



# WITHOUT A TRACE

PHIL M. WILLIAMS

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# PROLOGUE

2009

HIS MOTHER'S CELL PHONE BUZZED AS SHE PARKED HER HYUNDAI Elantra. Justin watched from his car seat as she flipped open her phone.

A robotic voice said, "*An inmate from State Correctional Facility Mahanoy...*"

"*Chandler Frye,*" said a man's voice.

"...is on the line. If you would like to accept the charges, please press one—"

His mother snapped shut her phone. She bowed her head.

"Mom?" Justin asked. "Are you okay?"

She rubbed her temples and faced her son. "I'm fine, honey."

Justin unlatched the buckle and slid out of his car seat to the footwell. He was four years old, old enough for a booster seat, but still much too small. "Do I have to go in?"

His mother eyed the four-story brick-box building. "Your great-uncle will be very sad if you don't come in."

"He doesn't even know."

She slumped her shoulders. "I know it seems that way, but he knows a lot more than you think. It's important to help others. Can you be a good boy for me?"

"Okay, Mom." Justin exited the car. He used both hands to shut the car door.

She took her son's hand and they walked to the front entrance. The air was sweet, a mix of blooming lilacs and freshly cut grass. Arborvitae

framed the entrance. The sign over the glass doors read *Wernersville State Hospital*.

Just inside, his mother signed in and showed her license to the security guard, while Justin held on to her leg. The security guard narrowed his eyes at his mother, checked her driver's license, then narrowed his eyes again.

“You’re thirty-two?” he asked.

She tucked her brown hair behind her ears. “Yes, sir.” It wasn’t that she appeared that young in the face, with dark circles around her eyes and laugh lines, but she was very petite, barely five feet tall and one pound shy of one hundred.

The security guard handed her license back. The big metal door buzzed. She took her son’s hand, and they slipped inside.

They took the elevator to the second floor. The doors opened to a wide hallway lined with linoleum. As they walked, their steps echoed through the hallway.

At the nurse’s station, Martisha said, “Good afternoon, Agatha.”

His mother forced a smile for the Jamaican nurse and said, “Thanks, Martisha. How are you?”

“Oh, quite well, *tan* you very much.”

Justin’s mother signed in and asked, “How is he today?”

“Like usual. Quiet. Well-behaved.”

They found Uncle Ellis in the activity room, sitting on a couch, staring into space. He was small for a man, his grayish-white hair disheveled, and his beady blue eyes vacant.

Justin’s mother hugged Ellis.

He didn’t react.

When she let go, she said, “Hi, Ellis. How is everything?”

Ellis peered through Justin’s mother.

Justin eyed Ellis’s head. A round scar marked his receding hairline, an inch above his right temple. The last time they’d visited Uncle Ellis, Justin had asked his mother about it. She had said that it was from a gun, and that was why he was sick. His mother had been adamant, making Justin promise never to touch a gun.

His mother sat on the couch next to Ellis. Justin crawled onto the couch and leaned against her.

“The weather is so nice today,” she said. “I think the winter is finally over.”

Ellis blinked and said, "Winter... bad. Cold. Winter cold."

Justin's mother beamed. "That's right, Ellis. You're so smart. Winter *is* cold." She hugged herself and rubbed her shoulders, animating the idea.

"Cold Cecil." Ellis's lip quivered as if straining for the words. "Bad and..." Ellis winced and rubbed his temples just as Justin's mother had.

She patted him on the leg. "I know, but we don't have to worry about him."

Ellis shook his head. "Worry, worry, worry."

"You don't need to worry about him. He's not interested in us."

This wasn't the first time Ellis had mentioned Cecil during their visits. Justin had asked his mother about Cecil four visits ago.

She'd said, "He's my father and your grandfather."

Justin had been confused. "Why do you call him Herb?"

"Cecil is a different grandfather. He's not a nice man, so we don't talk to him."

"How come?"

"It's complicated."

Justin's mother carried the conversation, mostly talking about her job as a nurse at Good Samaritan Hospital.

Justin surveyed the activity room, which was what Martisha called it, but Ellis never did anything, even if the name of the room said it was for doing things. A flat-screen television hung from the far wall. Several patients sat on the sectional couch, watching a game show. Bright-colored artwork hung from the walls, many of the pieces painted by patients.

A disheveled slack-jawed man shuffled into the activity room. He circled the room and stopped in front of the television. The patients watching television shouted. The slack-jawed man scurried away. He stopped twenty feet from the couch Justin shared with his mother and great-uncle. The man stared at them, vibrating.

Justin tugged on his mother's arm.

"What is it, honey?" she asked.

Justin pointed at the trembling man. "There's something wrong with that man."

She grabbed his outstretched hand and brought it back to his body. She whispered, "Don't point, Justin. It's rude."

"But Mom. There's something wrong with him."

His mother whispered in his ear. “Stop staring. Leave the man alone, okay?”

Justin nodded and stared at the floor.

His mother continued her story. “Doctor Watkins was so happy with my work that he’s recommending me for the ER. The ER’s more stressful, but also more rewarding.”

“Come... evil... is,” Ellis said.

The vibrating man shuffled closer, his shoes appearing in Justin’s line of sight. Justin raised his gaze. The man quaked so violently that he was a blur. He reached into his pocket and revealed a toothbrush, but he flipped it around, holding the implement by the bristles. The handle had been sharpened to a point.

It all happened in an instant. The man screamed like a banshee. He raised his makeshift knife and lunged at Justin, but his mother stepped in between. The man plunged his shank into her neck. When he removed the implement, blood squirted in a thick stream, and she dropped to her knees. She held her neck, her hands red and slippery.

Men in scrubs rushed to the scene, taking the vibrating man to the floor and restraining him. Others worked on Justin’s mother, but it was too late. Justin watched his mother’s eyes dim, never to see him again.

ONE  
2024

JUSTIN SCANNED A LARGE MAP OF LEBANON, PENNSYLVANIA, AND THE surrounding areas, tacked to a corkboard. A bright red pushpin marked Lebanon Valley Mall where he worked. A twenty-mile radius was drawn around the mall in black Sharpie. Fifty-two black pushpins with white numbers on the faces resided inside the circle. The numbers denoted open cases of missing people. A second corkboard held pictures of people with little numbers scrawled on the corners that corresponded to the numbers on the pushpins. Justin inspected the pictures, committing their faces, names, and their bios to memory.

He retrieved his phone from the front pocket of his slacks and checked the time—9:43 a.m. He inspected his LVM Security uniform in the mirror. Then he grabbed his keys from his dresser top. The keychain was a shiny silver AirTag, a disk featuring the Apple logo.

When he left his bedroom, he encountered a young woman in his living room, tiptoeing from his roommate's bedroom in a tight slinky dress, holding her heels, her makeup smudged, and her hair disheveled.

Justin raised his hand. "Good morning."

She blushed, not meeting Justin's eyes. "Oh, *um*, good morning."

"You need a ride home?"

She slipped on her heels, nearly toppling in the process. "I have an Uber coming." She scurried from the apartment.

Justin followed her out. She nearly fell down the stairs, but he pretended not to notice.

---

Foot traffic was light as Justin patrolled the mall. Polished tiles shimmered under the glow of fluorescent lighting. Storefronts offered their wares, everything from fashion to tech gadgets. Background music played overhead, an elevator version of some 80s hit. One-third of the stores were unoccupied, dark, the security gates pulled down.

Two middle-aged women trembled, but it was barely noticeable. An older man with his wife trembled as he ogled a younger woman. Near the fountain, two muscle-bound men strutted with their arms out, their muscles too big for their arms to hang normally. They both vibrated. A smaller bookish man meandered, his gaze on the bubbling water. The muscle-bound men saw the little man, but the little man didn't see them.

Justin rushed to the scene just as one of the meatheads shoulder-checked the bookish man, knocking him to the ground, his glasses sliding across the floor.

“Watch where you’re goin’,” one of the meatheads said.

Justin grabbed the glasses, helped the bookish man to his feet, and handed him his specs. “Are you okay, sir?”

The man took his glasses. “I think I’m okay. Thank you.”

“Why would you do that?” Justin asked the muscular men.

“I didn’t do nothin’. He needs to watch where he’s goin’,” one of the meatheads said.

“You could’ve moved. You saw him.”

The meathead shrugged. “What the fuck are you gonna do about it, mini-mall cop?”

The bookish little man scurried away, leaving Justin alone with the meatheads.

“I can ask you to leave the premises,” Justin said.

The meatheads snickered. They bumped Justin as they left, likely headed to GNC for some protein powder. Justin ducked his chin, embarrassed, then continued his patrol. As he neared Abbasi Electronics, he spotted a teen vibrating when he entered the store. Justin followed him.

Abbasi Electronics used to be Kay Jewelers, so it still had glass counters protecting much of the merchandise, although there were several open displays in the middle of the store for phone cases, chargers, various headphones, and flash drives.

Rakesh Abbasi helped a couple at the glass counter, showing them a laptop. The teen vibrated while browsing the headphones, some of them over one hundred dollars. He glanced at Rakesh and the couple, then grabbed the headphones, and shoved them in the front pocket of his hoodie.

“I wouldn’t do that if I was you,” Justin said.

The teen startled and faced Justin, a bulge in the front pocket of his hoodie. “What?”

Justin gestured to the bulge. “You know what.”

The teen retrieved the headphones from his pocket. “I wasn’t gonna steal nothin’, li’l bitch. I was just holdin’ it.”

Rakesh and the couple pivoted to the argument.

“I didn’t say anything about stealing,” Justin said.

“Whatever. I don’t want this shit anyway.” The would-be thief glared at Justin and dropped the headphones on the floor. He snapped his tongue off the roof of his mouth and sauntered from the store as if he’d been falsely accused.

Justin picked up the headphones and hung them on the display.

“Have you settled on this laptop?” Rakesh asked.

The couple turned their attention back to Rakesh.

“We’re offering ten percent off today.”

The man said, “Even with the discount, we can get this same laptop for like fifty bucks cheaper at Costco.”

“I’ll set it up for free.”

The man shook his head. “Naw. I don’t think so.”

“Thanks,” the woman said.

The couple left the store.

“Thank you for coming in,” Rakesh said to their backs.

Justin met Rakesh at the counter. Rakesh was short, but not abnormally short like Justin—with a stubbly beard, wavy black hair fit for a movie star, and a wide nose.

“What happened with that kid?” Rakesh asked.

“He was gonna steal some headphones,” Justin replied.

“Thanks, bro. That’s the second time. How are you always in the right place at the right time?”

“Lucky, I guess. I hope I didn’t ruin your sale.”

“They weren’t going to buy. The guy was so cheap, he probably negotiates at the Dollar Store.” Rakesh guffawed.

Justin smirked. “Haha.”

“You didn’t like that one?”

“Not your best work.” Justin surveyed the store. “Where’s your dad? I haven’t seen him in the shop lately.”

“He’s working at the chicken plant in Fredericksburg. Sales have been rough lately, so we need the extra money to keep the shop open.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Rakesh shrugged. “We’ll be okay. I’m trying to get more hours with my other job.”

Justin furrowed his brow. “How many jobs do you have?”

“Just two. I work part-time for a private investigation firm.”

“That’s cool. What kind of cases do you work on?”

“I don’t work on any cases. They do mostly corporate investigations. Fraud. Stuff like that. I fix their computers and make sure everything is updated and their network is working okay. It’s only eight hours a week, sometimes less.”

“Well, I’m glad you guys are hanging in there. I feel like a store closes every week.”

“I try not to think about it.”

Justin nodded.

“So, how’s your girl in the food court?” Rakesh asked.

“She’s not my girl. I’ve never even talked to her.”

“There’s no time like the present.” Rakesh removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. “Go get me some lunch and talk to her.”

Justin stared at the cash. “I don’t know.”

“What do mean, you don’t know? You like her, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

Justin let out a heavy breath. “I don’t even know her.”

“I thought you went to school with her.”

“I did, but we never talked.”

“How are you supposed to get to know her if you don’t talk to her?” Rakesh shoved the cash at Justin again. “*Talk to her.*”

“It’ll ruin everything.”

“There’s nothing to ruin, my friend. She’s nothing but a possibility to you.”

“That’s *not* nothing. When I see her at the food court, I feel good, but if I talk to her, she’ll reject me, and that good feeling I had will then be... not so good.” Justin bowed his head.

Rakesh sighed. “Would you still get me some lunch? I’m starving.”

Justin took the cash. “What do you want?”

“California Pizza Kitchen.”

Justin frowned. “That’s not what you want.”

“I want pizza.”

Justin cocked one eyebrow. “*Really?*”

“You don’t have to talk to her. Just order me a Mediterranean pizza and a Coke.”

---

Justin trudged to the food court with Rakesh’s cash in his pocket. He stopped fifty feet from the fast-food vendors, the seating area of plastic chairs and metal tables serving as a buffer from his crush. A handful of shoppers ate an early lunch, but most of the seats were unoccupied. Many food vendors had closed over the past few years, leaving half of the stalls empty. Despite this, a fusion of cinnamon, grilled meat, and onion hung in the air.

Grace stood at the counter of California Pizza Kitchen reading a book. Her dirty blond hair was unruly, parted to one side, hanging past her shoulders. She wasn’t classically beautiful, with a large nose, slightly crooked teeth, and squinty blue eyes, but to Justin, she was perfect. He took a deep breath and approached the pizza place.

As he neared the stall, Grace shut her book, her bookmark in place. His heart pounded; his face felt hot. *Will she recognize me from high school?*

“How can I help you?” she asked.

She was a couple of inches taller than him, which wasn’t uncommon, as he was 5’2”, maybe 5’3” if he stood up really straight. Justin ordered the

Mediterranean pizza and a Coke. He paid with the twenty Rakesh had given him. Her hand brushed against his as she dropped the coins into his hand followed by the bills, her touch sending a jolt of electricity through his body.

He shoved the change into his pocket and watched her prepare his pizza.

Once it was in the pizza oven, she said, "It'll be, like, fifteen minutes. You want a buzzer?" She held up a black disk which would flash and buzz when an order was ready.

"Um... okay, thanks." He took the disk and left the stall.

While he waited, he patrolled the nearby area, thinking about what he could say to Grace. When it was ready, he hurried back to the California Pizza Kitchen.

She was reading a paperback titled *The Black Widower*.

"Is it any good?" he asked.

Grace startled and raised her gaze. "Oh my God. You scared me. You're like a ninja." But she didn't answer his question. She placed the pizza in a to-go bag and set it on the counter with his Coke. "You're all set."

He gestured to her paperback. "I was just wondering about your book. Is it any good?"

"Oh." She checked the cover, like she'd forgotten what she was reading. "It's pretty good. It's true crime. I'm a true crime junkie. It's about this guy who killed his wife by pushing his Jeep on top of her when they were changing the tire."

Justin grimaced. "Brutal."

"I know. And he *totally* got away with it. Got a big insurance settlement too. Then he married this rich doctor and pushed her off a mountain."

"Whoa. Did he get another settlement?"

"He had a massive life insurance policy on her. Much bigger than his first wife. Not sure if he'll collect, though. I think the police are finally figuring him out." Grace flipped through the pages she'd yet to read. "I still have a lot left."

A handsome man appeared at the counter, towering over Justin.

Grace turned her attention to the man, all smiles. "Welcome to California Pizza Kitchen."

Justin left with Rakesh's lunch.

## TWO

# SIMPIN' AIN'T EASY

JUSTIN PARKED HIS KIA RIO IN THE GRAVEL PARKING LOT, CUT THE engine, and departed his econocar. His apartment building was a converted colonial, three stories tall, four units on each level. The siding, once white, was now a dingy gray. Two floodlights pointed down from the corners of the building, illuminating the parking lot.

Two teen boys straddled their E-bikes, eyeballing a young woman who stood with many cardboard boxes near the front entrance. She crossed her arms over her chest, tapped her feet, and watched the parking area and the road beyond. She was slightly shorter than Justin, with wavy blond hair to the middle of her back. Her short shorts and low-cut blouse exposed a shapely body. Despite the scowl on her round face, she was angelic, her skin radiant under the fluorescent flood lights.

Justin wouldn't have said anything to the young woman, but she stood right next to the front entrance, so he said, "Hello." As he fished his keys from his pocket, the young woman eyed his uniform, so he asked, "Are you okay?"

The young woman sulked. "Someone was supposed to help me with all these boxes." She glanced at the two teens with the E-bikes near the road. "I didn't wanna leave my stuff alone, so I've been here waiting like *forever*."

"What's your apartment number?"

"Three C."

“You’re right next to me. I’m in 3D. If you want, I can help you with those boxes.”

She simpered. “You would do that?”

“Of course. We’re neighbors.” He held out his hand. “I’m Justin.”

She took his fingers lightly. “Leah.”

Justin moved the boxes from outside into the first floor hallway. Leah helped, but she moved half as many boxes as he did. Once the boxes were all inside and safe from the teen lurkers, they carried them upstairs. The stairwell smelled like piss, which was reiterated by the spray-painted graffiti that read *SMELLS LIKE PISS*. Justin followed Leah to 3C, each of them carrying a cardboard box. Leah let them into the empty apartment, instructing Justin where to leave his box.

“I’m gonna ask my roommate to give us a hand,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Justin went to his next-door apartment. He heard gunshots, police sirens, and the revving of a high-horsepower engine. He entered his apartment to find Kyle on their black leather couch playing *Grand Theft Auto V*. Kyle was glued to the flat-screen as his Ferrari zipped around the corner, clipping a pedestrian, the police in hot pursuit. The game was old, debuting eleven years ago, but Kyle and Justin had grown up in a group home without video games, so when they’d turned eighteen and moved to the apartment, Kyle’s first purchase had been a PlayStation 5 and *Grand Theft Auto V*.

“I need your help,” Justin said.

“With what?” Kyle asked, not taking his eyes off the game. With an athletic build and Waspy good looks, he could play the college quarterback or the fraternity president in a movie, although he’d never played football or attended college.

“Our new neighbor needs help carrying her boxes.”

“What floor?”

“She’s right next door to us.”

“Three floors. Fuck that. Tell her to get a mover or a boyfriend. What does she look like?”

“She’s pretty.”

Kyle paused his game. “Is she out front?”

“She’s in her apartment, waiting for us to help her.”

“Why don’t you ask her out?”

Justin frowned. “Come on, bro.”

“You said she’s hot. You should ask her out.”

“I said she was pretty, not hot.”

“You don’t think she’s hot?”

Justin groaned. “I didn’t say that.”

Kyle grinned. “So you *do* think she’s hot.”

“Okay, fine. She’s hot.”

Kyle pointed at Justin. “I knew it.”

“Are you gonna help?”

“Fuck no. I’m no simp. If she’s hot, she probably has a boyfriend.”

“I don’t know. I think she would’ve mentioned him.”

Kyle shook his head. “Not if she’s trying to get some simp to be a free mover.”

“I already told her I would help her.”

“Then help her, but at least shoot your shot.”

“I don’t wanna be weird, like I’m only helping because I want something from her.”

“You don’t wanna ask her out?”

“No, I do. I just...”

“You just what?” Kyle asked, his hands held out.

Justin deflated, his shoulders slumped. “She’ll say no, or worse, laugh at me.”

“For what?”

Justin gestured to himself and scowled.

Kyle scowled back. “You need to stop that shit. There’s nothing wrong with you. Just ask her out for coffee or something. It doesn’t have to be a big thing.”

“Fine.” Justin headed for the exit.

“You better come back here with some digits. IG following doesn’t count,” Kyle called out to Justin’s back.

For the next half-hour, Justin carried every box, moving quickly up and down the stairs. Leah directed Justin to the appropriate location in her apartment for each box, as if he were her personal mover. Instead of helping him carry the boxes, she unpacked.

As he set down the last box, Leah said, “Thanks, Justin. You’re like the *best* neighbor.”

A flush crept across Justin’s cheeks. “You’re welcome.”

Leah glanced at her apartment door. “Well, I guess I’ll see you around.”

“Oh, right. I should let you unpack.”

Leah forced a smile. “I have like, so much to do.”

Justin took a deep breath. “This might seem a little random, but I was thinking it would be fun to get together for coffee or something.”

“Oh.” She pressed her full lips into a flat line. “I have a boyfriend.”

As if on cue, the apartment door opened and the boyfriend entered. He could’ve been a stunt double for a young Ryan Gosling, if Ryan Gosling was on drugs with red eyes and dilated pupils.

The boyfriend looked at Leah, then Justin, then back to Leah. “What’s goin’ on?”

Leah gestured to her simp mover. “This is our next-door neighbor, Justin.”

The boyfriend lifted his chin. “What’s up? I’m Beau.”

Justin held up one hand and said, “Hi.”

Then the boyfriend noticed the boxes. “Babe? Did you move all these boxes?”

“Justin did.”

Beau stepped to Justin, towering over him. “Appreciate the help, little bro. You live here with your mom?”

Justin reddened. “My roommate.”

“Right on.”

“I should go.”

“Bye. Thank you,” Leah called out as Justin left.

He returned to his apartment and slouched on the couch next to his roommate.

Kyle paused *Grand Theft Auto V*. “How did it go?”

Justin groaned.

“What happened?”

“I asked her out for coffee like *you* said.”

“*And?*”

“She told me about her boyfriend.”

“Fuck that bitch. We’re going out drinking this weekend. I’ll find you a girl.”

“I can’t get in anywhere. It’s embarrassing. I look too young.”

Justin and Kyle were both twenty years old.

Kyle grabbed his wallet from the coffee table and retrieved a New York driver's license, and handed it to Justin. "You're gonna be Dan Mayfield."

Justin inspected the bearded man on the license. "He doesn't look like me at all."

"We'll go to Infinity. They barely look at IDs. Plus, I know the bouncer."

## THREE

# ROACHES AND REFUNDS

JUSTIN PATROLLED THE FOOD COURT, WATCHING FOR VIBRATING shoppers. Saturday was the busiest shopping day, and in the afternoon, shoppers congregated at the food court for lunch. Even at its busiest, several tables were empty. A cacophony of voices came from people talking and eating. Taylor Swift was barely audible through the overhead speakers. Grace served a customer at California Pizza Kitchen. He wished that he'd never talked to her, then he could keep his pleasant delusions. He could watch her from afar and think about the possibilities, but when she had beamed at the handsome customer, it was clear that Justin wasn't her type. *Not surprising. What woman wants a guy that's short, skinny, and poor?*

A group of teen boys drew Justin's attention. They huddled around a table, giggling and *vibrating*. One boy produced a Ziploc bag with something black inside. *What is that? A beetle? A cockroach?* They dumped whatever it was into their pizza box, trying to restrain their laughter.

The teen boys brought the pizza box back to the California Pizza Kitchen counter. One of the boys recorded the interaction with his phone. Justin followed them, staying within earshot, but not making his presence known.

The leader of the pack opened the box to Grace working the counter, displaying a dead cockroach on the final two pieces of pizza.

Grace shrieked and said, "Oh my God. Is that a roach?"

“We want our money back,” the leader said.

“And some money for like, pain and suffering,” another boy said.

Once her initial disgust subsided, Grace narrowed her eyes. “You ate almost the whole pizza. Why would you do that with a big ole cockroach on it?”

“We didn’t look in there,” the leader said.

“We were just grabbing pieces,” another boy said.

“Yeah. We kept the box closed so it didn’t get cold.”

Grace crossed her arms over her chest. “I think you’re lying for your stupid TikTok channel.”

“Give us a refund or I’m sending this video to your boss,” said the boy videoing the altercation.

Justin stepped closer, right behind the vibrating boys. He spoke to Grace. “They put that roach in the box. I saw them.”

The boys faced Justin.

“Are you a security guard?” the leader asked, chuckling. “You’re smaller than my little brother.”

“Everything’s on camera,” Justin said to the boys. “I have proof that you planted that cockroach.”

“We didn’t do nothin’.”

“Fine. I’ll call the police and they can arrest you all for fraud.”

The boys shifted gears and said it was just a prank. Then, in an instant, they ran, no longer vibrating.

“Thank you,” Grace said.

Justin smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Didn’t you go to West Lebanon?”

Justin stood a little straighter. “We were in English together.”

Grace tapped her lips with her index finger. “Chemistry too, I think.”

“That’s right.”

“You were here yesterday.”

Justin nodded. “I was getting lunch for my friend Rakesh. His family owns Abbasi Electronics.” Justin half-turned and gestured behind him. “It’s right around the corner.”

“I’ve seen that store, but I’ve never been in it.” She gestured to his security uniform. “How long have you been working here?”

“Almost a year. What about you?” Justin knew exactly how long Grace had been working there.

“About a month.”

Justin’s radio crackled. It was his boss, Philip Buchanon. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

## FOUR

# BAD VIBRATIONS

A RHYTHMIC THUMP CAME FROM THE WAREHOUSE. A NEON SIGN OVER the entrance read *Infinity*. Justin and Kyle waited in line surrounded by scantily clad young women and bearded men wearing strong cologne.

When they reached the front of the queue, Kyle handed his fake ID to the muscle-bound bouncer.

As Kyle had said, the bouncer didn't even look at it. He lifted his chin and said, "What's up, Kyle."

"Duke. How's it hanging?" Kyle replied.

Duke eyed Justin.

Justin handed his fake ID to the bouncer.

Duke glared at Justin. "There's no way this is you. You look like you're twelve."

The people waiting in line behind them snickered.

"C'mon, bro, give us a break," Kyle whispered. "You know I'm cool. He's cool too."

Duke pointed at them and said, "If you two cause any problems, you're gone."

Inside, the air was humid, thick with a cocktail of perfumes and sweat. The best-looking men had smudges of makeup on their faces and shirts. The strobe lights on the dance floor pulsed with the beat of the music. LED beams bathed the dancers in alternating colors. A DJ booth perched above them, a single man bobbing to the beat, controlling the crowd. Beyond the

dance floor, a velvet rope separated the have-nots from the VIP section—with plush seating, designated waitresses, and high-end clientele. In this section, the liquor was top shelf, and the women outnumbered the men five to one.

Kyle pointed to the VIP section and shouted over the music, “See that boomer with the goatee and the baddies around him?”

The man was tall and thin with his white hair combed back. Several beefy men in suits stood sentry nearby.

“What about him?” Justin asked.

“That’s Sergey Petrov,” Kyle said, bending toward Justin’s ear. “He runs the Bratva in Pennsylvania.”

“Bratva?”

“The Russian Mafia.”

“How do you know that?”

Kyle smirked. “I deal with some shady people.”

“I didn’t know we had the Russian Mafia here.”

“The Italian mob too, but they’re weak, barely operating. The Russians are into some serious shit. Guns. Drugs. Trafficking underaged girls.”

“The police should do something.”

Kyle laughed. “He probably has the police on his payroll.”

Sergey Petrov put his arm around a young woman in a short skirt and squeezed her ass. The woman giggled and kissed the Russian mob boss.

“You want a beer?” Kyle asked.

“What?” Justin replied.

Kyle bent down to Justin and shouted over the music. “You want a beer?”

“Yeah, okay.”

The bar stretched along the wall, bartenders shaking and pouring, seemingly to the beat of the music. Shapely bottles of every color lined the shelves behind the bartenders, the top shelf liquor accented with yellow light. Justin waited his turn at the bar, but the bartender ignored him, serving the people on either side of him. Kyle finally appeared with two Yuengling beers.

Justin took his beer, held it up to Kyle, and shouted, “Thanks.”

Kyle nodded and tapped his beer bottle to Justin’s. Kyle scanned the room, nudged Justin, and asked, “See any talent?”

Justin shook his head.

Kyle flicked his eyes to two young women—heavy makeup and tight clothing—huddled together with their colorful drinks. “They’re pretty hot.”

“I don’t know,” Justin replied.

Kyle frowned. “What do you mean, you don’t know? C’mon, let’s talk to ’em.” Kyle strutted toward the women.

Justin followed like a puppy dog.

Kyle lifted his chin to the ladies and said, “Hey, what’s up?”

The women—one blonde and one brunette—appeared to be in their mid-twenties, although with the heavy makeup, it was hard to tell. They both wore heels, towering over Justin.

The brunette jutted her chin, her lips pressed into a thin line.

The blonde smiled at Kyle and said, “Hey.”

Kyle smiled back. “I’m not gonna go home with you.”

The blonde leaned back, but she was still smiling. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. I wanted you to know that I don’t go home with beautiful women, even when they really want me.”

The brunette rolled her eyes.

The blonde doubled over with laughter. When she stood upright, she poked Kyle’s chest with her index finger and said, “You’re ridiculous.”

He held out his hand. “I’m Kyle.”

She took his hand. “January.”

“Like the month?”

“Yep.”

Kyle chuckled. “You’re ridiculous too.”

“You wanna dance?”

Justin was about to leave when Kyle put his arm around Justin and said, “In a minute, but I wanted to introduce my boy, Justin.”

“Did you bring your little brother?” the brunette asked with a smirk.

“No, this is my best friend.”

“I bet I have underwear older than you,” the brunette said.

“Don’t be mean,” the blonde said.

“It’s cool.” Justin wiggled out of Kyle’s grasp. He gestured to nothing. “I have to... I saw someone.” Justin fled the humiliation.

“Justin,” Kyle called out, but he didn’t follow.

Apart from the VIP section, the lounge beyond the bar was the least crowded part of the club. Justin took a seat at a lonely table and nursed his beer so it appeared that he was doing something. A burly man with an open

collar, his chest hair spilling out, vibrated. He brought a drink to a curvy woman in a booth. They sat across from each other, drinking and talking, the man still vibrating, but Justin couldn't figure out why.

Once his beer bottle was empty, Justin went to the bathroom to waste some more time. *I knew we should've come in separate cars.* Justin had driven, so he'd be forced to wait for Kyle until he was ready to go home, or worse, he might want a ride to some woman's house, and then another ride in the morning.

Justin sat in a bathroom stall, playing *Parking Jam 3D* on his phone. He would've stayed there all night, but a man entered the stall next to him. The guy dropped his pants and sat on the toilet with a groan. The guy grunted and farted until an avalanche evacuated his intestines and dropped into the toilet water. Justin inhaled fecal matter particles. The sulfur smell caused him to gag and leave the bathroom.

He searched for Kyle, hoping he was ready to go, but he found him on the dance floor, grinding against the blonde's backside. Justin returned to the lounge. The burly man with the chest hair vibrated as he inched his hand up the curvy woman's leg, near the hem of her skirt, headed for her crotch. The curvy woman's head lolled to the side; her eyes were shut.

Justin approached the booth and the burly man. "What the hell are you doing?"

The burly man retracted his hand from the woman's leg and glowered at Justin. "What's it to you?"

Justin glowered back. "You drugged her."

The burly man clenched his jaw. "What the fuck did you say?"

"You drugged her."

The man stood from the booth and crowded Justin. "Get the fuck outta my face."

"You drugged her, and you were gonna sexually assault her."

The burly man balled his fists. "Walk away, little boy."

"I'm calling the police."

The burly man grabbed Justin, picked him up, and tossed him at a nearby table. Justin crashed through the wood, the table demolished. The drinks that had been on the tabletop went down with him, two of the glasses shattering on impact, the liquor spilling over him. The three girls at the table screeched and stood, backing away from the mess.

Justin writhed on the ground, his back and left elbow in pain. He twisted his left arm, examining his elbow, finding the source of discomfort—a shard of glass stuck into his flesh. He removed the shard and blood ran down his triceps. Boots appeared at his side.

Duke's red face bent down to Justin's. "I told you not to cause any fucking trouble."

"It wasn't my fault." Justin sat upright and surveyed the lounge, searching for the burly man, but he was gone. "There was this guy."

"What guy?" Duke asked, scanning the lounge. "I don't see a guy."

"He was a big guy with chest hair coming out of—"

"Get up. You're outta here."

"You can't kick me out." Justin pointed to the curvy woman napping in the booth. "He drugged her."

Duke's nostrils flared. "You're fucking wasted and so is she."

"I only had one beer."

"You smell like a fucking brewery. Let's go."

"No, I have to—"

Duke grabbed Justin by his belt and easily lifted his one hundred-and-fifteen-pound frame like a handbag. Justin dangled from his belt, facedown, as the muscle-bound bouncer carried him outside. Clubgoers snickered at Justin as they headed for the exit. At least Justin couldn't see their faces.

Near the exit, Kyle intervened. "Let him go. What are you doing?"

"Your friend's lucky I don't call the cops." Duke pointed at Kyle and gestured to another bouncer. "He's gone too."

Duke tossed Justin onto the sidewalk. The other bouncer shoved Kyle outside.

Bystanders gawked and giggled at the scene.

"Fuck you," Kyle said. "This club sucks anyway."

The bouncers returned to the club without a word.

Kyle helped Justin off the ground. "You okay?"

Justin nodded. "I'm sorry about that."

"Who was vibrating?"

## FIVE

# PROTECTION

JUSTIN WAS QUIET AS HE DROVE THEM HOME IN HIS KIA RIO, Harrisburg disappearing in the rear view. Nobody said anything until they were in downtown Hershey, driving by the old chocolate factory, the roadside lit by Hershey-Kiss-shaped lights.

“You can’t keep doing this,” Kyle said.

“Doing what?”

“You know what. Just cuz you think you see some shit, doesn’t mean it’s actually happening.”

Justin gave his friend the side-eye. “You don’t think I see people vibrating?”

“I don’t know what you see, but it always gets you in trouble. I can’t always be there to protect you.”

“I’m not asking you to protect me.”

Kyle shook his head. “That’s what you say...”

“Don’t protect me, then.”

“Fine. I won’t.”

“Fine.”

Kyle turned on the radio—country music.

As Justin drove through Hershey, then Palmyra, he remembered when Kyle had protected him at the group home. They had been ten years old. Justin had been shipped to the group home after his grandparents died. The boys had lured him to the nearby woods to play manhunt, but then they had

surrounded Justin, pushing him back and forth like a pinball. They had knocked him to the ground and kicked him repeatedly. Justin had thought he might die, but someone came running into the woods, crashing through the brush like a bear.

Kyle had shouted, “Get off of him!”

The ring leader, Edwin Arroyo, who was three years older than Kyle and Justin, had whupped Kyle’s ass, and left them both on the ground. But they had stopped picking on Justin. Kyle had earned Edwin’s respect by fighting without fear.

## SIX

# RACIST RENT-A-COP

JUSTIN'S BACK ACHED AND HE WORE A BANDAGE ON HIS LEFT ELBOW as he patrolled the Lebanon Valley Mall. It was quiet on that Sunday afternoon. A group of seniors fast-walked, pumping their arms, using the mall as their free gym. Justin spotted a vibrating man, middle-aged, his hands in his jacket pockets. The black man's face was taut, his jaw clenched.

The man meandered by the fountain, but found no joy in the soothing water. He ambled by a dozen stores without stopping or even peering inside, until he reached Zales Jewelers. He surveyed the store, his hands still in his jacket pockets, glaring at the image of a woman showing off her engagement ring. *Is he casing the store? Why is he wearing a jacket in June?* Justin worried that the man had a gun in his jacket pocket.

The man trudged through Zales.

A jeweler asked, "May I help you?"

But the man didn't answer. He left the store and Justin followed.

As they neared Hobby Lobby, the man spun around. He sneered at Justin, his eyes red and puffy. "Why the hell are you followin' me?"

Justin was tongue-tied.

"Speak up, boy."

"I'm, uh..."

"I'm not puttin' up with"—The black man gesticulated to Justin—"racist motherfuckers today. I wanna talk to your supervisor, now."

Justin showed his palms. “Sir. Uh... That’s not necessary.”

“Supervisor. Now.”

Justin called his boss on the radio.

“What is it?” Philip Buchanon asked.

“There’s a customer who needs to talk to you,” Justin said, with the middle-aged man eyeballing him.

“About what?”

“Because you’re a racist motherfucker.” The black man pointed to Justin’s radio. “Tell him.”

“He thinks I’m, uh, racist,” Justin said, saying the word “racist” barely above a whisper.

“Because you *are* racist,” the man interjected.

“Racist? Did I hear you right?” Mr. Buchanon asked.

“Yes,” Justin replied.

Mr. Buchanon exhaled. “Bring him to my office.”

“I’m not goin’ nowhere with you people,” the man said.

“He wants to meet you here,” Justin said. “We’re in front of the Hobby Lobby entrance.”

There was a long pause before Mr. Buchanon said, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Justin watched customers come and go from Hobby Lobby, while the middle-aged black man sneered at him.

After a few *very* long minutes, the mall boss arrived on the scene carrying an envelope. Justin knew what was in that envelope. Justin and the angry man faced the boss. Buchanon was chubby and puffy-faced, with bags under his eyes. The state of his health and appearance were much like the mall he managed—they’d seen better days.

“I’m Philip Buchanon, general manager of the Lebanon Valley Mall.” He held out his hand.

The angry man ignored his hand. “That supposed to impress me?”

Buchanon retracted his hand. “No, I was just—”

“What are you gonna do about this”—the angry man gestured to Justin—“racist motherfucker followin’ me all over the mall?”

Buchanon looked around, worried mallgoers would hear. “Can we talk in my office?”

The angry man crossed his arms over his chest. “I ain’t goin’ nowhere with you motherfuckers.”

“Okay. Can we try to keep this civil and refrain from the foul language?”

“Civil? I’m supposed to be civil while my civil rights are bein’ violated?”

Mr. Buchanon swallowed, then addressed Justin. “Were you following this man?”

“Yes,” Justin replied.

“Why?”

Justin hesitated for a beat. “He looked angry.”

“I am angry,” the man said. “I’m pissed that this little rent-a-cop is hasslin’ me.”

“You seemed angry before I started following you,” Justin replied.

The man knitted his brow, deep grooves erupting on his forehead. “I came here to walk around, clear my head. My wife just filed for divorce, not that it’s any of your fuckin’ business.” He gestured to Justin. “He didn’t need to be followin’ me around like I’m some kinda criminal. It ain’t right.”

“I’m very sorry, sir.” Mr. Buchanon shot Justin a withering look.

“I’m very sorry, sir,” Justin echoed. “You seemed angry, so—”

“That’s *enough*.” Mr. Buchanon faced the angry man. “We’re very sorry.” He held up the envelope. “As a token of our appreciation for your understanding regarding this unfortunate incident, here’s a gift certificate for fifty dollars. You can use it at any place in the mall.” Mr. Buchanon handed the envelope to the angry man.

He snatched the envelope and said, “You think you can bribe me with fifty dollars?”

“It’s not a bribe. It’s a token of our regret over the incident and our appreciation for you as a customer and a person.”

The angry man chuckled, but he didn’t sound happy. “Token of our appreciation, huh? I don’t think fifty dollars is near enough appreciation.”

“Oh... um, how about one hundred dollars?”

The angry man shook his head.

“One hundred and fifty?”

The angry man shook his head.

“I can’t do any more than two hundred.”

The angry man nodded. “I think that’s enough *appreciation*.”

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The man did go with Philip Buchanon to his office—to collect one hundred and fifty dollars in mall gift certificates. The angry man left happy. Justin was ordered into Buchanon's office immediately afterward.

Justin sat across from his boss at the metal desk.

"This is the third person who said you were following them," Mr. Buchanon said. "You can't keep harassing mall customers."

"I wasn't harassing anyone. I was trying to stop a crime from happening."

"You're not a cop, Justin. If something happens, you call the real cops."

Justin hung his head for a beat, then said, "But I've helped people. Talk to Rakesh at Abbasi Electronics. Or Grace at California Pizza Kitchen."

"If I hear about you following someone again, I'll have to let you go. The last thing this mall needs is a discrimination lawsuit. That'll be the final nail in the coffin."

## SEVEN

# GIRL. FRIEND

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, JUSTIN RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT building. As he parked in the gravel lot, he spotted Leah struggling to open the front door and hold on to her groceries.

Justin jogged to the front door and opened it for Leah.

“Oh, thanks,” Leah said as she stepped into their apartment building.

Justin gestured to the grocery bags in her arms. “You need help?”

“Sure. Thanks.” Leah handed him both grocery bags.

As they climbed the steps to the third floor, Justin asked, “How do you like the apartment so far?”

“It’s crappy, but beats living with my mom in a trailer.”

“I like having my own place too. Other than that, how do you like the area?”

She shrugged. “It’s okay. It’s close to where my boyfriend works. He’s a welder, working on the pipeline.”

They made it to the third floor, then walked down the hall toward her apartment.

“What about you? Are you in school?” Justin asked.

Leah shook her head. “School’s not for me. I did get a job at Dollar General today.”

“Congratulations.”

Leah frowned. “It’s no big deal.”

They stopped at her apartment door.

She fished her keys from her purse and opened the door. “You can put those in the kitchen.”

Justin took the grocery bags to the kitchen and set them on the counter. Leah followed him to the kitchen.

“Thanks for not being weird with me,” Leah said.

“Why would I be weird with you?” Justin asked.

“Sometimes guys are really nice, but then when they find out I have a boyfriend, they’re like, not so nice. Thanks for not doing that.”

“I don’t think I did anything, but you’re welcome.”

“Friends?” She held out her hand.

Justin shook her hand and smiled. “Friends.”

He left her apartment for his own next door. Justin found Kyle on the couch, watching a video on his phone, vaping marijuana. A faint musky smell hung in the air. Apart from the leather couch, the flat-screen television on the wall, the coffee table, and the chintzy entertainment center made from particle board, the room was empty, the walls stark white.

Kyle looked up from his screen. “You remember Edwin Arroyo?” He inhaled on his E-cigarette and exhaled marijuana vapor.

“I remember him beating us up when we were kids,” Justin replied. “Is he still fighting in the UFC?”

“He got kicked out of the UFC, like, six months ago. You don’t remember? He hit Lucas Silva after the bell, fucked his eye up.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. I remember now.”

“Now he’s on TMZ. Check out this video. It’s from right here in Lebanon.”

Justin sat next to Kyle on the couch and watched the video on his roommate’s phone. It showed Edwin drinking, the bottle covered by a paper bag. Some teenagers were videoing him.

One of them said, “That’s Edwin Arroyo.”

Then, Edwin dropped his pants and peed on someone’s car. TMZ blurred Edwin’s penis. The teens continued to video, laughing in the background.

Kyle laughed too, marijuana vapor spilling from his mouth.

The video ended with Edwin staggering and falling to the ground, peeing on himself.

“What a fucking loser,” Kyle said. “When we were kids, I wanted to kill that asshole.”

“Looks like he’s beating you to the punch.”

## EIGHT

# THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

AFTER WORK ON MONDAY, JUSTIN CLIMBED THE STAIRS TO HIS apartment, wearing his blue LVM Security uniform. He found Leah sitting in the hallway, her back against the wall, her head down.

“Hey, Leah,” Justin said with a little wave.

“Hey,” Leah replied, her voice catching, not making eye contact with Justin.

He approached the young woman. Her eyes were red and puffy. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine.”

“Why are you out in the hall?”

Leah glanced at her apartment door. “Beau locked me out. We had a fight.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. You can come over if you wanna get out of the hall.”

“No. That’s okay.”

“Are you sure? You can watch TV until...” Justin gestured to her apartment. “Until you can get back in.”

“No. I can’t. He’d be so mad if I did that. You know how it is when you’re, like, in a relationship.”

“Not really.”

Leah raised her eyebrows. “You’ve never had a girlfriend?”

“Nothing serious.”

“Oh.”

Justin grimaced. “You must think I’m a loser.”

“No. You’re lucky. Sometimes I wish I never had a boyfriend.”

As if conjured by Leah, Beau opened their apartment door and beckoned her back inside. Leah nodded to Justin and returned to her apartment.

Beau glowered at Justin. “Stay away from her.” He shut the door.

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That night, Justin lay in bed, scrolling his IG page on his phone. His profile picture was a selfie in his uniform with the caption, Justin Boyle: Mall Cop. He had six followers and followed one hundred and seventy-seven people. *Six? I had seven.* Justin checked his followers. His boss, Philip Buchanon, had unfollowed him. He tapped his way to Grace Turner’s IG page. He scrolled through her twenty-eight pictures. The most recent picture featured Aurora Valdez, the CEO of Nutribuddy, a nutrition system that created personalized meal plans for people based on their health data. The post read *My literal hero.*

Most of Grace’s pictures were not of herself, but of true crime books she loved. Even when she showed herself reading, the book was more prominent than herself. Despite this, she had 6,780 followers, and she only followed eighteen people. He thumb-typed a direct message.

**Justin:** It was great seeing you the other day! You really do love true crime!!!

He read his message several times, then deleted it. He started another DM, but he was distracted by Leah and Beau arguing on the other side of his wall.

“Why are you always talkin’ to him?” Beau asked.

“I’m *not*,” Leah replied.

“How do I know what you do all day?”

“I’ve been unpacking.”

“I don’t like him. I see the way he looks at you.”

“That’s not my fault.”

“You admit he likes you, then,” Beau said.

“I guess. Like, I don’t know,” Leah replied.

“You walk around here wearin’ your little shorts, your tits hangin’ out—”

“Stop it, Beau.”

“Don’t *fuckin’* tell me what to do.”

“I’m not—”

A *thud* came from the wall. “Shut the fuck up.”

The couple didn’t talk for the next half-hour until Beau said, “I’m sorry, babe. I don’t like other guys sniffin’ around you.”

“I love *you*, Beau. Not anyone else,” Leah replied.

Rustling, smacking, and soft moans came from next door. Justin imagined the couple kissing. This eventually escalated to loud moans, groans, and bed squeaks. Justin covered his head with his pillow.

## NINE

# EVERYONE LIKES HUGS

JUSTIN SIGNED IN AT THE NURSING STATION.

“Good morning, Justin,” the Jamaican nurse said.

Justin smiled. “Good morning, Nurse Ricketts.”

The nurse flicked her tongue off the roof of her mouth. “Stop with the ‘Nurse Ricketts.’ You’re grown. You can call me Martisha.”

“Sorry, it’s a habit.”

She swiped her hand across the air. “No need for apologizin’.”

“Thanks, Martisha. How’s he doing?”

“I *tink* he’s havin’ a good day. He’s been talkin’ a little bit. He’ll be happy to see you.”

Justin found Uncle Ellis in the activity room, sitting on his usual couch, staring into space, his bony shoulders hunched. His couch faced a wall-mounted flatscreen, the television on mute, showing some Wall Street news show, the stock ticker scrolling on the footer. A cacophony of voices came from the other patients. A quartet played cards at the table. Others colored in adult coloring books, some of the pictures bound for a space on the walls with the other patient-derived decor. Others stood by the windows, watching the world go on without them.

“Hi, Uncle Ellis,” Justin said.

The little man raised his gaze.

Justin hugged his great-uncle.

When they separated, Ellis said, “Hugs like.”

“I like hugs too,” Justin replied. “I’m sorry it’s been so long since I’ve been to visit.”

“Visit like.” Ellis talked, but his eyes never focused on Justin.

“I like visiting too.” Justin moved a nearby plastic chair and sat down, so he was facing his great-uncle. “I’ll try to be better about coming more often.”

“Pizza like.”

Justin grinned. “I like pizza too.”

“Pizza, pizza, pizza. Like, like, like.”

“Martisha said you’re having a good day.”

“Good day having. Having. Day. Good day, like.”

“Yeah. I like good days too.”

Ellis then rattled off the many things he liked. “Birds like. Sun like. Like Martisha. Cake like. Like pudding. Cats, dogs, pie. Like, like, like.”

“Those are some pretty good things. Is there anything you don’t like?” He asked the question rhetorically, under his breath. He didn’t expect his uncle to answer.

Ellis motioned to Justin and said, “Brother.”

“I’m not your brother. I’m your great-nephew.”

Ellis shook his head, his face contorted as if he’d smelled something foul. “Brother bad.”

“I don’t have a brother. I’m an only child.”

Ellis hit his chest, his face a hard mask. “Brother bad.”

“Are you talking about *your* brother?”

Ellis nodded. “Bad, bad, bad.”

Justin had heard about his rich grandfather, but his mother and grandmother had rarely talked about the man they both hated, saying he was someone who valued wealth and power over people. Justin had wanted to meet the man nonetheless, but his grandmother had said that his biological grandfather died of a heart attack, which was surprising to her, because she’d always thought he was heartless.

“Why didn’t you like your brother?” Justin asked.

For the first time that day, Ellis looked directly at Justin. “Evil. Dead. Want.” Ellis massaged his temples. “Hurt. Head.”

“You don’t have to worry about him. He died a long time ago.”

Ellis pointed at the television on the wall. “See um. See um. See um.”

Justin glanced at the Wall Street news anchor. “I don’t think that’s your brother.”

Ellis still pointed at the TV. “See um. See um. See um.”

## TEN

# DAMNED IF YOU DO

IT HAD BEEN A QUIET MORNING AT THE MALL. WEDNESDAYS WERE usually dead. Justin purposely took his lunch at 2:00 p.m., after the lunch rush, hoping to talk to Grace without interruption. He found her standing at the California Pizza Kitchen counter reading a true crime book, *Too Pretty to Live*.

“Hi, Grace,” Justin said.

She set her book on the counter and smiled, her teeth slightly crooked. “Hey, Justin.”

He gestured to her book. “You’re already on another one?”

“I’m a true crime freak. I go through these books like candy.”

“What happened in *The Black Widower*? Did they catch the guy?”

Grace grinned. “Arrested, charged, and put away for life.”

“That’s good.” Justin gestured to her book again. “What’s this one about?”

“This one’s so *ridiculous*. Basically, this woman catfished her own father to murder these people she was arguing with online. It’s so messed up.”

“Sounds like it. I bet you would make a good detective,” Justin said.

“I wish. I actually thought about becoming a private investigator, but you have to be twenty-five to get a PI’s license. It would never happen anyway.”

“Why not? You’d be a great private investigator.”

Grace blushed. “I doubt it. Just because I like true crime doesn’t mean I could solve *actual* crimes.”

“I don’t think you should dismiss it.”

Grace peered over Justin’s shoulder, causing him to turn. A large group of vibrating teenagers—wearing Covid masks, their hoods up—marched by the food court.

“That’s not good,” Grace said.

“Definitely not.” Justin called his boss on the radio.

“Go ahead, Justin,” Philip Buchanon replied.

Justin pressed Talk on the radio and said, “There’s a mob of teenagers, masked and hooded. They just walked past the food court, headed toward the fountain.”

“I’ll call the police. Stay away from the mob. Don’t get involved, Justin. Do you understand me?”

Justin pressed Talk and replied, “I understand.” Justin returned his radio to its holster, then said to Grace, “I gotta go.”

“Be careful,” Grace called out to his back.

Justin jogged after the mob. The mob didn’t make it to the fountain. Instead, they entered Abbasi Electronics. Justin stopped around the corner, still watching them. He grabbed his pepper spray, shook it, and turned the nozzle so it was ready to fire.

“What are you doing?” Rakesh shouted from behind the glass counter.

Justin ran into Abbasi Electronics with his pepper spray held up and shouted, “Stop right there. The police are coming.”

The mob stopped and gaped at the mall cop.

“Everyone on the ground!” Justin shouted.

A tall teenager approached Justin. “We haven’t done anything.”

Technically, the tall teen was correct.

The tall teen threw a straight right, his long reach connecting with Justin’s jaw, knocking him to the ground, and sending the pepper spray skidding across the floor.

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Justin stirred, his eyes fluttered. Glass and merchandise littered the floor. He sat up as the last few looters scurried from the store, their arms filled

with electronics.

## ELEVEN

# GOOD INTENTIONS

THE POLICE SPREAD CRIME SCENE TAPE ACROSS THE ENTRANCE TO Abbasi Electronics two hours after the crime had occurred. Justin sat on a plastic chair near the entrance, an EMT checking him for a concussion. A bruise had formed on his jaw. Justin declined his invitation to the hospital, but he took the ice pack and applied it to the bump on the back of his head.

A middle-aged West Lebanon Police detective approached Justin with Philip Buchanon at his side. The detective was average height, chubby, with thin lips, and a perpetual scowl. “Mr. Boyle. I’m Detective Brewer. Can you walk me through what happened here?”

Justin told the detective everything.

“Did you get a good look at the guy who punched you?” Detective Brewer asked.

“No. He was wearing a medical-type mask and his hood was up. He was pretty tall, though, maybe six-two. Athletic build.”

“Was he white, black, Hispanic?”

“White, I think.”

Detective Brewer scribbled into his notepad. “Any tattoos or other markers that might help us to identify him?”

“I didn’t see any tattoos or birthmarks or anything like that.”

Brewer nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Boyle.”

“What took you guys so long to get here?” Justin asked.

Detective Brewer narrowed his eyes. “We have more calls than officers.” The detective went to examine the crime scene.

Philip Buchanon said, “I need to talk to you in my office.”

Justin followed a few steps behind his boss to the office. He tossed his ice pack in a trash can along the way. Buchanon sat behind his desk. Before Justin could sit down, the man said, “I’m letting you go.”

Justin winced as if he’d been punched in the face again.

“I specifically told you *not* to get involved. You could’ve been seriously injured or, God forbid, killed. Lebanon Valley Mall doesn’t want our security guards to take those risks. That’s for the police.”

Justin bowed his head. “I’ll have to bring you my uniforms tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. We’ll mail your last check.” Mr. Buchanon leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry, Justin. I know you mean well. You’re just too much of a liability.”

Justin returned to Abbasi Electronics to talk to Rakesh. A uniformed police officer stood sentry at the entrance while Detective Brewer took pictures of the crime scene, but Rakesh wasn’t there. Justin used his keycard to access the rear entrance to the stores. Thankfully, Buchanon hadn’t deactivated it yet. He walked down the corridor to the service entrance of Abbasi Electronics and knocked.

Rakesh answered the door, his eyes red and puffy.

“Hey,” Justin said.

“Hey,” Rakesh said.

Justin followed Rakesh into the tiny storeroom.

Rakesh slumped in an old swivel chair. He sniffed and swallowed hard. “We’re ruined. We’ll have to close the store. What am I supposed to tell my parents?”

“The truth,” Justin replied.

Rakesh stared at his empty hands. “I can’t believe this happened.”

“I’m sorry, Rakesh. I should’ve... I should’ve stopped them.”

Rakesh swiveled his chair to face Justin. “How? How do you stop a mob without a gun?”

“I should’ve sprayed them with pepper spray.”

“It’s not your fault. You’re the only one who tries around here.” Rakesh blew out a heavy breath. “What did your boss say?”

“He’s not my boss anymore.”

“They fired you?”

## TWELVE

# DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE

THE WEST LEBANON POLICE DEPARTMENT DIDN'T STAY LONG AT Abbasi Electronics. Detective Brewer didn't bother dusting for fingerprints, and he doubted they would recover any of the merchandise, which to Justin meant the police wouldn't be searching. Justin helped Rakesh clean up the glass shards and scattered merchandise before he returned home.

He turned the key and entered his apartment. Kyle was at his usual spot on the couch playing *Halo* while vaping marijuana.

Kyle paused the game and called out to Justin, "Come over here, bro."

Justin stepped to the couch. "Hey. What's up?"

"Not much. You wanna play?"

Justin rubbed the back of his neck. "I think I'm gonna crash."

Kyle stared at Justin for a moment. "Shitty day?"

"Rakesh's store got robbed. I tried to stop it, but it didn't work out."

Justin turned his face, showing the nasty bruise on his jaw.

Kyle stood from the couch and stepped closer to examine the bruise. "Shit. Someone punched you?"

Justin nodded. "And I got fired."

"What the hell for?"

"I wasn't supposed to try to stop them."

Kyle scrunched his face in disapproval. "You're a security guard at a mall. Your whole job is to stop stealing."

Justin shook his head. "They don't want the liability."

“Sorry, bro. That’s fucked up.”

“Don’t worry. I have some savings, so I can cover my part of the rent for a couple months until I get another job.”

“I’m not worried about it. If you need a job, I could use someone to make deliveries for me.”

“I’m not judging, but I don’t wanna go to prison.”

“You won’t go to prison. Pot’s practically legal.”

“*Practically* is the key word there.”

