

LEAVE

HER

OUT

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THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES. FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF
FEAR, NOTHING IS SAFE ENOUGH. FROM A PERSPECTIVE
OF LOVE, NOTHING IS NECESSARY.

— EMMANUEL

1

HAVRE, MONTANA

Millie Smith stared at the man with the confusion of someone who'd just seen a dolphin in a desert. That man—he looked like...

“No way,” she mumbled.

No way was that famous, prestigious national figure striding down a lonely road crossing one of the golden wheat fields of the city of Havre. No way was he here, alone, looking anxious. Scanning all about like he'd lost something, or someone.

Millie slowed her pace and pulled the collar of her dog, a mighty mastiff. The man, about a hundred yards away now, did not slow his pace. The closer he

got, the more Millie thought... But Havre was a quiet community known for family values and small-town ideals, not a place to find celebrities walking by. Or toward you.

Millie squinted, still struggling to compute what her eyes told her was true, because what a weird and unbelievable encounter it would be.

The stranger who was so familiar jerked his head. A little tic she remembered from televised press conferences years ago. And Millie finally conceded: *Oh my. It's him!*

Before she could so much as frame another thought, Millie registered a loud noise behind her. The mastiff turned and began barking. Millie turned too, looking up at the sky and shielding her eyes against the direct sunlight. She saw a helicopter flying by. It must have taken off from somewhere in the wheat field.

This walk was getting stranger by the minute.

"Enough!" she yelled at her dog. The mastiff quieted and Millie turned to walk on across the field. The empty field.

What the hell?

The man who just ten seconds ago was moving in Millie's direction was no longer walking down the road. He was nowhere in sight.

There was no place to look for him other than the

road and the wheat field surrounding it. Millie rushed to where she'd last seen him, before the helicopter distracted her. She hoped the mastiff would sniff something unusual, but the tired animal just looked back at her, begging to go home.

Millie looked all about. The wheat wasn't so high it would hide a grown man. The truth was, there was no way he could have disappeared.

Heart pounding, she pulled out her cell phone.

"Hill County Sheriff's Office," said a familiar voice.

"Who's this, Nancy?"

"Yes?"

"It's Millie here."

"Millie Smith?"

"Yes. Listen, I need to report a missing person."

"OK, darling. I hope it's not one of yours?"

"No, no."

"Where are you?"

"I'm on Thirty-First Street. In the field near Wildhorse Road."

"Right. Do you know the person?"

"You bet."

"Well, do you have a name?"

Millie hesitated. "Anthony Morris."

"Like the president?"

"Not just *like* him. It's the former president himself."

“Uh-huh. You’re not fooling around, are you, Millie?”

“No, Nancy. I am not fooling around. We were about to cross paths. I heard a noise, looked behind me for a moment. When I looked back, he was gone.”

“OK, Millie, let me get this right. You’re saying that former President Anthony Morris decided to play hide-and-seek on a wheat field in Havre?”

“Will you send someone or what?”

“Uh, yeah. Can you wait there?”

“I have my dog with me. He’s tired.”

“It won’t take long.”

2

TWO MONTHS EARLIER. MONTANA, US

There I was, like countless times before, lost in a delusion that turned my pathetic life into a vision of pure torment. It was all due to the antique oak chest next to my bed, a gift from my past mentor, Charles Dulles, the man who had opened all the doors for me.

I was sure that chest was watching me.

Though it wasn't clear what was inside the damn thing, it had to be something powerful and valuable. Every time this happened, I was drawn to open it. I was aware of the danger. Regardless, a force impelled me. It pushed me to break free from the fear and reach for what was hidden in the chest.

I knew that this force represented greed. No shrink required.

Then, I did it—I mentally opened that presumptuous little box. I did it ritualistically, pretending I no longer cared about any consequence. I knelt down in front of it, stared at the beautiful wood, breathed in its symbolism for a while. I was gathering courage. It was, after all, my moment of truth. What exactly did I fear?

When bravery surpassed caution, I opened the lid. I did it slowly, until the underside was completely exposed. Inside the chest, darkness. Really, it couldn't have been sunshine—it didn't fit the nightmare. I bent forward to look inside, but I still couldn't see anything.

Instead, I *felt* it. That thing was alive.

In an instant, my mind sped up. A thrill ran down my spine, like in the old days of my political ladder climbing. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled—the danger was tangible.

Coming for me.

I had only a fraction of a second to identify the occupant of the chest as a serpent—with Charles Dulles's face—before that awful creature shot out and sank its poisonous fangs right into my neck.

“Jesus!” I yelled.

All I could do to release its grip on me was to shake my head. Or open my eyes.

So at that point, I did both.

Usually, I sweat profusely when the vision occurs. I even peed once or twice. Now, with my eyes open and the psychological threat gone, I felt wetness on my neck. I touched it, testing the viscosity between my fingers, and brought my hand up to my eyes. It was blood. My blood.

Next, I sensed a chilly draft on my face and turned to glance at my bedroom window. It was broken. There was glass all over the floor and next to me on the bed.

While I struggled to assimilate the nightmarish awakening, my door opened. Viktoria Krizman burst in and ran toward me. I sat up and raised my palms—*I'm OK*—trying to calm her.

Vicky inspected the bedroom, attempting to figure out what had happened. She saw the broken window, the glass all over, and finally found the missile that had done the damage: a small but heavy bronze puppet sculpture. She crossed quickly to the window, looked all over outside; then, seeing no one, she turned to me.

“What’s this, Tony?” she asked, raising the puppet. I stared at it and concluded, “That’s probably me.”

“I’m calling the Secret Service.”

“Don’t bother.”

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s just a scratch. Do me a favor, will you? Don’t tell anyone about this.”

Vicky looked unhappy with that, but she nodded. “We need to find out who did this,” she said.

“Oh, I know who did this.”

“Who?”

“Charles Dulles.”

“But why?”

“Because he still thinks I’m his puppet.”

Vicky looked suspiciously at the bronze sculpture, like she was saying, *Is that really what this attack was about?* I grimaced with disgust and looked away.

Then I said, to myself as much as her, “Charles is reminding me that nothing has changed.”