

Promptly following his order, Layla went outside and scanned the immediate area. Naturally turning right, her eyes frantically hunted the landscape for anything shiny. Dark already, the blended effect of shaded corners without the aid of a porch light forced her to drop to her knees. Combing her hands through the overgrown weeds, Layla picked up or pushed aside several rocks but did not find a gun.

Having no success, Layla reversed course and moved over to the left side of the steps. Staying on the ground, Layla continued to crawl until she noticed George. Balled up only a few feet away from the house, he painfully exhaled as he likewise noticed her. With a brief pause and understanding of what was being sought, both broke their exchange and feverishly searched for the gun.

Groaning as he swept the unkempt grass and fallen foliage, both simultaneously spotted the gun just to the left of a nearby brick pathway. Not wasting any time, both leaped for the gun, meeting at the same point at the same time. Wildly sparring over it, Layla found herself in the more favorable position as she was the first to take a firm grasp over it. Backpedaling towards the house, Layla quickly gave him a firm verbal warning.

“Don’t!” she sharply voiced, while pointing the gun at him.

Recognizing the seriousness within her voice, George paused until his momentary spout of adrenaline wore off. Feeling the bite of a thirty-eight caliber bullet reenter his consciousness, George again doubled over with a blunt burn coming from within his abdomen. Taking the moment to regroup, her brief respite was interrupted by the groans of her helping hand.

“My phone is recording outside the open window, hit save and call nine, one, one for the police and an ambulance.” The man said, with a short halt in his speech.

“Then find the duct tape and use it to secure that guy. It should be on the ground somewhere near him.”

Following his voice back inside the house, Layla first tried to tend to him. Despite his personal pain, the man rejected her offers and insisted that she tend to these tasks first. Obliging, Layla saved his recording, called for help, and then found the duct tape in the grass. Now more tempered than she had previously been, Layla noticed that the unknown man must have already tried to secure George, but had failed to completely do so. Discovering torn sections of tape near his wrists and ankles, Layla gently reapplied more tape, showing George the sympathy he had not.

Completing these tasks she returned to the man in the living room. Finding him still on the floor, she knelt down next to him and asked him how she could help.

“What hurts? Can I do anything?”

“Is the ambulance coming?” He asked, obviously in pain.

“Yes. I called them. They are on their way. Are you shot? Did you get hit?”

“No,” he replied while squinting.

“It’s my chest. I had surgery and I think I overexerted myself,” he added with a gasp.

“Surgery? What type of surgery? Why are you here and not in bed?”

“Your name’s Layla Clifton right?” he asked while trying to swallow back his pain.

“I am. Do I know you?” She replied, surprised he knew her name.

“No. No, you don’t. But part of me knows you. I had a congenital heart defect when I was born and needed a new heart. When your husband passed away, I received his. I managed to find out it was from him through some contacts I have at the hospital.”

Astonished and overwhelmed in how to interpret this, Layla didn’t reply as he went on.

“I’ve heard that sometimes memories and feelings get shared during these types of operations. After mine, when I saw your picture on the television, I felt an overwhelming desire to help. So much so that I can barely sleep. I’m always thinking about you.” He said while taking a moment to hold back a sharp burst of pain.

“I’m sorry if I ever scared you. I was just trying to find you to help.”

“Scared me? Why would you have scared me? I don’t even know you.”

“Oh. Well, my name is Jack Mantin. I heard the police were looking to arrest me because they thought I was some sort of mob hitman or stalker, which I am not. I’ve inwardly felt you were in danger, and I quickly got the feeling the law was not to be trusted. I didn’t know what I should one hundred percent do, so whenever I heard you were in a certain area, I just poked my head around.”

“Wait a minute, your name is Jack? Yeah... I was petrified of you! I thought you were hired to hunt me down. Didn’t you just break into a house not too far away from here?” she asked, referring to Lewis’s house.

“Yes. I heard the FBI was looking into an older guy they thought might know something about you, so I also took a look. I’m not a criminal. I’ve never, ever, done anything like that before in my life. But I felt I had to. To see if I could find you. So yes, I did break in.”

“Yeah, I saw you. I was thinking the exact opposite. I was across the street and ran. But how did you find me here?”

“When I was inside the house you saw me go into, I noticed an abrupt flurry of traffic pull into the house you must have been at. Whoever they were, ripped the house apart, then left. Since it was so close to where I was, I figured it was somehow connected, although those guys didn’t have on any FBI gear. After they left, I had a peek myself and found some directions in the trash. I then just went up and down the streets that were listed until I noticed a younger guy in a truck pull into this driveway. He got out holding a knife and some tape. His intents didn’t come off as very cordial, so I pointed my gun at him and kind of arrested him with his tape. Then I went over to the house and heard you guys talking inside. So I hit record on my phone and let you guys talk. The things he said sounded like things you would want saved,” he added before stopping to grasp his chest.

“Awww,” he grunted through his clenched teeth.

Worried for him, Layla scrambled to think of something to do. Getting up and running into the kitchen, she grabbed the roll of shop towels and dampened them. Returning to his side, she applied the cool towels to his forehead in an effort to ease his discomfort. Somewhat working, she then asked him if there was anything else she could do.

“Ummm. I definitely overexerted myself,” he responded, trying to take in a few calming breaths.

“But this will do. Cold things have been relaxing to me lately, so it does help. Thank you,” he said as he propped himself up a little.

“Actually, this might sound a little silly, but as of late, I can’t get enough cool things, like a big bowl of ice cream or a snow cone. They make me feel good, calm, kind of tranquil. Similar to how trying to find you did. Does that sound strange?”

“No. That sounds about right.”