---

Justin startled. His eyes opened and adjusted to the darkness. Sharp voices came from the other side of his wall.

“I told you not to buy anything without askin’ me first,” Beau said.

Leah replied, “We needed this stuff—”

A slap came from next door.

“*Ow*. Don’t hit me,” Leah said.

“I barely touched you,” Beau replied. “Quit bein’ a fuckin’ baby.”

“Fuck you.”

A *thud* and Leah shrieked.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” Beau said. “You’re outta your fuckin’ mind.”

Leah cried.

“Quit your fuckin’ cryin’. You’re not hurt.”

“I am. I am hurt,” Leah said through her tears.

Justin put on his sweatpants and jogged to Kyle’s room in his bare feet. He knocked, entered without invitation, and flipped on the overhead light.

Kyle rolled to his back, blocking the light with his forearm. “What the fuck, Justin?” he asked with a raspy voice.

“Beau’s hitting Leah. We need to help her.”

“*What?* Who the hell is Beau?”

“That’s her boyfriend. Come on, we have to do something.”

“I’m not doing shit. If you’re smart, you’ll stay out of it.”

Justin was speechless.

“Cut the light and shut my door.” Kyle rolled back to his stomach and covered his head with his pillow.

Justin left Kyle's bedroom, the light still on, and the door open in his wake.

"The light!" Kyle shouted.

Justin left his apartment and jogged next door. Sharp voices came from inside. He banged on the door. The apartment went quiet.

After a long while, Beau opened the door. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Is everything okay?" Justin asked.

Beau's nostrils flared. His neck vein pulsed. "What's it to you?"

"I heard fighting."

"So what? It's none of your fuckin' business." Beau slammed the door in Justin's face.

Justin returned to his apartment and called the police. He watched the road from the living room window. From that perspective, he couldn't see the parking lot, but he could see the road that the police would likely use.

He checked the time on his phone. It had been thirty-two minutes since he had called. Justin called 911 again. The operator assured Justin that his prior call was in the system and a police officer would eventually arrive.

"*When?*" Justin asked.

"When they have time," the operator replied.

## THIRTEEN

# MAKING ENEMIES

JUSTIN HAD BEEN UP MOST OF THE NIGHT, WAITING FOR THE POLICE TO arrive, and listening for more fighting between Beau and Leah. Next door had been quiet and the police never showed. Justin had fallen asleep at dawn.

Hard knocks came from the hall.

Justin shot upright in bed.

A stern voice said, “Police. Open up.”

Justin put on his sweatpants, hurried to his apartment door, and checked the peephole. Two police officers—male and female—stood at Beau and Leah’s apartment door.

The male cop banged on the door again. “Open up. It’s the police.”

Beau opened the door wearing his work clothes—jeans, boots, and a T-shirt that read *STL Resources*. “Can I help you?”

“We’ve had a report of domestic violence coming from your apartment.”

“Who called?”

“We can’t give out that information.”

“Is anyone in there with you?” the female cop asked.

“My girlfriend,” Beau replied.

“We need to talk to her and we need to see some ID.”

Beau crossed his arms over his chest. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“We’ll be the judge of that,” the female police officer said.

“Or we can cuff you right now,” the male officer said. Beau stepped aside, letting the officers into his apartment. Muffled voices argued back and forth in the apartment, but Justin couldn’t hear what was said.

Shortly thereafter, the female police officer left the apartment with Leah in tow. They talked in the hallway.

“What happened to your eye?” the female officer asked.

Leah touched her eye. “This?”

“You have a black eye. Did your boyfriend hit you?”

Justin clenched his fists and thought about punching Beau in the eye. He gritted his teeth as his temples throbbed.

“No. I tripped and hit my eye on the edge of my dresser. It was an accident,” Leah replied.

Justin rubbed his temples, trying to focus his mind on helping Leah, not hurting Beau.

The female cop eyed Leah for a long moment. “If he’s abusing you, we can help you, but you gotta be honest with us.”

“I *am* being honest,” Leah replied. “He’s not abusing me.”

The female cop raised one eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

The female cop sighed. “Okay. If you need help in the future, don’t hesitate to call.” The cop handed Leah her business card.

Leah and the female cop returned to the apartment. One minute later, both police officers exited the apartment, and left the way they came.

*They’re not gonna do anything.*

Beau entered the hallway. He checked the stairs, likely confirming the police had gone. Then he made a beeline to Justin’s apartment and banged on the door. Justin flinched, then tiptoed to his bedroom.

Beau banged on the door again and shouted, “Open the door, snitch.”

Justin peered from his bedroom. Kyle appeared, bleary-eyed, wearing sweatpants, no shirt, his dirty blond hair disheveled. Justin crept from his room, meeting Kyle in the living room.

Justin showed his palms like stop signs and whispered, “Don’t open the door.”

Beau banged on the door again, causing Justin to flinch again.

Kyle lifted his chin to the door and whispered, “Who is it?”

“It’s Leah’s boyfriend. He thinks I called the cops on him.”

“Did you?”

“He was hitting her.”

Kyle pointed at Justin. “I told you to stay out of it.”

“What if he beat her to death?”

Beau banged on the door again. “You can’t hide forever, little bitch.”

Kyle returned to his bedroom, then almost immediately emerged from his room, and marched to the front door. Realizing that Kyle was about to open the door, Justin frantically searched for a hiding spot. He dove beside the entertainment center.

Kyle opened the front door. “Why are you banging on my door?”

“I need to talk to your little bitch roommate,” Beau replied.

Justin crouched and peered out from the entertainment center. Kyle’s muscular back was to Justin. A black handle protruded from his waistband.

*Is that a gun?*

Kyle reached behind his back, grabbed his handgun, and held it at his side. “I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but you’re not gonna come to my house making demands.”

Beau held up his hands. “I don’t have any problems with you, bro. Your roommate called the cops on me.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m pretty sure he did. I was just gonna tell him to stay outta my business.”

“I suggest you stay outta *my* business.” Kyle slammed the door in Beau’s face.

Justin emerged from beside the entertainment center and approached Kyle, eyeing his handgun, his headache dissipating. “When did you get that?”

“A few weeks ago,” Kyle replied.

“If you need a gun to sell pot, maybe you should stop.”

Kyle frowned. “I don’t need a gun for anything, but you never know. I just used it to save your ass.”

“I’m sorry. I thought he might kill her.”

“I told you to stay out of it. You’re gonna get hurt if you keep getting into these situations. I can’t always be there to protect you.”

## FOURTEEN

# DOES IT HURT?

THROUGH THE PEEPHOLE, JUSTIN WATCHED BEAU LEAVE HIS apartment carrying his lunch pail. When he disappeared down the stairs, Justin left his apartment. He checked the stairs, seeing Beau's back as the man left the apartment building. Justin went to Leah's apartment and knocked on the door.

She opened the door a few inches, the chain still on. Only one side of Leah's face was visible, the good side without the black eye.

"Are you okay?" Justin asked.

"I'm fine," Leah replied. "I have to go." She shut the door.

"I got punched in the face yesterday," Justin said through the door. "I was knocked out. Hit my head on the floor."

Leah undid the chain and opened the door.

"See." Justin turned his face, showing the purple bruising.

Leah winced and asked, "What happened?"

Justin told her about Rakesh's store being robbed by a mob of teenagers, and how he tried to intervene, but was sucker punched, and then fired for his trouble.

"I'm really sorry," Leah said.

"I'm sorry about your eye," Justin said, referencing the black eye that wasn't adequately covered by her makeup. "Does it hurt?"

Leah dipped her head. "A little."

Justin moved his jaw back and forth. “My jaw keeps clicking. That’s probably not good.”

Leah raised her gaze. “Probably not.”

“Are you working today?” Justin asked.

“No. I’m not full-time at Dollar General. They said it’s been really slow.”

“You wanna do something with me? Go hiking or something?”

Leah pursed her lips, the wheels turning in her mind. “I guess.”

## FIFTEEN

# INTERNET FAMOUS

THEY HIKED THE WINDING GRAVEL PATH UNDER MAJESTIC OAKS AND hickories at Memorial Lake State Park. The rhythmic crunching of the gravel under their boots was accompanied by the melodic chirping of cardinals overhead. The dappled shade was a welcome relief from the summer sun.

“What are you gonna do about all this?” Justin asked.

Leah gazed to her right at the sun rays reflecting off the bright blue lake. Ducks glided across the water, their frantic paddling feet hidden from view.

Justin’s phone buzzed with a notification, which was odd, because he rarely received messages from anyone. He reached into his pocket and stopped the buzzing.

Leah glanced at Justin. “Beau’s a really good guy deep down, but he’s like, under a lotta stress. He’s been working all the time, like fifty hours a week.”

“It doesn’t give him the right to hit you,” Justin replied.

“He knows that. You have to understand. Beau’s had it *really* rough. His dad used to, like, beat him up pretty bad. Like, hospital bad. His family’s dirt poor, and he really wanted to get away, you know?”

Justin nodded.

“Beau should be playing football in the NFL right now. No cap. He was like the star quarterback at our high school. He was all-state in Virginia. Got

a scholarship to go to Virginia Tech. Literally nobody at our high school ever did that before.”

“What happened?” Justin’s phone buzzed with another notification, which he silenced.

Leah sighed. “The coach who recruited him left, and the new coach didn’t like him. He wanted Beau to like play a different position instead of quarterback. So he quit. He tried, like, walking on to UVA, but that didn’t work out either. You have to understand. He was literally famous in our town. Then it all went away, and people talk all this shit on X, calling him a loser. It’s, like, a lot to deal with.”

Justin nodded again, thinking that it still wasn’t an excuse to abuse her.

They hiked in silence over a wooden bridge that spanned a concrete spillway. Lake water spilled over the edge, a manmade waterfall, the excess water joining the creek thirty feet below. Beyond the spillway, they followed the asphalt walkway atop the wall constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers to create the eighty-five-acre lake. From the top of the engineered wall, they were drenched in sun, the lake stretching into the distance, framed by green foliage.

Justin peeked at Leah, noticing her shapely legs, her sun-kissed skin, and the sweat beads at her hairline. Even with her long hair tied into a ponytail, Justin figured it was warm with all that hair.

Leah must’ve sensed Justin staring, because she turned from the water and asked, “What?”

“Nothing,” Justin replied. But he wanted to tell her that she was beautiful and if she were his girlfriend, he’d never hurt her.

“Are you hot?” she asked.

“I’m okay.” Justin motioned up ahead. “If you need a break, there’s a picnic table in the shade coming up.”

They stopped and sat at the picnic table, shaded by a massive oak, with a view of the lake.

“I wanna tell you something, but I don’t want you to get mad,” Justin said.

Leah frowned. “I can’t control if I, like, get mad, so if you think it’s gonna make me mad... maybe you shouldn’t say it.”

“It’s important, so...” Justin took a deep breath. “Everyone has hard things to deal with. That doesn’t make it okay to abuse someone.”

“I never said it was *okay*.” She shook her head. “You don’t know what it’s like. I bet you grew up in the suburbs with a soccer mom and dad who, like, took you fishing.”

“Even if I had a perfect childhood with the perfect family, that doesn’t mean I can’t say that abuse is wrong.”

“*Whatever*. You’ve never even, like, been in a relationship either. I don’t know why you think you know everything about everything.”

Justin’s phone buzzed with another notification that he silenced. “I don’t think that. I’m just saying it’s never okay to abuse someone.”

“Your phone keeps buzzing,” Leah said.

“It’s just a notification. It’s not important.”

Justin’s phone buzzed again.

“Check it. I don’t care,” Leah said.

“Sorry. I’ll put it on silent,” Justin replied, retracting his phone from his pocket.

“You should probably check it. Could be, like, an emergency.”

Justin checked his phone. They were DMs from Instagram. He tapped the first one, which was titled *THIS YOU?* The DM contained a video showing Justin running into Abbasi Electronics with his pepper spray held out. The video likely originated from one of the masked teens.

“Oh, no,” Justin said.

Leah half-circled the picnic table to see what was on Justin’s phone. She sat next to him, sharing his screen.

On the video, Justin told the teens to stop, that the police were coming. He ordered everyone to the ground, but the teens didn’t listen.

That was when the tall teen approached Justin and said, “We haven’t done anything.”

The tall teen threw a straight right, his long reach connecting with Justin’s jaw, knocking him to the ground, and sending the pepper spray skidding across the floor.

Leah tittered.

Justin hung his head.

Leah placed her hand atop his. “I’m sorry. It’s nervous laughter. Sometimes I just laugh for, like, no reason.”

He checked the video. It had been posted by an IG account called #RealLifeFights. Justin’s IG account had been tagged with the video. It had

come out two hours ago and it already had over 100,000 views. Justin scrolled to the comments.

## Harry\_Knuckles\_11:

**GigaChad1234:** Why is that mall hiring literal children to be their security?

**SuperSigma290:** Temu mall cop got fucked up #JustinBoyle

“Shit.” Justin powered off his phone and slapped it face down on the picnic table.

“It’s not that bad,” Leah said.

“It’s not?”

“People on the internet are so fake. They talk all that shit online, but they wouldn’t, like, say that in real life. Who cares what stupid-ass internet people think? You didn’t, like, do anything wrong.”

“I feel like I did.”

“You didn’t.” Leah hugged Justin.

His entire body buzzed with her touch. His heart thumped in his chest.

She let go and leaned back, likely sensing his eagerness.

Justin realized it was the first hug he'd ever had from a woman he wasn't related to.

## SIXTEEN

# MOVING ON

JUSTIN PACKED CELL PHONE CASES INTO A CARDBOARD BOX, THE BOX sitting on one of the few glass counters that were still intact. The security gate for Abbasi Electronics was pulled down. The occasional shopper peered into the wrecked store.

“I’m sorry, Rakesh,” Justin said.

“Stop apologizing,” Rakesh replied as he packed cell phone chargers nearby.

“What are you gonna do with all this stuff?”

“Sell it on E-bay. Why, you need something?”

“No. I was just wondering.”

Silence passed between them for a few minutes.

Justin broke the silence. “What are you gonna do now?”

“I applied to the chicken plant.”

Justin scrunched his face. “Do you really wanna work there?”

“Hell, no,” Rakesh replied, “but my family needs the money.”

“If you could do anything, what would it be?”

“I liked running this store. I like working with phones and computers.”

“You could work at another tech store.”

Rakesh shook his head. “These stores are a dying business. Electronics are all online or being sold in big box stores. It’s over. I have to move on.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop being sorry. It wasn’t your fault. What about you? You have your own employment problems. What are *you* planning to do?”

“I don’t know.”

They packed their boxes in silence for a moment.

“I forgot to tell you, Grace stopped by yesterday,” Rakesh said.

Justin looked up from his mostly filled box. “For what?”

Rakesh closed his cardboard box. “She wanted to know how you were doing after the... video.”

Justin cringed. “That’s just great.”

Rakesh sealed the box with packing tape. “I think she was genuinely worried about you.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Rakesh took his cardboard box to the storage room, where they had stacked merchandise. He returned with an empty box, now packing flash drives. “I think you should talk to Grace. She’s a nice girl.”

Justin shook his head. “I don’t need more humiliation.”

“Come on, bro. You’ve been into Grace since she started working at the food court, and then she shows interest, and now you’re not interested?”

“I met someone else.”

“Who is she?”

Justin shut his box. “Her name’s Leah.”

“Where did you guys meet?” Rakesh asked.

Justin sealed his box with packing tape. “She just moved into my apartment building. She lives next door.”

“Nice. Lucky you. Does she live by herself?”

Justin hesitated for a beat. “She lives with someone.”

“What does her roommate look like? If she’s cute, maybe you can put in a good word.”

“She’s a he.”

Rakesh furrowed his brow. “She lives with a transgender person?”

“No, um... she lives with her... boyfriend.”

Rakesh stopped packing the flash drives. “And you’re trying to get together with her?”

“He hits her.”

“How do you know that?”

“I heard them. Saw her black eye. I called the police the other night, but they didn’t do anything.”

Rakesh stepped closer to Justin, so they were face-to-face. “This isn’t good, Justin. This is dangerous. I have a cousin in Pakistan who was in an abusive relationship. She finally got away from him, but he was stalking her. She went out on a date with a friend from work, and her ex beat the hell out of him.”

“I know it’s not ideal, but I really like her.”

“You’re a good guy. You deserve someone who’s at least single.”

“She can’t help her situation. I think she wants to leave, but she’s scared.”

“Did she say that?”

“No. Not exactly, but it makes sense, right? Why would she wanna stay with some dude that’s hitting her?”

Rakesh sighed and rested his hands on the counter. “I don’t know why, but it happens all the time.”

Justin picked up the cardboard box full of cell phone cases. “I really like her.”

“Be careful, okay? This is serious.”

“I know.” Justin carried the box to the storeroom.

## SEVENTEEN

# FIRST DATE?

ON THE FIRST MONDAY OF JULY, THEY HIKED THE WOODED TRAIL, dappled sunlight filtering through the tree canopy. Robins chirped overhead. Two squirrels skittered about, chasing each other around an old oak tree. A creek trickled to their right.

Justin glanced at Leah. She wore cutoff jean shorts and a tight white T-shirt, the outline of her bra visible.

“I wanted to call you over the weekend, but I didn’t wanna get you in trouble,” he said.

Leah glanced at Justin. “It’s good that you didn’t call.”

“How was your weekend with Beau?”

“Is it okay if we don’t talk about him? I’m already feeling guilty. He’s at work and we’re like...”

“We’re just hiking.”

“Still...”

“Yeah, sure. Of course. We don’t need to talk about him.”

They stepped over tree roots and stones on the rocky trail. The narrow creek to their right expanded and the water rushed, little pockets of white water created by haphazard boulders.

“I think we’re getting close,” Justin said.

Leah glanced over her shoulder. “Maybe we should go back.”

“We’re almost there.”

“Is it okay if we go back right after we see it?”

Justin forced a smile. “Yeah. Of course. Whatever you want.”

As they hiked, the creek to their right widened and deepened further. The *whoosh* of water grew louder until they reached the precipice.

“We’re here,” Justin said, leading Leah off the trail toward the water’s edge, and the top of the waterfall.

“Wow, it’s like...” Leah said, holding on to a maple tree, and watching the water fall twenty-five feet to a pool below.

“It’s beautiful, huh?”

“Can we, like, get in the water?”

“Uh... I think it’s against the park rules.”

Leah looked around theatrically. “I don’t see anyone here to, like, tell us not to.”

“Good point.”

They hiked down the steep embankment, using small trees for balance, and to slow their descent. At the bottom of the waterfall, they hiked across some large stones.

“Be careful,” Justin said, shouting over the *whoosh* of water. “The wet ones are slippery.”

She simpered and shouted, “You have a dirty mind.”

Justin blushed. “I meant the rocks.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know.”

They stood on a large rock, facing the waterfall, awash in sunlight. The sparkling cascade spilled over the rocky ledge, mist seeming to hover above the pool.

Leah gaped at the scene for a long moment. Then she grabbed her phone from the back pocket of her shorts and asked, “Can you take some pictures of me with the waterfall?”

Justin took her phone. “Yeah, sure.”

Leah tied her T-shirt into a knot, showing her midriff. She removed her boots and socks and dipped a toe into the pool.

“Is it cold?” Justin asked.

“Feels nice.” She stepped into the pool, moving toward the waterfall. She faced Justin with the water up to her knees. “I should’ve brought my bikini,” she shouted above the roar of the falls. “Take a whole bunch of pictures, okay?”

Justin gave her a thumbs-up.

She struck a pose, her hip cocked, a crooked smile on her lips.

Justin took several pictures each time she changed her pose.

Leah unbuttoned and unzipped her cutoff shorts, her fly open, exposing her pink underwear.

Justin gawked at her, his body buzzing.

She posed with her fly open and said, “Are you taking the pictures?”

Justin snapped to attention. “Sorry.” He took pictures of her increasingly sexy poses.

She rotated and hiked up her already short jean shorts, exposing the bottom of her butt cheeks. Justin took those pictures too. Then she bent over, showing more. And Justin snapped those pictures too, with an erection.

Leah returned to the rock, her fly still undone. Justin returned her phone.

She inspected the pictures. “These are, like, really good.”

Justin peered over her shoulder, reliving the experience. “I’m glad they turned out okay. I’ve never taken pictures like this.”

Leah raised her gaze to Justin. “Pictures like what?”

A flush crept across Justin’s cheeks, ending at the tips of his ears. “Um... you know, pictures of a... beautiful girl.”

Leah smirked. “You think I’m beautiful?”

Justin nodded, unable to make eye contact.

“Do you think I’m, like, pretty enough to be an IG model?” Leah asked.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“That’s what I wanna do.”

“That’s cool. Are you planning to post these on IG?”

Leah deflated, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t have an account.”

“Really? I thought every girl had an account.”

“Beau would like lose his shit if I was on IG, especially with these pics. I know I should just do it, but...”

“If it’s something you really want—”

“Let’s go in the waterfall.” Leah grinned, obviously changing the subject. “I wanna put my head in it.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Justin said. “That water might be a lot of pressure.”

Leah gave him a pouty face. “Don’t make me do this all by myself.” She slid her jean shorts down her thighs, exposing her pink bikini underwear.

Justin gawked as she removed her T-shirt, exposing her white lacy bra.

Leah noticed him noticing her and giggled. She waded into the pool, moving toward the falls. Justin watched her backside, mesmerized.

Once her lower half was underwater, she pivoted to Justin, and beckoned him with one finger.

“I don’t have a bathing suit,” Justin shouted over the *whoosh*.

“Get your ass in here,” she shouted back.

Justin stripped down to his black boxer briefs and hurried into the cool water, hopeful that she wouldn’t notice his erection. They waded toward the waterfall, the water now up to their shoulders. The water splashed in their faces. Leah reached into the falls, the water pounding her hand like a firehose.

She retracted her hand, faced Justin, and shouted over the *whoosh* of water, “You’re right. Too much pressure.” Leah waded within kissing distance, so they didn’t have to shout at each other to be heard over the falls. “I don’t normally do this.”

“Do what?” he asked.

“Take off my clothes on a first date.”

“Are we on a first date?”

She pursed her full lips. “Is that what you want this to be?”

Justin nodded.

Leah smirked. “I bet you do.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I think you know.”

Justin looked away. “I’m sorry. I know you have a boyfriend. I’m not acting... right.” He waited for a reply, hoping she’d reciprocate his feelings, but she didn’t. “We should go back.”

She grabbed his jaw and forced him to meet her eyes. Then she pressed her lips to his. Their noses and teeth bumped, causing her to draw back. “Have you ever kissed a girl before?”

Justin turned beet red. “I, uh... kind of.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

He hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

She put her hand under his chin and forced him to raise his gaze. “Look at me.”

He did as he was told.

“I’ll show you.” She placed his shaky hands on her curvy hips. “Tilt your head to get your nose out of the way. Now press your lips to mine, but not too hard and not too soft.”

He followed directions.

When they separated, she said, “That was totally better. I should be like a sex-ed teacher.”

Justin smiled. “That was better.”

“You wanna try a French kiss?”

Justin arched his eyebrows. “Like with tongue?”

She giggled. “Yes, with tongue.”

His body trembled with anticipation.

“The key is not to open your mouth too wide, and not to use too much tongue. Just a little, otherwise it’s, like, totally gross.”

They both laughed. Then she leaned in for the kiss. Justin tilted his head to the side like he’d learned and pressed his lips to hers. Leah opened her mouth a little, and he mimicked her, opening his mouth a little. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and he mimicked her again, their tongues twisting together.

When they separated, he was panting.

“How was that?” Leah asked.

Justin took a deep breath. “That was the most exciting thing I’ve ever done.”

Leah giggled and pecked him on the lips.

“Was it bad for you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It was okay.”

“We could practice.”

Leah forced a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “You’re sweet, but I don’t know what I’m doing. Everything is, like, so confusing. We should go back.”

“Are you sure? We don’t have to do anything.”

“I know.” Leah waded toward the rocks.

Justin followed her. Leah had already put on her shorts as Justin emerged from the pool. Voices carried on the breeze.

“Did you hear that?” Justin asked.

Leah froze, her head cocked. “I think someone’s coming.”

They dressed quickly and climbed the embankment back to the trail. An older couple hiked with walking sticks. The old man vibrated, ogling Leah’s

chest, no doubt noticing her wet T-shirt. Justin wondered what evil thoughts were in his mind.

“Hello,” the old woman said.

“Hi,” Justin replied.

Once they hiked out of earshot, Leah said, “That was a dirty old man. Did you see him staring at my chest?”

Justin nodded. “Right in front of his wife too.”

“What a creep.”

Justin knew he was likely much worse than a man with a wandering eye.

---

On the way home, they drove past waist-high cornfields, and the Pennsylvania wilderness.

Justin glanced at Leah. “Are you hungry? We could grab some lunch.”

“I was about to say something,” Leah replied. “I’m literally starving.”

They stopped at a Sheetz along the way and ordered turkey subs. They ate at an outdoor picnic table as people came and went from the gas station and convenience store.

Justin finished his sub and folded the wax paper it came in. “I was thinking about the whole IG modeling thing.”

Leah looked up from her sub, her mouth full.

“Maybe you could be a different type of model. You’re pretty enough.”

Leah swallowed and said, “You’re sweet, but I’m, like, five-one. There’s no other modeling for me.”

“But—”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Seriously. What about you? Was it your dream to be a security guard?”

“Kind of.”

She knitted her brow. “Really?”

“I’m pretty good at seeing when people wanna do bad things. I tried to use that as a security guard, but it got me into trouble.”

“Maybe you could be a police officer?”

“I don’t know how I could be a police officer if I can’t keep a job as a mall cop.”

---

Justin pulled over and dropped off Leah about two hundred yards from their apartment building. They didn't want a nosy neighbor to see them together. Potential gossip could be deadly. Then, he drove the rest of the way to their apartment building, hurried inside, and waited for Leah in the third-floor hallway.

She glared at him when she saw him in the hallway. "What are you doing?" she whispered. "Someone might see."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," Justin replied.

She sauntered closer, her hips rocking back and forth. "I think you wanted another kiss."

Justin grinned. "That would be nice."

"Let's see if you remembered your lesson."

He put his hands on her hips and pulled her close. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer. They pressed their lips together, more eager than earlier. Their lips parted, tongues exploring. Nothing could distract him from the task at hand.

Leah pulled back and whispered, "Someone's coming."

They separated as heavy footsteps climbed the stairs. It was too late to run. Better to act like nothing had happened. Justin prayed like a sinner. *Please God, make it anyone but Beau.*

Kyle appeared, carrying the black canvas duffel bag he used for work. He approached Justin and Leah. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Just saying hi." Leah returned to her apartment.

Kyle stared at Justin with raised eyebrows.

"What?" Justin asked.

"You know what."

Justin went to their apartment, unlocked the door, and entered with Kyle on his heels.

"Are you seeing that girl?" Kyle asked.

Justin reddened. "We were hanging out."

Kyle clapped Justin on the back. "She's pretty hot. I'm happy for you, bro, but be careful. Her boyfriend's a big angry dude."

## EIGHTEEN

# BIG DREAMS

JUSTIN TOSSED AND TURNED, STILL HIGH ON DOPAMINE FROM HIS FIRST kisses. He recreated the highlights in his mind. His phone buzzed. He knew it was a text, as he had deactivated his notifications for social media. He grabbed his phone from the bedside table.

**Leah:** I did it. <https://www.instagram.com/littlecurvy20/>

Justin tapped on the link, which led to Leah's Instagram page. She had posted a single picture, which doubled as her profile picture. Leah bit the corner of her lip, smooth legs glistening in the sun, her midriff exposed, her fly open, showing a glimpse of her pink underwear, the waterfall in the background. The image already had 277 likes and dozens of comments. Justin double-tapped the screen, adding one more like. He checked the comments.

**Crypto\_bro\_5000:** Damnnnnnn!

**Striker2567:** Want to smash

**GunnerGreg:** Give us more!!!!

**BigBassman243:** So fucking hot

He felt a pang of jealousy at the comments, but he returned her text with support.

**Justin:** Congratulations. You look beautiful!

**Leah:** Beau is asleep. Meet me outside in 10 min

**Justin:** Yes!!!

Justin brushed his teeth and put on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He checked the clock on his phone—12:21 a.m. It had been nine minutes since her last text. He grabbed his keys and rushed outside. The gravel parking lot was lit by the floodlights on the apartment building. Cicadas buzzed and clicked in the humid air. Leah wasn't there. He waited for a minute, watching the front door to the apartment building.

“*Justin*,” Leah whispered.

He wheeled around, searching for her.

“*Justin*,” Leah whispered again. “*Over here*.”

He followed her voice to his Kia Rio. She crouched by the passenger door wearing plaid pajamas, his vehicle shielding her from the apartment building.

“I don't want anyone to see us together,” she whispered.

“Okay. You wanna get outta here?” he asked.

She nodded.

Justin entered his Kia and unlocked the doors. Leah climbed in, keeping her head below the dashboard.

“Hurry up,” she said.

Justin started his car. “Where are we going?”

“Just drive.”

Once they were on the road, she sat upright. Justin drove on a two-lane country road, passing farms and rural homes. Leah prattled on about how she was going to be an IG model.

“That's only one picture, and I already have like 300 likes. Imagine what I can do if I really tried. I'll have, like, sponsors and everything.”

Justin glanced at her, then back to the road. “I'm happy for you. What about Beau? Are you gonna tell him?”

“I can't. He'll totally kill you.”

Justin gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white. “No, I mean about the modeling.”

“I can't. He'll totally kill *me*.”

Justin pulled off, turning onto an old logging road.

“Where are we going?” Leah asked.

“Nowhere. I need to pull over so we can talk.”

He parked in front of the chain blocking the road with a sign that read *PRIVATE PROPERTY*.

Justin turned in his seat to Leah. “He’s gonna find out eventually.”

She let out a heavy breath. “I know.”

“What are you gonna do?”

She lifted one shoulder. “I really don’t know.”

“You could break up with him.”

“Where would I go? Part-time at Dollar General doesn’t pay enough for my own place.”

“Maybe we could move someplace together.”

She arched her eyebrows. “You have that kinda money?”

“No, but maybe when I get a job.”

Leah sighed. “I know I could make it big. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about money. I could, like, do whatever the hell I want. But if I make it big, Beau would find out. It’s like a catch something.”

“Catch-22.”

She hung her head. “I don’t know what to do.”

Justin took her hand. “We’ll figure it out.”

Leah raised her gaze.

“When you make it big, I can be your photographer.”

She smiled and turned in her seat to Justin. “When I make it big, I’ll have a professional photographer.”

He pressed his lips into a flat line.

“And you’ll be, like, catching bad guys, but not as a cop, right?”

“I don’t know.”

She retracted her hand from his. “I thought you were good at, like... catching people doing bad things.”

“Not exactly.” Justin rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m good at seeing people who wanna do bad things.”

She cocked her head. “How do you like... see that?”

“I can see a negative aura around people who have evil intentions.”

“How do you know what their intentions are?”

“I don’t, really. I just see them vibrating, and it usually happens before they do something bad.”

“Really? Can you give me an example?”

“Those guys that robbed Rakesh’s store and punched me in the face. They were all vibrating. I knew they were gonna do something bad.”

“That’s so crazy. Try it out on me. See if it works.”

“Okay. Um, you’ll have to think of doing something evil.”

She put her hands together. “All right. Lemme think of something.” She tapped her bottom lip with her index finger, thinking for a moment. “Got it. Let me know when I, like, start vibrating.”

Justin watched Leah for a minute in silence.

“Was I vibrating?” Leah asked.

“No,” he replied.

“I was thinking about beating up my ex-best friend. She stole my boyfriend my freshman year.”

“I didn’t see anything. Maybe it’s because you’re not really serious about it.”

Leah shook her head. “I’m *totally* serious about it. If I saw her somewhere, I’d punch her right in her big fat head. I’ll try thinking about something else.”

They tried several times, but Justin never saw Leah vibrate.

“I don’t know why it’s not working,” Justin said. “I used to see people at the mall vibrating all the time.”

“Let’s try it at the mall tomorrow,” Leah replied.

## NINETEEN

# THE SOCIOPATH NEXT DOOR

JUSTIN AND LEAH PATROLLED LEBANON VALLEY MALL, SEARCHING FOR vibrating people. Foot traffic was sparse on a Tuesday at noon. Beyonce played on the overhead speakers.

“See anyone vibrating?” Leah asked, her head on a swivel.

“Not yet,” Justin replied.

They walked to the fountain. Two middle-aged ladies chatted and watched the spurting water, shopping bags in hand.

“What about those two ladies?” Leah asked, pointing at the chatting women.

“They’re fine.”

“This place is dead,” Leah said, scanning the fountain area.

“We might find more people by the food court,” Justin replied.

On the way to the food court, Justin spotted two vibrating teen girls.

Justin grabbed Leah’s hand and stopped in his tracks “Don’t point, but those two girls we just passed are vibrating. I think they’re planning to shoplift.”

“Oh, shit,” Leah replied. “Let’s follow ’em.”

They followed the girls at a safe distance to Boscov’s, a department store. The girls browsed women’s clothing.

“Oh my god, this is literally for grandmas,” one of the girls said.

The other girl snickered.

The girls moved from clothing to the jewelry counter. Justin and Leah pretended to browse nearby.

“You know the jewelry’s cheap when they leave it out,” one of the girls said.

“Remember when Robbie gave me that cheap gold bracelet and it turned my wrist green?” the other girl asked.

“What a freakin’ loser.”

The girls cackled. Then they wandered to the handbags, purses, and wallets.

Justin and Leah pretended to browse the jewelry, but watched the potential shoplifters.

The girls compared their purses to the merchandise.

“This one’s okay,” one girl said.

“It’s not that ugly,” the other girl replied.

They found leather wallets with zippers and wrist straps.

“This is pretty nice,” one girl said.

“How much is it?” the other girl asked.

“Free.” The girl slipped the wallet into her purse and giggled.

“Oh shit,” Leah whispered to Justin. “You were totally right.”

“The other girl’s gonna steal something too.”

And she did. The other girl found a wallet she liked and stuffed it into her purse.

“I’ll be right back,” Justin said to Leah. He approached the girls with Leah a few steps behind. “Excuse me,” he said.

Both girls glared at Justin.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I wanted you to know that those wallets are equipped with electronic article surveillance tags,” Justin said.

“What are you even saying?” one of the girls asked.

Justin gestured to the exit. “If you walk out those doors with those wallets in your purses, the alarm will sound and you’ll be arrested.”

One of the girls put her hands on her hips. “We’re not trying to steal anything, asshole.”

The other girl chimed in, “And you shouldn’t be coming up to underaged girls, creep.”

The girls turned on their sneakers and hurried for the exit.

Leah appeared at Justin’s side, also watching the girls. “Do the wallets really have security things on ‘em?”

“No, but I don’t think they’ll go through those doors with the wallets,” Justin replied.

The girls stopped near the exit, fished the wallets from their purses, and nonchalantly tossed them at the feet of a mannequin wearing the finest middle-aged couture Boscov’s had to offer. Then they left.

Justin and Leah walked to the mannequin near the exit. He picked up the wallets and returned them to the purse section.

As Justin restocked the merchandise, Leah asked, “Why would you help the mall? They just fired you.”

Justin shrugged. “The mall has their rules, and I have mine.”

As they left Boscov’s, Justin spotted a man vibrating while buying a suit at the men’s clothing department.

“That guy’s vibrating,” Justin said.

“But he’s paying,” Leah replied.

“I bet he’s planning to wear the suit once to a wedding or something, then he’ll bring it back.”

“This mall is dumb as shit for firing you.”

They scoured the mall for more vibrating people. Along the way, they stopped at Rakesh’s store. The security gate was pulled down. A sign read *FOR LEASE*.

“Rakesh loved working here,” Justin said.

“What’s he doing now?” Leah asked.

“Working at the chicken plant in Fredericksburg.”

They went to the food court and surveyed the lunch rush. Teenagers and older people occupied half of the metal tables.

“Anyone vibrating?” Leah asked.

“That old guy in the red shirt sitting at the far-left table,” Justin said.

The old guy ogled a group of scantily-clad teen girls.

“Gross,” Leah said. “What do you think he’s, like... thinking about doing?”

“I don’t know,” Justin replied.

“Should we warn them?”

“He might have evil intentions, but that doesn’t mean he’ll carry them out.”

“Still. We should say something?”

“I don’t know. I guess we could tell them to be careful, that some guy was staring at them, but that would be better coming from you.”

They headed toward the table, intending to warn them, but the teen girls stood, tossed their trash, and left the food court. The old man watched them leave, but he didn't follow.

“I think they’re okay,” Justin said as they disappeared from view.

“Some girl’s waving at us,” Leah said.

Justin spotted Grace, cheesing and waving. “That’s Grace. I should say hi to her.”

“Who’s she?”

“A friend.” Justin went to the California Pizza Kitchen counter with Leah in tow. Grace didn’t have any customers. A paperback, *The Sociopath Next Door*, sat on the counter.

“Hey, Justin,” Grace said, still smiling. “How are you?”

“I’m doing okay. How are you?”

“Same ole, same ole. You know how it is.”

He gestured to the book on the counter. “Another true crime book?”

“Not exactly. This is better. It’s all about the psychology of sociopaths. According to this book, four percent of the population is sociopathic. That means you and I probably know a sociopath pretty well.”

Leah elbowed Justin and cleared her throat.

He gestured to Leah. “Oh, sorry. This is my friend, Leah.”

Grace grinned. “Hi, Leah. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah.” Leah pursed her lips.

Grace turned her attention back to Justin. “How’s Rakesh doing?”

“He’s working at the chicken plant,” Justin replied.

“That sucks.”

Leah elbowed Justin again and said, “I’m leaving.” Before he could answer, she left.

Justin reddened.

“Where’s your friend going?” Grace asked.

“I don’t know. I should go find out.”

“I don’t have your number.” Grace retrieved her phone from her back pocket.

“It’s 717-555-2045.”

Grace thumb-typed the number into her contacts, then called Justin. His phone chimed, and she said, “Now you have mine.”

Justin reached into his pocket and silenced the call. “Thanks, Grace. “I’ll see you around.”

“It was really great to see you.”

Justin fast-walked to catch Leah, who was headed for the exit. He caught up to her outside, on the sidewalk. “Where are you going?”

Leah stopped and whipped around, red-faced. “I’m going *home*.”

“My car’s on the other side of the mall, by Boscov’s.”

“I don’t care. I’ll get a ride home from someone else.”

“Are you mad?”

She glared. “I don’t appreciate you ignoring me in front of your little girlfriend.”

“She’s just a friend, and I wasn’t ignoring you. We were talking.”

Leah crossed her arms over her chest. “You didn’t, like, include me in the conversation. I was just standing there looking stupid. And then you introduced me as your ‘friend’.”

“How was I supposed to introduce you?”

“Forget it. Take me home.”

“I don’t understand. You’re mad at me for having a friend who’s a girl, but you’re living with your boyfriend.”

She burst into tears. “I can’t believe you’re saying this to me. I don’t have any  *fucking*  choice.”

Justin approached her as if she was a rabid animal. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.” He took her hand.

She yanked back her hand. “Don’t  *touch*  me.”

He showed his palms. “Sorry.”

She wiped her eyes with her T-shirt sleeves. “This is such bullshit. You’re, like, giving me all this shit about my boyfriend, but I don’t see you stepping up to help me. If I told Beau about you, he’d literally kick your ass in a second.”

“You don’t have to be mean.”

“I’m not being mean. I’m just saying it like it is.”

## TWENTY

# HARRY EBERSOLE

JUSTIN WATCHED THROUGH HIS APARTMENT PEEPHOLE AS BEAU LEFT for work, carrying his lunch pail. Then Justin opened his apartment door, listening for the roar of Beau's truck. Once he heard the throaty V8, he knew it was safe to venture next door.

Leah answered the door wearing pink pajama pants, a white tank top without a bra, and a frown. He struggled to keep his eyes on her face.

“Hey,” Justin said.

“What do you want?” Leah replied.

“I’m sorry about yesterday. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset. Like you said, I’m living with my boyfriend.”

“Can we just forget about it?”

Leah let out a long sigh. “I guess.”

“I was gonna go visit my uncle this morning. You wanna come?”

“Visit him where?”

“He’s in a mental institution. I’ll buy you lunch after.”

Leah shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

---

Justin drove to Wernersville State Hospital. He found his Great-uncle Ellis in the activity room, sitting on his usual couch, staring into space, his bony shoulders hunched. The room was decorated with American flags for

tomorrow's Fourth of July party. The wall-mounted flatscreen was on mute, showing a talk show. The other patients were livelier, chatting with each other, playing board games, cards, and coloring. Several patients stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows watching the beautiful summer day.

"Hey, Uncle Ellis." Justin leaned over and hugged his great-uncle. Justin's touch woke the old man.

"Hugs like," Ellis said.

Justin sat next to Ellis. "I like hugs too." Justin turned in his seat toward his uncle. "How are you?"

Ellis stared into space.

"You look good. Healthy and handsome." Justin patted the old man on the back, waking him again.

"Handsome, handsome, handsome."

Justin smiled. "That's right. Handsome."

Ellis motioned to Justin. "Handsome."

"Me?"

Ellis jabbed his index finger at Justin. "Handsome."

Justin shook his head. "I'm too small."

Ellis jabbed his finger at Justin again. "Handsome."

"I'm okay, I guess. I did meet a girl."

Ellis grinned. "Girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend."

"I don't think I can call her my girlfriend. I really like her, and I'd like for her to be my girlfriend, but she has a complication, a six-foot, two-inch complication, if you know what I mean."

Ellis went to another world, his eyes glazed over.

Justin patted him on the back. "Uncle Ellis?"

His uncle didn't come back, so Justin talked about what was on his mind. He used a low tone so nearby patients and visitors couldn't hear. "Her name's Leah. I really like her. Maybe I even love her, but I don't know about that. I just had my first kiss. I know, it's really embarrassing, but also exciting. Better now than when I'm forty, right?" Justin paused for an answer that never came. "The problem is that she's in an abusive relationship, and I don't know how to help her. I might be making it more dangerous for her. If he finds out we've been seeing each other, I don't know what he'll do. I feel like I'm already in over my head. Any advice?"

Ellis still stared, glassy-eyed.

Justin waited for an answer that never came. Then he turned his attention to the television mounted on the wall. A middle-aged man, bald and muscular, wearing a police uniform, appeared on the screen along with his name—Chief Harold “Harry” Ebersole. The police chief addressed the public at a podium, then shook hands with a diverse group of construction workers, then carried a smiling little girl. The screen faded to black and a final message appeared: *Vote Harold “Harry” Ebersole for the 9th Congressional District of Pennsylvania.*

## TWENTY-ONE RED FLAGS

ON THE DRIVE HOME FROM WERNERSVILLE STATE HOSPITAL, JUSTIN'S phone buzzed with a text. He didn't check it until he parked at his apartment building.

**Grace:** It was good to see you yesterday. I hope everything is ok with your friend. If you ever want to hang out, let me know.

Justin pocketed his phone without replying. He exited his Kia, went to the apartment building entrance, and entered using his key. He climbed the steps to the third floor. As he approached his apartment, gun shots, explosions, and the whir of a helicopter carried into the hallway. *Kyle must be playing COD.* Muffled voices came with the sounds of war, one of them feminine. Justin would have figured his roommate had one of his hookups over, but Kyle never hung out with his conquests. Kyle described his "dating" as "hit it and quit it."

He entered his apartment and found Kyle and Leah on the couch, bantering back and forth, playing *Call of Duty*. Leah still wore her pajama pants and white tank top from earlier. At least she'd put on a bra.

"Headshot," Kyle said. "You're too easy."

"Damn it," Leah replied. "You have to give me a chance."

"We'll play on the same team next."

Justin approached the couch.

“What’s up, bro,” Kyle said, not taking his eyes off the screen as he set up a new match.

“What are you doing here?” Justin asked Leah.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Leah replied, not taking her eyes off the screen.

“She was bored,” Kyle said. “How was your uncle?”

“He’s fine.” Justin sat next to Leah on the couch, his thigh barely touching hers.

She scooted over so he wasn’t touching her.

Kyle started a new game. “Stick with me.”

Leah saluted her comrade. “Yes, sir; General, sir.”

Kyle laughed. “Generals aren’t in the shit.”

They parachuted into an urban warzone, immediately taking fire.

“Take cover.” Kyle’s character took cover behind some rusty barrels.

Leah’s character hid behind a wooden crate. Her screen flashed red, indicating she was being shot. “They’re killing me!”

“Click in the right stick to mount your weapon on that crate,” Justin said.

“What? I don’t know how to do that.” Leah’s character died. “Damn it. You got me killed.”

“I was trying to help.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re not helping.”

“You’re already dead?” Kyle asked, his eyes glued to his side of the screen as he moved his soldier through the urban warzone.

“Justin got me killed.”

“You have to learn the controls,” Justin said.

Leah gave Justin a look that could kill. *“Shut up. I know.”*

Justin went to his room without a word. He sat on his bed, tears welling in his eyes. There was a soft knock on his door. Justin wiped his face, sniffled, and said, “Come in.”

Leah opened the door but lingered in the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. What are you doing?” Justin replied.

“You look upset.”

Justin shrugged.

“I’m freaking starving. Do you still wanna take me to lunch?”

## TWENTY-TWO

# SINGLE MOTHERS AND ABSENT FATHERS

THEY SETTLED INTO A BOOTH AT HEISEY'S DINER WITH A VIEW OF Pennsylvania Route 72. Little American flags decorated the tables. The aroma of sizzling burgers and fresh coffee filled the air, blending with the cacophony of chatter and the clatter of dishes.

Leah ordered strawberry pancakes and Justin ordered a cheeseburger and fries. The waitress disappeared with their orders.

Leah sat across the table from Justin. "So, how long have you been friends with Kyle?"

"Since we were ten," Justin replied.

"Is he, like, your best friend?"

"Pretty much."

"Where did you two meet?"

The waitress brought orange juice for Leah and a water for Justin. Leah sipped her juice.

When the waitress left, Justin said, "We met at a group home."

"A group home? What does that mean?"

"It's a house for orphans." Justin gulped his water.

"Oh my god." Leah winced. "I was talking shit about you having a soccer mom and a dad who takes you fishing."

"You didn't know."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"It didn't seem like the time to talk about it."

Leah leaned forward and whispered, “What happened to your parents?”  
Justin hesitated.

Leah leaned back and flashed her palms. “I’m sorry. I’m being a nosy bitch. We don’t have to talk about this.”

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago. I never knew my dad. He took off before I was born. Got arrested for running a Ponzi scheme. Ripped off a bunch of old people. One of them was a judge.”

“That’s, like, really messed up.”

Justin nodded. “As far as I know, he’s still in prison.”

“We have, like, the same kinda dad. Mine left when I was little, moved all the way to Alaska to get away from me and my mom. We haven’t heard from him since. I don’t even know if he’s like, alive.”

“That sucks.”

She lifted one shoulder. “I guess. I don’t really think about him.” She took a sip of her orange juice, then asked, “What about your mom?”

“She died when I was four.”

“Where did you go when your mom died?”

“I lived with my grandparents until I was ten.”

“What happened to your grandparents?”

“They were murdered. It was a robbery that went bad.”

Leah contorted her face as if in pain. “That’s... that’s a lot. I’m really sorry, Justin.”

He shrugged. “Like I said, it was a long time ago.”

“Did the police ever, like, catch their killer?”

“No.”

An awkward silence passed between them. They both sipped their beverages.

“What about *your* mom?” Justin asked, hoping her mother might be a voice of reason regarding Beau. “You see her much?”

“Not since I moved here. She’s in Luray, near the Shenandoah Mountains in Virginia. With as much as Beau works, I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Justin cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “What does your mom think of Beau?”

Leah rolled her eyes. “She loves him. Thinks he’s like the best thing ever.”

“Does she know about...”

Leah blew up her cheeks and exhaled. “This is depressing. Can we talk about something fun?”

“Like what?”

Leah put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Like, where would you go if you could go anywhere?”

“Like, on vacation?”

“Vacation, or to live. Whatever.”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it. What about you?”

“Inside the United States or outside the United States?”

“Inside the US.”

Leah beamed. “I always wanted to live in Key West. The sunsets are supposed to be so beautiful, and the water is so blue.”

Justin smiled. “Key West would be nice. If you lived there, what would you do every day?”

Leah tapped her lip, thinking. “I’d get a dog and walk him on the beach at sunrise. I would, like, go shopping all day. Then I’d eat dinner at an oceanfront bar and grill and watch the sunset. Oh, and I’d also take one of those ghost tours.”

“Are you gonna do all that by yourself?”

Leah smirked. “I’d have my dog.”

Justin pouted.

“You could come too, if you’re good.”

---

After lunch, they strolled side by side to Justin’s Kia. He opened the passenger door for her. Before she entered the car, she pressed her curvy body against Justin and planted an open-mouthed kiss on him.

When they separated, she said, “Thanks for lunch.”

## TWENTY-THREE

# FIREWORKS

FIREWORKS POPPED AND CRACKLED, AUDIBLE THROUGH JUSTIN'S bedroom window. He checked the time on his phone—12:03 a.m. It was technically the Fourth of July.

Justin tapped to Leah's IG page. She had posted a few more images. A selfie showing ample cleavage had garnered over five hundred likes and dozens of comments from thirsty dudes. Justin double-tapped the picture, liking it, but he purposely avoided the sexually suggestive and objectifying comments. As much as he hated Beau, Justin understood why he didn't want Leah on IG. It was basically a dating app/gateway to porn.

His phone buzzed with a text.

**Leah:** Beau is asleep. Can I come over?

**Justin:** YES!

Justin bolted to his bathroom, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs. He gargled with mouthwash, put on a T-shirt, then hurried to his front door. He watched through the peephole until Leah tiptoed down the hall in her pajamas. He opened his door and Leah slipped inside.

Leah scanned the dark apartment. "Where's Kyle?" she whispered.

"He's at a girl's house," Justin replied.

Leah tilted her head, her brow furrowed. "He has a *girlfriend*?"

Justin shook his head. “No, just a rotating group of girls that he hooks up with.”

“Oh.”

“What did you wanna do? We can play *Call of Duty*, or we can watch a movie or—”

“Let’s go to your room.”

Justin’s stomach fluttered as he led her to his bedroom. The bedside lamp provided dim yellow light. His double bed was unmade. A cheap dresser made from particle board sat along one wall. A matching desk sat under the window, Justin’s tablet on the desktop.

Leah did a 360, taking in the space. She went to the map with the pushpins and pictures of people on the wall. “What’s all this?”

Justin joined her. “It’s map of all the open missing persons cases in our area.”

Leah inspected the images of women and children that corresponded to the numbers on the pushpins, which denoted their last known whereabouts. “What’s it for?”

“At the mall, I used to see about five hundred people every day—more on the weekends. If you add that up over a year, taking into account my days off, I probably saw at least 130,000 people every year. That’s about the population that lives in a twenty-mile radius of the mall. I figured if I kept up on these cases, I might eventually see a missing person, and I could get them help.”

“Did you ever, like... find anyone?”

“No.”

Leah nodded. “That’s nice that you were, like, trying to help.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

An awkward silence passed between them.

“Do you think Kyle might come home?” Leah asked.

“He might. He doesn’t usually stay over,” Justin replied.

Leah sauntered to the door and asked, “Is this locked?”

“No.”

She turned the lock, then tried the doorknob, making sure it was. “It is now.”

His stomach churned.

She sauntered to his bedside table and turned off the lamp. Moonlight and ambient light from the outdoor floodlights filtered through the blinds.

“Come here,” she said, beckoning with her index finger.

He went to her, his body trembling with anticipation. They embraced and kissed for a long moment. She tasted like mint and smelled faintly of vanilla. When they separated, she untied the drawstring on her pink pajama pants. Then she inched them over her round hips, dropped them to the floor, and stepped out of her pants. She stood in white socks, white cotton underwear, and a pink pajama top.

Leah glanced at Justin’s crotch, no doubt noticing the outline of his erection. “Lie on the bed.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for...” Justin trailed off.

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to, like, do anything.”

Justin moved his comforter aside and lay on his back. Leah climbed on the bed and straddled him. She bent forward at the waist and kissed him openmouthed, their tongues twisting together. His hands gripped her hips. She rubbed her clitoris against his erection. At first, she barely moved. It was almost incidental. Then she ground against him harder and faster, the thin cotton of their underwear the only thing separating them. She kissed him deeper, urgently, her tongue probing. They moved in sync, their breathing heavy and ragged. Justin’s entire body buzzed with dopamine.

He pushed her pajama top up, releasing her breasts, now mashed against his chest. She rubbed harder still, grinding back and forth against him, moaning as she did so. He slid his hands back down her body, grabbing her ass, feeling her gyrations. He was close to the edge, near release, but Leah let out a high-pitched squeak, followed by a long, heavy exhale. Then she rolled off him and lay on her back, catching her breath.

His penis throbbed in his boxer briefs, close but not quite there.

## TWENTY-FOUR

# UNREQUITED

THE FOURTH OF JULY HAD BEEN A THURSDAY, AND BEAU HAD BEEN OFF on Thursday, Friday, and the weekend, so Justin hadn't seen or talked to Leah until her text late on Sunday night.

**Leah:** Can't wait to see you tomorrow. Come over as soon as he leaves in the am.

Justin knocked on her door as soon as Beau pulled out of the parking lot in his pickup truck. Leah opened her door, pulled Justin into her apartment, and kissed him on the mouth. When they came up for air, they were giggling.

"I missed you," Justin said.

"Of course you did," Leah replied. "What do you, like, wanna do today?"

"Have you ever been to the Allen in Annville?"

"No. What's that?"

"It's a really cool old movie theatre with a café. I was thinking we could go there for lunch and a movie. I don't know what's playing but..."

---

They entered the dimly lit theater. A handful of couples were scattered across the leather seating. Justin and Leah sat on the left side, in a lonely section, their Cokes in the cupholders and their popcorn in Leah's lap. A red curtain covered the massive movie screen.

Leah leaned over and pecked Justin on the cheek. "I totally love this place."

"It's pretty cool, huh? I like when the curtains open," Justin replied.

"Beau wanted to see *The Fall Guy*. I guess I'll have to pretend I didn't see it."

Justin slumped his shoulders, bothered by her mentioning her boyfriend.

She took Justin's hand. "Let's not talk about him."

Justin nodded.

The red curtain parted and the previews played.

Justin leaned over and said into her ear, "I love you." He faced forward again, his stomach in knots.

She turned to him and said, "You're sweet."

## TWENTY-FIVE

# REALITY KILLS THE FANTASY

ON THE WAY HOME FROM THE MOVIES, JUSTIN GLANCED FROM THE road to Leah and said, “What do you wanna do now? We have a few hours before...”

Leah pursed her lips. “Did you like what we did the other night?”  
Justin blushed. “Yeah.”

“I was thinking we could, like... really do it this time.”

Justin swallowed. “You mean... have sex?”

Leah giggled. “Do you think Kyle’s home?”

“He wasn’t when we left for the Allen.”

“Let’s go to your room and have some fun, then.”

Justin mashed on the accelerator, knowing that they only had two hours before Beau returned from work, which meant that they only had one hour to be together, as Leah always left with an hour buffer just in case. As they neared their apartment building, Justin slowed his Kia to make the turn into the parking lot.

Leah shrieked and ducked down in her seat. “Don’t turn! Keep driving. Beau’s truck is there.”

Justin spotted Beau’s Dodge Ram and accelerated, leaving their apartment building in the rearview.

“Oh, my god. I’m so fucked,” Leah said, still crouched below the dashboard. “This is like really bad. *Really* bad.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out,” Justin replied.

Leah shook her head. “You don’t understand what he’s like. He’ll kill me, then he’ll kill you.”

“Tell him that you had to work at Dollar General.”

Leah sat upright in her seat. “He knows my schedule.”

They neared a tiny strip mall.

Leah motioned to the mall. “Pull in here.”

Justin turned into Swatara Plaza, a pothole jarring the Kia. The faded lines caused patrons to park haphazardly. Half of the spaces were empty, available for immediate lease. Only Bad Boys Vape Store, West Lebanon Pawn Brokers, and Subway were left. Justin parked near the Subway. A *Help Wanted* sign was posted in the restaurant’s window.

Leah checked her phone. “Oh, no. He sent like twenty texts. My phone was on silent when we were in the movies.”

Justin pivoted in his seat to face her. “What did he text?”

“Oh, you know. Nice little messages like, *Where the fuck are you?* And, *If you don’t call me right now, you’ll fucking regret it.* And my personal favorite, *You better be dead in a fucking ditch.*” Leah hung her head and cried.

Justin took her hand. “Hey. I won’t let him hurt you.”

She snatched her hand back. “Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

“I mean it. I really do.”

Leah sniffled and wiped her eyes on her T-shirt sleeves. “*You can’t stop him.*”

“*We’ll call the police.*”

She shook her head. “They won’t do anything until *after* he’s hurt me.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I need a lie. It has to be totally believable.”

“Tell him you went for a walk,” Justin suggested.

She sniffled again. “He wouldn’t believe that.” Leah spotted the *Help Wanted* sign and inhaled sharply. “I think I got it. I’ll tell him that I walked here to, like, fill out an application for Subway because Dollar General doesn’t give me enough hours. And that’s all true too.”

“He’ll wanna know why your phone was off.”

“I’ll tell him it was because I was in the interview, and then I forgot it was off.”

“Will he believe that? Applications are online.”

Leah frowned. “I can tell him that I thought I’d have a better chance to get the job if I met the manager in person.”

“I guess that could work.”

Leah opened the passenger door.

“Where are you going?” Justin asked.

“To fill out an application. If I’m actually telling the truth, it’ll be, like, believable.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Go home right now. It’s probably better that you’re there before I get there.”

## TWENTY-SIX

# CONSEQUENCES

JUSTIN RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND WAITED FOR LEAH TO WALK back from Subway. But she didn't walk back from Subway. Beau brought her back in his pickup truck. He watched through the peephole and listened as the couple argued.

"I don't know why you're, like, so mad," Leah said as they entered the hallway. "I was trying to get a job. I didn't know it was gonna, like, take so long."

"That's not why I'm mad," Beau replied through gritted teeth.

"Then what?"

"I'll tell you inside." Beau opened their apartment door, shoved Leah inside, and slammed the door behind them.

Justin grabbed a glass from the kitchen and ran to his bedroom. He placed the glass to the shared wall by his bed, then placed his ear to the glass, enhancing his hearing ability.

"What did I fuckin' tell you about Instagram?" Beau asked.

Leah hesitated. "I, um... I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bullshit. You fuckin' know I don't want you on there, but guess what I found?"

She didn't answer.

"Answer the fuckin' question!" Beau shouted.

"You found my pictures."

"I found pictures of you lookin' like a whore. Tits out, ass out."

“I’m not a *whore*,” Leah replied. “I didn’t touch anyone. I don’t even, like, respond to comments.”

A *thump* came from their apartment followed by a yelp.

“Don’t *lie* to me,” Beau said. “I’m not stupid. I know IG is for datin’. Who are you hookin’ up with?”

“Nobody! I swear,” Leah blubbered.

“I found fifteen douchebags that liked every one of your pictures. Which one are you fuckin’?”

“I’m not seeing anyone. I swear.”

“Let’s go through ‘em. How about Crypto Bro 5000? Are you bangin’ this loser?”

“Beau, stop, please. I don’t know these people.”

“You don’t? What about Striker 2567? He says he wants to ‘smash’ in the comments of every one of your pictures. Seems like he knows you.”

“He’s just a creep on the internet.”

“What about Gunner Greg? I bet he’s in your DMs wantin’ to fuck.”

“I haven’t responded to anyone in my DMs. I don’t want anyone but you.”

“How about Big Bassman? He liked all your posts, keeps tellin’ you how hot you are. Is that what this is about? You need attention from these coomers?”

“Stop, Beau. I don’t want anything to do with these guys. I’ll delete my account like right now. Please, just stop.”

“I don’t believe you,” Beau said.

“I’m telling the truth,” Leah said. “I don’t have anything to do with these guys.”

“Since you’re so truthful. Answer this question. Are you seein’ someone behind my back?”

“No. Of course not. I swear. I’ve never met any of these guys.”

There was a long pause. “You’ve never met *any* of these guys?”

“No. I haven’t.”

“You’re a fuckin’ liar and a whore. That little douche next door liked every one of your pictures. How does he even know you have an IG account?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know he was liking my pictures.”

Justin flinched, hearing the skin-on-skin slap, followed by Leah’s yelp.

“I’m *done* with you. It’s *over*,” Leah said.

Beau smacked her again. “I say when we’re done.”

Justin balled his fists, thinking about what to do, and remembering Kyle’s gun. Mind-numbing pain came from his temples. He staggered from his bedroom to Kyle’s room, struggling to see as the migraine radiated from his skull down his spine. He searched Kyle’s dresser and desk blindly, but he couldn’t find the handgun. He lurched into the kitchen and grabbed a steak knife from the drawer.

With gritted teeth, he lumbered toward the door, his vision blurry. He unlocked and opened his apartment door to find Beau standing there red-faced, his jaw set tight. Justin tried to raise the knife, but the pain overwhelmed his nervous system. Beau threw a roundhouse right that connected with Justin’s jaw and sent him sprawling to the floor.

Leah shrieked. “Beau. Stop it!”

But Beau didn’t stop. He kicked Justin while he was down. Justin groaned, struggling for air as the kicks kept coming. Then they stopped, and Beau tripped over Justin’s body. Kyle mounted Beau and pummeled him, throwing rights, lefts, and elbows like an MMA fighter. When Kyle finally stood, Beau writhed on the ground, moaning and bloody.

“Get the fuck outta my house,” Kyle said.

Beau struggled to his feet and staggered into the hallway. Leah shut and locked the door. Kyle and Leah knelt beside Justin.

Kyle tapped Justin’s cheek. “You okay?”

Justin grunted as he sat up, pain coming from his back, where he’d been kicked. He moved his jaw back and forth. More pain, but likely unbroken. “I think I’m okay.”

## TWENTY-SEVEN

# HAPPILY NEVER AFTER

JUSTIN SAT ON ONE END OF THE COUCH, AN ICEPACK ON HIS FACE. LEAH sat at the other end, checking her texts. Kyle paced before them, still wired from the fight.

“He sent me a text,” Leah said.

“What does it say?” Kyle asked.

“He’s begging me not to call the police. Says he’s sorry and he knows it’s over. Says he’s going to stay with a friend from work.”

Justin removed the icepack from his face and said, “Fuck him. We should call the police.”

“We can’t,” Leah replied. “He has serious issues, but getting him arrested will just, like, make it worse. And then when he gets out, who do you think he’ll come after?”

“You need to get away from him.”

“He knows it’s over,” Leah said.

“I don’t think he’ll listen.”

“That’s not what his text said.”

“What are you gonna do now?” Kyle asked Leah.

“I don’t know,” Leah replied. “Beau’s gonna move out, but I can’t afford the apartment on my own.”

“You could move in here,” Justin said.

Leah shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

Justin slapped the icepack back on his face.

“You should at least stay here until he moves out,” Kyle said.

---

Later that night, Justin brushed his teeth before bed. He tilted his head in the mirror, inspecting the purple bruise on his jawline. It had only been two weeks since he was punched in almost the exact same spot during the robbery of Abbasi Electronics. That bruise had finally disappeared, and now he had another one.

Justin entered his attached bedroom. Leah was already under the covers, scrolling IG on her phone.

He approached Leah’s bedside and asked, “Can you check my back?”

She lifted her gaze from her phone. “For what?”

“Tell me what it looks like.” He turned his back to her and lifted his shirt.

She sucked air through her teeth. “It’s all black and blue.”

Justin dropped his shirt and faced Leah.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah. I’ll have to sleep on my stomach.”

Leah returned to her phone like she didn’t care about his pain.

Justin went to the other side of the bed and climbed under the covers. He scooted over to her, put his arm around her, and nuzzled her neck.

She pulled away. “I don’t feel like hooking up.”

He retracted his arm. “We don’t have to do anything. We could just lie together and cuddle.”

“It’s too hot.”

## TWENTY-EIGHT

# SHE'S NOT WORTH IT

JUSTIN TENDED TO THE SCRAMBLED EGGS ON THE STOVETOP, THE PAN sizzling. Leah sat at the kitchen table, checking her texts. Justin turned off the burner and removed the pan from the stovetop. He seasoned the eggs with salt and pepper, then divvied them between the two plates. The toast popped. Justin buttered the toast and took the plates of eggs and toast to the kitchen table.

Leah scowled at her plate. “Don’t you have jelly?”

“Yeah.” Justin went to the refrigerator and returned with a jar of grape jelly.

She scrunched her face at the jelly. “You don’t have strawberry?”

“Just grape.”

“Forget it.”

Justin sighed and sat at the kitchen table.

Leah took a bite of her toast.

Justin stabbed some eggs.

With her mouth still full, Leah said, “Beau texted me again.”

Justin swallowed and asked, “What did he say?”

“He’s coming here with his friend in like an hour to get his stuff. I really don’t wanna see him.”

“If you stay here, it’ll be fine.”

She shook her head. “No, it won’t be. He could, like, take my stuff. Do you think Kyle could, like, help me watch him.”

“I can do it.” Justin took a bite of his eggs.

Leah rolled her eyes. “So he can beat you up again?”

Justin frowned. “Why are you being mean?”

Leah groaned in frustration. “Do you want me to lie to you?”

Justin didn’t reply.

Leah stood from the table. “I’m gonna ask Kyle.” She started for his room.

“He’s sleeping,” Justin said to her back.

But Leah tiptoed to Kyle’s room and knocked on the door. Kyle’s muffled voice came back. She entered his room and shut the door behind her. Justin’s stomach churned as he watched Kyle’s bedroom door, waiting for Leah to return. He pushed his plate away, his appetite gone.

Ten minutes later, she exited Kyle’s room, and returned to the kitchen. “He said he’ll do it.”

---

Justin watched through the peephole. Kyle and Leah stood in the hallway, watching each item that left the apartment, making sure Beau and his friend didn’t take anything that belonged to Leah.

Beau left the apartment, carrying a toolbox, and several plastic bags filled with items.

“Open it,” Kyle said, gesturing to the toolbox.

“Are you serious?” Beau asked.

“I don’t know what you put in there.”

“Tools. It’s a toolbox.”

“You’re a toolbox. Open it.”

Beau exhaled and set the items on the floor. He opened the toolbox and Leah peered inside.

“That’s all his,” Leah said.

“No shit.” Beau shut the toolbox and started to pick up his stuff.

“Hold on,” Kyle said. “She needs to check those plastic bags.”

Leah checked the plastic bags.

“Where’s your little bitch roommate?” Beau asked.

“You’re the little bitch, trying to beat up a guy half your size,” Kyle replied.

“That piece of shit is hookin’ up with my girlfriend.”

Leah stood from the plastic bags. “I’m not your girlfriend anymore.”

Beau’s friend exited the apartment carrying a football, a winter coat, hat, and some gloves.

Beau glared at Leah. “I was gonna marry you. Now you’re with that little fuckin’ weasel.”

“I’m not with anybody,” Leah replied.

Justin winced as if he’d been punched in the gut.

Beau’s friend nudged him. “Let’s go, man. She’s not worth it.”

## TWENTY-NINE

## FINE

JUSTIN TURNED OFF THE LAMP AND CLIMBED INTO BED. LEAH WAS already under the covers, scrolling on her phone.

“Are you okay?” Justin asked.

“I’m fine,” Leah replied, her eyes glued to her phone.

“You don’t seem fine. You’ve barely talked to me all day.”

She blew out a heavy breath. “I don’t feel like talking.”

Silence passed between them, Justin focused on her, Leah focused on her screen.

“I’m worried,” Justin said. “I feel like I messed everything up somehow.”

She finally looked at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Things just feel different between us. Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” Leah set her phone on the bedside table and rolled to her side, her back to Justin.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Justin said. “I’m trying to talk to you, and you just roll over.”

Leah rolled to her back. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want things back the way they were before Beau...” He shook his head.

Leah glowered at Justin. “Before Beau what? Before he, like, beat both of us up?”

“Yeah.” He rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling.

“Well, we can’t go back in time. What happened, happened.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you, like, apologizing?”

Justin rolled to his side facing her. “I don’t know. I feel like I can’t do anything right.”

“Just stop, okay. Like, just stop.” Leah rolled to her side again, showing Justin her back.

Justin tossed and turned, thinking about what he did wrong, before finally drifting off to a fitful sleep.

---

Justin woke with a start, sitting up in the darkness. He looked to his left. Leah was gone. Muted voices came from the living room. He tiptoed to his door and listened. Kyle and Leah joked back and forth, talking trash, playing *Call of Duty*. The musky smell of marijuana wafted into his bedroom. He returned to bed, but he couldn’t sleep. He imagined Leah and Kyle hanging out, smoking weed, and laughing and joking in a way she never did with him.

## THIRTY

# THE HARSH TRUTH

JUSTIN WOKE LONG BEFORE LEAH. HE WENT TO THE GROCERY STORE for bacon, strawberry preserves, pancake mix, and real strawberries. He thought about it most of the night and he came to the conclusion that Leah had been through a serious trauma with Beau, and it would take some time for her to be over him. Kindness and understanding were what she needed.

So, while she slept, he prepared her favorite breakfast, strawberry pancakes with a side of bacon. He loaded her breakfast on a tray and delivered it to her bedside.

“Good morning,” Justin said, all smiles.

She groaned, eyes fluttering in the morning light. She wore pajama pants and an oversized T-shirt.

“I made you breakfast. Your favorite. Strawberry pancakes.”

Leah sat up in bed and stretched her arms over her head. “I have to pee.”

Justin held the tray until she returned from the bathroom. Once she sat in his bed, he set the tray in her lap.

“Thanks,” she said without enthusiasm. Then she grabbed her phone and scrolled IG while she ate.

“Well, I’ll leave you alone. I should clean up the kitchen.” Justin hoped she would ask him to stay, but she didn’t say a word, so he returned to the kitchen to clean up, disappointed that his effort wasn’t recognized.

After cleaning the kitchen, he returned to his bedroom. Leah was still scrolling on her phone, but her plate was clean, the tray on the bed next to her.

“How was it?” Justin asked.

“Good,” she replied, focused on her phone.

Justin moved the tray to his dresser, then crawled into bed with her. He tried to kiss her, but she blocked him with her hand.

“I’m too full to hook up,” she said.

Justin recoiled. “You haven’t kissed me once since the fight with Beau.”

Leah looked up from her phone. “*And?*”

“Something’s wrong. I can tell.”

Leah let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine. I don’t think this is, like... working anymore.”

Justin’s voice rose an octave. “What do you mean it’s not working? We don’t have to sneak around anymore. We can finally be together without worrying about Beau. It should work *better*.”

Leah shrugged. “For you, maybe.”

“Are you saying you don’t wanna be with me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Justin cocked his head, his brow furrowed. “*No*. I don’t understand.”

“I’m trying not to be mean.” She grabbed her phone from the bedside table and scrolled again.

“Be mean. Just tell me the truth. I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

Leah shook her head, her attention still on her phone.

Justin got out of bed and went to Leah’s bedside, standing over her. “Just tell me. Please, Leah. Please tell me—”

“I don’t feel safe with you.” She said this in a monotone, like it was of no consequence.

“What?”

Leah slapped her phone on the bedside table and looked at Justin. “I’m, like, a small woman. I need a bigger man to feel like... protected. It’s nothing against you, but I’m pretty sure I could beat you up. How are you supposed to, like, protect me?”

Tears filled his eyes. “But it’s not like some guy attacking you is a regular occurrence. It’ll probably never happen again.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, her back against the headboard. “It doesn’t matter. I have to know my man can protect me. If he can’t, I’m

not..."

"You're not, what?"

"Forget it." She stood from the bed, grabbed her phone, and slipped her feet into her sandals. "I should go back to my place." She started for the bedroom door.

"Please. Tell me."

She pivoted to him in the doorway. "You're sweet, Justin. You really are. But I'm not attracted to little guys who can't protect me."

Tears slipped down his face. "Then why did you get involved with me in the first place?"

She pressed her lips into a flat line, thinking for a moment, unmoved by his tears. "I thought I wanted, like, the opposite of Beau. Someone I knew would, like, never hurt me, but that's not what I want."

He held out his trembling hands, his voice desperate. "What do you want? I can be whatever you want."

"I want someone who would never hurt me, but can still hurt other men to protect me. You can't even, like, protect yourself." She left his room.

"Don't go," Justin called out to her back. He followed her to the front door. "Please, Leah. Don't go."

She left without looking back.

## THIRTY-ONE

# BLOCKED

JUSTIN SAT ON HIS BED, HIS THUMBS TAPPING ANOTHER TEXT, THE glow of the screen providing the only light.

**Justin:** Please don't do this. I love you.

**Justin:** You're just confused about what happened with Beau. Please don't throw us away. We are really good together. I love you.

**Justin:** Please talk to me. I feel like I'm losing my mind without you. I love you.

**Justin:** I really need to talk to you. Please. I love you so much.

**Justin:** I need you to know that I love you and I always will. If you give me a chance, I promise I'll be the best boyfriend. I love you always.

His final text was tagged with a message that read *Not Delivered*. He tried calling Leah, but his call went directly to voicemail. "God damn it," he said to himself. *She blocked me.* He banged on their shared wall and shouted, "Leah, talk to me! Leah, please. I love you."

He waited with his ear to the wall. Nothing. Justin put on his sweatpants and left his apartment in his stocking feet.

He hurried down the short hallway to Leah's apartment and banged on the door. "Leah. You have to talk to me! Please. Just give me five minutes. I love you."

She finally responded. Her first words to him since their breakup were, “I’m calling the police.”

Kyle emerged from their apartment and jogged to Justin’s side.

Tears welled in Justin’s eyes. “Go ahead. Call the police. I don’t care anymore.”

“Don’t call the police, Leah. I got him,” Kyle said to the door.

“Make sure he doesn’t come back,” Leah replied.

“I got him.” Kyle took Justin by the arm and escorted him back to his bedroom.

Justin slumped on his bed, a lump in his throat. “I love her.”

Kyle stood over Justin. “You don’t. It’s just the first time a female has ever given you attention. Forget about her. You’ll find someone better.”

“I don’t want anyone else.”

Kyle placed his hand on Justin’s shoulder and squeezed. “I know it seems like that, but you’ll move on in time.”

Justin crawled under his covers.

“If you need anything, let me know.” Kyle left the bedroom.

As soon as Kyle shut the bedroom door, Justin burst into tears, his pillow muffling his sobs.

## THIRTY-TWO

# TENT CITY

A KNOCK CAME TO JUSTIN'S BEDROOM DOOR.

Then Kyle's voice. "I'm coming in." He flipped on the overhead light. Justin covered his head with his comforter.

Kyle approached the bedside. "Hey, bro. Are you alive?" Kyle paused, but didn't receive a response. "You can't stay in here forever. It's been three days."

Justin grunted.

Kyle yanked the covers from the bed, dumping Justin on the floor in the process. "Get dressed. I got something to show you that'll cheer you up."

Justin wrapped the covers around him, hiding from the world. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You are." Kyle pulled the covers, unraveling Justin, then tossed the blanket back on the bed.

Justin rolled to his stomach, covering his head with his arms.

Kyle opened Justin's dresser, grabbed some clothing, then tossed the items at his roommate. "Get dressed."

---

Kyle drove Justin into Harrisburg in his Jeep Wrangler. They took I-83 to Front Street. They parked along South Front Street, just off the exit, in front of a city block, overgrown with weedy trees, and piles of trash strewn

about. Sagging tarps, frayed tents, and makeshift shelters made from wood scraps and corrugated metal utilized the trees for support and shelter. Across Front Street, the Susquehanna River flowed in the summer breeze. The woody dumping ground was bordered by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. A trio of scraggly men shuffled past, two of them drinking beer.

“Where are we?” Justin asked.

“Tent City,” Kyle replied.

“Is this a homeless encampment?”

Kyle nodded.

Justin frowned. “Why would you bring me here?”

“You’ll see.”

“Is it safe?”

“Relax, bro. It’s fine. Come on. Trust me.”

Justin groaned and said, “Fine.”

They followed the well-worn path into Tent City. An ammonia and sulfur smell permeated the compacted soil. Men wearing soiled clothing and scraggly beards gawked at them like zombies. Scattered items told sad stories—shredded clothing, plastic water bottles, candy wrappers, a naked and headless doll, needles, and condoms. Another group sat in camping chairs before a red tent, smoking and drinking by flashlight. One of them was a forty-something woman who looked familiar to Justin, but he couldn’t place her.

“The surprise is this way.” Kyle took them to a gray-and-yellow tent in a dark and lonely corner of the encampment. Barking came from the tent. “Hey, Edwin. It’s Kyle.”

The dog kept barking.

“Who?” a man asked from inside the tent.

“Kyle Fleming. I was here the other day, remember? We were in the same group home when we were kids.”

“Did you bring it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Edwin Arroyo, disgraced UFC fighter, emerged from the tent, a mangy golden retriever mix in lockstep, still barking his head off. Edwin was average height with a curly mop of greasy black hair. He bore the signs of a former fighter with his crooked nose, cauliflower ears, and wiry build. He

also bore the signs of homelessness, with his dirty clothes, bloodshot eyes, and the yellow tint to his teeth.

Edwin said to his dog, “*Cálmate, Chico.*”

The dog stopped barking. The shorthaired mutt had a reddish-tan coat with floppy ears, a black nose, a long snout, and a white patch of fur that ran from his neck down his belly.

Edwin glared and lifted his chin to Justin. “Who’s this?”

“That’s Justin Boyle,” Kyle said. “You don’t remember him?”

Edwin shook his head.

“He was in our group home too.”

Edwin nodded, then held out his hand to Kyle. “Gimme the stuff.”

“You got any money?” Kyle replied.

“Naw, but I’ll pay you back. I just need a little to get right.”

“I’m not Bank of America. I don’t do credit.”

Edwin’s hand trembled. “Come on, man. I’ll do anything. Anything you need.”

Kyle glanced at Justin, then said, “Bark like a dog.”

“What?”

“What are you doing?” Justin asked in a hushed whisper.

“Bark like a dog,” Kyle said, with a smirk.

Edwin barked several times. The mutt barked too, like they were talking.

Kyle snickered and removed a clear plastic baggie from his pocket containing a small amount of white powder. He held up the baggie and waved it back and forth, watching Edwin’s eyes follow it, like a dog with a treat.

“Go get it, boy.” Kyle tossed the baggie into a patch of weeds.

Edwin scurried after the drugs, his dog hot on his heels. When he reached the approximate location of the drugs, he dropped to his knees and scoured the dark ground for the precious item.

They left Edwin without saying goodbye.

Justin wondered where Kyle had gotten the drugs and what it was? *Heroin? Cocaine?* He thought Kyle only sold marijuana.

“You’re quiet,” Kyle said as they hiked through Tent City, heading back to the Jeep. “I thought seeing your bully get what he deserves would cheer you up.”

Justin shrugged. “I don’t know. It didn’t feel right. It felt like bullying.”

“Which he deserved. Don’t you remember what he did to us?”

“I remember.”

“Then you know he got off easy. I should’ve beat his ass.”

Justin saw the same familiar forty-something woman, staring into the oblivion, her eyes unfocused. He racked his brain, but he still couldn’t place her.

## THIRTY-THREE

# BACK TO WORK

JUSTIN GAPED AT THE LAST FROOT LOOP FLOATING IN HIS MILKY cereal bowl, thinking about Edwin, and wondering what it was like to fall so far.

Kyle entered the kitchen. “Rent’s due tomorrow.”

Justin blinked and stood from the kitchen table. “I’ll get a check.” He washed out his bowl and went to his room while Kyle prepared his own cereal.

Justin sat at his desk and checked his bank account balance on his cell phone—\$1132.09. He had enough for rent, but he needed a job. He wrote a check to their landlord for his half of the apartment and stuffed it into an envelope. Then, he collected Kyle’s check and promised to drop it off.

“How are you doing for money?” Kyle asked.

“I need a job,” Justin replied.

“Can you cover your rent okay?”

“I got it. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. I could still use some help with deliveries, if you wanna make some money.”

“No, but thanks. I’m gonna go by Subway. They had a *Help Wanted* sign the other day.”

“Subway?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong with Subway?”

“Nothing, except it’s probably minimum wage and sounds boring as hell.”

“Most places are laying people off.”

Kyle grinned. “Not your friendly neighborhood weed dealer.”

---

Justin dropped their rent off at the landlord’s house, leaving it in the mailbox. Then he drove to the West Lebanon Subway. He needed a job, but he had an ulterior motive, not only for applying to Subway, but for applying in person.

He entered the Subway restaurant, immediately inundated with the yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread. The walls were decorated with images of fresh produce and vintage maps of the New York City subway system, along with two flatscreen televisions that played the local news on mute. The counter stretched before him, the glass panels showcasing a colorful array of fresh veggies, condiments, and toppings. An older man worked behind the counter with a teen girl.

Justin asked the old guy for an application, which he provided with a big smile. Justin sat at a booth and filled out the application. When he was finished, he took it to the old man.

The old guy skimmed the application, then said, “Justin... do you have a few minutes for an interview?”

“Yes, sir,” Justin replied.

“No need to call me sir. Harvey’s just fine with me.”

“Thanks... Harvey.”

Justin and the old man settled into a lonely booth in the back corner of the restaurant. The old man had a full head of white hair, and oddly, gray eyebrows. His face was weathered and his nose was large and pointy.

“Do you have a car, Justin?” Harvey asked.

“Yes, although I could walk here from my apartment if I had to.”

Harvey nodded. “That’s good to know.” The old man narrowed his eyes and asked, “Why do you want this job?”

“Because I need the money.”

Harvey grinned. “Honesty. I like honesty.” He checked Justin’s application. “It says here that you were let go from your job at the Lebanon

Valley Mall. What happened?"

Justin cleared his throat. "There was a robbery at the mall, and I wasn't supposed to intervene, but I did, so they fired me. To be fair, it wasn't the first time I disobeyed my boss."

Harvey chuckled. "That's an interesting thing to say in an interview. Do you have a problem listening to your boss?"

"Not if we share the same goals."

"You didn't share the same goals with your boss at the mall?"

"I guess I didn't understand the job. I thought I was supposed to help people, to stop shoplifting and help little kids find their parents, things like that, but they were more concerned about liability and lawsuits than doing the right thing."

Harvey chuckled again. "Bold statements for a twenty-year-old."

"I'm not trying to be bold."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to get a job."

"The pay is fifteen dollars an hour. In addition to preparing the food, you'll be expected to clean the restaurant, including the bathroom. Are you okay with that?"

Justin nodded. "I'm okay with that."

"Can you work full-time?"

"I was hoping to work full-time."

Harvey held out his hand. "Then the job is yours."

Justin shook the old man's hand. "Thank you... Harvey. I appreciate it."

"You're very welcome. When can you start?"

"Tomorrow, if you need me to."

"Perfect."

"I have a friend who applied here too. I was just wondering if you hired her. Her name's Leah Fletcher."

"I can offer you this job because she turned it down."

On the ride home from Subway, Justin stopped by Dollar General, hoping to see Leah, but she wasn't there. He asked for an application, which the manager provided, but he added, "We're not hiring right now."

## THIRTY-FOUR

# SERVING MORE THAN SANDWICHES

THE NEXT DAY, JUSTIN LEARNED THE ROPES AT THE WEST LEBANON Subway. Harvey took care of the first few customers—taking their orders and making their food—knowing most of them by name, while Justin watched. Then Harvey let Justin prepare the food, the old man watching and correcting where needed. Eventually, Justin took the orders and processed payments too.

At lunchtime, a young mother with two young boys entered the restaurant. They ordered grilled cheese sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies. After preparing the sandwiches, Justin opened the plastic container that housed the cookies.

Harvey touched Justin's elbow and said, "Hold on a second." He turned his attention to the mother. "If you folks can wait five minutes, I'll have fresh baked cookies."

"Do you hear that? Cookies right out of the oven," the mother said to her kids.

The boys pumped their fists and celebrated their good fortune.

When the family took their seat, Justin whispered to Harvey, "Don't we have to sell the old cookies?"

"It's more important that our customers are happy," Harvey whispered back.

When the cookies were ready, Justin delivered them to the family.

"What do you say to Justin?" the mother asked, reading his nametag.

“Thank you, Justin!” the boys shouted in unison.

Justin smiled. “You’re welcome.”

An elderly woman entered the restaurant and shuffled to the counter, her back hunched. Justin returned to the counter.

Harvey stood at the register, smiling at the elderly woman. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Ritter.”

“Hello, Harvey.” She retrieved a ten-dollar bill from her purse and placed it on the counter.

“Why don’t you have a seat, and I’ll prepare your food, and bring your change.”

“You’re a dear.” The old woman shuffled to the booth facing one of the wall-mounted flat-screens.

Harvey told Justin to prepare an egg salad sandwich on white bread, and cut it into triangles. While Justin prepared the sandwich, Harvey processed her payment, then poured her coffee.

After they prepared her tray, Harvey handed Justin a remote control. “Put it on channel three for her.”

Justin delivered Mrs. Ritter’s tray with her food and change to her booth. Then he changed the channel to three.

The old woman patted Justin’s hand and said, “Thank you, dear.”

When Justin returned to the counter, he asked Harvey, “I’m assuming she’s a regular?”

“My best customer,” Harvey replied. “Eats here almost every day for lunch and watches *The Price is Right*.”

Three old men entered the restaurant, bantering back and forth. Justin prepared value meals for the men. Then it was dead, so he cleaned the counter and the floor.

“What do you think so far?” Harvey asked.

“I like it more than I thought I would,” Justin replied.

Harvey grinned. “There’s that honesty that I like so much. It does seem like you’re getting the hang of everything.”

Justin and his boss chatted for a few minutes. When the conversation hit a lull, Harvey said, “Why don’t you clear that table?”

“I’m happy to do it, but aren’t customers supposed to clear their own tables?” Justin asked.

“Yes, usually, but if we have time, we do it.”

Justin went to the men and asked, “Can I clear your table?”

The men agreed, keeping their sodas, and thanking Justin for his service. On the way back, he cleared Mrs. Ritter's table too. She was still nursing her coffee, engrossed in her favorite game show.

When Justin returned to the counter, Harvey whispered, "They've been friends for sixty-five years, since they were in high school."

"Wow, that's a long time to be friends." Justin glanced at the old friends laughing.

"Unfortunately, they all lost their wives within the last few years. They meet here once or twice per week now. I think their friendship helps ease the pain. We help facilitate that connection. You picking up their trash matters more than you might think."

## THIRTY-FIVE

# THE GOOD LIE

A WEEK LATER, JUSTIN WAS COMPETENT ENOUGH TO WORK ALONE AT Subway. He delivered Mrs. Ritter's food and changed the channel to three. Then, he cleaned the floor and counter. His phone buzzed with a text. Since he didn't have any other customers, he checked his phone.

**Grace:** Hi Justin, it's Grace. You know, from California Pizza Kitchen. Not sure if you got my last text, but I thought I'd reach out again. I know you have a girlfriend, and I don't want to cause any issues. I just really liked our friendship. It's not every day that you meet someone that's a genuine good person. If you want to, text me back.

**Justin:** Sorry I didn't reply before. A lot has happened since we last talked. I'm working at the West Lebanon Subway on Hillcrest. I'm here every day except Tuesday and Thursday. I usually take my lunch around 2 if you want to stop by. I'll buy you a sub!

A heavyset woman and a wiry man with two rambunctious twin boys entered the Subway. The woman said to Justin, "Can you give us a minute? We're figuring out what we want."

"Of course. Take your time," Justin replied.

"I'm starving," one of the twins said, stomping his feet. "I can eat a whole footlong sub all by myself."

“Me too,” the other twin said, pushing his brother. “I want my own footlong sub.”

“That’s too much food,” the wiry man said.

“They haven’t had anything to eat all day,” the woman replied.

“It’s a waste of money.”

“Food isn’t a waste of money.”

The wiry man eyed the woman’s protruding belly.

The woman told her boys to order what they wanted. The boys ordered footlong subs with cookies and Cokes.

The wiry man shook his head, vibrating slightly.

“They’ll eat it,” the woman said.

The wiry man and the woman ordered six-inch subs with chips and Cokes. Justin prepared their food while the boys arm-wrestled at one of the booths. Once the food was done, Justin punched the order into the register.

“That’ll be \$37.69,” Justin said.

The woman dug into her purse and produced a Visa card. Justin swiped the card, but it was declined.

The woman reddened. “Oh, my god. I’m so embarrassed. I have cash.”

“It’s okay,” Justin replied, handing her back her card.

The woman dug into her purse and produced twenty-seven dollars. “I should have more.” She kept digging, but all she found was ninety-six cents in change.

The wiry man sneered. “I fuckin’ told you.”

“Sorry,” she said to Justin. The woman dug into her purse, finding another thirty-six cents. She addressed the wiry man. “Can you lend me ten dollars? I’ll pay you back.”

The man huffed, vibrating more. “I don’t have my wallet with me.”

The woman faced Justin again. “I’m so sorry. I guess we can’t buy all this stuff. Can you take my sub off the order? I don’t need to eat.”

“That’s for sure,” the wiry man said under his breath.

“I’m really sorry, but I made a big mistake,” Justin said. “I totally forgot about the kids’ deal today. Are your kids under ten?”

“They’re seven.”

“That’s great because everything is half-off for them today.”

The woman smiled. “So how much do I owe?”

Justin wasn’t sure, but he subtracted ten bucks from the total and said, “Twenty-seven-sixty-nine.”

“Oh... that’s great. Thank you.” She gave Justin the exact amount, before shoveling the rest of her change back into her purse.

Justin handed them their food. Before he shut the register, he grabbed two fives from his wallet and added them to the tray.

The wiry man stopped vibrating.

---

At the end of Justin’s shift, he locked the door and mopped the floor. He turned on the local news while he worked.

The newscaster said, “A local woman, Tonya Lawrence, was found dead of a drug overdose last night at a homeless encampment in Harrisburg, locally known as Tent City. Tonya Lawrence had been reported missing by her family two years earlier.” A picture of Tonya Lawrence appeared on the screen.

Justin dropped the mop and stared. It was the woman he’d seen about a week ago when he’d gone with Kyle to humiliate Edwin Arroyo. Now he knew why she was familiar to him. Tonya Lawrence was on the wall in his bedroom. She had gone missing within the twenty-mile radius of the Lebanon Valley Mall. He’d looked at her picture every day for two years, until he lost his job at the mall. He hadn’t recognized her because he had stopped looking at those pictures. He was too wrapped up with Leah. Had he kept looking at those pictures, she’d be alive.

He kicked the bucket, soapy water splashing across the floor.

## THIRTY-SIX

# YOU ARE NOTHING

TEARS SLIPPED DOWN HIS FACE AS HE DROVE HOME FROM WORK. JUSTIN thought about Tonya Lawrence, thinking about how he could've saved her life, how he could've reunited her with her family.

He parked in the gravel lot of his apartment building and banged his head on his steering wheel. Justin ran to Leah's apartment and pounded on the door.

“Go away, Justin,” Leah said, through the door.

“Please, I need to talk to you,” Justin said, his voice shaky.

“I’m calling the police if you don’t leave.”

“Please, Leah. A woman died. It’s all my fault. I don’t know what to do. Tonya Lawrence. She’s on my wall and I found her, but I didn’t know it was her, because I stopped looking at the pictures. Now she’s dead because of me.”

Leah opened the door, but guarded the doorway. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is. I looked at those pictures every day. Then I stopped and I forgot her face.” Justin shook his head, his eyes glassy. “Now she’s dead.”

“It’s not your fault. Nobody else was looking for her. Like, where was the police or her family? It’s not your job to find people. Like, you’re not a cop. You’re just like...”

“I’m just what?”

“Nothing. You didn’t do anything wrong. Now go home.”

Justin swallowed hard and wiped his face with his shirt. “Thanks for talking to me.”

“That doesn’t mean I want you coming over here.”

“I know.”

As she shut the door, he noticed a black canvas duffel bag sitting on the floor behind her. “Leah, wait.”

She opened the door with a scowl. “*What?*”

Justin pointed at the canvas bag in her apartment. “Why do you have Kyle’s duffel bag?”

Leah flushed beet red. “That’s not Kyle’s bag.”

“Yes, it is. I know that bag. He either has it with him, or it’s in his room. Did you *steal* it?”

“*No.* That’s *literally* insane.”

A *thump* came from the apartment. Justin narrowed his gaze. “Is he in there with you?”

Leah was tongue tied. “Uh...”

Kyle stepped into view, wearing only sweatpants. He approached the door. “Hey, bro. We were gonna tell you, but we were waiting for the right time.”

Leah cleared her throat. “We got together after you and I, like, broke up.”

“It just *kinda* happened. You know how it is.”

Justin clenched his jaw. “*No.* I *don’t* know how it is.” Justin addressed Leah. “This is why you started acting weird. You were already with him.”

“*No*, that’s, like, not true,” Leah replied, but she didn’t sound confident.

“You’re lying.”

“There might’ve been a week overlap, but, bro, it’s not like she was your girlfriend,” Kyle said.

Justin glowered at Kyle. “That night you were playing video games with her.”

Kyle looked away.

Leah blushed.

“She was never yours, bro,” Kyle said.

“Fuck you. Fuck both of you,” Justin replied.

Kyle balled his fists and crowded Justin. “You think you can talk to me like that?”

Justin backpedaled. “You steal my girlfriend, now you’re threatening me?”

“I was *never* your girlfriend!” Leah shouted. “You were *nothing* to me!”

“What are you gonna do about it?” Kyle said, still stepping to Justin.

“I don’t wanna live with you anymore,” Justin replied. “I don’t want anything to do with either of you.”

For the first time, he saw Kyle and Leah vibrating.

---

The next day, Justin sat at his desk listening to Kyle move his things out of their apartment. His former best friend decided to move in with Leah so he could help her pay rent, as she couldn’t afford her apartment since Beau left. It was a win-win for Kyle and Leah, but a lose-lose for Justin. He thought about Kyle vibrating last night. *I’ve known Kyle for ten years, and I’ve never seen him vibrate. Not once. Why now? What changed?*

Kyle banged on Justin’s door and entered without asking for permission. “I’m outta here.”

“Yeah,” Justin replied.

“You know what pisses me off the most? I’ve defended you so many fucking times. I should’ve let you get your ass kicked. Maybe you wouldn’t be such a little bitch.”

Justin tucked his chin into his chest.

Kyle left the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

Justin’s hands trembled and his stomach felt queasy as he ventured into the living area. It was now empty. Only depressions were left in the carpet denoting the couch, coffee table, and entertainment center. Four little holes were in the wall where the television had been hung. Only Justin’s bedroom furniture and the small kitchen table were left.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

# YOU NEVER KNOW

JUSTIN WORKED AT SUBWAY ON AUTOPILOT, TAKING ORDERS AND making sandwiches, the day trudging by in a haze. He would've called in sick, but he didn't want to be in the same building as Kyle and Leah. As he prepared Mrs. Ritter's lunch, he searched his mind for clues that he had missed. *Why didn't Kyle ever vibrate? Why didn't I ever notice?*

He delivered Mrs. Ritter's lunch and changed the channel to three. A commercial touting Chief Harold "Harry" Ebersole for the 9th Congressional District of Pennsylvania played on the screen.

"Are you okay, dear?" Mrs. Ritter asked.

"I'm fine. Thank you," Justin replied.

She patted his forearm, sadness in her eyes, but she didn't press the issue.

He returned to the counter, helping the occasional customer, but mostly thinking about Kyle, Leah, and Tonya Lawrence. Mrs. Ritter left after *Price is Right*, leaving the restaurant empty until Grace arrived shortly before 2:00 p.m.

She was all smiles. "Hey, Justin."

Justin stood upright. He had been leaning on the counter in a daze. He gave her a tight smile. "Hey, Grace."

She studied him for a beat. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"If it's not a good time, I can come back another time."

“No. Sorry. I’m... a little out of it. Are you hungry? What do you want?”

Justin made her sub and paid for it, even though Grace told him it wasn’t necessary. He took his lunch break and sat with Grace while she ate. There were no other customers.

Grace held her turkey sub to her lips. Before taking a bite, she said, “You’re not going to eat anything?”

“I’m not hungry,” Justin replied.

Grace set down her sub, swallowed, and said, “You said in your text that a lot has happened since we last talked.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s true.”

Grace held out her hands. “Well, what happened? Did something happen with you and your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I don’t think I ever did.” Justin told Grace about Kyle and Leah and Tonya Lawrence. Grace listened, never once interrupting him.

“I don’t know what to do,” Justin said.

“About Kyle and Leah, or Tonya Lawrence?” Grace asked.

“About anything. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“What if you would’ve recognized Tonya Lawrence and you would’ve called the police, and what if she would’ve reunited with her parents all because of you. What then?”

“My life would mean something, because I could always point to that time I saved someone’s life.”

Grace nodded. “Does that mean you think your life doesn’t mean anything?”

Justin looked away. “I know it doesn’t.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Justin faced Grace again. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

“I can understand that. You’ve been dealing with a lot.”

Justin held out his hands like a beggar. “Is this my life now? Destined to be alone and working at Subway?”

“What do you want your life to be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Are you suggesting that you used to know?”

“More than I do now.”

“When?”

Justin wrung his hands on the tabletop. “I guess when I was working at the mall. I know it was just a stupid mall security job, but I was helping people. I stopped people from stealing. I helped kids find their parents—”

“You stopped a potential lawsuit with that roach those kids planted in their pizza box.”

Justin cracked a small grin. “Yeah. I did that too, and it felt good. It made me feel like my life mattered.”

“You don’t have to have a certain job to help people,” Grace said. “My uncle, he’s really into true crime, like me. He wanted to write true crime books, and he did. He wrote four of them, but he couldn’t find a literary agent or a publisher that would publish his work.”

“What did he do?”

“He found a different way to tell true crime stories. He started a YouTube channel called True Crime All the Time.” Grace broke her cookie in two and handed half to Justin.

He took the cookie. “Thanks.”

“You never know what can happen.”

## THIRTY-EIGHT

# BACK TO THE MALL

ON THURSDAY, JUSTIN WASN'T SCHEDULED TO WORK, SO HE DROVE TO Lebanon Valley Mall. Grace's words from the previous day had inspired him. She was right when she said that he didn't have to have a certain job to help people.

Justin parked near the food court and went directly to California Pizza Kitchen, but Grace wasn't working. While he was there, three girls drinking smoothies, their faces glued to their phones, drew his attention. Two of them, a blonde and a brunette, appeared to be older teens, but they could've been in their twenties. These young women vibrated, the blonde more vigorously than the brunette. The other girl appeared to be much younger, maybe fifteen or sixteen. The older teens thumb-typed on their phones, gave each other smirky smiles and side-eyes, while the younger girl was left out of the loop.

The blonde wore heavy makeup, accenting her full lips and oval face. If not for her extreme eyebrows—which had been plucked diagonally upward, giving her a perpetually angry expression—she would've been fit for a fashion magazine. The brunette was plain in comparison, with an obvious nose job. The younger girl was more petite, with a mouth full of metal, and her straight hair hanging to the middle of her back.

The blonde said something unintelligible from Justin's position fifty feet away. The teen girls stood from the table as if synchronized. Justin followed them to Natural Nails, but didn't follow them into the salon. He waited on a

bench with a view of the store while the girls had manicures. When they left the salon, the tall blonde complimented the younger girl's nails, but the blonde was still vibrating.

*What is she up to?*

After their manicures, they stopped at the fountain and asked a middle-aged woman to take a picture of the three of them. From there, Justin followed the teens to Boscov's. They browsed women's clothing, the older girls picking clothes for the younger one. Justin spotted the older girls making faces at each other behind the younger girl's back. The younger teen appeared to be uncomfortable with their selections, but she acquiesced. The older teens led the younger girl to the dressing rooms, their arms filled with clothing. They all entered a single dressing stall.

Justin sat in one of the chairs designated for waiting. An older man sat nearby, tapping on his phone. Justin listened as the older girls gushed their approval for some outfits or rejected others. The trio emerged from the dressing stall, the youngest girl carrying two bright and busy blouses and a dress.

The older girls still vibrated, the blonde still more vigorously. *What the hell are they up to?* The younger teen took her garments to the register, while the older girls stood back and whispered back and forth, barely containing their giggles.

After the younger girl paid, the trio left the mall. Justin followed a safe distance behind. They surrounded a BMW SUV. The blonde entered the driver's seat, the brunette in the shotgun seat, and the younger girl in the back. As they drove away, Justin wondered what the vibrating teens were thinking.

## THIRTY-NINE

# NO GOOD DEED

JUSTIN PARKED AT HIS APARTMENT BUILDING, CUT THE ENGINE, AND undid his seatbelt. He thought about the three girls he'd followed. *Were the older girls bullying the younger girl? Maybe she's the younger sister of one of the older girls. But they didn't look like they were related.*

Kyle's Jeep rumbled into the parking lot. Justin ducked in his seat. His ex-best friend parked his Jeep at the opposite end of the lot. Kyle and Leah exited the vehicle and strolled to the building hand-in-hand. Bile crept up Justin's throat. He'd never seen Kyle hold hands with a girl like that. *What happened to his "hit it and quit it" philosophy?* Leah spotted Justin and extended her middle finger in his direction.

Justin ducked beneath the dashboard. After a few seconds, he raised his head and peeked at the front entrance. They were gone. He sat up in his seat, no longer wanting to return to his apartment. *I'm such a fucking loser. What am I doing?* He slumped his shoulders and hung his head. He had tried to help someone at the mall, but he didn't spot any shoplifters or any other criminals, and if he did, he had even less authority than he did as a security guard. The only vibrating people he saw were those teen girls, but they hadn't done anything wrong, unless you counted subtle rudeness.

Grace's words popped into his head again. *You don't have to have a certain job to help someone.* Justin shook his head. *I don't know if that's true.* Then, a thought hit him like a bolt of lightning. He grinned from ear to ear, knowing exactly who needed his help.

He started his Kia and drove to Tent City.

The homeless encampment was grittier during the day. The scope of the squalor was on full display under the hot sun. Trash collected under the trees, clinging to the exposed roots and trunks like decorations. The ammonia and sulfur smell from hundreds of homeless people using the area as a toilet overwhelmed his senses. He breathed through his mouth, and he swore he could taste the shit and piss. As he neared the heart of Tent City, a group of four bearded men eyed him, vibrating. He continued toward the rear of the encampment.

He must've made a wrong turn because Edwin's gray-and-yellow tent wasn't where he thought it was. Instead, he found a cluster of five shabby tents and a centrally located blue tarp affixed to four trees, providing a makeshift gazebo. Justin pivoted and went back the way he came, searching for his wrong turn on the compacted dirt path. As he rounded the corner, he nearly bumped into the four vibrating men from earlier. They surrounded Justin.

"What are you doin' here?" asked the man with the black beard, dirty jeans, and Guns N Roses T-shirt.

"I'm visiting a friend," Justin replied, his heart pounding.

The four men inched closer, their body odor invading Justin's nostrils.

"You gotta pay a toll," said the blond with patchy facial hair.

"How much?" Justin asked.

"How much you got?" Blackbeard asked.

"Twenty bucks, I think."

Blackbeard motioned with his index finger. "Gimme your wallet."

"C'mon, guys. I'm just here to see a friend."

Blackbeard grabbed Justin by the collar and yanked him so they were nose to nose. His teeth were yellow and his breath was putrid. "I don't give a shit why you're here. Gimme your fuckin' money, or we'll beat it outta ya."

Justin turned his head to avoid the man's breath. He reached into his back pocket and held up his wallet. "It's right here."

Blackbeard snatched Justin's wallet and stepped back. The homeless man opened the wallet and took the cash—roughly two hundred bucks. Once he pocketed the bills, he handed Justin's wallet back with a leer and said, "Twenty dollars, my ass. Nice doin' business with ya."

The other homeless men laughed. Then they left, talking about making a trip to the liquor store.

Justin sighed in relief. He checked his wallet making sure his license and credit cards were still accounted for. They were. He shoved his wallet back into his pocket and continued his search. The path that led to Edwin's tent was blocked by a pallet leaning against two trees. Justin circumnavigated the pallet and took the short path to Edwin's gray-and-yellow tent.

The former UFC fighter sat on a lawn chair in front of his tent, reading a ratty car magazine. His dog, Chico, ate dog food directly from the can. The dog didn't bark as Justin approached. He was too busy with his food.

"Hey, Edwin. I'm Justin Boyle. I was here last week with Kyle Fleming. Remember?"

"Go away," Edwin said, his gaze glued to his magazine.

"Kyle brought you drugs. Remember?"

Edwin looked up from his magazine. "You got more?"

"No. We used to be in the same group home. You used to beat me up."

Edwin smirked at Justin. "I can see why. Get the fuck outta here before you get hurt."

"I wanna help you."

Edwin cackled. "Help me? Help me do what?"

"I wanna help you get clean."

"How the *fuck* are you gonna do that?"

"I can take you anywhere you wanna go. Do you have any family that could help you?"

"Are you fuckin' stupid? I'm an orphan, like you."

"Right. Sorry. Well, you can come live with me for a while. I'll cook for you and take care of you—"

"Are you a faggot?"

Justin exhaled. "No, but you'll need someone to take care of you while you're going through withdrawal."

"What the hell do you know about withdrawal?"

"Only what I've read on the internet. If you prefer, I can try to get you into a drug rehab facility."

"I'm not going to any fuckin' hospital."

"You could come to my apartment, have a hot meal and a hot shower. I have an extra room, but you don't have to stay if you don't want to."

Edwin narrowed his eyes, then he jabbed his index finger in Justin's direction. "I remember you now. You were that little bitch who couldn't fight. Always had your boy do your fightin' for you. Used to fake a fuckin' headache anytime someone wanted to fight."

Justin clenched his jaw, his head pounding. "Do you want my help or not?"

"You wanna help me? Gimme all your cash."

"I don't have any cash. I was just robbed."

Edwin leaned back in his lawn chair. "Who robbed you?"

"It was a group of four guys. One had a black beard and was wearing a Guns N Roses T-shirt."

Edwin nodded, a slight smile on his lips.

"Do you know them? Can you help me get my money back?"

Edwin pointed toward the path. "It's time for you to fuck off."

Chico barked in solidarity.

## FORTY WISHES

JUSTIN WAS BACK AT SUBWAY ON FRIDAY, BUT IT WAS SLOW, SO HARVEY sent him home after lunch. Instead of going home, Justin drove to Lebanon Valley Mall. He took off his Subway polo, and wore his gray T-shirt and black pants into the empty food court. He found Grace at California Pizza Kitchen with no customers, tapping on her phone.

“Hi, Grace,” Justin said.

She looked up. “Oh, hey.”

Justin gestured to her phone. “Are you busy?”

She set her phone on the counter. “Oh, no. I’m just updating my Nutribuddy app.”

“You’re doing Nutribuddy? Isn’t that for older people?”

“It’s for anybody who wants to be healthy. I used to eat so much processed crap before I started using the app. I feel like a million times better now. I sleep better. I have more energy. My skin used to always break out. It was so embarrassing, but now, all clear.” Grace smiled wide, showing her slight overbite.

“That’s cool. Maybe I should check it out.”

“You should.” Grace leaned on the counter. “I really like the woman who started the app, Aurora Valdez. She’s always talking about how big pharma, big ag, and the FDA are literally making us unhealthy so they can make money. It’s sick. If she ran for President, I would totally vote for her.”

“I’m not really into politics.”

An awkward silence passed between them.

Justin finally said, "I took your advice."

"About what?" Grace asked.

"Helping people regardless of my job."

"You did?"

Justin told her about getting robbed at Tent City and about Edwin's reluctance.

"Oh my god. I feel terrible," Grace said. "That must've been really scary."

"It's not your fault. I'm okay. They took my money, but they didn't hurt me."

"How do you know Edwin?"

Justin explained how Edwin used to bully him when they lived in the group home together.

"You were in a group home?" Grace asked.

Justin nodded.

"Like an orphanage?"

Justin nodded again.

Grace winced. "I'm so sorry, Justin. I didn't know any of that."

"It's okay. It was a long time ago. I barely even remember my mother."

"If you don't mind me asking, why do you want to help Edwin? If he used to bully you..."

"I feel like there's goodness in him. He has this dog that he's taking care of. I mean, he has nothing, but he finds a way to get dog food."

Grace pursed her lips. "I admire your ability to see goodness in others."

Justin thought, *I'm actually better at seeing the evil in people.*

"What are you going to do?" Grace asked.

"I need to try again."

"You probably shouldn't go there by yourself."

"I know. I would ask Kyle, but we're not even friends anymore after, well, you know what happened."

Grace frowned. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"Don't be. I'm not sure I ever really knew him." Justin told Grace about Kyle throwing drugs to Edwin and treating him like a dog.

"That's seriously messed up."

"I know."

A middle-aged woman with her daughter came to the counter.

“I’ll let you work,” Justin said.

“It was good to see you.”

Justin smiled at Grace, then left. He wandered the mall, searching for vibrating people. He spotted two older women vibrating slightly while they stole change from the fountain.

Justin approached the women and said, “You’re stealing someone’s wish.”

One of the old women cackled and replied, “Honey, wishes don’t come true in this economy.”

## FORTY-ONE

# BACK TO TENT CITY

AFTER THE VIBRATING WISH STEALERS, JUSTIN DIDN'T SEE ANY OTHER mischief, so he left the mall. His failed attempt to help Edwin bothered him. He realized how ridiculous he must've seemed to Edwin. *Why would Edwin believe anything I say? He doesn't know me. I have to build a relationship with him. I have to build trust.*

Justin drove to the grocery store and bought a bag of dog food, some granola bars, and a case of bottled water. Then he returned to Tent City, hoping to complete his mission before dark.

The sun was an orange orb hanging low in the sky, but he still had enough daylight to drop off the supplies. Justin parked along South Front Street. He hid his wallet in the center console of his Kia, grabbed the dog food and granola bars, and locked his vehicle. He would have to return for the case of bottled water. He marched toward the homeless encampment, carrying his donations.

He moved quickly through Tent City, not making eye contact with the inhabitants, even though they gawked at Justin like he was an invader from a foreign land. He heard the barking before he reached Edwin's tent.

Chico was inside Edwin's tent, barking constantly. Justin figured Edwin must've left, and put his dog in his tent for security. He thought about leaving the goods next to Edwin's tent, but he worried that they would be stolen.

“Edwin?” Justin said to the tent. “It’s Justin. I have some stuff for you.”

No response.

Chico barked and whined with more urgency.

He thought about leaving his donations inside the tent, but he worried about being bitten by the dog. Justin examined the zipper door, wondering if he could open it just enough to toss the granola bars inside. He figured the large bag of dog food would be less likely to be stolen. So Justin opened a little corner of the door and peeked inside.

Edwin lay inside, seemingly unconscious, as he didn't wake with his dog barking in his face. A needle and syringe sat near his arm, along with a bottle of water, and an open Ziploc baggie containing white powder. Justin dialed 911 with a shaky finger.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?" the female operator asked.

Justin spoke rapidly. "My friend overdosed. I think it's cocaine or heroin. It's a white powder. He appears to be unconscious. I think he needs an ambulance."

"What's your name and location?"

"I'm Justin Boyle. I'm at Tent City, the homeless place on South Front Street in Harrisburg, next to the DOT."

"I'm sending an ambulance now, Justin. They should be there in about ten minutes. In the meantime, I need you to do a few things for your friend."

"Okay."

"What's your friend's name?" the operator asked.

"Edwin Arroyo," Justin replied.

"I need you to check to see if Edwin's breathing."

"Okay." Justin opened the tent door, his phone to his ear, willing to risk being bitten. He entered the tent and said, "Chico. I'm here to help. Be a good dog, okay?"

Chico stopped barking and stared at Justin with watery brown eyes. He whined as if begging Justin to help his master.

"That's his dog," Justin clarified for the operator.

"Are you in danger?" the operator asked.

"I don't think so." Justin knelt next to Edwin and watched his chest, hoping to see it rise and fall. He thought he saw Edwin's chest move, but he wasn't certain. Justin put his ear near Edwin's mouth, hearing his shallow breaths. "He's breathing, but it's not very strong."

“Okay, Justin. I want you to check for a pulse. Do you know how to do that?”

“Yes.” Justin placed three fingers on the side of Edwin’s windpipe just below his jawbone. He didn’t feel anything at first, but then shifted his fingers, and felt a pulse. “He has a pulse, but it’s weak.”

“I need you to try to wake him up. To do this, vigorously rub his chest with your fist, right over the breastbone. Can you do that?”

“I think so. I’m gonna put you on speaker.” Justin put his cell phone on speaker and set it on the floor nearby.

“Vigorously rub his chest with your fist, right over the breastbone,” the operator reminded him.

He knelt next to Edwin and rubbed his fist in a circular motion, right over the breast bone, but nothing happened.

Chico whined.

“I don’t think it’s working,” Justin said to his phone. “He’s still breathing, but he won’t wake up.”

“Do you have Narcan on you?”

“What’s Narcan?”

“It’s a medicine that will help counteract the opioids in Edwin’s system. The EMTs will have it. They should be there in less than five minutes. Will it be easy for the EMTs to find Edwin?”

“Not really. His tent is in the back of this place.”

“Okay. I need you to go to South Front Street and wait for the ambulance. When they get there, take them to Edwin. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Before you go, I want you to do one more thing for Edwin.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to roll Edwin to his side and tilt his head back. This will prevent choking and help to keep his airways clear.”

Justin rolled his former bully to his side and tilted his head back. “Okay. It’s done.”

“The ambulance is two minutes away. Meet them on South Front Street.”

“I’m headed there now.”

Chico followed Justin as he left the tent and ran to South Front Street. A siren wailed in the distance. Shortly thereafter, the ambulance appeared,

red, white, and blue lights flashing. Justin met the EMTs and led them to Edwin's tent.

One of the EMTs sprayed Narcan up Edwin's nose, but nothing happened. Justin had hoped the drug would instantly solve the effects of whatever Edwin had ingested. The EMTs hauled Edwin to the ambulance on a stretcher. Justin and Chico followed the EMTs. They told Justin they were taking Edwin to UPMC on South Front Street.

"It's less than a mile north of here," one of the EMTs said.

Justin nodded, wondering why it took them ten minutes if they were less than a mile away.

As the ambulance drove away, Chico whined. The dog gazed at Justin with those big brown eyes. Justin petted the dog on his head. "You wanna come with me?"

The dog whined again.

Justin doubted the dog would follow him to his car, but he did. He also doubted Chico would jump into his back seat, but he did that too.

## FORTY-TWO OD'D

VINYL-UPHOLSTERED CHAIRS WERE ARRANGED IN NEAT ROWS. AN OLD man browsed the overpriced drinks and snacks of the vending machines. The faint aroma of antiseptic mingled with sour sweat. The waiting room was nearly full that Friday evening, but it was quiet, families barely talking or minimally mumbling. Mostly, people sat with their worst-case scenarios, wondering if their friend or loved one would ever be the same again.

Justin had asked the hospital reception desk for information on Edwin, but they refused to give out any information. Justin had told the woman that he was Edwin's foster brother and his only family, but the receptionist wouldn't budge, stating that he was not approved by the patient. She did tell Justin that they could ask Edwin to approve Justin once he was able.

"Is he not able right now?" Justin had asked.

"I'm sorry, I can't give out that information," the receptionist had said. "I suggest you come back at a later time."

Justin sat in a lonely corner, texting Grace, asking if she could dog-sit, as he didn't know how long he'd be at the hospital. Chico was in Justin's Kia. He had vented all the windows for the dog, but it wasn't hot, now that the sun had gone down.

**Grace:** I can come get him. What hospital?

**Justin:** UPMC in Harrisburg. On South Front Street

**Grace:** B there in an hour.

**Justin:** Text me when you get here, and I will come out. THANK YOU!!!

**Grace:** You're welcome. Happy to help! I hope Edwin is okay.

**Justin:** Me too. Still waiting to find out.

He pocketed his phone, happy to find a temporary sitter for Chico. He replayed the events in his mind, hopeful that Edwin would survive with all his marbles intact. *Where did he even get the money for drugs?*

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Two hours later, Justin returned to the reception desk. The receptionist agreed to give his name for patient approval.

“Can you also tell him that I have his dog?” Justin asked.

The receptionist made a phone call, giving Justin’s name and message. Shortly thereafter, he was given Edwin’s room number, so Justin took the elevator to the third-floor recovery rooms.

The room was dimly lit, monitors beeping quietly in the background. Curtains divided several patients. Heart monitors and IV poles accompanied each adjustable bed. Justin found Edwin in bed, eyes droopy, a nasal cannula in his nose, and an IV in his arm.

Justin approached his bedside. “How are you feeling?”

Edwin narrowed his gaze. “Where’s my dog?”

“My friend Grace is taking care of him right now. I’ll take care of him until you’re released.”

Edwin pressed his lips into a flat line, glaring at Justin. “I guess that’s okay, but don’t get any ideas about stealin’ my dog.”

Justin flashed his palms. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Edwin cracked his knuckles. “You better not. How did you get my dog anyway?”

“I came by to bring you some supplies. I found you passed out, so I called 911.”

“What the fuck do you want with me?”

“*Nothing.* Just trying to help.”

“Help comes with strings.”

“Do I look like I could force you to do anything?”

Edwin chuckled. "That's a good point."

"When do you think you'll be outta here?"

"They're sendin' me to detox tomorrow. I should be out in a few days. If you really wanna help, you can gimme a ride to Tent City when I get out." Edwin sat up straight. "Hold on. What did you do with my tent and all my stuff?"

"I didn't touch your stuff."

"You *left* my shit there?"

"Well... yeah."

"*Chingada.*" Edwin pointed at Justin, his jaw set tight. "You need to go back there right fuckin' now and get my shit."

"Why?"

"Because they'll fuckin' steal everything, dumbass."

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Justin returned to the homeless encampment, his flashlight bobbing in the dark as he jogged to Edwin's tent. When he arrived at the location, there was nothing but a circular patch of compacted dirt. He rotated 360 degrees with his flashlight, hoping to see Edwin's stuff, but it was all gone.

The four bearded men who had robbed him appeared on the trail.

Blackbeard shined his flashlight at Justin. "Tell your friend he ain't welcome here no more."

Justin shined his flashlight back on them. They all had battered faces: black eyes, bruising, split lips, and swollen eyes. "What happened to you guys?"

"You don't know?"

"No. I just came here to get Edwin's stuff for him."

"Your fuckin' friend robbed us," Black Beard said.

The blond with the patchy facial hair said, "Serves him right that he OD'd. He used our money to buy the shit that fucked him up."

"I bet the shit was laced with fentanyl," one of the other men said.

Black Beard snickered. "How's that for fuckin' irony?"

## FORTY-THREE

# FRIENDS DON'T OWE

GRACE'S HOUSE WAS IN WEST LEBANON, ONLY A FEW MILES FROM Justin's apartment. Actually, it was Grace's roommate's house. She simply rented a bedroom. The end-unit townhouse was clad in taupe siding and boasted a bay window and a side yard. A line of cars parked in front of the townhouses, each space numbered for the appropriate unit. Justin parked in a space marked for visitors.

He followed the concrete sidewalk that led to the front door. A boxwood hedge and yellow daylilies were planted on either side of the front stoop. He pressed the doorbell. Grace answered the door wearing shorts and a T-shirt, her feet bare. Chico stood behind her, wagging his tail.

“How is he?” Grace asked.

“He’s gonna be fine,” Justin replied.

Grace mimed wiping her forehead. “That’s a relief.”

“Yeah.” Justin gestured to Chico. “Thanks for watching him.”

“It was no problem. He’s a sweet boy.” Grace stepped aside from the doorway. “Do you want to come in?”

“It’s late. I should probably go.”

“Come in for just a second. I have something for you.”

Justin entered the townhouse. The entryway opened into an airy living room with a fireplace nestled between bookshelves. Hardwood floors stretched across the space with an Oriental area rug. A curvy woman with a

ruddy complexion and thick-framed glasses slouched on the couch watching a dating show.

Justin followed Grace into the living room where she introduced him to her roommate, Penny.

“Thank you for letting Chico stay here,” Justin said.

Penny adjusted her glasses. “You’re welcome.”

Penny returned to her show and they went to the kitchen, Chico following them, his toenails clicking on the hardwood. Grace grabbed a leash and a bag of dog food from the kitchen counter and returned to the entryway.

“He ate already, and I thought the leash might come in handy if you wanted to take him for a walk.” Grace handed over the dog food and the leash.

“Thanks. This is really thoughtful.”

Grace smiled and tapped the blue collar around Chico’s neck. “I got him a collar too.” She flicked the little metal disc attached to the collar, then flipped it over. “It has a QR code with your name and phone number. I would’ve put Edwin’s name and number, but I didn’t know if he had a phone. He can change it if he wants.”

“Wow, this is really nice. I appreciate it. How much do I owe you?”

Grace frowned. “Seriously?” She reached out and playfully tapped his forearm. “We’re friends. Friends don’t owe. I’ll walk you out.”

They returned to the front door. Grace slipped on her flipflops. Justin attached the leash to Chico’s new collar. They strolled to Justin’s nearby Kia, bathed in the glow of the streetlights, the dog food in the crook of his arm.

“So when does Edwin get out of the hospital?” Grace asked.

Justin explained that Edwin needed to go to a treatment center for a few days to detox.

“Where’s he going after he gets out?” Grace asked.

They stopped alongside Justin’s car.

“He wants to go back to Tent City.” Justin told Grace about Edwin’s tent and personal items being stolen. “It’s partly my fault, because I left his stuff out there. I was thinking about offering my apartment. I have an extra room.”

Grace scrunched her face as if in pain. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? He’s an addict. He can’t be trusted.”

“If I don’t help him, he’ll be dead in a year, maybe sooner.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m trying to make up for Tonya Lawrence.”

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Justin returned to his apartment building with Chico lying in the back seat. Justin carried the dog food to his apartment, Chico following obediently on his leash. As Justin fished his front pocket for his keys, Leah’s apartment door opened and shut. From the heavy footsteps, Justin knew it was Kyle before he turned around.

Kyle crowded Justin, sneering and vibrating.

Justin let go of Chico’s leash, dropped the dog food and cowered, head down, his forearms covering his face.

“You’re making shit uncomfortable for Leah,” Kyle said.

Chico growled and Kyle stepped back.

Justin dropped his arms to his side and lifted his chin. “I’m not doing anything.”

“You being here is enough. Find another place to live. I’ll give you a week.”

“I can’t move in a week.”

Kyle crowded Justin again, and poked him in the chest, hard. “Who’s gonna protect you now?”

Chico growled again.

Kyle backpedaled. “Where’d you get this fucking mutt?”

Justin didn’t respond.

“Don’t make this difficult, bro. Just fucking leave.” Kyle returned to Leah’s apartment.

## FORTY-FOUR

# WHO'S A GOOD BOY?

SOMETHING SPLASHED ACROSS JUSTIN'S CHEEK AND THE SIDE OF HIS nose. Then it splashed over his chin and lips. His eyes fluttered and opened to Chico standing next to his bed, his tail wagging. The dog tried to lick him again.

Justin turned his head and sat up in bed. "Chico. No." He wiped the dog saliva with his T-shirt.

The dog flattened his ears, but still wagged his tail.

"Are you hungry?"

Chico's ears perked and his tail thumped Justin's bedside.

Justin fed the dog and fed himself, then he took Chico to PetSmart. On the way, the dog sat in the front seat with his head out the window, his tongue blowing in the breeze.

At PetSmart, Justin bought dog shampoo, treats, and more dog food. Chico was a big hit, with several customers and employees giving him pets and attention.

After PetSmart, Justin took Chico to Memorial Lake State Park at Fort Indiantown Gap. A gravel path surrounded the 85-acre lake, perfect for hikers and dogwalkers. Chico was a ball of energy, his nose twitching, leading them to the various smells that possessed the pooch.

Dappled sunlight cut through the oaks and hickories, blunting the summer sun. Robins chirped and bluebirds whistled overhead. A woodpecker hammered a nearby tree trunk, adding a drumbeat to their

melody. The occasional hiker and dogwalker passed them, many of them smiling at Chico. Other dogs barked and tugged on their leashes, but Chico didn't reciprocate their unruliness.

Justin sat on a bench overlooking the lake. Chico sat on the grass, at Justin's feet. They watched ducks paddle in the distance, leaving little wakes behind them. Justin leaned forward and petted the dog. When he stopped, Chico turned back to Justin and bumped him with his wet nose, encouraging more pets.

"I can see why Edwin likes you," Justin said, petting the pooch, "and he doesn't like anybody."

Chico stared at him with his dark watery eyes.

"You're a good boy."

Chico wagged his tail as if to say, *I am a good boy*.

Justin stared at the lake, revisiting his problems. "What am I gonna do, Chico?"

The dog turned back to Justin again, his head cocked in confusion.

Justin let out a heavy breath. "I loved Leah, I really did, but I should've known she didn't love me back. But I didn't think Kyle would do that to me. He was my best friend since we were ten. And now... it's over, just like that." Justin snapped his fingers.

Chico gave Justin a single bark.

"Yeah. That's exactly how I feel about it. And now I'm totally screwed. I can't afford to get another apartment. I don't have enough money for a security deposit, first and last month and all that. I might end up in Tent City."

## FORTY-FIVE

# ROCK BOTTOM

JUSTIN FOLLOWED THE TWISTY ROAD TO A COMPLEX NESTLED AMONG the forest. The wooded sign read, *New Beginnings*. A maintenance worker edged the concrete sidewalk that led to a sanctuary garden. Justin checked the time on his phone—9:51 a.m. He had a few minutes. Justin exited his Kia and walked to the front entrance.

He entered the vestibule. A receptionist sat behind thick glass. Justin told the woman that he was there to pick up Edwin Arroyo. She checked her computer and said he would be out shortly. While waiting, Justin browsed the brochures, picking up one for Narcotics Anonymous.

Edwin appeared a few minutes later, appearing younger and stronger, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt from *New Beginnings*, while carrying a plastic bag full of his dirty clothes.

“Hey, Edwin. You look good,” Justin said.

Edwin sneered at Justin. “You keep sayin’ you’re not a fag, but you keep actin’ like one.”

Justin looked away.

“Where’s my dog?” Edwin asked.

Justin made eye contact with the addict. “He’s in the car.”

“You left him in the car? It’s fuckin’ hot.”

“I parked in the shade with the windows down, and it’s only been ten minutes.”

They went outside, Edwin leading the way even though he had no idea what Justin drove, but he found the car when he spotted Chico in the back seat. The dog spotted his master but didn't seem excited to see him until Edwin opened the door and said, "How's my boy?"

Chico jumped out, wagging his tail, his body twisting back and forth. Edwin bent down and embraced his dog.

Edwin let go of his dog, stood, and asked Justin, "You got any money?"

Justin frowned, thinking about Grace's warning. "No. I was robbed. Remember? Then you robbed the guys who robbed me and blew all my money on drugs and almost died."

Edwin raised one side of his mouth in contempt. "I don't know what you're talkin' about. I never robbed nobody." He checked the back seat of the Kia. "Did you get my tent and all my stuff?"

"About that. I went back to get it... but everything was gone."

Edwin clenched his jaw. "God damn it. I fuckin' told you." He paced away from the car, then back. "You owe me some new clothes and a new tent."

"I saved your life."

"You also left my shit to be stolen."

"I can buy you some clothes at Goodwill, but I can't afford a tent right now, at least not until I get paid."

"When will that be?"

"Next week."

"I'll stay with you until you replace my tent."

Justin thought, *I didn't invite you.*

On the way home, Edwin chose the music, an R&B station. He hung his arm out the window, his head bobbing to the beat. Chico stuck his head out the back passenger window, his tongue flapping in the wind.

A commercial played on the radio.

Justin stopped at a red light.

Edwin turned down the radio. "Your car is a piece of shit."

Justin gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white. "I know. It's all I can afford."

"I used to have a Nissan GT-R. All-wheel drive. Five hundred and sixty-five horsepower. Twin-turbo V-6. That car was badass."

"Now you're riding in a Kia Rio."

Edwin sighed. "This shit is rock bottom."

## FORTY-SIX

# NEVER TRUST AN ADDICT

JUSTIN SHOWED EDWIN AROUND HIS APARTMENT, CHICO FOLLOWING and watching them.

“How come you don’t got any furniture?” Edwin asked, surveying the empty living room.

“My roommate just moved out,” Justin replied. “All the furniture was his.”

“You got a TV? PlayStation?”

“My roommate did.”

Edwin huffed. “This shit is worse than the hospital.”

“I have an old tablet you can use for entertainment.”

Justin showed Edwin the kitchen. “Feel free to eat anything you want.”

Chico meandered around the kitchen, his toenails tapping the linoleum.

Edwin opened the refrigerator, peered inside, and shut the door. “You need to get some more food.”

“When I get paid.” Justin removed the Narcotics Anonymous brochure from his back pocket and set it atop the mail on the counter, hoping Edwin might take the hint.

“Where’s my room?” Edwin asked.

Justin showed him his bedroom, the only room with furniture, and the tablet.

“You only got one bed?” Edwin asked.

“You can have it. I’ll sleep in the other room,” Justin replied.

Edwin tossed the plastic bag filled with his dirty clothes onto Justin's bed.

"I gotta go to work, so I'll see you later. I can bring some food home. What do you like from Subway?"

"Footlong meatball sub with provolone cheese. Double meat. With some barbecue chips and a Coke."

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Justin returned to his apartment carrying a Coke and a plastic Subway bag with Edwin's dinner. The door was unlocked. He entered his apartment, expecting Chico to greet him at the door, but it was dead quiet.

"Edwin?" Justin called out. "I brought your dinner." Justin scanned his apartment.

The kitchen cabinets were all open. He padded to the kitchen. It was ransacked with kitchen utensils and mail on the floor.

"Damn it," Justin said aloud, thinking about what Grace had said about not trusting addicts.

Justin placed Edwin's dinner on the table, then went to his bedroom. Like the kitchen, it had been ransacked with open drawers, clothes on the floor, and his tablet missing.

The front door opened and shut. Justin left his room. He found Edwin and Chico in the kitchen—Chico panting while Edwin filled a bowl with water. Edwin's eyes were red and his pupils were dilated.

"Where's my tablet?" Justin asked, his hands held out.

Edwin set down the water bowl for Chico. "I don't know."

Chico lapped at the water.

"You traded it for drugs."

"I didn't do nothin'."

Justin narrowed his eyes. "You look high."

"Your shitty tablet was barely enough to get a hit," Edwin replied.

"This is why you don't have anyone."

Edwin stepped to Justin, his fists balled, and his neck vein bulging. "You don't know *shit* about me."

Chico barked.

“You’re right. I don’t know anything about you,” Justin replied. “The one thing I do know is I’m the only one willing to help you. Why do you think that is?”

Edwin vibrated and chest-bumped Justin, causing him to stumble backwards against the counter. “That’s none of your fuckin’ business.”

Chico barked and growled and moved between the men.

Edwin noticed that his dog was barking at *him*. Edwin backpedaled, stunned. “What the fuck did you do to my dog?”

“I didn’t do anything. Maybe it’s *you*,” Justin replied.

Edwin backpedaled two more steps, and Chico stopped barking, but the dog stood close to Justin in solidarity.

“You need professional help,” Justin said.

“Fuck you.”

Justin blew out a tired breath. “There’s nothing wrong with getting help.”

“You gonna get me help? Your broke ass can’t even buy a tent.”

Justin searched the mail on the kitchen floor.

“What the fuck are you doin’?”

Justin spotted the brochure. He grabbed it and showed it to Edwin. “Narcotics Anonymous is free.”

“Is that like AA?”

“I think so. I got this at New Beginnings.” Justin scanned the brochure. “Says they have meetings every night on Monday and Friday. I could take you there.”

“Naw. Fuck that. I’m outta here.” Edwin leashed his dog, grabbed the Subway bag from the kitchen table, and left Justin with the mess.

Chico fought Edwin, tugging on his leash, choking in the process as his owner dragged him from the apartment.

## FORTY-SEVEN

# DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

AS JUSTIN ATE HIS BREAKFAST CEREAL, HIS PHONE CHIMED WITH AN unfamiliar number.

He swiped right, expecting a telemarketer. “Hello?”

“Is this Justin Boyle?” a woman asked.

“Yes.” *Definitely a telemarketer.* Justin moved the phone from his ear, about to tap the red button, ending the call.

But he heard the woman through the speaker say, “I’m Wendy from the Harrisburg Humane Society.”

Justin put his phone back to his ear.

Wendy continued, “We have a golden retriever mix that came in this morning with the Harrisburg Police Animal Control Unit. He has a collar with your name and number on it. Is this your dog?”

“Yes. Can I come pick him up?”

“Can you tell me your dog’s name?”

“Chico.”

“Good. That’s what we have on the QR code.” Wendy gave Justin their address.

On the way to the Harrisburg Humane Society, he thought about stopping by UPMC to see if Edwin had been admitted, but he was still annoyed with him for trashing his apartment and stealing his tablet for drugs.

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By the next morning, Justin's conscience had gotten the better of him, and he drove to UPMC in Harrisburg. He played the same HIPAA game, with the receptionist refusing to give any information unless the patient approved it.

“Can you confirm that he’s here?” Justin asked.

“I can’t,” the receptionist replied. “I suggest you come back tomorrow.”

Justin read between the lines, figuring Edwin was at UPMC, unable to talk at the moment, but he might be lucid tomorrow. Justin figured this overdose was more serious than the previous one. *He might be in surgery or even in a coma.*

## FORTY-EIGHT

# DEATH IS UNDERRATED

THE NEXT DAY, JUSTIN RETURNED TO THE UPMC IN HARRISBURG. THIS time, the receptionist gave his name to the appropriate person and he was directed to Edwin's recovery room. Before taking the elevator to the third-floor recovery rooms, he browsed the gift shop, and purchased a copy of *UFC* magazine with a muscular man on the cover, his fist extended. Then Justin went to Edwin's room.

The room was bathed in soft yellow light. Medical equipment beeped quietly in the background. Edwin sat up in the adjustable bed nearest the door, watching the television with subtitles, the volume muted. An IV snaked from his arm. A heart monitor was clipped to his finger.

Justin approached the bedside.

Edwin glowered at his visitor. "Do you have my dog?"

"Yeah. Animal control called me. He's at my apartment."

Edwin exhaled, his shoulders relaxing.

"How are you doing?"

"How do you *think* I'm doin'?"

Justin shrugged. "I don't know. That's why I asked."

"You *think* you're smarter than me, don't you?"

"If I was smarter than you, I wouldn't be here."

Edwin chuckled, then gestured to the magazine. "What's that?"

Justin handed him the *UFC* magazine.

Edwin took the magazine and jabbed the muscled man on the cover. “He was a punk-ass bitch. I beat his ass in the first round.” He tossed the magazine on the overbed table. “I prefer car magazines.”

“You’re lucky you don’t have brain damage.”

“Maybe. Maybe I’d be happier if I didn’t know what was happenin’.”

“You could be dead.”

“Death doesn’t sound so bad.”

“I think that sometimes too, but—”

“Why don’t you end it, then? Why are you standin’ here?”

Justin let out a tired sigh. “Because… if I can do one really good thing, my life will mean something.”

Edwin raised one side of his mouth in contempt. “That’s the dumbest fuckin’ thing I’ve ever heard.”

Justin wilted from the insult. “Don’t you ever wonder why we’re here?”

“Nobody gives a shit whether I’m here or not.”

“If you were doing something productive, you might feel differently.”

Edwin picked up the *UFC* magazine, then slapped it back on the overbed table. “The only thing I know how to do is fight, and I can’t do that anymore.”

“You could coach. Teach self-defense or something.”

“Who the fuck is gonna listen to a drug addict?”

“I would. You could coach me.”

Edwin laughed. “You sure you’re not a faggot?”

Justin looked away. “I should go. I need to walk Chico before work.” He headed for the door.

Edwin called out, “Hey, Justin.”

Justin turned.

“You gonna pick me up from detox?”

“I’ll be there.”

## FORTY-NINE

# ONE WEEK LATER...

JUSTIN GRABBED HIS WALLET FROM HIS DRESSER TOP AND SHOVED IT into the back pocket of his jeans. Chico looked up at him, his tail waving back and forth. He fished his phone from his front pocket and checked the time—9:28 a.m. He needed to hurry or he'd be late to pick up Edwin from detox. New Beginnings kept him a little longer this time, so hopefully, he wouldn't relapse. Justin shoved his phone back into his front pocket and swiped his keys from his dresser top.

He petted Chico. “I’m gonna miss you, boy.”

The dog stared up at him with dark watery eyes.

Banging came from his apartment door. Justin crept to the door, Chico right behind him. He peered through the peephole. Kyle stood in the hall vibrating. Justin thought about waiting until his ex-best friend left.

But Kyle banged on the door again and shouted, “I know you’re in there. Your car’s here. Open the door.”

Chico barked.

Justin turned the deadbolt, opened the door, and slipped into the hallway, shutting Chico in the apartment. He worried that Chico might bite Kyle, which could result in the dog’s detention by animal control or worse, considering Kyle had a gun.

“What are you still doing here?” Kyle asked through gritted teeth.

“I don’t know what you expect me to do,” Justin replied. “My lease isn’t up for six months.”

“You’re not gonna be here another six months.”

Justin held out his hands like a beggar. “Why are you doing this to me? You were my best friend, and you just throw me away for a girl.”

Kyle shook his head. “You got that backwards. You threw *me* away for a girl.”

“I’ll leave when the lease is up.”

Kyle grabbed Justin’s collar and yanked him within an inch of his face. “Break the fucking lease or I’ll break your fucking face. Got me?”

Chico scratched at the door, barking repeatedly.

Justin nodded, his head tilted back and away from Kyle.

“I expect you to be gone by the end of this week. Don’t fuck with me.”  
Kyle let go.

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Justin picked up Edwin from New Beginnings a few minutes late. Edwin vacated the building as soon as they parked, approaching the car carrying a plastic bag with his dirty clothes. Edwin opened the back passenger door and Chico jumped out, wagging his tail, his body wiggling back and forth. He hugged his dog. Justin popped the trunk and exited his Kia.

“I have something for you,” Justin said.

Edwin stood from his dog and joined Justin at the open trunk. Inside was a backpack and a tent packed in a canvas bag.

“What’s this?” Edwin asked.

“Clothes and a tent,” Justin replied.

Edwin unzipped the backpack, finding toiletries, clothes, and forty bucks in cash. He shoved the cash in his pocket, zipped up the backpack, and faced Justin. “Thanks, bro.”

“You’re welcome. Where do you want me to take you?”

“I’ll stay in your apartment for a while. See how it goes.”

Justin deadpanned, “That’s not an option.”

Edwin creased his brow. “What do you mean that’s not an option?”

“It didn’t work out so well last time.”

“I never stole shit.”

Justin sighed. “This is part of the problem. You’re dishonest. If you wanna stay with me, I have a few rules.”

Edwin cackled. “You must be jokin’.”

Justin raised a finger each time he recited a new rule. “Rule one is to tell the truth. Rule two is no stealing. And rule three... you have to go to regular NA meetings.”

“Fuck all that. You can drop me back at Tent City.”

“Suit yourself.”

They didn’t speak during the drive to Tent City. Justin parked in front of the homeless encampment and popped the trunk. They exited the car, meeting at the back of the Kia.

Edwin grabbed his stuff from the trunk, opened the back passenger door, and called for Chico. “Come on, boy. Let’s go.”

Chico didn’t budge.

“What the fuck did you do to my dog?” Edwin asked.

“Nothing,” Justin replied, standing nearby.

“He’s confused because you’ve been feedin’ him.” Edwin dropped his bags, grabbed Chico by the collar, and pulled him from the car. Chico bit his master. “*Ow. Chingada.*” Edwin waved his hand, blood running down his fingers.

Chico cowered behind Justin.

“What’s wrong with you?” Edwin asked his dog. “Come here, boy. I won’t hurt you.”

Still, Chico wouldn’t budge.

Edwin slumped his shoulders in resignation. “I’ll follow your fuckin’ rules until my dog remembers who his master is.”

## FIFTY NA

JUSTIN SAT IN HIS CAR, BATHED IN THE FLUORESCENT GLOW OF THE parking lot post lights, the steeple towering over him. He fished his phone from his pocket and called Grace.

After greetings and pleasantries, Grace asked, “How did it go with Edwin? Did you drop him off at Tent City?”

“I dropped him off at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting,” Justin replied. “I’m waiting for him. It’s at the Messiah Lutheran Church in Lebanon.”

“That’s good that he’s getting help. Is he staying with you?”

Justin hesitated. “Yeah, but don’t worry. There’s nothing left to steal except for my car.”

“Don’t leave your keys lying around.”

“I won’t.”

“Grace. It’s starting,” Penny called out.

“Coming,” Grace called back. “That was Penny. We’re watching *Perfect Match*.”

“I’ll let you go, then.”

“Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll come by and see you if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, sure. My lunch break is at two.”

“Okay. See you then.”

Justin checked his Instagram account. Most of the posts clowning on Justin for getting knocked out by that teen robber had stopped, but he still received the occasional comment about his stature and the absurdity of someone so small being a security guard. Apart from those comments, he didn't receive anything else, no friend requests, and no positive comments, or even any likes.

People filtered out of the church. Edwin spoke to an older man for a few minutes. Then, they shook hands and Edwin returned to the Kia, sliding into the front passenger seat.

“How did it go?” Justin asked.

“Do you know what NA stands for?” Edwin asked.

“Narcotics Anonymous.”

“You know what anonymous means?”

Justin frowned, started the car, and drove out of the parking lot.

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When they returned home, Justin grabbed Chico's leash, the dog wagging his tail.

“I'll take him.” Edwin held out his hand to Justin. “He needs to get used to me again.”

Justin handed Edwin the leash. “You hungry? I was gonna make spaghetti.”

“Yeah. Sounds good. Thanks, bro.” Edwin cleared his throat. “Sorry for bein' a dick earlier.” Edwin didn't wait for a response. He hooked the leash on Chico's collar and left the apartment.

Justin went to the kitchen and worked on the spaghetti.

There was a hard knock at the door. Justin stepped to the door and opened it, thinking it was Edwin, but it was Kyle.

“Why the fuck is Edwin Arroyo here?” Kyle said, vibrating.

“I'm helping him out,” Justin replied, guarding the doorway.

“He can't fucking be here. He's not on the lease.”

“You're not on Leah's lease either.”

“What the hell are you trying to do?” Kyle clenched his fists.

“I told you. I'm trying to help him.”

Kyle spoke through gritted teeth. “I don’t want you here, and I sure as hell don’t want Edwin fucking Arroyo here either.”

“He won’t be here very long.”

Kyle poked Justin in the chest. “Both of you better be gone by the end of the week.”

## FIFTY-ONE

# AMBER ALERT

THE CEILING FAN ROTATED OVERHEAD. THE TELEVISIONS IN THE Subway restaurant were muted and tuned to the local news. Justin and Grace sat in a booth eating their subs. Justin's coworker, a teen girl scrolling on her phone behind the counter, covered for him while he took his break, although they hadn't had a customer in twenty minutes. The news showed a mangled BMW wrapped around a telephone pole.

Grace gestured to the TV. "Can you turn it up?"

Justin grabbed the remote and raised the volume.

The newscaster appeared, his hair perfectly coiffed. "Tragedy struck this evening in West Lebanon as a fatal car accident claimed the life of Chad Stevens"—a picture of a handsome young man with a square jaw appeared to the right of the newscaster—"a recent graduate of West Lebanon High School. The collision occurred near the intersection of Blevins Street and Horner Road. Authorities do not believe drugs or alcohol were involved in the tragedy. Chad Stevens was only eighteen years old."

The news cut to a commercial.

Justin muted the television. "That's terrible. Did you know him?"

Grace shook her head. "No. Did you?"

"No. I knew of him, though. He was two years behind us. He was the quarterback on the football team." Justin took a bite of his sub.

"I'm surprised there wasn't drugs or alcohol involved." Grace sipped her soda.

Justin swallowed. “Could’ve been texting and driving.”  
Both their phones buzzed at the same time. Justin checked his phone.

**AMBER ALERT:** *Missing child. Kristin Bennett. Age: 16 years old.*

**Last Seen:** *August 8, 2024, in the Rolling Hills neighborhood of West Lebanon, PA. around 5:00 p.m.*

**Description:** *5'2", petite, brown hair, hazel eyes, braces, wearing a white T-shirt with multi-colored butterflies, jeans, and white sneakers. PICTURE*

*If seen, call 911 immediately or contact the West Lebanon Police Department at 555-821-3145.*

“It’s a missing girl,” Grace said, reading the text.

Justin tapped on the PICTURE link and saw Kristin smiling back at him, her braces on full display, her brown hair silky straight and parted down the middle. Her eyes crinkled at the camera.

“This is terrible,” Grace said. “She’s been missing since yesterday. If they don’t find her in the first forty-eight hours, the chances that she’s found decrease significantly.”

“I’ve seen her before,” Justin said, still inspecting the picture.

She set down her phone. “When?”

Justin set down his phone. “It was like two weeks ago, at the mall. She was with two other girls and...”

“And what?”

“Well... they picked out some ugly clothes for her at Boscov’s, and they were making faces at each other behind her back. I’m pretty sure they were making fun of her.”

“That’s typical mean girl behavior. Doesn’t mean they kidnapped or killed her.”

“But it looked like they wanted to do something to her.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He hesitated. “Something bad.”

“Well, what exactly?”

“I don’t know, but I need to tell the police,” Justin said. “Like you said, if she’s not found in the first forty-eight hours...”

“But what will you tell the police?” Grace asked. “They’ll want something concrete. I guess you can tell them about the ugly clothes and making faces behind her back, but I doubt that’ll do much.”

Justin hung his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry to be pessimistic, but I’ve read enough true crime to know what the police can and can’t do.”

He raised his gaze. “You’re right. The police probably won’t care about that.”

She leaned forward. “Did you see anything else?”

Justin took a deep breath. “I’m gonna tell you something that I’ve only told two other people in my entire life.”

Grace raised her eyebrows. “Okay. What is it?”

“I can see evil intentions.”

“What?”

Justin explained how people vibrate when they have evil intentions and he could see the vibrations.

“Vibrations?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

“The two girls that she was with at the mall were vibrating,” Justin said. “I don’t know exactly what they were thinking, but it wasn’t good, and now the girl is missing. There has to be something to that.”

Grace gaped at Justin.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You might have some really strong intuitions. I could see that. But it doesn’t matter what I think. It matters what the police will think, and I don’t think they’re very receptive to ESP, or whatever it is that you think you have.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

Justin leaned forward, his elbows on the table. His voice was sharper. “I don’t know what it is that I have. I see the vibrations, and it means they have evil intentions. That’s it.”

Grace flashed her palms. “I’m not saying you don’t have this ability. I don’t know what you see. I’m just saying you can’t tell the police that.”

“Then what?”

“You could tell the police that they were giving her dirty looks or something like that.”

“But they weren’t. Except for when they were making faces at each other, they were smiling and acting like her friend.”

“I guess you can tell them that, but I doubt they’ll care.”

He let out a heavy exhale. “Well, I have to say something.” He stood from the table. “I’ll figure it out on the way over there.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure.” Justin asked his coworker to cover for him for an hour or so.

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Justin drove Grace to the West Lebanon Township Police Department on a narrow two-lane road, passing chest-high cornfields, soybean fields, and oak forests.

“What are you planning to say?” Grace asked.

“I guess I’ll tell them what I saw, apart from the vibrations,” Justin replied.

Grace pursed her lips.

“You don’t believe me about the vibrations, do you?” Justin asked.

“I never said that.”

“I can tell.”

“It is... far-fetched. Sorry, I’m not trying to be mean.”

Justin shook his head. “It’s okay.”

They drove in silence for several minutes. The forests and farms gave way to rural residences on acre lots. As they neared town, the lots and homes grew smaller.

Justin stopped his Kia at a traffic light. He checked his rearview mirror. “The man on that motorcycle behind us is vibrating. I think he might be road-raging.”

Grace looked back. “He’s just sitting on his bike.”

The biker revved his engine and did a burnout, throwing smoke at the Tesla behind him.

“Why is he doing that?” Grace asked.

“I think he’s mad at the guy in the Tesla,” Justin replied.

“Did you see the Tesla cut him off or something?”

“I just saw them in my rearview mirror at this light.”

The light went green and Justin drove through the intersection.

Grace turned to Justin. “Did you really see that biker vibrate?”

He nodded. “Just like I saw Kristin Bennett’s friends vibrating. But, like you said, I can’t tell the police that.”

“You think the vibrations mean that someone has evil intentions?”

“Yeah. Sometimes the vibrations are subtle, and other times, they’re so bad, the person looks like a blur.”

“Why would that be?”

“I think when a person is a blur, the evil is imminent and really bad. When it’s subtle, it’s more of a passing thought, and whatever it is probably isn’t as bad, and it’s less likely to happen right then. Like maybe they’re thinking of shoplifting as opposed to murder.”

## FIFTY-TWO

# CAUGHT A CASE

IT WAS A SINGLE-STORY BRICK BUILDING WITH TINTED WINDOWS AND A gold sign that read *West Lebanon Township Police Department*. Patrol cars parked in the adjacent lot along with several news vans. The American flag and the Pennsylvania state flag fluttered on flagpoles. Security cameras were mounted and strategically positioned, monitoring the comings and goings of law enforcement and the public.

Justin parked his Kia near the Channel 8 news van, and they walked to the police station, squinting into the summer sun. The lobby was a vestibule, a place to stow civilians until they were needed inside. It held a row of plastic chairs and a receptionist behind bulletproof glass. A metal door labeled *Employees Only* led into the police station.

They went to the receptionist. She addressed them through the speaker. “Can I help you?”

“We have information about the missing girl,” Justin said.

“The detective in charge of the case is in a press conference, but it should be done soon. Could you sign in? And I need to see your IDs.” The receptionist placed a clipboard with an attached pen through the metal drawer.

Justin and Grace added their names and signatures to the sign-in sheet and handed their licenses to the receptionist. She photocopied and returned their licenses, then invited them to sit and wait for the detective.

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Twenty minutes later, reporters and cameramen entered the lobby, then exited the police department. A few minutes after that, a chubby man wearing an ill-fitting suit approached them.

“I’m Detective Brewer. Are you Justin and Grace?” The detective’s loose neck skin jiggled as he talked.

They shook hands and confirmed their identities. Justin reminded the detective that they had met at Lebanon Valley Mall, when Abbasi Electronics was robbed.

A middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair and a goatee to match entered the lobby from the police station. He was heavyset, with a hangdog look, his eyes red and dark-circled.

“Let’s go to my office,” Detective Brewer said.

The middle-aged man butted into their conversation, lifting his chin to Justin and Grace. “Who are they?”

“Go home, Larry,” Detective Brewer said. “When I have something for you, you’ll know.”

Detective Brewer led Grace and Justin into the police station. Before entering the station, Justin glanced back at the lobby. Larry stood there, his arms crossed, watching them.

Inside, the air carried a mix of stale coffee and sweat. A gang of cubicles sat in the center of the room. Some of them were occupied by officers on their laptops or cell phones. Doors to private offices and interrogation rooms lined the walls. Detective Brewer opened his office, flipped on the overhead light, and ushered them in.

The detective’s office was dominated by his metal desk. Metal filing cabinets lined one wall. Detective Brewer sat behind his cluttered desk. His lips were thin, his mouth perpetually downturned. The blinds behind him were partially shut, letting in narrow beams of sunlight, and exposing dust motes. Justin and Grace sat across from him on plastic chairs.

“You have information about Kristin Bennett?” the detective asked.

“I saw her two weeks ago at the Lebanon Valley Mall,” Justin replied. “She was with two other girls who looked to be a little older.”

“Do you know the identity of these other two girls?”

“No.”

“Okay, what were they doing?”

“They were eating at the food court. Then they went to get their nails done. Then they went to Boscov’s to shop.”

Brewer rubbed his chin, his unblinking gaze on Justin. “Were you following them?”

“Well, uh... not exactly.”

“If you weren’t following them, how do you know they were eating at the food court or getting their nails done or shopping at Boscov’s?”

Justin fidgeted in his seat. “I guess maybe I was watching them, but it was because it seemed like the older girls were mad at Kristin.”

He leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. “How do you know they were mad at Kristin?”

“Well, uh... they picked out ugly clothes for her at Boscov’s and they were making faces at each other behind her back.”

The detective let out a ragged breath. “So, let me get this straight. You were following around underaged girls, and you think two of the girls were mad at Kristin because they picked out ugly clothes and they were making faces.”

“I, uh...”

“Did *you* have anything to do with Kristin Bennett’s disappearance?”

Justin tensed in his seat. “*No*. Of course not.”

Brewer addressed Grace. “What about you, young lady? Did you see Kristin Bennett at the mall?”

“*No*. I wasn’t there.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To help?”

Detective Brewer glowered at them, his jaw set tight. “I don’t know what television shows you watch, but this is real life. I have a missing girl and a devastated father. Every minute I waste with you is a minute I’m not searching for Kristin. It could be the difference between finding her or not.” The detective pointed at them. “If you waste this department’s time again, you will be arrested. You got me?”

“Yes,” Justin and Grace replied in unison, their heads bowed.

They were quiet for most of the trip back to Subway.

“That didn’t go so well,” Justin said, his eyes on the narrow country road.

“No, it didn’t,” Grace replied.

An old Ford pickup truck appeared in Justin's rearview mirror, tailgating them.

Justin checked his mirror. "What does this guy want? I'm already going ten over."

Grace turned around in her seat. "Looks like he's in a hurry."

"I'm not speeding any more than this. We don't need more trouble with the police."

A few minutes later, Justin parked in front of the West Lebanon Subway, the Ford pickup parking one space over. Justin exited his car, bracing himself for a road rage confrontation. Grace joined him. Larry from the police station climbed out of the truck and made a beeline for them.

"Who are you? How do you know my daughter?" Larry asked, his chest puffed up.

They introduced themselves and Justin explained what he had told Detective Brewer.

"Was one of those girls a Mexican?"

Justin and Grace gave each other that's-a-weird-question looks.

"No. They were both white," Justin replied.

Larry shook his head. "That don't make no sense."

"What doesn't make sense?" Grace asked.

"Kristin's best friend is a Mexican. Never goes anywhere without her. She was supposed to be sleepin' over at Maya's. The next day, she didn't come home."

"Did you call Maya?"

Larry frowned. "That was the first thing I did, but Mrs. Camacho said Kristin never came over. In fact, she said she hadn't seen Kristin in a long time, which don't make no sense. Kristin and Maya have been best friends since first grade."

"This isn't any of our business," Justin said.

Larry jabbed a craggy finger at Justin. "That's right. It's *my* business, but if you saw my daughter with two older girls who were bullyin' her, I wanna know who they are."

"We don't know who they are."

"Not yet, but you saw them."

"What did Maya say?" Grace asked.

"Nothin'. I didn't talk to her," Larry replied. "Mrs. Camacho told me she was sleepin', but it was two in the afternoon."

“That’s suspicious.”

“That’s what I thought, so I went to the police, but they haven’t done shit.”

Grace furrowed her brow, her hands on her hips. “The police haven’t talked to Maya yet?”

“I asked Detective Numb Nuts if he talked to her, and he gave me some bullshit about explorin’ all leads. He thinks Kristin ran away. My daughter would *never* run away. Somethin’ happened to her, and Maya knows somethin’.”

“Did you try talking to any of her other friends?” Grace asked.

“I don’t know any of her other friends.”

“Is she on social media?”

“I think so. She’s always takin’ pictures of herself. You know, those selfie pictures. Takes hundreds of ‘em to find one good one.”

“She’s probably on Instagram,” Grace said. “It would be smart to see her followers, see who likes and comments on her posts. She might have a boyfriend.”

“If she had a boyfriend, I’d know about him,” Larry said.

“Well, I would try to talk to Maya again. I would find her IG profile and figure out who she seems to be friendly with online.”

Larry nodded.

“If you find her IG profile,” Justin said, “I can search her friends list. I might be able to identify the girls she was with at the mall.”

Larry nodded again. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Find the people your daughter spends time with, and do it quickly,” Grace said.

“I have a Facebook account, but I’m not on nothin’ else, and I don’t have time to be messin’ around.” Larry looked at Grace, then Justin, then back to Grace. “Would you two help me look that stuff up?”

Grace was taken aback. “Oh. Of course. I’d be happy to help.”

“Me too,” Justin said.

## FIFTY-THREE

# SOMEONE ELSE'S BOYFRIEND

LARRY GAVE THEM HIS HOME ADDRESS, WHICH WAS ONLY FIVE MINUTES from the Subway. Justin called Harvey and received permission to take the rest of the day off. His coworker was a little miffed, but it was slow. Justin and Grace drove to her townhouse for her laptop and tablet, then they met at Larry's house.

The Rolling Hills neighborhood was a mixture of ramblers, trailers, and split-level homes on quarter-acre lots. *Make America Great Again* signs proudly proclaimed the prevailing patriotism. The occasional *FJB* sign proudly proclaimed their disgust with the Biden administration. A lone *Biden/Harris 2024* sign stood in the sea of red, even though Joe Biden had dropped out of the presidential race three weeks ago.

They parked on the street by a redbrick rambler. Larry's F-150 and a dump truck were parked in the driveway. Justin and Grace exited his Kia and headed for the front door, carrying the tablet and laptop. Justin stopped and gawked at the candy-apple-red dump truck gleaming in the sun, with shiny chrome wheels, a massive chrome push bar, and a stainless-steel dump body.

“You coming?” Grace asked.

Justin followed Grace to the front door. She pressed the doorbell and Larry ushered them inside. They followed the heavyset man into his cozy living room with wood panel walls. A single TV tray stood in front of the

worn couch. A grandfather clock stood in the corner, the pendulum bob swinging back and forth.

“We can work in here,” Larry said, staring at Grace’s chest for a little too long.

Grace adjusted her V-neck T-shirt. “Did you search your daughter’s room?”

“The police did.”

“Did they find anything useful?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What about her phone?”

“It’s gone. Must’ve had it with her. I assume the police tried to track it, but they obviously didn’t find her.”

“You should search her room again, while we work on the social media stuff. If you’re worried about the police, it might be smart to double-check their work.”

“Good idea.” Larry started to leave.

“We need your Wi-Fi password.” Grace held up her tablet.

“Oh, right. It’s Peterbilt1, with a capital P.” Larry spelled out the password. Then he walked down the hallway to his daughter’s bedroom.

“You know what you’re doing,” Justin said as he sat on the couch.

“I’ve read about enough disappearances to know the basics,” Grace replied, sitting next to him.

Grace couldn’t find Kristin’s IG account with her name or location, so she went to the girl’s bedroom and asked Larry if he had her cell phone number, which he did.

Justin used Grace’s tablet to search for Maya on Instagram.

Grace returned to the living room and the couch.

“I don’t think Maya Camacho’s on IG,” Justin said.

“If I can find Kristin’s handle, we might be able to find Maya’s. If Kristin used her phone number to sign up for IG, her profile will appear.” Grace entered Kristin’s phone number into the contacts of her own IG account. “There it is. KBCutie9.”

“Nice work.”

They searched Kristin’s followers, but they didn’t see Maya Camacho. They scrolled through Kristin’s IG account, which was only a year old. At the very beginning of her account were pictures of Kristin with a Latina, but

they stopped abruptly, and she was never featured again. One caption read, *My best friend Maya*, but there was no profile connected to Maya.

“I think you’re right,” Grace said. “I don’t think Maya has an account.”

“I don’t think Maya’s her friend anymore,” Justin replied.

“Do you think that’s motive?”

“I hope not. Mr. Bennett needs to talk to her.”

They continued to scroll through Kristin’s IG pictures. Recent pictures were more adult. She hung out with older kids. In one picture, they were all grinning and holding Solo cups. Another picture showed Kristin with two older girls in their skimpy bikinis.

Justin pointed at the bikini picture. “Those are the two girls that were with Kristin at the mall. What are their IG handles?”

“GlamourGoddess24 and CelestialCarrie30,” Grace replied. “It looks like these two girls are her new best friends. They’re in most of the pictures.”

Mr. Bennett entered the room with a folded piece of paper, his face taut.

“We found Kristin’s IG page and we found the girls who were with her at the mall,” Grace said.

“That’s good, but I don’t think they did nothin’ to Kristin. Look at this.” Larry handed the folded paper to Grace.

“What’s this?” Grace asked, taking the paper.

“You might be right about her havin’ a boyfriend.”

Grace unfolded the paper. “Where did you get this?”

“The secret compartment of her jewelry box. The only reason I know about it is cuz I bought it for her birthday. The saleslady showed it to me.” Larry slumped into the nearby recliner.

Grace held up the letter, letting Justin read along with her.

*Kristin,*

*I’ve never felt like this about anybody. I think you’re a total baddie. Every time you smile, my heart skips a beat. Yes, even with those braces! You’re not like these other girls who are just into money and hooking up. You’re different. You’re special. You’re the only girl I’ve ever trusted.*

*I never believed in fate and destiny before you, but I know we were meant to be together. How else can I explain how much I love you? I wish we could run away together and get away from your dad, our friends, everything. I wish I could sign this letter.*

Grace set the letter on the table.

“Who do you think it is? Did you see any guys on her social media?” Larry asked.

“I don’t know,” Grace replied. “Most of the pictures on her IG were with other girls.”

Larry leaned forward in his recliner. “What should I do now?”

“I would talk to Maya Camacho. Something happened between Maya and Kristin. I don’t think they’re friends anymore.”

Larry stood from the recliner. “I want you two to come with me. You know the right questions to ask.”

“I don’t know,” Justin replied. “Maybe you should contact Detective Brewer about this.”

Larry frowned. “Detective Numb Nuts doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. Look, I’ll pay you for your time. I don’t expect you two to work for free.”

“That’s not necessary,” Grace said.

“No offense, but you two don’t look rich. Lemme pay you for your time.”

Justin and Grace looked at each other and nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Bennett,” Grace said.

“Call me Larry,” he replied.

“Okay.”

“All right. Lemme hit the bathroom and we’ll go.” Larry left the living room.

Grace shut her laptop and whispered, “I don’t think Kristin has a public boyfriend.”

“Yeah, because she has someone else’s boyfriend,” Justin whispered back.

“In the letter, he said he wished they could run away from her dad.”

“I know. I saw that.”

“You think Larry was abusing her?”

“I don’t know. It crossed my mind.”

“You think she ran away with this guy?”

“The cops think so. Maybe Detective Numb Nuts knows what he’s talking about.”

## FIFTY-FOUR

# THE EX-BEST FRIEND

THEY CLIMBED INTO LARRY'S FORD F-150, THE THREE OF THEM across the bench seat. Larry cranked the ignition, the big V8 roaring to life.

"Having all three of us there might scare her," Grace said.

Larry turned to Grace. "I don't know the right questions to ask, but you sure do."

"It might be good to tell them we're related," Justin said.

"I'll tell 'em you're my niece and nephew visitin' from California."

"Don't you think Kristin might've mentioned to Maya that she has cousins from California?" Grace asked.

"Hell if I know. You got a better idea?" Larry asked.

"Don't mention that we're from California. It sounds like a lie. Just tell them that we're your niece and nephew, and leave it at that."

Larry nodded and reversed his truck into the street. Maya's house was less than a mile away, at the opposite end of the same Rolling Hills neighborhood. The doublewide trailer home was well kept with clean siding, a freshly cut green lawn, and pink petunias in the flowerbeds. A Toyota Camry was parked in the driveway.

They parked along the street and walked to the front door. Larry pressed the doorbell. A short Latina answered the door.

"Hi, Mrs. Camacho," Larry said.

"Hello, Mr. Bennett." Mrs. Camacho squinted at Justin and Grace.

“This is my niece and nephew, Grace and Justin,” Larry said, motioning to the pair. “They’re helpin’ me find Kristin.”

Mrs. Camacho guarded the doorway.

“Can we talk to Maya for a few minutes?”

“Kristin hasn’t been to our house in a very long time. We already told the police. Maya had nothing to do with this. I’m very sorry, but we can’t get involved.” She started to shut the door.

“Maya can talk to us without getting involved,” Grace blurted out.

Mrs. Camacho hesitated, the door half-closed.

“We’re not with the police. We know Maya and Kristin aren’t friends anymore, but they used to be *best* friends. Maya might know something that could help us find her. *Please*. You don’t have to worry about the authorities bothering your family.”

Mrs. Camacho nodded and stepped aside. They entered the trailer home. The living room appeared lived in—with worn armrests on the couch and recliner, the seats facing a wall-mounted flatscreen. Jesus, staked to a crucifix, watched over the room. Faded floral curtains filtered the summer sun.

Mrs. Camacho gestured to the couch and said, “Have a seat.”

The three of them sat on the couch, Larry on one end, Justin and Grace on the other.

Mrs. Camacho disappeared down the hallway. She knocked on Maya’s bedroom door and said, “Mr. Bennett’s here to see you.”

Shortly thereafter, Maya appeared in the living room with her mother. She was short, fresh-faced without makeup, and wore sweatpants and a T-shirt that read *Be Happy*. A striped headband held her curly hair back and was tied in a bow.

“Hi, Mr. Bennett,” Maya said without making eye contact.

“Hi, Maya.” Larry gestured to the opposite end of the couch. “This is my niece and nephew, Grace and Justin. They’re helpin’ me look for Kristin.”

“I haven’t talked to Kristin in a really long time.”

“That’s what your mom said, but you might know some things that could help us find her.”

“Okay. I’ll try.” Maya perched on the edge of the recliner and swiveled toward the couch.

Mrs. Camacho still stood, watching over the affair.

“What happened between you two?” Larry asked. “You were best friends.”

Maya wrung her hands in her lap. “There’s not some big reason why we’re not friends anymore. It was a whole bunch of things. We used to go to the football games together, but then she started sitting with other people. At first, she’d tell me that she’d be right back, that she wanted to say hi to somebody. But then she started doing that a lot, until she left me alone for almost the whole game.”

Justin watched Maya for signs of vibration, but she was steady.

Maya continued, “Same thing happened at lunch. She would go say hi to this person or that person. Before I knew it, I was eating all by myself.”

“Did you talk to her about it?” Grace asked.

“I tried. She told me to be more outgoing like her, then I wouldn’t feel abandoned. That just made me feel worse.”

“Did you two argue?” Justin asked.

Maya fidgeted in her seat. “Not really. It wasn’t even all her. I got annoyed with her and stopped trying, and she stopped too. After a while, we didn’t even say hello in school. It wasn’t like we had some big falling out. I guess we just grew apart.”

“Does Kristin have a boyfriend?” Larry asked.

“I don’t know,” Maya replied.

“Do you know anybody who disliked Kristin? Someone who might want to hurt her?” Grace asked.

“No. Kristin was nice to everyone.”

“Except you,” Justin deadpanned.

Mrs. Camacho glared at Justin.

Maya blanched. “We’re not best friends anymore, which hurts. It used to hurt a lot, but I’m not angry with her. She never did anything really mean to me. She just stopped being my friend.”

“Can I show you a picture?” Justin asked. “I’m hoping you can tell me this person’s name.”

Maya nodded. “Okay.”

Justin tapped on his phone, finding the profile picture of the brunette with a nose job who had accompanied Kristin to the mall, known on IG as CelestialCarrie30. He stood from the couch and handed his phone to Maya.

Mrs. Camacho watched Justin like a hawk.

Maya inspected the image. “That’s Carrie Wagner. She’ll be a senior this fall at West Lebanon.” Maya returned Justin’s phone.

Justin tapped on his phone, finding the profile picture of the tall blonde who had also been at the mall with Kristin, known on IG as GlamourGoddess24.

Maya checked the picture. “That’s Larissa Miles. I’m surprised you don’t know who she is.”

Justin pocketed his phone. “Is she famous?”

“Kind of.” Maya bowed her head. “Her boyfriend just died.”

“How did he die?” Grace asked.

Justin sat on the couch.

“He died in that car accident like yesterday,” Maya said. “His name was Chad Stevens.”

“We saw that on the news,” Justin said to Grace.

“It was very tragic,” Mrs. Camacho said, her arms crossed over her chest.

Maya shook her head, her mouth downturned. “I never knew Chad, but it’s really sad. Everyone’s going to his memorial thing at school.”

“When is the memorial?” Grace asked.

“It’s tomorrow at one. It’s on the school website.”

Grace nodded. “One more question. Who is Kristin’s best friend now?”

Maya shrugged. “I’m not sure. Maybe Larissa or Carrie, although Larissa and Carrie have been best friends since like forever. Maybe they’re all best friends now. I don’t know. That’s who I saw her with the most.”

On the ride back to Larry’s house, Justin said, “I don’t think Maya had anything to do with it.”

“How do you know that?” Larry asked as he made a slow turn.

Justin glanced at Grace, then said, “She seems like a really nice girl. I can’t see her being involved in Kristin’s disappearance.” *And she wasn’t vibrating.*

“I agree,” Grace said. “We need to talk to Larissa and Carrie. If Kristin has a boyfriend, they would know who he is. I also think we should check out this memorial tomorrow. There’ll be lots of people who know Kristin there.”

## FIFTY-FIVE

# FRIEND OR FOE?

BACK AT LARRY'S HOUSE, GRACE AND JUSTIN SAT ON THE COUCH IN the living room. Grace tapped on her tablet, double-checking the Chad Stevens Memorial on the West Lebanon High School website. It was, in fact, tomorrow—Saturday, at 1:00 p.m. in the auditorium.

"We need to talk to those girls *now*," Larry said, pacing in the living room. "We're wastin' time."

"We could split up," Justin said. "That would save time. Larry can question one of them, and we can question the other."

"I like that idea," Larry replied. "How do we find out where they live?"

"With their first and last names, ages, and more or less where they live, we could easily do an online background check." Grace clicked her way to PeopleFinder.com.

Larry handed over his Visa card. Grace set up an account on the site and bought a bundle of ten background checks, which was far cheaper per background check than buying them one at a time.

Justin watched Grace find Larissa's and Carrie's home addresses with ease. Before splitting up, they exchanged their cell phone numbers so they could update each other. Larry drove to Larissa's house, while Justin and Grace went to Carrie's house.

Justin drove while Grace tapped on her IG, stalking CelestialCarrie30 for information.

“I’m pretty sure Carrie has a boyfriend named Troy Williamson,” Grace said, her face in her phone. “Looks like he’s a year ahead of Carrie. Just graduated. He has a YouTube channel with Chad Stevens called Bros Before 304s.” She frowned. “Or at least he *had* a channel with Chad Stevens.”

Justin glanced at Grace, then back to the country road. “Three-oh-four is hoe upside down and backwards.”

“I’m sure this channel is kind to women. *Not*.”

“Is the channel popular?”

“Pretty popular. It has 166,000 subs on YouTube.”

“That’s interesting. We’ll have to talk to Troy Williamson too. I’d like to look through the videos.”

“Misogyny could be a motive.”

Valley View Estates was a community of McMansions on acre lots built with chipboard and vinyl siding, but the front faces were adorned with stone or brick like a modern-day Potemkin Village.

Justin turned his Kia onto the driveway of a stone-faced colonial with a three-car garage, and a *Harris for President* sign stuck in the lawn. They followed the stone pathway to the front door. High-pitched screams came from inside.

“What is that?” Justin asked.

“Sounds like a kid throwing a tantrum.” Grace pressed the doorbell.

A middle-aged man answered the door wearing a Lebanon Valley College sweatshirt, his hair disheveled, the screaming still going on. “Yes?” he said abruptly, his face a hard mask.

“Hi, we’re relatives of Kristin Bennett, and we’re helping with her search,” Grace said.

The man softened his stance.

“We’re talking to some of Kristin’s classmates for information that might help us find her. Could we talk to Carrie?”

The screaming still played in the background.

“Doug! I need your help,” a female voice called out from inside the house.

Carrie appeared behind the middle-aged man. “*Dad*. Mom’s calling for you.”

The man turned to his daughter. “These people are relatives of Kristin Bennett. Can you talk to them?” He hurried toward the screaming.

Carrie stepped onto the front stoop and shut the door behind her. Her eyes were furtive. "Sorry. That's my brother. He has special needs."

"That's okay." Grace introduced herself and Justin as cousins of Kristin.

"I already told the police, like... everything," Carrie said, her hands a little shaky. Her nails had been bitten to nubs.

"We'd like to hear it again, if you don't mind," Grace replied.

Carrie grasped her hands, possibly to stop the trembling.

"When was the last time you saw Kristin?" Justin asked.

"Like, a few days before she disappeared, at my friend Larissa's house," Carrie replied.

"Does she have any enemies?"

"I don't think so."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

Carrie lifted one shoulder. "I don't know, but Larissa said that she was like hooking up with an older guy, and that's, like, who she ran off with."

"Did she give you a name?" Justin asked.

Carrie shook her head. "I don't think Larissa knows who it is either. I think Kristin was, like, keeping it a secret because he's older."

"Has she ever had any other boyfriends?"

"I don't think so." Carrie paused, biting at her thumbnail. "There was this one guy that Larissa set Kristin up with. They went out like a few times, but it didn't work out."

"Who was the guy she went out with?" Grace asked.

"Shane Stickler."

"Why didn't it work out?"

"She said she liked him like a friend. Larissa was..." Carrie trailed off.

"You started to say something about Larissa," Grace said.

"No, I don't know what I was, like, saying. Sorry, it's been like really sad with Chad and Kristin. You know what I mean?"

Grace nodded. "I understand."

"Was Larissa bothered that Kristin didn't like the guy she set her up with?" Justin asked.

"No, it's nothing like that," Carrie replied. "I mean, Larissa was disappointed because she thought Shane was like a good match for her, but she wasn't mad."

## FIFTY-SIX

# DEAD ENDS

THEY DROVE TOWARD LARRY'S HOUSE, THE SUN LOW ON THE HORIZON, casting the country road in an orange glow.

“Do you think Carrie had anything to do with Kristin’s disappearance? Was she vibrating?” Grace asked.

“She wasn’t, but she seemed nervous,” Justin replied, his hands on the steering wheel, and his eyes on the road.

“I thought that too. I think she knows more than she’s letting on.” Grace’s phone chimed. “It’s Larry.” She swiped right, put her phone on speaker, and said, “Did you talk to Larissa?”

“I talked to her,” Larry said through the speaker. “She said Kristin was talkin’ about runnin’ away with some older guy, but she didn’t know who.”

“Did she mention Shane Stickler?” Grace asked.

“Yep. Said Kristin went out with him once or twice, but nothin’ came of it.”

“Carrie said the same thing.”

“What did you think of Larissa?” Justin asked.

“She’s a real beauty. Could be a model in my estimation.”

Justin and Grace gave each other the side-eye.

“But do you think she had anything to with this?” Justin asked.

“I don’t,” Larry replied. “Girl’s in a bad state with her boyfriend dyin’. Even with that, she was real worried about Kristin. Offered to help, but she didn’t know nothin’.”

Grace explained what they had learned from Carrie, which wasn't much except for Shane Stickler as a person of interest. She told Larry they were on their way back and ended the call. Then she turned to Justin and said, "Her friends were no help."

Justin glanced at Grace then back to the road. "Another dead end?"  
"Maybe."

At Larry's house, he had McDonald's cheeseburgers and fries waiting for them, and they were grateful. Larry also gave them each one hundred dollars cash and said, "I wish I could afford more."

They ate their dinners on the couch, Larry on one end, using his TV tray, Justin and Grace at the opposite end, perched on the edge, using the coffee table. They watched the news on the flatscreen.

Larry was front and center on the screen, standing behind a podium, flanked by Detective Brewer and Chief Harold Ebersole. Limp flags—Old Glory and the Pennsylvania state flag—framed the scene. The press sat before them, microphones and cameras rolling. Larry appeared fatter on TV as he read from the paper on the podium without looking at the camera.

"My name is Larry Bennett. My daughter, Kristin Bennett, went missin' yesterday."

The news showed an image of Kristin with her metal smile on the lower corner of the screen.

"If you have any information about Kristin and her whereabouts, please contact the West Lebanon Police Department."

A phone number appeared at the bottom of the screen.

Larry finally raised his gaze, showing his bloodshot eyes. "Thank you."

Detective Brewer took over behind the podium, answering various questions from the press.

"Where was Kristin last seen?" a female reporter asked.

"She was last seen yesterday around five p.m. in the Rolling Hills neighborhood of West Lebanon." Detective Brewer pointed to another reporter.

"Was there any evidence of foul play?" a male reporter asked.

"No." The detective pointed to another reporter.

"Do you have any suspects or leads?" another male reporter asked.

"I can't share that information as this is an active investigation. That's all for now."

The reporters hurled questions at Detective Brewer, but he left the podium. The news cut to a commercial.

Larry aimed his remote at the television and turned it off. “That was useless.”

“Someone who knows something might call the tip line,” Grace said, trying to be positive.

“I don’t know.” Larry cleared his throat. “I think *we* need to keep goin’. The cops ain’t gonna find her.”

“What’s next?” Justin shoved a few fries into his mouth.

“I think we need to find Shane Stickler,” Grace said, “and we need to talk to Carrie’s boyfriend, Troy Williamson. Then we have the memorial tomorrow.”

“Why would we talk to this Troy Williamson?” Larry asked.

“He has a misogynistic YouTube channel.”

Larry tilted his head. “What does that mean?”

“It means he might hate women, which could be motive,” Justin said. “We still have to watch the content. I think it’s more likely he’s posting this content for views and ad revenue. He might be trolling.”

Grace frowned at Justin. “We’ll see. I’m betting he’s a misogynist.”

“Even if he is a total misogynist, that’s not evidence that he had anything to do with this.”

“If Kristin hung around Larissa and Carrie, she likely hung around their boyfriends too. For all we know, *he* could be the mystery boyfriend.”

Justin nodded and showed his palms in surrender. “That’s a good point.”

Grace found and purchased background checks for Shane Stickler and Troy Williamson. They split up again, Justin and Grace meeting Shane, and Larry to meet Troy.

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Shane Stickler lived in a middle-class neighborhood across the street from West Lebanon High School. His parents’ house was a modest two-story colonial with black shutters and white siding on a quarter-acre lot. Grace pressed the doorbell and a handsome young man answered the door wearing tight jeans and a West Lebanon Baseball T-shirt.

“Hi, we’re looking for Shane Stickler,” Grace said.

“That’s me.” Shane drew his eyebrows together. “Who are you?”  
Grace introduced themselves as cousins of Kristin Bennett.  
Shane dipped his head. “I’m sorry about your cousin. The whole thing’s  
messed up.”

“Carrie Wagner told us that you went out with Kristin. Is that true?”  
Grace asked.

“Yeah, it’s true,” Shane replied. “We went out twice, but she didn’t  
seem interested, which surprised me.” He smirked. “I got some pretty good  
rizz.”

“If she wasn’t interested, why did she go out with you?” Justin asked.

“Don’t know. Probably cuz Larissa set it up.”

## FIFTY-SEVEN

# BROS BEFORE 304S

JUSTIN DROVE GRACE HOME, HIS HEADLIGHTS CUTTING THROUGH THE darkness, forests and farms passing in a blur of dark green.

“What did you think of Shane?” Grace asked.

“He wasn’t vibrating,” Justin replied. “I don’t think he had anything to do with it.”

“Neither do I.”

Grace grabbed her phone from her purse. “I wonder if Larry found out anything useful from Troy Williamson.” She tapped on her phone, the phone ringing on speaker.

“Larry here,” he answered.

“Did you talk to Troy?” Grace asked.

“Yep. Headed home now. He answered my questions, but he didn’t know nothin’.”

“We didn’t get anything useful from Shane either.”

Larry let out a heavy breath. “Hopefully, we’ll find somethin’ tomorrow at the memorial.”

“We’ll do some more research on Kristin’s IG followers tonight.”

“I’m plannin’ to search Kristin’s bathroom. If the cops missed that letter, maybe they missed somethin’ else.”

“Good idea.”

“What time do you wanna meet tomorrow?”

“Early. How about eight?”

“Fine by me,” Larry replied. “I can’t hardly sleep anyway.”

Justin turned his Kia into Grace’s neighborhood.

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Grace said.

“I appreciate everything you’re doin’. See you tomorrow.” Larry disconnected the call.

Justin parked his Kia in a visitor’s spot near Grace’s end unit townhouse. “Why so early? The memorial doesn’t start until one.”

“Because every second counts in these cases. You can meet us at the school at one if you want.”

Justin shook his head. “No. I’ll be there at eight. I can pick you up. Your house is on the way.”

“Okay. If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Thanks.” Grace undid her seatbelt.

“I’m supposed to work tomorrow afternoon. Not sure how Harvey will react to me asking for another day off.”

“Do what you have to do. I’m supposed to work at the food court, but I don’t even care if I get fired. I’ve heard rumors that California Pizza Kitchen is closing their space soon, which I bet is true. It’s so dead.”

“That sucks. What are you planning to do?”

Grace lifted one shoulder. “I was thinking about applying to Cracker Barrel. The girl I used to work with at California works there as a server. She said she could get me in.”

“That’s cool.”

Grace eyed her townhouse. “Do you want to come in and work on the research? It might be more fun to do it together.”

“Yeah, sure.” Justin undid his seatbelt.

They walked to the townhouse.

Before Grace opened the front door, she put her index finger to her lips and said, “Penny might be asleep, so we have to be quiet.”

Justin followed her inside. They settled in the basement with Grace’s laptop, tablet, and two bottled waters. They could talk normally downstairs without waking the roommate. The basement walls were unfinished concrete, and boxes were stacked on one end for storage, but the floor was carpeted. There were plenty of outlets, and there was a round wooden table with four chairs. Grace ran an extension cord to the table. They charged the devices as they used them.

Justin searched the Bros Before 304s YouTube channel. The late Chad Stevens and Troy Williamson did street interviews and pranks humiliating women by making fun of their body counts and hoe-like behavior. Justin watched on Grace's tablet, using her over-ears headphones.

Chad was on camera far more often than Troy. They were both handsome white boys, but Chad was taller, his skin was clearer, and his jaw was squarer.

In one interview, Chad talked to a mismatched couple in Philadelphia. The man was short, a little nerdy, but his girlfriend was beautiful and she knew it, showing off her assets with a short skirt and a low-cut blouse.

“Are you guys dating?” Chad asked.

“We’re married,” the nerdy man announced with a grin.

The woman eyed Chad.

“Nice. How long have you guys been married?” Chad asked.

“It’s our one-year anniversary today,” the nerdy man replied. “We’re headed to a show, then dinner.”

“Nice. Good for you guys.” Chad addressed the nerdy man. “Do you trust your wife, bro?”

“Of course. One hundred percent.”

Chad addressed the woman. “Do you trust your husband?”

“Of course.” She motioned to herself with a crooked smile. “You really think he would cheat on this?”

Chad laughed. “No. I don’t think he would. So you guys think you’d pass a loyalty test?”

“Of course,” the nerdy man said.

“Do you mind if we check?”

The nerdy man cocked his head. “What do you mean? How do you check?”

Chad retrieved his phone from his pocket. “Check this out, bro. I have an AI app that can tell me if you or your wife are on any dating apps. All I have to do is take pictures of your faces, plug it into the program with your first name, and *boom*, it’ll find you if you’re on any dating apps.”

“We’re not on any dating apps.”

“Let’s check.”

“We should get going,” the wife said, taking a step away.

“We have time,” the nerdy man said.

“This is stupid. He’s not going to, like, find anything.”

“If we don’t do it, the whole world will think we’re having affairs.”

Chad held up his index finger. “Bro makes a good point. You guys ready to do this?”

“Whatever,” the wife said.

Chad snapped pictures of both of them and got their first names. He plugged the husband into the app. After a tense few seconds, Chad said, “Oh no, he’s on Grindr.”

“That can’t be right,” the husband said, his voice going up an octave.

The wife’s eyes bulged. “You better not be.”

Chad snickered. “I’m just kidding, bro. He’s not on any dating apps. Now let’s check the Mrs.” Chad entered her name and image into the app.

The wife crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot as they waited for the results.

Chad smirked, his eyes dancing with delight. “Bro. Is this your wife?” Chad showed his phone screen to the husband.

The nerdy husband winced as if he’d been punched in the gut. “That’s her. What is that?”

“That’s her Tinder profile.”

“That’s old,” the wife protested. “I’m not on there anymore.”

“This is up to date. Your account’s active,” Chad said. “You’re also on Hinge. That one’s active too.”

“Why are you on dating apps?” the husband whined. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing anything. This guy’s full of shit.”

“You should look it up for yourself,” Chad said.

“Shut the fuck up,” the wife snapped at Chad.

Chad showed his hands. “Whoa. She’s mad because she got caught, bro.”

“I said, shut the fuck up!”

“Such hostility.”

“Why would you do this to me?” the husband asked.

“I didn’t do anything,” the wife replied.

The husband stormed off camera, the wife chasing after him.

Chad faced the camera and said, “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. Accountability is like kryptonite to these hoes.”

Grace tapped Justin on the arm.

Justin stopped the video and removed the headphones.

“I found something pretty big,” Grace said.

“Yeah?”

Grace scooted her chair closer to Justin so they could share her laptop screen.

Justin inhaled a hint of lavender, his body buzzing.

“Look at this.” Grace pointed to a selfie of Kristin with the orangey sunset in the background.

“What about it?” Justin asked.

“Read the comments.”

Justin skimmed the Instagram comments.

**Eric the great9931:** Absolutely gorgeous

**The Silent Minority Report:** So freaking hot!!!!!!!

**TheUndertaker551:** I would smash

**FAFO33333:** Love the braces. Such a turn on.

**Reggie and the gang:** DAM GIRLLL

**DallasCowboys4Life:** Wish I was their

**CelestialCarrie30:** So beautiful!

**GlamourGoddess24:** I agree!

**BlueSkiesForever111:** The SUNSET is beautiful.

“I don’t get it,” Justin said. “You think one of these guys could’ve done something to her?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it,” Grace replied. “It’s the internet. This kind of male attention is common. This is why I don’t post on my IG anymore. What’s interesting to me is this post by Blue Skies Forever. It’s the only one that’s negative. They said that the *sunset* is beautiful—a subtle jab that Kristin *isn’t* beautiful.”

“Okay, I see that. Is that it?”

“There’s a lot more.” Grace opened another window, showing another picture from Kristin’s IG page. This one was a group picture showing Larissa, Kristin, and Carrie, posing in front of the fountain at the Lebanon Valley Mall.

“I saw them when they took this picture,” Justin said.

“Check out the comment by Blue Skies.”

**BlueSkiesForever111:** One thinks she's hot but looks like a literal child.

"Do you know who is Blue Skies?" Justin asked.

Grace smiled. "I might." She opened another window, showing the IG page for BlueSkiesForever111. The account only had one picture of a blue sky with scattered clouds, and they followed a few celebrities.

"Is Blue Skies a bot?" Justin asked.

"I don't think so. Look at this." Grace clicked on another window, showing a picture from GlamourGoddess24 AKA Larissa's IG page. Larissa and Carrie simpered for the camera in their bikinis, a public pool in the background. In the lower corner of the image, a young boy photobombed the picture with a cheesy grin. The caption read *This literal child asked me out!*

Justin turned to Grace. "Holy shit. Larissa is Blue Skies. They both wrote 'literal child'."

"I'm not certain. It could be a coincidence, but I think it's likely that Larissa is Blue Skies."

"Something else bothers me about Larissa. When I saw Carrie and Larissa in the mall with Kristin, they were vibrating, but *Larissa* was vibrating more than Carrie."

"We need to meet Larissa in person."

"Larry was impressed by her."

"Larry might've been blinded by her beauty."

Justin chuckled. "You might be right. We'll definitely see her tomorrow at her boyfriend's memorial."

"I'll be watching her like a hawk." Grace paused for a beat. "Did you find anything on the YouTube channel?"

"It's basically Chad and Troy dunking on women," Justin said.

"That's what I thought."

"The videos are misogynistic, but I don't see why Troy would have a grudge against Kristin. I could see if they were together, and she cheated or had a promiscuous past—" Justin inhaled sharply.

"What is it?" Grace asked.

"Kristin has this serious love letter from a guy who won't sign his name, and her friends say she has an older guy, but they don't know anything about him, not even a name. Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't girls talk

about their boyfriends with their best friends? Wouldn't Kristin, being younger than Larissa and Carrie, wanna brag about her older boyfriend?"

"Maybe the boyfriend's a *lot* older. Could be a teacher for all we know."

"Or her friend's boyfriend," Justin said.

Grace's eyes widened. "I didn't think of that. It could be Troy or even Chad. He died the same day she went missing."

"*Exactly.* Doesn't that seem like too much of a coincidence? It has to mean *something*."

"Holy crap. We're good." Grace gave Justin an impromptu hug.

When they separated, Justin's face felt hot. An awkward silence passed between them.

Grace checked the time on her laptop. "Oh my God, it's almost midnight."

"Oh, wow. I didn't know it was so late. I should go."

"You can stay here. You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the couch," Grace replied.

"That's really nice of you, but I have Edwin and Chico in my apartment. I trust the dog more than Edwin, so I should get home."

Grace escorted Justin to her front door.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Justin said. "I'll pick you up around 7:50." He leaned toward her, not sure if he would hug or kiss her or both, but she leaned back and held out her hand. Justin straightened, blushed fire-engine red, pumped her hand, then hurried out the front door.

## FIFTY-EIGHT

# THE NEW EDWIN

THE NEXT MORNING, JUSTIN STAGGERED INTO THE KITCHEN, following the smell of cooking eggs and toast. Edwin stood at the stove, pushing scrambled eggs around the pan with a spatula. Chico sat nearby, a glob of slobber dangling from his mouth.

Edwin turned from the stove. “You want some breakfast?”

Justin tilted his head, wondering what happened to the real Edwin. “Yeah... thanks.”

“What happened to you last night?” Edwin asked, grinning. “You get some?”

Justin reddened, thinking of Grace. “No. Did you hear that Amber Alert yesterday?”

“On what? You don’t even have a fuckin’ TV. I was goin’ crazy yesterday. All I did was sleep, work out, and walk Chico.” Edwin pointed the spatula at the kitchen table. “Sit. Food’s almost ready.”

Justin sat at the kitchen table. “I recognized the girl on the Amber Alert.”

Edwin took the eggs off the electric burner. “Shit. What did you do?”

Justin explained everything that had happened pertaining to Kristin’s disappearance while Edwin finished preparing breakfast.

“Damn. That’s crazy,” Edwin said, setting two plates on the table.

“Shit. I need to text my boss. Let him know I won’t be able to work the next few days. I’m worried he’s gonna fire me.” Justin tapped out a text.

Edwin gave Chico the rest of the eggs from the pan, then joined Justin at the kitchen table.

“What are you doing today?” Justin dug into his eggs.

“I gotta figure out my next move. I can’t stick around here all day. It’s drivin’ me crazy. I need a phone and a job.” Edwin forked eggs onto his toast.

“I have a friend who used to sell phones. I bet he could sell us a cheap used one.”

“That sounds good. You think you could get me a job at Subway?” Edwin took a bite of his egg sandwich.

“You wanna work at Subway?” Justin took a bite of his toast.

Edwin chewed and swallowed. “No, but I need work experience. What am I supposed to put on a job application? That I’m a professional drug addict?”

“I’ll talk to my boss.”

“All right. Bet. I gotta NA meeting tonight at eight. I’ll need a ride.”

“Okay. I can do that.” Justin sent a text to his friend Rakesh about a possible used phone to buy.

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As promised, Justin picked up Grace on the way to Larry’s. The heavyset man had doughnuts for them and envelopes with the cash for the day. They settled around the kitchen table.

Larry had dark circles around his eyes and his salt-and-pepper hair was disheveled. Larry told them that he had searched Kristin’s bathroom and bedroom again, but he hadn’t found anything useful.

Grace and Justin told Larry about the fake account and the trolling that they thought was likely Larissa, as well as the theory about the older boyfriend being Troy, or more likely Chad, noting that he had died in a car accident the same day Kristin disappeared.

Larry stroked his goatee. “That’s... interestin’, but I can’t imagine Larissa lyin’. She was real upset about Kristin.”

“Maybe she’s a good actress,” Grace replied.

“Or maybe she’s just upset about her boyfriend,” Justin replied. “We should talk to her and Troy again. We can drop by their houses before we

go to the memorial.”

“That’s a good idea,” Larry said.

Grace addressed Larry. “I think it’ll be better if Justin and I interview them alone, since you just talked to them.”

“That’s fine, but I need to do *somethin’*. I can’t just sit here.”

“It would be helpful to look up everything you can on Chad Stevens and his death. See if there are any connections to Kristin.”

“I’m on it,” Larry said, standing from the kitchen table.

Justin’s phone chimed. “Shit. It’s my boss.”

Harvey was upset about Justin calling off again, leaving him shorthanded. “Do you know how hard it is to find decent workers?”

“I know. I’m really sorry,” Justin replied. “I know someone who’s looking for a job. I could ask him.”

“Is he a good worker?”

“He’s a *great* worker.”

“If he’s interested, have him meet me at Subway tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.”

## FIFTY-NINE

# TROY WILLIAMSON

LARISSA LIVED IN VALLEY VIEW ESTATES, NOT FAR FROM CARRIE. Larissa's family home was the largest and most extravagant McMansion in the neighborhood. The red brick colonial boasted two chimneys, a four-car garage, a pool, a wraparound deck, and a manicured lawn.

Justin and Grace drove on the circular driveway, parking near the front walkway. They went to the front door and pressed the doorbell, the chime audible outside. They waited for a minute and pressed the doorbell again, but nobody appeared, so they went to Troy's house.

The Williamsons lived five minutes from Valley View Estates. The double-wide trailer home had seen better days. The vinyl siding was tinged gray with dirt and mold. An ancient oak shaded the home, only allowing a thin and patchy lawn. A little pink bicycle, a kickball, and a naked doll littered the lawn. A dented and rusty Chevy Silverado pickup truck was parked in the driveway.

Justin and Grace stepped to the front door and knocked. A blonde girl with a fruit punch mustache answered the door, a doll cradled in her arm. Gunfire and the sounds of war came from the house. The little girl gaped at them.

“Is Troy here?” Grace asked.

She pivoted from Grace and squealed, “Troy! Somebody’s here!” The little girl bolted inside, leaving the door open in her wake.

The sounds of war halted and Troy Williamson appeared in the open doorway. “Yeah?” Acne marred his baby face. He was tall and athletically built, with dirty blond hair.

Grace explained that they were cousins of Kristin and were trying to find her. “What kind of relationship did you have with Kristin?”

Troy cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“Were you friends?”

Troy shrugged. “Not really, bro. I mean I knew her, but we didn’t really hang out like that.”

“When was the last time you saw Kristin?”

Troy looked over Grace’s shoulder as he said, “I don’t really remember.”

“Were you ever romantically involved with Kristin?” Grace asked.

Troy dipped his head for a split second. “No. We were just friends.”

Troy stepped onto the front stoop, shutting the door behind him.

Justin and Grace backpedaled to accommodate the young man.

“Did Kristin have a boyfriend?” Grace asked.

“I don’t think so,” Troy replied.

“Do you know of anyone who might want to hurt Kristin?”

Troy shook his head. “No. Everyone liked her. She was a nice girl.”

“Was?”

Troy blanched. “Is a nice girl. Sorry, bro. I’m not thinking straight with Chad... and everything.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Grace said.

“Thanks.”

“What’s gonna happen to your YouTube channel?” Justin asked.

Troy turned his attention to Justin. “You know our YouTube channel?”

Justin nodded. “Yeah. It’s pretty big. Don’t you have like 170,000 subs?”

“Yeah.” Troy tried to contain his smile. “I don’t know yet, bro. I guess I’ll have to take Chad’s place, do the street interviews, and maybe find someone to film.” Troy glanced over his shoulder, to the double-wide trailer home. “Is that it, bro? I got some stuff to do before Chad’s funeral thing.”

“Just a few more questions. Was Larissa mad at Kristin?” Justin asked, purposely fishing.

“I don’t know about that, bro.”

“I heard she was trolling Kristin on IG, posting negative things about her with a fake account.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Troy replied.

“Where do you think Kristin might be?”

“I really don’t know, bro. Wish I did.”

“What do you think happened to her?”

“I don’t know.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “You don’t have any opinion?”

“Not really, bro.”

“If you had to guess, what do you think happened? Kidnapped? Killed? Did she run away?”

“Have you talked to her father?”

“We have. He’s our uncle.”

“Right. Well, uh... I’m not trying to be a dick, bro, but Kristin was always complaining about him. I wouldn’t be surprised if she ran away.”

“What was she complaining about exactly?”

“He was too strict, always snooping in her room.”

## SIXTY CENTER STAGE

THE WEST LEBANON HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM WAS MOSTLY FILLED with high school students and parents. Chief Harold Ebersole, Detective Brewer, and an entourage of police officers stood in the back, overseeing the memorial. A lone podium stood center stage. A projection screen hung from the rafters.

Justin and Grace searched for a seat on the right-hand side of the auditorium while Larry went left, so together they had a good view of the audience. Justin and Grace settled into their seats. They scanned the attendees, spotting Carrie Wagner sitting alone, her eyes downcast.

“Where’s Troy?” Justin asked, surveying the audience.

“There he is,” Grace said. “On your left.”

Justin spotted the young man. He sat among several boys, his expression somber.

“Those two don’t look like a couple anymore,” Grace said.

“They don’t,” Justin replied. “Troy’s best friend died, and Carrie’s friend is missing. You’d think the shared tragedy would bring them together.”

“Unless they’re to blame for the tragedies somehow.”

“We should talk to them again.”

The lights dimmed and the high school principal asked everyone to take their seats. They watched a slide show—complete with a melancholy instrumental—commemorating Chad’s life. Images showed Chad as a

former all-section quarterback and team leader. Other pictures showed Chad joking with friends—most of them featuring his best buddy, Troy. Several more showed Chad with his BMW M3, or interviewing someone for his YouTube channel. Older pictures showed Chad with his proud parents. He was a clone of his square-jawed muscular father, and his mother fit the stereotype of the rich trophy wife. More than anything, though, images of Chad with his girlfriend, Larissa, dominated the slide show.

Justin figured that Larissa was in about half of the featured images. He leaned over and whispered to Grace, “I bet Larissa planned the pictures.”

Grace nodded. “I thought that too.”

After the slide show, several people spoke about Chad from the podium onstage. His football coach talked about Chad being a great player, teammate, leader, and role model.

Troy read from a paper, never looking at the audience. He talked about his best friend—the fun they had together, and how much he would miss his brother from another mother.

Larissa was perfectly put together, her blue eyes clear, her hair and makeup done, wearing a stylish black dress. “I stand here with a broken heart. Chad wasn’t just my boyfriend; he was my best friend, my partner in crime, and the love of my life.” She scanned the paper on the podium, then raised her gaze to the audience.

Justin thought, *She practiced.*

“Chad looked at me like I was the only person in the world. He made me feel safe and secure and loved. He was a part of me and I was a part of him. How do I go on when a literal part of my soul dies? I still feel him with me—” Her voice caught. Larissa bowed her head and sniffled. Her body shuddered.

High school girls in the audience cried along with their grieving classmate. Larissa grabbed her typewritten paper and rushed off stage. A few girls left the auditorium, no doubt to offer their condolences. Oddly, Carrie Wagner wasn’t among those girls.

Grace nudged Justin and whispered, “Let’s go find her.”

They slipped out of the auditorium as Chad’s mother took the podium. They followed the girls to the bathroom entrance. Grace entered the bathroom, while Justin waited in the wide hallway among the trophy cases.

Grace returned shortly thereafter, a frown on her face. “She’s in the bathroom with three of her friends consoling her. It doesn’t look like she

was crying. Her eyes are clear.”

“You think she was faking?”

“Maybe. I’d like to isolate her from her friends when she comes out of the bathroom.”

Larissa left the bathroom, her friends orbiting her like she was the sun.

Grace and Justin approached the group.

“Larissa?” Grace said. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. Do I know you?” Larissa asked.

Grace introduced them as Kristin’s cousins. “Could we talk to you in private for a few minutes?”

Larissa told her friends that she’d catch up with them. They stood by the trophy cases in the empty hallway. The statuesque blonde towered over Justin and Grace in her heels.

“Do you have any idea what might’ve happened to Kristin?” Grace asked.

“I think she ran away with some older guy that she was seeing,” Larissa replied.

“What makes you say that?”

“She told me she was running away. She didn’t get along with her dad. He was too strict, and I think she wanted her freedom.”

“Did she tell you this in person?”

“Over text. I have the texts.” Larissa reached into her purse and retrieved her phone. “I already showed this to the police.” She tapped on her phone, then showed Grace and Justin a text string between her and Kristin from the day she disappeared.

**Kristin:** I can’t take my dad anymore. I’m running away.

**Larissa:** Where are you going? You can’t go alone.

**Kristin:** I’m not going alone. I have somebody who really loves me.

**Larissa:** Where are you going?

Detective Brewer walked by them, rubbernecking in their direction as he entered the bathroom.

“This was definitely from Kristin’s phone?” Justin asked.

“Yes. The police checked it out.” Larissa slipped her phone back into her purse.

“Do you have any idea where Kristin was going?” Grace asked.

Larissa shook her head. "No. I wish I did. I haven't seen her or heard from her since these texts."

"Do you have any idea who this older guy might be?" Justin asked.

"I have no idea, but I don't think he's the problem," Larissa replied.

"Who's the problem?"

Larissa looked around, making sure they were alone. "Kristin's dad. He's... *creepy*."

"How so?" Grace asked.

"He showed up at my house yesterday out of nowhere. I never even met him before. He was asking me all these questions about Kristin, but he didn't seem like a dad that's looking for his daughter."

"What did he seem like?"

Larissa pursed her lips. "He was staring at me like he wanted me, like... *sexually*."

"Did he touch you or say anything inappropriate?"

"No, it's just a feeling I have." Larissa checked the hall. "I should really get back."

"Thank you for your help," Grace replied.

"Thanks," Justin added.

When they were alone in the hallway, Grace asked, "Do you think she ran away?"

"I don't know, but I think we need to know more about Larry," Justin replied.

## SIXTY-ONE

# OBSTRUCTION

THE MEMORIAL CROWD FILED OUT OF THE AUDITORIUM AND HEADED for the parking lot. Some mourners, mostly high school girls, still whimpered and sobbed, their friends surrounding them, comforting them. Others, mostly high school boys, joked and laughed with no regard for the occasion. The adults were quieter, somber without weeping.

Justin, Grace, and Larry stood in the parking lot near their vehicles, watching the attendees. When the crowd dissipated, Justin and Grace told Larry about their conversation with Larissa, and the text messages from Kristin stating that she was running away because of him.

“Did you know about the texts?” Grace asked.

Larry exhaled and rubbed his temples. “Yeah, I knew. The cops told me, but I’m tellin’ you, she wouldn’t run away. I know my daughter. I don’t believe it.”

“Are you strict with your daughter?”

“Maybe I am strict. I don’t let Kristin do whatever the hell she wants like some of these other parents, lettin’ their kids stay out all night doin’ God knows what.” Larry faced Grace and Justin. “Kristin’s mom left us two years ago, was seein’ some asshole from Canada behind my back. Kristin hasn’t seen her since. Barely even calls. Since then, I’ve had to watch out for my daughter by myself. I know I don’t always get it right, but at least I’m tryin’.”

“If we find the secret boyfriend, I think we’ll find your daughter,” Grace said.

“We’re out of leads,” Larry replied.

“Not necessarily. It looks like Troy and Carrie might’ve broken up,” Justin said. “Grace and I could talk to them again. It seems like odd timing for a breakup. Maybe Troy is the mystery boyfriend.”

“Maybe,” Larry replied, noncommittal.

“We asked Troy directly if he was romantically involved with Kristin,” Grace said. “He denied it, but I didn’t totally believe him.”

“Neither did I,” Justin added.

“I don’t know, but he ain’t talkin’,” Larry said.

Detective Brewer spotted them and made a beeline in their direction.

“Incoming,” Grace said.

The detective approached them red-faced, his jaw set tight. He crowded Justin and Grace. “What the hell are you two doing?”

Grace put her hands on her hips. “Standing here. Is that against the law?”

Detective Brewer glared at Grace. “Don’t get smart with me.” He pointed at Justin and Grace. “I’ve been hearing about you two running around town, interfering with my investigation.”

“They’re not interferin’,” Larry said. “They’re helpin’ me. They ain’t broken any laws.”

The detective turned his ire on Larry. “I’ll be the judge of that. You wanna find your daughter?”

“Yeah. Do you?”

“Stay the hell out of my investigation. If I hear about any of you interfering again, I’ll arrest you for obstruction.”

Larry held out his hands. “What investigation? I don’t see you guys doin’ shit for my daughter.”

Detective Brewer crowded Larry, the men chest to chest. “I can’t share everything we’re doing because *you* haven’t been cleared yet. Stay the fuck outta my case.” Brewer marched to his unmarked police car.

Larry hung his head for a moment. When he lifted his chin, he said, “I appreciate what you’ve done, but it’s over. I’ll figure it out on my own.”

“We can be more discreet, if you’re worried about Brewer,” Grace said.

Larry shook his head. “I’ll call if I need you.”

## SIXTY-TWO

# INDECENT ASSAULT

JUSTIN DROVE GRACE HOME, THE KIA PUTTERING ALONG A COUNTRY road, a cornfield on one side, a soybean field on the other.

“Brewer thinks Larry might be involved,” Grace said.

“Seems like it. You think Larry had something to do with it?” Justin asked.

“My gut says no, but what do I know? The cops are looking at him for a reason. I think we should do a background check on him. Maybe he’s been playing us from the beginning.”

Justin glanced from the road to Grace and back. “If he did something to Kristin, why would he even hire us?”

“I doubt he killed her, but maybe he did something to her, and she ran away. Maybe he wants to find her before the police do.”

“Why would he wanna do that?”

“Maybe to cover up what he did to her.”

A shiver snaked down Justin’s spine.

They arrived at Grace’s townhouse. Her roommate, Penny, wasn’t home, so they settled at the dining room table.

Grace opened her laptop and ran a background check on Larry Bennett. With his name and address, it was easy for PeopleFinder.com to locate him.

“Look at this,” she said.

Justin sat close to Grace, sharing her screen.

She clicked on his criminal record. “He was convicted of indecent assault. It’s a misdemeanor of the second degree.”

Justin pointed to the screen. “It says that was in 1983. How old is Larry? I thought he was in his fifties.”

Grace clicked back to Larry’s data. “Says here he’s sixty. Born in 1964.”

“He was nineteen in 1983.”

“Old enough to know better.”

“What does indecent assault actually mean?”

“Not sure. Let’s find out.” Grace did a Google search, then read the top result. “Indecent assault is sexual contact without consent.”

“That’s doesn’t sound good,” Justin replied.

“Hold on. There’s more to it.” Grace scrolled down to the Criminal Code of Pennsylvania and clicked. “Here we go. This is from the Pennsylvania Statute, Section 3126. Indecent assault is a second-degree misdemeanor. It says here that it would be number one or eight under subsection A.” Grace scanned the screen. “Number one would be indecent contact and the person does so without the complainant’s consent. Number eight would be indecent contact and the complainant is less than sixteen years of age and the person is four or more years older than the complainant.”

“So, Larry might’ve sexually assaulted a minor?”

“Maybe. It says here that indecent assault is essentially sexual touching. It’s not rape, but I guess it could be groping someone.”

Justin let out a heavy breath. “This isn’t good. If you add what Larissa said about him, it’s even worse. Maybe Larry’s some kind of predator?”

“Maybe, but if he’s a predator, it seems odd that he hasn’t been convicted of anything since 1983. He doesn’t strike me as a criminal mastermind.”

“Should we contact Detective Brewer?”

“I’m sure he already knows,” Grace replied. “It’s probably part of the reason Larry’s a suspect. I think we should confront Larry directly, see what he says.”

## SIXTY-THREE

# JACK DANIELS

GRACE KNOCKED ON LARRY'S FRONT DOOR. SCATTERED CLOUDS moved overhead, obscuring the afternoon sun. Nobody answered, so she banged on the door.

Larry finally answered the door, a bottle of Jack Daniels in hand. "What are you two doin' here?"

Justin wondered if he was drinking because he felt guilty.

"Can we talk?" Grace asked.

"Ain't nothin' left to say. Ain't nothin' left to do neither." Larry staggered back into the house, leaving the door open.

Justin and Grace followed him into the living room, where Larry slouched on the couch.

He took a swig of whiskey. "She's gone, and she ain't never comin' back."

Justin and Grace gave each other a that-was-incriminating look.

"How do you know that?" Grace asked.

"It's been over forty-eight hours and we got nothin'. The police got nothin'. Nobody knows shit. I know how this story ends."

"Did you and Kristin have a fight before she disappeared?" Justin asked.

Larry wagged his head. His voice trembled as he said, "I did worse."

"What happened?" Grace asked. "What did you do?"

Larry shook his head, tears filling his dark eyes.

“Where’s Kristin?” Justin asked.

“It’s my fault.” A tear slipped down his cheek. “I’ve been... workin’ and workin’, tryin’ to save for Kristin’s college, but I was gone too much. And when I was here, I was so damn tired...” More tears came. “Nobody was watchin’ out for my little girl.” He put his head in his hands and sobbed.

Justin and Grace watched the old man cry until he was out of tears. Then, Grace retrieved a piece of paper from her back pocket, unfolded it, and set it on the coffee table.

Larry sniffled, picked up the paper, and said, “What’s this?”

“Read it,” Grace replied.

“I need my readin’ glasses.”

“It says you were arrested for indecent assault in 1983.”

Larry crumpled the paper and dropped it on the coffee table. “That’s none of your fuckin’ business.”

“The police think Kristin ran away from *you*. Did you do something to her?”

Larry stood, his eyes red, and his fists clenched. “I didn’t do nothin’.”

“What happened in 1983? Did you sexually assault a child?” Grace asked, her hands folded over her chest.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?”

Larry wobbled and slumped on the couch again.

“What was it like, Larry?” Grace asked again.

“She was my first girlfriend. I wasn’t exactly a ladies’ man in high school. I never had a girl even look my way. When I graduated, I went to work at the chicken plant. I fuckin’ hated that job, and so did everyone else. I used to take my break outside, so I could dip. My break was at 3:30 every day, which was about the time Allie would walk over to the chicken plant from the high school. She was my boss’s daughter. It wasn’t nothin’ at first. We’d talk for a few minutes, and that was it. But over time, we talked more and more, and before I knew it, we were meetin’ after my shift in secret. She told me she was sixteen, which was legal. I know because I checked before I did anything with the girl. Hell, I was only nineteen. She had more experience with love than I did.”

“If you thought she was legal, why were you sneaking around?” Justin asked.

“Because there was no way her rich daddy would want her datin’ a line worker.”

“How did you get caught?” Grace asked.

Larry took another swig of whiskey. “Her mom came home early, caught us in bed together. Her mom called her husband and the police. Her dad tried to punch me, but he wasn’t much of a fighter. The police told me she was only fifteen. I tried to tell the cop that Allie told me she was sixteen, but she wouldn’t back me up. I think she was gettin’ pressure from her parents. I don’t know.” Larry swallowed hard. “I plea bargained and got the sentence reduced from a possible five years to six months.” Larry sat up straighter. “I did my time and tried to move on with my life, but I didn’t trust females for a long time. That’s why I didn’t get married until I was forty-three. That turned out to be a fuckin’ mistake too. The only good thing I had in this life was Kristin. Now she’s gone.” He pointed toward the front door. “Get outta my house.”

Justin and Grace glanced at each other.

“Go on, *get*.”

As they left the house, they heard glass shattering, likely Larry throwing his whiskey bottle against the wall.

## SIXTY-FOUR

## SPOOFED

ON THE DRIVE BACK TO GRACE'S TOWNHOUSE, SHE SAID, "THAT WAS messed up."

"I know," Justin replied.

"You think he was telling the truth?"

Justin stopped his Kia at a stop sign. "He wasn't vibrating."

"I still think Troy and Carrie potentially breaking up is really odd timing."

Justin turned onto the country road, leaving Larry's working-class neighborhood. "I agree. I also think Larissa looked too put-together at the memorial."

"I'm not a fan of her fake crying either."

"We're not supposed to be doing this anymore."

"I know, but I can't turn it off," Grace said. "I have to know what happened to her. I wish we could tap their phones."

"I'm not saying we should do it," Justin replied, "but I know someone who might be able to do it."

Grace grinned. "Really?"

---

Justin called Rakesh, finding out that he was on his way home from the chicken plant. Justin made a U-turn and headed for Rakesh's house. He

lived in a crowded one-story rancher with his parents and younger siblings, one of whom was married with two children.

Justin parked along the curb, waiting for Rakesh to make it home. When he did, he got out of his car with slow and deliberate movements.

“You okay, bro?” Justin asked, patting him on the back.

“I’m fine. Just tired,” Rakesh replied. “It’s good to see you. I’d give you a hug, but I smell like chicken guts.”

Justin scrunched his face and stepped back from his friend.

“Why did the chicken cross the road wearing perfume?”

Justin groaned. “This joke is gonna be *dumb*.”

“Don’t be a hater when you haven’t even heard the punchline.”

“Why *did* the chicken cross the road wearing perfume?” Grace asked.

“Because it didn’t want to ruffle any feathers with its fowl odor.”

Rakesh guffawed.

Grace giggled.

Justin was stone-faced.

“You know fowl, like f-o-w-l,” Rakesh said to Justin.

“I get it,” Justin replied. “It’s not funny.”

“It’s kind of funny,” Grace said.

Rakesh nodded to Grace. “I like her.”

Justin gestured to his partner in crime. “You remember Grace?”

“Of course. It’s good to see you again.” Rakesh wagged his finger at them, eyebrows raised. “Are you two together now?”

“We’re friends,” Grace said quickly.

“Okay... friends. What can I do for you two?”

“We need some technical help,” Justin replied.

Rakesh led them to the basement door at the rear of the house, bypassing the chaos, taking them directly to his bedroom and office. Rakesh’s office resembled an electronics store, with various gadgets sitting on a large table. Rakesh’s desktop computer featured multiple screens.

“I saw your text about a phone,” Rakesh said, setting his keys on his desktop.

“Yeah. Could I buy a pre-paid phone from you?” Justin asked.

Rakesh went to the table, picked out a phone, and handed it to Justin. “Take this one.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing. It’s yours.”

Justin frowned. “I can’t just take it.” Justin grabbed his wallet.

Rakesh frowned back. “Put that away. Don’t insult me.”

“Thanks, bro.” Justin put his wallet back in his pocket.

“You’re welcome. Is that all you needed?”

“We’re working on a case.”

“A case? For what?”

Justin explained Kristin’s disappearance and working for Larry.

“Wow, you guys are in deep,” Rakesh said. “Not sure how I can help you.”

“We’d like to hack some cell phones to figure out what Troy, Carrie, and Larissa are saying. Do you know how to do that?” Justin asked.

“There are lots of ways this can be done—malware, smishing, pretexting, hacking their Bluetooth or their Wi-Fi. The easiest way is to send them spying software that they download themselves.”

“Could you do that?” Grace asked.

“I could, but it’s illegal. Whatever we found could never be used in court, and it could mess up the police investigation.”

“We’re not trying to arrest someone. We’re trying to find Kristin,” Grace replied.

“If we got in trouble, we’d leave your name out of it. It won’t come back on you,” Justin said.

“I would hope so,” Rakesh replied.

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. Kristin’s life is at stake.”

Rakesh sucked air through his teeth. “I don’t know.”

“What we’re doing might be against the law, but it’s the right thing to do,” Grace said.

“Please, Rakesh,” Justin said, his hands clasped together as if in prayer.

“You guys have to promise to keep my name out of this,” Rakesh said.

“I promise,” Justin said.

Grace put her hand over her heart. “I promise too.”

Rakesh sighed. “Do you have their cell phone numbers?”

“Not on me,” Justin said. “We did a background check on them, but we were searching for their addresses. I’m sure their numbers are probably on there.”

“They probably are, but their numbers are probably listed under their parents’ name.” Rakesh started his computer, sat at his desk, and navigated to FamilyTreeNow.com.

Justin and Grace flanked him, watching the screen.

“Is that a genealogy site?” Grace asked.

“Yes. It’s also a good source for phone numbers,” Rakesh replied. “Give me one of the names.”

“Larissa Miles,” Justin said.

Rakesh typed it in. “I’m assuming she lives in West Lebanon.”

“Yeah, she does.”

Rakesh found Larissa, but she didn’t have a cell phone listed because the phone was likely in her parents’ name. Rakesh cross-referenced her parents, who were listed as relations. Under both her parents he found many phone numbers listed by start of service date. Larissa’s father was listed at a different address with a different wife, so they figured her cell phone came from her mother.

Rakesh tapped on his cell phone, spoofing his phone number so he could call and remain anonymous. “We need to get Larissa to at least confirm her phone number. I can’t make the call. She’d probably hang up on me immediately. Women are less threatening.” He held out his phone to Grace.

“But she’s heard my voice,” she replied.

Rakesh tapped on his phone, applying a voice filter. “I can make the pitch of your voice higher or lower with this app. Which would you prefer?”

“Lower. I already sound like a little girl.”

Rakesh handed over his phone. “You’re all set.”

Grace dialed the most recent phone number listed for Larissa’s mother, but it went to voicemail after several rings. “*You’ve reached Olivia Appleton. Please leave your—*”

Grace disconnected the call. “That was her mother’s phone.” She tried several more numbers listed to Olivia Appleton, but they were all disconnected numbers.

“Maybe her dad pays for her phone?” Justin asked.

Grace made another call using one of the phone numbers listed under Larissa’s father, Michael Miles. Her call went directly to voicemail, which indicated she had reached Larissa’s phone. Grace disconnected the call and smiled. “Jackpot.”

They found Carrie’s phone number the same way, although Carrie actually answered her phone, and Grace asked, “Is this Carrie Wagner?”

“Yes,” Carrie replied.

Then Grace disconnected the call.

Troy’s phone number was harder to find, as it wasn’t listed on the website, but they did find his number through a site called Who.Is. At this site, Rakesh typed in the domain address of Troy’s website BrosBefore304s.com. Here they found out that Troy was the site owner. His home address and cell phone number were also listed.

“Now what do we do?” Justin asked.

“Well, I can send them spyware from a spoofed phone number,” Rakesh said, “but you two need to figure out what number to spoof and what to write to get them to download the spyware.”

“We could send them a message from their parent’s phone number telling them to download the security software,” Justin said. “We could tell them that it’s important because they’re getting a discount from their cell phone provider.”

“Sounds suspicious,” Grace replied.

“You got something better?”

“Tell them that they have to download the security software or their bank can’t send them any more money through their phone. That would probably get them to click.”

Justin chuckled. “Good thinking.”

They crafted the text messages pretending to be a parent of their targets, spoofed the parent’s cell phone number, and sent the attached spyware labeled *Security Safe*.

## SIXTY-FIVE

# TWO DAYS

JUSTIN DROPPED OFF GRACE AT HER TOWNHOUSE, THEN DROVE TO THE West Lebanon Subway. He found Harvey working alone behind the counter, two couples eating in booths. His stomach tightened at the sight of his boss doing his job. He had hoped to see one of his coworkers behind the counter.

“Hey, Harvey,” Justin said, forcing a smile.

Harvey lifted one eyebrow. “I have a feeling you have more bad news for me.”

Justin swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Harvey. I need next week off too.”

“Are you sure you want this job? If you don’t, it’s okay.”

“No. I need this job. It’s just I have a short-term job that I have to finish. It’s really important.”

“What is this job?”

Justin looked around, making sure nobody else was listening. “I’m trying to find Kristin Bennett. I met her father the other day, and I was helping him.”

“I hope you’re telling me the truth, because using a girl’s disappearance to get out of work would be a pretty terrible thing to do.”

Justin put his hand over his heart. “I swear it’s true. I wouldn’t lie about something like that.”

Harvey stared at Justin for a moment, then said, “Okay. I trust you.”

“My friend Edwin will be here tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.”

“Good. Hopefully, he’s reliable.”

That barb stung. “I’m sorry, Harvey.”

His boss nodded.

Justin ordered some dinner for himself and Edwin. He offered to make the food, but Harvey refused. And then, to make Justin feel even worse, Harvey gave him the food for free.

Justin made it home around seven, giving him plenty of time to eat, and for Edwin to make his NA meeting at eight. Chico trotted to him, tail wagging. Justin petted Chico while the dog sniffed at the Subway bag. A hint of lemon hung in the air. The house was spotless, the floors shiny, and the carpet vacuumed. Edwin rose from the living room carpet where he’d been doing pushups.

Justin went to Edwin and said, “I got you a meatball sub like last time.”

“Thanks,” Edwin replied, taking the Subway bag to the kitchen table.

“Did you clean?”

Edwin nodded. “I had nothin’ else to do.”

“Thanks.” Justin scanned the carpet. “It looks like you vacuumed the carpet, but I don’t have a vacuum.”

“I borrowed a vacuum from our downstairs neighbor. A nice old lady—Edna. You know her?”

“No.”

Justin followed Edwin to the kitchen, with Chico underfoot. He retrieved the prepaid cell phone from his pocket and handed it to Edwin.

“What’s this?” Edwin asked.

“Prepaid cell phone. My friend Rakesh gave it to me.”

“Thanks, bro. Appreciate it.”

“I almost forgot. I also got you an interview at Subway tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. He’s pretty desperate for help.”

Edwin suppressed his grin. “Damn. You did all this for me?”

“It’s not a big deal.”

Edwin rapped him on the back. “It is. Thanks, bro.”

Justin beamed. “You’re welcome.”

They sat at the kitchen table eating their subs, and talking about Kristin Bennett’s disappearance. Chico gaped at them, slobber dripping from his mouth. Justin fed the dog some turkey from the table. Edwin asked a ton of questions about the case.

“Shit. That’s crazy,” Edwin said. “You need any help, let me know.”

“I will.” Justin checked the time on his phone. “Your meeting is at eight, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s 7:38.” Justin fished his keys from his pocket and handed them to Edwin. “You can take my car.”

Edwin took the keys and frowned. “You don’t trust me?”

“I wouldn’t give you my car keys if I didn’t trust you.”

Edwin held up the Apple AirTag keychain. “You think I don’t know what this is?”

“It’s not to track *you*. It’s so I don’t lose my keys.” Justin hesitated for a second. “If I’m being honest, I am a little worried you might steal my car, but that’s not why I have the AirTag. It’s attached to a carabiner clip. You could easily take it off the keychain.”

“That’s fair. Don’t worry, I won’t steal your car. I’ll be back in a couple hours.” Edwin tossed his trash from dinner and left the apartment.

Justin cleaned up the rest of dinner, then called Rakesh to ask if anyone had downloaded the spyware yet.

“No. Nothing yet,” Rakesh replied. “I’ll let you know as soon as someone does.”

“Thanks, Rakesh,” Justin replied.

He went to his empty room and lay on the carpet. Edwin had vacuumed his room too. His clothes were folded in neat piles along the wall. Chico curled up next to him, and they both fell asleep.

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Banging jolted him from his slumber. He figured it was Edwin, but when he opened his apartment door, Kyle stood there vibrating.

“What do you want?” Justin asked, rubbing his eyes.

“You find a place to live yet?” Kyle asked, his fists balled.

Chico barked and galloped toward the door.

Justin stepped into the hall, shutting the door behind him to keep Chico inside. “I haven’t had time to do anything. I’ve been busy.”

Kyle grabbed him by the neck with the speed of a viper.

Justin gasped for air.

“You got two days.” Kyle shoved him backwards, slamming the back of Justin’s head into the apartment door.

Justin wheezed. “Why... are you... doing this?”

Kyle shoved him again. “Two days.”

## SIXTY-SIX

# LINE IN THE SAND

JUSTIN STIRRED, HIS LEFT HIP ACHING FROM SLEEPING ON THAT SIDE. He rolled to his back to release the pressure, wrapped in his comforter like a burrito. Morning sunlight filtered through the blinds in strips. He groped for his phone on the floor next him, unplugged it from the charger, and checked his texts. Nothing new.

He sent a text to Rakesh.

**Justin:** Anybody download the spyware?

Rakesh responded almost instantly.

**Rakesh:** Not yet

**Justin:** Is there anything else we can do?

**Rakesh:** If you can get me close to their phone, I might be able to hack their Wi-Fi, but this is technically illegal.

**Justin:** Are you free now?

**Rakesh:** I will be in about two hours.

**Justin:** I'll pick you up then. We can go to their houses.

**Rakesh:** I'm not stepping foot on their property.

**Justin:** We'll figure it out.

**Rakesh:** If I do this, I was NEVER there.

**Justin:** I know

“Shit,” Justin said aloud, just realizing that Edwin had an interview at 10:00 a.m. He called Grace and explained the situation. She was off that Sunday, on board for the mission, and agreed to pick up Justin from his apartment building. She did want to drop by Larry’s house to secure his blessing to work on the case, hopeful that he’d changed his mind after their scolding by Detective Brewer.

Justin brushed his teeth, dressed, and went to the kitchen. Edwin stood at the stove cooking eggs. He wore slacks and a button-down shirt from the Goodwill clothes Justin had purchased, along with his sneakers. Chico wagged his tail at Justin.

“You hungry?” Edwin asked, removing the eggs from the burner. “It’s almost ready.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Justin replied, sitting at the small kitchen table. Two glasses of orange juice were already on the table. “You ready for the interview?”

Edwin glanced over his shoulder to Justin. “It’s Subway. I think I can handle it.”

“How was NA last night—sorry, I forgot, I know it’s anonymous.”

The toast popped.

Edwin grabbed two plates from the cupboard. “I can talk about it. I just can’t use names.”

“Do you think it’s helping?” Justin asked.

Edwin buttered the toast. “I think so. My sponsor’s an old Iraq war vet. The first Iraq war. He was on the streets for ten years before he got clean. He’s a counselor at the Lebanon VA now.” Edwin split the eggs, saving some for Chico.

“What does a sponsor do?”

Edwin brought the plates to the kitchen table, setting one before Justin. “They help people who are new to recovery. He’s someone I can call anytime I’m strugglin’.”

“We all need someone like that.” Justin sipped his orange juice.

“Yeah.” Edwin fed Chico some eggs, then joined Justin at the breakfast table. Edwin made an egg sandwich and took a big bite. He washed it down with OJ. As he set down his glass, he noticed Justin’s neck. Edwin leaned forward, squinting. “What’s that on your neck?”

Justin swallowed eggs and touched his neck reflexively. “It’s, uh...”

“It looks like someone choked you?”

Justin dipped his head. “It’s nothing.”

“That ain’t nothin’. I know what bruisin’ from chokin’ looks like. Who did that to you?”

“Nobody. It’s just...” Justin couldn’t think of a lie.

“*Who* did it?”

Justin raised his gaze. “My ex-best friend—Kyle. You know him. He was at the group home with us.”

Edwin clenched his jaw. “He’s the guy who came to my tent with heroin and treated me like a dog.”

“Yeah. We were both there.”

“But you weren’t the one fuckin’ with me.”

Justin shook his head. “I didn’t like it.”

“Why did he put his hands on you?”

“He wants me to move out. His girlfriend doesn’t want me here.”

“Hold on.” Edwin held up one hand. “He lives here in this buildin’?”

“He’s our next-door neighbor, along with his girlfriend.”

“I think I saw him the other day in the parkin’ lot when I took Chico for a walk, but I wasn’t really lookin’ at the dude. Does he drive a Jeep?”

“Yeah.”

“Why doesn’t his girl want you around?”

“It’s a long story.” Justin sipped his OJ.

“Give me the short version.”

“Her name’s Leah. She had an abusive boyfriend when she moved in here. A guy named Beau. I started seeing her—”

Edwin chuckled. “I bet you got yourself into a world of shit.”

“Pretty much. Beau found out, and he was a big dude. He kicked my ass. It could’ve been a lot worse, but Kyle intervened.”

“Lemme guess, little Leah didn’t want you after you got your ass kicked?”

Justin moved his eggs around the plate with his fork. “She wanted Kyle.”

Edwin grunted. “And now it’s uncomfortable for her with you still in the buildin’.”

Justin set down his fork. “Pretty much.”

“And Kyle’s tellin’ you to leave?”

Justin nodded.

“When are you supposed to leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

Edwin tilted his head. “*Tomorrow?*”

“That’s what he said, but I don’t have any place to go. I don’t have enough money to get into another apartment. I tried to tell him that.”

“What’s he gonna do if you don’t leave?”

Justin rubbed his temples. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do know.” Edwin stood from the table, vibrating, his fists balled. “I’ll put a stop to this shit right now. I’ll break his fuckin’ face.”

Justin stood from the table, showing his palms. “It’s not your fight. I don’t want you going to prison for me.”

“It *is* my fight. We’re *not* movin’ out, and if that motherfucker tries somethin’, it’ll be the last thing he ever does.”

## SIXTY-SEVEN

# SPYWARE

GRACE PICKED UP JUSTIN IN HER RED NISSAN VERSA. THEY STOPPED BY Larry's house on the way to Rakesh's. Larry didn't answer the doorbell or Grace's knocks. Justin peered into the sidelight window and spotted Larry lying on the couch—face up, motionless—with a rifle leaning against the coffee table.

“He's in there. He might be hurt or...” Justin opened the door, surprised it was unlocked.

They rushed to Larry's side.

“Larry,” Grace said, shaking him.

The heavyset man groaned, but he didn't wake up. Alcohol fumes emanated from his pores.

“At least he's alive,” Justin said.

“He's wasted. Help me push him on his side.”

They pushed the heavyset man to his side, grunting with the effort.

Grace exhaled. “We obviously can't talk him into putting us back on the case.”

“Not right now.” Justin gestured to the rifle. “You think he was planning to...”

“I don't know. I hope not.” Grace picked up a piece of paper from the coffee table. “It's Kristin's love letter.” She refolded it and stuck it in her purse.

“What are you doing?” Justin asked.

“I want to ask Larissa and Carrie if they recognize the handwriting.”

Justin inspected the living room. “Check out his television.” The screen was cracked, broken shards of a whiskey bottle on the floor beneath it.

“He had a rough night.”

“Yeah. What now? Should we text Rakesh, let him know that we’re waiting to talk to Larry?”

Grace shook her head. “The longer we wait, the less likely we are to find her.”

They drove across town to Rakesh’s house. They entered the one-story rancher from the rear, directly into Rakesh’s basement office. He sat at his desk, three screens of code before him, his fingers moving on the keyboard like a virtuoso.

“One second,” Rakesh said, his eyes glued to the screen. A “second” was really a few minutes, before he finally saved his work and closed the program. He swiveled in his chair, stood, and grabbed his laptop bag.

“Can we take your car?” Justin asked. “Grace’s car is red.”

“No can do, bro. We’re committing a crime, and I can’t be connected to this.”

“It’s okay,” Grace said.

On the way to Valley View Estates, Rakesh explained how he might be able to hack their phones. “I’ll find their Wi-Fi network, create an evil twin, which is basically a copy of their network that I control. Then, it banks on a few things going our way. If the targets are using a good VPN, it won’t work. Their phones have to be automatically connected to their Wi-Fi when they’re at home. And we have to get them to disconnect their home Wi-Fi, and to reconnect to our evil twin network.”

“How do we do that?” Justin asked, turning in his seat to Rakesh.

“The target has to take their cell phone out of range of the home Wi-Fi and in range of my Wi-Fi Pineapple. Or, in some cases, their phone might automatically connect to my network if the home network is weak.”

“What’s a Wi-Fi Pineapple?” Grace asked, glancing at Rakesh in the rearview mirror as she drove.

Rakesh retrieved a black box with multiple stubby antennas from his laptop bag and held it up. “This is a Wi-Fi Pineapple. A hacker’s dream.”

“So, do we have to lure Larissa all the way to you?” Grace asked.

“Probably not,” Rakesh said. “This device has a very powerful signal, so as long as the target disconnects from their home Wi-Fi, *and* her phone is

set to auto-connect with the home Wi-Fi, they should connect to my network. Their phone might automatically connect when it notices that my signal is stronger. That might happen just outside their door, or it could be a little farther. It really depends on where the router is located and how strong the signal is.”

“Is that it?” Justin asked.

“No, there’s more to it. Just getting them to connect to my network will only give us the data passing through. To know more, I have to intercept the data passing and inject spyware that will give us full access to the phone remotely. If they have a brand-new iPhone, it probably won’t work. But if they have an older phone, it might.”

“There’s a lot that has to go right,” Justin said.

They parked near the brick-faced McMansion owned by Larissa’s family. Rakesh sat in the back seat of the Nissan with his laptop open and connected to the Wi-Fi Pineapple.

“I think I found their Wi-Fi. It’s listed as ‘Miles Family’,” Rakesh said. “Does that sound right?”

“The mom’s last name is Appleton,” Justin said.

“Larissa’s parents divorced two years ago,” Grace said. “I doubt the mom’s changing the name on the Wi-Fi.”

Rakesh typed and clicked. “My evil twin network is up and running. Now I’m scanning for signals. See if you can get her to come outside.”

Justin and Grace walked to the front door and pressed the doorbell. A tall blonde opened the door. Her face was like a smooth mask, her lips puffy, likely the result of too much Botox and lip filler.

The blonde narrowed her eyes at them. “Can I help you?”

Grace smiled. “Could we talk to Larissa, please?”

“Who are you?”

Grace introduced themselves and explained that they were searching for their cousin, Kristin Bennett.

“I’m Olivia Appleton, Larissa’s mom,” the blonde replied. “It’s just awful that Kristin’s missing. I’ll see if Larissa—”

Larissa appeared in the doorway. “I got it, Mom.”

“Are you sure? I can—”

“I *got* it,” Larissa said, cutting off her mother.

“Fine.” Olivia Appleton disappeared into her McMansion.

Larissa stepped onto the front stoop and shut the door behind her. She sneered at Grace and Justin. “What are you doing here?”

“We just wanted to ask you a few more questions,” Grace said.

Larissa put her hands on her hips. “I answered your questions at my boyfriend’s *memorial*.”

“Yes. Sorry. I know this is a tough time—”

“You don’t know shit.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss.”

“I already said everything I needed to say to the police.”

“We were hoping—”

“I don’t care what you were hoping. You have no right to be here. Leave or I’m calling the police.” Larissa pivoted on her slippers.

Grace dug into her purse. “I have a letter—”

Larissa retreated into her house, slamming the door behind her.

“Shit.”

As they returned to the Nissan Versa, Justin said, “Hopefully, that was enough time for Rakesh to work his magic.”

“Hopefully, she had her cell phone on her.”

They entered the Nissan.

“Did you get it?” Justin asked.

Rakesh shook his head. “I was able to get her phone to log on to my network, so I had access to the data going to and from her phone for a minute, but I couldn’t inject my spyware into the data stream, and now that she’s back in the house, her phone auto-connected to her home network, so I’m out.”

“Do you think there’s anything in the data you collected?” Grace asked.

“I doubt it, but let’s see...” Rakesh clicked and checked his laptop screen. “It looks like some data from TikTok, but other than that, nothing out of the ordinary.”

Carrie’s house was also in Valley View Estates, so they drove the short distance. They parked in the street adjacent to the Wagner’s stone-faced colonial. A blue Chevy Aveo was parked near the three-car garage. Rakesh worked his magic finding what he thought was the Wagner’s Wi-Fi router—NETGEAR86-5G—given that it was the strongest nearby signal.

Justin and Grace went to the front door and pressed the doorbell. Carrie’s father, Doug Wagner, answered the door.

“Hi, Mr. Wagner,” Grace said. “We were here the other day.”

“I remember,” Mr. Wagner replied.

“Could we speak to Carrie for a few minutes?”

“Sure. Hold on.” He disappeared into the house, shutting the door behind him.

Carrie appeared a few minutes later without makeup, her eyes puffy and red, and her hair disheveled. She shut the door and joined them on the front stoop.

“Hi, Carrie,” Grace said. “Sorry to bother you again, but we had a couple questions for you. I was hoping you could help us.”

“I already, like, told you everything I know,” Carrie replied.

“I was hoping you could look at a letter.” Grace retrieved Kristin’s love letter from her purse, unfolded it, and handed it to Carrie. “Do you recognize this handwriting?”

Carrie took the letter, examined it for a minute. “Is this a love letter to Kristin?”

“It is,” Grace replied.

Carrie handed the letter back to Grace. “I don’t know who wrote this.”

“It’s not Troy’s handwriting?”

“No way. Troy’s handwriting is, like, literally *terrible*. You can’t even, like, read it.”

“What about Chad?”

“I don’t know his handwriting.”

An awkward silence passed between them.

“We were wondering about you and Troy?” Justin asked.

Carrie crossed her arms over her chest, rubbing her shoulders as if comforting herself. “What about us?”

“Did you break up? At the funeral, we noticed that you didn’t sit together.”

Carrie sighed. “High school relationships don’t, like... last. I’m not trying to be mean, but it’s none of your business.”

Justin nodded. “You’re right. Normally, it wouldn’t be our business, but we believe that Kristin might’ve been seeing Chad or Troy.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Carrie’s voice was shaky.

“It speaks to motive,” Grace said.

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Are you sure?”

Carrie glowered at them. “I don’t have to talk to you. You’re not the police.”

“That’s an odd thing to say. Seems like we should both want to find Kristin,” Grace said.

“Please leave me alone.” Carrie went back inside, shutting the door behind her, the deadbolt sliding into place.

They returned to the car.

“Did you get it?” Justin asked as he climbed into the front passenger seat.

“Spyware’s installed,” Rakesh replied, beaming.

## SIXTY-EIGHT

# TIME IS RUNNING OUT

THEY DROVE TO GRACE'S TOWNHOUSE TO CHECK CARRIE'S CELL phone through Rakesh's spyware. They entered the townhouse, walking past the living room to the kitchen, following the sound of clanging dishes and silverware. Grace's roommate, Penny, loaded the dishwasher.

Penny faced Grace with a smile, her cheeks ruddy. She was tall and chubby, wearing an oversized T-shirt and leggings. "Where have you been?"

"Trying to find Kristin Bennett," Grace replied.

"I thought that was over."

"We're back on for now." Grace gestured to the guys. "You remember Justin."

But Penny's gaze was on Rakesh and his gaze was on her.

"This is Rakesh," Grace said.

Rakesh approached Penny and they shook hands. "It's very nice to meet you," he said, his eyes locked on her.

Penny blushed. "It's nice to meet you too. How did you get wrapped up in all this?"

"Officially, I'm *not* wrapped up in all this. I'm officially *not* here either."

"Your secret's safe with me." Penny winked.

"Why did the detective bring string to the crime scene?"

Penny cocked her head. "What?"

“It’s a joke,” Justin said.

Rakesh frowned at Justin. “Now you’ve ruined it.”

“Ask me again. I love jokes,” Penny said.

“Why did the detective bring string to the crime scene?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because he wanted to tie up loose ends.” Rakesh chuckled.

Penny chortled and snorted.

“Dumb,” Justin said.

“That’s because you lack a sense of humor,” Rakesh replied with a smirk.

The three amateur detectives settled in the basement at the round table.

Rakesh opened his laptop. While the computer loaded, he asked Grace, “What does Penny do?”

“She’s an IT consultant,” Grace replied.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Why?”

Rakesh shrugged. “No reason. Just wondering. She has a nice laugh.”

Justin and Grace gave each other a knowing look.

Rakesh sat before his laptop, clicking and typing. Grace gave him the Wi-Fi password; then he navigated to the spyware program.

Justin and Grace flanked him at the table, also watching his screen.

“I’d like to see her texts,” Grace said.

Rakesh clicked, showing her most recent text messages.

“It looks like she texted Larissa right after we left,” Justin said, pointing at the text string.

“Can you open that up?” Grace asked.

Rakesh clicked on the text string, opening the conversation.

**Carrie:** Her cousins were back to talk to me again.

**Larissa:** What did u tell them?

**Carrie:** Nothing. They think Kristin was seeing Chad or Troy. They think that could be motive. I’m worried that they think I did something to her.

**Larissa:** STOP worrying. Keep your mouth shut and everything will be fine. It will all be over soon. Don’t text me about this again.

“Larissa and Carrie obviously know more than they’re letting on,” Justin said.

“You’re right,” Grace replied. “What do you think Larissa meant by ‘It will all be over soon’?”

“She could be talking about the investigation,” Rakesh said.

“Could be. How would she know that, though?” Justin asked.

“Maybe she thinks the police will give up soon?”

“Maybe. But I don’t think so.”

“Or she knows what will happen to Kristin and when,” Grace said.

A shiver snaked down Justin’s spine. “If that’s the case, it implies Kristin’s still alive, but she’s running out of time.”

“We need to find her immediately.” Grace addressed Rakesh. “Can you search for the most recent text conversation that mentions Kristin?”

“Easy.” Rakesh typed and clicked, his hands flittering over the keyboard. “Looks like the most recent mention of Kristin was on August 7th in a text from Larissa.”

“That was four days ago,” Justin said.

“The day before she disappeared,” Grace added.

Rakesh enlarged the text from August 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Larissa:** You know what their YT channel is like. They want the innocent virgin but that’s not us. That’s **Kristin**. Troy wants her. I bet they already smashed. You should’ve seen the way he was looking at her at the pool. And I swear **Kristin** was bending over for him on purpose.

“So Larissa thinks Troy and Kristin are together,” Justin said. “Can you show the next most recent text mentioning Kristin?”

Rakesh scrolled up and enlarged another text.

**Larissa:** I don’t like the way **Kristin** was flirting with Troy. Did you see her giggling and flipping her hair? I wanted to slap that smile off her face.

“This is so weird,” Grace said. “It’s like Larissa is trying to convince Carrie that Troy and Kristin are hooking up behind her back.”

“But the mystery man can’t be Troy,” Justin replied. “The handwriting doesn’t match.”

“Unless Carrie was lying to us.”

“Or Larissa wanted Carrie to hate Troy and Kristin.”

“What would be the motive for that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you ask Troy if he was hooking up with Kristin?” Rakesh asked.

“We already did. He denied it,” Justin replied.

“We should talk to Troy again anyway,” Grace said. “He might tell us something useful about Carrie. People love to talk shit about their exes.”

## SIXTY-NINE

# A MOTHER'S LOVE

THE WILLIAMSONS' DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER HOME APPEARED THE SAME as yesterday—unkempt and dilapidated. The same old Chevy Silverado truck was parked in the driveway, along with a Hyundai Sonata that was missing a hubcap. They parked behind the truck, shaded by the massive oak tree.

Rakesh went to work, copying the Williamsons' Wi-Fi network.

Justin and Grace marched to the front door and knocked.

A haggard middle-aged woman answered the door. "Yes?"

Grace introduced them, explaining that they were Kristin Bennett's cousins, and they were helping with the search. "We'd like to speak with Troy. We think he might have information that could be helpful to finding Kristin."

The woman knitted her brow. "I'm very sorry about your cousin, but I don't know how my son could possibly help you."

"We're not sure that he can," Grace replied, "but he is friends with Kristin, and we're talking to everyone."

"Well, he's not feeling well. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"We just need a minute. Every second counts for Kristin."

"You're wasting those minutes on my son. I hope you find her." The woman shut the front door in their faces.

Justin and Grace returned to the Nissan Versa.

"He won't come out," Justin said.

“That’s all right, he’s on my network,” Rakesh said, typing on his laptop. “His Wi-Fi router signal must be weak. I’m intercepting his data, but I can’t inject the spyware into the data stream.”

Justin and Grace watched Rakesh work, his fingers frantically typing and clicking.

A knock to Grace’s window startled the trio. It was Troy’s mother.

Grace powered down her window.

“What are you still doing in my driveway?” the woman asked, her hands on her hips.

“Um... we’re about to leave,” Grace replied.

The woman squinted at Rakesh over Grace’s shoulder. “What the hell is he doing?”

Rakesh stopped typing, but kept his head down.

“He’s working,” Grace said.

“Get off my property before I call the police,” the woman said.

“We think Troy has something to do with Kristin’s disappearance,” Grace said.

Justin braced himself for the mother’s backlash.

“That’s ridiculous.” But the woman didn’t sound confident.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that Chad died on the same day that Kristin disappeared?” Grace asked. “Both of them were friends with *your* son.”

The woman blanched.

“Is Troy sick, or is he worried sick over something he saw?” Justin asked.

Troy’s mother covered her mouth with her hand.

“We heard from a source very close to your son that Troy was having an affair with Kristin.”

The woman shook her head. “This can’t be right. He loves Carrie.”

“They’re not together anymore.”

The woman winced as if Justin had smacked her.

“We’re not the police, Mrs. Williamson,” Grace said. “We’re just trying to find Kristin. Can we please talk to your son?”

The woman’s shoulders slumped. “Just for a few minutes.”

Justin and Grace followed Troy’s mother back to the front door. The woman made them wait on the stoop while she collected her son. Justin watched through the door window as the mother disappeared down the hall, likely to the bedrooms. Shortly thereafter, harsh voices came from the

trailer. With the thin walls of the trailer, the conversation was almost decipherable.

Justin touched Grace's forearm and said, "I'll be right back." He jogged around the house, following the arguing voices. They were loudest near the back corner. Justin knelt underneath the window, listening to Troy and his mother.

"Chad was the one smashing. Not me," Troy said.

"You never touched her?" Mom asked.

Troy hesitated. "I didn't do anything to her. You have to believe me."

Mom let out a heavy breath. "I really hope you're telling the truth."

"I am. I swear."

"Okay."

"What are you gonna do about her cousins?"

"I'll tell them to leave."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you."

Justin raced back to the front door, making it there just before Troy's mother.

The woman opened her door. "Troy had nothing to do with Kristin's disappearance, and he doesn't know anything either."

"You don't know that," Grace replied.

"Leave him alone, and leave my property. If I see you two again, I *will* call the police."

Grace crossed her arms over her chest. "The fact that we can't talk to him is suspicious."

The woman brandished her phone. "I'm calling the police."

"It's fine, Mrs. Williamson." Justin tugged on Grace's elbow. "We're leaving."

They returned to the car. Justin discreetly told Grace about Troy telling his mother that Chad was having sex with Kristin.

Rakesh sat in the back, his face taut, and his laptop shut. "I'm out. That was way too close."

"I'm sorry, Rakesh," Justin said, turned in his seat.

"You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet," Grace said, buckling her seatbelt.

"That's what a reckless person would say. I can't afford to be reckless," Rakesh replied.

"Were you able to install the spyware?" Justin asked.

“No.”

“What about the data traffic?”

“He was on YouTube.”

## SEVENTY DOWN BAD

RAKESH MARCHED TOWARD HIS HOUSE, HIS LAPTOP BAG OVER HIS shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Justin called out to his back.

Rakesh raised his hand without looking back, letting Justin know that they would be okay... in time.

Justin powered up his window.

“What should we do now?” Grace asked from the driver’s seat of her Nissan.

“We need to confirm that Chad was Kristin’s mystery boyfriend,” Justin replied.

“Good idea. All we have to do is ask Chad’s parents if that’s his handwriting.”

Grace tapped on her phone, searching the internet. She found Chad’s parents’ names in a recent news article regarding their son’s death in the automobile accident. Then, Grace ran a background check on the dad, easily finding the address in West Lebanon.

The house wasn’t visible from the road, but they found the Stevens’s driveway by their mailbox. Grace drove them on the winding gravel driveway through a young forest, the afternoon sun piercing the canopy. Around the bend, the property had been cleared for a renovated farmhouse surrounded by two acres of manicured lawn. Grace parked by the three-car garage.

They exited the Nissan. Justin peeked in the garage window, noticing two BMWs—an SUV and a sedan. They took the walkway to the front door. Grace pressed the doorbell.

A tall and powerfully built man with a five o'clock shadow and bloodshot eyes answered the door. "Can I help you?" he asked, as if he had no intention of helping anyone.

"We're cousins of Kristin Bennett. I'm Grace and this is my brother, Justin. We're helping our uncle search for Kristin."

The man softened. "I'm Bart Stevens. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you could look at a letter and tell me if it was written by your son or not?"

Bart tilted his head, confused, but said, "I know my son's handwriting."

Grace handed him the letter.

Bart took it and scanned the letter, his brow creased. After a few minutes of reading and examining the handwriting, he looked up and said, "My son wrote this to Kristin?"

"The letter was in Kristin's room," Grace replied.

Bart handed the letter to Grace.

"Do you think that's your son's handwriting?" Justin asked.

Bart nodded and rubbed his eyes. "They were in love? My son and Kristin?"

"We think so," Grace replied.

"Did he... did he... have something to do with her disappearance?"

"We don't think so. We think he died before she was taken."

The father exhaled. "Do you think Larissa had something to do with it?"

"Larissa?" Justin asked. "Why would you think she had something to do with Kristin's disappearance?"

"I don't know Larissa very well, but I know my son. He wasn't happy with her, but then he was happy over the past few months. That must've been Kristin. If Larissa found out..." Bart shook his head. "Don't listen to me. I'm not making any sense. She's just a high school girl. I'm not thinking straight. Forget what I said."

They pried for more information about Larissa's potential guilt, but Bart Stevens wasn't forthcoming.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Stevens," Grace said.

On the walk back to the car, Justin asked, "Is it me, or do all roads lead to Larissa?"

“It’s not you. I’m starting to think Larissa is the linchpin,” Grace replied.

“Chad hooking up with Kristin gives Larissa motive to get rid of both of them.”

“But Larissa didn’t rig Chad’s car to crash. It was an accident. Kristin, well, that’s still an open investigation.”

They climbed into the Nissan and buckled their seatbelts.

“There’s an interesting dynamic we’re missing,” Grace said. “Think about this. According to Maya, Larissa and Carrie are best friends. Their boyfriends were even best friends. They must’ve done everything together. Then, Kristin comes along and hooks up with Chad. That would’ve destroyed *everything*. Not only would Chad and Larissa be over, but all the hanging out would be over too. It would be hard for Carrie to spend time with Larissa, because they can’t all hang out together anymore. Carrie would have to choose between her boyfriend and her best friend.” Grace cranked the ignition, starting the car.

“Do you think that’s why Larissa was telling Carrie that it was Troy hooking up with Kristin?” Justin asked. “If Larissa could break them up, then Larissa and Carrie could be single together. That would be much better for Larissa, than potentially being a third wheel with Carrie and Troy.”

Grace turned to Justin. “That makes a lot of sense. I know a girl who did that in high school. She broke up with her boyfriend, then she tried to get all her friends to break up with their boyfriends too. I think we’re getting closer to the truth.”

“So do I. What’s our next move?”

Grace put the car into reverse. “I’m starving. We missed lunch.”

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They drove to the West Lebanon Subway. It was hours after the lunch rush and empty. Edwin stood behind the counter wearing a green Subway polo. Justin introduced Grace to Edwin. They shook hands over the counter.

“Thanks for takin’ care of my dog,” Edwin said.

“It was no problem. Chico’s the sweetest dog,” Grace replied.

“Harvey put you to work already?” Justin asked.

“He was desperate because of you leavin’ him without notice,” Edwin replied.

Justin grimaced. “I know. I feel bad.”

“Don’t. I gotta job because of you.”

Edwin took their order and made their subs. Justin and Grace took their subs and sodas to a corner booth. They ate while Edwin cleaned the counter.

Midway through their meal, Edwin joined them, sitting next to Justin in the booth. “How’s it going with the case?”

Justin caught him up to speed, telling him everything that had happened that day.

“Sounds like you gotta press this Larissa bitch,” Edwin said.

“I don’t think she’ll talk.” Justin sipped his soda.

Edwin cracked his knuckles and said, with a smirk, “I can make her talk.”

“We definitely can’t do *that*.” Justin took a bite of his sub.

Grace set down her soda and said, “I wish we could. I do *not* like that girl.”

Edwin gave Grace a fist bump across the table.

Justin swallowed. “I think Carrie might be the weak link. She may not have done anything to Kristin, but I think she knows what happened to her. Remember the text she sent Larissa? She said that she’s worried that we think she did something to Kristin. Maybe we should play that up, see if we can get some information out of her.”

Grace nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

Edwin nudged Justin with his elbow. “My boy Justin’s smart.”

A group of young men entered the Subway, one tall and muscular, the other two shorter and stocky. They all wore long basketball shorts. The taller guy wore a tank top, prominently displaying his chest and underarm hair.

Edwin left the table to take their orders. “What can I get you guys?”

The young men gave Edwin their orders.

“Edwin’s nicer than I thought he’d be,” Grace said to Justin.

“He’s been better since he’s been in NA,” Justin replied to Grace, but watching Edwin at the counter with the young men.

“I thought you were making a mistake helping him. I’m glad I’m wrong. You’re a good person.”

Justin blushed. “Thanks.”

They finished their food in silence, but Justin kept an eye on Edwin and the young men as they paid for their food.

“Hey, I know you,” the taller guy said.

“I don’t think so,” Edwin replied.

“You used to be a UFC fighter. You’re Edwin Arroyo, aren’t you?” the taller guy asked.

“He was in that video pissin’ on that car,” one of the stocky guys said.

The young men snickered and vibrated slightly.

“That was some funny shit,” the taller guy said. “And now you’re working at Subway. Don’t you feel like a loser?”

Edwin put his head down and prepared their subs.

The taller guy started videoing Edwin, complete with his own narration. “This is Edwin Arroyo, former UFC champ, making my sandwich.”

Edwin glared at the camera. “Stop filmin’ me.”

“You’re in public, bro. There’s no expectation of privacy in public.”

“I’m not your bro.” Edwin focused on the subs.

“That cheap shot you took on Lucas Silva ruined your whole life,” one of the stocky guys said.

The young guys hooted.

“Damn, that’s right,” the taller guy said, still videoing. “I forgot that he did that. Hey, Edwin, I bet you wish you could do that over. Do you wanna apologize to Lucas Silva right now? C’mon, bro. Maybe Dana White will see this and let you back in.”

Edwin vibrated. He slapped mayo on the turkey sub and glowered at the camera. “Stop pushin’ me.”

“Or what? What are you gonna do, bro?”

Edwin focused on the subs again.

“He ain’t gonna do shit,” one of the stocky guys said. “This ain’t the octagon.”

“I’ll be back,” Justin said to Grace. He slipped out of the booth and rushed to the action.

“He looks small,” the other stocky guy said, sizing up Edwin. “How much do you weigh, like one-fifty?”

Justin opened the half-door and slipped behind the counter. “It’s your break time. I’ll take over from here.”

Edwin glowered at the camera again.

“What are you gonna do, bro?” the taller guy asked.

Edwin left without a word, going to the back office.

“Later, bro,” the taller guy called out to Edwin’s back.

Edwin left the restaurant through the back exit, slamming the metal door behind him.

Justin took over, finishing their sandwiches, and filling their sodas.

“This dude looks like he’s in eighth grade,” one of the stocky guys said.

“How old are you?” the other stocky guy asked.

“Old enough to work here,” Justin replied in monotone.

The taller guy pocketed his phone. “What’s up with your boy?”

Justin ignored the question, placing their subs and sodas on the counter, the subs in to-go bags. He gave a saccharine smile to the taller guy. “Enjoy your meals.”

The vibrating young men took their subs and sodas, but they didn’t leave. Instead, they sat at the booth next to Grace despite the fact that she was the only other customer in the dining area. Justin cleaned the counter and watched the guys, hoping they wouldn’t cause any more trouble.

“Hey, blondie,” the taller guy said to Grace. “Is that little guy over there your boyfriend?”

“He’s my friend. Do you have a problem with that?” Grace asked, her jaw set tight.

“She friend-zoned him,” one of the stocky guys said.

The young men cackled.

The taller guy stood from the table. Justin thought they might leave, but the taller guy slipped into the booth next to Grace.

“Mind if I join you?” the taller guy asked.

“I *do* mind,” Grace replied, scooting closer to the wall.

The two stocky guys slid into the booth across from Grace. The three of them were vibrating faster.

“I bet I’m more your type,” the taller guy said, scooting closer to Grace.

“Get the fuck away from me,” Grace replied.

Justin clenched his fists and opened the half-door, imagining himself killing these scumbags. Overwhelmed with evil intentions, the migraine hit him like a freight train, sending him to his knees.

“You like me. I know you do,” the taller guy said. “You wanna smash?”

“Leave me alone or you’ll be sorry,” Grace replied.

The young men cackled.

“She wants to smash,” one of the stocky guys said.

“I got next,” the other stocky guy said.

Grace sneered at them.

Justin clamped his head in his hands, trying to prevent his brain from exploding.

“Don’t act so offended,” the taller guy said. “You love the attention. I bet you got ass pictures on IG.”

“I bet she does,” one of the stocky guys said.

“What’s your IG handle?”

Grace fished for her lipstick from her purse. “This is your last chance, assholes.”

The taller guy put his arm around Grace, his hairy armpit in her face.

Grace flicked the switch on the faux lipstick case, leaned away from the taller guy, and sprayed him in the face with pepper spray. The taller guy scrambled away, falling out of the booth to the floor, writhing and howling in pain. She turned her pepper spray on the stocky guys, catching them in the face too. The three young men writhed on the ground, moaning and groaning, clawing at their faces, their eyes sealed shut, mucus streaming from their noses.

Grace slid out of the booth and aimed her pepper spray at the men. “I suggest you get the fuck out before I spray you again.”

The young men staggered to their feet and felt their way to the exit, knocking into tables on the way. Once they were gone, Grace noticed Justin on his knees, his head in his hands. She hurried to him, kneeling next to him. “Are you okay?”

Justin struggled to his feet, wincing, and leaning on the counter. “I’m fine. It’s a... migraine.”

“A migraine? Just now?”

Justin nodded. “Are you... okay?”

“I’m good. Our lunch is ruined.” She smirked. “Too much pepper.”

Justin coughed, the pepper spray still in the air. “I should open the doors.”

“I got it.” Grace started for the entrance.

“There’s a little piece of wood to prop the door,” Justin called to her back.

She propped open the doors, letting the fresh air in.

When she returned to him, he said, “I’m sorry I didn’t... like... help.”

Grace shrugged. “I had it under control.”

“I’m supposed to...”

“Supposed to what? Save me? Because you’re a guy and I’m a helpless little girl?”

“I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I *am* worried about it.”

“I’m not worried about it. People get scared or whatever. I’m not judging.”

“I wasn’t scared.”

She cocked her head. “*Really?*”

“Yeah, really.”

“Then what happened?”

“Those guys were vibrating a little, but Edwin was vibrating more. I thought he might kick the shit outta those assholes. He used to be in the UFC. He could probably kill them. I didn’t want him going to prison.”

“That’s why you took his place.”

“Yes.”

Grace eyed Justin for a long moment. “What did you see when those guys were hassling *me*?”

“They started vibrating more then. That’s why I wanted to intervene.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I can see evil intentions in others, but if I have evil intentions myself, I get an instant migraine that is the most painful thing I’ve ever experienced. It paralyzes me. When those guys were bothering you, I wasn’t thinking about helping you. I was angry. I wanted to hurt them, not that I could’ve anyway”—Justin frowned—“with my size.”

“So anytime you think about doing something evil, you get a migraine.”

“Pretty much. I think my mom had the same thing.”

“Could she see evil intentions like you?”

“No.”

“How do you know that?”

“Can we sit down?” Justin asked.

They sat at a table as far away from the pepper smell as possible.

Justin took a deep breath. “When I was four, my mother took me to a mental institution to visit my great-uncle. There was this guy staring at us, vibrating. I told my mom about him, but she told me not to stare, that it was

rude. The guy attacked me, but my mom stepped in front of me. He killed her with a sharpened toothbrush.”

Grace inhaled sharply. “Oh my God. Justin. I’m so sorry—”

Justin held up his hand like a stop sign. “It was a long time ago. I’m only telling you this because if she could’ve seen what I see, she would’ve seen that guy coming from a mile away.”

Edwin entered the Subway from the back and approached their table. “What happened to the three douchebags?” He sniffed. “It smells like pepper really bad.”

“Grace pepper-sprayed them,” Justin said.

Edwin smiled wide and fist-bumped Grace.

## SEVENTY-ONE

# THE WEAK LINK

WITH THE AFTERNOON SUN LOW ON THE HORIZON, THEY DROVE toward Valley View Estates. Along the way, Justin called Rakesh on speaker, explaining that they were headed to Carrie's house to try to talk to her again.

"Can you check your spyware program, see what she's been doing on her phone?" Justin asked.

"Yes. Give me a minute." Shortly thereafter, Rakesh came back on the line. "She hasn't been texting or calling since Larissa told her to stop, but she has been making some odd internet searches."

"Like what?" Justin asked.

"Like 'kidnapping in PA' and 'punishment for kidnapping in PA' and 'what happens if a minor is arrested for kidnapping a minor?'"

"Holy shit," Grace said, glancing from the road to Justin and back. "She knows what happened to Kristin."

Justin thanked Rakesh and they said their goodbyes.

Grace turned into Valley View Estates. They cruised by McMansions made with particle board and vinyl siding, finally parking in the Wagner family's driveway, next to the Chevy Aveo. They walked to the front door and pressed the doorbell.

Doug Wagner answered the door. Before they could ask the question, he said, "Carrie's busy, but you can leave your cell number with me and she can call you back when she has time."

Grace gave Mr. Wagner her phone number, which he dutifully typed into his phone.

As they returned to the car, Grace said, “Carrie’s blowing us off. I doubt she’ll talk to us again.”

“You’re right, but I have an idea.” Justin explained the idea to Grace.

“We need to go to Rakesh’s,” Grace said.

On the drive toward Rakesh’s family home, Justin called him on speaker.

“She didn’t talk to you, did she?” Rakesh asked.

“No, but I think I know another way. We need your help again,” Justin replied.

“I don’t know. We could’ve gotten arrested today.”

“You don’t even have to leave your house.”

“What do I have to do?”

“We’re coming over now. I’ll explain when we get there.”

---

In Rakesh’s office, Justin asked, “Can you send a text to Carrie making it look like it came from Larissa?”

Rakesh nodded, sitting on his swivel chair. “That’s very easy to do. It’s called spoofing.”

“I thought you could do that. You kind of did that before, when we were trying to find Larissa and Carrie’s cell phone numbers.”

“Pretty much, but I was using a random number.” Rakesh paused for a beat. “What do you want the text to say?”

“We need a few minutes to figure it out.”

Justin and Grace worked on the message, typing it on Rakesh’s phone. When they were finished, Rakesh read it aloud.

“Do not reply to this text. This is a literal emergency. Meet me at Jonestown Park at midnight tonight. We need to talk in person. Do not tell anyone. Wait for me on the swings.”

## SEVENTY-TWO

# AMBUSH

A FEW MINUTES BEFORE MIDNIGHT, JUSTIN AND GRACE HID IN THE playhouse beneath the slide. Moonbeams filtered into the playhouse. They had parked in the nearby neighborhood, and hiked a half-mile to Jonestown Park so Carrie wouldn't see Grace's Nissan.

A Chevy Aveo crept into the parking lot, gravel crunching under the tires. A female form emerged from the subcompact car. She walked tentatively to the playground, her head on a swivel. Carrie called out, "Larissa? Larissa?" Then she said to herself, "Of course. I always have to wait for her." She sat on the swings.

Crouching in the playhouse, Justin held up one finger to Grace. Two fingers. On the third finger, they emerged from the playhouse, circling Carrie on the swings.

Carrie screeched and stood. "What the hell?"

"We just wanna talk," Justin said.

Carrie put her hands on her hips. "How did you know I was here? Did you, like, follow me?"

"We hacked your phone," Grace said. "Larissa didn't request this meeting. It was us."

"You people are literally crazy. I'm, like, calling the police." Carrie retrieved her phone from the front pocket of her jeans.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you. You might go to prison for kidnapping."

Carrie dropped her phone like it was hot. She grabbed her phone from the wood chips, her hand shaky. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your internet search history is very interesting,” Justin said. “I wonder what the police would think about you searching ‘What happens if a minor kidnaps a minor?’”

“I wasn’t...” Carrie started.

“You weren’t what?” Grace asked, inching closer.

“I was scared, okay? You guys were acting like I did something, so I was just looking at worst-case scenarios. I didn’t even see Kristin that whole day. I swear to God.”

“I might be able to buy that, but we need to know *everything* that happened.”

“Better to talk to us than the police,” Justin added.

Carrie pursed her lips. “But you would get in trouble for, like, hacking my phone.”

“Not necessarily,” Grace replied. “We could give an anonymous tip.”

“But if I, like, tell you what I know, you’ll still tell the police.”

“If you tell the truth, there’s no need to involve the police,” Grace said. “We’re not trying to arrest anyone. We just want to find Kristin.”

“But I don’t know anything.”

“We hacked your phone, Carrie,” Justin said, his arms crossed over his chest. “We’ve seen your text messages. We know Larissa wants you to keep your mouth shut. What are you supposed to keep secret?”

“I can’t... Larissa would be...”

“Larissa’s not the friend you think she is,” Grace said.

“What are you talking about?” Carrie asked.

“We know Larissa was trying to convince you that Troy was having an affair with Kristin, but Kristin was having an affair with Chad, not Troy.”

“She wanted revenge on Kristin and Chad, and she wanted you and Troy to break up,” Justin added.

Carrie’s voice was shaky. “Why would she do that to me? We’re, like, *best friends*.”

“Think about it from Larissa’s perspective,” Grace said. “If she broke up with Chad, she’d be all alone. You’d still be with Troy, Chad’s best friend. No more hanging out as a foursome. I doubt she’s someone who’s willing to be the third wheel. I’m sure she’d rather her best friend be single with her.”

Carrie shook her head. "No. She wouldn't do that to me."

"Are you sure?"

Carrie hugged herself. "I don't know."

"Maybe we can figure it out together," Grace said.

"But I didn't see anything. Like, I didn't even see Kristin."

"Then you don't have to worry about getting anyone into trouble. Just tell us what you did on the night Kristin disappeared."

Carrie dropped her arms to her side, her shoulders slumping. "I can't. Larissa..."

Grace inched closer to Carrie. "You don't have to worry about Larissa. She won't know that you talked to us."

Carrie chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't know."

"This isn't going away, Carrie. Do you want us to tell the police about your internet searches?"

She sniffed and said, "Do you promise not to tell Larissa or the police?"

"Yes. I promise."

Carrie looked around, likely making sure they were alone. "It was Chad's birthday, and Larissa had this surprise party planned for him. I went to the party by myself."

"Why didn't you go with Troy?" Grace asked.

"I would've gone with Troy, but Larissa needed Troy to move furniture and hang decorations for the party."

"Why didn't you help with the decorations?"

"I offered to help, but Larissa said she had everything covered."

Grace nodded. "Then what happened?"

"Right when I got there, I like knew something was wrong. Chad was driving away from Larissa's, like, *really* fast. We almost got in an accident. I thought he was in a fight with Larissa."

"Did Chad and Larissa fight a lot?"

Carrie nodded. "This summer's been like *really* bad."

"What happened after Chad drove away?"

"I went into the party. I expected more people to be there, but it was just Larissa and Jimmy, like, sitting at the kitchen table drinking and vaping weed. I knew Troy was there somewhere, because his truck was in the driveway."

"This Jimmy person. Was it Jimmy Conley?" Grace asked.

"Yes. Do you know him?" Carrie asked.

“Not really. I was in his year at West Lebanon, but I moved junior year.”

“He used to hook up with Larissa,” Carrie said. “Chad didn’t like Larissa talking to Jimmy, but she would do it anyway when she was, like, mad at Chad.”

“Why was Jimmy at Chad’s birthday party, then?” Grace asked.

“I don’t know,” Carrie replied, not making eye contact.

“I think you do know.”

Carrie swallowed hard and wrung her hands. “You can’t tell my parents.”

“We won’t. I promise,” Grace replied.

“Jimmy, like... gets us drugs. Not, like, anything really hard. Just like weed and ecstasy.”

“So Jimmy’s your drug dealer?”

“I guess, but he’s not like a serious criminal or anything,” Carrie replied.

“Okay, so you go inside and see Larissa and Jimmy getting high and drunk. What happened next?” Grace asked.

“I asked Larissa about Chad’s crazy driving. She said she didn’t know about that. Then I asked where Troy was, and Jimmy started like laughing really weird. Larissa didn’t say anything, so I asked her about Troy again. But she didn’t say anything. She was acting totally weird. Then I heard the bed squeak from the downstairs bedroom. I’ve slept in that room before. The box spring is like really squeaky. So I was like, what was that? Then Larissa said that Troy failed the test.” Carrie’s voice wavered when she said “test.”

“What test did he fail?”

“Can I sit down?” Carrie asked.

“Sure.”

Carrie sat on the swing, gripping the chains, her legs wobbly. “Larissa thinks Troy’s a fuck boy. You already know that she, like, thought he was sleeping with Kristin.” She sniffled. “I told Larissa that I didn’t think he would do that to me. I know Troy acts like an asshole on his YouTube channel, but I didn’t think he was like that IRL.” She stared at the ground.

“What was the test, Carrie?” Grace asked.

Carrie swallowed hard and lifted her chin. “She wanted to test him by having some girl offer him sex, to see if he would cheat on me. I was like,

how would we even do that? Larissa told me not to worry about that. I didn't think Larissa would, like, really do it."

"Did Larissa test Troy that night?"

Carrie dipped her head and nodded. She was quiet for a long time. Then she said, "I was, like, freaked out, you know? I asked Larissa if Troy was sleeping with someone."

"What did Larissa say?"

"She didn't say anything at first. Then the bed started squeaking louder, and I heard Troy... like, making noises. Jimmy was being a total asshole. He said something like, 'Sounds like he's almost done.'" Carrie scrunched her face, tears welling in her eyes. "It was so gross. I couldn't believe Larissa literally did it. I asked her why. She said I needed to know what Troy was really like. I didn't know what to say to that. I was literally in shock. Then I heard the bedroom door open and shut. Troy walked into the kitchen like everything was fine. He was like, 'Hey, Carrie,' like nothing happened, but I could tell he did it. His face was all red and he smelled like sex and perfume. I almost threw up in my mouth." She bowed her head, tears slipping down her face.

Justin and Grace were quiet while she wept. Carrie eventually sniffled and wiped her face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"What happened after that?" Grace asked.

Carrie raised her gaze. "I called Troy a fucking asshole. Told him never to call me again, and I left. I went home and literally cried my eyes out. The next day, Kristin was... missing."

"Do you think it was Kristin in that bedroom with Troy?" Justin asked.

"I don't know. I didn't see who it was. I asked Larissa, but she wouldn't tell me. Said it didn't matter. I asked her, like, point blank if it was Kristin, but she said no."

"Do you think Larissa did something to Kristin?"

Carrie shook her head. "I really don't know. I told you everything. I swear. Can I please go now?"

Justin glanced at Grace.

She nodded her approval.

"Yeah," Justin said, stepping aside.

Carrie stood from the swing. "Please don't tell Larissa or my parents what I told you."

"We won't," Grace replied.

“Or the police,” Carrie added.

“We won’t.”

“Thank you.” Carrie returned to her Chevy Aveo.

Once Carrie was out of earshot, Grace said, “We need to talk to Jimmy Conley.”

## SEVENTY-THREE

# JIMMY THE DRUG DEALER

JUSTIN WOKE TO HIS CELL PHONE CHIMING NEAR HIS HEAD. HE checked the caller ID and answered, his voice gravelly with sleep.

“Get up. I found Jimmy Conley,” Grace said.

Justin sat up on the carpet, his comforter still wrapped around him like a burrito. “How?”

“What do you mean, how? I did a background check. I’m coming to pick you up in fifteen minutes. I think we’re getting close.”

“Does he have an arrest record?”

“No.”

“That’s weird. If he’s a drug dealer...”

“Maybe he’s lucky, or maybe he hasn’t been a drug dealer very long. He’s our age.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, get ready. I’ll be there soon.”

Justin brushed his teeth, dressed, and exited his room, expecting to be greeted by Chico, but the apartment was silent. Justin checked Edwin’s bedroom. The bed was made with hospital corners. He went to the kitchen, ate a granola bar, drank a glass of water, and left the apartment. Justin waited out front for Grace to pick him up.

Edwin and Chico raced along the roadside toward the apartment, seemingly at a dead sprint. Edwin slowed to a walk at the parking lot, his hands behind his head, Chico dragging his leash, panting.

“Good morning,” Justin said, petting Chico.

“What are you doin’ out here?” Edwin asked, still sucking air.

“Waiting for Grace. We’re going to talk to this guy, Jimmy Conley. He was the same year as me, so you probably don’t know him.” Edwin was three years ahead of them in school.

“The drug dealer?” Edwin asked.

“Yeah. You know him?”

“You’re talkin’ to an addict. I know all the local dealers. You want some backup? This is a criminal you’re dealin’ with.”

“That’s a good point.”

“Do you even know what the neighborhood’s like?”

“I have no idea. Grace has the address.”

“Lemme get a quick shower, and I’ll come with you guys.”

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At 9:34 in the morning, Grace’s red Nissan crept through the rural neighborhood, avoiding potholes, the tires crunching gravel. Trailer homes, modular homes, and dilapidated farmhouses occupied unkempt lots with overgrown weeds and rusty trucks parked haphazardly. Several of the houses proudly featured yard signs and flags proclaiming to *Make America Great Again*.

From the front passenger seat, Justin pointed at a rusty mailbox with stickers indicating Jimmy’s house number. “I think it’s this one.”

Jimmy Conley’s house was secluded from the road by trees and blackberry brambles tangled with honeysuckle and multiflora rose.

“Park up here, along the road,” Edwin said, signaling from the back seat.

Grace parked her car along the road. They hiked up the gravel driveway, the tree canopy shading them from the sun. A shiny black Ford Mustang was parked in front of the double-wide trailer home.

Justin knocked on the door to the trailer, the flimsy door rattling. Jimmy opened the door bare-chested, wearing basketball shorts and slides. A marijuana leaf and a pistol were tattooed to his chest. A shamrock adorned his calf. His blond hair was disheveled, his beard stubbled, and his eyes dark-circled.

“What the fuck do you want?” Jimmy asked.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about Kristin Bennett?” Justin asked.

Jimmy tilted his head. “*Who?*”

“Kristin Bennett. The girl who went missing on August eighth.”

“I don’t know anything about that. Get the fuck off my porch.” Jimmy slammed his door shut, leaving them outside.

“He was hostile,” Justin said.

“We really need to talk to him,” Grace said.

“I’ll take care of this.” Edwin pointed to a large tree. “Go over there, behind that tree.”

“What are you doing?”

“Trust me.”

Justin and Grace hid behind the tree, but they peeked around the trunk, watching the front door.

Edwin banged on the door, hard enough to shake the door frame. Then he stood to the left side of the door, out of view of the door window. Jimmy exited the door, red-faced, vibrating, his handgun out front. In a split-second, Edwin reached under Jimmy’s wrist with his left hand and smacked the barrel of the handgun with his right hand at the same time, the countervailing pressure twisting the gun, breaking Jimmy’s trigger finger, and sending the handgun sliding across the porch.

Before Jimmy could react, Edwin gave the drug dealer an uppercut to the gut, sending him to his knees, wheezing for air, holding his right hand, his trigger finger bent at an odd angle. Edwin stood over Jimmy while the drug dealer whined and wheezed.

Jimmy finally said, “You broke my fucking finger.”

“You’re gonna answer our questions or I’ll break your face.”

“Ask your fucking questions, then.”

Edwin motioned for Justin and Grace to come to the porch. They emerged from behind the large oak tree and stepped to the porch. Jimmy staggered to his feet, still holding his right hand.

“My finger’s all fucked,” Jimmy said.

“Shut up. Nobody gives a shit,” Edwin replied. “Answer their questions.”

Jimmy glared at Edwin. “I know you from somewhere.”

“Answer their questions, unless you’d rather fight.”

“I’ll answer the questions.”

“Thought so.” Edwin gestured to Jimmy. “Go ahead. He’s ready to cooperate now.”

“I don’t know anything about the girl,” Jimmy said preemptively.

“We already know Kristin was at Larissa’s house on August eighth, and so were you,” Grace said.

“So what? I already told the police that. Doesn’t mean I had anything to do with her disappearance. She left Larissa’s perfectly fine. Left with some old man in a gray car.”

“What kind of car was it?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know. It was a regular car,” Jimmy replied.

“So not a Mercedes or a BMW?”

“No.”

“A Ford Taurus or a Toyota Camry?” Justin asked, thinking of common “regular” cars.

“I don’t know, bro.”

“Why were you at Larissa’s on August eighth?” Grace asked.

“Larissa called me,” Jimmy replied. “Wanted some drugs. So I went over there.”

“Was it just Larissa when you got there?”

Jimmy leaned against his house, his face pale. “I need to go to the hospital.”

“It’s a broken finger. Quit bein’ a bitch,” Edwin said. “Answer her question.”

“Larissa and that Kristin girl were there when I got there,” Jimmy said.

“Did you talk to Kristin?” Grace asked.

“No. I made my sale and left.”

“Did you see Chad Stevens or Troy Williamson there?”

“Yeah, I saw them before I left.”

Grace squinted at Jimmy. “You just said it was only Larissa and Kristin there.”

Jimmy motioned to Edwin. “This asshole’s got me all fucked up.”

“When did you see Chad and Troy?”

“They came after I got there. I don’t know the exact fucking time.”

“How did Chad act when he saw you?”

Jimmy shook his head. “Chad doesn’t like me because I used to bang Larissa in high school. He was pissed that I was there, and he left in a hurry,

which is prob'ly why the dumbass wrecked his car.”

“Did you have sex with Kristin?” Grace asked.

“No. I never touched that girl.”

“Did anyone have sex with Kristin?”

“Not that I saw.”

“We heard that Troy had sex with Kristin. Is that true?”

“Not that I saw.”

“What do you think happened to Kristin?”

“I know what happened to her. She drove off with some old man.”

“What did the old man look like?”

Jimmy shrugged. “I don’t fucking know. I didn’t get a good look at him.”

“You must’ve seen something to make you think he was old,” Grace said.

“Not really. Larissa said she thought he was an old man. He drove an old man car.”

“Do you think Larissa had something to do with Kristin’s disappearance?”

“Why would I think that? She was in the house with me when Kristin left with the old guy.”

“I thought you made your sale and left,” Justin said. “If you just made your sale and left, how did you see Kristin leave with the old man?”

Jimmy blew out a tired breath. “I stuck around and vaped and drank beer until Kristin left. Then I left. That’s everything I fucking know.”

On the way back to the car, Edwin removed the magazine from the handgun, ejected the round from the chamber, and chucked the handgun into the woods.

Once they were inside the Nissan, Grace said, “I think I know what happened to Kristin, and I’m worried that she’s dead.”

Justin nodded, his face pained. “I think I do too.”

They discussed their theories, which were identical.

“I really hope we’re wrong,” Grace said.

## SEVENTY-FOUR

## SOBERING

THEY DROVE FROM JIMMY'S TRAILER HOME TO LARRY'S RED BRICK rambler. Grace parked in the driveway. Larry's shiny red dump truck was there, but his Ford F-150 wasn't.

"Where could he be?" Justin asked. "He's obviously not working."

"I don't know. Lemme call him." Grace tried his cell phone, but it went straight to voicemail.

"Could be with the cops," Edwin said. "If they think he had somethin' to do with this, they'll keep him in interrogation until they get a confession or he cries for a lawyer."

"There's only one way to find out," Justin said.

They drove by the West Lebanon Police station on the way home. Larry's old Ford F-150 was in the parking lot.

"We'll have to call him later," Grace said.

They dropped off Edwin at Justin's apartment building so he could tend to Chico. Then, they drove to Grace's townhouse to figure out their next move.

On the way, Grace said, "Knowing what we know now, I think we need to check the real estate records of all the family members connected to our suspects. If they kidnapped Kristin, she could be at someone's hunting cabin or vacation property."

"Good idea," Justin said from the front passenger seat. "I also think we should look into any criminal family members. They're likely not

experienced kidnappers. I think there's a good possibility that they had help."

"I totally agree."

While researching real estate records and criminal records, Grace periodically called Larry, but he never answered or returned her messages.

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In the evening, Justin, Grace, and Edwin returned to Larry's house. He answered the door, bleary-eyed, and smelling like alcohol.

"What do you want?" Larry asked.

"I tried calling you," Grace replied.

"I turned off my phone. The goddamn media's been hasslin' me."

"How was the police department?"

"How did you know I was there?"

"We came by earlier. You weren't here, so we drove by the police station and saw your truck. We were worried about you."

Larry lifted his chin to Edwin. "Who's he?"

"Edwin Arroyo. He's a friend. You can trust him."

"The cops wanted me to take a goddamned polygraph." Larry rubbed his goatee. "They said if I did, it would rule me out as a suspect, so I did it, but it didn't change a damn thing. They think I did somethin' to Kristin to make her run away. They keep sayin' shit like it's okay to tell them what I did. But I didn't do nothin'. Fuckin' idiots."

"We've figured some things out over the last twenty-four hours. Can we come in?" Grace asked.

Larry left the door open as he staggered back into the house. They followed him, finally settling around the dining room table.

"We think we're getting really close to the truth," Grace said.

"Some of this will be hard to hear," Justin added.

"Give it to me straight," Larry replied.

"Here's what we know for sure, or at least we're fairly certain," Grace said. "On the night Kristin disappeared, Larissa had a birthday party at her house for Chad Stevens. This has been confirmed by multiple people. We also know that Kristin was seeing Chad behind Larissa's back, confirmed by the handwriting in the love letter. We know that Larissa invited Jimmy

Conley to the party early to supply drugs, and when he arrived, it was just him, Larissa, and Kristin. For some reason, Jimmy didn't simply make his drug deal and leave, as he was there when the birthday boy arrived, even though Larissa knew Chad despised Jimmy."

Justin said, "According to Carrie, we know that Troy arrived to the party early, likely after Jimmy, but before Chad and Carrie arrived. Carrie said that Larissa invited him over early to help move some furniture and to hang some decorations for the party. Carrie asked if they needed help, but Larissa declined, which is odd to me. Not to be stereotypical, but aren't women better at decorating than men?"

Grace nodded. "We believe Larissa wanted Carrie to arrive later than her boyfriend, Troy, and this decorating was just a ruse. We'll explain why in a minute."

Justin continued, "Chad arrived at the party and had an argument with Larissa, and he left angry. Carrie thought the fight was over Jimmy's presence at the party, but if Chad was in love with Kristin, why would he care about Larissa's ex? According to Carrie, Chad drove his car erratically, almost hitting her as she was arriving at the party. Then Chad died in that accident not too far from Larissa's house."

"I think I'm followin' so far," Larry said.

"Carrie also said Troy was having sex with someone in the downstairs bedroom." Grace addressed Larry. "My apologies, Larry, but based on Jimmy's account of Kristin being the only other girl there, we think it was likely Kristin in that bedroom."

Larry nodded, his face red and taut.

Grace continued, "Troy came out of the bedroom alone, but based on the circumstances, Carrie believed that he'd slept with another girl. So she broke up with him and left."

"This leaves Troy, Larissa, Jimmy, and likely Kristin in the house," Justin said. "We believe Larissa wanted revenge on Chad and Kristin for having an affair. This is where we're getting into speculation."

Justin and Grace shared their theory of what they thought happened to Kristin, which involved drugs, rape, kidnapping, and possibly murder. Larry grew paler as their theory reached its conclusion. Larry staggered to the bathroom. The old man retched, vomit splashing in the toilet water.

Grace winced.

"I hope we're wrong," Justin said.

“I just hope she’s still alive, which is looking less and less likely,” Grace whispered.

“That’s what I’m worried about too. I don’t know if it’s worse to never find her, or to find her dead?”

They went quiet as Larry returned from the bathroom. “Sorry about that. Please keep goin’. I have to know.”

Grace nodded and addressed Larry again. “Jimmy and Larissa both said that Kristin was running away from you, and she left with some old guy in a gray car.”

Larry hung his head. “That’s why the police are on my ass.”

“We think it’s bullshit,” Justin said. “With Chad’s father confirming the handwriting of the love letter, we don’t believe Kristin was seeing some old man too. Jimmy said that this is what he told the police, so we think this is the cover story that they all told.”

“Should we go to the police with all this?” Larry asked.

“That’s up to you,” Grace replied. “It concerns me that the police seem to have tunnel vision for *you*. I don’t know why they’re so eager to accept Larissa and Jimmy’s account. Maybe it’s laziness, but it feels like corruption. I don’t know.”

“I doubt the police can use this information, considering we obtained much of it illegally,” Justin said.

“Then what do we do? She could be out there hurt or in a cell somewhere,” Larry said, holding out his hands.

“We’ve already started searching,” Justin said. “From the background checks, we pulled up all the property records from everyone connected to either Larissa, Jimmy, or Troy. We found eleven cabins and vacation or rental homes in Pennsylvania, and two in northern Maryland that might be a good place to stash Kristin. We need to split up and start checking these.”

Larry stood from the table. “Let’s get goin’, then.”

Grace held up her hand. “Hold on. There’s more. As we said earlier, we think kidnapping might be over their heads, so we also checked for relatives that might be hardcore criminals. We figured someone who never kidnapped a person would want help from someone with experience. Larissa and Troy have squeaky clean family trees, but unsurprisingly, Jimmy has some shady family members.”

“Jimmy’s older brother is currently in prison for drug trafficking,” Justin said, “and he has two cousins with extensive rap sheets. Not

kidnapping. But armed robbery, burglary, and various drug offenses.”

“We need to be smart about this,” Larry said. “I know how to make an efficient delivery route. My girl’s life depends on it. How many addresses you got?”

Grace scanned her paper. “Thirteen in total. Ten of them are within ninety minutes of here, but we have three hunting cabins about four hours northwest. Also, two of the addresses are the primary residences for Jimmy’s cousins. The rest are vacation homes, rentals, and hunting cabins.”

“I have a few trucker friends I could call that live up north.”

“We have three cars between the three of us,” Grace said.

“Edwin could drive a car, if we rented another,” Justin said.

“No need,” Larry said. “He can drive my F-150. I’ll take my rig.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” Grace asked.

Larry frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You smell like alcohol.”

“After the shit you told me, I’m pretty damn sober.”

“Rakesh could help too. He has a car,” Justin said. “That would be five cars. Everyone would have two locations.”

Larry spread out an old-school map of Pennsylvania and the adjoining states on the table. He marked the locations on the map with a pen. Then he assigned two locations to each person.

Grace pointed to the two locations assigned to Justin, which were the primary residences of Jimmy’s cousins. “I don’t think Justin should go to a criminal’s house by himself.”

“I can go,” Edwin said.

“I want Justin or Grace askin’ the questions.” Larry addressed Edwin. “No offense.”

“Then put Justin and me together,” Edwin said.

“We’re runnin’ outta time.”

“To save time, Edwin and Justin can hit these hunting cabins separately”—Grace pointed at the black dots on the map—“Then they can get together before checking the cousins.”

“That’s fine with me,” Justin said.

“What if we get into a really dangerous situation?” Grace asked. “Should we be carrying weapons?”

“I have a huntin’ rifle,” Larry said. “I haven’t hunted in years, but I used to be a good shot.”

“I’ve never fired a gun,” Justin said.

“Me neither,” Grace said. “I do have pepper spray.”

“I’ve shot before on a range,” Edwin said, “but I’m not an expert.”

“There’s that 911 Rapid Response store in Annville. I bet they have Tasers,” Justin said.

## SEVENTY-FIVE

# MAX CONLEY

BY LUNCHTIME, THEY WERE ON THE ROAD SEARCHING FOR KRISTIN with Tasers on their hips. Larry had purchased the self-defense devices. Everyone had shared their cell phone numbers, so they were all connected by phone. Two trucker friends of Larry's were checking the three hunting cabins in northwestern Pennsylvania about four hours away. The remaining ten sites were within ninety minutes of West Lebanon. Grace drove her Nissan to two rental homes about forty miles to the east. Rakesh took his Ford Escape north to check two hunting cabins. Larry drove his dump truck south to inspect two vacation homes in northern Maryland. Edwin drove Larry's F-150 west to check a rental, then he was supposed to link up with Justin to visit Jimmy Conley's cousins.

Justin navigated his Kia along the twisting country road, passing farms with dilapidated barns and rusty trailer homes baking in the summer sun. He turned left onto a narrow gravel road, the forest encroaching on the roadsides. Shortly thereafter, he found the hunting cabin owned by Larissa's grandfather. He parked in front of the one-story stone hut. It appeared unoccupied.

Justin exited his car and circled the cabin, searching for signs of Kristin. He checked the outhouse, but it was empty. He peered into the windows of the cabin. The dusty wooden furniture faced a stone fireplace. Exposed wooden beams supported the roof. A double bed was shoved against the wall. Dust covered everything. *I don't think anyone's been here for years.*

He left the hunting cabin, driving toward the rendezvous location with Edwin. Along the way, he called Grace.

“Did you find anything?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know yet,” she replied. “I’m still driving to the Miles property in Quakertown. What about you?”

“Larissa’s grandfather’s hunting cabin was deserted. I don’t think anyone’s been there in a long time.”

“Damn. I thought that was our most promising lead.”

“Me too. I’m headed to meet Edwin now, so we can check out the Conley cousins.”

“Be careful. Let me know how it goes.”

“I will. You too.”

Justin found Max Conley’s house in a rural neighborhood of modular homes, log cabins, and trailers. The houses were generously spaced on weedy acre lots. It was Trump country, with many *Make America Great Again* signs and a few *Fuck Joe Biden* signs.

Justin parked along the dirt road, in the shade of an oak tree, with a view of Max Conley’s trailer home. The front yard was an open lawn, but the forest encroached on the back yard, and a strip of woods ran along the left side of the property, providing a buffer from the next-door neighbor. A green Dodge Ram 1500 was parked in the driveway. A dented Ford Focus was parked behind the pickup truck. He called Edwin.

“Are you close?” Justin asked.

“I’m fuckin’ lost,” Edwin replied. “I think I was goin’ the wrong way. Now I’m way too far west. There’s no GPS in Larry’s truck either.”

“When do you think you’ll be here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe an hour or two.”

“Two hours?”

“I gotta go. I need to pay attention to these signs.” Edwin disconnected the call.

“Shit.” *Two hours.* Justin eyed the trailer, wondering if he could approach it through the woods along the left side property line, which extended to the back yard, very near the trailer. He exited his car and trekked through the woods to Conley’s back yard.

He crouched at the edge of the wood line only thirty feet from the trailer, obscured by honeysuckle and the trunk of a Tree of Heaven. Faint screams came from inside the trailer. *Kristin.* Justin hurried to the

weathered deck, taking two steps up, then running to the back door. The woman shrieked. Justin twisted the knob, surprised that it was unlocked.

He crept inside, stained gray carpeting under his sneakers. The air was musty with smoke, marijuana, and sweat. A sagging couch and a frayed recliner faced a massive flat screen on the wall. His hand trembled as he grabbed his Taser from his holster. Sweat pooled under his arms and at his hairline. He followed the woman's cries of distress down the narrow hallway, toward the master bedroom.

Justin tiptoed to the end of the hall, his heart pounding. He took a deep breath, turned the knob, and pushed inside.

As he pushed into the bedroom, the woman said, "Gimme that dick, Daddy!"

The heavily-tatted, rail-thin woman was bent over the bed naked, Max Conley—a wiry young man with a beard—behind her, pumping. Justin froze like a deer in headlights. The woman saw Justin first and screamed in actual terror.

Max Conley's eyes bulged. "What the fuck?"

"I'm sorry." Justin bolted for the exit. Heavy footsteps lumbered after him. Justin fled through the back door, jumped off the short deck, turned left, and sprinted into the front yard. As he ran, he glanced over his shoulder.

A red-faced and naked Max Conley sprinted after him, vibrating, his penis leading the way, shouting, "I'm gonna fuck you up!"

As Justin raced toward his car, he glanced over his shoulder again and tripped on a groundhog hole. He rolled on the ground, but still held his Taser. Max Conley closed rapidly. Justin rose to one knee, facing Max, the naked man on an imminent collision course. Justin aimed his Taser at Max's chest and fired, but his aim was off and the prongs stuck into his penis. Fifty-thousand volts zapped Max's junk, dropping him like a stone. Max writhed and groaned, his body coursing with electricity.

Justin rose to his feet, dropped the Taser, and sprinted to his car. He hopped into his Kia, grabbed his keys from his pocket, and tried to insert his key into the ignition, but his hands were too shaky. He spotted Max Conley in his rearview mirror. Justin finally inserted his key and cranked the ignition. Max banged on the driver's side window, shouting obscenities, spittle flying from his mouth.

“I’m sorry!” Justin put his Kia into drive and slammed the accelerator, chirping the front tire as he drove away.

Max chased the Kia down the dirt road like a dog.

## SEVENTY-SIX

# BEN CONLEY

JUSTIN DROVE TOWARD THE OTHER CONLEY COUSIN'S HOUSE, TALKING to Grace along the way. She howled with laughter. He frowned at his phone in his cupholder, her laughs echoing through the speaker.

“I’m okay, if you’re wondering,” Justin said.

Her chuckles dissipated. “*Are you okay?*”

“Yeah, I’m fine. A little freaked out, but fine.”

“I can’t believe you tased his penis.”

“I wasn’t *trying* to tase his penis.”

Grace giggled.

“What about you? Did you find anything in Quakertown?”

“It was a young couple renting the place. I told them I used to live there when I was a kid, and they gave me a tour. Kristin’s definitely not there.”

“I’m headed to see the other Conley cousin. Hopefully, I’ll at least find a clue.”

“Wait for Edwin this time.”

“I will. I should go. I need to let Edwin know our meeting spot has changed.”

Justin called Edwin to let him know that he had already checked Max Conley’s house, so the meeting place was now Ben Conley’s house. He told him the story of tasing Max’s genitals, which Edwin found hilarious. Edwin said that it would be around ninety minutes until he reached the new meeting place.

Ben Conley's house was ten minutes away from Max's trailer. Ben's neighborhood was middle-class, with maple-tree-lined streets of modular homes, ramblers, and split-levels built in the 70s and 80s. Justin drove by Ben's house twice, checking the modular home with white siding, and a two-car detached garage. He parked in the shade of a maple two houses down. It didn't appear that anyone was home, but there might be a car in the garage.

Justin checked the clock on his phone—12:37. *It'll be at least eighty minutes before Edwin makes it here.* His stomach rumbled. All he'd had for breakfast was a granola bar. He called Rakesh to take his mind off Kristin, the wait for Edwin, and his rumbling stomach.

Rakesh had searched Troy's uncle's cabin, but found nothing. Justin entertained Rakesh with the story of tasing Max Conley's penis. When they said their goodbyes, it was 12:48. *Seventy minutes still to wait.*

Justin watched the road, waiting for someone to pull into Ben Conley's driveway. Justin thought, *I really don't think anyone's home. It is almost one on a Monday. He's probably at work. This is the perfect opportunity to look around.*

Justin strolled on the sidewalk in the shade of the maple trees. When he came upon Ben's driveway, he looked around, making sure he wasn't being watched, then he fast-walked up the driveway. He slipped behind the detached garage, the structure providing cover from the prying eyes of potential nosy neighbors.

He peered into the door window. A dozen or so safes of different sizes and styles were arranged in neat rows and covered one of the garage spaces. A work bench stood along the back wall, where an extensive collection of tools hung from pegboards. A large toolbox on wheels stood next to the work bench. A plastic bag from Lowes sat on the work bench, its contents partially visible—rope and duct tape. From the background check, Justin knew that Ben Conley had been arrested for burglary and drug possession twice.

*If he's a burglar, what's he doing with the rope and duct tape? It looks like he just bought it. For what? To restrain Kristin? Maybe they're planning on moving her.*

Justin crept to the back door of the modular home, walking on the paver patio, passing the gas grill and the fire pit. The back yard was secluded by the neighbor's privacy fence and fifteen-foot Arborvitae hedge. He peered

into the door window. The kitchen was to the left, the sink and counter littered with dirty dishes. The living room was to the right, open beer cans on the coffee table, the décor shabby country. He tried the doorknob, but it was locked. Justin inspected the patio, then he checked the fire pit, and grabbed the iron poker. He returned to the back door, his heart thumping, and jabbed at the lower right windowpane. The glass shattered. Justin looked around, making sure he wasn't being watched. Then he reached inside, unlocked the door, and entered the house.

It was dead quiet. His mouth was dry, his stomach queasy. He crept through the kitchen to the dining room. The wooden table was branded with burn marks. Two empty plastic bags and one partially filled with white powder sat on the table, along with a crack pipe, lighter, burnt spoon, a needle, and a syringe.

Justin climbed the stairs to the bedrooms, not expecting to find Kristin, but hoping to find a clue to her whereabouts. The guest bedrooms were sparsely furnished with double beds, the mattresses stained and uncovered. A used condom was on the floor in one of the rooms. The master bedroom was fully furnished with a king-sized bed, leather couch, a wooden dresser, and a television on the wall. Dirty clothes were strewn about the room. Justin searched the dresser drawers, finding drugs and cash rolled up and held together with a rubber band.

The rumble of a V8 engine approached the house. Justin padded to the window and parted the blinds. A black Dodge Charger parked in front. A white guy with his trucker hat canted to the side exited the vehicle, his cell phone to his ear. Justin figured it was likely Ben Conley, as he was a paler, uglier version of his brother. Ben entered through the front door, his voice carrying through the house.

*Shit.* Justin thought about hiding in a guest bedroom, but they were sparsely furnished, and he didn't want to walk down the hall, potentially alerting Ben Conley to his presence. Justin scanned the master bedroom for a hiding place, finally crawling under the king-sized bed.

“Fuck,” Ben shouted from downstairs. “That motherfucker broke my window.” Ben searched downstairs, likely determining if Justin had stolen anything. He kept talking on the phone, but not loud enough for Justin to understand what he said.

A few minutes later, Ben climbed the stairs and stepped to the master bedroom, still jabbering on the phone. “I gotta check my stash.” He rifled

through his drawer, finding the cash and drugs. “Looks like it’s all here. They don’t want money. They’re lookin’ for the girl.”

The person on the other end of the line said something inaudible. Justin figured he was likely talking to Max.

“I never should’ve helped Jimmy. I figured I could pass her off to the Russians, make a few bucks, and that’d be the end of it.”

Max said something else inaudible.

Ben’s boots appeared alongside the bed. “It ain’t just some kid with a Taser. Some Mexican motherfucker broke Jimmy’s finger. Jimmy swore he used to be in the UFC.” He sat on the bed above Justin, the box spring squeaking. “I don’t need this shit.”

Max said something.

“I don’t know,” Ben replied. “I gotta tell the Russians what’s goin’ on, which is gonna be a pain in the ass. Hold on. I’m puttin’ you on speaker.”

“You can’t send them a text?” Max asked, his voice loud and clear through the speaker.

Ben unlaced his boots while he talked. “I have a contact, but he doesn’t make serious decisions. They do serious business face to face. I’m sure I’ll have to meet one of the boss men. Not lookin’ forward to it. These guys are fuckin’ crazy.” Ben removed one of his boots, dumping it on the floor with a *thump*. “They’re gonna blame me for bringin’ this shit to ‘em.”

“Then don’t go. Pretend like everything’s good.”

“Can’t do that.” Ben removed his other boot. “If I don’t tell ‘em that these guys are onto us, and the police show up askin’ questions, I’m a dead man. Guaranteed. But if I warn ‘em, then I got a chance.”

“You want backup?” Max asked.

Ben shifted on the bed and farted. “You don’t want a piece a this. If they wanna hurt me, they’ll hurt me. You bein’ there won’t make a difference, unless you wanna get fucked up too.”

“Shit. That sucks, bro.”

“Yeah. Fuckin’ Jimmy and his bullshit.” Ben farted again. “I gotta take a shit. I’ll call you back.”

Justin waited for Ben to go to the bathroom, then he shimmied out from under the bed, and crawled out of the room. He tiptoed along the hallway, then down the stairs, and out the back door. He crept around the house to the front, and patted his pocket, making sure he had his keys. House sparrows squawked and fought over space behind the shutters of the house.

Justin eyed the Dodge Charger, an idea coming to him. He rushed to the car and fished his keys from his pocket. He removed the Apple AirTag by detaching the carabiner clip from his keychain. Then, he shimmied on his back under the back end of the Hemi-powered machine and clipped the AirTag to the frame with the carabiner clip.

## SEVENTY-SEVEN

# SHADY PEOPLE

AS SOON AS JUSTIN WAS SAFELY OUT OF BEN CONLEY'S neighborhood, he called everyone, letting them know of the break in the case. It took almost two hours for everyone to arrive at the Sheetz gas station near Ben Conley's house. Everyone except Larry, who was stuck in traffic in Maryland, and still fifty miles south of them. They congregated in a corner booth of the convenience store.

A handful of customers ate MTO subs in the dining area, including Justin, who hadn't eaten since his breakfast granola bar, and Edwin, who hadn't eaten anything since dinner the night before. Rakesh and Grace monitored the AirTag on Justin's cell phone.

"After a few hours, this guy will be notified by Apple that an AirTag is tracking him," Rakesh said. "After twenty-four hours, it starts beeping. I can get anonymous tracking devices if you ever need to track someone again."

Justin and Edwin nodded, their mouths full.

"He's moving," Rakesh said.

They hurried from the convenience store. Justin and Edwin dropped their half-eaten subs in the trash. They doubled up, Justin driving his Kia with Rakesh in the front passenger seat and Grace driving her Nissan with Edwin. Rakesh was monitoring the cell phone, tracking the AirTag, and Grace had offered to call Larry, to let him know where they were headed.

They followed the AirTag on Ben Conley's Dodge Charger from his rural home to the highway, never actually seeing the Charger. They traveled south on US Route 522 for about two miles, then they took the Pennsylvania Turnpike forty-nine miles east, passing the small city of Carlisle.

"It looks like he's going to Harrisburg," Rakesh said, watching the AirTag on Justin's cell phone. Rakesh pointed to the upcoming exit. "Take 15 North."

Justin took the exit, driving north for five miles and crossing the Susquehanna River at the Harvey Taylor Bridge. They crossed Front Street. Justin recognized the area. Just south of them was the homeless encampment where Edwin used to live. They passed the State Museum of Pennsylvania, its circular façade and weathered concrete innovative or dystopian depending on the sun or lack thereof, then the blocky Commonwealth Keystone Building, followed by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.

Beyond the Capitol Complex, they drove over the industrial yard for Conrail, then beyond warehouses, and into a mixed residential and commercial zone, with dilapidated row homes, small shopping centers, and restaurants.

The AirTag stopped.

Justin and Rakesh arrived a minute later at a little shopping center with a Chinese restaurant, a smoke shop, and a dry cleaner. The Dodge Charger was parked in front of Designer Dry Cleaning. A shiny black Mercedes G-Wagon sat two spaces over, by far the nicest car in the neighborhood. Justin parked in front of the adjacent Chinese restaurant. Grace pulled up next to him, and she and Edwin got out.

Edwin slid into the back seat of the Kia. "I bet that's the boss man's G-Wagon."

Grace crept toward Designer Dry Cleaning.

"What's she doing?" Justin asked.

"I don't know," Edwin replied.

Grace peered into the shop window, then hurried back, entering the back seat of the Kia. "Ben's talking to some big dude in a suit. We need to hear what they're saying."

Justin addressed Rakesh. "Do you have a listening device or something we could put in there?"

“Why would I have that?” Rakesh replied. “If you needed that, you should’ve told me before.”

“We could put a phone in there,” Grace said. “Somebody call me.”  
Justin called Grace.

She swiped right. “Mute your microphone.”  
Justin muted his microphone.

Grace exited the car with her phone in hand.

“*Shit*,” Justin said. “What if Jimmy gave Ben a description of Grace?”

“Too late to stop her,” Edwin said, as Grace entered the dry cleaners.

They listened through Justin’ phone.

A bell jingled.

“Can I help you?” said a man with a Russian accent.

“Hi. I was looking for a new dry cleaner,” Grace said. “The other one, I won’t use any names, ruined my favorite dress. Can you believe that?”

“This is no good. There are many bad dry cleaners.”

“I was wondering if you had a brochure or a card or something I could show my roommate. She uses the same dry cleaner, and she wants to change too.”

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Grace said, “Thank you.”

A bell jingled again.

The Russian man said something in his native tongue.

Another voice replied in Russian. It sounded harsh. The first man responded.

Then a new voice said, in accented English, “What is the problem?”

Grace entered the car. Everyone listened intently to the phone.

Ben Conley replied, “I don’t know if there’s a problem, but these people have been askin’ questions about the girl. They came to my house.”

“Who are these people?” the new voice asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Police?”

“I don’t think so. They might be family or maybe friends of the girl.”

“Then they are nothing.”

“That’s what I thought, but I still wanted to bring this—”

“Shut up. When I was boy in USSR, I learned many things. I saw girls taken, sold, sent around world to pleasure rich men. Do you know why these girls are same?”

“No, sir.”

“They have no family to fight for them. People say they fight for family, but they lie. They not ready to die for family. They are cowards. Do you think girl has family ready to die for her?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Then we have no problems.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But if we have problems, *you* have problems. Understand?”

Ben’s voice quivered. “Yes. Yes, sir.”

“Good. You go now. Do not come back.”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Shit*,” Justin said, exiting his car.

“What?” Grace asked.

But Justin was already running for Ben’s car. He was too late. Ben had already departed the dry cleaners, so Justin hid behind the back wheel of the G-Wagon while Ben started his Dodge Charger and drove away.

Justin returned to his Kia.

“What happened? Are you crazy?” Grace asked from the back seat.

“I wanted to move the AirTag to the Mercedes,” Justin said. “I don’t think Ben’s gonna lead us to Kristin, but this Russian boss might.”

“They sell them at Best Buy,” Rakesh said. “I can go there while you guys watch the G-Wagon.”

“Good idea.”

“You can take my car.” Grace handed Rakesh her keys.

Rakesh took the keys and left.

“I guess we can end this call,” Justin said, disconnecting the call.

“I need to go in there and see if I can snag my phone,” Grace said.

“Could blow our cover.”

“Wait a little bit, and I’ll grab it,” Edwin said.

A few minutes later, four Russian men left Designer Dry Cleaning. They were all massive muscular men, except for the older man they orbited. He was tall and thin, his salt-and-pepper hair slicked back with a thick goatee to match.

“*Shit*. They’re leaving,” Justin said.

“I don’t think we can get your phone,” Edwin said.

“Forget the phone,” Grace said. “Follow them.”

Justin started his car. “I’ve seen that guy before.”

“Which one?” Grace asked.

“The old guy. That’s Sergey Petrov. He runs the Russian Mafia around here.”

“How do you know that?”

“I had a friend who knew some shady people.”

## SEVENTY-EIGHT

# ON THE TAKE

JUSTIN DROVE HIS KIA, FOLLOWING THE G-WAGON AT A SAFE distance, the tall, black, boxy vehicle easy to see, even with two cars in front of them. Grace sat in the front passenger seat. Edwin was in the back. They followed the truck northwest, deep into the Pennsylvania wilderness.

While driving, Grace called Larry using Justin's phone, told him where they were headed, and that they thought Kristin was taken by the Russian Mafia. She recapped the situation at the dry cleaners. Larry told them not to engage with the mobsters. Unfortunately, they were driving away from Larry. He was about an hour southeast of their location.

The G-Wagon turned off the two-lane country road and stopped in front of a chain link fence, with barbed wire on top. The woods partially obscured a warehouse beyond the gate. Justin drove past, not wanting to be spotted. In the rearview mirror, the gate opened automatically, and the G-Wagon proceeded inside. Justin did an illegal U-turn and parked on the roadside about four hundred yards from the gate.

Everyone vacated the Kia and cut through the woods. The afternoon sun was high in the sky, sunbeams piercing the forest canopy. As they neared the chain link fence, the warehouse came into view, with three tractor trailers parked along the back, and several loading docks. They stood on the edge of the wood line, outside the chain link fence with three lines of barbed wire on top, and concealed by the honeysuckle woven through the fence. They didn't see any men outside, but cameras dotted the boxy metal

warehouse. They hiked along the fence line to get a view of the front. The G-Wagon was parked there. A sign on the warehouse read *Oriental Rug Emporium*.

“I don’t like this place,” Edwin said.

“Neither do I,” Justin replied.

Grace called Larry, giving him the coordinates of their location—using the GPS app on Justin’s phone—along with the name of the business. Larry wanted to call the police.

“But what if she’s not here?” Grace asked. “Then she’ll be gone forever.”

“This is over our heads,” Larry replied through the cell phone speaker. “I’m callin’ the cops.”

“They can’t search the place without a warrant.”

“You can’t search it either. If it’s Russian Mafia, they’ll kill you.”

“Okay, I’ll tell everyone.” Grace disconnected the call. “It’s over. He’s calling the police.”

Justin breathed a sigh of relief. “Let’s hope she’s in there.”

The cell phone in Grace’s hand buzzed. “It’s Rakesh.” She answered the phone.

“Where are you guys?” Rakesh asked, loud enough to hear through the speaker. “What’s going on?”

Grace brought Rakesh up to speed, and gave him their coordinates. She told him to park on the main road where they had parked. When she ended the call, she returned the phone to Justin.

“What do we do now?” Justin asked.

“Wait for the police to come?” Edwin asked.

“What if the police don’t find her? They won’t have a warrant, even if she is here,” Grace said. “Seems like we should keep an eye on that G-Wagon at least. Maybe we can stick an AirTag on it when Rakesh gets here.”

“How do we get over this fence and across the parking lot without being seen by cameras?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know, but maybe we can figure it out before Rakesh gets here.”

Edwin glanced at Grace’s sweatshirt. “If we put your sweatshirt on that barbed wire, I can climb that fence pretty easy, but they’ll see me on the cameras.”

“What about the front gate?” Justin asked. “When the G-Wagon leaves, it’ll have to stop at the gate while it opens. Are there cameras at the gate?”

“I don’t know,” Grace replied.

“I’ll check it out.” Edwin left, cutting through the forest along the fence line, but still concealed by the brambles and honeysuckle growing on the fence.

Justin and Grace watched the G-Wagon and the front of the warehouse.

Edwin returned a few minutes later. “Two cameras at the gate, but they look like they’re pointed out.”

“Then we can slap an AirTag on the G-Wagon when it stops at the gate,” Justin said.

“Maybe. It’s risky. There’s about twenty feet of grass along both sides of the road, so I’d be exposed. I think the only way I could do it would be at night.”

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Justin’s phone buzzed. He answered.

“I just parked behind your car. Where are you guys?” Rakesh asked.

“I’ll come get you,” Justin replied.

“All right. I’ll wait for you.”

Justin met Rakesh and led him back through the woods to their hiding place just outside the fence of the Oriental Rug Emporium.

Rakesh reached into his pocket and retrieved an Apple AirTag. He held it up by the carabiner clip. “The cover is magnetic. I thought it might be useful to stick to a car.”

“Thanks, Rakesh,” Justin said. “Good idea.”

“Give it to Edwin,” Grace said. “Not sure if we’ll use it, though. Larry called the police, and we’re waiting to see what happens when they show up.”

Rakesh handed the AirTag to Edwin. “We need to connect it to somebody’s phone.”

Justin handed Rakesh his phone. “Put it on mine.”

Rakesh worked his magic while the others watched the warehouse.

A police cruiser stopped at the front gate.

“Here we go,” Edwin said.

The gate opened and the police cruiser motored to the warehouse, then parked two spaces down from the G-Wagon. A single police officer exited the car and marched to the front door. A large man opened the door and ushered him inside.

“What the hell?” Edwin asked.

“I don’t like this,” Justin said.

“I was expecting like ten cop cars and sirens and guns,” Grace said, frowning. “I should’ve known better.”

A few minutes later, the policeman left the warehouse escorted by Sergey Petrov. Both men were vibrating as Petrov handed the officer a thick envelope, and they shook hands. The policeman entered his cruiser and drove away.

“This is so fucked up,” Grace said.

“That cop’s on Petrov’s payroll,” Edwin said.

“Petrov and the cop were both vibrating,” Justin said to Grace, low, so only she heard.

## SEVENTY-NINE

# KING OF THE ROAD

SHORTLY AFTER THE CROOKED COP LEFT THE WAREHOUSE, EIGHT muscular men in dark suits hurried from the building, entered two black Cadillac Escalade SUVs, and drove to the rear of the warehouse. Everyone ran along the fence line to see what was happening behind the warehouse. A white panel van parked next to the loading dock. The black SUVs idled near the van, one in front, and one behind. Another man in a dark suit exited the van and opened the rear doors. Then he climbed the stairs next to the loading dock, and banged on the metal door.

The door opened and five young women evacuated the warehouse in a single-file line. One of them had her hands bound. *Kristin*.

“That’s her,” Grace said, breathless.

“Holy shit,” Edwin whispered.

Another beefy man in a dark suit escorted them into the back of the van, and shut the doors behind them. The other man rushed back to the driver’s seat of the van. Then the caravan sped toward the front gate.

“They’re leaving,” Grace said.

“We have to follow them,” Justin said.

The four of them sprinted through the forest back to their cars. Justin drove with Edwin in his Kia, and Grace drove with Rakesh in her Nissan.

Justin was in the lead, speeding toward the gate on the two-lane road.

“We’ll either catch them, or we’ll see them going the other way,” Justin said.

They passed the gate and shortly thereafter saw the caravan in the distance, just before a tight corner.

Edwin talked to Grace and Rakesh on speakerphone while they drove, keeping them updated, and making plans on the move.

“Should we call the police again?” Justin asked.

“Can we trust them?” Grace asked through the speakerphone. “That cop was crooked. They might warn the Russians that we’re tailing them.”

“I’ll call Larry, see what he thinks. Maybe we can call the state police.”

The caravan drove on the country road at the speed limit, headed for the highway. Justin kept his distance, staying one hundred yards back from the caravan, not wanting to blow their cover.

Edwin kept his phone connected to Rakesh’s phone, while Justin called Larry, tapping his contact from a recent call, and also putting his phone on speaker.

“I’m almost there,” Larry said, in lieu of a greeting. “Are the police there yet?”

“The police already left,” Justin replied. “They didn’t do anything. I think the local cops are corrupt. As soon as the officer left, the Russians put five girls in a white van, and now they’re driving toward the interstate. One of them was Kristin. We saw her.”

“Don’t let ’em get away,” Larry said, his voice tight.

“We won’t, but there’s a serious problem. Two black SUVs are driving with the van—one in back, one in front. The SUVs each have four Russian mobsters in them, and there’s two more in the van. I’m sure they all have guns.”

“Where are you exactly?”

“We’re on Sand Mountain Road headed toward 322.”

“Let me know when you get to 322.”

“Should be there soon.”

Thirty seconds later, the caravan turned right onto US Route 322.

“They’re headed south on 322,” Justin said. “What do we do? Should we call the state police?”

“Yeah. Call ’em, and don’t lose that caravan. I’m driving north on 22. Should meet you in about twenty minutes. Call me back when you have a chance.”

Justin called 911, thinking that his emergency would be routed to the Pennsylvania State Police, considering they were on the highway. Justin

explained the situation to the operator, stressing the danger with ten armed mobsters, and that five underaged girls were being trafficked. Justin wasn't sure about the four young ladies who seemed to be willing participants, but he didn't want to lessen the emergency response by downplaying the trafficking. As they drove, Justin told the operator exactly where they were, and where they were headed.

"An officer is in pursuit," the operator said. "Please stay on the line."

The caravan stayed in the right lane, driving the speed limit. They descended a steep decline, no sign of any state troopers. They passed a deep blue lake, Laurel Creek Reservoir on their left, a cliff face on their right.

A minute later, the decline flattened and Justin followed the highway, bending left around the lake. As the highway straightened, a police cruiser, with its siren blaring and lights rotating, appeared in the distance, approaching the caravan from the opposite lane at a high rate of speed. When the cruiser neared the caravan, it slowed, crossed the grassy median, and pursued them from behind. Justin drove his Kia behind the police cruiser, keeping a safe distance. Grace still tailed them in her Nissan.

The police cruiser caught the caravan quickly, as the three vehicles traveled at the speed limit. Much to Justin's surprise, the caravan pulled over on the shoulder, the police cruiser parking behind them. Justin narrated the scene for the 911 operator, who urged them to keep their distance from the potentially dangerous situation.

Justin eased into the left lane as he passed the police cruiser and the caravan, with Grace driving close behind. They drove beyond the scene about a quarter mile, just around the bend, and parked along the roadside. Justin told the operator what they were doing.

"Please stay back, sir," the operator replied.

Everyone exited the Kia and the Nissan. The foursome hiked around the corner, so they could see the caravan in the distance. A second police cruiser approached the scene at a high rate of speed, also crossing the grassy median, and joining the first police cruiser. One of the officers barked orders through the speaker on his cruiser.

"Stay in your vehicles. Do not move," the officer said.

"They're waiting for more backup," Grace said.

All four doors of both SUVs opened simultaneously, eight mobsters exiting the Cadillac Escalades, not with pistols, but with AK-47s in hand. The men fanned out and rapid-fired at the officers, the bullets shredding the

cruisers, the officers ducking down in their seats. The mobsters moved methodically, surrounding the police cruisers, and bombarding them with rifle fire. Glass shattered, tires popped, smoke came from the hoods of the cruisers. The occasional car drove by the scene, using the left lane to avoid the mobsters. A few cars drove over the grassy median and went north on 322 to avoid them.

Justin gave the 911 operator the play by play. The rifle fire stopped and several mobsters approached the cruisers, peering into the vehicles. They fired another volley of bullets at point-blank range.

“I think the officers are dead,” Justin said.

The 911 operator was silent.

The mobsters scurried back to their SUVs.

“We can’t let them get away,” Grace said.

Justin disconnected the call and they ran to their cars. As the caravan zoomed by, Justin mashed on his accelerator, his little four-cylinder engine revving and whining, with Grace and Rakesh right behind them in the Nissan. Edwin’s phone sat in the cupholder, still connected to Rakesh’s phone on speaker. Justin handed his phone to Edwin and asked him to call Larry to let him know what had happened.

Edwin called Larry on speaker and said, “They killed the cops. We’re following them south on 322.”

“Where are you?” Larry asked, his voice strained.

Justin spotted the caravan in the distance. They were speeding at one hundred miles per hour, slowly gaining ground on the mobsters.

“Hold on.” Edwin tapped on the GPS app. Edwin looked around while the app loaded, but didn’t see any exits or landmarks. “We’re past the lake.” The app loaded, and Edwin watched their dot move on 322. “We just passed over Oak Street. Looks like we’re coming up on Old 322.”

“I know where you are. I’m headed north on 322. I’m close.” Larry paused for a second. “How far apart are the SUVs and the van?”

“I don’t know,” Justin interjected. “We’re trying to get closer.”

“How fast are they going?”

“Very fast. Eighty-five. Ninety, maybe.”

“Can you catch ’em in the next two minutes?”

“I think so.” Justin floored his accelerator, pushing the speedometer to 110, the engine screaming. He veered into the left lane, Grace following behind him.

“Can you fit your car between the lead SUV and the van?”

Justin and Edwin glanced at each other.

“Probably,” Justin said. “Why do you wanna do that?”

“Church Hill is coming up in about a mile and a half. When you pass the exit for Church Hill, I want you to position your car between the lead SUV and the van.”

“Then what?” Justin asked, his heart beating a mile a minute.

“Then you’ll need to brake and slow down that van, because I’m gonna take out that lead SUV.”

“Oh, shit,” Edwin said.

“They’ll just go around me,” Justin said.

“Not if we block the other lane,” Grace said, through the speakerphone.

“Good idea, Grace,” Larry said.

“I don’t know about this,” Justin said as they neared the caravan. “Why don’t we wait until they stop?”

“They got the advantage if we wait until they stop. They got the guns. On the road, I got the advantage, and I ain’t about to let ’em drive away with my daughter.”

Justin glanced at Edwin, who nodded. “We’re in.”

“So are we,” Grace said through the speakerphone.

“This is crazy,” Rakesh said.

“We’re in,” Grace said again.

“We just saw the sign for Church Hill,” Edwin said.

“Get into position,” Larry shouted. “I’m almost there.”

Justin passed the rear SUV at over one hundred miles per hour.

“Almost there,” Justin said, gripping the steering wheel.

“I’ll tell you when to brake,” Larry said.

“Got it.”

Justin passed the van. Grace kept pace, nearly tailgating the Kia. Justin veered into the right lane, squeezing between the van and the lead SUV. The van honked its horn repeatedly. Grace pulled up alongside Justin so the van couldn’t escape.

“We’re in position!” Edwin said, gripping the armrest, his muscles taut.

“Brake!” Larry shouted.

Justin and Grace braked in unison, causing the van to brake, tires squealing, the vehicle nearly rear-ending Justin’s Kia, and the rear SUV

nearly rear-ending the van. The lead SUV slowed, but still separated from the pack by two hundred yards or so.

“Oh my God,” Grace said.

Larry drove his big red dump truck across the grassy median, coming the wrong way, smashing the lead SUV head on. The Peterbilt dump truck obliterated the Cadillac Escalade, the four men inside likely dead on impact. Plastic, metal, glass, and bloody body parts littered the road. Justin and Grace came to a dead stop, forcing the van and the rear SUV to also stop. A few cars and trucks slowed and stopped behind them.

Larry and his dump truck kept coming, driving the wrong way on the inside shoulder. When he neared the traffic, he made a hard right into the grassy median to set up the hard left he needed to T-bone the rear SUV. Justin watched in his rearview mirror as Larry smashed into the side of the Cadillac Escalade, pushing it off the highway, then rolling it into a ditch, the SUV now upside down.

Several vehicles that had queued behind them reversed and fled the scene, driving across the grassy median to the northbound lanes of 322. The van driver gunned their engine, trying to drive around Justin and Grace, headed for the left-hand shoulder.

“They’re trying to get away!” Grace shouted.

Justin and Grace mirrored the van, and blocked the shoulder on the left, but the van slammed into the back of Justin’s car, pushing the vehicle forward. Justin slammed on the brakes, trying to keep the van in place. Edwin powered down his window, the AirTag in hand. A mobster leaned out the front passenger window of the van and fired a handgun at Justin’s Kia, shattering the back window. Justin and Edwin ducked down.

The van squeezed between the Kia and Nissan, scraping the sides of the compact cars. At the same time, the mobster in the front passenger seat opened fire on Grace’s Nissan, peppering the compact car with bullets. Grace and Rakesh ducked down in their seats. As the van passed Edwin, he reached out the passenger window and slapped the magnetic AirTag to the side of the van.

More vehicles from the backed-up traffic crossed the grassy median to escape the carnage.

The van accelerated away from the scene, driving through and over the debris from the initial crash.

“They’re getting away,” Grace said through the speakerphone.

“I put on the AirTag,” Edwin replied.

Larry backed up his dump truck, doing a three-point turn to right himself again.

“Rakesh is shot!” Grace shouted.

Justin peered to his right, seeing Rakesh slumped in his seat, his shirt soaked with blood. “*Shit.* Is he okay?”

“I don’t know. I have to get him to a hospital,” Grace said.

Bullets ripped into both compact cars. In the rearview mirror, two mobsters had emerged from the overturned SUV, and staggered toward them firing their AK-47s.

Grace sped away from the scene, using the shoulder to avoid the debris and human body parts. “I’m going to the hospital. Don’t let them get away.”

Justin mashed on the accelerator too, also using the shoulder, and leaving the mobsters in the dust. Larry was right behind them, his dump truck still intact after two collisions, those chrome bumper bars coming in handy.

“Is everyone okay?” Larry asked over the speakerphone.

“I don’t know. Rakesh was shot,” Justin said.

A moment of silence passed between them.

“I’m sorry,” Larry said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but we need to find that van. I don’t know where they’re goin’, and I don’t see ‘em. This rig ain’t built for speed.”

Edwin grabbed Justin’s phone. “We have a tracker on it. Follow us.”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“It’s magnetic.” Edwin opened the AirTag app on Justin’s phone. “They’re not that far ahead.”

“Where are they going?” Justin asked.

“Still south on 322.”

A few miles down the highway, the fuel light flashed red.

“What the hell?” Justin said. “I just filled up.”

“I bet there’s a bullet hole in the gas tank,” Edwin said.

The Kia sputtered, losing power. Justin guided his car to the shoulder.

Edwin spoke into the speakerphone. “Larry—”

“I heard,” Larry replied. “I’ll pick you up.”

Larry picked them up on the roadside, the van putting more distance between them. Justin and Edwin climbed into the cab. Larry put the rig into gear, diesel smoke pumping from the twin stacks.

Edwin watched the AirTag app. “They just got off the highway.”

“Where are they going?” Justin asked.

“I think it’s an airport. Is there an airport around here?”

“A little one,” Larry replied. “Mifflin County Airport.”

“I bet they’re flying on a private plane,” Edwin said.

“If she gets on that plane, she’s gone,” Justin said.

Larry stomped the accelerator, pushing the big dump truck to the limit.

## EIGHTY

# SHOOTOUT AT THE AIRPORT

JUSTIN CALLED 911 AND TOLD THEM THAT THE WHITE VAN trafficking five underaged girls was headed to the airport.

“Please send as many police cars as you can to Mifflin County Airport. They’re armed with AK-47s.” Justin disconnected the call.

Nine-one-one called back, but Justin silenced his phone as Larry exited US Route 322 to State Route 655. The AirTag stopped moving at the airport as expected. Larry shifted gears and mashed the accelerator, passing a firehouse on the left. A cornfield was on their right, the stalks waving in the breeze.

“I think we missed the turn,” Edwin said, his eyes on the phone screen, viewing the AirTag app.

“God damn it. You’re right.” Instead of making a five-point-turn on the narrow country road, Larry drove around the block.

Edwin pointed out the turn they’d missed. Larry turned left and gunned the engine, black smoke spilling from the stacks. They passed another cornfield on their left, and an animal hospital and a granary on their right.

Edwin gestured to the upcoming fork in the road. “Go right. That’s Airport Road.”

Thirty seconds later, they barreled into the Mifflin County Airport parking lot, the terminal on their left. Larry slammed on the brakes. A chain-link fence separated the parking lot from the single empty runway. Three cars were in the lot, but no van.

“Where the hell did they go?” Larry asked.

“I think they’re in one of these buildings,” Edwin replied, scanning the AirTag app.

“They’re probably in a hangar, boarding,” Justin said.

Larry reached behind his seat, grabbed his scoped hunting rifle, and departed the dump truck. Justin and Edwin departed too. Edwin used the AirTag app to lead them to the farthest hangar, about two hundred yards from the parking lot. The van was parked alongside the building. The *whoosh* of propellers came from the hangar. They crept alongside the hangar as a private plane emerged, headed toward the runway.

Two mobsters came around the corner, AK-47s in hand. Edwin, Justin, and Larry froze like deer in headlights. The mobsters halted for a beat, processing the scene. Then they raised their rifles. Justin bolted first, seeing them vibrate before firing. They sprinted back the way they came as gunshots snapped over their heads.

Once they were around the corner, the building shielding them from the mobsters, Larry shouted, “We have to stop that plane!”

They raced to the dump truck, Larry huffing and puffing, lagging behind.

Back in the truck, Larry was red-faced, still sucking air as he reversed his truck. Then, he slammed it into first gear, and mashed the accelerator, headed for the locked gate. They burst through, the chain-link gate ripped off its hinges by the 20,000-pound dump truck.

The twin engine turboprop plane taxied toward the runway, almost in position for takeoff. Larry drove across the access road and turned right onto the runway as the plane zoomed toward them, intent on climbing to the safety of the sky. They were on a collision course, the plane and the dump truck at full throttle. Larry pulled his horn, giving the plane a warning, hoping that it might stop.

It was a game of chicken that neither player planned to lose.

“You’ll kill everyone!” Justin shouted, gripping the armrest.

“Brace yourself.” Larry pulled the horn one more time, but the plane accelerated. At the last second, Larry veered to the left and smashed into the plane’s wing and propeller, breaking both, and causing the plane to do a half-spin and then stop dead.

Steam came from the truck’s engine bay, broken pieces of the propeller stuck into the hood. The plane and the truck were still. Larry grabbed his

hunting rifle from behind the passenger seat, vibrating as he got out.

“Wait for the police,” Justin called out to his back.

Justin and Edwin exited too, armed with a single Taser between the two of them.

Larry knelt behind the back corner of his dump truck, his rifle aimed at the plane door. Justin and Edwin crept up behind him, shielded from view by the truck.

The plane door opened, the top of the door touching the tarmac, and providing stairs for the passengers to exit. It was dead quiet except for the steam coming from Larry’s truck. Several seconds felt like minutes. A mobster in a black suit finally emerged with an AK-47. Larry waited until the mobster stopped at the bottom of the steps, then fired. The .308 round penetrated the man’s heart, dropping him like a stone. Larry worked the bolt action, ejecting the spent casing, and chambering another round.

The van raced toward them, coming from the hangar. Larry took his eye off the door, checking the approaching van. While he looked away, another Russian mobster had departed the plane, and began firing on the dump truck with his AK-47. They huddled behind the truck, bullets pinging off the stainless-steel dump body.

The van turned broadside and parked fifty feet away, the dump truck now sandwiched between the plane and the van. Faint sirens blared in the distance. Two more armed mobsters exited the van with AK-47s. Larry aimed his rifle at the men, firing and dropping another man. The remaining mobster fired a barrage of bullets in their direction, hitting Larry.

Justin and Edwin scrambled under the dump truck. The mobster from the plane neared the truck. Edwin drew his Taser and fired from his low position, the prongs biting into the man’s thigh. Edwin sent 50,000 volts of electricity into the man. He fell awkwardly, dropping his rifle to the tarmac. Justin picked up the rifle and circled the dump truck, his head pounding, and his vision blurry. As soon as he peeked around the corner, he came face to face with the mobster from the van, no more than ten feet away.

Justin pulled the trigger, the AK-47 firing wildly from his hip. A starburst of white-hot pain came from his brain, blinding him, and sending him to the tarmac. Everything went black.

Shortly thereafter, his eyes fluttered. His head pulsed with pain. The AK-47 lay on the ground next to him. The mobster was slumped on his side in front of him, a pool of blood from his neck spreading on the tarmac.

Sirens approached.

Justin rose to his feet and staggered to Larry, who sat with his back against the rear wheel of his truck. His head lolled to the side. His shirt was stained with blood. Justin couldn't tell how many times he'd been shot.

Larry said, "Kristin. Tell her... I love her."

Justin knelt and took Larry's hand. "You tell her."

"I will... take blame... everything."

"Don't worry about that."

Police cars surrounded them. A fire truck and two ambulances parked behind the police, lights flashing. The cops aimed their shotguns at them over the hoods of their cruisers. Edwin dropped the Taser and raised his hands over his head, the incapacitated mobster at his feet.

Justin raised his hands over his head and shouted, "He needs medical care!"

But the police ordered them to lie on their stomachs, their hands interlaced behind their heads. Once they'd done that, police officers approached them, cuffed them, and searched them.

"He needs a doctor," Justin said to the officer.

Instead of getting Larry a doctor, they forced him on the tarmac and handcuffed him.

Justin lay on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind his back. More police officers rushed past them, headed for the plane. Shortly thereafter, five girls emerged from the plane, along with a pilot and co-pilot. Kristin was among them.

Justin turned his head to Larry. His eyes were closed. Justin wondered if the old truck driver was still alive. "You saved your daughter. She's safe." If Larry died, Justin wanted those words to be the last he heard.

Justin, Edwin, and one mobster were hoisted to their feet and led to separate police cruisers, their hands cuffed behind their backs. Through the window of the cruiser, Justin watched paramedics finally working on Larry. Kristin surveyed the wreckage and ran toward her father's truck, but a police officer grabbed her. She pointed to the truck and argued with the officer. The paramedics hoisted Larry onto a gurney and wheeled him toward the ambulance. He breathed through an oxygen mask. Justin was relieved to see an oxygen mask over his face instead of a sheet. As they moved Larry from behind his truck, Kristin spotted him from her location near the airplane.

She sprinted to her father. The police converged on her, holding her back from the gurney. She cried and begged, the police finally letting her into the back of the ambulance. Justin watched the ambulance leave, siren blaring and lights flashing. Then he turned his attention to the four girls talking to the police on the tarmac. He smiled to himself, thinking that whatever happened next, his life meant something. He'd done something that really mattered.

## EIGHTY-ONE

# COURAGE

JUSTIN SAT AT A METAL TABLE IN THE MIFFLIN COUNTY REGIONAL Police Department, his hands cuffed and chained to the table. A video camera recorded him from the upper corner of the square room, the red light illuminated. He peered into the two-way mirror, wondering if they were watching him. Justin knew Larry wanted to take the fall for everything they'd done, but he wasn't sure the old truck driver would survive to do so. And even if Larry did survive, Justin had tested positive for gunshot residue, so he felt the best option was the truth.

Detective Brewer entered the interrogation room. Justin was surprised to see him, as this was not his jurisdiction, but it was his case. The detective sat across from Justin, no greeting, his face taut. Brewer retrieved his cell phone from the inside pocket of his suit jacket, tapped a few times, then faced the screen toward Justin.

The shaky video showed Larry and his dump truck destroying a Cadillac Escalade, followed by the truck T-boning and flipping the other Escalade in a ditch. The van plowed into the back of Justin's Kia while a mobster in the front passenger seat fired a pistol at the compact car. The van eventually split Justin's Kia and Grace's Nissan, the mobster shooting at Grace and Rakesh, then fleeing the scene. Justin's Kia and Larry's dump truck chased the van, disappearing from view, but the video kept going, with the mobsters carjacking a minivan. Two more police cruisers arrived

on the scene, forcing the mobsters to flee across the grassy median, before chasing them north on 322.

Detective Brewer set his phone face down on the table and glared at Justin. “You got anything to say about this?”

Justin swallowed hard. “It looks bad, but I think you need to hear the whole story.”

Justin told the story from the very beginning, leaving out his foray into breaking and entering at Ben and Max Conley’s houses. Grace and Rakesh were in the video, so he couldn’t cover for them, but thankfully, they hadn’t killed anyone.

Justin summed up his story with this. “The Russian Mafia is trafficking girls. It’s happening right here.”

“What would you have me do?” Detective Brewer asked.

“Arrest them.”

“The state police arrested the guys who carjacked that minivan. Mifflin County PD arrested the only guy you left alive at the airport, and he’s not talking. They never do.”

“What’s gonna happen to me?” Justin asked.

Detective Brewer sighed. “I don’t know. That’s up to Mifflin County PD.” The detective left the interrogation room.

Justin rested his head on his forearms, trying not to think of prison, but unable to think of anything else.

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A few hours later, a Mifflin County police officer and a white-haired man in a suit entered the interrogation room.

Justin sat up straight.

The white-haired man said, “I’m DA Lester.”

Justin nodded.

DA Lester said to the police officer, “Remove his handcuffs.”

The police officer removed the handcuffs without a word, then stood sentry by the door.

Justin rubbed his bare wrists.

DA Lester sat at the table opposite Justin. “Mr. Boyle. What you did was incredibly dangerous and stupid... but there are five young ladies who

can go home, partly because of you. As a district attorney, I'd like to charge you, but I think you'd win with a self-defense case. As a father of two girls, I'd like to thank you for what you did." The district attorney stood from the table and held out his hand.

Justin stood from the table and shook the man's hand.

"It might be a few weeks before you get your car," the district attorney said. "It's evidence at the moment. And we *will* be sending you a ticket for reckless driving, which carries a \$200 fine. I wouldn't contest it if I was you."

"What about Larry?" Justin asked.

"His situation is a lot more complicated. We're still trying to piece everything together."

"So he's alive?"

"For the time being. He's in surgery last I heard."

"And Edwin?"

"We let him go hours ago. He's waiting for you. He's been bugging the hell out of us. I would appreciate it if you would take him with you when you leave."

Justin found Edwin pacing in the waiting room of the police station.

"What happened? Are they chargin' you?" Edwin asked.

"They're sending me a ticket for reckless driving," Justin replied.

Edwin smirked. "That's fair."

"I have a lot to ask you—"

"Not here."

They left the police department, stepping into the night, the parking lot lit by the post lamps.

"How's Rakesh doing?" Justin asked as they walked to the parking lot.

"I spoke with Grace less than an hour ago. Rakesh is out of surgery, and he's stable."

"So he's gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. He's gonna be okay. He wasn't hit directly. The bullet that hit his upper chest was a ricochet, and he had some glass embedded in his cheek, but he's gonna be fine."

Justin let out a sigh of relief.

Edwin pressed the key fob, the lights on Rakesh's Ford Escape flashing in response.

"Did they take Grace's car too?" Justin asked.

“Yeah, they said it’s evidence,” Edwin replied. “Grace’s roommate gave me a ride to Huntingdon County to pick up Rakesh’s car. She seemed really worried about him.”

They climbed into the Ford Escape, Edwin in the driver’s seat.

Edwin continued, “Larry’s truck is still stuck out there. We can pick it up tomorrow.”

“The DA told me that Larry was in surgery,” Justin said as he buckled his seatbelt.

“That’s what Grace said too. She’s been at the hospital with Kristin, and I think Kristin’s aunt or somethin’.”

“So we don’t know if he’s okay?”

Edwin shook his head and cranked the ignition.

“He was in bad shape last I saw him,” Justin said.

“Yeah,” Edwin replied.

“I’ve never been that scared before.”

“My jiu-jitsu coach used to say courage is when you’re scared but you do it anyway.”

## EIGHTY-TWO

# NEW FRIEND > OLD FRIEND

RAKESH SAT AT A FORTY-FIVE-DEGREE ANGLE ON THE ADJUSTABLE hospital bed. An IV snaked into his vein. A heart monitor was attached to his finger. His chest and face were bandaged. Justin, Grace, and Edwin sat around his bed telling war stories about Larry's heroic drive into the heart of the Russian Mafia.

“Did you see her red pen?” Rakesh asked, lifting his chin to the nurse as she left the hospital room.

“What does she need a red pen for?” Grace asked.

“In case she needs to draw blood.” Rakesh cackled at his joke.

Grace and Edwin laughed.

Justin smirked. “Dumb.”

Kristin entered the room, and they went quiet. “He’s out of surgery.”

“Is he okay?” Grace asked.

Kristin smiled, showing her braces. “He’s gonna be okay.” Her smile evaporated. “Well, I mean, I’m not sure about the police or whatever, but he’s gonna be, like, *okay*.”

“Your dad loves you,” Justin said.

“I know that... now.” Kristin took a deep breath. “Thank you for, like... finding me.”

“You’re welcome,” Justin and Grace replied in unison.

“I should go back. He’ll be awake soon.” Kristin pivoted toward the door.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Grace said. Kristin pivoted back to Grace.

“Do you know where that plane was going?” Grace asked.

“Some private island,” Kristin replied. “That’s what the other girls told me. They said it was like paradise, but I don’t believe them.”

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Once visiting hours were over, Edwin and Justin drove Grace home, parking in front of her townhouse.

“It’s been a crazy day, huh?” Grace asked from the back seat.

“Yeah,” Justin replied.

“Just another Monday for me,” Edwin said with a smirk.

“Shut up,” Grace replied with a smile.

“The *craziest* day for me,” Edwin said.

Grace brushed a strand of her blonde hair from her face. “We did a good thing, didn’t we?”

“Damn right we did.”

They all laughed, not because it was funny, but because it was true.

When the laughter died, Grace said, “I guess I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She exited the car.

“See you tomorrow,” Justin said to her back.

Grace went to her front door and fished her keys from her purse.

As they watched her, Edwin asked, “Why didn’t you walk her to the door and kiss her?”

“Why would I do that?” Justin asked.

“Because you like her and she likes you.”

“She doesn’t *like* me. Not like that.”

Grace opened her door and stepped inside. Before shutting the door, she turned back to them and waved.

Justin waved back.

“See. She likes you,” Edwin said, putting the Ford Escape into reverse.

“As a friend,” Justin replied.

Edwin put the Ford into drive and motored toward home. “After what happened, it could’ve been the perfect endin’.”

“It could’ve ended with her slapping me and never talking to me again.”

Edwin shook his head. "I don't think so."

Justin exhaled, his posture deflating. "She can do better."

Edwin frowned at Justin, then focused on the road. "I don't know anyone who would do what you did."

"What are you talking about?"

"You saved those girls today."

"We all did," Justin replied. "If you hadn't put that AirTag on the van, we would've lost them."

"We make a good team."

Justin grinned. "Yeah. We do."

Edwin turned on the radio, tuning it to Real 99.3, the local R&B station. Justin leaned his head against the window, his eyes heavy. They drove to the beat of Usher for a few minutes. Edwin turned off the country road into the gravel lot of their apartment building. He parked and cut the radio.

Justin sat up and undid his seatbelt.

Edwin stared out the windshield. "I gotta say somethin'." He took a deep breath. "You saved my life. *Twice.*" Edwin turned in the driver's seat to Justin. "If it wasn't for you, I would've died from an overdose. I won't forget that." Edwin was out of the car before Justin could reply, heading upstairs to their apartment.

Justin sat in the Ford Escape for a minute, thinking about all that had happened in the last sixteen hours. He smiled to himself.

Kyle drove his Jeep Wrangler into the lot and parked near the Ford Escape. *Shit.* It was Monday night. Justin was supposed to be gone. He slouched in his seat as Kyle and Leah exited the vehicle. As Leah walked by, she peered inside the Ford, and spotted Justin. She stood in front of the SUV with her hands on her hips.

"That's Justin," Leah said, gesturing to the Ford Escape. "He's right there, spying on us like a little creep."

Kyle marched to the front passenger door, vibrating.

Justin locked the door.

Kyle jiggled the handle, trying to open it. "Open the door, Justin."

"I'm not spying on anyone," Justin replied. "I was just sitting here."

"Open the *fucking* door," Kyle said.

"I'm not leaving my apartment. Deal with it."

Kyle clenched his jaw. He tried the other doors, but they were all locked. He returned to the front passenger door. "You got ten seconds to

open that door or I'll bust your  *fucking*  window."

"Leave me alone."

Kyle marched to his Jeep, grabbed a tire iron, and returned to Justin's passenger window.

"Why are you doing this?" Justin asked. "We were friends."

Justin hoped Kyle would stop vibrating, that the tire iron was just a threat, but his ex-best friend reared back and smashed the window, glass raining on Justin's lap. Kyle reached into the car and opened the door. Justin scrambled for the driver's seat, trying to stay out of reach, but Kyle dragged Justin from the car and dumped him on the gravel parking lot. Justin staggered to his feet. Kyle shoved him against the car and gave him a quick left jab, right cross combination that left Justin dazed, his lip bloodied.

Leah cheered on her man. "Fuck him up."

Barking came from somewhere.

Kyle reared back for the haymaker, but Edwin slammed into Kyle, tackling him to the ground. Chico barked and growled. Edwin mounted Kyle and pounded his face until Kyle stopped moving. Then Edwin stood, wiped off his hands and pants, and spit on Kyle.

Leah ran to Kyle, kneeling over his prone body. "Oh my God. Are you okay?"

Chico still barked.

Kyle mumbled incoherently.

Edwin went to his friend.

Justin shook his head, regaining his faculties. He spit blood from his split lip onto the gravel.

"You all right?" Edwin asked.

Justin nodded. "Thanks for saving my ass."

Edwin chuckled and clapped Justin on the shoulder. "You've had a helluva day."

Leah helped Kyle to his feet.

Chico calmed down, now standing in solidarity with Justin.

Edwin approached the couple, pointing at Kyle. "You touch my friend again, I'll fuckin' kill you with my bare hands. Got me?"

Kyle nodded, his face battered and bloodied.

"And you're gonna pay for that window."

## EIGHTY-THREE

# TWO DAYS LATER...

JUSTIN MOPPED THE FLOOR, WHILE EDWIN CLEANED UP BEHIND THE counter of the West Lebanon Subway restaurant. On the flatscreen, two talking heads argued over the recent anointing of Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee. The political pundit argued that Harris would make a fine candidate, while the host of the largest left-wing news show on YouTube argued that Harris wasn't chosen by the voters, that it was a subversion of democracy.

Justin grabbed the remote. "I'm so sick of election bullshit." He flipped through the channels, stopping on the local news, and video of Jimmy Conley being escorted by the police in handcuffs. "Check this out."

Edwin watched the television too.

The newsman spoke over the video. "Jimmy Conley and Troy Williamson were arrested today for rape"—Troy Williamson was shown in handcuffs—"a felony of the first degree."

They cut to the middle-aged newsman who defied nature with his wrinkle-free skin and perfectly coiffed black hair. "The two men are being held at the West Lebanon Township Police Jail. Arraignment is scheduled for tomorrow morning."

The local news cut to a commercial for Best Bologna of Lebanon, featuring the owner and founder, Anthony Belloni, AKA Tony Baloney. He stood behind a counter, wearing an apron, and cutting bologna. "When I

founded this company, it wasn't about cutting corners or pinching pennies. It was about creating the best deli meat in Pennsylvania."

Justin muted the television.

"You think they're guilty?" Edwin asked.

"Yeah, but I don't think any of this happens without Larissa's influence."

## EIGHTY-FOUR

# CLOSING STATEMENTS

THE COURTROOM WAS PACKED, CITIZENS OF WEST LEBANON CRAMMING into the pews. The judge's elevated bench stood like a throne, slightly higher than the next-door witness box, or the jury box along the east wall. The prosecution and defense tables faced the judge, along with a lectern. The audience was separated from the action by a short wooden divider wall.

Eight months after Larry's arrest, he was standing trial for four counts of vehicular homicide, four counts of attempted vehicular homicide, and four counts of reckless endangerment. Larry's insurance company had already paid the airport for the damage to their fence. The turboprop airplane that had been destroyed was owned by a Russian shell company that was likely a fraud, as nobody claimed damages.

The trial had been a back-and-forth affair, his guilt or innocence still very much undecided. District Attorney Victor Fox hoped to sway the jury with his closing argument. The defense attorney, Sally Robertson, hoped to do the same. Judge Patrick Collins hoped to maintain order.

Justin, Grace, Edwin, Rakesh, Kristin, and Chad's parents sat in the front row of the audience, just behind the defense table. Kristin rested her hands on her round belly. She was eight months pregnant with Chad's baby. It was all she had left of her secret lover who had died in a car accident on his eighteenth birthday.

District Attorney Victor Fox stood in front of the jury, dapper in his black suit, mostly bald, a crescent of brown and gray hair cut tight to his

scalp, with a stubbly beard to match.

DA Fox said, “This case is about the vigilante vengeance of an unstable man. But vengeance isn’t justice. The defendant is *not* a hero. He’s a vigilante who put the lives of motorists in mortal danger by driving his ten-ton dump truck into oncoming traffic, causing the deaths of four men, and endangering the lives of countless others.”

The district attorney gestured to Larry and his attorney sitting at the defense table. “Mrs. Robertson would have you believe that her client had to use his massive truck as a weapon on a public roadway to save his daughter, but his reckless actions added to the death toll, and could have killed his daughter in the process. The proper course of action would have been to let the police do their job. The police are trained to de-escalate situations and dispense justice *without* casualties.”

DA Fox paced along the jury box. “Follow the law. If you don’t, this case will likely create more vigilantes willing to risk public safety for their vengeance. Remember, vengeance is *not* justice. Do the right thing.” DA Fox returned to his seat at the prosecution table.

Sally Robertson stood from the defense table and placed her hand on Larry’s shoulder, conveying to the jury that she believed in her client’s innocence. Larry looked up, and his attorney nodded. Sally strolled across the courtroom to the jury. She was a curvy and imposing woman, well over six feet tall in her heels. Despite being in her sixties, she fought aging tooth and nail. Her tight face had been nipped, tucked, and injected; her white hair had been dyed blond, but her veiny hands and wrinkly neck told the truth.

“Good morning,” Sally said.

A few jurors nodded.

“This is a very special case. I’ve never seen or heard of anything quite like it before. You all saw the video. Mr. Bennett’s actions appeared extreme, dangerous, and desperate—but it was an extreme, dangerous, and desperate situation. He could’ve backed off, let the police handle it, but he had already tried that, and two police officers were murdered in cold blood, and the men who killed them had kidnapped his daughter.”

Sally paused, letting her point marinate with the jury. “Even after the initial collision, Mr. Bennett tailed the kidnappers, hoping that the police would intervene, but they never made it, and if that plane had taken off, he

likely never would've seen his daughter again. She would've been sold into sex slavery or worse."

Sally scanned the jury. "Imagine that you found the men who had kidnapped your daughter and you called the police, but these men were so ruthless that they killed the police, and took your daughter to an airport to traffic her outside of the country. What would you do?" She paused for effect. "I would hope you would have the courage to save your daughter"—Sally gestured to her client at the defense table—"like Larry Bennett did."

Sally Robertson rested her veiny hands on the jury box. "The law is on our side. Pennsylvania law states that you can use the same degree of force to defend others as you would for yourself. Those kidnappers had killed two police officers, and they were kidnapping Mr. Bennett's sixteen-year-old daughter. He had every right to use proportional force in defense of another. According to the law, Larry Bennett had no duty to retreat, because his daughter was in imminent danger of serious bodily injury, rape, and possibly death.

"I believe in the law. Self-defense laws allow citizens to protect themselves and their loved ones. The police can't be everywhere all the time. Mr. Bennett acted in self-defense on behalf of his daughter, who could not defend herself, pure and simple. I could make a strong argument that his actions saved the lives of police officers, not to mention the four other young ladies who were on that airplane. It's a travesty of justice that the state brought these charges against a father who was rescuing his daughter from human traffickers. Follow your conscience. Follow the law. Find Larry Bennett not guilty on all charges."

## EIGHTY-FIVE

# THE VERDICT

ON FRIDAY MORNING, THE JURY FILED INTO THE COURTROOM. JUSTIN, Edwin, Grace, and Rakesh sat in the first row behind the defense table, with Kristin and Chad's parents. Justin peered over his shoulder, spotting Sergey Petrov near the back, flanked by two beefy Russians.

The jury foreman, a white-haired woman with an apron belly, handed a folder to the bailiff, who handed the folder to Judge Patrick Collins. The judge was a petite man with a white chinstrap beard and a shiny bald head. He opened the folder, adjusted his round glasses, read the form for a minute, then handed it back to the bailiff. The bailiff handed the form back to the foreman, and gave her a few muted instructions.

"Larry Bennett, please stand for the reading of the verdict," Judge Collins said.

Sally Robertson and Larry stood in unison.

Kristin held hands with Chad's mother. The women had bonded over the baby boy growing in Kristin's womb. Kristin had vowed to name him Chad Jr. Justin was on the edge of his seat, trying to decipher the blank faces on the jury for a hint at the verdict.

"You may read the verdict," Judge Collins said to the jury foreman.

The old woman stood in front of her seat on the jury, holding the folder open. She read from the form without emotion. "For the charge of vehicular homicide, count one, we find the defendant... not guilty."

Kristin smiled as each count of vehicular homicide was declared not guilty. Sally Robertson patted her client on the back. Grace nudged Justin, giving him a grin. Hushed murmurs came from the audience.

The foreman continued, unmoved by the audience. "For the charge of attempted vehicular homicide, count one, we find the defendant... not guilty."

It was the same for counts two through four.

"For the charge of reckless endangerment, count one, we find the defendant... guilty."

"*What?*" Kristin said in disbelief.

"Shit," Grace said under her breath.

"For the charge of reckless endangerment, count two, we find the defendant... guilty."

"It's only a misdemeanor," Justin whispered to Grace and Kristin. "Judge Collins might let him walk with time served."

Justin's words proved prophetic, as the next week, Judge Collins sentenced Larry to time served and a \$5000 fine.

EIGHTY-SIX

## THE PROSECUTION'S CASE PART 1

SIX WEEKS AFTER LARRY BENNETT'S TRIAL, LARISSA MILES STOOD trial for kidnapping of a minor, aiding consummation of a crime, and conspiracy to commit rape. She was facing two first-degree felony charges and one third-degree felony charge, which could result in up to forty-seven years in prison and a \$65,000 fine. Judge Patrick Collins presided over the trial, surveying the scene from his elevated desk.

Larissa Miles sat at the defense table with her attorney, Carol Graham, a bulldog disguised as a white-haired grandma. Larissa wore a gray skirt suit, her makeup muted. Her blonde hair framed her face, giving her a soft appearance. The audience crowded the pews. Like a wedding, friends and family members of Larissa Miles sat on the left-hand side, behind the defense table. Justin, Grace, and Edwin sat on the right-hand side, behind the prosecution table, along with random gawkers and media. Kristin had given birth to Chad Jr. two weeks before the trial, but she was still on the witness list. Cameras and recording devices weren't allowed in the courtroom, so reporters and artists took notes and drew pictures of the scene.

DA Victor Fox stood at the lectern, interviewing Jimmy Conley in the witness box, while the jury watched. "Why did you go to the defendant's home on August 8th, 2024?"

Jimmy Conley leaned into the microphone and said, "Larissa invited me, said she wanted some drugs for the party."

“What kind of drugs did she ask for?”

“Marijuana and liquid ecstasy.”

“Did you supply marijuana and liquid ecstasy to Larissa?”

“Yeah.”

“Is liquid ecstasy common?”

“Objection, speculation,” Carol Graham said from her seat at the defense table.

“I’ll rephrase,” DA Fox said. “As a drug dealer, was it common for you to sell liquid ecstasy?”

“I mostly sold ecstasy in pill form.”

“Why do you think the defendant wanted *liquid* ecstasy?”

“Objection, *speculation*,” Carol said again.

“Sustained,” Judge Collins said.

“Who was at the defendant’s house when you delivered the drugs?” DA Fox asked.

“Just Larissa and Jane,” Jimmy replied.

The witnesses and attorneys had been instructed by the court to refer to Kristin Bennett as “Jane Doe” or “Jane” to preserve her anonymity, even though everyone in the courtroom knew the victim had been Kristin Bennett.

“What were they doing?” DA Fox asked.

“They were decorating for Chad’s birthday party,” Jimmy replied.

“Did you make the drug deal in front of Jane Doe?”

Jimmy shook his head. “No. Larissa took me to her bedroom, paid me for the drugs, and asked me how much liquid ecstasy she should take for a good buzz.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Depends on someone’s weight, so I asked her how much she weighed and she said 145, so I told her how much to take based on that weight.”

“What happened next?”

“We went to the kitchen to make some drinks. She made vodka cranberries for herself and Kris—I mean, Jane. I took a beer from the fridge.”

“Did the defendant put anything in the vodka cranberry drinks apart from cranberry juice and vodka?”

“Yeah. She put liquid ecstasy in one of the drinks,” Jimmy replied.

“Did the defendant put the liquid ecstasy in her drink or Jane Doe’s?”

“In Jane Doe’s.”

An audible gasp came from the court audience.

“Got her,” Grace whispered.

Justin nodded.

Larissa kept her poker face.

Jimmy continued, “I remember because I told Larissa that it was too high of a dose for Jane, that it might knock her out, but she said that Jane wanted to get fucked up—”

“Objection. Hearsay,” Carol Graham said from her seat at the defense table.

DA Fox addressed Judge Collins. “Your Honor, this statement is not being used as evidence that Jane wanted to be intoxicated. In fact, the State believes that this is not true at all. Rather, this statement is being introduced to demonstrate the impact that it had on Jimmy. It is, therefore, *not* hearsay.”

“Overruled. I’ll allow it,” Judge Collins said.

DA Fox glanced at the jury. They were on the edge of their seats. “Did you see the defendant give Jane Doe the vodka cranberry drink that was spiked with ecstasy?”

“Yeah, I saw Larissa give Jane the drink,” Jimmy replied.

“Did you hear the defendant tell Jane Doe that the drink was spiked with ecstasy?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Did you see Jane Doe drink the spiked vodka cranberry?”

“Yeah. She drank it quick too.”

“What happened next?”

“I was gonna go home, but Larissa begged me to stay and hang out, so I did. We were just drinking and vaping marijuana at the kitchen table. Jane started to feel dizzy, so Larissa took her to the downstairs bedroom.”

“What happened when the defendant came back from the bedroom?”

Jimmy dipped his head. “She told me that Jane said she wanted to, uh... fuck me.” He blushed.

“Objection. Hearsay,” Carol Graham said from her seat at the defense table.

DA Fox addressed Judge Collins again. “Your Honor, this statement is not being used as evidence that Jane wanted sexual contact. The State

believes that this is not true at all. Again, this is being introduced to show the impact that it had on Jimmy.”

“Overruled. I’ll allow it,” Judge Collins said.

DA Fox addressed the witness. “How did you respond to the defendant telling you that Jane wanted to have sex with you?”

“I didn’t believe her at first, but Larissa kept saying that Jane wanted me to go back there and... you know... have sex or whatever.”

“Did you go to that bedroom and have sex with Jane Doe?”

Jimmy swallowed hard. “Yeah. I did.”

Murmurs came from the audience.

“Was Jane Doe conscious?” DA Fox asked.

“Yeah, but she was out of it, thought I was Chad, which didn’t make any sense at the time,” Jimmy replied. “I used a condom, because I didn’t know if she was on the pill or whatever.”

Grace rolled her eyes at the condom comment.

Justin thought sarcastically, *What a nice guy.*

DA Fox took a deep breath, checked the jury, then asked the witness, “Would you have gone into that room and had sex with Jane Doe if Larissa hadn’t told you that Jane Doe wanted to have sex with you?”

Jimmy shook his head. “Absolutely not. I thought it was what Jane wanted. I thought Larissa and her were, like, friends or whatever.”

DA Fox nodded and gave the jury a grave look, letting that last point soak for a moment. Then he asked, “What happened after you had sex with Jane Doe?”

“I left the room and went back to the kitchen,” Jimmy replied. “Troy Williamson was there with Larissa. I think they were doing shots, but he seemed mad.”

“How do you know he was mad?”

“His face was red. Fists balled up. He seemed mad.”

“What happened next?”

“Larissa asked me if I had a... good time back there.” Jimmy bowed his head.

“What did you say?”

Without lifting his head, Jimmy replied, “I told her that she was a good time.”

“That’s awful,” Grace whispered to Justin.

“I know,” Justin replied.

“What happened next?” DA Fox asked.

“Larissa told Troy to go to the bedroom too,” Jimmy replied, “told him that Kris—Jane wanted to have a hot girl summer. Sorry.”

“Did Troy go to the bedroom?”

Jimmy raised his gaze. “Yeah. He did.”

“What happened after Troy went to the bedroom?”

“Maybe ten minutes later, Chad came over. He was pissed that I was there. I told him to relax, that I was just there to supply the party favors. I offered Chad a hit off my vape pen, but he didn’t want it. Then we heard bed squeaks coming from the bedroom. Chad wanted to know who was in the bedroom. Larissa said it was Troy. Chad wanted to know who he was with, and Larissa said something like, ‘Why do you care about a little slut?’”

“How did Chad respond to that?” DA Fox asked.

“He kept asking Larissa who Troy was with. Larissa finally told Chad it was... Jane, and that she wanted to have a hot girl summer and she’d already been with me. I didn’t know that was a problem, but Chad started crying and Larissa laughed at him. He ran out of the house. I heard his car. He peeled out. Must’ve been driving pretty fast. I asked Larissa what was wrong with Chad, and she said, ‘His little angel’s not so innocent anymore.’”

DA Fox deftly questioned Jimmy, letting him finish his story of that fateful night, pointing the finger at Larissa being responsible for Kristin Bennett’s rape and kidnapping.

Defense attorney Carol Graham replaced DA Fox at the lectern for cross-examination. After a brief greeting, Carol asked Jimmy, “You pled guilty to kidnapping and raping Jane Doe, didn’t you?”

Jimmy recoiled as if he’d been slapped. “Yeah.”

Carol glanced at the jury with raised eyebrows. Then she faced Jimmy again. “And you received a lesser sentence for those charges by testifying against Larissa Miles today, isn’t that right?”

Jimmy opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“Answer the question, Mr. Conley,” Judge Collins said, peering over his glasses at the witness.

“Yeah, I did,” Jimmy replied.

“In earlier testimony, you claimed that Larissa encouraged you to have sex with Jane Doe. You don’t have any proof of this, do you?”

Jimmy cocked his head. “You mean, did anyone hear her say that?”

“I’ll rephrase the question. Did anyone besides you hear Larissa encouraging you to have sex with Jane Doe?”

Jimmy looked down and answered, “No.”

Carol gave the jury a can-you-believe-this-guy look. “Are we supposed to believe the convicted rapist and kidnapper of Jane Doe was actually manipulated into those heinous acts by Jane’s seventeen-year-old friend?”

DA Fox stood from his seat. “*Objection. Argumentative.*”

“Sustained.” Judge Collins glared at Carol Graham.

Carol flashed her palms to the judge. “I have nothing further for this witness.”

EIGHTY-SEVEN

## THE PROSECUTION'S CASE PART 2

DISTRICT ATTORNEY VICTOR FOX CALLED TROY WILLIAMSON TO THE stand. The bailiff escorted him to the witness box from the back door of the courtroom. Despite being incarcerated for first-degree rape and kidnapping, he wore a gray suit provided by the prosecutor's office.

After a series of setup questions from the lectern, DA Fox asked, "What happened when you arrived at the defendant's home on the evening of August 8th?"

Troy cleared his throat. "Larissa gave me a bunch of shots right when I got there. I was like, slow down, relax, bro. But Larissa told me to stop being a pussy."

Grace leaned over and whispered in Justin's ear, "Larissa was trying to lower his inhibitions."

Justin nodded.

"What happened after the defendant gave you shots?" DA Fox asked.

"Larissa told me that my girlfriend, Carrie, was having an affair with my best friend, Chad," Troy replied.

"Objection. Hearsay," Carol Graham said from her seat at the defense table.

DA Fox addressed Judge Collins. "Your Honor, this isn't hearsay. This statement is *not* being used as evidence that Carrie was having an affair with Chad. The State believes this was a fabrication by the defendant used to manipulate the witness into criminal activity."

“Overruled. I’ll allow it,” Judge Collins said.

“Did you believe her?” DA Fox asked.

Troy shook his head. “No, not at first, but she got in my head, said she caught ’em making out in Chad’s car. She said that Carrie was supposed to tell me the truth, but she never did. Larissa said that she wanted me to know the truth.”

“How did you react to that?”

“I was upset. Angry. Sad. All that, you know?”

“What happened next?”

“Larissa told me that I needed to get Carrie back, you know? She said the best way to get revenge was to have sex with one of her friends. At first, I thought Larissa meant herself, but she meant Jane. She told me that Jane wanted me to, you know... have sex with her after Jimmy was done. She told me Jane was having a hot girl summer.”

Justin grimaced, disgusted by the admission.

“Did you have sex with Jane Doe?” DA Fox asked from the lectern.

Troy squirmed in his seat and answered, “Yeah.”

“Did Jane resist you?”

Troy cleared his throat. “No. She was out of it.”

“Would you have had sex with Jane Doe if the defendant hadn’t told you that your girlfriend had had an affair with your best friend, and having sex with Jane was the perfect revenge, *and* Jane wanted you to have sex with her?”

“No. I *never* would’ve done that.” Tears welled in his eyes. “I was stupid. That’s why I’m in prison.” Troy pointed at Larissa, tears streaming down his cheeks. “But *she* made me do it.”

The court audience gasped and murmured to each other. The jury watched in rapt attention.

Carol stood from her seat. “*Objection. Prejudicial.*”

“*Sustained.*” Judge Collins addressed Troy. “Do *not* point at anyone in this courtroom, unless you are asked to. Do you understand me?”

Troy swallowed hard, his voice shaky. “Yes, Your Honor.”

Judge Collins moved the tissues from his desk so Troy could easily reach them.

Troy grabbed two tissues and wiped his face discreetly.

“Do you need a break, Mr. Williamson?” Judge Collins asked.

Troy sniffed. “No, Your Honor.”

DA Fox continued the interview. Troy described Carrie's shock and horror that he'd been with Kristin, their subsequent breakup, and Carrie's rapid departure from the party. Chad had already come and gone to his own party, while Troy was in the back room with Kristin, unaware. Chad had left the party, shocked that the love of his life had sex with his best friend, Troy, and his biggest enemy, Jimmy. The shock had likely caused Chad to drive erratically, resulting in the accident that took his life.

"What happened when Jane Doe emerged from that bedroom?" DA Fox asked.

"She was still kind of out of it. She was struggling to walk and slurring her speech. She was like, 'Call the police. I was raped.'"

"Objection. Hearsay," Carol Graham said from her seat.

DA Fox addressed Judge Collins. "Your Honor, Jane Doe's rape is an established fact. Additionally, this was an excited utterance by Jane Doe, and therefore an exception to hearsay."

"Overruled," Judge Collins said.

DA Fox addressed the witness again, speaking into the microphone on the lectern. "What happened after Jane Doe declared that she had been raped?"

"Larissa tried to calm her down, telling Jane that she said she wanted to have sex." Troy rubbed the back of his neck. "But Jane looked at Jimmy and me and said, 'They raped me. Didn't they?'"

"Did the defendant help her friend call the police?"

"No."

"What did the defendant do after her friend told her she had been raped?"

"She tried to convince Jane that it had never happened. She was saying stuff like 'you can't say that' and 'you said you wanted it,' but Jane was sobering up, and she was angry. She said she didn't wanna have sex with anyone, and she was calling the police—"

Carol Graham stood from her seat. "*Objection. Hearsay.*"

"Sustained," Judge Collins said. "I'd like to hear Jane Doe testify to this herself."

"What happened next?" DA Fox asked.

"Jane took out her phone from her pocket, but Larissa took the phone before Jane could call the cops," Troy replied. "Larissa talked Jane into laying down for a few minutes until she felt better, then if she still wanted

to call the police, she could. Larissa told Jane that she didn't want her to get into trouble for filing a false police report—”

Carol stood from her seat again. “*Objection. Hearsay.*”

“Sustained,” Judge Collins said.

“What happened next?” DA Fox asked.

“Larissa took Jane back to the bedroom,” Troy answered, “and gave her some water laced with X, so she'd go back to sleep.”

DA Fox arched his eyebrows, playing up his skepticism for the jury. “How do you know the defendant gave Jane water laced with ecstasy?”

“Larissa had a little vial of liquid ecstasy, and she asked Jimmy if it was enough to kill her. He said probably not, but it would knock her out. She poured a glass of water from the sink and dumped in the ecstasy, then took the water to the back bedroom.”

DA Fox wagged his head at the jury. “Some friend.”

“*Objection. Prejudicial,*” Carol Graham said from the defense table.

“Withdrawn,” DA Fox said before the judge could rebuke him. “What happened after the defendant took the water laced with ecstasy to Jane Doe?”

“We had a meeting, trying to figure out what to do.”

DA Fox glanced at the jury, giving them a this-is-important look. “What was said in this meeting?”

“Larissa said that we needed to get rid of Jane, otherwise me and Jimmy could go to prison for rape. Jimmy told Larissa about his cousin, Ben, who worked with the Russian Mafia doing burglaries. He said that Ben probably knew someone who could make her disappear. Larissa told Jimmy to call his cousin.”

“Larissa caused all this,” Grace whispered to Justin.

“You're right,” Justin whispered back.

“Did Jimmy call his cousin, Ben Conley?” DA Fox asked.

“Yeah, he did,” Troy replied.

“What happened when Ben Conley showed up?”

“Ben brought rope and duct tape, but he didn't need it. Kristin was out cold. I thought she might be dead. We put her in the back of Ben's SUV. Ben and Jimmy drove off with her, and I never saw her again.” Troy slumped his shoulders, as if exhausted by his admission.

Carol Graham cross-examined Troy, her strategy similar to her cross-examination of Jimmy Conley. She stressed Troy's status as a convicted

rapist and kidnapper, and the shortened sentence he'd obtained from the state in exchange for his testimony against Larissa Miles.

After Troy Williamson, DA Fox called Sharonda Reynolds to the stand. The bailiff escorted the curvy woman to the witness box. If she were a doll, she'd be Jailhouse Oprah, as she had the same oval face, high cheekbones, and curly locks like the billionaire, but her missing tooth and neck tattoo were straight out of the slammer.

From the witness box, Sharonda explained that she had been in the West Lebanon Township Police Jail with Larissa Miles.

"Did you know why she was in jail?" DA Fox asked from the lectern.

Sharonda grunted. "Everyone knew. She's famous, or infamous, dependin' on how you look at it."

"Did she talk about her case to you?"

"She sure did."

DA Fox tilted his head in mock surprise. "What did she say?"

"She said the white girl... Jane, got what she deserved. Said her boyfriend got what he deserved too. She said they were havin' an affair together, and she wanted revenge. So, she had this birthday party for her man. At the party, she drugged Jane, told her man's best friend and his biggest enemy that Jane wanted to have sex with them, and they did it cuz men are dogs, you know?"

More than a few women in the court audience nodded their agreement.

Sharonda continued, "Then when her boyfriend came to the party, Jane was in the bedroom with his best friend. The boyfriend ran off, got in an accident and died." Sharonda pointed a chubby finger at Larissa. "That girl's cold as ice."

"*Objection. Prejudicial,*" Carol Graham said.

"She's the puppet master," Grace said under her breath.

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The courtroom was emptied for the final witness of the day. Justin and the gang knew it was Kristin Bennett. They found out later that Kristin had corroborated most of Jimmy and Troy's stories as true, although she couldn't corroborate their motivations, or Larissa's supposed manipulations that had caused the rapes. Most importantly, she had corroborated the fact

that she'd likely been drugged by the drinks provided by Larissa, but other than that, she wasn't aware of Larissa being involved in the rapes or her kidnapping. The jury would have to choose whether to believe Larissa, the beautiful blond teenager, or the word of three convicted criminals who received sentence reductions for their testimonies against Larissa.

## EIGHTY-EIGHT

# MASTERMIND OR VICTIM

THE STATE AND THE DEFENSE HAD WRAPPED UP THEIR CASES BY Wednesday afternoon, leaving only the closing arguments and the verdict. On Thursday morning, DA Victor Fox paced along the jury box, the audience on the edge of their seats, including Justin, Grace, Edwin, and Rakesh.

“Jimmy Conley and Troy Williamson were manipulated by the defendant to commit rape,” DA Fox said. “The defendant orchestrated everything. This was premeditated and meticulously planned. Why? Why would the defendant drug a sixteen-year-old girl who was supposed to be her friend in order to subject her to multiple rapes?”

DA Fox stopped pacing and faced the jury, resting his hands on the jury box. “As you heard from Sharonda Reynolds, the defendant bragged about it. The defendant wanted revenge on her boyfriend and Jane Doe because they were in love. She couldn’t handle the fact that her boyfriend chose another girl over her. So she planned a birthday party for her boyfriend, Chad Stevens. The defendant invited her drug dealer, Jimmy Conley, and instructed him to bring liquid ecstasy along with marijuana.” DA Fox held out his hands. “What was the liquid ecstasy for?” He paused for a beat. “It was to drug Jane Doe so she wouldn’t be able to resist the rapes she had planned for her.”

DA Fox took a deep breath. “Once Jane was incoherent, she told Jimmy Conley that the semi-conscious girl wanted to have sex with him, so that’s

what he did. Yes, Jimmy should've walked away when he saw that she was heavily drugged, but the defendant told him that Jane Doe *wanted* sex from him. Then, the defendant used the same ruse on Troy Williamson, who succumbed to the same lies. Both of these young men are in prison where they belong, but that doesn't absolve the defendant of her culpability. It is my opinion that neither of these rapes would have happened without the defendant's heinous lies and criminal intent."

Justin regarded Larissa sitting at the defense table. Despite DA Fox's stinging words, she appeared unfazed, her face blank.

DA Fox continued, "The defendant had planned for her boyfriend, Chad Stevens, to arrive at precisely the same time that his best friend, Troy Williamson, was in the bedroom having sex with the love of his life. Predictably, this broke Chad, sent him into an emotional crisis, which sadly led to his death in an automobile accident." DA Fox bowed his head, giving Chad a moment of silence.

The district attorney surveyed the jury. "The defendant's plan for revenge would've worked if Jane Doe hadn't been aware enough to recognize that she'd been raped twice. This would've exposed the defendant for her important role in the rapes. So the defendant proposed getting rid of Jane Doe, using the threat of prison to Troy Williamson and Jimmy Conley so they would do the dirty work. The defendant actively participated in the kidnapping by providing a bedroom to hold Jane Doe while they waited for Ben Conley to transport her to the Russian Mafia." The district attorney paused, letting his previous point sink into the collective conscience of the jury.

"Jane Doe corroborated Troy Williamson and Jimmy Conley's testimonies. She testified that *Larissa* had provided the drinks that made her dizzy and drowsy. The defendant, Larissa Miles, is the catalyst for the rapes and the kidnapping of Jane Doe. She is *culpable* under the law."

DA Fox held up one finger. "She is *guilty* of kidnapping of a minor." The DA held up two fingers. "She is *guilty* of aiding consummation of a crime." The DA held up three fingers. "She is *guilty* of conspiracy to commit rape." DA Fox balled those fingers into a fist. "Larissa Miles belongs in prison for as long as the law allows. Do the right thing. Thank you."

Several people in the court audience clapped.

Judge Collins pounded his gavel. “Stop the clapping or I’ll have you removed from my court.”

The audience went silent.

“That was a great closing argument,” Grace whispered.

Justin nodded, not daring to speak.

Carol Graham waited for DA Fox to return to his seat at the prosecutor’s table before she rose. She patted Larissa’s back, letting the jury know that she supported her client despite the scathing closing argument by the State. Carol staggered to the jury box, slightly hunched, wearing flats and a blue pantsuit.

Carol nodded to the jurors. “That was some closing argument, huh? The State has constructed a fantastical story, and like all fantasies, it’s tempting to believe it. The State’s case hinges entirely on convicted criminals and a jailhouse snitch, who all received rewards from the State in the form of reduced sentences. Jimmy Conley and Troy Williamson raped a nearly unconscious sixteen-year-old girl. The only evidence that Larissa encouraged these men to rape Jane Doe is from the testimony of the rapists. It’s awfully convenient for two rapists to blame a seventeen-year-old girl for the rapes *they* committed.” Carol let that point marinate for a few seconds.

“My heart breaks”—Carol Graham touched her heart—“for Jane Doe. She suffered a terrible trauma at the hands of two very sick individuals, Troy Williamson and Jimmy Conley. But I must be perfectly precise about Jane Doe’s testimony. Nothing in her testimony is direct evidence that Larissa Miles planned, participated, or encouraged Jane Doe’s rape and kidnapping. Even the belief that Larissa Miles spiked her drinks with liquid ecstasy is unproven. The drug dealer, Jimmy Conley, could’ve easily added the liquid ecstasy to Jane Doe’s drinks. After all, he had motive. He obviously wanted to rape her.”

“Larissa Miles has never been in trouble in school. She’s never had a speeding ticket. She’s never been in any kind of trouble at all. What are the chances that she’s a criminal mastermind as portrayed by the State? It’s far more likely that the drug dealer and the man with the misogynistic YouTube channel saw a vulnerable and beautiful young woman and took advantage of her.”

Carol thrummed her fingers on the jury box. “Even if you believe Larissa might hold some responsibility for what happened, don’t forget, you

must be certain that she committed these terrible crimes beyond a reasonable doubt. If you have doubts, don't compound this tragedy by sending an innocent young woman to prison for a crime that she didn't commit. Thank you."

Carol puttered back to her client, the courtroom dead silent.

Grace gave Justin a worried look.

"I know," Justin whispered.

"This bitch needs to go to prison," Grace whispered back.

## EIGHTY-NINE

# THE RECKONING

THE JURY BEGAN DELIBERATIONS AFTER LUNCH ON THURSDAY, AND they were still deliberating into the afternoon on Friday. Justin figured they wouldn't hear the verdict until Monday at the earliest, but it was announced that the verdict was in, and everyone rushed to the courtroom.

Larissa's family and friends packed the pews behind the defense table. Her supporters had been vocal online and in the media about her innocence. The internet was largely in support of Larissa's innocence as her camp was doing most of the talking. Chad's parents and Kristin decided to avoid the media circus, but Justin, Grace, Edwin, and Rakesh sat in the second row behind the prosecutor's table. Media and townspeople filled the remaining pews.

The jury filed into the courtroom with somber expressions. Justin scanned their faces, trying to decipher the verdict. Judge Collins called the court to order, then lectured the audience about keeping their composure during the reading of the verdict.

Justin leaned over to Grace and whispered, "You think they voted to convict?"

Grace shook her head and whispered back, "I really don't know."

The jury foreman, a bald man with a paunch, handed a folder to the bailiff, who handed the folder to Judge Patrick Collins. The judge opened the folder, adjusted his round glasses, read the form for a minute, then

handed it back to the bailiff. The bailiff handed the form back to the foreman, and gave him a few quiet instructions.

“Larissa Miles, please stand for the reading of the verdict,” Judge Collins said.

Carol Graham stood first and beckoned Larissa to rise. The blond teenager stood on shaky legs. Larissa’s perfect makeup told a lie, but her red eyes and droopy posture told the truth.

Grace took Justin’s hand and squeezed, sending a jolt of electricity through his body. The audience was wide-eyed and on the edge of their seats.

“You may read the verdict,” Judge Collins said to the jury foreman.

The middle-aged man stood in front of his seat in the jury box, holding the folder open. He read from the form. “For the charge of conspiracy to commit rape, we find the defendant... *guilty*.”

Gasps came from Larissa’s supporters. Murmurs came from the media and townspeople. Larissa’s mother burst into tears. Larissa cried too, her legs giving way, but she used the defense table to steady herself.

Grace squeezed Justin’s hand and whispered, “Got her.”

Justin nodded, holding back his smile, not at the verdict, but Grace’s touch.

The foreman continued, unmoved by the audience. “For the charge of kidnapping of a minor, we find the defendant... *guilty*.”

More murmurs and gasps came from the audience. Larissa’s mother sobbed. Tears rolled down Larissa’s cheeks too, streaking her mascara.

“She’s not sorry,” Grace whispered.

“She’s sorry she got caught,” Justin replied.

The jury foreman said, “For the charge of aiding consummation of a crime, we find the defendant... *guilty*.”

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They waited for the crowd to file out of the courtroom before leaving—Justin and Grace leading, Edwin and Rakesh right behind them.

A thirty-something woman approached them, her face taut. “Excuse me.”

The foursome stopped before the woman.

“Yes?” Grace asked.

The woman looked around, making sure nobody was listening. “I need help with my husband. I think he’s having an affair. Will you help me?”

Justin and Grace glanced at each other.

“We’re not private investigators,” Justin replied.

“I’m sorry,” Grace said.

## NINETY

# NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES

AFTER THE LUNCH RUSH, JUSTIN AND EDWIN CLEANED UP THE WEST Lebanon Subway—Justin washing serving spoons in the sink, and Edwin wiping the counter. The bell on the door jingled and Grace entered the restaurant.

“What’s up, girl?” Edwin said, noticing her first.

“Hey, Grace,” Justin said, pivoting from the sink.

Grace smiled at them both, then asked Justin, “When was the last time you checked your Instagram?”

Justin shrugged while drying his hands with a towel. “I don’t know. I don’t go on there anymore.”

“What about you?” Grace asked, nodding to Edwin.

“I stay away from that shit,” Edwin replied. “Nothin’ but negativity for me. It’s bad for my sobriety.”

“Well, I checked mine this morning, and I have a bunch of DMs asking for our help.”

“Help with what?” Edwin asked.

“Like private investigation stuff,” Grace replied. “Cheating wives and cheating husbands. Missing kids. Missing adults. Political dirt. Anything and everything you can think of.”

“I don’t understand,” Justin said. “Why is this happening now?”

“I think it’s this video that just came out,” Grace replied.

“What video?”

“Check it out.” Grace retrieved her phone from her purse, played the video, and handed her cell to Justin.

Justin and Edwin watched the phone. The video had over two million views, yet it had only been out for two days.

The video showed Justin at the mall being punched in the face. The video paused and showed an IG photo of Justin, identifying him by name.

The narrator said, “Despite being undersized and outnumbered, this mall security guard tried to protect this store from being robbed. He was shamed and humiliated online for his trouble.”

The video showed a montage of prominent influencers making fun of Justin.

Justin frowned. “Why am I watching this again?”

“Just watch,” Grace replied.

Dashcam video portrayed Larry using his dump truck as a battering ram. The van carrying the trafficked girls was blocked by Justin’s Kia and Grace’s Nissan. The video paused and a red circle identified the van with a subtitle that read, *trafficked girls inside*. Two more red circles appeared around the Kia and the Nissan, along with IG photos identifying Justin and Grace as the drivers of the vehicles. The van pushed past them, the mobster firing at them from the front passenger window before escaping.

Security footage from the airport appeared, showing the van parking at the hangar. The girls were escorted from the van into the hangar by Russian mobsters. Kristin was the only girl in handcuffs.

The video cut to the turboprop private passenger plane leaving the hangar. A red circle appeared around the plane with a subtitle that read, *trafficked girls in here now*. The video sped up as the plane taxied to the runway, then slowed to normal speed as Larry’s dump truck busted through the fence, on a collision course. They showed the crash between the dump truck and the airplane that severed a wing and destroyed the propeller and the truck engine.

A shaky video taken by one of the airport employees showed the shoot-out from a distance, pausing at various points, identifying Justin, Edwin, and Larry. The video ended with the police escorting five girls off the plane, a red circle and subtitle identifying Kristin Bennett.

The narrator said, “These young women were being trafficked, but they’re now safe and sound. Not all heroes wear capes.”

## NINETY-ONE

# THE FANTASTIC FOUR

THEY MET IN THE BASEMENT OF PENNY'S TOWNHOUSE, WHERE GRACE rented a room. Edwin sat at the round table. Chico the dog found a spot on the couch.

“Is it okay if he lays there?” Edwin asked.

“I think so. That’s Penny’s old couch,” Grace replied, already seated at the table.

Justin checked the staircase. “What happened to Rakesh?”

Grace grinned. “He’s talking to Penny. I’m pretty sure they’re into each other.”

Rakesh descended the stairs, his face flushed.

“Why don’t you ask her out?” Edwin asked.

“We’re just friends,” Rakesh replied, not making eye contact as he sat at the table.

“Uh huh.”

Justin took the final seat at the table.

“So I called you all here because we’ve had hundreds of offers for jobs,” Grace said. “I seriously think we should start a private investigation firm.”

“But we’re not private investigators,” Rakesh replied.

“Maybe not individually, but together we could really do this.” Grace gestured to Rakesh. “You could do all the tech stuff. Listening devices. Cameras. Hacking—”

“I won’t be hacking anything. I’m not going to prison.”

“Okay, fine, no hacking. My point is that you’re great with tech, so we have that covered.” Grace gestured to Edwin. “And Edwin can kick anybody’s ass, so he can be security.”

“That’s true,” Edwin replied, cracking his knuckles. “You know, Chico could help us too. There’s this old K-9 cop that I met in NA. We were talkin’ about our dogs, and he said that Golden Retrievers make great search dogs. We could get Chico trained and we’d have a real search and recovery dog.”

“That’s a good idea. He’d be a huge asset for missing persons cases.” Justin went to the couch and petted Chico. “Are you in?”

Chico wagged his tail.

“I think he’s in,” Edwin said with a crooked smile.

Grace addressed Justin. “And then there’s you.”

Justin pivoted from the couch, facing Grace.

“You have this sixth sense that I’ve never seen before. You can read people better than anyone.”

Justin blushed and returned to his seat. He said, “And *you* know more about crime and investigations than anyone *I* know.”

It was Grace’s turn to blush. “Plus, we’re freaking *awesome* together. Think about what we did finding Kristin. We could really do this, like, for our real job. What do you think?”

“Don’t we need PI licenses?” Rakesh asked.

Grace winced. “There’s a small problem with that. You have to be a former cop or you have to have worked for another PI firm. I think we can work without a license until we figure out how to get the experience.”

“Rakesh works for a PI firm right now,” Justin said.

Rakesh shook his head. “I’m not an investigator. I don’t even go to their offices. I work on their computers remotely.”

“The requirements don’t specify that you have to be an investigator, only that you’ve worked for a detective agency for three years,” Grace said.

“I’ve been there for four years, but I only work like eight hours per week.”

“We don’t need to mention that on the application,” Justin said.

“You also have to be at least twenty-five to obtain the license.” Grace addressed Rakesh. “You’re over twenty-five, right?”

Rakesh nodded. “I’m twenty-six.”

“This is perfect. Rakesh can get the license for the whole firm, at least until we’re old enough to get our own licenses. What do you guys think? Who’s in?” Grace raised her hand first.

Justin and Edwin raised their hands at the same time.

Rakesh pursed his lips, then he raised his hand too.

# EPILOGUE

ANOTHER BOYLE

JUSTIN DROVE TO WERNERSVILLE STATE HOSPITAL. HE SIGNED IN WITH Martisha the nurse and asked, “How is he?”

“Quiet,” Martisha replied. “He’s sitting in his usual spot.”

Justin found his Great-uncle Ellis in the activity room on his favorite couch. Ellis stared at the floor, his bony shoulders hunched, and his head hanging. The wall-mounted flatscreen was on mute, showing a Mercedes-Benz commercial. Other patients chatted with each other, played board games and cards. A few painted and colored. Several patients stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows watching the spring rain.

“Hey, Uncle Ellis,” Justin said.

No response.

Justin sat next to his great-uncle. “Sorry it’s been so long. Believe it or not, I was trying to find a missing girl. You know what?” Justin waited for a response that never came. “I helped find her. Can you believe that?”

Still no response from Ellis.

For the next thirty minutes or so, Justin told Ellis about the case, finishing with, “Pretty crazy, huh?”

Ellis raised his gaze and said, “He knows.”

Justin tilted his head to Ellis. “Who knows?”

Ellis giggled like a demented schoolgirl. “Tell can’t. Tell no. No tell. Die I.”

“Why can’t you tell?”

“Pizza like. Pizza like.”

“Yeah. Me too. I’d bring you some pizza, but it’s not allowed. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry. Sorry. Sorry,” Ellis repeated.

Justin put his hand atop his uncle’s. “I love you, Uncle Ellis. I want you to know that. You’re the only family I have left.”

Ellis shook his head. “No. No. No.”

Justin retracted his hand. “Okay, that’s technically incorrect. I know my biological father is out there somewhere, but he’s not my father. I’ve never even spoken to the man. As far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t exist. So I stand by my statement. You’re the only family I have, and I love you.”

Ellis shook his head again. “No. No. No.”

Justin sighed. “Yes. I *do* love you. Deep down, I hope you know that.”

“No. No. No.”

Justin showed his palms in surrender. “Okay, I won’t push you.”

“No. No. No. Alive.”

“Yes, I know you’re alive.”

“No. No. No. Alive. *Him*.”

“Who?”

Ellis pointed a shaky finger at the television. It was tuned to MSNBC. A white-haired man talked about how banks were hiding their insolvency by overvaluing their commercial real estate. The older man was tan, handsome for his age. His name and title were in block letters underneath his image: *Cecil Boyle. President, Titan Capital Management.*

Justin gaped at the man who shared his dead grandfather’s name, his hands suddenly jittery, and his stomach filled with butterflies. He noticed the facial similarities between himself, Uncle Ellis, and the man on the screen.

Justin addressed Uncle Ellis. “He has the same name as your brother, but your brother died a long time ago.”

“No. No. No. Died never. Never died.”

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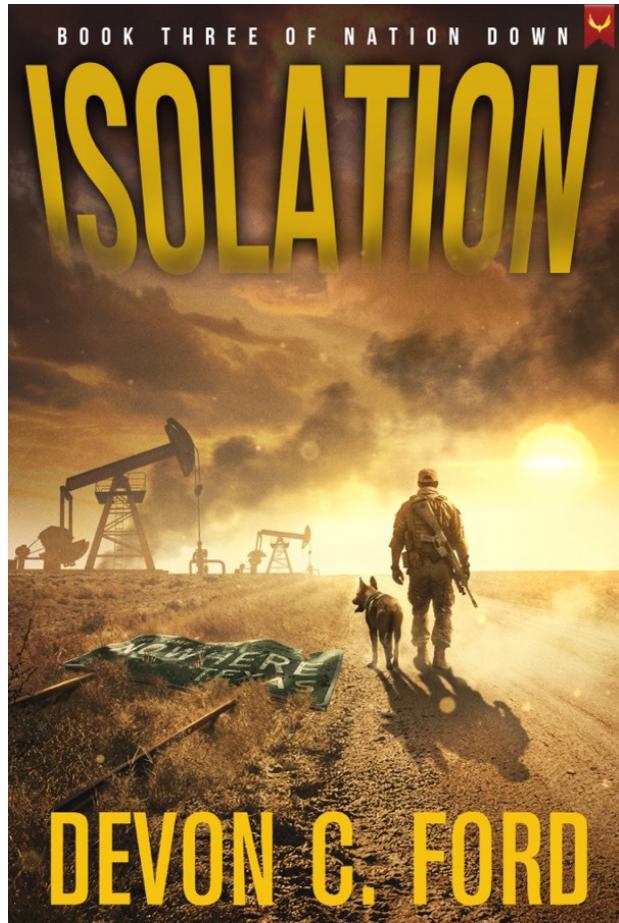
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil M. Williams is the author of thirty books, his diverse thrillers delving into the mysterious, psychological, domestic, dystopian, political, and technological. Williams is known for weaving headline inspired realism into gripping narratives that thrust ordinary people into extraordinary circumstances. With meticulous research and a fearless approach to social and political issues, Williams crafts stories that entertain while challenging readers to think critically about the world around them. Whether exploring crime, corruption, or survival against impossible odds, his novels deliver fast-paced plots, authentic detail, and unforgettable characters.

## GRATITUDE

I'd like to thank my wife for being my first reader, sounding board, and cheerleader. I struggled with the complexity of this plot and bored her with endless possibilities of where to take the story. Her support, patience, and unwavering belief in my skill as an author were integral to the creation of this story. Her only complaint was, "Do we have to talk about murder right before bed?" I love you, Denise.

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